

This is how we drink up the sea: Liberal democracy and the prospect of truth

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Abstract

I begin my paper by deconstructing Nietzsche's two distinct theories of truth—Perspectivism and Interpretationism—and the ways in which they differ from one another. I then suggest that by conceiving modern politics to mean liberal democracy, it follows that there are a number of critiques that Interpretationist truth has to bear on the institution. With this synthesis, I argue that rather than posing any danger to modern politics, liberal democracy is endangered only to the extent that it ignores Nietzschean theory and its ramifications for both the political institution and individuals in society. In particular, I suggest that there is a role for philosophy, theory, culture and art to 'interrupt' liberal democracy, and in so doing regenerate its capacity for creativity, guard against its habit of static domination, and frustrate its tendency toward deindividuation such that institutions and individuals can attain existential and material freedom. My conclusion supports the notion that a positive understanding of nihilistic philosophy is credible, and could be constructively employed to enrich the political experience if actors chose to embrace it.

Is Dumbo the Übermensch?

In 1941, Disney released *Dumbo*, its fourth technicolour animation, to great acclaim. *Dumbo* is about a circus elephant that is teased for his protruding ears, but tricked into believing he can fly by way of holding a 'magic' crow feather in his trunk. When Dumbo is called on to save the circus, he realises he has misplaced his feather, and refuses to face danger in the belief that his ability to soar was contingent on its magical powers. Just in time, he comprehends that the feather was meaningless all along and it was in fact his ears—an innate quality—that gave him lift. Thus, Dumbo, like Nietzsche, finds that in the moment of his greatest

affliction he is ‘brought to reason’: the crutch and resentment that the feather represented is discarded for a flight to new heights, unencumbered by falsity and doubt.¹

From a Straussian conceptualisation of the American Dream to a Platonic illustration of the need for restrictions on knowledge, there are a number of ways in which the allegory of the Dumbo feather can be interpreted. Nevertheless, for our own purposes, considering the story from a Nietzschean perspective is most rewarding. With this reading, the motifs in this famous children’s movie can be seen to contain parallels to Nietzschean conceptualisations of slave morality, the will-to-power and, most of all, truth. It is unsurprising though, that determining what Nietzsche actually believed was true and untrue without the proverbial elephant allegory presents us with a much more difficult picture. Indeed, Nietzsche vacillated and developed two theories of truth that I will call *Perspectivism* and *Interpretationism*. This essay will begin by deconstructing these distinct Nietzschean theories of truth and the ways in which they differ from one another. It will then suggest that by conceiving modern politics to mean liberal democracy, it follows that there are a number of critiques that Interpretationist truth has to bear on the institution. Lastly, I will argue that rather than posing any danger to modern politics, liberal democracy is endangered only to the extent that it ignores Nietzschean theory and its ramifications for both the political institution and individuals in society. In particular, I suggest that there is a role for philosophy, theory, culture and art to ‘interrupt’ liberal democracy, and in so doing regenerate its capacity for creativity, guard against its habit of static domination, and frustrate its tendency toward deindividuation such that institutions and individuals can attain freedom.

Politics is dead, but not because Nietzsche killed it

Before we begin, a note on the meta-pitfalls and paradoxes that come with applying Nietzsche’s theories to politics. Stefan Zweig once commented that the tragedy of Nietzsche’s life was a monodrama and, so it seems, was his work.² Always the anti-dogmatist, Nietzsche shied away from prescriptivism, a choice that presents a challenge to the contemporary application of his theories.³ If, indeed, ‘there is no heroic age, only heroic men’ and each individual is their own Napoleon or Alexander without a legacy to pass on, how is it that Nietzsche can be practically applied to politics, an endeavour that is inherently collaborative and communal

1 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo* (Vintage Books: New York, NY, 1989) 242.

2 Stefan Zweig, *Nietzsche* (Hesperus Press Limited: London, United Kingdom, [1925] 2013) 3.

3 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (Serendipity Publishers: Rockville, MA, [1886] 2008) 7.

in nature?⁴ This is a limitation that any Nietzschean critique of politics must acknowledge. Moreover, while Nietzsche suggests that the man who seeks out danger lives with a greater capacity for will-to-power, this essay asks what dangers his theories might pose to modern politics.⁵ I propose a solution to this danger (i.e. an amelioration of it) but it would be misleading to omit that this in turn creates a Nietzschean Gordian Knot of sorts. If *more danger = more will-to-power*, then shouldn't relatively safer solutions to problems be discarded in the face of that danger, and as such, the promise of more will-to-power? Or, put another way, for Nietzsche, it may be that *less danger = more danger*, and yet *facing that danger (comparatively more danger) = less danger*. Perhaps, logic here has finally bitten its own tail.

That's all there is, there isn't any more

'It is obvious', remarked Sir Bertrand Russell in his tome, *History of Western Philosophy*, 'that in his day dreams [Nietzsche] is a warrior, not a professor'.⁶ This comment, which was intended as a slight, unwittingly also serves as a way into the perspectivist psyche. What Nietzsche was or was not in his head is irrelevant, for as Hillary Clinton has been heard to say 'what difference does it make?', or more directly, there is no such thing as an assertion that can be metaphysically true because there is no underlying 'real world' structure that can be interpreted as reality.⁷ This is Perspectivism and like the Dada artists it spawned, Nietzsche maintained that everything ever conceived of came from an act of 'metaphorical' classification, a naming or conceptualisation of a perspective that cannot correspond to reality.⁸

It follows then that a perspectivist 'truth' is only true in so much that it is consistent with an agreed canonical structure developed by humans over time—a structure that has come to be accepted as real only by virtue of consensus.⁹ This gave rise to Nietzsche's statement 'there can be no facts, only interpretations' and to the somewhat paradoxical conclusion that separate agents dealing with the same phenomenon (i.e. a beach ball) can find themselves experiencing different but nonetheless objective realities at the same time.¹⁰

4 Stefan Zweig, *The Struggle With The Daemon: Holderlin, Kleist and Nietzsche* (Pushkin Press: London, United Kingdom, 2012) 514; Zweig, op. cit. (2013) 89.

5 Zweig, op. cit. (2012) 432.

6 Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (Taylor and Francis: London, United Kingdom, [1946] 2005) 693.

7 'Clinton Benghazi Testimony—What does it matter?' YouTube video, 0:47, posted by 'atomiktiger', 23 January 2013, youtu.be/ny3bOmey-BE; Peter Poellner, *Nietzsche and Metaphysics* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, United Kingdom, 1995) 149.

8 Dafydd Jones, *Dada Culture: Critical Texts in the Avant-Garde* (Ingenta: New York, NY, 2006) 214; Daniel O'Hara, ed., *Why Nietzsche Now?* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington IN, [1981] 1985) 44.

9 Poellner, op. cit. 19.

10 Walter Kaufmann, ed., *The Portable Nietzsche* (Penguin Books: London, United Kingdom, [1954] 1982) 458; Poellner, op. cit. 110.

This freedom of relative perspective, however, is precisely perspectivism's most dangerous element; for it follows that the objective realities of individuals are dependent on their personal interests and biases. This precipitates 'interest-determined-beliefs', or canonical collections of 'knowledge' that may be internally consistent, but will always risk spreading metaphysical falsehood.¹¹ Christianity provides the benchmark Nietzschean example, whereby asking followers to accept the 'reality' of an external 'other world', they are consequently forced to reject that most basic world of differing perspectives—or the closest thing we have to real life.¹² Nietzsche's rejection of canonical 'knowledge' then is not so much that it is inconsistent, but rather that it forces people to reject the most objective reality that is attainable: life as they subjectively experience it. For Nietzsche then, one may be forced to accept, like the Joker, that 'everything burns', but when the world is necessarily valueless, the solution to freedom is not to engage in the fabrication of illusionary value, but rather accept that there is nothing, and nothing more.¹³

Insert truth here

The more optimistic Batmans of the world, however, can count themselves lucky, for with *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche had an abrupt about-face concerning the nature of truth in 1886.¹⁴ Instead of suggesting that there is no objective and universal truth to be discovered, Nietzsche began to argue that truth does exist to the extent that it is created via individual interpretations of neutral subjective reality.¹⁵ 'Truth' thus conceived comes into being via an individual attribution of value based on personal experience and, as such, the 'creation' of such truth is wholly dependent on willpower, for the greater the will-to-create the more truth will be generated.¹⁶ It follows, therefore, that the will-to-power can be fostered simply by acknowledging and reinterpreting the world only as one's own independent projection. This process, says Nietzsche, 'has no end' and 'is put forth as a process in infinitum' meaning, in the words of Robert Wicks, that one can 'cut, divide, and slice' the apparent world as much as they desire, but will never reach any extremity. There will only ever be more metaphysical sameness, that is, interpretation.¹⁷

11 Ibid 149.

12 Robert Wicks, *Nietzsche* (Oneworld Publications: Oxford, United Kingdom, 2012) 94; Ibid 97.

13 *The Dark Knight*, directed by Christopher Nolan (Los Angeles: Warner Bros. Pictures, 2008) DVD; Alan D. Shrift, ed., *Why Nietzsche Still? Reflections on Drama, Culture and Politics* (University of California Press: Berkeley, CA, 2000) 218.

14 Wicks, op. cit. 100; Friedrich Nietzsche. *Beyond Good and Evil* (Serendipity Publishers: Rockville, MA, [1886] 2008) 9.

15 Wicks, op. cit. 149; Nietzsche, op. cit. 11.

16 Poeller, op. cit. 19; Nietzsche, op. cit. 68; Arthur C. Danto, *Nietzsche as Philosopher* (Macmillan Company: New York, NY, 1965) 80.

17 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Nietzsche: Writings from the Late Notebooks* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, United Kingdom, 2003) 125; Wicks, op. cit. 102; Luc Ferry and Alain Renault, eds, *Why We are not Nietzscheans* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, IL, 1997) 117.

The best allegorical example for Interpretationism is given to us by Nietzsche himself in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, when the narrator meets Life who admits to him that she is that which ‘must always overcome itself’.¹⁸ Just because Zarathustra has met Life and ‘comprehended’ her, all he can rely on is her capriciousness, and therefore no bedrock on which knowledge can be founded exists.¹⁹ Consequently, the more an individual takes responsibility for what they experience—by appreciating that reality is a subjective and created self-projection—the more they use creativity to formulate their reality, and in so doing, generate increasing will-to-power, and more personal liberation. Truth, concluded Nietzsche, is thus an ‘active determining—not a becoming-conscious of something that is solid and determined in itself. [But] it is a word for the will to power’.²⁰

Ressentiment is the real opiate of the masses

If ‘with the true world, we have also abolished the apparent one’, where does that leave modern politics, that obscure ‘art of looking for trouble, [and] finding it everywhere’?²¹ Before we begin, it is necessary to note that when we speak of modern politics, we mean liberal democracy: the representative democratic system that enshrines in law and practice the rights of the individual.²² Moreover, the liberal democratic model that is considered below is not conceptualised in the context of a Straussian framework of nihilism or neutrality.²³ We are talking instead of the liberal democracy that is free from a tyranny of arbitrary ‘preferences’—a perfect model, so to speak.²⁴ This model is taken as the most prescient example of contemporary politics. With the supposed ‘end of history’, liberal democracy is arguably the greatest ideology of our time and for Nietzsche, who was at best sceptical of idealism and ideology, it provides the most fertile ground on which to demonstrate the applications of his philosophy.²⁵

Indeed, two major Nietzschean objections to such a political system exist, and in so doing, endanger the institution’s ultimate project. Firstly, Nietzsche maintains that all men are not equal, and yet the modern liberal democratic project is founded

18 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, United Kingdom, [1891] 2005) 99.

19 Alan White, *Within Nietzsche’s Labyrinth* (Rutledge: New York, NY, 1990) 96.

20 Nietzsche, op. cit. *Notebooks*, 125.

21 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols with The Antichrist and Ecce Homo* (Wordsworth Editions Ltd: London, United Kingdom, 2007) 23; Susan Ratcliffe, ed., *The Oxford Treasury of Sayings and Quotations* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, United Kingdom, 2011) 351(21).

22 Kenneth L. Deutsch and Walter Soffer, eds, *The Crisis of Liberal Democracy: A Straussian Perspective* (State University of New York Press: New York, NY, 1987) 1.

23 Ibid 91.

24 Nasser Behnegar, *Leo Strauss, Max Weber and the Scientific Study of Politics* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, IL, 2005) 145–146.

25 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (Simon and Schuster Inc.: New York, NY, [1992] 2006) 117; Lawrence Lampert, *Nietzsche and Modern Times, A study of Bacon, Descartes, and Nietzsche* (Yale University Press: New Haven, CT, 1993) 409.

in a notion of radical equality.²⁶ Like Plato's Cephalos, Nietzsche maintains that 'justice' as liberal democracy conceives of it consists of returning perceived property to its rightful owner.²⁷ Except, in the case of modern politics, justice is not just or fair (for there is no such thing), but rather grounded in feelings of resentment and revenge; a way for the 'many' to outwardly assign blame for their own internal inadequacies.²⁸ Consequently, liberal democracy engages in slave morality and, as such, is actively founded on it.²⁹ It follows then, that the shepherds of society are necessarily sacrificed for the subjective 'betterment' of the herd, and any potentially 'great' individual is always subsumed under the weight of the mediocre many. Secondly, liberal democracy is nothing more than a 'tremendous machine' that, like Foucault later maintained, obsessively institutionalises, organises and stratifies its citizens to such an extent that they become deindividuated.³⁰ This not only dulls the capacity of individuals to gain access to their own creativity, and thus will-to-power via interpretive truth but, more importantly, condemns the liberal democratic institution to what Wendy Brown has labelled 'an ethos of static domination', or an inability to accept and initiate change in and for itself.³¹ For Nietzsche, consistency by definition equals the death of creativity, without which there can be no interpretation of truth, no will-to-power, and therefore no freedom.³² In the night of the liberal democratic project then, all cows are indeed black, inasmuch as by attempting to ensure the equal freedom of all who are not equal to begin with, it necessarily condemns them to bondage.³³

Politicians! Build your polling booths near Vesuvius!

Fortunately there is a solution to all this that may turn out 'more beautiful than the puzzle' itself.³⁴ The danger that Nietzsche's truth poses to modern politics is not a threat in the face of an inactive liberal democracy, but rather only dangerous should these contemporary polities choose not to acknowledge and incorporate

26 Kaufmann, op. cit. 213; Lars Tonder, and Lasse Thomassen, eds, *Radical Democracy Politics between abundance and lack, reappraising the political* (Manchester University Press: Manchester, United Kingdom, 2005) 4.

27 Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey, eds, *History of Political Philosophy* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, IL, 1987) 35; Schrift, op. cit. 217.

28 John Richardson, *Nietzsche's System* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, United Kingdom, 1996) 172; Schrift, op. cit. 217–218.

29 Ibid 217.

30 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (Random House: New York, NY, 1968) 383; Michel Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977–1984* (Routledge: New York, NY, 1990) 361; David Krepes, ed., *Gramsci and Foucault: A Reassessment* (Ashgate Publishing Ltd: Farnham, United Kingdom, 2015) 82.

31 Schrift, op. cit. 217.

32 Wicks, op. cit. 100.

33 Frederik C. Beiser, *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, United Kingdom, 1993) 7.

34 Richard Dawkins, *Unweaving the Rainbow: Science, Delusion and the Appetite for Wonder* (Penguin Books Kindle: USA, 2006).

Nietzsche's truths and their ramifications into the institution itself. Contemporary liberal democracy therefore requires the transition to a more agonistic form of representative government; that is, the regular 'interruption' or 'fracture' of political theory, philosophy, culture, and art to prevent it from becoming immobile and conservative.³⁵ Or, in the words of Plato, modern politics is in need of rupture to intercept the 'tyranny [that] naturally arises out of democracy'.³⁶ Nietzsche would likely have described this in mythical terms, conceptualising liberal democracy as being in need of greater balance between the Apollonian and Dionysian elements of its nature, rather than leaning towards the cold rationality and logic we see in its stubborn adherence to its foundational values of the enlightenment era.³⁷

In a more contemporary setting, this would mean a greater engagement and questioning of the liberal democratic model without those in positions of power (or, indeed, resentment) immediately dismissing such criticisms as incontrovertibly opposed to its central purpose of individual freedom, which does tally to an extent with the Nietzschean project.³⁸ More specifically, questioning the way that personal freedom and culture is subsumed under the institution of the free market and critically examining the motif of constructed equality would be the first step in this much-needed project to disturb and punctuate the day-to-day operation of liberal politics or, in effect, allow for constructive conflict that would strengthen contemporary political life.³⁹ In this sense, the Nietzschean danger to contemporary politics must not only be deliberately courted (a climb up the proverbial Vesuvius) but also lies in our own inactivity. Like Christianity and science before it, if we neglect to increase democracy's capacity for creativity and change via the vehicle of concentrated and deliberate ruptures, it risks becoming another canonical monolithic block of knowledge—internally consistent, but always metaphysically false. Moreover, a modern polity that is persistently unchanging is a polity without interpretation, creativity, will-to-power, and thus without freedom. Accordingly, active engagement in a project of quasi-Cartesian 'radical doubt' so as to support the interruption of modern liberal democracy could also be conceived of as an individual project of will-to-power. 'The better the state is established', noted Nietzsche, 'the fainter is humanity', and as such the more pressing the need to attain freedom in the face of arbitrary meaninglessness that is any constructed reality, political or otherwise.⁴⁰

35 Lars Tonder, and Lasse Thomassen, eds, op. cit. 108; Schrift, op. cit. 209.

36 Plato, *Dialogues of Plato* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, United Kingdom, 2010) 401.

37 Weaver Santaniello, ed., *Nietzsche and the Gods* (State University of New York Press: Albany, NY, 2001) 49.

38 Schrift, op. cit. 209.

39 Ibid.

40 Kaufmann, op. cit. 50.

Creating a Nietzsche market

This essay has analysed Nietzsche's two dominant theories of truth, Perspectivism, which he ascribed to in the years preceding 1887, and Interpretationism, which he adopted from the age of 43 and by all accounts appeared to maintain for the remainder of his life. These theories were then applied to liberal democracy and, in so doing, brought two main Nietzschean critiques of the institution to the fore. Lastly, I argued that rather than posing any explicit danger to modern politics, Nietzschean theories of truth are dangerous to liberal democracy only if they are ignored and remain unincorporated into the contemporary political project. The suggested amelioration of this danger takes the form of an 'interruption' or 'rupture' that can be provided to liberal democracy by philosophy, theory, culture and art, so as to assure that its capacity for creativity is not stifled, citizens are not deindividuated by the state, and the ethos of unchanging control is frustrated.

Thus, we have come full circle. However, our conclusion begs the question: once the metaphorical tail has been bitten away, is the animal not itself different? Can this world of interdependencies, both economic and political, really be expected to swallow the bitter yet 'true' pill of its own cosmological indifference? Or, more compellingly, are we already starting to see an unconscious but nevertheless fervent adoption of Nietzschean 'interruption' with regard to liberal democracy? A world where the phrases 'I did not have sexual relations with that woman' and 'I'm not a crook' become metaphysically true by virtue of interpretation and perspective on behalf of the individual and their own wills, rather than appeals to a constructed morality.⁴¹ In Chinese, the words pessimism and optimism share the same root '观', meaning 'concept' or 'outlook'.⁴² I find it appropriate that such a genesis would suggest that these states of mind are inherently plastic and dependent only on perspective. Correspondingly, it seems there is hope for both Nietzsche and modern politics in the contemporary world. Although this pessimism is at first blush nihilistic, there is no reason to say it cannot be refashioned into something more promising for humanity as a whole. Like Dumbo, just because we think we can't fly, doesn't mean we won't one day if we simply will it hard enough.

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41 'Clinton—"I did not have sexual relations with that woman ..."', YouTube video, 0.25, posted by 'forquignon', 30 August 2006, youtu.be/KiIP_KDQmXs; 'Richard Nixon—"I'm not a crook"', YouTube video, 0.36, posted by 'Max Power', 15 July 2009, youtu.be/sh163n1J4M.

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