Dewey and Nietzsche: Their Alethiology Compared

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Careful comparative scholarship has shown clearly that John Dewey's instrumentalism is not a peculiarly unique formal articulation of the realistic and democratic temper of the American people. Students of the "internal" history of ideas, i.e. those who examine the "relationship between what some men write or say and what other men write or say," have noted similarities between Dewey's experimentalism and Hume's empirical analysis, Kant's phenomena, Hegel's phenomenology, the social orientation of the Utilitarians, the positivism of Comte and Haeckel, and Bergson's emphasis on activity.[2] Dewey recognized and expounded upon the logical connections between his brand of pragmatism and the separate thought of several European philosophers.[3] Although many comparative studies have discouraged the parochial misprisoning of instrumentalism, further work needs to be done. No account of experimentalism's European resemblances can be complete without the recognition of similarities with the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate likeness of thought in the specific area of alethiology. Such a comparative demonstration will enlarge the conceptual Euro-American background against which instrumentalism must be understood.

John Dewey's attack on inexpugnable objective truth took the form of criticizing two widely held theories on what constitutes truth. One of these theories avers that there is little distinction between truth and reality. In other words, this Platonic concept claims that truth already exists (as does reality) whether one comes upon it or not. Attendant to this belief is the notion that there is but one truth for everyone at any given time. Dewey answers this by pointing out the obvious empirical refutation that various people do not attain to the same truths. Another difficulty with this former hoary argument is that it finds the subject matter of truth to be reality at large, "a metaphysical heaven to be mimeographed at many removes upon a badly constructed mental carbon copy which yields at best only fragmentary, blurred, and erroneous copies."[4] The only proper object of truth is and must be that relationship of organism and environment in which functioning is most amply and effectively attained.[5] Truth can not be monistic as the Platonist asserts.

The second attack on "objective" verity is against another major defense: the correspondence theory of truth. This is the idea that truth is a duplicate or copy of an independent reality. Dewey admits the innate plausibility of this account because it does distinguish between truth and reality. Since such a distinction is made, the correspondence theory does

include statements men make about the world. As such, it involves meaning or discourse and refers to ideas and their validity. However, Dewey complains, the claim that veracity equals a one-to-one relation with objective existents opens up the old (and still unsolved) Cartesian problem of dualism.[6] The correspondence theory can not explain how mind, world, and body interact to produce knowledge and "truth." He further argues that even if this theory could explain the ontological abyss between facts and ideas, we would still not know *why* the mind should make a copy of the world at all.[7] Hence, Dewey finds two venerable supports for objective truth to be unconvincing. Not content to merely analyze, he has synthesized a positive, subjective approach to truth.

Such an approach he calls the instrumental or consequence theory. Dewey states that truth or falseness is a property of ideas. This property is chiefly one of predictions of what consequences will follow if any given plan of action, communicated by an idea, is carried out. All ideas are hypotheses continually being verified or disverified in the light of predictable results. The particular consequences or results are those in terms of which a problem has arisen.[8] Pretend, for example, that you hear a noise in the street. The meaning suggested to you is that a street-car has caused the sound. To test the idea you walk to the window and through observation organize into a unity elements of existence and meaning which previously were disconnected. In this way your idea is rendered true; that which was a proposal or hypothesis is no longer a mere educated speculation. Apart from your forming and considering some interpretation, the category of truth has neither meaning nor existence. Your idea, in other words, had to be acted upon to become a truth.[9] As Dewey concludes about his "non-objective" theory,

> Truth. . . is a just name for an experienced relation among the things of experience: that sort of relation in which intents are retrospectively viewed from the standpoint of the fulfillment which they secure through their own natural operation or incitement. Thus the experimental theory explains directly and simply the absolutistic tendency to translate concrete true things into the general relationship, Truth, and then to hypostatize this abstraction into identity with real being, Truth *per se* and *in se*, of which all transitory things and events–that is, all experienced realities–are only shadowy futile approximations.[10]

In conclusion, truth belongs to humans actively engaged in a changing world. Verity, as Dewey sees it, is a satisfactory response to a problem originating in the world. Because truths are not monolithic or fixed in a rigid matrix forever, they can be transformed by the subjective, interested thinker who must consciously and continuously strive to cope with his

environment. Since there is no final and absolute truth, there can be no further test of veracity other than its ability to work and to organize facts.[11] Objective truth, moreover, must be recognized as yet another symptom of man's quixotism and quest for security; subjective truth must be recognized as successful and dynamic "interpretations" proposed tentatively by adaptive and creative individuals.

Nietzsche would appear to agree fully with the above conclusions of Dewey. He, too, devastated pretensions to objective truth by revealing the psychology on which they are based and the thin reasoning which disguises them. He too relativized truth to a context of person, world, and problem. And he too, though less carefully and systematically, posited a subjective brand of truth to replace impossible, surreal objectivity. Nietzsche is perhaps most effective in analyzing the psychological bases of cognition and truth.

Even the greatest philosophers, we are told, think that they can achieve *the* Truth through elaborate reasoning. But the theories of men like Spinoza, Wolff, Descartes, and Plato are only fatuous efforts to justify the beliefs they hold on instinctive or pre-reflective grounds. Behind even the purest logic, there are subjective prejudices and physiological demands.[12] Far from being disinterested and objective, Nietzsche sees the intellect as the instrument of something nonintellectual:

> The unconscious disguising of physiological requirements under the cloak of the objective, the ideal, the purely spiritual, is carried on to an alarming extent, and I have often enough asked myself, whether on the whole, philosophy hitherto has not generally been merely an interpretation of the body, and a *misunderstanding of the body*.[13]

The concept of transcendent and final truth must, then, be an illusion.

In addition, Nietzsche uses an epistemological argument to attack any claims that "objective" truth can be supported by a strictly empirical outlook. His argument is that we have the kinds of sensations and perceptions we do because of their "utility." The product of our senses reflect our values, and the senses are pragmatic just as our conceptual abilities are. He denies, furthermore, that our sensations and perceptions are uninfluenced by the concepts and prejudgments which we all hold; our conceptual life mandates, in large part, our sensory life.[14] Hence, in contraposition to empiricists such as Locke, the senses can not absolutely and objectively verify the concepts we may hold as the senses are preinfluenced by beliefs and values. Nietzsche tells us that "faith is the primal beginning even in every sense impression."[15] Consequently, the quest for the Platonic realist version of truth as static and independent of humans

may not rest on our conceptual or empirical abilities. No "truth" about the "world of appearances" or phenomena can be any more than a perspectival interpretation.

Finally, Nietzsche shares Dewey's odium for the Kantian noumenon or absolute "thing-in-itself" (or "Truth-in-itself") which so many thinkers for centuries had pursued. Nietzsche in his writings not only denies that our knowledge could transcend the limitations of the senses, but also writes that the very concept of noumenon which we seek to know is an *ignis fatuus*. First, he offers the now familiar psychological explanation (and reduction) of the origin of the notion: the realm of absolute reality was concocted by weak intellects who do not dare to live and adjust in a changing world. The quest for the fictional transcendent and inaccessible noumenon serves as an escape mechansim for such weak spirits.[16] Secondly, he finds the Kantian belief in noumenon useless and superfluous and therefore refuted.[17] Although many reasons are given for the contradictory character of an objective realm of truth, Nietzsche's greatest complaint is that it makes no difference for our quotidian engaged life. With Dewey, he believes that nothing possesses a constitution in itself apart from active interpretation and subjectivity. As Nietzsche understands it,

> Every centre of energy has its point of view of the whole of the remainder of the world—that is to say, its perfectly definite valuation, its mode of action, its mode of resistance. The 'world of appearance' is thus reduced to a specific kind of action on the world proceeding from a centre.
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> But there is no other kind of action: and the 'world' is only a word for the collective play of these actions. *Reality* consists precisely in this particular action and reaction of every isolated factor against the whole.[18]

Consequently, there can be no truth apart from the subjectively engaged subjectively thinker.

Although denying the possibility of inaccessible verity, Nietzsche proposed that a subjective truth could yet be very instrumental to the man who has the courage to live with perspectivism. Interpretative truths, the only ones we are really capable of, can still give us practical guidance in life. Subjective truth is or can be a useful tool. It can observe how elements in the world affect us, noting their actual benevolence or malevolence, and can draw up from this very personal angle of vision a picture or scheme of the world. With the aid of ideas we can make our way through life's mazes with more confidence because we can handle the empirical world more easily.[19] Those ideas which have life-preserving consequences should be labeled as "truths" while ideas which decrease our chances of coping with the environment should be abandoned as "lies." Truth is

human and only individuals who possess it give it importance. With Dewey, Nietzsche concludes that this importance lies in our confrontation with a problematic world. For both men, there is no shame in the fact that we do not have entry into the fictive mansion of static and transcendent verity. Alethiology belongs only and fully to mankind.

Footnotes

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3. John Dewey, "From Absolutism to Experimentalism," *Contemporary American Philosophers*, George P. Adams and William P. Montague (Eds.), Vol. II, (New York: Macmillan Co., 1930), pp. 13-27.
4. John Dewey, "Truth and Reality," *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, edited by Joseph Ratner (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1928), pp. 188-189.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 190.
6. John Dewey, "The Correspondence Theory of Truth is Inadequate," *The Philosophy of Johy Dewey*, edited by Joseph Ratner (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1928), p. 192.
7. George Geiger, *John Dewey in Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 72.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
9. John Dewey, "The Instrumental Theory of Truth," *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, edited by Joseph Ratner (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1928), pp. 199-200.
10. John Dewey, "The Experience of Knowing," *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, Volume I, edited by John McDermott (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1973), p. 192.
11. Morton White, *The Origin of Dewey's Instrumentalism* (New York: Octagon Books, 1964), p. 82.
12. M. A. Mugge, *Friedrich Nietzsche: His Life and Work* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1908), p. 214.
13. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Joyful Wisdom*, translated by Thomas Common (New York: Russell and Russell, Inc., 1964), p. 5.
14. John T. Wilcox, *Truth and Value in Nietzsche: A Study of His Metaethics and Epistemology* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1974), p. 149.
15. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, translated by Anthony M. Ludovici (New York: Russell and Russell, Inc., 1964), p. 25.
16. Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Aniticrist," *The Portable Nietzsche*, edited by Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Viking Press, 1954), pp. 576-577.
17. Friedrich Nietzsche, "Twilight of the Gods," *The Portable Nietzsche*, edited by Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Viking Press, 1954), p. 485.
18. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, translated by Anthony M. Ludovici (New York: Russell and Russell, Inc., 1964), p. 71.
19. William M. Salter, *Nietzsche the Thinker: A Study* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1968), p. 52.

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