

“there are no facts...”: Nietzsche as Predecessor of Post-Truth?

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In light of recent political events Nietzsche was (again) charged as proponent of unscrupulous power-politics and as predecessor of “post-truth.” A passage from his late notes is notoriously quoted to denounce him as figurehead of relativism, truth-denial and post-factual attitudes: “facts are precisely what there is not, only interpretations.” By means of an analysis of this passage and its 19th century contexts, the paper reconstructs Nietzsche’s criticism of absolute truth. He problematizes notions of truth on the basis of epistemological, physiological, historical, and sociological considerations, arguing in favour of self-reflexive, pluralistic, and modest epistemic attitudes, which are occasionally associated with relativism. Unlike certain cliché-versions of relativism Nietzsche denies that every “perspective” is equally valid, and develops and employs a variety of interpretational and argumentative standards. These standards are not absolute, but allow human evaluations of knowledge-claims. The proposed alternative between “truth” or “post-truth” construes a false opposition and underestimates the need for informed value-judgments in politics and culture. In conclusion it is argued that prosecutors and defendants of “post-truth” are similarly vulnerable for resentful dogmatic ideologies, because of unwillingness or inability to accept and employ a post-absolutist loss of certainty.

Keywords: relativism, truth, certainty, perspectivism

Signal of an *unscientific* man: he takes an opinion for true, if it flatters him and makes him look good. (Nietzsche 1988, 498f)

1. Post-Truth Nietzsche?

When the editors of the Oxford Dictionaries decided to declare “Post-Truth” the word of the year 2016 they drew international attention to recent trends

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in political discourse in Western democracies. The neologism was mainly coined to describe certain features of processes of public decision-making such as the presidential election in the United States or the British referendum about membership in the European Union. According to some observers, public statements of influential politicians, viral tweets in the new media, the strategies of political campaigns and parts of the media-coverage were oblivious or ignorant of plain facts and truths to a yet unprecedented degree. The dictionary defines “post-truth” as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” and provides two exemplary statements: “in this era of post-truth politics, it’s easy to cherry-pick data and come to whatever conclusion you desire” or “some commentators have observed that we are living in a post-truth age.”¹ Unlike other composites with “post-“ such as “post-modern” or “post-colonial,” post-truth is obviously meant in an unmasking and compromising way. The term itself is inevitably embedded in political discourse, incriminating others for their increasing disrespect for facts and truth. Particularly in light of Trump’s or the Brexiteer’s campaigns this impression seems well justified, and its diagnostic validity is taken for granted for the sake of argument in this paper. One should, however, keep in mind that talk about “post-truth politics” implies the contrast to an earlier and different, by now elapsed state of affairs. Were we once living in a political truth-age? When was it? Even the critical label predates Trump (Keyes 2004). The question whether esteem for facts and truth in politics decreased in a way justifying this new label is an empirical and historical problem, which could not be addressed in this paper. I rather turn to the philosophical problem of “post-truth” and the related issue of philosopher’s responsibility for the current political and cultural situation.

Some commentators, in search for an explanation of the “post-truth” climate, pointed to a supposed tradition of philosophers decrying truth. Particularly Friedrich Nietzsche is often named in contexts of truth-denial (Higgins 2016). On July 5th 2016, a *New York Times* article stated that “Trump embodies a Nietzschean morality rather than a Christian one. It is characterized by indifference to objective truth (there are no facts, only interpretations).”² I leave it to others to contemplate the traditional connection between Christianity and objective truth. Nietzsche, however, serves as god-father and outspoken representative of indifference to facts and objectivity.

¹ Oxford Dictionaries, “Word of the year 2016 is ... post-truth”, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016>.

² Peter Wehner “The Theology of Donald Trump” in *The New York Times* July 5, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/05/opinion/campaign-stops/the-theology-of-donald-trump.html>.

Because of his critical remarks about traditional concepts of truth, Simon Blackburn, employing the very same quote, calls him “the Arch-Debunker” (Blackburn 2005, 73) and Maria Baghramian notes that Nietzsche is “possibly the most influential single philosopher of relativism in recent history” (Baghramian 2010, 45). The—wrong cited—notorious quote is taken from Nietzsche’s late notes written down in spring 1887. It is a private jotting, a memo not meant for publication and reads as follows:

Against positivism which halts at the phenomenon “There are only facts” I would say: no, precisely facts do not exist, only interpretations. We cannot determine any fact “in itself”: perhaps it is a nonsense to want such a thing. “Everything is subjective,” you say: but that itself is an *interpretation*, the “subject” is not a given, but an added-on-fiction, tucked-behind.—Is it at last necessary to posit the interpreter behind the interpretation? Even that is poetry, hypothesis. Inasmuch as the word “knowledge” [“Erkenntnis”] has any meaning at all, the world is knowable: but it is variously *interpretable*; it has no meaning behind it, but countless meanings. “Perspectivism.” [...] (Nietzsche 2003, 139)

Despite its provisional character, the text is clear enough. The apparent denial of facts is not simply stated as a doctrine but introduced as an anti-thesis and anti-dote to a positivist assumption, that there are clear, plain, and obvious facts alone. Moreover, the text actually admits the phenomenon of “facts,” but requires and invites further critical examination. In opposition to positivism Nietzsche states that there are no facts without interpretation, i.e. without selection, valuation, adoption, contextualization, simplification, reduction of complexity, etc.. The note continues with a warning that the significance of interpretation should not be confused with subjectivism. The world is knowable to us, in a way according to us, to our capacities and needs. The alternative to objectivism is not subjectivism, but a certain kind of anthropocentrism. Human beings form interpretations of the world we live in, which must—for the sake of survival—be somewhat successful. We shall see that Nietzsche argues that interpretations could be good or bad, despite their inevitable under-determination by data or text. They are ordering simplifications and therefore, strictly speaking, falsifications of empirical abundance according to specific human standards. These standards accord to the needs and values of living human beings and different standards and different successful interpretations are possible, they were and still are actually real.

Nietzsche’s philosophical project in this regard is not mainly destructive. He points to the limits of simple trust in “the given” and effectively tries to counterbalance one-sided objectivist views. As he notes a few years earlier: “To mock the school of “objectivists” and “positivists.” They wish to avoid

the value-judgements and discover and present the *facta* alone” (Nietzsche 1988, 241). In his denial of facts as such, Nietzsche also emphasizes the necessity and inevitability of values. He demands an increased awareness of the active role we are playing in our world of experience. Claims on factual truth are always charged with value-judgements; they reveal an order of rank of preferences regarding our physiological faculties and needs, our epistemic interests and values, and our cultural tasks and goals. Which piece of perceived data is significant in what a way, what context, for what purpose, and what does it mean? Knowledge implies and requires evaluation. While this observation also applies to scientific theories, it is more obviously the case in domains of political discourse. From a “Nietzschean” perspective, contemporary debates about post-truth and fake-news reveals the intellectual limits and moral prejudices of bounded and un-free spirits on both sides of the political spectrum.

In order to explicate this view I shall proceed in two steps. In a first step I will reconstruct Nietzsche’s views on truth within the contexts of his late 19th century readings of Schopenhauer, Lange, Comte and others. These contexts indicate that Nietzsche was well justified to perceive a certain version of epistemic relativism or contextualism as the most advanced and enlightened philosophical view. His denial of mere facts in favour of human interpretations allows to evaluate the quality of human knowledge-claims nonetheless. Far from assuming equal validity for any powerful proposition, I argue in a second step that Nietzsche applies and employs criteria to qualify interpretations. These criteria, however, are in themselves (only) human standards. The paper concludes with theses on post-truth politics, suggesting that the debate itself indicates that the conscious, self-confident, enlightened and sovereign state of affairs Nietzsche envisions is not yet reached.

2. Nietzsche in Context—Overcoming the Quest for Certainty

Nietzsche reservations against dogmatic trust in facts are not limited to his late unpublished notes. In the preface of *Beyond Good and Evil* he observes that “dogmatism of all types standing sad and discouraged,” and he further writes that some critics of traditional philosophy even assume “that dogmatism is in its last gasps” and basically failed to conquer truth (Nietzsche 2001, 3). Nietzsche does not mean to be original here. The negative diagnosis regarding dogmatism is presented as the widely accepted view he basically takes for granted. Nietzsche was an intent and thoughtful observer of the discussions about human knowledge, its limits and prospectives in the later 19th century. During his readings he encountered reservations against the ideal of merely given facts and truths at various occasions. A broad variety of philosophers, historians, and scientists opposed absolutist aspirations

and insisted on the conditional character of human knowledge. It becomes particularly obvious in the light of his readings that Nietzsche took the collapse of absolutist claims on truth to be the most advanced epistemological view of his time. Accordingly, the defeat of dogmatism is not Nietzsche's main task, he is more interested in the causes and again even more in the consequences of its downfall.

The failure of dogmatism, Nietzsche assumes in a moderate claim on originality, results from its overly solemn approach, from prejudices, false assumptions, and over-ambitious expectations. Traditional philosophers tried to erect eternal systems, but the allegedly "sublime and unconditional philosophical edifices that the dogmatists used to build" actually rested on "folk superstition," on a "seduction of grammar, or an over-eager generalization from facts that are really very local, very personal, very human-all-too-human" (Nietzsche 2001, 3). Far from being unconditioned or absolute, these philosophical systems were relative to their culture, their common-sense, their language, and their perspectives. According to Nietzsche, ideas such as "pure spirit" or "the Good in itself" are "the worst, most prolonged, and most dangerous of all errors to this day," they meant "standing truth on its head and disowning even the *perspectival*, which is the fundamental condition of all life" (Nietzsche 2001, 4).

Recognizing the perspectival condition of life is the outcome of the erroneous dogmatist ambition. The institutionalized quest for objective and unconditioned truth itself lead to the self-undermining insight that human beings might be peculiar animals, who are able to comprehend the perspectival condition of life, but who do not escape it. While the failing dogmatists are subject of ironic mockery, Nietzsche rather seriously sees "good reasons for hoping that all dogmatizing in philosophy was just noble (though childish) ambling and preambing" (Nietzsche 2001, 3). He calls for "hope that the dogmatists' philosophy was only a promise over the millennia" and invites not to be "ungrateful towards dogmatism." This is the *leitmotif* of the preface and to a certain degree of Nietzsche's *Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future* in general: The hope that the dogmatist quest for absolute truth and some "in itself," however based on false assumptions and including its inevitable shipwreck, might serve a productive and promising cultural role and enables new cultural opportunities: "But now that it has been overcome, and Europe breathes a sigh of relief after this nightmare, and at least can enjoy a healthier—well—sleep, we, *whose task is wakefulness itself*, are the heirs to all the force cultivated through the struggle against this error" (Nietzsche 2001, 4). Complete wakefulness might inevitably remain to be a task for some rather than a reality for all, but the sleep could be more or less healthy. It is important to note that Nietzsche defines his role as a heir of this struggle

and its achievements, in particular the value of intellectual honesty. These considerations place Nietzsche in contexts of radicalized enlightenment. He assumes a widely acknowledged collapse of claims on absolutely unconditioned knowledge, and tries to draw new conclusions from this situation.

Looking into Nietzsche's contexts helps to better understand and appreciate his particular reservations against the objectivist and positivist trust in facts and truth. I shall therefore discuss three authors with significant impact on his philosophy in general, and on his understanding of the limits of truth in particular: Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Albert Lange and Auguste Comte. Nietzsche encountered Schopenhauer's *World as Will and Representation* in a bookstore in Leipzig in October or November 1865 and read it with enthusiasm shortly thereafter. Schopenhauer initially triggered Nietzsche's philosophical ambition; namely his discussion of Kant and of contemporary academic philosophy contains two aspects essential to understand the younger's stance towards truth: Schopenhauer observes, first, the collapse of dogmatism and, second, has a sense for the far-reaching cultural implications of this downfall. In his rebuttal of *Professorenphilosophie* Schopenhauer notes that he no longer employs the "fable" cleverly devised by "well-paid lectern-philosophers" of an "immediately and absolutely cognizing, intuiting or apprehending reason" (Schopenhauer 1873, xxvii).³ In direct opposition to such prejudices, Schopenhauer denies "the dogmatist's declaration that the external world is real apart from the subject" and declares that without our understanding the world is nothing: "The entire world of objects is, and remains, representation; and precisely because of this, it is and will always be thoroughly conditioned by the subject, that is: the world has transcendental ideality" (Schopenhauer 1873, 17). The way we perceive and know the world is neither absolute nor unconditioned, but relative to the reasoning subject and its necessary conditions of thought and representation. Schopenhauer is an anti-absolutist who renders claims about "the" nature of "the" reality dogmatic and empty. His "relativism," however, is constrained by the categorically necessary conditions of thought and representation. Schopenhauer therefore neither allows arbitrary subjectivism, nor does he admit a plurality of equally valid phenomenal worlds. The transcendental ideality of the world must be the same for every rational subject.

The early Nietzsche adopted the specific version of Kantianism he found in Schopenhauer and continuously employed and radicalized it. His first philosophical book, *The Birth of Tragedy* already attributes the "hardest fought victory" to the "wisdom and courage of *Kant* and *Schopenhauer*"

³ I refer to Nietzsche's copy of Schopenhauer's works, which is kept at the Herzogin Anna Amalia Bibliothek in Weimar with the reference number C 321-b. The edition Nietzsche read in 1865 is lost. Translations into English are my own.

(Nietzsche 1999, 87). Their sober and considerate application “of the tools of science itself” revealed the “constraints and conditionality of insight” and decisively rejected the optimistic “claim of science to universal validity and universal goals” (Nietzsche 1999, 87). While this overcoming of epistemic optimism is a joint achievement of Kant and Schopenhauer, only Schopenhauer, so Nietzsche assumes, realized its tremendous and dangerous cultural implications. In contrast to the common saying that “Kant has had a living and life-transforming influence” Nietzsche notes that this is the case apparently for “only a very few men” (Nietzsche 1997, 140) such as Schopenhauer. Despite the intellectual revolution Kant initiated he did not reach the minds and hearts of a majority of people. The first impact of Kant on those who fully apprehend the implications and consequences of his philosophy should be a complete undermining of the most fundamental certainties we relied on so far: “If Kant ever should begin to exercise any wide influence we shall be aware of it in the form of a gnawing and disintegrating scepticism and relativism” (Nietzsche 1997, 140). Nietzsche saw Kant as the most significant representative and begetter of relativism; a philosophy which renders our traditional quest for truth impossible.

The case of Heinrich von Kleist illustrates that a proper understanding of Kant naturally leads to relativism in a first step. While the immediate consequence of Kant’s insight must be destructive, in the long run it might open new prospects and emancipatory options. If taken seriously, this insight into our lack of truth, i.e. of any absolute measure of orientation and certainty should lead to a fundamental crisis, which is only postponed, suppressed or ignored. Nietzsche asks with concern: “When, indeed, will men again feel in this natural Kleistian fashion, when will they again learn to assess the meaning of a philosophy in the “most sacred part” of their being?” (Nietzsche 1997, 141). A fundamental crisis of cultural and intellectual orientation is not only natural, it is also needed, because it serves a cultural role and calls for a solution. Only if we really understand the implications of the collapse of dogmatism could we accept its inheritance. The implications of our erroneous trust in a human organ for truth must be taken serious:

[I]f we are to understand what, after Kant, Schopenhauer can be to us—namely the leader who leads us from the depths of sceptical gloom or criticizing renunciation up to the heights of tragic contemplation, to the nocturnal sky and its stars extended endlessly above us, and who was himself the first to take his path. (Nietzsche 1997, 141)

Nietzsche later ceased to believe, that Schopenhauer, his “tragic contemplation” and his whole “artist’s metaphysics” (Nietzsche 1999, 5) could be the guide out of despair. But his engagement with Schopenhauer shows two essential features of Nietzsche’s philosophy in the context of contemporary

debates about post-truth: Nietzsche understood the failure of traditional concepts of truth as the an clearly stated result of the most advanced contemporary philosophy. And this failure begets a crisis, indeed, but a crisis necessary for cultural transformation. These Nietzschean conclusions are reinforced by further readings.

The second important context of Nietzsche necessary to mention is Friedrich Albert Lange's *History of Materialism*, first published in 1866. In addition to Schopenhauer's mainly philosophical and epistemological arguments, Lange points to the history of science, too. He draws a line of counter-arguments against the absolutist aspirations from the ancient Greek materialists and sophists via Thomas Hobbes and Baron d'Holbach to contemporary philosophy and science. Like Schopenhauer, he mainly grants it to the philosophical rigour or Kant, but also to the historical consciousness of scientists and to the intellectual talent of French mathematicians "that today the exact science in all domains of experience no longer set up absolute truths, but only *relative* ones; that the conditions of the acquired knowledge are always recalled, and that the accuracy of all doctrine is justified on the *reservation of the progress of knowledge*" (Lange 1866, 244). The combination of empiricism and fallibilism with a hypothetico-deductive understanding of scientific progress leads Lange to a certain concept of relativism. This concept not only means to provide an appropriate understanding of human knowledge and science; it is also taken as a better, more promising, and self-conscious epistemic attitude. Admitting the lack of certainty is the only attitude in accordance with science, and which enables further scientific and cultural progress:

Lange is quick to point out that Kant's theory of knowledge is one that is compatible with the views of "men of science." He relates Kant's account of the constitutive function of *Sinnlichkeit* to the studies in the physiology of the senses and to Protagoras' principle that "man is the measure of all things." Probing behind Kant's notion that our senses apprehend appearances, our organs. If we add to this the idea that our experience is conditioned by our "intellectual organization," then we see that the phenomenal appearances we apprehend are specifically relative to our sensory-cognitive organization and that beings with another organisation would experience different phenomena. (Stack 1983, 196f)

Reference to physiology adds the materialistic or naturalistic twist typical for Lange's (and Nietzsche's) Kantianism. The cautious reserve, however, also applies to materialism, too. While it is generally rational to prefer naturalistic explications over super-naturalistic ones, unconditioned faith in a universal naturalistic ontology is not. Lange quotes Justus von Liebig to argue that materialism (as much as any other dogmatic ontological doc-

trine) reveals ignorance of the history of science as well as lack of philosophical and mathematical education. Materialism and the application of complex mathematics formed the core of scientific success only after their functional nature was acknowledged. Namely the mathematical conventionalists in France “breathed life into the mathematical formulas, and from the essence of definition and conclusion produced that consistent relativism, which alone forms the basis of all exactness” (Lange 1866, 323). Conscious awareness of the hypothetical and functional character of the premises not only “protects from enthusiasm” (Lange 1866, 323), it also allows science to grow, to reorganize, and to adjust to changing epistemic and cultural needs and interests.

Lange’s prime example is Newton’s introduction of the law of gravitation into cosmology, which helped to unify planetary and molecular theory and to precisely calculate the respective movements. Notwithstanding Newton’s reluctance to admit, Lange is convinced that the very idea of gravitation implies some *actio in distans*, which fundamentally opposes the basic understanding of traditional mechanism:

The absurdity of the effect in the distance, however, was made harmless for the exact sciences, by pushing it back into the metaphysical beginnings of natural science and leaving it as unaffected as possible. The increasing *relativism* soon brought with it that it was no longer necessary for the progress of the sciences to have a completely satisfactory starting point. If only one had a fixed point at all, from which one could advance. The absolute foundation was left for the metaphysician; the natural scientist kept to the relative. (Lange 1866, 359f)

According to Lange, modern science succeeds without a clear and accessible absolute foundation. In his image, science is an economic and functional organisation of practical and mathematical knowledge, which successfully allows us to explicate, calculate, and control natural events. Modern science uses mathematical construction and empirical tests to set aside foundational metaphysical questions about the nature of reality. We do not exactly know how a body makes another very distant body move, but we can predict, calculate, and thereby control it up to an incredible precision. Whether our scientific theories are “true” beyond their practical success, in the sense of corresponding to some absolute and purely objective order of the world, is not (anymore) a scientific question and should therefore be insignificant to scientists. In light of the authors discussed above there seems to be a broad and influential movement, if not consensus, that human beings possess no absolute knowledge. According to this image, modern science works with relatively valid, hypothetical theories, with models, useful fictions, functional simplifications and generalisations.

In 1884, when Nietzsche re-read Lange's *History of Materialism* in its revised and extended edition, he made a note which is very illuminating in regard of his perspective on the active role the subject plays in epistemic contexts—and regarding his broader philosophical project. Nietzsche copies a passage from Lange which says that “a *reality* as man imagines it” in the sense of “an *absolutely firm* existence *independent of us* and yet recognized by us—such a reality does not exist” (Nietzsche 1988, 94).⁴ Nietzsche summarizes the relativist conclusion “We are active in it,” but goes on to give his explication of Lange a peculiar twist: “but that gives no pride to Lange!” (Nietzsche 1988, 94). While emphasizing the enlightening and liberating aspect of the collapse of absolutism, he reproaches Lange for “he desires nothing deceptive, changing, dependent, unrecognizable—these are instincts of *frightened* beings and those who are still morally dominated: they desire an *absolute lord*, something loving truth-talking—in short, this longing of the idealist is morally-religious from the slave's point of view out” (Nietzsche 1988, 94). The alternative Nietzsche has in mind takes the collapse of absolutism not as a sad though appropriate insight into the condition of human knowledge, but as an encouraging invitation to accept and employ our active role with consciousness and confidence: “Just the opposite, our artist-sovereign right could revel in *having created this world*. “subjectively *only*,” but I feel the opposite: *we* have created it!” (Nietzsche 1988, 94). This spirit reveals the same transformatory ambition of the preface to *Beyond Good and Evil*. Nietzsche combines insight in the limited validity of our knowledge-claims and the active role we play in constructing our phenomenal world with an emancipatory and creative goal of conscious affirmation.

A third set of readings I wish to address leads closer to Nietzsche particular understanding of positivism and indicates that he adopted as well as rejected some of its views. Nietzsche owned a German translation of introductory parts of the *Cours de philosophie positive* in which Auguste Comte associates the false assumption of “unconditioned knowledge” with the theological and metaphysical age of humankind, while the mind of the contemporary scientific stadium renounces from such ambitions and “realizes the impossibility to achieve absolute knowledge” (Comte 1880, 3).⁵ Modern man renounces universal truth and accepts the limited validity of the little facts we know. Comte's positivism not only denies absolutism, it even explicitly adopts its alternative, relativism. His understanding of relativism,

⁴ The quotation stems from Lange (1882, 822); the emphases are Nietzsche's.

⁵ I refer to Nietzsche's copy Comte's *Cours de philosophie positive*, an abbreviated German translation kept in Weimar with the reference number C 246. Translations into English are my own. There is good evidence that Nietzsche read other works of and about Comte; see (Piazzesi 2016, 341–361).

however, differs significantly from most of the more recent discussions about that term. In another text probably unknown to Nietzsche, Comte explicitly points to the advantages of “relativism” contained in positivism in his attempt to convince the “true conservatives” to adopt the positivist “synthese finale” as constitutional philosophy. According to Comte, the beneficial validity of “relativisme” not only applies “to the entire intellectual domain, where its universality is no longer disputed, except by backward thinkers” but also to the practical and moral order (Comte 1855, 23).⁶ To Comte, relativism is the informed, reflexive, and modest mind-set of modern science, it is also the only intellectual attitude that ensure human sympathy and cultural progress:

Regarding sentiment, this extension becomes irrefutable if one considers [...] the affinity between relative character and a sympathetic disposition, in contrast with the spontaneous connection between egoism and the absolute. As for activity, relativism must always dominate our projects and our hopes, since continuous improvement supposes constant imperfection. Instead of representing the best as the enemy of good, positivism proclaims that happiness, and even duty, is incompatible with any absolute aspiration, under any of the aspects peculiar to human existence. (Comte 1855, 23)

According to John Stuart Mill’s sympathetic explication of Comte’s philosophy, this is the core doctrine of positivism: “We have no knowledge of anything other than phenomena, and our knowledge of phenomena is relative, not absolute” (Mill 1874, 4).⁷ We only know the relation between facts, their succession and similarity, the essence of things is unknown and unknowable to us. In sharp contrast to the mainly derogatory usage of the word in the 20th century, Comte understands relativism as the epistemologically valid position of non-retarded thinkers. And since a relativistic mind is better prepared to acknowledge alternatives and to admit imperfection, it is naturally better prepared for open-mindedness and progress. In his rejection of positivism, however, Nietzsche moves a step further and denies that significant and informative facts are merely given, because “facts” must always be recognized, selected, pondered, evaluated, in short: interpreted. Ignoring

⁶ In her history of relativism, Maria Baghramian fails to note the positive use of relativism in Comte. Referring to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, she writes that John Grote was the first to introduce “relativism” as a technical term in 1865 (Baghramian 2004, 11). Grote indeed claims that the “notion of the mask over the face of nature is [...] what I have called “relativism”” (Grote 1865, 229). Comte, however, spoke of “relativisme” ten years earlier.

⁷ I refer to Nietzsche’s highly annotated copy of Comte’s *Appel aux conservateurs*. The reference number in the Weimar library is C 713-b. Translations into English are my own.

this need for interpretation exposes intellectual insufficiency, which in turn points to underlying weakness.

This is exactly the view of another French author Nietzsche read between 1885 and 1887 with some enthusiasm in contexts of his criticism of religion and traditional morality: Jean Marie Guyau explicitly acknowledges the “relativity of human knowledge” and highlights the cultural and epistemic advantages of the self-reflexive modesty involved (Guyau 1887, 116).⁸ The quest for absolute certainty and the dogmatic insistence on unconditioned truth reveals the weakness of a barbaric and uncivilized state of mind, driven by emotions rather than reason (Guyau 1887, 109f). Guyau therefore states that tolerance is not only founded in respect for others but based on intelligence. Realizing the infinite variety of the world and the impossibility of any one solution supports informed distrust in human knowledge and conscience as an essential source of tolerance, while “intolerance is only the outside extension of the exclusive domination of dogmatic faith exercised within us” (Guyau 1887, 111). Relativism therefore, is not only supported by objective reasons, but it is the view of a sovereign and self-reflexive culture which could bear to note, tolerate, and endorse alterity. Like Schopenhauer, Lange, Mill, and Comte, Guyau basically takes the relative validity and context-dependency of human knowledge for granted and highlights the emancipatory prospects of a culture, strong enough to admit this condition. Nietzsche’s reservations against absolutism strongly resembles this perspective.

3. On the Virtue of Cautious Reserve

If we, by way of conclusion, approach the issue of “post-truth” in Nietzsche from a broader, less methodological stance, we can distinguish four kinds of arguments he proposes in favour of it at various occasions and in various contexts. First there are the philosophical-epistemic considerations. Eminent philosophers such as Kant, Schopenhauer, Mill, Comte, and others came to the conclusion that the human mind is active. They agreed that we have no immediate and unconditioned access to the empirical world as such, not to mention something absolute. These considerations require intellectual modesty and an experimental attitude, but they do not render rational discourse impossible. Unlike the cliché of a blatant relativist, who takes whatever pleases him for a sacred and unquestionable truth, Nietzsche’s critique of absolutism requires cautious reserve.

Nietzsche’s philosophical anti-absolutist arguments are bolstered by physiological and biological insights Nietzsche derived from his readings

⁸ Nietzsche owned a copy of this book. Reference number in Nietzsche’s late library is C 268. Again, translations into English are my own.

of Lange and of scientists such as Helmholtz, Du Bois-Reymond or Zöllner. Not only our conceptual interpretation, but already sensual perception is an active process, produced by our contingent human nature. Sensory organs simplify and interpret the world, but they respond to the same unqualified world of becoming and they express similar human needs. Our intellect is an instrument of survival, not of truth-acquisition. Regarding observation, however, all members of the human species are basically captured within the same perspective and could therefore agree on their worldview. Within the limited domain of science, human research produces useful and reliable knowledge. Scientific findings are relative to our mathematics and our axioms, relative to our sensory organization and our experimental settings, and they are relative to our epistemic and practical interests, values and needs. Neo-Kantians, positivists, and evolutionary materialists not only agreed on the collapse of absolutism, they also saw their specific understanding of relativism as in accordance with science. Truth became a regulative idea. The assumption of simultaneously absolute and demonstrable starting-points was abandoned and replaced by functional and hypothetical considerations. Nietzsche observes this “loss of certainty” (Schiemann 2008; Schiemann 2016), which separates modern science from classical mechanics, and he was well justified to take it as the advanced and informed understanding of science at his time.

But absolutism was not only undermined by philosophy and by science itself. A refined understanding for language lead to the same result. Nietzsche learned from Herder, Gerber, and others that language is no representation of plain facts, but a translation into human metaphors, which serves a social function embedded in evolutionary needs. Every propositional worldview is a translation into constructed signs and human grammar, by which alone we can speak and think. The social character of language and grammar, however, requires us to use the established metaphors, we cannot do without. This explains why the philological art of careful reading remains important to Nietzsche. He allows a hierarchy of interpretations by means of non-absolute standards of evaluation.

After the decline of Hegel, historical consciousness provides a fourth set of arguments in favour of relativism (Burckhardt, Taine, Mach *et al.*). Not only our cultural certainties and idiosyncrasies, even epistemic categories are subject to change and the development of knowledge is not only progress but change of (epistemic) interests, values, orientation. The collapse of truth results from a self-reflection and self-overcoming of our will to truth; it is not meant to be an objectively true doctrine, but denotes a reasonable epistemic attitude. Nietzsche’s saying that there are no facts but only interpretations, should not be confused with sceptic *epoché* or with arbitrary indifference.

Living creatures must interact with their world, they cannot suspend judgment and completely stay aside, but they must form beliefs about dangerous and friendly, eatable and poisonous, good and bad by interpreting information. Whatever lives, interprets (Simon 1986). As such, interpretations can never be true as such, but they could be more or less successful.

It seems that these philosophical, scientific, linguistic and historical consideration place Nietzsche in close connection to epistemic relativism, a view often defined as a composition of two theses: First, a relativity- or dependency-thesis and second, a plurality- or symmetry-thesis.⁹ While Nietzsche clearly subscribes to the first, he significantly less so does to the second. Experiencing and cognizing are active processes, the characteristics of the biological, social, cultural and individual subject contribute to its emergence, its content, and to its justification. However, if one assumes that an epistemic relativist must entertain the view, that any statement is equally valid or appropriate in any given context or situation, Nietzsche is none. He expresses respect for the ontological assumptions, methods, practices, and results of the sciences. There is broad evidence that he approved of scientific findings, read scientific literature, even intended to study chemistry and physics. Nietzsche accepts the assumption that God is dead, or Copernicus' claim that the earth is moving. He was strongly influenced by his anti-religious and anti-metaphysical contemporary "Age of Science."¹⁰ But far from assuming an unconstrained authority of "the sciences" he rather observes a process of "self-sublimation" (Nietzsche 2006, 119), by which the institutionalized will to truth undermines its own foundations and proves its limited validity (Heit 2016). Science reveals itself to Nietzsche as a subtle and sublime work of art, but this does not render it worthless. He therefore saw relativism as the natural and appropriate epistemic attitude of a confident and conscious scientific time, whereas dogmatist philosophy and absolutist speculations only lead to superstition and failure.

These considerations shed light on a passage in Nietzsche's writings, which is particularly illuminating to estimate his contribution to our contemporary concern with post-truth. Section 631 of *Human All Too Human* including the neighbouring aphorisms, deepens and specifies the educational and transformatory dimension of Nietzsche's views on truth in a modern and free culture. In section 630, he defines: "Conviction is the belief that on some particular point of knowledge one is in possession of the unconditioned truth" (Nietzsche 1996, 199). This belief presupposes that unconditioned truth exists, that we possess perfect methods to acquire it, and that these methods were perfectly employed by the holder of the convic-

⁹ See, for example, (Baghramian 2004, 138); (Boghossian 2006, 73).

¹⁰ See (Moore and Brobjer 2004) or (Heit et al. 2014).

tion. It seems unlikely that all these requirements are met in regard of complex political issues. Notwithstanding their questionable principal tenability, their character alone indicates ignorance, for it denies the hypothetical self-understanding of modern science. Nietzsche therefore concludes that “that the man of convictions is not the man of scientific thought” (Nietzsche 1996, 199). Holding convictions reveals an un-scientific state of mind, but moreover, holding a conviction is not only an epistemic, but also and more importantly a certain psychological state.

Very much like Comte or Guyau, Nietzsche associates the capacity to cope with a post-truth condition with individual and cultural strength. “From the ages in which men were accustomed to believe in possession of unqualified truth there has come a profound *displeasure* with all sceptical and relativistic positions in regard to any question of knowledge; one usually prefers to surrender unconditionally to a conviction harboured by people in authority” (Nietzsche 1996, 200). While the authoritarian state of mind is understandable for its historical function, a refined and adult culture should be in the position to overcome it. The alternative to epistemic convictions, however, is not to take no position whatsoever like an ancient sceptic, or to arbitrarily adopt positions at random like an eristic sophist, but to be conscious, modest and open-minded about them: “But gradually the scientific spirit in men has to bring to maturity that virtue of cautious reserve” (Nietzsche 1996, 200). The epistemic virtues of “wise moderation” and “cautious thinking” are formed and developed through a process of learning and re-learning.

He who has not passed through different convictions, but remains in the belief in whose net he was first captured, is on account of this unchangeability under all circumstances a representative of *retarded* cultures; in accordance with this lack of cultivation (which always presupposes cultivatability) he is a man hard, uncomprehending, unteachable, ungenerous, everlastingly suspicious and unheeding, who neglects no means of constantly asserting his own point of view because he is quite incapable of grasping that there are bound to be other points of view. (Nietzsche 1996, 200)

The diagnosis of relativism assumes that we are inevitably caught in a net of beliefs, and that there are more and different such nets. The absolutist alternative, according to which we could form beliefs which carry no signs of such nets, is untenable according to Nietzsche and to many of his scientifically minded contemporaries. The denial of our fundamental ignorance and uncertainty therefore either leads to the ethnocentric parochialism of those who eagerly adopt any conspiracy-theory that suits their prejudices, or to the universalist self-misunderstanding of those who confuse their justified

beliefs with absolute truths. Both attitudes are the product of weak and delicate conditions. Regarding the prospects of cultural transformation, both are equally dangerous, since they deny the possibility of justified or promising different views. Both cannot cope with the existential lack of absolutes and clear horizons. If the significance of the discussion about truth beyond the scope of epistemic consideration lies in the domain of culture, society, and politics, Nietzsche sheds light on this issues from a very different angle.

The will to truth not only aims for something inaccessible, it also reveals a weak, insecure and stubborn constitution, incapable of cultivation, pluralism, and transformation. Overcoming the ideal of certainty is a liberating and advantageous epistemic attitude of educated, strong, and cultured people. Relativism includes fallibilism and invites change, overcoming, destruction and transformation, whereas dogmatism and the insistence on absolute truth hinders new ideas and cultural evolution. The denial of relativity leads to stagnancy and—according to Guyau—even to barbarism. Accepting the limited validity even of our best convictions is an epistemic and cultural attitude of strength and sovereignty, which is capable of modesty and tolerance, whereas those in need for absolute truth, certainty, and safety cannot endure the existence or even the idea of alternatives. Without alternatives, however, human life is feeble and the future is empty.

4. Theses on Nietzsche and Post-Truth Politics

The cultural functions of truth are reliable orientation, successful control, and justified agreement. Human beings need to find their way in a literal and metaphorical sense, they need to employ, predict and command natural and cultural resources, and they must have procedures to harmonize contradicting opinions and convictions. Knowing the naked and simple truth would be a convenient mean to serve these needs. According to the arguments raised above, however, we do not command this kind of knowledge. The pretence of absolute certainty is therefore either uninformed or strategic, and we should rather take our chance with something less perfect. Nietzsche's denial of plainly objective factual truth results from applying a historically evolved and self-reflexive will to truth; it is supported by reasons and scientific findings. It is (of course) not meant to be an objectively true doctrine, but denotes a reasonable epistemic attitude, while the false belief to know the truth, is intellectually dissatisfying and culturally dangerous. Nietzsche sees a necessity to realize the downfall of the Western quest for absolute truth, because it enables further cultural transformation. Lack of certainty and cautious reserve is liberating and advantageous for educated, strong, cultured people. But Nietzsche also suggests and employs functional equivalents to traditional understandings of truth. He neither renders attempts to well-

informed orientation, strategic control and reasonable agreement futile, nor takes any interpretation equally valid. He proposes an art of critical interpretation, and he displays constrained respect for relevant scientific findings. However, his main emphasis lies on the necessity of conscious decisions and value-judgments.

The critical diagnosis of post-truth politics suggests a cultural division between two camps: those who are the objects of it, found guilty of indifference towards truth, and those who are its subject, judging from a position of privileged knowledge and understanding. According to Nietzsche, there is weakness and self-misunderstanding on both sides of the dispute. Thinking of Donald Trump and, for example, the debate about the number of attendees at his inauguration, the note that serves as motto of this paper comes to mind: “Signal of an *unscientific* man: he takes an opinion for true, if it flatters him and makes him look good” (Nietzsche 1988, 498f). Trump is obviously prepared to perceive features of the world in a very peculiar way, but he, or better, what the name of “Trump” (or Farrange, Johnson, Putin, Erdogan, *et al.*) stands for, represents no position beyond or post truth, but rather before enlightenment or modernity. “Trump” and his supporters confuse their underdetermined convictions with truth, be it obliviously or strategically. Effectively, they lack the strength to accept uncertainty and they apparently do not wish to live in a world with open horizons.

Within the domain of contingency, i.e. within the domain of politics and culture, facts alone are never decisive, even if they were uncontroversial. They always combine with interests, value-judgments and ideals. In our daily practices we have to trust in the reliability of information and testimony provided by others at numerous occasions. Under this condition it is advisable to respect scientific findings, since by collaborative work and critical investigation humankind improved the particular knowledge of numerous features. We know a lot of singular facts, but politics is about value-judgements, social organisation and future orientation. Focus on facts has therefore never been the sole and central concern of politics and public opinion. Political decisions are evaluative and normative judgments, ideally based on the best possible information about the state of affairs and understanding of probable consequences. The concept of absolute truth denies this condition. The idea of evidence-based pragmatic policy-making, often combined with the suggestion that there is no alternative (the TINA-principle), therefore either underestimates or hides the necessity of value-judgments. Talk about post-truth effectively serves to discredit the stubborn political opponent, which similarly shows, to use Nietzsche’s terminology, a bounded spirit.

The alternative to dogmatism and oblivious trust in authorities is not plain and unconstrained truth, but a refined epistemic attitude of cautious reserve. Admitting the limited validity of our knowledge-claims requires first and foremost the self-application of this insight. The public debate about post-truth, however, reveals a lack of this cautious reserve on both sides. Those to whom the “post-truth-objection” applies, happily believe whatever suits them and dogmatically add up positive evidence and reinforcing information while ignoring any irritation or falsification. They confuse their contingent web of beliefs with truth and represent a state of weak, dependent and “retarded cultures” (Nietzsche 1996, 200). Those, however, who raise the “post-truth-objection” in a moral gesture of superior knowledge, similarly lack intellectual honesty in their attempt to counterfeit their political values for evidence-based truisms. According to Nietzsche, we “know” a number of more or less uncontroversial individual facts, but facts alone are never politically decisive, since politics consists in value-judgments and normative orientations. Processes of political decision-making should be well informed, but the objection of post-truth denies the possibility of rational disagreement. “Trump” stands for ignorance and lack of cultivation in his inability to change his perspective and to acknowledge different perspectives, but his opponents also struggle to cope with the irritation he poses. Both sides assume access to “the truth.” Cultural progress in a way envisioned by Nietzsche is impossible with such a state of mind. The idea of true politics merely based on facts negates the justified and necessary struggle of competing interests and values, a struggle which must be fought in an age of post-truth, too.

Acknowledgements

This research is supported by the “Double First Class” development project of Tongji University, Shanghai.

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