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**Nietzsche, Naturalism, and Falsification**

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Joshua Andresen is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the American University of Beirut. His research interests and publications center on the anti-foundationalist implications of Nietzsche's work and deconstruction.

This presentation focuses on one of the greatest challenges still besetting Nietzsche scholarship: making sense of his so-called "falsification thesis." I argue that despite several innovative and insightful attempts to understand Nietzsche's claims about falsification, they have failed because they have not made an adequate connection between Nietzsche's falsification claims and his naturalistic account of the development of human cognition.<sup>1</sup> I begin by presenting and briefly evaluating three distinct types of "falsification" to which Nietzsche calls our attention. I then move to highlighting some of the interpretive difficulties that attend apparent claims to unconditional falsification and some of the possible strategies for resolving them. While we might attempt to resolve these difficulties by rejecting unconditional falsification on grounds of internal incoherence, I argue that Nietzsche's naturalism actually provides an explanation for the success of cognition and science *despite* inevitable falsification. That is, Nietzsche's naturalism explains how we may have knowledge and successfully pursue science *without* avoiding falsification altogether.

## 1. Nietzsche's Falsification Claims

A disservice is done to Nietzsche's falsification claims and our understanding of them when they are lumped together as if they composed a single thesis. There are three distinct kinds of falsification to which Nietzsche calls our attention: 1. falsification due to language, reason, or consciousness; 2. falsification due to the senses; and 3. falsification due to improper judgments about our cognitive status. Nietzsche most frequently writes of falsification of the first sort, which is also the most general and intractable form of falsification. Consciousness and reason falsify because they make use of concepts and grammatical structure which themselves falsify. Thus Nietzsche reaches the conclusion that "all becoming conscious involves a vast and thorough corruption, falsification, superficialization, and generalization" because "the world of which we can become conscious is merely a surface- and sign-world, a world turned into generalities and thereby debased to its lowest common denominator" (*GS* 354). Likewise, he argues that "'Reason' is the cause of our falsification of the testimony of the senses" because it employs concepts such as unity, thinghood, substance, and permanence, while also employing the subject-predicate grammatical structure that insinuates a doer for every deed (*TI* III, 2, 5; *BGE* 21). Language, and the

consciousness and reason that it structures, falsify as a result of their conceptual and grammatical structure. They do so by simplifying experience and by giving it order and form that are either contradicted by other experience or shown to be ultimately incoherent in their own right.

Somewhat less frequently, Nietzsche ascribes falsification also to the senses. He argues that in every sensation and sense impression there is “some fantasy, some prejudice, some irrationality, some ignorance” (GS 57; cf. GS 107, 110, 114). It is, admittedly, very difficult not to understand such statements as at least hyperbolic, if not confused. Indeed, Nietzsche seems to substantially amend his prior claims about the intrinsically erroneous nature of sensation when he suggests that, “As soon as we see a new picture, we immediately construct it with the help of old experiences we have had *depending on the degree* of our honesty and justice. There are no experiences other than moral ones, not even in the realm of sense perception” (GS 114). Here it seems that it is not sensation itself that is responsible for error, but rather a judgment we make about sensation, e.g. that we are sensing the same picture rather than a different one. Thus it seems we are back to the claim stated in *Twilight of the Idols*, that it is reason, and not the senses themselves, that falsify.

While it may be difficult to make sense of the idea that sensation continuously falsifies reality, Nietzsche does, just three sections after claiming that senses “do not lie at all,” give us an example of falsification by the senses. He argues with regard to the apparent movement of the sun across the sky that our eyes are “the constant advocate of error” (TI III, 5). We can add that it is not only our eyes that advocate error. We do not at all feel the movement of the earth that modern astronomy has taught us to accept. Indeed, relying on the senses alone it seems we would be forced to affirm that we are standing still. Our present motion at approximately 1000km/h around the center of the earth would be quite unbelievable. We should note Nietzsche’s suggestion in this section of *Twilight* that both reason and the senses can testify against each other’s errors. Indeed, for Nietzsche, it is reason that allows us to identify the clear sensation that we are not presently moving at 1000km/h as an error and the senses that allow us to identify posits of permanence as erroneous.

Finally, Nietzsche articulates a third kind of falsification that does not so much distort the world as the nature of our relation to it and the status of our claims about it. He argues that we fall into error when we understand our perceptions of and claims about the world to provide an objective or perspective-independent characterization of the world (GM III, 12; cf. GS 301). Here it is not our perceptions or claims *per se* that are falsifying. Rather, it is the objectivity we ascribe to them that is falsifying. Thus Nietzsche allows, for example, our use of “cause” and “effect” “as conventional fictions for the purpose of designation and communication,” but argues we go wrong when we “reify” them and then “project and mix this symbol world into things as if it existed ‘in itself’” (BGE 21). Although Nietzsche may have independent grounds for arguing that “cause,” “effect,” or other concepts that he often refers to as “anthropomorphic” distort the world in some way (cf. GS 109), the specific falsifying error he has in mind in passages like this one on “cause” and “effect” (BGE 21) is that of wrongly construing the perspectival and anthropomorphic as objective and mind-independent.

The most pressing question to resolve with respect to these three forms of falsification is the following: does any one of them, or the three taken together, commit

Nietzsche to general and inevitable falsification of the world, such that all of our beliefs about the world would turn out to be false? It seems we can quickly eliminate the third form from committing Nietzsche to inevitable falsification. For even as he articulates falsification by misconstruing the nature of our cognitive relation to the world, he also articulates an alternative self-understanding. Such falsification should thus simply be understood as contingent and, at least in principle, eradicable. There appears to be somewhat less hope for the other two forms of falsification, however. As we have seen, he claims, “all becoming conscious involves a vast and thorough corruption, falsification, superficialization, and generalization” (GS 354), and that in every sensation and sense impression there is “some fantasy, some prejudice, some irrationality, some ignorance” (GS 57). He even claims “delusion and error [are] a condition of cognitive and sensate existence” (GS 107). Even in *Twilight*, where he appears to vindicate at least the necessary falsification of the senses by assigning falsification instead to reason, he reinforces the inevitability of falsification by reason and language by arguing that “every word we say and every sentence” speaks in favor of the error of being over becoming (TI III, 5). Even if we discard Nietzsche’s remarks about the falsification intrinsic to sensation and sensate existence as confused hyperbole that Nietzsche finally comes to reject in *Twilight*, he seems, *pace* Clark, to clearly and emphatically reassert general falsification, at least whenever we talk about any “thing” that “exists,” i.e. whenever we talk about anything at all (TI III, 5).<sup>2</sup>

As I mentioned at the outset, there are a number of interpretive difficulties in making sense of Nietzsche’s apparent commitment to general and inevitable falsification. Among these, an unconditional claim of falsification seems to commit Nietzsche to that which he clearly denies, the existence of determinate mind-independent properties, or things in themselves. Lanier Anderson has recently defended an interpretation of Nietzsche’s falsification claims that seeks to show how Nietzsche can maintain falsification and avoid any commitment to things in themselves. Anderson argues that Nietzsche takes all consciousness to be falsifying because consciousness necessarily distorts the “*unconscious* sense impressions,” which are for Nietzsche essentially chaotic (Anderson 2005, p. 190-1).<sup>3</sup> It is difficult, however, to make sense of the claim that consciousness distorts, or even transforms, unconscious sense impressions without recommitting him to the existence of determinate mind-independent entities. For if sense impressions are truly disordered or chaotic, then they lack any determinate content that could be falsified. Conversely, if sense impressions do have determinate content that could be falsified, then we must either conclude that Nietzsche was in fact committed to mind-independent determinate properties, or we should downgrade “falsification” to mere hyperbole because the ordering or “logicizing” of *mental* sense impressions with determinate content would not amount to any fundamental falsification, or even transformation, in the sense intended. As with the general claim that language, reason, or consciousness falsifies some underlying pre-cognitive and pre-linguistic content, it seems we must either conclude that “falsification” is a misnomer because such content has no determinate qualities, or that Nietzsche was committed to things in themselves after all. Unfortunately, Anderson’s proposed solution does not furnish us with a way both to take falsification seriously and avoid ascribing to Nietzsche commitments he explicitly rejects.<sup>4</sup> Nietzsche’s naturalistic account of cognition, however, does enable us to do both of these. With its help we can

understand the claims that consciousness *and* sensation falsify as substantive epistemological theses that do not depend on any commitment to mind-independent determinate properties, or things in themselves.

## 2. Falsification and Naturalism

Nietzsche's naturalism consists in a commitment to do without transcendent and teleological explanation in general (cf. *GS* 109, *BGE* 230). With regard to humanity in particular, it is a commitment to interpret human phenomena consistently and continuously with the rest of the natural world. Nietzsche's naturalism is a heuristic principle that leads him to develop interpretations of phenomena that are consistent with a non-teleological developmental picture of the natural world. In turn, the principle requires intense scrutiny of any concept or theory that makes recourse to ideas or principles that are inconsistent with such a picture. It is a virtue of his naturalism that he is able to explain the source of conceptual "errors" such as "permanence," "substance," or "being," explain why they are erroneous, and explain how they nevertheless serve both human life and human knowledge. On Nietzsche's naturalistic picture, human knowledge succeeds not because of any objective correspondence between minds and world, nor due to necessary conformity of objects to forms and categories of cognition. Human knowledge succeeds because conceptual capacities are just good enough to serve our interests. In other words, we parse the world in ways which are wrought with error but nevertheless allow us to meet our needs and even plan for the future. What stands behind our success? The luck of our evolutionary development. If our capacities were either ill-suited to the world we live in or ill-suited to meeting our interests, then either we would not have survived at all, or survived as very differently abled creatures. The fact that our capacities are well suited to the world we live in does not, however, mean that they get things right. Perhaps Nietzsche's most interesting insight, and what he claims might well sound strangest, is that falsifying perceptions, judgments, and beliefs may well be the most valuable; they may even count most strongly as knowledge (e.g. the interpretation of the world given by physics (*BGE* 14) or the quantification of the world in science more generally (*BGE* 4)).

We are now in a position to understand Nietzsche's claims of fundamental falsification by both the senses and the higher linguistic elements of cognition in a naturalistic-evolutionary manner. Nietzsche explicitly argues that "No living being would be preserved had not the [...] disposition to affirm rather than suspend judgment, to err and make things up rather than wait, to agree rather than deny, to judge rather than be just – been cultivated so extraordinarily strongly" (*GS* 111). He also argues that "We have arranged for ourselves a world in which we are able to live – by positing bodies, lines, planes, causes and effects, motion and rest, form and content; without these articles of faith no one could endure living! But that does not prove them. Life is not an argument; the conditions of life might include error" (*GS* 121). In light of these passages and Nietzsche's general naturalistic account of cognition, when Nietzsche claims that "delusion and error [are] a condition of cognitive and sensate existence" (*GS* 107), we should understand him as claiming that our sensory capacities are such that we inevitably crudely perceive the world as consisting in discrete, unified, objects that

persist unchanged over time. Moreover, the crudeness of sensory capacities leads us to quickly group insufficiently dissimilar things as equivalent to one another (e.g. trees, other humans, etc.). The falsification that begins with our senses is extended by concepts and grammatical structures that formalize many of the sensory errors while adding lots of new ones (e.g. cause and effect, form and content, atom, soul, will, etc.).

While Nietzsche presents many of these falsifications as actually necessary for life and integral to knowledge (since all knowledge is expressed in signs and much of scientific knowledge relies on quantification of phenomena), we must still face the question, from what perspective does Nietzsche gain the right to describe sensory and conceptual simplification as falsification? It seems Nietzsche must reserve some privileged perspective immune to falsification for his own criticisms. Fortunately, Nietzsche does not need to make recourse to such an ad hoc position of personal immunity or privileged perspective. In fact, we have already seen a substantive clue as to how Nietzsche can make general falsification claims without falling prey to self-referential paradoxes. At *Twilight* III, 5 when he discusses the errors of both reason and the senses he makes it clear that each can testify against the other, as well as testifying against themselves in the form of immanent critique. Thus empirical claims can be shown erroneous by other empirical claims and/or rational arguments, and rational or logical claims can be shown to be erroneous by demonstrating their internal incoherence or their inconsistency with empirical claims. All that Nietzsche needs to make his general falsification claims plausible is 1. agreement that we generally tend to perceive and describe the world under the forms and categories Nietzsche characterizes as erroneous (e.g. as consisting in discrete unified objects that are causally linked and persist unchanged over time); 2a. perceptual evidence that suggests “objects” are neither unified wholes nor unchanging; and/or 2b. rational arguments that show basic concepts such as “substance” or “cause” to be ultimately incoherent. If we are willing to assent to the first claim and grant that Nietzsche has either the perceptual or rational evidence or both on his side, then he is well justified in claiming that we are in error any time we perceive the world as consisting of discrete objects grouped by kinds and linked by causal interaction. Despite their generality, Nietzsche’s falsification claims must not be understood as trivial or academic quibbles. They are the constituting evidence of the naturalistic conception of cognition and knowledge he develops. They show how knowledge is possible without the presuppositions of “pre-established harmony,” transcendental subjects, or even objective correspondence between mind and world.

The paradoxes that seem to surround Nietzsche’s falsification claims recede still further when we confront his claims about the continuity of knowledge and ignorance. Nietzsche argues in a variety of passages that knowledge and ignorance are not opposed fundamentally, but rather that knowledge is built on and a refinement of ignorance, that knowledge and falsification are linked insofar as they serve the higher value of life, and that life uses both to its advantage (*BGE* 24, *GS* 110, cf. *GS* 111 re. logic). Nietzsche, in turn, calls into question the opposition of truth and falsity, suggesting instead “degrees of apparentness” as a more useful measure (*BGE* 34). When he comes to examine the scientific will to truth (*GS* 344, *GM* III, 24-5), Nietzsche suggests first, that the means science uses in its pursuit of truth (quantification, “matter,” “cause” and “effect,” etc.) are known simplifications of

phenomena that do not, in fact, correspond to the phenomena in question (cf. *BGE* 24); and second, that the absolute freedom from deception science seeks is not actually conducive to life. The position Nietzsche articulates is one where science fundamentally makes use of both truth and untruth in the service of life.

### 3. Naturalism, Falsification, and Science

Despite some attempts to broaden the scope and meaning of Nietzsche's naturalism, commentators have tended to reduce it to a commitment to only what is consistent with our best empirical science.<sup>5</sup> While Nietzsche is certainly friendly toward science, I have argued that he neither accepts science as the final arbiter of truth and knowledge (cf. *BGE* 14, 21), nor does his naturalism rest on or entail a commitment to science. Nietzsche's naturalism does not entail an epistemological commitment to any privileged source of truth or knowledge. Rather, when we understand Nietzsche's naturalized account of human cognition, we see that the tendency to make falsifying inferences arises specifically because of our successful evolutionary development. As Kevin Hill has recently argued, Nietzsche responds to the long-standing puzzle of the harmony between human cognition and the world with neither a transcendent or transcendental account, but with a naturalistic evolutionary account. However, contrary to Hill's further claims, Nietzsche does not invoke "falsification" to qualify ordinary human "phenomenal" perceptions of the world in contrast to supposedly truer "physical" accounts given by our best science. Given the tendency to align Nietzsche's naturalism with the claims of science, Hill's insightful account is worth examining as a case in point.

As Hill convincingly shows, Nietzsche's naturalism develops, at least in part, as a critical alternative to Kant's attempt to guarantee the objective validity of knowledge about the physical world by recourse to the noumenal self that imposes space and time on the natural world we experience. Only by making the Euclidian-Newtonian forms of space and time necessary and universal forms of experience can Kant win the objective validity he seeks for science, particularly the paradigm of Newtonian physics. The price Kant has to pay for such a guarantee, however, is the posit of a noumenal subject that stands outside the natural order insofar as it gives the natural order its very form. By contrast, Nietzsche rejects the excess of the noumenal realm as itself incoherent, rejects the thesis that the human mind defines the nature of the world, and develops an account of human knowledge that accounts for its success developmentally. The price Nietzsche has to pay for his naturalistic account—one that he is very happy to pay, though many of us may not be—is forfeiture of any guarantee of objective, as well as intersubjective, validity for knowledge claims. Nietzsche instead gives us a picture in which knowledge claims reflect human cognitive capacities and interests, are valid only relative to a perspective, and are continuous with error and ignorance rather than bivalently true or false. For instance, the desk in front of me is, from my perspective, perfectly solid, as are the books, papers, glass, and computer sitting on top of it. From a different perspective, however, all of the "objects" I've just named are not solid at all. They consist mostly of empty space. It is not even clear that there is any solid matter at all, given our ability to describe what we previously took to be material as loci of force. "My solid material desk" and "loci of immaterial force" are clearly inconsistent and

opposed descriptions of the same part of the natural world, each of which is valid in terms of the cognitive interests of its perspective. There is no general answer to the question, which one is the right or true description? Again, the right or true description can only be determined by the cognitive interests of the perspective in question. If I want to know whether the desk I've just been given is a sturdy, well-built one that is still in good solid condition (rather than a desk that was shoddily built or perhaps structurally unsound because internally eaten away by termites), then questions of the micro-physical structure and which of the going theoretical descriptions is the proper one is of no interest to me. Likewise, if I am attempting to determine the proper characterization of what has historically been called "matter," the specific characteristics of any particular desk will have no bearing on my investigation. Moreover, we may even find that more than one description of the basic structure of "matter" is appropriate, just as wave-particle duality holds that all matter and energy can be described as particulate or as wave-like. These are not equivalent descriptions of the same thing in the way that "Schnee" and "snow," 47 and XLVII,  $x^2 + y^2 = 1$  and  $\sin^2\theta + \cos^2\theta = 1$  are. Wave-particle duality ascribes inconsistent descriptions to the same phenomena, i.e. descriptions that parse the phenomena in different ways, both of which are equally justifiable. Indeed, following Nietzsche's recommendation, we ought to understand the ability to describe the same phenomena from a variety of (not necessarily consistent) perspectives to be the mark of greater objectivity.<sup>6</sup>

Bearing these arguments in mind, we should reject Hill's account of Nietzsche's naturalism and falsification claims whereby Nietzsche diverges from Kant insofar as he refuses to identify space and time as we experience them with "the space and time of nature" (Hill 2003, p. 136). For Hill, the space and time of nature is just space and time as it is identified by our best scientific theory (ibid., pp. 127-8). The implication is not the trivially true claim that our standard Euclidian experience of space does not accord with contemporary theories of "curved" space. The implication is rather that there is a single universal and objective character of space and time that science is in the business of identifying. Nietzsche, however, specifically rejects the idea that science gives us objective knowledge of the world (*BGE* 14) and calls into question the very idea of a determinate objective world. If the nature described by science is not to take on the characteristics of the thing in itself, then it must remain one perspectival interpretation among many possible others. The actual state of affairs of contemporary science, wherein there is no consensus on the best or right theory of the basic character of the natural world should remind us that in science as elsewhere "perspective estimates" reign (*BGE* 34; cf. *GS* 374, *BGE* 2, 11).

## Conclusion

Unfortunately, the issue of falsification has often been set up as if it were an all or nothing proposition. Either we live with complete falsification, or falsification turns out to have been mistaken and we can go back to relying on our common sense beliefs in empirical science.<sup>7</sup> I have attempted to cut a middle path with the help of Nietzsche's naturalism. There may, in fact, be very little chance of escaping falsification altogether, insofar as it seems we must falsely imply unity and permanence of some "thing" in order

to speak about anything at all. Nietzsche's most important insight, however, is that the basic falsifications and simplifications of sensation and language are not only often quite useful, but also the cornerstone of knowledge and science. That is, we accomplish a great deal relying on simplification, approximation, and concepts whose ultimate coherence we cannot establish. These insights form the backbone of Nietzsche's naturalism, the epistemological aspect of which transforms our basic understanding of cognition and science. The central implications that follow are that cognition can succeed without correspondence between mind and world and that the standard assumption thought to be absolutely indispensable for science, that the world is fundamentally ordered, or a cosmos, is unnecessary. On Nietzsche's naturalistic view, the measure of cognitive and scientific success is our ability to order phenomena, not our ability to discover order in nature itself.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the most insightful recent interpretations of Nietzsche's falsification claims have been given by Hill 2003, Hussain 2004, and Anderson 2002, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche lists the errors of "thinghood" and "being," amongst several others. Cf. Clark 1990, pp. 103ff.

<sup>3</sup> Anderson is referencing *WP 569/KSA 12:9[106]*. Cf. Anderson's discussion of Leibniz's account of "*petites perceptions*" and unconscious mental representations in Anderson 2002, pp. 97ff.

<sup>4</sup> A thorough discussion of Anderson's insightful contributions to understanding Nietzsche's falsification claims and their possible reliance on a Leibnizian conception of *petites perceptions* is, unfortunately beyond the scope of this short presentation. In work in progress, however, I argue that although of great interest in their own right, Leibniz's *petites perceptions* are an inappropriate model for Nietzsche's "raw sensory 'material'" because *petites perceptions* are *already* mental representations of sensation.<sup>4</sup> That is, *petites perceptions* are neither raw nor chaotic in the way sensation is supposed to be for Nietzsche. Perhaps more importantly, because unconscious *petites perceptions* are themselves mental representations, they are already a transformation of something. For Leibniz, that something is mind-independent objects. He likens *petites perceptions* to "images of sensible qualities", where sensible qualities are themselves mental representations of something physical (Leibniz 1982, 54-5). While it is true that unconscious *petites perceptions* are frequently characterized by Leibniz as "confused" insofar as they have not been ordered by conscious perception, they are neither chaotic nor formless in the way Nietzsche describes sensation in the *Nachlass* passage in question.

Anderson's slide from formless raw sensory material to sensations that represent is not an unessential part of his argument that can be excised or corrected. For in order to make sense of falsification as falsifying, there must be some *thing* that is falsified, i.e. something with some formal characteristics or qualities. Anderson can conclude that consciousness falsifies unconscious sensations only if those sensations have some definite content. If sensation is indeed chaotic, formless, and unformalizable, then there does not appear to be any content that could meaningfully be said to be falsified. Indeed, as Nietzsche goes on to argue in the *Nachlass* passage in question, "'thinghood' is first created by us" out of "sense-reception and activity of understanding" (*KSA 12: 9[106]/WP 569*). That is, the identification of "things" as such depends on our understanding. Without the activity of the understanding, there simply are no "things"—and thus, literally, nothing to falsify.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Hill 2003, 132-3; Clark 1998, 53, 59.

<sup>6</sup> *GM III, 12*. A thorough discussion of the conception of "objectivity" Nietzsche articulates and defends at *GM III, 12* is beyond the scope of this essay. In work in progress, however, I argue that the conception of "objectivity" Nietzsche defines at *GM III, 12* parallels and uses the same language as his description of the power and right of free spirits in the 1886 preface to *Human All-Too-Human*: "the ability to have in one's power one's for and against and to suspend and reinstate (*aus- und einzuhängen*) them..." (*HAH* Preface 6; *GM III, 12*). At *GM III, 12* Nietzsche discusses objectivity and knowledge in terms of possessing a diversity of perspectives and conflicting value judgments ("one's for and against"). Nietzsche insists that his sense of "knowing" depends on manipulating one's perspective and the values constituting it in the context of a specific will and set of affects. "Knowledge" depends on a temporary arrangement of values in which some of one's value commitments are suspended and others emphasized. Importantly, however, one's value commitments, as they are manifest in one's will and affects, are never suspended altogether. For Nietzsche suggests that to do so would mean "*castrating* the intellect." In contrast to knowledge, Nietzsche's "objectivity" depends precisely on maintaining a diversity of affects, values, and wills. Although knowledge depends on temporarily fixing values, objectivity, for Nietzsche, demands control over a range of evaluations. As in the preface to *Human All-Too-Human*, Nietzsche's discussion of perspectivism at *GM III, 12* calls attention to the diversity of valuations controlled and cultivated by those capable of adhering to this new sense of "objectivity" and pursuing the Nietzschean project of reevaluation. Reevaluation thus demands reckoning with a range of different and possibly conflicting knowledge claims.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Clark 1990, pp. 103-9.

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