

# Chapter 2

## Truth, Knowledge and Life

### 2.1 Introduction

What is the *value* of truth or knowledge? Nietzsche opens *Beyond Good and Evil* by posing this question, which he says philosophers have always overlooked (Nietzsche 1966, p. 9). We take it for granted that knowledge is a good thing, especially if we are teachers or researchers, and most of all if we are both. Nietzsche wants to turn this into a *problem*. A claim that knowledge has value ‘in its own right’, apart from other values (such as pleasure or happiness, for instance) looks like mere assertion. But any other answer raises the possibility that knowledge might not always be a good thing, a troubling idea at the best of times, and one that undermines our beliefs about education. It forces us to reconsider its aim and purpose. As we shall see, this is just what Nietzsche wants to do.

What determines the value of something, anyway? That is the deeper question that Nietzsche is raising. Again, it is an unfamiliar one. We usually regard values as somehow given, or accepted on the authority of parents, teachers and other authorities, like most of our everyday knowledge. If any question of their source arises, one traditional answer is provided by religion: values come from God, a perfect being who is wholly distinct from the world of our experience. Western philosophy gives a parallel solution in Plato’s idealistic metaphysics of timeless ‘Forms’, the highest of which is ‘the Good’. Nietzsche not only rejects these doctrines, but makes a bolder claim: in today’s world, nobody can believe in them. The blame (or credit, if one prefers) for their loss of credibility goes to modern science’s insistence on proven truth and readiness to criticise even generally held beliefs. We now expect to find natural causes for everything that once seemed to come from a ‘higher’ world, including the principles and values that provide guidance in life. The irony here is that the will to truth which religion and metaphysics held up as a virtue has, in the end, destroyed the fundamental beliefs that they relied on.

What is so bad about this? one might say. Surely we are better off without illusions. But Nietzsche claims that Western culture faces a deep crisis, even if

many are unaware of it. As long as the drive to truth was exercised within limits, tolerating illusions and leaving key premises unquestioned, it did no harm. But when it removes the basis on which beliefs and actions have been justified, the outcome is the loss of meaning and value that Nietzsche labels ‘nihilism’. This loss is symbolised in a much-quoted line: ‘God is dead.’ It occurs in a narrative section of *The Gay Science*. A ‘madman’ appears in a marketplace, announcing that he is seeking God. When people there refuse to take him seriously, he goes on:

Whither is God?’ he cried; ‘I will tell you. *We have killed him* – you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing?’ (Nietzsche 1974, p. 181).

It is clear that this ‘death of God’ is really an event to do with ourselves, although one that most do not realise has happened. No longer able to look to religious authority for our values but without any replacement, we are left with no direction or meaning in life. The only escape from this predicament would be a discovery of new values and a new concept of truth. But where are those to be found? According to Nietzsche, past philosophers have found life in the present world wanting, as judged by a higher standard: that is, compared with another, ideal world. In his own time, pessimistic thinkers such as Schopenhauer denied the value of life without holding out hopes of a future reward. Nietzsche does not want simply to replace this with a positive valuation, in the manner of contemporary writers such as Eugen Dühring. Instead, he writes:

Judgments, judgments of value, concerning life, for it or against it, can, in the end, never be true: they have value only as symptoms, they are worthy of consideration only as symptoms; in themselves such judgments are stupidities. One must by all means stretch out one’s fingers and make the attempt to grasp this amazing finesse, *that the value of life cannot be estimated*. Not by the living, for they are an interested party, even a bone of contention, and not judges; not by the dead, for a different reason (Nietzsche 1954, p. 474).

Nietzsche’s point is that, without any external standard, life itself must be the measure of value. Putting this principle into practice, however, will bring about a revolution in our judgements of good and bad, right and wrong: a ‘revaluation of values’. When moral values such as justice are placed on the scales and weighed accurately, as he puts it, they will be discarded. In their place will appear new virtues, some looking very like the traits long condemned as vices by morality. This is a pressing task: Nietzsche’s Zarathustra urges us to break the old tablets (he may have the Ten Commandments in mind) and write new values on tablets of our own (Nietzsche 1954, pp. 308–327).

A parallel argument applies to concepts of knowledge and truth. Idealists such as Plato devalue the world of experience, Nietzsche suggests, by categorising it as semblance rather than reality. They take knowledge to be reached by thought, not through the senses, and to have what is unchanging and self-identical as its object. In contrast, Nietzsche asserts that all knowledge is perspectival, tied to a standpoint,

and thus limited to appearances. ‘Today all of us are believers in the senses’, he writes, meaning that we are empiricists who accept the senses as giving access to reality (Nietzsche 1974, p. 332). But this philosophical change involves rethinking what is meant by knowledge.

The idealist metaphysics that Nietzsche thinks is unsupportable has a strong motive. Like belief in God and future reward or punishment, it appears as a solution to a problem. What is more, this is not a problem that can be avoided by living beings like us. We live in a world of continual becoming, and have to process a chaotic diversity of sensations and impressions in order to cope with our environment. Since pure becoming is ungraspable in usable concepts, anyone truly aware of its reality would be incapable of meaningful thought or deliberate action, Nietzsche suggests: ‘such a man would no longer believe in his own being, would no longer believe in himself, would see everything flowing asunder in moving points and would lose himself in this stream of becoming’ (Nietzsche 1983, p. 62). So, is knowledge at all possible for us? Idealism offers reassurance that we can, after all, get a grasp of reality, but it does this by positing another reality, above and beyond sensory experience. Since Nietzsche regards that as a myth, the puzzle he faces is to find some understanding of truth consistent with our human situation.

## 2.2 Nietzsche’s Epistemology

One approach that appeals to him is what is nowadays called an evolutionary epistemology, that is, a theory of knowledge in which concepts and beliefs are seen as like the features of any organism that enable it to cope with a competitive world. Nietzsche adds his own touch by remarking that humans would be at a disadvantage compared to bigger and fiercer animals if not for their intellect and their ability to band together for mutual support. Hence, they develop a ‘herd instinct’. This is a concept he returns to in later reflections on morality, but in early writings such as ‘On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense’ it leads to the claim that what ‘truth’ means is just social consensus.

For now that is fixed which henceforth shall be ‘truth’; that is, a regularly valid and obligatory designation of things is invented, and this linguistic legislation also furnishes the first laws of truth: for it is here that the contrast between truth and lie first originates (Nietzsche 1954, p. 44).

Lies are condemned as breaches of convention, especially when they serve the individual’s self-interest at the expense of the community. Nietzsche argues that this disapproval is due to the harm done by lies: only later does lying come to be seen as bad in itself, apart from its further consequences. That shift corresponds to the appearance of the ‘will to truth’, for which truth is a value to be preserved and pursued in its own right.

In this essay, Nietzsche sketches an ambitious theory of knowledge. Society’s notion of truth is determined by the rules of its language. These are largely

conventional, as we see in comparing natural languages. As for our beliefs about the world, these come from the senses, and are based on nerve signals which we have no reason to believe resemble their external causes. When these inputs appear in consciousness as ideas, they are brought under general concepts and related by categories such as space and time, substance and accident, or cause and effect. This leads to a key thesis: concepts are representations of sense impressions in a different medium, that of thinking. So far Nietzsche has followed theorists of perception such as Hermann von Helmholtz. However, whereas Helmholtz posits unconscious processes of inference, Nietzsche compares the processing of sense data to a literary device: *metaphor*. As he was aware, this word in the original Greek implies a ‘carrying across’. A metaphor transfers an idea into a different vocabulary: it is like a translation from one language to another. The essay’s argument is summed up in an often quoted passage, which is itself highly metaphorical.

What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms—in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins (Nietzsche 1954, pp. 46–47).

The only kind of ‘truthfulness’ identified here is a social expectation of conformity with the concepts and beliefs that are commonly accepted in the community and passed on through upbringing and education. This conceptual structure is so systematic and seemingly independent that we forget its origin as a set of metaphors for sensory impressions.

In his mature writing Nietzsche returns to these issues with a new terminology. Two key terms are ‘projection’ and ‘perspective’. Both had been used by psychologists and taken up by the philosopher Gustav Teichmüller, a former Basel colleague whose work Nietzsche read with interest (Small 2001, pp. 41–58). All knowledge is perspectival, Teichmüller argues. That is, it assumes a standpoint from which the world appears in a particular way. Nietzsche endorses this thesis, giving it a naturalistic turn: ‘there would be no life at all if not on the basis of perspective estimates and appearances’ (Nietzsche 1966, p. 46). Here valuation and observation go together. Our values are ‘projections’ of drives or affects, and our perceptions represent the way things appear from a particular standpoint.

The metaphor of perspective is consistent with Nietzsche’s notion of interpretation. However elaborately and systematically our interpretation is conceptualised, it is just our perspective, and other conscious beings might see and think reality quite differently. ‘We cannot look around our own corner’, he writes, ‘it is a hopeless curiosity that wants to know what other kinds of intellects and perspectives there *might* be’ (Nietzsche 1974, p. 336). Despite this advice, he often speculates about identifying and even trying out alternatives. Perspectives can be narrow or wide, from above or below, and *long* perspectives are especially useful. ‘The devil has the broadest perspectives for God; therefore he keeps so far away from God—the devil

being the most ancient friend of wisdom' (Nietzsche 1966, p. 87). Radical changes to our world-view involve 'resolute reversals of accustomed perspectives and valuations' (Nietzsche 1969, p. 119). He even claims for himself a special talent for reversing perspectives: 'the first reason why a "revaluation of values" is perhaps possible for me alone' (Nietzsche 1969, p. 223).

This line of thought enables Nietzsche to reclaim a concept that one might think he has given up altogether: the idea of *objectivity*. He writes:

There is *only* a perspective seeing, *only* a perspective 'knowing'; and the *more* affects we allow to speak about one thing, the *more* eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our 'concept' of this thing, our 'objectivity' be (Nietzsche 1969, p. 119).

Admittedly, this is not the usual meaning of 'objectivity'. In everyday talk it has several senses, often mixed up. Sometimes it refers to the status of knowledge claims, at other times to the mental states or motives that have given rise to them. In the first case, we describe a judgement as 'objective' if it is true or false for everyone—that is, if its validity is not restricted to particular people or groups. The word is also used as a description of the motives lying behind a truth claim. Biased or prejudiced people, we say, are not 'objective' in their judgements. Now, Nietzsche rejects the notion of objectivity implied there, because he thinks it sets up an ideal of impersonal and disinterested observation which is impossible for living human beings—or at least, for healthy ones. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* he mocks it as 'immaculate perception'. But he does not reject the other use of the word. Instead, he puts his own stamp on it by re-defining objectivity as the power to see things from many perspectives, each adding something to our knowledge and, by the same token, making it available to others.

Another word for a flexible strategy in seeking knowledge is 'experimentalism'. Borrowed from John Dewey, the label was used by Walter Kaufmann to characterise Nietzsche's approach to theorising. It fits Nietzsche's own uses of the word 'experiment', especially in his middle period, when he holds up scientific methodology for praise. One passage in *The Gay Science* reads: 'I favour any *skopsis* to which I may reply: "Let us try it!" But I no longer wish to hear anything of all those things and questions that do not permit any experiment' (Nietzsche 1974, p. 115). Experimenting with ideas is consistent with returning to the same issues on different occasions, with each an opportunity to try a fresh approach, and Nietzsche often does just that.

What are the features of an experimental attitude? First of all, it implies accepting uncertainty. We do not perform an experiment when we know what the outcome will be. Hence, a suspension of existing opinions—and an avoidance of fixed beliefs—is a precondition for any new enquiry. 'Convictions are prisons', Nietzsche warns (Nietzsche 1954, p. 638). Secondly, it requires a willingness to 'live dangerously'. Many thought-experiments are risks, or so Nietzsche assumes. Questioning whether we can manage our lives in the light of meaningful values and genuine knowledge is something most people avoid for just that reason. Thirdly, we must not be discouraged if things go wrong. 'A thinker sees his own

actions as experiments and questions—as attempts to find out something. Success and failure are for him *answers* above all’ (Nietzsche 1974, p. 108). Nietzsche demands that any theory, taken as a thought-experiment, must be carried through to its ultimate consequences, even if those amount to some kind of absurdity (Nietzsche 1966, p. 48). By making us go back to our premises, this ‘failure’ may result in some theoretical breakthrough.

Questions about the basis of knowledge and strategies for understanding the world around us are familiar to students of philosophy. They go back to the ancient Greeks and continue to be central to philosophical debate. But Nietzsche raises a further issue which is far less common, and potentially more radical in its consequences, concerning *life*.

### 2.3 The Problem of Knowledge and Life

The question of knowledge and life runs through his thought from beginning to end. Can we live with knowing the truth about reality? If not, which should we choose? The problem is inescapable for humanity, owing to what Nietzsche calls our *will to truth*. As he explains it, this is a trait that competes with our tendency to self-deception, but remains strangely persistent. We refuse to be content with beliefs that make us feel comfortable or satisfied: we want to know whether they are *true* or not. Nietzsche thinks this need is a real one, found especially in modern science, and a puzzle for the biological theory of the mind that attracts him. If the beliefs that enable us to manage our life turn out to be illusions, as he thinks they do, what have we gained through that discovery? Further, if this will to truth does more harm than good, why would it have become stronger and stronger?

For education, these are practical issues. Is education about knowledge or about life? Most of us will probably reply: ‘Both, of course’. But in that case, Nietzsche argues, it must face the tension that exists between the two sides. This will extend across the whole range of educational issues, from theories about teaching and learning to policies for school systems in modern society. His thesis about the underlying conflict gives us a way of seeing all these issues as belonging together. On this view, educational practices are our responses to the challenge of reconciling knowledge and life within a changing human world.

Let us look more closely at what Nietzsche means in treating knowledge and life as opposing powers. The best place to start is his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy* (Nietzsche 1967). It offers a picture of life in ancient Greece which is very different from the usual image of classical culture as having the same tranquillity and harmony as its art and architecture. Nietzsche claims to have uncovered an earlier period of severe crisis, brought about by insight into the true nature of human life as bound to conflict and suffering. ‘The Greek knew and felt the terror and horror of existence’, he writes (Nietzsche 1967, p. 42). The perception that he attributes to the Greeks is bound up with the perceived universality of becoming, further defined as an unending

conflict between opposed forces. Conflict and suffering, they saw, were essential to life, and so impossible to eliminate. What could this lead to but hopeless despair?

The Greeks, Nietzsche suggests, found a solution in the cultivation of illusion. They created an imaginary world of images, ruled by Apollo, the god of measure and moderation. The gods of Olympus, living an idealised version of human life, replaced the earlier Titans. Sculpture, architecture and painting, as well as epic poetry such as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, are the Apollonian art forms. At the same time, the Greeks were aware of another response: a surrender to the primordial nature of life which affirmed and celebrated its excesses. Nietzsche calls this the 'Dionysian', and identifies its expression as music: in particular, music relying on the power of harmony rather than the regular measures of music and poetry. The Apollonian and Dionysian drives eventually came together in a single art form, classical tragedy. The central thesis of *The Birth of Tragedy* is that tragic drama enabled the Greeks to cope with an otherwise unbearable insight into the nature of human life. Nietzsche goes on to describe how this solution was overtaken by cultural changes that made it unworkable. Later societies have failed to remedy the situation, although for a time he believed that Richard Wagner's 'art-work of the future' might provide a way forward.

In these early writings on aesthetics and epistemology, Nietzsche is concerned with the same problem: the issue of knowledge and life, the contradiction between the human need for illusion and the countervailing force he calls the *will to truth*. At first sight a straightforward notion, this becomes puzzling on closer examination.

What exactly is the will to truth? In the past, Nietzsche explains, knowledge has been valued for contributing to moral virtue or worldly happiness or eternal salvation, but not for its own sake. 'It is something new to history that knowledge wants to be more than a mere means', he writes (Nietzsche 1974, p. 180). The virtue of truthfulness was regarded as an obligation by morality and religion, because they claimed to value truth for its own sake. According to Nietzsche, this was really a will to deception, complicit in the falsehoods taken for granted in conventional conceptualisations of the world. Ironically, the will to truth has now become what it pretended to be: a rejection of deception. The entire development of philosophy, he suggests, is just a history of that development (Nietzsche 1980, vol. 12, p. 339). The final consequence of the will to truth's growing power is a weakening of idealistic belief in a 'true' world, until it is 'an idea which has become useless and superfluous—*consequently*, a refuted idea: let us abolish it!' (Nietzsche 1954, p. 485). Such insights remove our consoling illusions, but provide nothing to replace them. Hence, they bring on a new outbreak of the old conflict between knowledge and life.

If the function of natural drives is to serve the purposes of life, how can there be a will to truth that criticises and rejects accepted beliefs without offering better ones? Nietzsche hints at his answer in a series of rhetorical questions. 'How *could* anything originate out of its opposite? for example, truth out of error? or the will to truth out of the will to deception?' (Nietzsche 1966, pp. 9–10) The usual answer, he says, is that such an origination is impossible, and that these valued qualities much have a separate, higher source. His own view is that the supposed oppositions are false ones. As with the distinction between unselfish and selfish motives, judged respectively

as good and evil by morality, they are really contrasts between versions of the same thing. The will to truth is a ‘sublimation’ of the will to untruth, just as the character traits that promote artistic achievement are sublimations of more destructive passions. But how does it become a power in its own right? In one note Nietzsche explains that the basis of the scientific attitude is the belief that there is no benefit or harm in something—and because the number of these things has steadily grown, there is greater scope for impartial knowledge, ‘which gradually became a taste and in the end becomes a passion’ (Nietzsche 1980, vol. 9, p. 480). The will to truth is, in fact, a version of the will to power. It is just the most systematic and comprehensive kind of conceptualisation, for which other versions are rejected as illusion.

Tracing the emergence of the will to truth that drives both scientific inquiry and academic scholarship, Nietzsche argues that its demolition of the old, ingrained errors that serve the purposes of life forces us to reconsider our values.

Compared to the significance of this fight, everything else is a matter of indifference: the ultimate question about the conditions of life has been posed here, and we confront the first attempt to answer this question by experiment. To what extent can truth endure incorporation? That is the question; that is the experiment (Nietzsche 1974, p. 171).

The experimenters are the ‘new philosophers’ amongst whom Nietzsche counts himself. The ‘truth’ that they dare to confront includes some startling theses. Can one live, for example, with awareness that every occurrence is an absolute necessity, and that the freedom of the will is a delusion? (Nietzsche 1986a, pp. 57–59) Or with the equally disconcerting (and at first sight contradictory) discovery that the patterns and regularities we observe in nature arise from our own acts of selection and omission, which disguise the chaotic character of the world and ‘the whole purely chance character of events’? (Nietzsche 1982, p. 13) In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* the thought of eternal return brings these insights together in a single picture. The radical implications of this conception are hard to face, as Nietzsche recognises, and commentators differ in describing the new way of living that he believes ‘incorporating’ the eternal return would demand.

## 2.4 The Case of Historical Knowledge

The problem of knowledge and life becomes more pressing when some particular kind of knowledge is involved. This might be natural science, but for our purpose it is *history*. The study of history is important to Nietzsche for several reasons. As classical philology, it is his own academic discipline, and so places his personal choices in question. Since classics dominated the curriculum of the *Gymnasium*, he is able to raise educational issues at the same time. Further, history displays the tension between knowledge and life as it is encountered not just by individuals but, in Nietzsche’s view, by a modern culture in which historical awareness is highly developed. To analyse historical knowledge is thus to pose the crucial question:

‘Is life to dominate knowledge and science, or is knowledge to dominate life? Which of these two forces is the higher and more decisive?’ (Nietzsche 1983, p. 121).

The second of the ‘untimely meditations’ is ‘On The Uses and Disadvantages of History For Life’. The title signals its question: what are the benefits or disadvantages for life from knowledge of past cultures, especially those of ancient Greece and Rome? Nietzsche’s answer is that there are different ways of grasping history, each of which may bring both benefits and harm. The essay starts by reflecting on the mental process that makes history possible in the first place: *memory*. Animals live in the present, with no concern for what has been. Does this make them happier than human beings? The question is perhaps idle, since we are burdened with awareness of the past from childhood on. Our upbringing and education reinforce this trait: we are praised and rewarded for remembering and punished for forgetting. Nietzsche argues that these measures (and much harsher ones in early societies) are needed to achieve the desired goal, just because memory is not a natural process.

So far, his discussion is about the personal past, often bound up with feelings of regret or guilt. What about the past that is not our own past? How is that our concern? In the essay’s opening section, Nietzsche sounds a warning: too much history is harmful to life, and a culture that makes history the basis of its education will suffer in consequence. His analysis becomes more subtle as he makes distinctions between approaches to history and in each case considers them from the standpoint of life rather than knowledge.

History pertains to the living man in three respects: it pertains to him as a being who acts and strives, as a being who preserves and reveres, and as a being who suffers and seeks deliverance. This threefold relationship corresponds to three species of history – insofar as it is permissible to distinguish between a *monumental*, an *antiquarian* and a *critical* species of history (Nietzsche 1983, p. 67).

The first kind of history supports those who want to change the world by providing them with examples of great achievement in the past to make up for the absence of models and teachers in the present. Nietzsche thinks that the modern world is hostile to the idea of individual greatness, and that mass society enforces a general mediocrity. Even so, someone striving to overcome this conformism can be heartened by knowing ‘that the greatness that once existed was in any event once *possible* and may thus be possible again’ (Nietzsche 1983, p. 69).

On the other hand, Nietzsche sees limitations in such knowledge. Anyone looking for encouragement from the past will inevitably be selective in picking out the features that are similar to the present situation. Many will be set aside, while others will be seized on and exaggerated to make the example look more relevant. Worse still, a past achievement will be abstracted from the conditions that gave rise to it, leaving no connection between cause and effect. In that case, Nietzsche says, any future occurrence will be a matter of chance. In these ways, monumental history can be harmful to knowledge, by misrepresenting the past, and also to life, by raising hopes that greatness can be repeated in different conditions. He adds one further point: past greatness can be misused to discourage

innovation, as when classical works of art are held up as an authority by those who are themselves incapable of creativity.

Less space is given to the other two models of history, but in both cases Nietzsche identifies benefits and disadvantages for life. Antiquarian history provides the security of a valued heritage, even if this is without pretensions, although it too may become a hostility toward anything new. In contrast, critical history makes a break from the past by standing in judgement on it. This is a dangerous process, Nietzsche points out, since we are ourselves the products of this past, and risk being included in the condemnation that he sees as an inevitable outcome.

The best we can do is to confront our inherited and hereditary nature with our knowledge of it, and through a new, stern discipline combat our inborn heritage and implant in ourselves a new habit, a new instinct, a second nature, so that our first nature withers away (Nietzsche 1983, p. 76).

One feature of Nietzsche's analysis of the three kinds of history is that, despite the essay's title, it is concerned with their implications for knowledge as well as for life. Because each is concerned with its own agenda—to find what can serve as a guiding model, what is in need of protection or what deserves to be condemned—it falsifies the past.

To start with, the 'monumental' has a close connection with memory. Etymologically its name implies a reminder or even a warning. A monument is designed to perform that role by preserving a memory of past persons or events. Nietzsche argues from the start that human beings are necessarily historical, just because they have memories of what has been. He claims that memory involves an *identification* of the past and the present: 'Every recollection is a comparison, i.e. identification' (Nietzsche 1980, vol. 7, p. 636). In other words, memory even in its simplest form is a precursor of 'monumental' history. However, Nietzsche asserts that such identifications are always false. This is one of his main criticisms of the 'monumental' mode, and it raises a further puzzle: must not he say the same thing about 'antiquarian' history, insofar as it relies on memory? In a draft, Nietzsche writes: 'In contrast stands the antiquarian drive, that is concerned to grasp the past as past and not to distort it, not to idealise it' (Nietzsche 1980, vol. 7, p. 636). Yet the essay suggests that the antiquarian is no more inspired by a will to truth than the monumental—in fact, even less so, given the link between truth and justice that is introduced later on.

Justice is the highest virtue, Nietzsche explains, but also the one most claimed by today's culture without justification. In one note, he describes justice as 'the mother of the true drive for truth' (Nietzsche 1980, vol. 7, p. 634). This is linked with what Nietzsche regards as a true concept of objectivity, since that also has its origin in 'an enhanced need and demand for justice' (Nietzsche 1983, p. 88). He has said that critical history is unjust because it serves life. 'It is not justice which here sits in judgment; it is even less mercy which pronounces the verdict: it is life alone, that dark, driving power that insatiably thirsts for itself. Its sentence is always unmerciful, always unjust' (Nietzsche 1983, p. 76). The tension between life and knowledge (or truth, its ideal standard) reappears throughout this discussion.

Near the end of the essay, Nietzsche argues that the danger of historical knowledge to life needs to be countered by calling on two ‘antidotes’, the ‘unhistorical’ and the ‘suprahistorical’ (Nietzsche 1983, p. 120). The unhistorical is just the forgetting which is natural to all living things. It is seen in the animals who live in the present moment, without awareness of past and future. The suprahistorical is typified in art and religion, which disengage themselves from the historical process to turn toward what is timeless and indestructible. This should remind us that human life is just one form of life, and that we should not be taking its characteristics for granted, even when thinking about our own relation to the world.

## 2.5 Values, Character and Education

One concern of education is knowledge, since that is central to teaching and learning. We have seen that Nietzsche treats it as problematical, especially in relation to life. Another concern of education is *value*, which guides both judgement and conduct. For Nietzsche this is not a distinct issue, since the value of truth is to be treated like any other value, that is, in relation to life. But it will be helpful to look at what he says about values, and about the personality traits that correspond to them. These are commonly known as *virtues*. The word may look old-fashioned, but it is a useful label for the dispositions that determine conduct. Hence, for example, to assert the value of truth is to regard truthfulness as a virtue, and to see promoting this personal quality as one of the aims of education—especially of what is often called ‘character education’.

To provide a context, let us consider character by itself. What does Nietzsche think it involves, and how is that related to education? His starting-point is rather unpromising. It is the view held by Schopenhauer, that each of us has a moral character that is innate and unchangeable. Kant had already said the same thing: ‘There are cases in which men, even with an education that was profitable to others, have shown from childhood such depravity, which continues to increase during their adult years, that they are held to be born villains and incapable of any improvement in character’ (Kant 1956, p. 103). On this view, moral education seems either superfluous or a futile undertaking. The answer to the question raised by Socrates in Plato’s dialogues, ‘Can virtue be taught?’ is a definite ‘No’. What teaching can do is show us how to find more effective ways to achieve our aims in life. The aims themselves are still determined by our permanent character, which centres upon willing rather than thinking. As Schopenhauer puts it, ‘The head becomes clear; the heart remains unreformed’ (Schopenhauer 1966, p. 195). A selfish, dishonest person may learn to go along with society’s rules, but this is just acquired prudence, not moral development. The same idea is expressed in an aphorism of Paul Rée: ‘Teaching alters our behaviour, not our character’ (Rée 2003, p. 15). The young Nietzsche makes the point figuratively: ‘What the philosophers call character is an incurable disease’ (Nietzsche 1954, p. 30).

Later Nietzsche distances himself from the doctrine of unchangeable character (Nietzsche 1982, p. 225). He wants to leave open the possibility of radical changes that liberate the individual from the beliefs and values of the moral world-view. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* the process of personal transformation is symbolised as ‘metamorphoses of the spirit’. However, even radical changes depend on some continuity of personality. We often see Nietzsche trying to reconcile these ideas, as in this passage of *Beyond Good and Evil*:

Learning changes us; it does what all nourishment does which also does not merely ‘preserve’ – as physiologists know. But at the bottom of us, really ‘deep down’, there is, of course, something unteachable, some granite of spiritual *fatum*, of predetermined decision and answer to predetermined selected questions (Nietzsche 1966, p. 162).

The remark about ‘physiologists’ refers to the biologist Wilhelm Roux, author of *Der Kampf der Theile im Organismus* (The Conflict of Parts Within the Organism) (Roux 1881). According to Roux, competition for nutrition between the parts of an organism produces changes in its structure, and these in turn result in evolutionary development. Nietzsche is arguing that something similar happens within individual personality in consequence of ‘learning’. Each of us has various talents, interests and inclinations, which develop at different rates and to different extents, depending in part on the influences of upbringing and education. In *Schopenhauer As Educator*, he discusses the implications for pedagogy. He sets up a dilemma by stating two ‘maxims’ concerning education that he says are in common use.

One of them demands that the educator should quickly recognize the real strength of his pupil and then direct all his efforts and energy and heat at them so as to help that one virtue to attain true maturity and fruitfulness. The other maxim, on the contrary, requires that the educator should draw forth and nourish *all* the forces which exist in his pupil and bring them to a harmonious relationship with one another (Nietzsche 1983, p. 130).

Nietzsche evidently thinks that each of these imperatives carries weight, so he casts about for a way to reconcile them. One answer is that they apply to different people. Harmonious development is good for learners who have no strong abilities, but not for those with special talents. Having entered that suggestion, he adds a new idea. (This is a good example of the way Nietzsche’s thinking stays on the move, so to speak.) When we look at people who have one exceptional talent, we find a kind of harmony in their natures, after all. A metaphor expresses what is meant: such a personality is like the solar system, consisting of sun and planets. The central body undoubtedly dominates, yet it allows other bodies to move ‘back and forth, to and fro’ in their own paths, although each of those is determined by its presence. The outcome is a single, stable system. So too, Nietzsche thinks, it should be with ‘strong and clearly marked talents.’ The educator’s aim must be to give the dominant capacity a similar place in an overall development that is guided by teaching.

What about the ‘unteachable’ element, though? That implies a limit to learning, and presumably to education as well. Within each of us, Nietzsche argues, there is an element which is not open to change, as far as one can tell here, and which determines how we answer some important questions—which ones differ from person to person, it seems. Here there is still learning to do, but it is learning about ourselves:

that is, finding out more about an inner nature which is usually hidden from view, even to us. Nietzsche plays on two German words: we cannot re-learn from the start (*umlernen*) but we can carry our learning through to the end (*auslernen*). At that conclusion, one will simply say: 'That's who I am' (*das bin ich*). This is what Nietzsche later calls 'becoming what we are'. He writes: 'Your true educators and formative teachers reveal to you what the true basic material of your being is, something in itself ineducable and in any case difficult of access, bound and paralysed: your educators can be only your liberators' (Nietzsche 1983, p. 129).

Here and elsewhere, Nietzsche compares the educator to a gardener who cultivates flowering or fruit-bearing plants. He writes: 'Culture is liberation, the removal of all the weeds, rubble and vermin that want to attack the tender buds of the plant, an outstreaming of light and warmth, the gentle rustling of nocturnal rain' (Nietzsche 1983, p. 130). The gardening metaphor goes back to Plato (2005, p. 65) and is popular with advocates of a child-centred approach to education. A common example of its use, so familiar as to go unnoticed, is just the word 'kindergarten', coined by Friedrich Froebel for his new model of early childhood education. However, it is a metaphor that can be used in various ways, since there are different kinds of garden and different ways of engaging in gardening. Nietzsche is aware of this, as a passage in *Daybreak* demonstrates:

One can dispose of one's drives like a gardener and, though few know it, cultivate the shoots of anger, pity, curiosity, vanity as productively and profitably as a beautiful fruit tree on a trellis; one can do it with the good or bad taste of a gardener and, as it were, in the French or English or Dutch or Chinese fashion; one can also let nature rule and only attend to a little embellishment and tidying-up here and there; one can, finally, without paying any attention to them at all, let the plants grow up and fight their fight out among themselves (Nietzsche 1982, p. 225).

In assuming character as fixed, he concludes, 'the great philosophers' (that is, Kant and Schopenhauer) overlook these possibilities. Nietzsche's elaborated metaphor makes it possible to retain that doctrine, while not concluding that character education is a futile notion. The unchangeable element is the 'spiritual granite' underlying the cultivable soil of individual personality.

This passage is about self-education, but the same range of options is available for education carried out by others. In that case, which is Nietzsche's preferred model of the educator as gardener? Certainly not the *laissez-faire* policy. His ideal teacher is like a plant breeder, intent on bringing about changes and using whatever means will achieve that end. The goal will be a certain kind of personality, best described in terms of the qualities of character called 'virtues'. Nietzsche's use of this word, however, is not for the virtues of conventional morality. His project of revaluation is intended to create a new 'table' of values and develop a new set of virtues matching them. The consequences for education's objectives and ways of achieving them will be just as transformative.

## 2.6 Nietzsche's New Virtues

Education in its present form promotes certain virtues, assuring the learner that acquiring these as settled habits will be to his or her advantage. In fact, Nietzsche says, the intended benefit is the common good, not the individual's interests. Hard work is an example. It is said to lead to wealth and social position, and maybe it does, he allows, but at what personal cost? Years of serving as a willing instrument of others prevent any real self-development (Nietzsche 1974, p. 93). So too with other supposed virtues, such as obedience, chastity, piety and justice. According to Nietzsche, this is how the school as we know it acts. It promotes beliefs, attitudes and habits which work for the general good, but to individual disadvantage. He draws attention to the inconsistency in such a morality. If self-sacrifice is so praiseworthy for the individual, why should not it be practiced by society as a whole?

On this view, what are commonly called virtues are really weaknesses. They are praised and instilled because they benefit other people, or society in general, not the individual who practices them. Conventional moral education promotes industriousness, obedience, truthfulness, and other versions of selflessness. 'If this education succeeds, then every virtue of an individual is a public utility and a private disadvantage, measured against the supreme private goal' (Nietzsche 1974, p. 94). Yet there is a 'fundamental contradiction' in this conception of moral value, since anyone who recommends selflessness to others is plainly acting to gain benefits for himself. Hence, 'the *motives* of this morality stand opposed to its *principle*.'

Much of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is devoted to condemning morality and proposing an alternative. It is assumed that moral values are the virtues of the Christian tradition, notably what St Paul calls charity (*agape*), meaning sympathy with others and a selfless concern for their welfare. In place of these, Nietzsche proposes new virtues. Some of them go by old names, used in a new sense, while others are harder to label, and Nietzsche is forced to invent his own terminology: for example, 'gift-giving virtue' (Nietzsche 1954, pp. 186–191). The word 'virtue' (*Tugend*) is especially prominent in *Zarathustra*. It is a term that Nietzsche wants to retain for his own purposes. He identifies what he means with the Italian word *virtù*, a derivative of the Latin *virtus* that Machiavelli uses for the qualities of character required by his ruling 'prince'. The important point is that a virtue is a *strength*. (This sense is rare in English, except for phrases like 'by virtue of...') That means it is a resource but, like the old moral virtues, it is also a motivating force, a sign of its ongoing links with the drives from which it has arisen.

What are the new virtues that should figure in a new education? Writers on the subject have always been fond of lists, starting with Plato, who names wisdom, courage, self-discipline (or 'temperance') and justice as the main virtues (Plato 1987, p. 138). Nietzsche may have this precedent in mind when he gives his own version in *Daybreak*: 'Honest towards ourselves and whoever *else* is a friend to us; brave towards the enemy; *magnanimous* towards the defeated; *polite*—always: this is what the four cardinal virtues want us to be' (Nietzsche 1982, p. 224). This is more like a code of conduct, giving policies for particular situations. Useful though those

are, they leave us at a loss in facing new and unfamiliar problems, which is where virtues should show their worth. In *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche says that 'our' four virtues are 'courage, insight, sympathy, and solitude' (Nietzsche 1966, p. 226). While it has some overlap with the earlier passage, this list is a mixture of states of mind with behaviours, so we are left unclear.

Discussions of particular 'virtues' are more helpful. Much of the first book of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is concerned with a virtue which Nietzsche says has no standard name. He calls it *das schenkende Tugend*, an expression for which 'gift-giving virtue' is about the best translation. From a distance, it resembles the traditional moral concept of benevolence, or acting to benefit others. A closer look reveals striking differences. Having rejected pity or sympathy as a motivating force, Nietzsche maintains that anyone with an abundance of understanding and knowledge will need to share it with others. They will not be selective about who is to receive their wealth. Where wisdom is offered, those who have ears to hear will hear, while others will treat it as foolishness. Thus, a range of outcomes will occur after all, not as the giver's choices but through something like Darwin's metaphorical 'natural selection'.

What are the implications of the 'gift-giving virtue' for pedagogy? Robert Solomon suggests that it implies a teacher who is not tied to learning objectives defined in advance, but sees his or her classroom activity as far more open-ended than any delivery of a given curriculum.

So, too, an excellent teacher, to generalize the image, is not someone who dollops out bits of knowledge, prodded on by duty (or the need to keep his salary). An excellent teacher bounds into the classroom hardly able to restraint him or herself, 'overflowing' with knowledge and opinions. (One hopes the opinions are disciplined by taste, not always evident in Nietzsche.) (Solomon 2006, p. 153)

What Nietzsche says about his new virtues is not always as benign as this. Some of them are identifiable as versions of drives usually regarded as vices. Provocative examples are given in a chapter of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* entitled 'On The Three Great Evils'. For example, the 'lust to rule' is commonly condemned as a cruel and destructive passion. Zarathustra rejects that prejudice, declaring that power that seeks to extend 'downward' rather than remaining self-sufficient is not an unhealthy sign, but a longing to share with others (Nietzsche 1954, pp. 301–302). He invokes the 'gift-giving virtue' as a model, and yet it is clear that controlling power is not excluded from the picture.

Another new virtue important for education is what Nietzsche calls 'honesty' (*Redlichkeit*), although another translation might be 'integrity'. Honesty is 'our virtue from which we cannot get away, we free spirits' (Nietzsche 1966, p. 155). It is introduced in *Daybreak* as having a very recent history:

Notice, however, that *honesty* is among neither the Socratic nor the Christian virtues: it is the youngest virtue, still very immature, still often misjudged and taken for something else, still hardly aware of itself – something in process of becoming which we can advance or obstruct as we think fit (Nietzsche 1982, p. 191).

This is not the well-established moral virtue of truthfulness, understood by Nietzsche as compliance with a demand that society places on its members, in its own interests. He says: ‘to be truthful means using the customary metaphors—in moral terms: the obligation to lie according to a fixed convention, to lie herd-like in a style obligatory for all’ (Nietzsche 1954, p. 47).

Much of Nietzsche’s thinking about human life centres on its problematical relation to past, present and future, and the contrast between truthfulness and honesty is a case in point. Truthfulness has to do with information already at hand, whereas honesty is about knowledge that is still to come—depending, that is, on our willingness to reach it. Honesty is closely linked with the experimental conception of truth as consisting not in one privileged perspective but rather in having as many as possible at one’s command. A teacher who demonstrated this Nietzschean virtue would not treat knowledge as something to be simply received and possessed, but would maintain a questioning attitude and, perhaps, a tendency for the unexpected.

## 2.7 The Education of the Will

The ultimate goal that Nietzsche sets for the education of character is what he calls ‘the sovereign individual’. The expression connotes freedom or independence, but he has his own view of what these involve. ‘For what is freedom?’ he writes. ‘That one has the will to assume responsibility for oneself’ (Nietzsche 1954, p. 542). Another word for independence is *autonomy*, which literally means making laws for oneself. Consistent with this is the description of the ‘sovereign individual’ as someone who ‘has the right to make promises’ (literally, ‘who may promise’) (Nietzsche 1969, p. 59). That phrase needs close attention. What really concerns Nietzsche is the ability to *keep* promises. Taking present action may not be hard, but keeping a promise requires maintaining a commitment through a period of time, and that is an uncertain undertaking. Many circumstances may alter in the meantime, including changes in the person who makes the promise. Hence, what Nietzsche calls ‘a protracted and unbreakable will’ is required (Nietzsche 1969, p. 60). For morality, what is important is that others hold me responsible for fulfilling my promise. What matters here is that I hold myself responsible.

Sovereignty means power over one’s life, not just in the present but into a more or less distant future. The same idea is seen in the concept of ‘honesty’ as commitment to a truth that is still to come, rather than already at hand. Further examples are found in Nietzsche’s writing, especially in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, where the ‘drive to rule’ is an instance. So, how do these capacities come to be present in the individual? The education required to produce the sovereign person is an education of the *will* rather than the intellect, as Nietzsche makes clear:

Our absurd education system (which envisages the ‘useful civil servant’ as a guiding model) thinks it can get by with ‘instruction’, with brain-drill; it has no idea that something else is needed first – education of *will power*; tests are laid down for everything, but not for the

main thing: whether one can *will*, whether one may *promise*; the young man finishes without a single question, without any curiosity about this supreme value-problem of his nature (Nietzsche 1980, vol. 12, p. 552).

How could a school carry out this function? Nietzsche's answer comes out in a long and quite polished notebook entry, written at the end of his working life, presumably for some projected publication:

I cannot see at all how anyone can ever make up for having failed to go to a *good school* at the right time. Such a person does not know himself; he walks through life without having learned to walk, and his weak muscles betray themselves with every step. Sometimes life is charitable enough to provide this hard schooling later: perhaps a long sickness that calls forth an extreme strength of will and self-sufficiency, or a sudden emergency, affecting one's wife and child as well, which compels one into an activity that gives new energy to dormant fibres and restores tenacity to the will to live.

Yet the most desirable thing under all circumstances is still a hard discipline *at the right time*, i.e. at that age when it still makes one proud to see that much is demanded of one. For this is what distinguishes the hard school as a good school from all others: that much is demanded, and strictly; that the good, even the exceptional, is demanded as the norm; that praise is rare and indulgence non-existent; that reprimands are sharp and objective (*sachlich*), without regard for talent or background.

Such a school is needed in every respect: that applies to the most physical as well as to the most intellectual pursuits: it would be disastrous to try to separate the two! The same discipline makes both the good soldier and the good scholar; and looked at more closely, there is no good scholar who does not have the instincts of a good soldier in his body. To be able to command and also to obey proudly; to stand in the rank and file yet also be able to lead at any time; to prefer danger to comfort; not to weigh the permitted and the forbidden on a shopkeeper's scales; to be more hostile to the petty, sly and parasitic than to the evil. What does one learn in a hard school? Obeying and commanding (Nietzsche 1980, vol. 13, p. 346).

This vision of an education designed to produce the self-disciplined 'sovereign' individual illustrates some of Nietzsche's personal traits: his ambition to be regarded as a soldier (despite a spell of army service largely spent in hospital) and his 'aristocratic' scorn for the business world. But it is instructive in making clear that the qualities of character he wants the school to promote are as necessary for the academic scholar as for others who strive for achievement.

Nietzsche's later readership has included many educators. Can we point to evidence of his influence on their thinking, and maybe practice as well? With one prominent figure, Maria Montessori, confirmation is not hard to find (Simons 1988). Montessori encountered Nietzsche's ideas in the early 1900s when, having qualified in medicine, she returned to study in the faculty of philosophy at the University of Rome. The professor of philosophy, Ettore Zoccoli, had written a critical study of Nietzsche's moral and religious thought, and several of Nietzsche's books had recently appeared in Italian translation. As in other European countries, the younger generation in Italy was strongly drawn to Nietzsche's works for their bold questioning of accepted beliefs and customs.

Montessori certainly studied *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and took note of its main themes. Her central text *The Montessori Method* is strikingly Nietzschean in various places (Montessori 1912). Nietzsche is quoted only once, as a source of insight into

marriage—not the most obvious topic, but his words serve to support a feminist critique of conventional gender roles. His presence is strongest in the book’s treatment of child development and upbringing. Montessori insists that children must learn, above all, to become independent. Whenever we help them, it should be for that purpose alone. Of course, the very young child has to be fed, washed, dressed and so on. ‘By the age of three, however, the child should have been able to render himself to a great extent *independent* and free’ (Montessori 1912, p. 96). Her general ethical principle is stated clearly: nobody should be the servant of anyone else. To be a servant is bad enough, but those who have servants are no better off, because they are dependent on them. Independence means power and self-reliance, as well as self-discipline. The parallel with Nietzsche’s concept of the ‘sovereign individual’ is evident.

Montessori’s emphasis on the disempowerment of women under prevailing social conditions is her own extension of these ideas, and so are her recommendations for the education of children. She emphasises the importance of developing the child’s will-power in order to achieve the goal of independence:

The method which is the subject of this book contains in every part an exercise for the will-power, when the child completes co-ordinated actions directed towards a given end, when he achieves something he set out to do, when he repeats patiently his exercises, he is training his positive will-power (Montessori 1912, p. 364).

Montessori rejects the idea, which she says is prevalent in conventional pedagogy, that the child’s will must be subjected to the will of adults. When a child behaves wilfully, this is ‘like every strong creature fighting for the right to live’, and the adult who discounts such behaviour as naughtiness or condemns it as rebellion is acting against the child’s real interests, even if out of good motives. On Montessori’s view, relying solely on adult authority is a self-defeating policy, apart from what she considers its injustice. The natural growth of self-control requires children to be given opportunities to test their powers—for example, by being challenged to stay completely silent for a period of time. Their developing strength of will then becomes a lasting self-discipline that will prove its worth in adult life.

Montessorian classroom pedagogy is consistent with her Nietzschean emphasis on power and self-sufficiency. She wants children to gain a sense of personal strength by facing challenges and being rewarded by their own sense of achievement, not by external incentives such as prizes and awards (Montessori 1912, p. 101). This strongly individualistic approach explains why children in a Montessori classroom do not work together in groups as much as those in schools belonging to the progressive tradition of John Dewey, for whom shared experience is a key factor in learning, and socialisation a central function of schooling. After observing her *Casa dei Bambini*, Dewey’s supporter William Heard Kilpatrick noted that ‘each Montessori child is an isolated worker, though one or more comrades may look on and suggest’ (Kilpatrick 1914, p. 14). He concluded that ‘she does not provide situations for more adequate social cooperation’ (Kilpatrick 1914, p. 20).

Perhaps not many in the Montessori movement are aware of the Nietzschean elements in her writing. Her biographer Rita Kramer dismisses these passages as

‘vague philosophical underpinning that add[s] nothing to the thought’ (Kramer 1978, p. 140). With Dewey as his standard, Kilpatrick judged that ‘she has made no theoretical contribution’ (Kilpatrick 1914, p. 66). In fact, Montessori’s Nietzschean concepts and objectives point toward an alternative to the pragmatism and Darwinian naturalism that constitute the philosophical basis for child-centred education in its most familiar version.

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