“Gay Science” as a Conditional Will to Truth

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1. What is the unconditional will to truth?

Nietzsche’s views on truth and its pursuit are among the most difficult and contested issues in the interpretation of his philosophy. In his late works, Nietzsche levels a fierce critique at what he calls the unconditional will to truth, characterized as “the faith, the principle, the conviction [...]” ‘Nothing is needed more than truth, and in relation to it everything else has only second-rate value’ (GS 344). But, at the same time, Nietzsche persists in his own relentless (sometimes ruthless) pursuit of truth and praises others who do the same. A possible resolution to this apparent tension suggests itself immediately: Nietzsche’s ire is only for the unconditional will to truth; he admires the will to truth when followed under certain conditions. But what would it mean to follow the will to truth only conditionally, and what conditions would Nietzsche favor placing on it? This paper aims, first, to explain what Nietzsche finds so objectionable about the unconditional will to truth and, second, to lay out his version of what a conditional will to truth would be like. I show how Nietzsche’s alternative steers a course between the unconditional will to truth—which Nietzsche takes to reflect an attitude of psychologically and socially damaging asceticism—and the negligent or willful disregard of truth, for which Nietzsche shows nothing but contempt.

The version of the will to truth that Nietzsche attacks could be called unconditional (unbedingt) in two senses, and he seems to intend the term to encompass both. First, this will is unconditional in that its authority does not depend on any higher value or commandment: truth is a final rather than an instrumental aim, to be pursued for its own sake rather than as a means to some other goal. Second, this will is unconditional in that its command is overriding, and therefore its authority is unrestricted: truth is to be pursued always and everywhere, regardless of whether the pursuit of truth advances or hinders other goals or values one might have.
These two senses of "unconditional" may sometimes be conflated because they often non-coincidentally overlap. If a goal or value is unconditional in the first sense, i.e., final rather than instrumental, the obvious conditions that set limits on pursuing an instrumental aim—namely, that it does not, in a given case, advance the aim toward which it is instrumental—do not apply. For example, if the value of drinking wine is instrumental toward other values, such as aesthetic and physical pleasure or social ease, one should drink wine only as long as it advances these other aims, and stop drinking if it tastes bad, starts to make one sick, or is making the social situation less comfortable. It is clear, then, how an instrumental aim might also end up being a restricted aim; there is no such obvious mechanism for placing situational restrictions on a final aim.

Nonetheless, the two types of unconditionality can come apart. First, an end could be conditional in the sense of being instrumental toward a final end but unconditional in the sense of being unrestricted because the final end to which it is a means is unrestricted and pursuing the instrumental aim advances the final aim under all circumstances. Suppose that someone takes doing God’s will to be both a final and an unrestricted end and believes that loving one’s neighbor is always an instance of doing God’s will, but also believes that the actions God commands are not valuable independently, but only in virtue of having been commanded by God. Such a believer would then regard the aim of loving one’s neighbor as unconditional in the “unrestricted” sense, but its value would still be conditional on (merely instrumental toward) the value of doing God’s will.

Second, an end could be unconditional in that it does not derive its value from any higher aim, but the conditions under which it is to be pursued might still be limited by other final ends with which it competes. For example, one might think that art is valuable in itself, not merely as a means to advancing any other aim. But that certainly does not mean that artists should spend all their time creating art, or that all the ends they pursue when they are not presently creating art should be regarded as instrumental to the creation of art. If an author regarded her friendships as

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1 Of course, this kind of situation could only arise under a value theory that permits several final ends.
valuable only because she can use them to inform her writing, she would be missing the distinctive value of friendship. Artists, we imagine, should regard both their art and their friendships as final ends, each placing limits on the time and effort to be spent pursuing the other. When the demands of one final aim interfere with the demands of another, it is a difficult question which of them should take precedence over the other, or what kind of balance should be struck between them.

It seems that Nietzsche intended the “unconditional will to truth” to include both meanings, non-instrumental and unrestricted. “Seek truth and avoid error” is regarded as a categorical rather than a hypothetical imperative. In calling the imperative “unrestricted,” we need not suppose that adherents of the unconditional will to truth are obligated to actively pursue truth at every moment when they aren’t meeting basic biological needs. Nonetheless, possessors of an unconditional will to truth do regard truth-seeking as their most important normative aim, in much the way that followers of altruistic morality regard helping others as the most important normative aim.

Like deontological forms of altruism, the unconditional will to truth imposes negative duties (to avoid error) more strictly than positive duties (to seek truth). Just as followers of altruistic morality should seek out opportunities to help others, to an extent that may vary from agent to agent, followers of the unconditional will to truth are required to make the active pursuit of truth a central part of their lives. Just as altruistic morality demands that its adherents not pass up a clear opportunity to help another, the unconditional will to truth demands that its adherents not pass up an opportunity to uncover new truth, whether this is evidence that they stumble across or a line of reasoning that occurs to them; they must follow the evidence, or the argument, wherever it leads. And just as altruistic morality strictly forbids its followers to harm another deliberately or negligently, the unconditional will to truth forbids its followers to willfully or carelessly ignore evidence or arguments, or to place their belief in a proposition insufficiently supported by the

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2 William James points out this implicit ranking in “The Will to Believe” (1896); Nietzsche, in his attacks on the unconditional will to truth, seems to assume a similar ordering of priority, though he does not acknowledge it explicitly.
evidence. This last tenet is expressed especially forcefully by W.K. Clifford in "The Ethics of Belief," in a dictum that has come to be known as Clifford’s Principle: “It is wrong always, everywhere, and for everyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence” (Clifford 1999 [1877]: 77).

Because they regard the pursuit of truth as their highest duty, adherents to the unconditional will to truth will adjudicate any direct conflict of values in favor of truth. This does not necessarily mean that they never lie to others, and they may not make a point of debunking others’ comforting illusions (about, e.g., God, an afterlife, or a reason to all misfortunes). But it does mean that they will not allow themselves any pleasant illusions even if it would improve their lives in practical respects, either by furnishing more effective motivation to act or by providing comfort.

Assuming that the will to truth with which Nietzsche finds fault is unconditional in both senses, what is the conditional will to truth Nietzsche would prefer? Such a will might regard the value of truth as final, like that of friendship or art, but weight it less heavily among the final values the agent recognizes, so that other values—the “life-affirming” ones that Nietzsche prizes (strength, power, health, growth, courage, and self-overcoming, in his peculiar senses thereof)—may take precedence in case of conflict. Alternatively, a Nietzschean conditional will to truth might regard the value of truth as unrestricted, but only because pursuing truth always advances a further aim to which it is instrumental. Finally, it might be conditional in both senses: instrumental to higher values, with its scope restricted to the circumstances in which it advances those values.

In section 2, I will lay out Nietzsche’s criticisms of the unconditional will to truth, focusing on his charge that this will, and science insofar as it is motivated by it, is the latest incarnation of what he calls the ascetic ideal: the attitude of condemning our imperfect, changeable material world in favor of another, vastly different world, changeless and eternal. In section 3, I will explore the mode of pursuing truth that Nietzsche implicitly recommends as an alternative to the unconditional pursuit practiced by the disciples of modern science: gay science. I will argue that Nietzsche favors a will to truth that is conditional in both senses. First, he regards the value of truth, and of the will to
truth, as instrumental to promoting the life-affirming values of strength and courage. Second—since truth and truth-seeking promote strength and courage only accidentally—he restricts the pursuit of truth to circumstances that advance these values. In principle, this instrumental pursuit of truth could be unrestricted, if the agent was strong and courageous enough not to be psychologically threatened by the dangers of too much truth. In fact, the ability to pursue truth without restriction seems to be something like a regulative ideal for Nietzsche. But this ideal is still valuable only in the service of other values, and it is important to know when one has not yet reached the point at which persisting in the pursuit of truth cannot threaten the life-affirming values Nietzsche holds highest.

2. Against the unconditional will to truth

2.1 “How we, too, are still pious”: the will to truth as a faith

In his two most sustained attacks on the unconditional will to truth—section 344 of The Gay Science and the Third Essay of On the Genealogy of Morality—Nietzsche explicitly connects this will to the aims and the practice of science. GS 344 starts with an observation about science:

In science convictions have no rights of citizenship, as one says with good reason. Only when they descend to the modesty of hypotheses, of a provisional experimental point of view, of a regulative fiction, they may be granted admission and even a certain value in the realm of knowledge […]—But does this not mean […] that a conviction may obtain admission to science only when it ceases to be a conviction? Would it not be the first step in the discipline of the scientific spirit that one would not permit oneself any more convictions?

The stringency of this policy raises for Nietzsche a question about its motivation: “To make it possible for this discipline to begin, must there not be some prior conviction—even one so commanding and unconditional that it sacrifices all other convictions to itself?” Yes, he answers: “The question whether truth is needed must not only have been affirmed in advance, but affirmed to such a degree that the principle, the faith, the conviction finds expression: ‘Nothing is needed more than truth, and in relation to it everything else has only second-rate value.’” Paradoxically, he concludes, to some degree anticipating the results of the argument that follows: “We see that science also rests on a faith; there simply is no science ‘without presuppositions.’”
What does Nietzsche mean by calling the unconditional will to truth a “faith” (Glaube) or a “conviction” (Ueberzeugung) of the kind that scientific inquiry does not permit? In Human, All Too Human (1878), he defines “conviction” [Ueberzeugung] as “the belief [Glaube] that on some particular point of knowledge one is in possession of the unqualified truth” (HAH I, 630). A conviction, then, is a view that is no longer open to question for those who hold it. Nietzsche maintains (as he does in GS 344) that scientific thinking precludes convictions: the presuppositions of having a conviction as he defines it—“that unqualified truths exist; likewise that perfect methods of attaining to them have been discovered; finally, that everyone who possesses convictions avails himself of these perfect methods”—“demonstrate at once that the man of convictions is not the man of scientific thought” (HAH I, 630). Scientific thought requires regarding everything as open to question and defeasible by the evidence, even the methods of science itself.

However, this definition of convictions does not explain how they could naturally “descend to the modesty of hypotheses” or “a provisional experimental point of view”—as Nietzsche says they must in order to be “granted admission” into science (GS 344)—since those who entertain hypotheses decidedly do not regard them as unqualified truths. What such tools of inquiry do have in common with convictions is that they are not presently open to question; they are being assumed until the evidence for or against them comes in. Bernard Reginster (2003) argues that Nietzsche’s “man of conviction” (HAH I, 630ff.) is the same type as the “fettered spirit” whom he earlier contrasted with the “free spirit” (HAH I, 225ff.). The fettered spirit can justify his beliefs only by “reasons judged a posteriori on the basis of consequences”: “only regard this as true, he says, and you will see how much good it will do you” (HAH I, 227). In a sense, this is true of hypotheses and “regulative fictions” as well; they are adopted in advance of the evidence, and their adoption is (one hopes) vindicated by their usefulness in guiding inquiry.

The crucial difference is that the fettered spirit will not give up his belief even if the evidence runs counter to it: having formed a belief “out of habit,” “he may perhaps have also
devised a couple of reasons favorable to his habits; but if one refutes these reasons, one does not therewith refute him in his general position” (HAH I, 226). “An article of faith could be refuted before [the believer] a thousand times—if he needed it, he would consider it ‘true’ again and again” (GS 347). A scientific hypothesis, by contrast, is genuinely on trial, and while it may be adopted as “a provisional experimental point of view” (GS 344) ahead of the evidence, it must be abandoned if the evidence militates against it. But the principle that one must “not permit oneself any more convictions” (GS 344)—that any assumption is subject to revision—is not merely a provisional assumption of scientific practice, but an unrevisable one. The integrity of science depends on the requirement to regard everything as open to question—except for this requirement itself.

Why does Nietzsche draw the extreme conclusion that this requirement expresses the conviction that “[n]othing is needed more than truth, and in relation to it everything else has only second-rate value” (GS 344)? We can understand this inference by considering that if some belief were placed beyond question, one would not be open to any evidence indicating that it, or any conclusion drawn from it, was in fact false. True, it is the desire to avoid or eliminate false beliefs rather than to acquire true beliefs that primarily motivates this rule of method. However, the desire not to miss new truths also plays a role: a mistaken assumption could lead scientific inquiry down the wrong path, blocking discoveries that might have been available otherwise. And Nietzsche’s point in saying that the principle “Nothing is needed more than truth” is a “prior conviction” or a “faith” is that it is not genuinely open for question—violating the rule that the principle itself imposes on all other propositions by forbidding any (other) convictions.4

3 I’m not sure that what Nietzsche means by “hypothesis” or “provisional experimental point of view” is what has come to be the technical meaning of hypothesis in scientific methodology: the possibility an experiment is designed to test. This may be one of the things he has in mind; this kind of hypothesis does resemble a Nietzschean “conviction” in the limited sense that experiments are often designed by assuming temporarily that the hypothesis is true, then predicting what would happen under certain producible conditions. I suspect, however, that what he means is more along the lines of a candidate theory or a component of a theory that one would assume for the purposes of an entire program of observation and experiment.

4 But why does Nietzsche claim that the commitment to question every assumption presupposes that “in relation to [truth] everything else has only second-rate value” (GS 344)? After all, scientific inquiry is only one area of life; and while ensuring that one has the truth about every scientific matter is also the highest
GS 344 now asks how one might arrive at the unhesitable conviction that truth has overriding value and must be pursued under all circumstances. Nietzsche's answer comes in the form of one of the few relatively conventional (albeit still somewhat elliptical) philosophical arguments in his oeuvre. All quotations in the following reconstruction are from GS 344.

1. The unconditional will to truth might be a prudential rule (“I will not allow myself to be deceived”) or a moral rule (“I will not deceive, not even myself”).

2. The conviction that it is most prudent or useful to know the truth under all circumstances “could never have come into being if both truth and untruth constantly proved to be useful,” or (relatedly) if “much trust as well as much mistrust” of appearances (i.e., endorsing one’s immediate impression as well as stopping to investigate further) were both useful in some situations. That is, someone who believed that one should always seek the truth on the grounds that truth is always more useful than ignorance or falsehood could not long hold onto such a view if, in fact, truth were not always more useful, because her own commitment to the pursuit of truth would lead her to that conclusion.

3. It is the case that both “truth and untruth,” “trust and mistrust,” are sometimes useful.

4. Therefore, from (2) and (3), the unconditional will to truth is not prudentially motivated: “the faith in science, which after all exists undeniably, cannot owe its origin to such a calculus of utility; it must have originated in spite of the fact that the disutility and dangerousness of ‘the will to truth,’ of ‘truth at any price’ is proved to it constantly” (I will explain this claim following the reconstruction).

5. From (1) and (4), the unconditional will to truth is a moral principle.

scientific priority, this does not mean that science or its practitioners claim that truth must be the highest value in life overall. Nietzsche has not established yet that overvaluing truth in the way that science demands interferes with the conduct of life or the pursuit of other values. I will discuss this further when I turn to the argument in GM III that science is ascetic, where I will also present samples of the many texts throughout Nietzsche’s works in which he argues that the unconditional will to truth can be detrimental to human life.

5 Reginster gives a helpful reconstruction of the argument of that section (2003: 65–8); I take some cues from him in my own version of the reconstruction.
6. Morality in general, understood as an unconditional rule to do or refrain from something, is highly unusual in the world we live in ("life, nature, and history are ‘not moral’"). So, more specifically, is the moral injunction always to be truthful ("especially if it should seem—and it does seem!—as if life aimed at semblance, meaning error, deception, simulation, self-delusion, and when the great sweep of life has actually always shown itself to be on the side of the most unscrupulous polytropoi")

7. “[T]hose who are truthful in that audacious and ultimate sense that is presupposed by the faith in science” thus set themselves apart from the rest of life and our world.

8. This “might perhaps be a quixotism, a minor slightly mad enthusiasm; but it might also be something more serious, namely, a principle that is hostile to life and destructive.” Nietzsche seems to dismiss the first option and favors the second, leading him to:

9. **Conclusion:** Adherents of the unconditional will to truth “thereby affirm another world than the world of life, nature, and history” and “negate its counterpart, this world, our world.”

Why does Nietzsche conclude that, by following the unconditional will to truth, which can only be a *moral* principle, the champions of science “affirm another world” and negate our own? We can make sense of this opaque inference by recalling the “world-to-mind” direction of fit of normative claims: if a norm and the world do not agree, it is the *world* that we take to be at fault and to need to change. *Prudential* norms demand that a subject make certain changes to the world in order to satisfy her own needs or desires. But this subject’s needs and desires, like everything in the natural world, are changeable; and if they change, the former prudential norms no longer hold. Prudential norms are by nature responsive to the needs and desires of creatures in the world. *Moral* norms, by contrast, are always binding, no matter what circumstances obtain in the world.

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6 Probably what Nietzsche means by this grandiose statement is that defense mechanisms based on deception (e.g., camouflage, mimicry) tend to promote the survival of the organisms that use them, not to mention the usefulness of deception in the human social world.
What, then, is holding the world accountable to a demand that it should change? The norm cannot come from the human agent who honors it, because she takes herself to be subject to it as well. As part of the world governed by it, she too is at fault and must change her conduct if she violates it; no change in her desires or situation can cancel it. Nothing in the natural world is as unchanging as a moral imperative. Even laws of nature take the form of a hypothetical imperative: the way things behave always depends on the antecedent circumstances in which the law operates. Nietzsche concludes that following unconditional moral rules presupposes another world, a “metaphysical” world, that imposes demands on our world and holds it at fault, condemns it, if it fails to obey them.

We must still ask how Nietzsche arrives at premise (3) in the argument, i.e., that both truth and untruth are sometimes useful—or, as he puts it more strongly in the passage quoted under premise (4), that “the disutility and dangerousness of ‘the will to truth,’ of ‘truth at any price’ is proved [...] constantly.” The weaker claim can be illustrated simply by pointing out that the naïve perspectives of folk ontology and psychology are much more useful in daily life than the perspectives of our most sophisticated physics and neuroscience. But to show “the disutility and dangerousness of ‘the will to truth’” he writes, “At any price’: how well we understand these words once we have offered and slaughtered one faith after another on this altar!” (i.e., of truth; GS 344). The greatest danger of the unconditional will to truth is that it tears down the ideals that people once lived by, depriving them of the sources of meaning and value in their lives by showing the assumptions on which they rested to be false and the sources of their authority to be counterfeit.

Nietzsche’s criticism of the unconditional will to truth is twofold. The first component is an internal criticism, effectively a charge of hypocrisy. As noted before, the conviction motivating the rule against convictions—that truth has overriding value—violates its own rule: it stands unquestioned as long as the rule to permit oneself no convictions is obeyed. Thus the will to truth is

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7 Kant notwithstanding: the moral law may come from the agent regarded as a purely rational subject, stripped of all contingent features, but it does not come from her qua human being in the phenomenal world. In any case, Kant certainly is not immune from the charge of “affirming another world” over our own!
not truly unconditional as long as it does not question itself. Nietzsche finds it ironic that “It is still a metaphysical faith upon which our faith in science rests […], we seekers after knowledge today, we godless anti-metaphysicians” (GS 344). The partisans of science who espouse the unconditional will to truth are committed to skepticism about anything that cannot be verified by the methods of science, and accordingly withhold belief from invisible supernatural entities for which scientifically respectable evidence is scant. Nonetheless, Nietzsche argues, their own unconditional will to truth implicitly commits them to the existence of some sort of invisible world beyond the natural one.

The second component of Nietzsche’s critique of the unconditional will to truth is ethical: that it expresses an attitude of condemnation toward the world we live in—the only world there is, according to Nietzsche. With his assertion that “life, nature, and history are ‘not moral’” (GS 344), he implies that our world will inevitably flout such moral rules. Meanwhile, claims he makes elsewhere about our extremely limited condition as knowers (see, e.g., GS 107, 110; BGE 24, 34) imply, more specifically, that we will inevitably fail to conform to the demand that we believe nothing but the truth. Finally, those who endorse and hold themselves bound by unconditional moral rules thus declare their allegiance to this metaphysical world (be it the Platonic world of Forms, the Christian Heaven, or the Kantian noumenal realm) in preference to our own. They declare their willingness to condemn our world for its inevitable moral shortcomings and (as I will detail in what follows) to sacrifice the needs and interests of life on earth to the moral demands of the metaphysical world.

2.2 The asceticism of science

The attitude of condemning our world in favor of another, vastly different world is what Nietzsche refers to in the Third Essay of On the Genealogy of Morality as asceticism or the ascetic ideal; and he spends the essay arguing that it is both psychologically unhealthy for those who hold it and detrimental to the cultural life of societies for which it is the central value. The ascetic ideal is,

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8 Nietzsche, of course, does pose this question, acknowledging that he is motivated to the will to truth (see BGE 1 and GM III, 27, which I will discuss in section 3). But his criticism of (fellow?) adherents to the unconditional will to truth is that they are inconsistent by failing to have done this already.
at its most basic, the devaluation of worldly goods, pleasures, and ambitions and the glorification of “poverty, humility, chastity” (*GM* III, 8). These, though, are only the surface expressions of the attitude at the heart of the ideal, embodied in prototypical form by the ascetic priest (III, 10):

The idea at issue here is the *valuation* the ascetic priest places on our life: he juxtaposes it (along with what pertains to it: “nature,” “world,” the whole sphere of becoming and transitoriness) with a quite different mode of existence which it opposes and excludes, *unless* it turn against itself, *deny* itself: in that case, the case of the ascetic life, life counts as a bridge to that other mode of existence. The ascetic treats life as a wrong road on which one must finally walk back to the point where it begins, or as a mistake that is put right by deeds—that we *ought* to put right [...] (*GM* III, 11)

Christianity is an important and typical expression of the ascetic ideal. God, who is pure spirit, eternally changeless, perfectly wise and loving, represents the “different mode of existence” opposed to our own corporeal, time-bound, limited and selfish one. God is “the ultimate antithesis of [our] own animal instincts,” which human beings come to see “as a form of guilt before God” (*GM* II, 22). And although Nietzsche also names Vedanta (III, 12) and Buddhism (III, 17) as incarnations of the ascetic ideal, not all incarnations of the ascetic ideal are religious; (officially) non-religious philosophers also express it in various ways. One is Schopenhauer, who argued from the ubiquity and inevitability of suffering that the world ought not to exist, and urged that we make an effort to take it out of existence by extinguishing our desires. In Schopenhauer’s case, the only “different mode of existence” being contrasted favorably with our own is non-existence.

In *GM* III, Nietzsche draws on the argument of *GS* 344 to make the case that modern science, far from being the enemy of religious asceticism that its champions take it to be, is an incarnation of the very same ideal he has spent the essay excoriating. He introduces this counterintuitive claim by considering a proposed objection to his thesis that the ascetic ideal has been so prevalent only because humanity has lacked any rival ideal. “But they tell me [a rival ideal] is not lacking,” he says:

> it has not merely waged a long and successful fight against [the ascetic] ideal, it has already conquered this ideal in all important respects: all of modern *science* is supposed to bear witness to that—modern science which, as a genuine philosophy of reality, clearly believes in itself alone [...] and has up to now survived well enough without God, the beyond, and the virtues of denial. (*GM* III, 23)

Nietzsche rejects this purported counterexample and rebuts: “where [science] still inspires passion, love, ardor, and *suffering* at all, it is not the opposite of the ascetic ideal but rather the latest and
noblest form of it” (ibid.). For “idealists of knowledge” who pursue science with love and ardor, “this ideal is precisely their ideal, too [...] they themselves are its most spiritualized product” (III, 24).

How do these "last idealists among philosophers and scholars" (GM III, 24) perpetuate the ascetic ideal? Nietzsche answers:

These Nay-sayers and outsiders of today who are unconditional on one point—their insistence on intellectual cleanliness; these hard, severe, abstinent, heroic spirits who constitute the honor of our age; all these pale atheists, anti-Christians [Antichristen], immoralists, nihilists [...] these last idealists of knowledge in whom alone the intellectual conscience dwells and is incarnate today—they certainly believe they are as completely liberated from the ascetic ideal as possible, these "free, very free spirits"; and yet, to disclose to them what they themselves cannot see [...] this ideal is precisely their ideal, too [...] They are far from being free spirits: for they still have faith in truth. (GM III, 24; emphasis original)

The first thing to notice is Nietzsche's rather favorable characterization of “these last idealists of knowledge.” Although he does not explicitly identify himself as one of them, he leaves some clues. He refers to them as "Antichristen"—which is most naturally read as "anti-Christians," but could also be interpreted as "Antichrists"—perhaps in anticipation of his forthcoming book Der Antichrist (1888), which makes clear that he is the titular "Antichrist."9 He calls them "immoralists," a word he applied to himself on several occasions.10 Finally, the phrase in quotation marks, “free, very free spirits,” is a reference to BGE 230, where the full phrase is “we free, very free spirits” (bold emphasis added) clearly refers to himself and people of a similar cast of mind.

Nietzsche’s (at least partial) self-identification with the targets of his critique is confirmed when he goes on to quote from the conclusion of GS 344:

those who are truthful in that audacious and ultimate sense that is presupposed by the faith in science thereby affirm another world than that of life, nature, and history; and insofar as they affirm this "other world"—look, must they not by the same token negate its counterpart, this world, our world? [...] It is still a metaphysical faith upon which our faith in science rests—even we seekers after knowledge today, we godless anti-metaphysicians, we, too, take our fire from the flame lit by a faith that is thousands of years old, that Christian faith, which was also Plato’s, that God is truth, that truth is divine. (GM III, 24, quoting GS 344; ellipsis and italics original, bold emphasis mine)

Nietzsche here brings down on “idealists of knowledge” like himself the criticism that their "faith in

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9 In an editorial footnote (GM III, 24, p. 149, n. 8), Walter Kaufmann also refers the reader to the preface Nietzsche wrote for the new 1886 edition of The Birth of Tragedy, "Attempt at a Self-Criticism," in which he plays on the ambiguity of the German word Antichrist and identifies the Antichrist as Dionysus (BT Pref. 5).

10 See Beyond Good and Evil 32, the preface to the 1886 edition of Daybreak (Pref. 4), and Ecce Homo (IV, 2–6).
truth” (GM III, 24)—i.e., in the absolute value of truth—negates “our world” by holding it accountable to a demand from “another world,” a “metaphysical” world (GS 344). That is precisely the structure of the ascetic ideal, which condemns the natural world in favor of “a quite different mode of existence which it opposes and excludes” (GM III, 11).

Nietzsche acknowledges that these “godless anti-metaphysicians” (GS 344) have done away with most of the features of the “other world” that the ascetic priest posits, including the benevolent but stern God who promises eternal bliss if we “turn against” and “deny” everything pertaining to our world (GM III, 11) or threatens eternal punishment if we fail to do so. Truly obeying the self-denying spirit of the ascetic ideal requires stripping the ideal of these ornaments. In its purest form, it does without ideals of any kind—the popular expression for this abstinence is “atheism”—except for its will to truth. But this will, this remnant of an ideal, is, if you will believe me, this ideal itself in its strictest, most spiritual formulation, esoteric through and through, with all external additions abolished, and thus not so much its remnant as its kernel. (GM III, 27)

The unconditional will to truth recognizes demands that “the other world” makes on us, but does away with the promise of a reward if we obey it and permits only duty as a motive for obeying; selfish human concerns regarding reward and punishment are not even in the offing.11

So far Nietzsche’s argument has been very abstract: he has argued that in principle science, assuming it is founded on the unconditional will to truth, is ascetic. Why does he think that science is beholden to the ascetic ideal in practice? While Nietzsche draws some amusing parallels between the behavior of scientists and of ascetic monks (GM III, 17, 25; cf. BGE 207), science’s clearest expression of the ascetic ideal lies in the knowledge it has uncovered. “Has the self-belittlement of man, his will to self-belittlement, not progressed irresistibly since Copernicus?” Nietzsche asks (GM III, 25). The scientific worldview has displaced humanity from the center of the universe and made human life appear “arbitrary, beggarly, and dispensable” (III, 25). Since Darwin especially, “the faith

11 Lest it be objected that the reward for believing truths is greater success in one’s earthly projects and the punishment for believing falsehoods is frustration and failure, recall that Nietzsche already ruled out the prudential explanation for the unconditional will to truth in GS 344. We are talking about seeking to attain truth and root out falsehood beyond the point where it is useful for life.
in the dignity and uniqueness of man, in his irreplaceability in the great chain of being, is a thing of
the past—he has become an animal, literally and without reservation or qualification, he who was,
according to his old faith, almost God.” “All science has at present the object of dissuading man from
his former respect for himself,” Nietzsche declares. “One might even say that […] its own austere
form of stoical ataraxy consists in sustaining this hard-won self-contempt of man” (III, 25).

Science constitutes the spiritualization of the ascetic ideal (see III, 24, 27) in that it
translates ascetic self-denial and contempt for human existence into the intellectual rather than the
physical realm. Science denies us any comforting “convictions,” any faith in a purpose to human
existence, any illusions about our privileged place in the universe. GS 357 (which Nietzsche quotes
at length in GM III, 27) brings science even closer to the Christian form of the ascetic ideal:

unconditional honest atheism […] is a triumph achieved finally and with great difficulty by the
European conscience […] the most fateful act of two thousand years of discipline for truth that in the end
forbids itself the lie in faith in God.

You see what it was that really triumphed over the Christian god: Christian morality itself, the
concept of truthfulness that was understood ever more rigorously, the father confessor’s refinement of
the Christian conscience, translated and sublimated into a scientific conscience, into intellectual
cleanness at any price. Looking at nature as if it were proof of the goodness and governance of a god;
interpreting history in honor of some divine reason, as a continual testimony of a moral world order […]
interpreting one’s own experiences […] as if everything were providential […] is considered indecent and
dishonest by every more refined conscience […] (GS 357)

In Beyond Good and Evil Nietzsche expresses the religious character of scientific asceticism still
more sharply. “There is a great ladder of religious cruelty, with many rungs,” he says, including the
sacrifice of human life and the ascetic sacrifice of “one’s own strongest instincts” (BGE 55):

Finally—what remained to be sacrificed? At long last, did one not have to sacrifice for once whatever is
comforting, holy, healing: all hope, all faith in hidden harmony, in future blisses and justices? didn’t one
have to sacrifice God himself and, from cruelty against oneself, worship the stone, stupidity, gravity, fate,
the nothing? To sacrifice God for the nothing— […] all of us already know something of this.— (BGE 55)

The modern partisans of science have sacrificed God, Nietzsche says, from cruelty to themselves;
but to what? To truth and the imperative of truthfulness, on which the scientific enterprise places
the highest value. Truth is treated as a surrogate for God, but it is a cold, unresponsive surrogate—
and thus all the more in keeping with the self-denial demanded by the ascetic ideal.

This is a stark example of the willingness to sacrifice the interests of life to the demands of
truth. Human beings need ideals in order to live—that is crucial to the argument of *GM III*; they need to be shown a “*meaning*” or “*purpose*” for their suffering (*GM III*, 28), a reason for their very existence (see *GS* 1). But science will never *find* such a meaning or purpose in things, and cannot *create* one itself, as Nietzsche asserts: “Science [...] first requires in every respect an ideal of value, a value-creating power, in the *service* of which it could *believe* in itself—it never creates values” (*GM III*, 25). It can only undermine the old ideals that gave meaning to people’s lives, replacing them with nothing, and raising the threat that people will fall into *nihilism*, as Nietzsche defines it: “*That the highest values devaluate themselves.* The aim is lacking; ‘*why?’ finds no answer” (*WP* 2 [1887]).

3. **Pursuing a conditional will to truth: “gay science”**

Should we conclude from this revelation of the asceticism of the unconditional will to truth, and of science insofar as it is animated by that will, that we should give up science and the search for truth? Nietzsche’s self-identification as one of the “idealists of knowledge” at whom his criticism is aimed suggests that the answer is “no”—but might not Nietzsche be exposing his own hypocritical asceticism in order to publicly force himself to cast it away? That, however, would be yet another instance of asceticism: sacrificing one more ideal because the *unconditional will to truth* revealed that the belief in the overriding value of the ideal was unjustified, and therefore the idealist had no right to it. And Nietzsche makes clear that it is, in fact, the will to truth that drives the investigation into the origins, motivations, and value of the will to truth itself:

> The will to truth which will still tempt us to many a venture [...]—what questions has this will to truth not laid before us! What strange, wicked, questionable questions! [...] Is it any wonder that we should finally become suspicious [...]? that we should finally learn from this Sphinx to ask questions, too? *Who* is it really that puts questions to us here? *What* in us really wants “truth”? Indeed we came to a long halt at the question about the cause of this will—until we finally came to a complete stop before a still more basic question. We asked about the *value* of this will. Suppose we want truth: *why not rather* untruth? and uncertainty? even ignorance? (*BGE* 1)

12 Reginster (2006) calls this “*nihilism as disorientation*”—the view that there are no legitimate values, so “*nothing has value, nothing really matters* [...] there really is no good life to be had” (26–7)—as contrasted with “*nihilism as despair,*” which is the belief that there *are* legitimate values, but that “our existence in this world cannot realize our ‘highest values and ideals’” (31).
In the penultimate section of *GM* III, Nietzsche underlines this irony still more emphatically:

All great things bring about their own destruction through an act of self-overcoming: thus the law of life will have it [...] the lawgiver himself eventually receives the call: “*patere legem, quam ipse tulisti*” [“submit to the law you yourself proposed”]. In this way Christianity as a dogma was destroyed by its own morality; in the same way Christianity as morality must now perish, too: we stand on the threshold of this event. After Christian truthfulness has drawn one inference after another, it must end by drawing its most striking inference, its inference against itself; this will happen, however, when it poses the question “what is the meaning of all will to truth?” (GM III, 27)

If, as Nietzsche predicts, “morality will gradually perish now” (ibid.), does that not mean that Nietzsche is recommending that we give up the will to truth? For Nietzsche, this would mean sacrificing his own ideal—but might he regard it as necessary to climb that last rung of “the great ladder of religious cruelty” (*BGE* 55) in order to kick it away and become entirely free of morality?

Some of Nietzsche's remarks about his own will to truth suggest that this solution may not be possible for him, since it is such a deep-rooted, intractable part of his character. This emerges especially in Part VII of *Beyond Good and Evil*, “Our Virtues,” in which he speaks of “honesty” as something he simply finds himself stuck with: “Honesty, supposing that this is our virtue from which we cannot get away, we free spirits—well, let us work on it with all our malice and love and not weary of ‘perfecting’ ourselves in our virtue, the only one left us” (*BGE* 227). He reinforces this suggestion obliquely a few sections later with a rather peculiar transition. *BGE* 230 closes with a characterization of Nietzsche’s fellow “free spirits” and the task to which they feel they are bound:

Every courageous thinker will recognize this in himself, assuming only that, as fit, he has hardened and sharpened his eye for himself long enough [...] He will say: “there is something cruel in the inclination of my spirit”; let the virtuous and kindly try to talk him out of that!

Indeed, it would sound nicer if we were [...] reputed to be distinguished not by cruelty but by “extravagant honesty,” we free, very free spirits [...] But we hermits and marmots have long persuaded ourselves [...] that this worthy verbal pomp, too, belongs to the old mendacious pomp, junk, and gold dust of unconscious human vanity [...] To translate man back into nature; to become master over the many vain and overly enthusiastic interpretations [...] that have so far been scrawled and painted over that eternal basic text of *homo natura*; to see to it that man henceforth stands before man as even today, hardened in the discipline of science, he stands before the rest of nature [...] deaf to the siren songs of old metaphysical bird catchers who have been piping at him all too long, “you are more, you are higher, you are of a different origin!” — that may be a strange and insane task, but it is a task—who would deny that? Why did we choose this insane task? Or, putting it differently: “why have knowledge at all?”

Everybody will ask us that. And we, pressed this way, who have put the same question to ourselves a hundred times, we have found and find no better answer— (*BGE* 230)

Nietzsche appears to leave the question unanswered and moves on to seemingly unrelated musings
in *BGE* 231: “Learning changes us [...] But at the bottom of us, really ‘deep down,’ there is, of course, something unteachable, some granite of spiritual *fatum* [...].” I read this apparently abrupt transition not as a change of subject, but as an answer to the question posed at the end of *BGE* 230.

Nietzsche and his free spirits are committed to the “strange and insane task” of unveiling the painful truth about humanity: we are just another species of animal, not “higher,” “of a different origin,” uniquely endowed with a rational soul or made in God’s image. This is precisely the kind of painful scientific revelation that Nietzsche identified as evidence of the asceticism of science. The question “Why did we choose this insane task?”, Nietzsche says, is equivalent to the question “why have knowledge at all?” (*BGE* 230). In *GS* 344 and *GM* III, Nietzsche answers this question in terms of the world-negating morality of the ascetic ideal: “[T]he question ‘Why science?’ leads back to the moral problem: *Why have morality at all* when life, nature, and history are ‘not moral?’” (*GS* 344).

But when he poses the question in *BGE* 230 about his own will to truth (“Why did we choose this insane task?”), he replies, “we who have put the same question to ourselves a hundred times, we have found and find no better answer”—no better answer, apparently, than that “at the bottom of us, really ‘deep down,’ there is [...] something unteachable, some granite of spiritual *fatum* [...]” (*BGE* 231). But he does not answer that question directly because it is not the kind of answer the questioner is looking for: it is a *cause* of his commitment to the pursuit of truth, not a *reason* or justification for it. Nietzsche argues in *GS* 344 and *GM* III that the only possible justification for the unconditional will to truth, the moral one, not only rests on false presuppositions but also involves a positively harmful attitude toward life: there is no good reason to be committed to the pursuit of truth at any price. But when a will to truth is part of the “granite of spiritual *fatum*” (*BGE* 231), reasons cannot budge it. In fact, Nietzsche is at pains to point out that the “extravagant honesty” he might like to be credited with would be more accurately identified as “cruelty” (*BGE* 230); and cruelty, Nietzsche remarks repeatedly, is a thoroughly natural, ultimately ineradicable human
inclination (see, e.g., GM II, 5–7, 16–18). And as noted before, it smacks of the ascetic ideal to try to eradicate one’s deepest animal nature because its behavior runs contrary to reason.

Nietzsche’s way out of this conundrum hinges on the “unconditional” part of the “unconditional will to truth.” He argued in GS 344 that the unconditional will to truth is a moral imperative, and thus “negate[s] this world, our world.” But the possibility that the will to truth might be a prudential rule implies that truth is sometimes, though not always, beneficial for life (“both truth and untruth constantly proved to be useful,” GS 344). This suggests that a conditional will to truth, at least in the sense of being restricted to cases in which truth is useful for life, might not fall prey to the charge of asceticism. Nietzsche almost explicitly answers the question of where to draw the line around this restricted will to truth when he writes, “The falseness of a judgment is for us not necessarily an objection […] The question is to what extent it is life-promoting, life-preserving, species-preserving, perhaps even species-cultivating” (BGE 4). In fact, this appears to state his criterion for the value of any impulse or institution, from altruistic morality (see GM Pref. 6) to hierarchical social structures (BGE 257), so it is hardly surprising that he holds the will to truth to the same standard. But what would it mean to exercise the will to truth only so far as it is “life-promoting, life-preserving, species-preserving, perhaps even species-cultivating” (BGE 4)?

I take it that Nietzsche has already given a sketch, albeit unsystematic and allusive, of such a will to truth in The Gay Science. He points to the distinctive role of art in saving the pursuit of truth from asceticism with his choice of the expression “la gaya scienza” (the subtitle of Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft), the Provençal term for the art of the medieval troubadours—“that unity of singer, knight, and free spirit which distinguishes the wonderful early culture of the Provençals from all equivocal cultures” (EH III, “Gay Science”). The “gay science” Nietzsche describes is a mode of pursuing truth that enables the pursuer—who, like Nietzsche, may be committed to seeking truth

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13 This does not, however, excuse the cruelty involved in the unconditional will to truth. The point is that cruelty as such need not be condemned; the value of cruelty depends on the purpose to which it is directed.
by "some granite of spiritual fatum" (*BGE* 231)—to remain cheerful and life-affirming, despite the ever-present risk that too much knowledge, or some particular ugly truth, will depress or crush her.

The key attributes of gay science are these: (1) The inquirer uses *artistry* to interpret the knowledge she acquires in a way that enables her to love and affirm life, rather than condemn it for its horror and meaninglessness. Sometimes this is a matter of artistically interpreting her own life of *inquiry* so that she can affirm *it*, despite the pain it may have brought. A primary way of doing this that Nietzsche emphasizes is (2) regarding *experimentation* as an opportunity for courage and adventure (thus adapting the "knight" aspect of the Provençal practitioners of *la gaya scienza*). The practice is a "gay science" because modern science is the mode of truth-seeking that distinctively prioritizes experimentation. Lastly, (3) the gay scientist maintains a spirit of *play* in all her inquiry. In the remainder of this section, I will explicate these components and show how Nietzsche’s conception of gay science involves a will to truth that is conditional in both senses: *instrumental* to life-affirming values as well as *restricted* to circumstances in which it promotes them.

### 3.1 Honesty and artistry

R. Lanier Anderson (2005) presents a reading of the eternal recurrence as a test of the goodness of a life and as a tool for helping us to endorse our own lives by "redeeming" past events of questionable value. Anderson argues that in order to be able to affirm her life as the eternal recurrence demands, an agent must balance two competing criteria: honesty and artistry. *Honesty* ensures that it is really *her own life* she is affirming, not something fictionalized beyond recognition. *Artistry*, meanwhile, enables her to "tell her life to herself" (cf. *EH*, epigraph) in a way that is narratively satisfying, and shows that questionable elements are *necessary* either to other elements that she would not want her life to be without, or simply to the aesthetic integrity of the whole. Anderson also suggests that this "thought of an ideal somehow based on the mutually limiting combination of virtues drawn from art and science [...] informs [Nietzsche’s] idea of a ‘gay science’" (2005: 220, n. 47)—i.e., that gay science is the practice of balancing honesty and artistry. And
Nietzsche in fact asserts that an artistic attitude can help us evade the risk of becoming beholden to the ascetic ideal: “Art [...], in which precisely the lie is sanctified and the will to deception has a good conscience, is much more fundamentally opposed to the ascetic ideal than is science” (GM III, 25).

The idea of using artistic techniques to shape one’s life occurs repeatedly throughout The Gay Science. In GS 290 Nietzsche extols the “great and rare art” of “giv[ing] style’ to one’s character” by “survey[ing] all the strengths and weaknesses of [one’s] nature and then fit[ting] them into an artistic plan”; in GS 299, he recommends that we “learn from artists” how to “make things beautiful, attractive, and desirable for us when they are not,” in order to “be the poets of our life.” He brings the idea to bear specifically on the problem of potentially harmful knowledge in GS 107:

Our ultimate gratitude to art.— If we had not welcomed the arts and invented this kind of cult of the untrue, then the realization of general untruth and mendaciously that now comes to us through science—the realization that delusion and error are conditions of human knowledge and sensation—would be utterly unbearable. Honesty would lead to nausea and suicide. But now there is a counterforce against our honesty that helps us to avoid such consequences: art as the good will to appearance. We do not always keep our eyes from rounding off something and, as it were, finishing the poem [...]. As an aesthetic phenomenon existence is still bearable for us, and art furnishes us with eyes and hands and above all the good conscience to be able to turn ourselves into such a phenomenon.

This passage alludes to four separate ways in which we can improve our lives using the tools of art: (1) we can accept that we perceive the world through a screen of “delusion and error,” i.e., through the potentially distorting structures of our cognitive apparatus, because we can regard ourselves as doing artistic shaping of the world around us; (2) we can deliberately view things in the world with artists’ eyes, “rounding [them] off” with a neatness and symmetry they do not possess; (3) we can regard life as “an aesthetic phenomenon” and appreciate it for the beauty that can be found in spite of its suffering and moral disorder; and (4) we can regard ourselves as aesthetic phenomena, and carry out the kind of artistic fashioning of our character described in GS 290 and 299.

As Nietzsche suggests in the Preface to the second edition of The Gay Science, this artistic license that the practitioner of gay science permits herself in interpreting the world is sometimes simply a matter of knowing when to look away or forget what she has seen:

There are a few things we now know too well, we knowing ones: oh, how we now learn to forget well, and to be good at not knowing, as artists!
And as for our future, one will hardly find us again on the paths of those Egyptian youths who endanger temples by night, embrace statues, and want by all means to unveil, uncover, and put into a bright light whatever is kept concealed for good reasons. No, this bad taste, **this will to truth, to “truth at any price,”** this youthful madness in the love of truth, have lost their charm for us: for that we are too experienced, too serious, too merry, too burned, too profound. [...] 

Oh, those Greeks! They knew how to live. What is required for that is to stop courageously at the surface, the fold, the skin, to adore appearance […] (GS Preface 4; bold emphasis added)

In view of the similarity of the highlighted phrase, “this will to truth, to ‘truth at any price,’” to “the disutility and dangerousness of ‘the will to truth,’ of ‘truth at any price’ is proved […] constantly” (GS 344), this passage might constitute Nietzsche’s response to the criticism he aims at himself in GS 344. Yes, he admits in the Preface, he **used** to be a devotee of the unconditional will “to ‘truth at any price.’” But “one will hardly find us again on the path” of those who want to “unveil” everything; such “youthful madness” and “bad taste,” as he calls it—framing the problem of the will to truth, tellingly, in aesthetic terms—“have lost their charm for us” (GS Pref. 4, emphasis added). He and other gay scientists exercise their good **taste** in choosing what not to look into, or what to ignore. Nietzsche certainly does not disavow the will to truth entirely here; rather, he ties it even more tightly to his individual character, as seen in **BGE** Part VII:

We philosophers are not free to divide body from soul as the people do […] We are not thinking frogs, nor objectifying and registering mechanisms with their innards removed: constantly, we have to give birth to our thoughts out of our pain and, like mothers, endow them with all we have of blood, heart, fire, pleasure, passion, agony, conscience, fate, and catastrophe. […] Only great pain is the ultimate liberator of the spirit, being the teacher of the **great suspicion** that turns every **U** into an **X**14 […] 

The attraction of everything problematic, the delight in an **x**, however, is so great in such more spiritual, more spiritualized men that this delight flares up again and again like a bright blaze over the distress of what is problematic […] We know a new happiness. (GS Preface 3)

The drive to investigate “what is problematic,” or to solve for **x**, is here understood not as the fulfillment of a duty, but as the pursuit of a “delight” available only to the “more spiritual.” This view of the relationship of philosophers to their thoughts is reaffirmed in the Preface to the Genealogy: “we may not make isolated errors or hit upon isolated truths. Rather do our ideas, our values, our yeas and nays […] grow out of us with the necessity with which a tree bears fruit—related and each […] 

14 As Walter Kaufmann clarifies in an editorial footnote, Nietzsche means that “the great suspicion” casts doubt on apparently familiar things, thus turning supposedly known quantities into unknown quantities, as symbolized by the algebraist’s **x** (GS Preface 3, note 6, p. 36).
with an affinity to each, and evidence of one will, one health, one soil, one sun” (GM Pref. 2).

The idea that a philosopher’s ideas grow out of the needs, strengths, and weaknesses of her character, not an indifferent will to truth, is thoroughly in keeping with Nietzsche’s characterization of philosophers past and future in Beyond Good and Evil. While he criticizes past philosophers for their hypocrisy and timidity in denying it (see, e.g., BGE 5, 6, 9, 187), he declares it approvingly in the case of the “philosopher of the future” who will avow openly, “My judgment is my judgment: no one else is easily entitled to it” (BGE 43). This kind of individuality seems less suited to truth—which is generally understood to be universal—than to taste; Nietzsche’s tree metaphor in GM Pref. 2 could as well describe an aesthetic unity among a philosopher’s thoughts as a logical unity: “when the work [of giving style to one’s character] is finished, it becomes evident how the constraint of a single taste governed and formed everything large and small. Whether this taste was good or bad is less important than one might suppose, if only it was a single taste!” (GS 290).

These characterizations of gay scientists and new philosophers point to ways in which their will to truth is both instrumental to other values and restricted accordingly. They pursue truth not from a sense of moral obligation but for the pleasure it brings them: “The attraction of everything problematic, the delight in an x […] flares up again and again like a bright blaze over the distress of what is problematic” (GS Pref. 3). True Nietzschean philosophers do not pursue truth in general, but their own truths, expressing their distinctive temperament, worldview, and vision for the future. Their pursuit of truth is a process of self-creation: as philosophers’ ideas develop from their character like fruit from a tree (GM Pref. 2), they simultaneously discover and shape who they are. Moreover, their truth-seeking is not only a matter of self-shaping, but of shaping humankind:

*Genuine philosophers [...] are commanders and legislators: they say, “thus it shall be!” They first determine the Whither and For What of man [...] With a creative hand they reach for the future, and all that is and has been becomes a means for them, an instrument, a hammer. Their “knowing” is creating, their creating is a legislation, their will to truth is—will to power.* (BGE 211)

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15 Nietzsche’s perspectivism may complicate this generalization slightly, but does not invalidate it: perspectivism is not the same as relativism.
Gay scientists and philosophers, then, pursue truth with aesthetic and creative as well as epistemic considerations in mind, following certain avenues of inquiry rather than others because of how well they fit with their personal concerns or their life history, or because of how the answers might contribute to a project of reshaping the world.

3.2 Experimentation and courage

In a few apparently confessional sections of The Gay Science, Nietzsche describes the weariness and disillusionment that attend the life of the seeker of knowledge. Here is one example:

_Excelsior._ — “You will never pray again, never adore again, never again rest in endless trust; you do not permit yourself to stop before any ultimate wisdom, ultimate goodness, ultimate power, while un harnessing your thoughts; you have no perpetual guardian and friend for your seven solitudes[...] there is no longer any reason in what happens, no love in what happens to you; no resting place is open any longer to your heart[...]; you resist any ultimate peace; you will the eternal recurrence of war and peace: man of renunciation, all this you wish to renounce? Who will give you the strength for that? Nobody yet has had this strength!” (GS 285)

In short, a knowledge-seeker cannot be simply comforted or enchanted by any ideals or heroes of the past or present: she too often feels compelled to look beneath, behind, or through them; she sees their flaws and limitations, and this inevitably breaks the enchantment.

Besides resisting the urge “to unveil [...] whatever is kept concealed for good reasons” (GS Pref. 4), the seeker of knowledge can also regard her disappointments, disillusionments, and renunciations, with some exercise of the artistic license discussed in section 3.1, as tests of her courage and strength: she can regard herself as a warrior in the service of truth. Nietzsche clearly thinks strength and courage (intellectual as well as physical) are thoroughly life-affirming primary values, and his outlook makes the pursuit of truth instrumental to them. Paradoxically, this way of treating the will to truth as instrumental can serve as a counterweight to the artistic tendency to embellish or elide the truth, and thus push the will to truth closer to being unrestricted. Nietzsche suggests that he believes “the strength of a spirit should be measured according to how much of the

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16 Nietzsche seems to think this would make the gay scientist a more effective as well as a healthier seeker of truth, as he indicates in the epigraph to the Third Essay of the Genealogy: “Unconcerned, mocking, violent—thus wisdom wants us; she is a woman and always loves only a warrior.”
‘truth’ one could still barely endure—or to put it more clearly, to what degree one would require it to be thinned down, shrouded, sweetened, blunted, falsified” (BGE 39). Therefore, someone who pursues truth as a means to prove or cultivate her strength would be motivated to take in more of it in unedited, unembellished form, for that reason, not from an ascetic moral commitment to truth. In fact, Nietzsche may regard it as a regulative ideal to be able to take in all of the truth that one comes across in a life spent seeking truth; but the value of such an accomplishment lies in the spiritual strength one must build in order to be capable of it, not in the commitment to truth as such.

Elsewhere Nietzsche connects the “heroic” aspects of the search for knowledge specifically with its experimental character: “I favor any skepsis to which I may reply: ‘Let us try it!’ But I no longer wish to hear anything of... questions that do not permit any experiment. This is the limit of my ‘truthfulness’; for there courage has lost its right” (GS 51). This maxim explicitly restricts the search for truth to questions that require courage in experimentation (in living according to new rules and values, not in laboratories). And the implied rationale for this restriction is that inquiry is valuable only as a means to exercising one’s courage, which would make the gay scientist’s will to truth conditional in both senses laid out in section 1. This restriction would mean, furthermore, that interpreting the life of inquiry as one of heroism would end up being quite natural.

Nietzsche appeals to experimental courage to address a serious problem, which he calls “the most insidious question of all,” raised by the thorough comparative study of moral customs:

whether science can furnish goals of action after it has proved that it can take such goals away and annihilate them; and then experimentation would be in order that would allow every kind of heroism to find satisfaction—centuries of experimentation that might eclipse all the great projects and sacrifices of history to date. (GS 7)

Later Nietzsche, as we have seen, determines that science cannot “furnish goals of action.” But this last paragraph of GS 7 reveals a sense in which “science” can furnish goals of action: the activity of gay science, which crucially involves experimentation, provides occasions for acts of heroism. Of course, science cannot tell us that courage is valuable, or that pioneering novel ways of life counts as a worthy example of heroism; we must assume these values already. But since (as Nietzsche
supposes) we generally do, this way of conducting science can offer a satisfying and meaningful life.

3.3 The child at play

A particular image—the image of a child at play—recurs at crucial points in *The Gay Science* in a way that suggests it is key to understanding Nietzsche’s conception of a gay science. The most famous occurrence of this image in Nietzsche’s writings is in the section of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* called “The Three Metamorphoses” (1883). Zarathustra explains how the human spirit must become a camel, who obeys difficult commandments; a lion, who tears down old commandments—not in order to create new values, which he cannot do, but to create “freedom [...] for new creation”; and finally a child. The child *can* create new values because “[t]he child is innocence and forgetting, a new beginning, a game, a self-propelled wheel, a first movement, a sacred ‘Yes’” (ZI, 1). The child is not weighed down by the memory of the old ideals, because he simply “forgets”; it is all a game to him, and each game—the reign of each value-ideal—has its own rules, but he knocks it all down from time to time, tired of the old game, and starts a new game with new rules, the old one over and forgotten (see Acampora 2004: 177).

Nietzsche returns to this image in the last substantive section of Book V of *The Gay Science*:

Another ideal runs ahead of us, a strange, tempting, dangerous ideal[...]: the ideal of a spirit who plays naively—that is, not deliberately but from overflowing power and abundance— with all that was hitherto called holy, good, untouchable, divine; [...] the ideal of a human, superhuman well-being and benevolence that will often appear *inhuman*—for example, when it confronts all earthly seriousness so far [...] as if it were [the] most incarnate and involuntary parody—and in spite of all of this, it is perhaps only with him that *great seriousness* really begins, that the real question mark is posed for the first time, that the destiny of the soul changes[...], the tragedy *begins*. (GS 382)

This section connects itself with both the first and the last sections of the original 1882 edition of *The Gay Science*, reinforcing the idea that the whole book is intended as a unity. The final phrase of *GS 382*, “the tragedy *begins,*” translates “Incipit tragoedia,” the title of the last section of Book IV (which is virtually identical to the first paragraph of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, potentially strengthening the connection with the child in “The Three Metamorphoses”).

The quoted passage also returns to a central idea of *GS 1*: the juxtaposition and eventual
synthesis of comedy and tragedy. In *GS* 1, Nietzsche contrasted the viewpoint of “the age of tragedy, the age of moralities and religions”—which teach that all of life, and every individual life, has a “purpose”—with that of “the eternal comedy of existence,” which reveals that each individual is a laughably insignificant tool for the perpetuation of the species. At the end of the section, “the most cautious friend of man” concludes: “Not only laughter and gay wisdom but the tragic, too, with all its sublime unreason, belongs among the means and necessities of the preservation of the species.” In light of “this new law of ebb and flood,” Nietzsche appears to be seeking a perspective that could merge the seemingly opposed viewpoints of comedy and tragedy. The figure presented as an “ideal” in *GS* 382 can meet this demand, since he “confronts all earthly seriousness so far [...] as if it were [the] most incarnate and involuntary parody—and in spite of all of this, it is perhaps only with him that great seriousness really begins.” The depiction of this ideal figure as one who “plays naively” with the ideals of the past raises the question whether this “great seriousness” is the same one that Nietzsche identifies with true “maturity” in *BGE* 94: “the seriousness one had as a child, at play.”

This closing image of *GS* 382 also calls our attention to the various occurrences of the notion of “play” throughout *The Gay Science*. *GS* 110—which points out the inherent limitations on the human capacity for knowledge that, Nietzsche worried in *GS* 107, would “lead to nausea and suicide” if fully acknowledged—places this notion of play at the very origin of the will to knowledge:

This subtler honesty and skepticism came into being wherever two contradictory sentences appeared to be applicable to life because both were compatible with the basic errors, and it was therefore possible to argue about the higher or lower degree of utility for life; also wherever new propositions, though not useful for life, were also evidently not harmful to life: in such cases there was room for the expression of an intellectual play impulse [Spieltrieb], and honesty and skepticism were innocent and happy like all play [Spiele].

(*GS* 110)

The pursuit of truth became a serious matter when “[n]ot only utility and delight but every kind of impulse took sides in [the] fight about ‘truths,’” and “eventually knowledge and the striving for the truth found their place as a need among other needs” (ibid.). But I think that Nietzsche posits for it

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17 Namely, the ones that “proved to be useful and helped to preserve the species,” in that “those who hit upon or inherited these had better luck in their struggle for themselves and their progeny,” and were therefore “continually inherited until they became almost part of the basic endowment of the species” (*GS* 110).
an origin in play in order to emphasize the possibilities for playfulness in the search for truth, especially in the kind of experimentation, the spirit of “Let us try it!”, adverted to in GS 51. This proposed origin story also drives home that the will to truth has only incidentally acquired a moral valence: it can still be pursued for the sheer pleasure of contrariness and curiosity, and pursued only as long as it is “not harmful to life” (GS 110), rather than unconditionally, “at any price.”

In GS 107 Nietzsche unites all these components of gay science, describing the knowledge-seeker’s artistic reinterpretation of herself and the world in terms of childhood, play, and heroism:

We do not always keep our eyes from rounding off something and, as it were, finishing the poem; and then it is no longer eternal imperfection that we carry across the river of becoming—then we have the sense of carrying a goddess, and feel proud and childlike [kindlich] as we perform this service... At times we need a rest from ourselves by looking upon, by looking down upon, ourselves and, from an artistic distance, laughing over ourselves or weeping over ourselves. We must discover the hero no less than the fool in our passion for knowledge... Precisely because we are at bottom grave and serious human beings...nothing does us as much good as a fool's cap: we need it in relation to ourselves—we need all exuberant, floating, dancing, mocking, childish [kindische] and blissful art lest we lose the freedom above things that our ideal demands of us... We should be able also to stand above morality—and not only to stand with the anxious stiffness of a man who is afraid of slipping and falling any moment, but also to float above it and play. (GS 107)

Here the child represents both the “childlike” reverence toward the “goddess” that life becomes under our artist’s gaze and the “childish” irreverence we direct toward ourselves when we picture a “fool’s cap” on our own head: as suggested by GS 382, the child is the figure in whom tragedy and comedy come together.18 The artistic impulse that enables us to feel thus both “childlike” and “childish” also enables us to view ourselves as a “hero [...] in our passion for knowledge,” not only as a fool (GS 107). Paradoxically, Nietzsche suggests that the attitude of “floating above” that we adopt when we look at ourselves and the world through artists’ eyes helps us to practice and maintain “the freedom above things that our ideal”—i.e., the ideal of the pursuit of truth—“demands of us,” including the ability to “float above” morality and view it clearly and without prejudice or attachment. The knower and the artist are not so different in the masterly, proprietary, sometimes

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18 GS 382 does not actually mention the word “child,” but the image of a “human, superhuman” but also “inhuman” being who “plays naively” with the most important things calls to mind the Heracitean Weltkind also evoked in Zarathustra.
playful attitudes they direct at their objects. To practice gay science, then, is to seamlessly blend the attitudes of artist and knower, to view things with keen eyes from above, but also with a “good conscience” to be able to reshape them creatively when necessary (GS 107); to blend the viewpoints of comedy and tragedy, treating the world with “the seriousness one had as a child, at play” (BGE 94); and to approach the objects of inquiry with a spirit of courageous and playful experimentation.

4. Conclusion

“Gay science” as I have described it accommodates Nietzsche’s own stubborn drive to seek truth without falling afoul of his powerful critique of the unconditional will to truth because it is conditional in both senses in which the attitude he criticizes is unconditional. Gay scientists regard the value of pursuing truth as instrumental to aims Nietzsche considers life-affirming: the delight of discovery, the cultivation of strength and courage, and (if they are philosophers) the advancement of their own aesthetic and ethical vision for the world. They also restrict their pursuit of truth to circumstances in which it promotes those aims; they know to look away from truth when it causes pain that weakens rather than strengthens them, and to shape their picture of the world, with artists’ eyes, so that they can love and affirm life in spite of the pain and disappointment it presents. Gay scientists take a wholly different stance toward truth than do adherents to the unconditional will to truth: they regard the pursuit of truth as a game rather than a solemn duty. At times they can be wholly engrossed in it, so that it can produce the “passion, love, ardor, and” (yes) “suffering” that Nietzsche admires in the “last idealists of knowledge” (GM III, 24). But they can also step back from their pursuit of truth and assess whether it is fulfilling the purposes for which they engage in it.
References

Works by Nietzsche

Primary texts are cited with an abbreviation for the title, Roman numerals for the larger divisions of the text where relevant, and Arabic numerals for the aphorism numbers.

Abbreviations

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Citations


Other Works


