Semblance and Authenticity: Nietzsche on the Use and Misuse of Illusion

Dissertation Summary

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My dissertation provides a comprehensive analysis of Nietzsche’s conception of the nature and value of illusion, with special emphasis on his view of the nature and value of art. I argue that attention to the role of illusion in Nietzsche’s aesthetics helps illuminate central aspects of both his theoretical and practical philosophy. Specifically, my interpretation promises new resolutions to two long-standing problems in the literature. The first is whether Nietzsche can insist on the value of art and illusion given his profound and explicit commitment to intellectual honesty and the unflinching pursuit of truth. The second concerns the coherence of Nietzsche’s epistemology. Nietzsche is often thought to question whether any human belief can possibly be true. This view, often referred to as the falsification thesis, creates serious self-referential worries and also stands in obvious conflict with Nietzsche’s own commitment to the truth of many of his philosophical claims.

Nietzsche was not the first to suggest that there is something special and particularly valuable about aesthetic illusions. In Chapter 1, I provide an in-depth examination of the theories of “aesthetic semblance” developed by three of Nietzsche’s most important influences, Schiller, Goethe, and Schopenhauer. According to Schiller and Goethe, a semblance is aesthetic only if it satisfies two conditions, which I call the honesty and autonomy conditions. The honesty condition holds that spectators must be conscious of the fact that the work of art they are viewing is semblance. The autonomy condition holds that they must appreciate the work of art as semblance. This latter condition entails two important corollaries, to wit, (i) that appreciation of aesthetic semblance involves appreciation of the form rather than the content or “matter” of a work, and (ii) that the enjoyment of a work of art is disinterested.

After explicating the basic conception of aesthetic semblance, I show how Schiller and Goethe apply it to their view of the idealized content of art. Both hold that naturalistic representations—representations that produce convincing illusions—are aesthetically undesirable, since they impede the honest and autonomous appreciation of the work. Specifically, such representations convince us that what a work of art represents is merely an individual thing of the kind represented (say, a particular plant). By contrast, they hold that the proper subjects of artistic representations are moral or metaphysical archetypes of the kind of object that they represent (say, the archetypal plant or “Urpflanze”). Finally, I show how these ideas are adopted and refined by Schopenhauer. An important result of the whole discussion is a distinction between two kinds of falsehood, representational and imitative falsehood. This
distinction is familiar from the dual use of the word ‘false’ in sentences like ‘It is false that Princeton is north of New York City’ and ‘Fred is a false friend.’

With this distinction in mind, I turn in Chapter 2 to the questions of why Nietzsche claims that art is “false” and why he thinks this is something good. According to one very prevalent interpretation, Nietzsche thinks that art misrepresents its objects in certain ways and instills false beliefs in us about what it represents. Supposedly, this is valuable because Nietzsche holds that false beliefs can be useful.

I argue that a close examination of the texts does not support this received view, but instead suggests that Nietzsche is interested in the fact that art is illusory, or “false” in the imitative sense. I then show that, from an early date, Nietzsche accepted the basic features of aesthetic semblance laid out by his predecessors. An important feature of Nietzsche’s own theory, however, is that the appreciation of aesthetic semblance instills a positive evaluative attitude towards semblance as such. This, I argue, helps explain how Nietzsche’s appraisal of art is compatible with, and indeed integral to, his own insistence on intellectual honesty. The crucial observation here is that he believes that some degree of illusion is a necessary condition of all life. By reorienting our evaluative attitude towards semblance, art helps us to be honest about and well disposed towards this fact.

Chapter 3 concludes my discussion of Nietzsche’s aesthetics proper, examining his conception of aesthetic idealization and expanding upon the notion of evaluative reorientation from the previous chapter. I argue against a common reading according to which Nietzsche thinks that idealization works by excising or “airbrushing” out the disturbing or ugly features of what it represents. Rather, the appreciation of aesthetic semblance distances us from our normal evaluations of things, and shows them in a new evaluative light, whereby what we normally find “ugly” or reprehensible about them is, in Nietzsche’s terminology, “transfigured” [verklärt]. A striking conclusion of this chapter is that Nietzsche remains committed to a certain version of the classic thesis that aesthetic appreciation should be disinterested. Specifically, Nietzsche believes that aesthetic appreciation should not be based on any antecedent interests. This view is compatible with his rejection of the Kantian and Schopenhauerian thesis that a judgment is aesthetic if and only if it involves no interest whatsoever (a thesis which comprises the claim that aesthetic judgments cannot produce any interest).

The next two chapters examine the role of illusion in Nietzsche’s theoretical philosophy. Their main thrust is to show that, contrary to widespread scholarly consensus, Nietzsche never accepted the falsification thesis. In the process, I illuminate central aspects of Nietzsche’s theory of science, and his theory of experience. Nietzsche, I argue, is no skeptic about the possibility of true belief; his skepticism rather targets the possibility of knowledge, understood in the thick
sense of understanding, comprehension, or insight into the underlying nature of the natural world.

Chapter 4 examines how this critique applies to natural science. Nietzsche subscribes to and radicalizes a style of criticism, pressed by a wide variety of thinkers in 19th-century Germany, which maintains that scientific theories provide only “descriptive” or “morphological,” but not explanatory, knowledge of the natural world. However, I suggest that Nietzsche’s conception of descriptive knowledge is robust and compatible with his commitment to the truth and rigor of scientific theories.

In the next chapter, I parlay this distinction into a broader critique of readings of Nietzsche’s epistemology based on the falsification thesis. I show that Nietzsche believes that even ordinary experience can yield considerable descriptive knowledge of the world, though of a much coarser-grained sort than that found in science. The resulting interpretation reveals that he holds certain illusions—though not false belief or judgment—to be a necessary condition of our knowledge of empirical reality. This dependence claim, however, does not imply that no claim to knowledge can ever be correct.

In Chapter 6, I turn to Nietzsche’s notorious claim that what he calls the “absolute and unconditional will to truth” is a clandestine expression of the Christian ascetic ideal. I locate the motivation for this claim, not, as is usual, in the putative harmfulness of some truths but in certain structural features associated with what Nietzsche calls scientific “discipline” [Zucht] or “intellectual conscientiousness.” I show further that Nietzsche’s view logically depends on his endorsement of the position, detailed in Chapter 5, according to which illusion is a necessary condition of experience.

Finally, I argue that the theory of aesthetic semblance, outlined in Chapters 2 and 3, explains how Nietzsche can continue to advocate intellectual conscientiousness in the pursuit of science in a way that he considers “non-ascetic.” What he thinks needs to be changed, I suggest, is not scientific practice, but the underlying motives for engaging in that practice—something which is made possible by the reevaluation of semblance that takes place in our appreciation of art. I suggest further that Nietzsche’s conception of aesthetic idealization explains his own conception of scientific “objectivity.” Being objective involves being disinterested, not in the sense of being uninterested or evaluatively neutral, but in being unconstrained by any particular set of interests. Aesthetic semblance thus turns out not only to be of central value to life in general but, especially, to the life of science. Nietzsche’s theory of semblance, therefore, involves not merely a reevaluation of the Platonic attitude towards truth; surprisingly, it also contributes to a conception of scientific inquiry that even someone in the grips of those Platonic values could, in principle, come to accept.