The debate between the realist and the anti-realist is—in a sense—the debate between the possibility of pure passive description versus the necessity of interpretation. The realist argues, broadly, that there is a single way the world truly is. Describing this world without the bias of interpretation has been the project of the philosophical realist. The realist hopes to engage in what Nietzsche calls “that general renunciation of all interpretation (of forcing, adjusting, abbreviating, omitting, padding, inventing, falsifying, and whatever else is of the essence of interpreting)” (Genealogy of Morals, 587). On the other hand, the anti-realist argues that a reduction of the world into purely factual propositions is impossible; in other words, the anti-realist believes that every proposition about the world involves interpretation, so that a solely descriptive account of reality is impossible. A potential consequence of the anti-realist position is that there is no single ‘real’ way the world is. By this view there is only the variety of interpretive perspectives.

My project is to outline a reading of Nietzsche that allows us to place him within these two competing accounts of reality. Nietzsche is commonly ignored or misrepresented in contemporary Analytic Philosophy, even though he is often credited (Taylor, 1987) with furnishing some of the most devastating critiques of Analytic Metaphysics and Epistemology. So, my goal is to furnish a miniature map that locates Nietzsche in relation to one of the questions engaged by analytic philosophy. I will attempt a textual analysis that argues—as many might suspect—that Nietzsche is properly an anti-realist because of his view on language and valuation.

Nietzsche and, lately, Foucault are taken as enemies of Analytic Epistemology because they argue that knowledge and the belief-making process is guided by contingent cultural conditions. Since the conditions are contingent, there is no way to isolate solid criteria for justified-true-belief or whatever. I agree that this is the reason for Nietzsche’s distaste for Epistemology, but, left unexamined, it potentially leads to what I take to be misunderstanding (or understatement) of Nietzsche’s anti-realist position.
Alan White writes in *Within Nietzsche’s Labyrinth*, “The problem [for Nietzsche]... is not that there are no facts, but that there are too many facts. There are too many in that not all can be registered, and not all can be interrelated” (48). White argues that human beings are too limited to absorb all possible propositions about the world. This limitation requires that some propositions be taken seriously at the expense of others, and this taking seriously of one proposition over another is an interpretive act, since one must interpret which are the serious facts versus the frivolous facts. Moreover, the interpretive act is fueled and guided by relations of power in a culture.

My worry is that White’s account—and accounts like it—of Nietzsche’s view of fact and interpretation leaves Nietzsche open to attack from a savvy correspondence theorist (CT). The traditional CT argues that a sufficiently powerful “viewer” of the world would be able to collect all factual propositions and synthesize them into a single, truthful, perfectly corresponding account of reality. Because Nietzsche’s position has to be reconstructed by stressing the limitation of humankind, the correspondence theory is left a viable option. Just because human beings now are unable to digest all the facts or see all the interrelations or transcend power relationships, the CT argument would go, nothing is said against the possibility of a God’s eye viewpoint attainable, by, say, expert honest science as it progresses into the future. Recall the position ascribed to Charles S. Peirce: Peirce argued that there was a method—the method of science—that could overcome the limitations inherent in the ways people “fix their beliefs.” Where, then, does Nietzsche stand in relation to the objectivity of science? (Nietzsche gives us a rough hint when he writes, “... physics, too, is only an interpretation and exegesis of the world (to suit us, if I may say so!) and not world explanation; [physics]... strikes an age with fundamentally plebeian tastes as fascinating, persuasive, and convincing—after all, it follows instinctively the canon of truth of eternally popular sensualism” (BGE, 212).

If we are to take Nietzsche as a full-blown anti-realist, we must understand how he evades the optimistic realist’s challenge, fueled by a position such as Peirce’s. In other words, we must investigate whether Nietzsche believes that a God’s eye view is presently unattainable or that a God’s eye view is in principal incoherent. My view is the latter. I shall argue that, although White’s reading has shown an important sense (perhaps the
most important sense) in which Nietzsche is an anti-realist, a deeper anti-realist tendency can be traced in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and *Genealogy of Morals*. I will also engage the traditional argument against relativism—as some might think that I am painting Nietzsche as a relativist—and show how Nietzsche evades the venerable Socratic charges against the relativist.

The CT argues that the Truth is correspondence between certain linguistic propositions and the way the world really is. In this way, the CT feels that a statement such as “there is a tree” is true if, in fact, a tree is in the area indicated by “there.” Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra* is no friend of the CT: the correspondence theorist’s way of waiting for the truth of the world to come to light is to remain “mere spectators... Like those who stand in the street and gape at the people who pass by” (237). Zarathustra charges that these ‘scholars’ are as blind to the (sun)light of truth as someone who never leaves “dusty rooms.”

Zarathustra gives a more obvious critique of the CT in the Convalescent. He awakens after confronting his most abysmal thought and marvels at the chattering of his animals:

... Are not words and sounds rainbows and illusive bridges between things which are eternally apart?... For Me—how should there be any outside-myself? There is no outside. But all sounds make us forget this; how lovely it is that we forget. Have not names and sounds been given to things that man might find things refreshing? Speaking is a beautiful folly: with that man dances over all things (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 329).

The position Nietzsche is suggesting here argues that although words may bridge the gap between the self (a single limited human perspective) and the world, there can never be a direct correspondence between propositions and observations made by the self and factual features about the world: “how should there be any outside-myself?” Zarathustra wonders. We can reconstruct Nietzsche’s argument this way: when anyone uses a word, he or she is creating a link between a sound and the world that in no way ‘contains’ the feature of the world picked out. How could a sound ‘contain’ anything but noise? So, if the sound’s link to the world is an arbitrary link, there is no reason to suspect that the link specifies the essential, true, eternal nature
of the world. At best the sound allows speakers to "dance over all things." This dancing is not necessarily either careful or precise.

In Nietzsche's view, it is impossible in principle that dancing over all things would allow someone to grasp all things unambiguously. Except for the difficult cases of onomatopoeia, the relationship between sounds and the world is contingent. Moreover, the words themselves are not bridges of steel and concrete. They are not bridges of permanence, but rather bridges made of rainbows and illusions. There is flux in the relationship between words and the world and flux in the meanings of words. "... The form is fluid," (the relationship between words and the world) "but the 'meaning' [of words considered in isolation from the world] even more so" (Genealogy of Morals, 514). The argument against the CT has two branches. The first denies the possibility for a word to link-up with reality in any objectively convincing way, and the second denies that any word has a single transcendent meaning. In this way the possibility of a God's eye point of view is negated: the complete set of propositions about the world that God would have can, at best, be made of concepts that have no fixed meaning; even if they did, they could not 'contain' all of the features of what they are picking out in the world. Again, the reason the containment is impossible is that there is no way, when naming things in the world, to capture or contain the essential features of the thing in the world. "... How should there be any outside myself...," that is not accessed via "... illusive bridges...."

If it is the case that words are fluid over time, the CT might here attempt to "fix the meaning" of a word—at least temporarily—so that a word can pick out a distinct feature of the world. This would help the CT in her or his project in that it would allow a word with a fixed meaning to 'link to' a fixed reference in the world. Given a very powerful mechanism for linking all these fixed references in the world, the CT might think that a God's eye perspective is yet possible.

Nietzsche's suggestion is that the gap between words and world is a chasm that cannot be crossed by permanent, solid bridges. In response, the CT attempts to make a word-bridge solid by stipulating the meaning of a word. This is "... a metaphysician's ambition to a hopeless position..." (BEG, 7). Nietzsche evaluates the move to fix a reference as follows: "The lordly right of giving names extends so far that one should allow oneself to conceive the origin of language itself as an expression of power on the part
of the rulers: they say 'this is this and this,' they seal every thing and event with a sound and, as it were, take possession of it" (GM, 463). The problem, in Nietzsche’s view, is not that a CT cannot fix the reference of a word, but rather that the reference that is fixed is arbitrary. This is another way toward White’s critique of facts, but it brings out more carefully the plight of the CT. Where the CT attempts to fix the meaning of a word so that it picks out a single thing in the world, what actually happens is that the CT picked out a thing in the world and forced that as a meaning of a word. If this is the case—if giving names is a lordly right and an act of taking possession—what is taken is chosen arbitrarily by the CT. In practical terms, picking out something in the world and calling it, for example, a tree ends up not fixing any reference: what determines if the dirt in the five-meter circle around the roots is contained in the word ‘tree’; or who decides if leaves and branches are part of a tree—or if only the trunk (not counting the bark) is a tree?

The problem arises when the CT attempts to use this newly stipulated word to link to reality and to make the claim that it picks out exactly what is really there: of course the word links to a reality, because that reality is just what was put into the word. But filling up a word (fixing a reference) with an arbitrarily chosen thing goes nowhere in showing that that meaning is the single possible meaning. At best, fixing a meaning places inside a word a reference that is relevant to some perspective. And, of course, there is no reason to suspect that this perspective, powerful in its ability to temporarily fix the meanings of words, is able to access the Truth. While the CT thinks that he or she has pursued reality outside the cave, something else has happened in Nietzsche’s view.

... purposes and utilities [of words for describing the world] are only signs that a will to power has become master of something less powerful and imposed upon it the character of a function; and the entire history of a “thing,” and organ, a custom can in this way be a continuous sign-chain of ever new interpretations and adaptations whose causes do not even have to be related to one another but, on the contrary, in some cases succeed and alternate with one another in a purely chance fashion (GM, 513).
Nietzsche elaborates on the position I am ascribing to him by arguing that the meaning of any "thing" or "organ" (or word) is constantly contingent—that the appropriation of language by the CT for a certain purpose is no more legitimate than the appropriation by anyone else to fix the reference in a different way (make the word 'tree', for instance, describe the juxtaposition of leaves, branches, trunk, roots and a one-foot deep space of air around the trunk). How the reference is fixed can "succeed... in a purely chance fashion." Nietzsche's view denies the possibility of some way to describe the world that is essentially more right than any other. Nietzsche argues that even an exact science of giving more complex and complete meanings will fail to get closer to an objective meaning.

The "evolution" of a thing, a custom, an organ is... by no means its progressus towards a goal...—but a succession of more or less profound, more or less mutually independent processes of subduing, plus the resistances they encounter, the attempts at transformation for the purpose of defense and reaction, and the results of successful counteractions (GM, 514).

So, subduing a word by fixing its reference does not further the pursuit of truth as correspondence. All it does is subdue words in an arbitrary way. This is why White argues that "Even to register a fact then, is to interpret, in that the registering involves the singling out of that specific fact" (WNL, 48). But this is not solely, as White argues, because there is a necessary exclusion of other facts. Nietzsche's critique of realism is more serious: even if there was a mechanism—say, science—that could catalog every fact, it is not clear, by Nietzsche's view, what should count as a 'fact'. When any proposition is made about the world and held up as an example of a 'fact', the words that comprise that proposition are either in flux or have a fixed reference. If they are in flux, then there is no way they can pick out one truthful state of affairs in the world. If the meaning of the words is fixed in the way the CT attempts to fix a reference, all that is fixed is one subjective perspective of the world, and thus the proposition does not describe the single truthful state of affairs.
Traditionally, the CT has held up the curious coincidence between the perception and philosophical descriptions made by many cultures. Surely, argues the realist, if dividing up the world is a purely arbitrary practice, there would be much more diversity in the ways the world is divided up. But the absence of this diversity indicates to the realist that world/word making is not arbitrary. Nietzsche challenges this inference:

The strange family resemblance of all Indian, Greek, and German philosophizing is explained easily enough. Where there is affinity of languages, it cannot fail, owing to the common philosophy of grammar—I mean, owing to the unconscious domination and guidance by similar grammatical functions—that everything is prepared at the outset for a similar development and sequence of philosophical systems; just as the way seems barred against certain other possibilities of world-interpretation (BGE, ¶20).

Nietzsche recommends that one ought not to conclude from cultural coincidences of 'facts' that everyone is latching on to some essential, true feature of the world. One ought to conclude from this coincidence only that the ways of dividing up world, as they rely on a 'philosophy of grammar', come from very similar philosophies of grammar and thus look very similar.

Nietzsche’s view has serious consequence for science, the traditional tool of the correspondence theorist. Of science, Nietzsche writes, "Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as science 'without any presuppositions'... a philosophy, a 'faith,' must always be there first of all, so that science can acquire from it a direction, a meaning, a limit, a method, a right to exist" (GM, 587-88). From the correspondence theorist's standpoint this view of science would be startling. Science is supposed to be the tool by which all references can be fixed and the truth of the world can be told. But in light of Nietzsche's critique of the CT position, his view on science is not surprising at all. Science is engaged in the pursuit of a certain kind of thing that it believes—because of the will of some lord of names—to be facts. Even if science could collect all of these 'facts', what counted as a fact would itself be arbitrary. Of course, the plight of the scientist is deepened to a third degree when we attempt to make sense of the *significance* of those things
that are called facts. This is White’s critique, what I am calling the third critique, of the pursuit of truth: "... as soon as this truth or fact—or any other—is selectively registered, the problem of interpretation arises once again: what is the significance of the fact?” (49). The situation for the realist in Nietzsche's view is precarious. Truth as correspondence loses its coherence as Nietzsche points out that the bridge between propositions about the world and the world itself are always illusory and tenuous.

A brief recap of Nietzsche's critique of correspondence theory: A) Our only means of describing the world, our only access to the world are subjective states and the words used to describe subjective states. Word-bridges are illusory. B) No description can have a non-arbitrary fixed-reference. C) Even if the problems of A and B could be solved, the facts acquired about the world would need to be placed into some system of significance which, by definition, would be subjective (i.e. significance to whom?).

If this is Nietzsche's view, one might be tempted to label him a relativist. But if Nietzsche is a relativist, he could fall prey to the venerable critique against relativism that Socrates used against Protagoras. For the rest of this paper I will give the framework for perspectivism that Nietzsche more rightly fits into. In the process I will show how perspectivism evades the critique of Protagorean relativism.

Relativism is the position that every proposition about the world is as correct as any other proposition. According to the relativist, 'truth' depends on your point of view. When Protagoras articulated a view like this Socrates charged him with an incoherence that is now famous: "How could you, Protagoras, argue that relativism is true if relativism argues that nothing is true?"

Relativism seems to be self-refuting because if relativism was right, there would be no reason to believe that relativism was right—**truth depends on your point of view.** Whether or not this critique of Protagoras is devastating is not clear (I think it is not), but the danger is that Nietzsche may be charged with the same incoherence. Is Nietzsche’s perspectivism just a perspective, no more right than any other—say, the correspondence theorist’s—perspective?

Although strict relativism is consistent with Nietzsche’s point of view, it leaves no room for objectivity through diversity. This feature of
objectivity through diversity of perspectives is the way Nietzsche answers Protagorean incoherence. The relativist seems to throw his or her hands up in the air and proclaim that 'everything is right.' Nietzsche needs to do no such thing, as his view allows for valuations to arise from engaging many perspectives. In an often cited passage from Genealogy, Nietzsche writes,

... let us be on guard against the dangerous old conceptual fiction that posited a 'pure, will-less, painless, timeless knowing subject'; let us guard against the snares of such contradictory concepts as 'pure reason,' 'absolute spirituality,' 'knowledge in itself'; these always demand that we should think of an eye that is completely unthinkable, an eye turned in no particular direction, in which the active and interpreting forces, through which alone seeing becomes seeing something, are supposed to be lacking; these always demand of the eye an absurdity and a nonsense. 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 (GM, 555).

The first half of the quote is the critique of realism that developed in the first half of the paper. Alone, it makes Nietzsche sound relativist and thus subject to Socrates' challenge. The second half of the quote illuminates Nietzsche's view by explaining the role of a variety of perspectives. Not every perspective is as right as any other, and the only way to make value judgements between perspectives is to be aware of the diversity of perspectives. Our concepts of a thing is made rich by noting as many of the possible perspectives one can. Only in light of this richness is valuation (viz. objectivity) in knowledge possible:

'objectivity'... understood not as 'contemplation without interest' (which is nonsensical absurdity), but as the ability to control one's Pro and Con and to dispose of them, so that one knows how to employ a variety of perspectives and affective interpretations in the service of knowledge (GM, 555).
So, even though Nietzsche is no realist, he is not a relativist either. This is a way in Nietzsche's view to evade the charge of 'everything is correct.' Valuation is possible, given a diversity of perspectives on the world—that is, given a diversity in what is considered important and what is considered a 'fact.' The framework for perspectivism is one where many views on the world are weighed in light of the kind of life a person wishes to lead and the kind of world a person wishes to live in. This perspectivism has a strong anti-realist tendency, but does not leave the anti-realist helpless.

Works Cited


