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Non-Cognitivism in *The Gay Science*

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From the paper: “When we join Nietzsche in rejecting Christianity, it is not because of a logical proof against it. Instead, we are expressing our taste, or more accurately, our distaste for Christianity. What is involved in having distaste for something? Certainly, we can list reasons for finding something distasteful, but these reasons need not have normative force.”

Nietzsche’s thought in *The Gay Science* (hereafter GS) endorses a certain kind of naturalism on which “nature is always value-less”.1 But Nietzsche does not deny the existence of values, so he must offer an alternative account of where values come from. Of course, Nietzsche does not think they come from God, for Nietzsche’s rejection of God is obvious (GS108, 109). Instead, Nietzsche thinks that man creates value: “Whatever has value in the present world has it not in itself, according to its nature…but has rather been given, granted value, and we were the givers and granters!” (GS301, 171). What sense are we to make of such a claim? One way to approach it is to consider its implications for our discourse about values. When we say that X is valuable, are we expressing a belief that X really has value? Or are we instead expressing an attitude of approval or disapproval towards X? The former view is what is known as cognitivism, whereas the latter view is called non-cognitivism. The question of which approach to value discourse Nietzsche endorses has implications for how we are to make sense of the claim quoted from GS301. If Nietzsche is a cognitivist, but thinks that nature lacks any values, then we must always have false beliefs when we think X has value. But, as Clark and Dudrick point out, Nietzsche’s view in GS moves away from his earlier “error-theory” towards a kind of celebration of “the second world [the world of values, as distinct from the empirical, natural world] as a human creation”.2 As a result, they think that Nietzsche must be a non-cognitivist about value discourse. However, as they point out, another reading of Nietzsche is to say that he is a fictionalist, which holds that Nietzsche can maintain cognitivism about value discourse and yet avoid an “error-theory” by creating the values about which we express beliefs in our value discourse.


discourse. On fictionalism, we create these values by engaging in “make-believe” that X has value, so that we are not wrong when we say that X has value. Clark and Dudrick express a number of doubts about fictionalism as a metaethical position (NMO 206). In this paper, however, I will argue that fictionalism is not the right reading of GS because it embraces cognitivism about value discourse. There are a number of statements scattered throughout GS that, to my mind, suggest that Nietzsche must be holding to a kind of non-cognitivism about value discourse. More specifically, when GS301 is considered as a sort of continuation of GS299, we see that non-cognitivism is the best reading of Nietzsche. As a result, my paper will indirectly defend part of Clark and Dudrick’s view of Nietzsche’s metaethics. This paper will not, however, go into whether, as a non-cognitivist, Nietzsche can make any claims to moral objectivity.

In GS132, Nietzsche says that “What decides against Christianity now is our taste, not our reasons” (GS132, 123). As I understand it, this claim amounts to saying that when we reject Christianity, we are not doing so because of a list of reasons that refute it as a religious or ethical system. When we join Nietzsche in rejecting Christianity, it is not because of a logical proof against it. Instead, we are expressing our taste, or more accurately, our distaste for Christianity. What is involved in having distaste for something? Certainly, we can list reasons for finding something distasteful, but these reasons need not have normative force. If I find landscape paintings distasteful in comparison to portraiture, I might offer reasons, but you could rationally disagree with them. I would not be rational in demanding that you endorse these reasons and come to hold my view on landscapes. So, though reasons are involved in expressions of taste, taste is ultimately a matter of attitudes. Therefore, when I reject Christianity because of my distaste for it, I am saying that it is not palatable to me. I do not draw on reasons; I am simply averse to it. By endorsing this idea that taste, not reasons, decides against Christianity, Nietzsche commits himself to non-cognitivism about value discourse. Consider: cognitivism about value discourse commits us to the view that we can argue over whether or not our value judgments are true or false. Such arguments will progress through the offering, acceptance, and rejection of reasons. So an argument over the value or disvalue of Christianity will involve reasons for and against. But Nietzsche tells us that our taste decides against Christianity, not our reasons. In rejecting Christianity, we do not draw on arguments and reasons, but rather our attitudes. So here is our first suggestion that Nietzsche is a non-cognitivist.

There are other examples. In GS116, Nietzsche says that a morality is “an evaluation and ranking of human drives and actions” which “are always the expressions of the needs of a community and herd” (GS116, 114). Nietzsche goes further, and tells us that as these needs change, so do moralities (GS116, 115). Moralities are, at heart, systems of values. So if moralities, or value systems generally, are expressions of needs, then surely value discourse must be understood non-cognitively. This follows because, if we value X because it satisfies a certain need, then it is inaccurate to say that it is true (or
false) that X is valuable. We just have a positive attitude towards X because it fulfills a need. Insofar as this need changes, so does the value of X, and surely to say that it was once true that X was valuable but it is now false that X has value is problematic. Thus, GS116 cannot make sense on a cognitivist approach to value discourse. Again, such discourse holds that we are expressing beliefs about whether or not X is valuable. But in GS116, we do not say that we believe X has or lacks value, but rather that we approve (or disapprove) of X because it fulfills (or fails to fulfill) a need of ours. Again, Nietzsche appears to be embracing non-cognitivism.

GS58 also seems to support my position. Nietzsche says “what things are called is unspeakably more important than what they are” (GS58, 69). Now, two qualifications are important here. First is that Nietzsche admits that this thought worries him (GS58, 69). Presumably, this is because it is a certain kind of threat to science, but I digress. Second is that this claim does not amount to a full denial that things might have value in themselves. All GS58 says is that what we call those things is more important than what they might in fact be. Nevertheless, I think this aphorism can most certainly be read as an endorsement of non-cognitivism. If cognitivism about value discourse were true, then Nietzsche would have to make the exact opposite of the claim he in fact makes. For, on cognitivism, we are expressing beliefs about what things are, about whether or not they in fact have value. But this would require us to say that what things are is more important than our attitudes about them, because on cognitivism, we should be most concerned with the truth or falsity of our beliefs, which can only be determined through consideration of what things are, not of our attitudes about them. Since Nietzsche says that what things are called (what we say about things) is more important than what they are, however, GS58 seems to further motivate non-cognitivism as a reading.

To be sure, these are only three instances where we find suggestions of non-cognitivism in Nietzsche. I will consider the most important evidence shortly. But let’s consider cognitivism again. There seem to be three views that fall under cognitivism about value discourse: value realism, “error-theory”, and fictionalism. Nietzsche certainly doesn’t seem to be a realist about values. After all, he says in GS301 that we make values. If values were already real in themselves, then we couldn’t make them in any meaningful sense of the word “make”. But neither does Nietzsche seem to endorse an “error-theory”. For one thing, as I’ve pointed out, Clark and Dudrick explain that Nietzsche’s view in GS is a celebration of the world of values that we make. And insofar as he identifies himself with artists and creators, he certainly doesn’t seem to think he’s in error about values. Rather, as reflected in GS301, he seems to think instead that we are wrong only in thinking that we merely perceive values, when we in fact create them. So we arrive again at fictionalism. Thus far I’ve argued that fictionalism cannot be the right reading of Nietzsche because it endorses a cognitivist approach to value discourse, whereas Nietzsche is a non-cognitivist. But considered on its own as a reading, it seems that fictionalism does have some plausibility. Specifically, we might look at GS107, where art makes it possible that existence is bearable for us.
Nietzsche says that “As an aesthetic phenomenon existence is still bearable to us”, which suggests that as any other kind of phenomenon (whether it be naturalistic, moral, or religious) it would be unbearable. Art has this kind of greatness about it that it makes life worth living in some sense. As far as GS301 is concerned, the fictionalist would seem to hold that when in creating values, we “make-believe” that things have value, even though “nature is always value-less” (GS301, 171). This isn’t an unrealistic reading of Nietzsche.

But two problems exist for fictionalism besides Clark and Dudrick’s worries about it as a metaethical position itself. For one thing, they mention that the fictionalist reading of Nietzsche clashes with Nietzsche’s concern with truth as expressed in *Human, All too Human* (NMO 206). The burden of proof is on the fictionalist to answer Nietzsche’s question whether it is possible to “consciously reside in untruth” (NMO 206). The second problem is that the fictionalist reading seems as though it must ignore GS299, where Nietzsche poses the question of how we are to make things have value when they in fact do not have it. The answer for Nietzsche is not that we create some kind of fiction or “make-believe” that things really have value. For Nietzsche, we really do give them value. GS299, titled “What one should learn from artists”, suggests that the way to give things value is to consider them from various perspectives. The artist, in creating art, does so by considering his object from myriad angles or distances, concealing some parts and not others, seeing things as though through a colored glass, and so on (GS299, 169-170). When Nietzsche says we need to take this model and go further than the artist and apply it to life (GS299, 170), he is answering the question that he posed at the beginning of the aphorism. How do we make things valuable? By imitating the artist. What does the artist do? He looks at things from different perspectives. The artist isn’t one who simply engages in make-believe. The artist imagines things from all sorts of angles and points of view. This is what makes him an artist. Any child can engage in make-believe without being an artist. It is the concern with perspective that makes art what it is, and it is how artists value things. And we need to take this wisdom and apply it to life.

We can take the lesson from GS299 and show how non-cognitivism is part and parcel of GS301, and thus fully refute fictionalism as a reading of Nietzsche. Granting value will somehow involve considering things from many perspectives. But the whole story can only be filled in by the non-cognitivist: we properly grant value when we express an attitude about the thing in question. To say that X has value is to say that, after having considering it from many perspectives, we can express a positive attitude about it. Conversely, to say that X lacks value is to say that, after having considered it from many perspectives, we can express a negative attitude about it. So to say murder is wrong is to say that we’ve considered what murder is from a number of perspectives, and we can only express a negative attitude towards it. Put another way, we can find no perspective from which murder is right. This form can be generalized to all value claims. This is a better reading than the cognitivist one, in which Nietzsche would be saying that after considering things from multiple perspectives, we’ve
arrived at the belief that X has value. It seems like we would only need one perspective (whichever the “right” perspective is) to determine whether X has value on this view. The only value that taking up multiple perspectives has is as an avenue to finding the right perspective. But this is hard to make sense of given Nietzsche’s emphasis on multiple perspectives as what we learn from artists. Artists don’t arrive at the “right” perspective, and then make their art from there forever. Artists are always playing with perspective. And this is what Nietzsche thinks we ought to do. Not find the “right” perspective, but take up many perspectives. It is then that we can properly or justifiably express an attitude about something, and thus give it value. This, I take it, is what Clark and Dudrick are getting at towards the end of their paper when they discuss how Nietzsche’s perspectivism can have a claim towards objectivity (NMO 220-1). But I must note that that objectivity will always involve taking up many perspectives. It will never be the case that taking up many perspectives is just the way to find the “right” one, after which we can always just take up the “right” one.

Nietzsche, then, is a non-cognitivist about value discourse. The passages quoted from the text seem to best make sense on a non-cognitivist reading of Nietzsche. GS299 and Nietzsche’s general concerns about perspectives fully motivate the non-cognitivist reading. To be sure, perspectivism can make some kind of sense on cognitivism, but again, it seems that perspectivism’s value would diminish as soon as we discovered the “right” one. But there is no “right” perspective in art, and it is from art that Nietzsche thinks we ought to draw our lesson about perspectives. All perspectives are important and worth considering, and only after taking them up are we in the best position possible to grant things value. Granting things value cannot make sense except non-cognitively, as the expression of attitudes about the things in question, after having taken up many points of view with respect to them. This, I think, is what Nietzsche is after in The Gay Science. Scientific naturalism may be true, but we can make values by adopting myriad perspectives and expressing our attitudes about the things in question. This is how science can be gay, and how Nietzsche turns from his earlier pessimism.