

## “Perfect Moral Skeptics”:

### Moral Skepticism in Nietzsche and Moral Disagreement in the Skeptics

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Is Nietzsche an anti-realist about moral value? The short answer to this question, which I will defend here, is ‘no’. Nietzsche rejects the objectivity of moral valuations, but his rejection is a great deal more circumspect, and less metaphysically ambitious, than it would have to be in order to qualify as a version of anti-realism. What I shall argue instead is that Nietzsche is a moral skeptic; indeed, a “perfect moral skeptic.”<sup>1</sup>

#### I. Terminological Disagreement

In his classic handbook of Pyrrhonism, Sextus Empiricus observes that “it is unbecoming for a Skeptic to fight over phrases,”<sup>2</sup> but in this case a little discussion is called for. In particular, the term ‘skeptic’ needs some clarification, since it seems to have become conventional in the literature on metaethics to use ‘skeptic’ basically interchangeably with ‘anti-realist’. The opening line of J. L. Mackie’s 1977 work *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* advances the bold claim, “There are no objective values,” and it does so under the heading “Moral Skepticism” (1977: 15). Perhaps it was this move that licensed use of the term ‘moral skeptic’ to describe both ‘subjectivists’—those who, like Mackie, hold that all value judgments depend for their truth on

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase “perfect moral skeptic” is borrowed from Peter Railton (1986b: 185) by way of Brian Leiter (2009: 3), to whom I am deeply grateful for permission to discuss his essay “Moral Skepticism and Moral Disagreement in Nietzsche,” which is not yet in print but was presented at the annual “History of Modern Philosophy” conference at New York University (November 8, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Sextus Empiricus’ *Outlines of Skepticism* will hereafter be abbreviated in the text as ‘PH’, which is the standard abbreviation for its title in Greek. Citations in what follows refer to the translation by Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes (Cambridge University Press, 2000); PH 1: 207.

facts about persons—and ‘anti-realists’ (or ‘irrealists’)—those who deny the existence of objective moral properties and facts. Combined with the view that moral discourse is cognitivist, the denial that there are moral facts yields an ‘error theory’ about value judgments that pretend to objectivity: according to this theory—also associated with Mackie, also referred to as a variety of ‘skepticism’, also not infrequently attributed to Nietzsche—all claims about values are truth-apart and all of them are false. Recently, the provocative moniker ‘moral nihilist’ has even been suggested to describe those who hold the latter view, better to highlight their similarity with atheists in theological discourse.<sup>3</sup>

Here, I am going to set aside semantic issues, especially the debate about cognitivism and its implications, and concentrate only on the metaphysical question whether there are objective moral facts. Those who answer this question in the affirmative are ‘moral realists’ proper; those who answer it in the negative I shall refer to as ‘moral anti-realists’. But I shall reserve the term ‘skeptic’ in what follows for *those who maintain a principled suspension of judgment* on the metaphysical debate at issue. The use of the term ‘skepticism’ to describe ‘anti-realism’ foments misunderstanding and is at best imprecise; at worst, it has the effect of obscuring completely an important and philosophically interesting avenue of response, one that I believe is central to understanding Nietzsche’s views on morality and how those views serve his larger philosophical project.

As I have already indicated, though, this meaning does not track the one current in the literature. As Walter Sinnott-Armstrong has recently observed:

The most central versions of moral skepticism correspond to two varieties of general epistemological skepticism. These views are often conflated and confused, but the distinction between them is crucial to my project. One tradition descends from Plato’s

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<sup>3</sup> Peter J. Graham, in his review of Walter Sinnott-Armstrong’s *Moral Skepticisms* (Oxford University Press, 2006); *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* 2007.03.19 (<http://ndpr.nd.edu/review.cfm?id=9123>).

Academy, so it is called *Academic* skepticism. ... [This] kind of skepticism is defined by the claim that nobody knows anything or is justified in believing anything.

In contrast, this claim is neither asserted nor believed by skeptics in the other tradition. They also neither deny nor disbelieve it. They have so much doubt that they do not make any claim about whether or not anyone has any knowledge or justified belief. They suspend belief about Academic skepticism. This other variety of skepticism descends from the ancient philosopher Pyrrho, so it is often called *Pyrrhonian* skepticism. (2006: 10)

With the distinction between these two varieties of epistemological skepticism in mind, we can better understand their contemporary metaethical counterparts: the *Academic* skeptic about morality will say, e.g., that no one has any moral knowledge, and the anti-realist (the one who is called a ‘skeptic’ today) offers an explanation of this phenomenon. If nobody has any moral knowledge, he will say, it is because there is nothing that could ground such knowledge; and that, because there are no (objective) moral facts. The *Pyrrhonian* skeptic, as the above description suggests, will appear more cautious; he withholds judgment on whether anyone has knowledge about morality or is justified in having moral beliefs and on whether the relevant facts or properties actually exist. For our purposes here, when I use the term ‘skeptic’, I shall mean one who adopts a practice of such suspension. And when I say that Nietzsche is a “perfect moral skeptic,” that is the position I have in mind.

## **II. Moral Disagreement in Nietzsche**

Now that we can more easily appreciate how different this reading is from the one that would make Nietzsche a moral anti-realist, I shall begin my defense of it by examining some of the reasons that have been offered for attributing anti-realism to Nietzsche in the first place. One of the most cogent and succinct recent defenses of Nietzsche’s moral anti-realism has been offered by Brian Leiter (2009). He is certainly not alone in reading Nietzsche this way; in fact, he opens this recent essay with the claim that, “Almost everyone agrees that Nietzsche is a

skeptic about the objectivity of morality...” (2009: 1).<sup>4</sup> I shall concentrate on his formulation of the argument here, though, first because it rightly identifies and draws our attention to an intriguing and heretofore mostly overlooked set of considerations that inform the position he ascribes to Nietzsche, and second because one of the passages he adduces as textual evidence for his interpretation is importantly relevant to the issue but, I argue, should lead us to a very different conclusion.

In this essay, then, Leiter argues for the thesis that, “Nietzsche is a moral [anti-realist] in the sense of affirming the *metaphysical* thesis that there do not exist any objective moral properties or facts” (2009: 4).<sup>5</sup> As Leiter has argued elsewhere, the “central argument for anti-realism about value [in Nietzsche] is *explanatory*: moral facts don’t figure in the ‘best explanation’ of experience, and so are not real constituents of the objective world” (Leiter 2002: 148).<sup>6</sup> To this argument, Leiter has added another set of considerations that he takes to motivate, independently, Nietzsche’s anti-realism. These considerations are also explanatory, but “not with respect to our moral experiences *per se* but rather with regard to the phenomenon of moral disagreement” (2009: 7). The persistence of disagreement about morality has of course been frequently exploited as a challenge to moral realism. Support for these arguments is typically anthropological, focusing on differences among first-order moral claims made by individuals or on the discrepancies in moral practice across cultures and epochs. And there are such arguments

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<sup>4</sup> Prior defenses of this anti-realist reading include Leiter (2001) and (2002: 146-55); for very different versions, see Danto (1963), Nehamas (1985), Hunt (1991), and Reginster (2006). Cf. Clark & Dudrick (2007), who defend Leiter’s moral anti-realist reading of Nietzsche through the publication of *Human, All too Human* but then argue for a realist reading of Nietzsche’s later works.

<sup>5</sup> Leiter actually says, “Nietzsche is a moral skeptic in the sense of affirming [this] *metaphysical* thesis,” adding parenthetically that, “I will refer to this [view] hereafter as simply ‘skepticism about moral facts’.” But I hope the previous distinction between two varieties of ‘skepticism’ will now make clear why I am going to be consistent in calling this an ‘anti-realism’ about moral facts.

<sup>6</sup> See Leiter 2001 for a more detailed version of the ‘best explanation’ argument.

to be found in Nietzsche.<sup>7</sup> As Leiter rightly notes, however, “Nietzsche’s approach is a bit different”:

For what he calls attention to is not ‘ordinary’ or ‘folk’ moral disagreement, but rather what seems to me the single most important and embarrassing fact about the history of moral theorizing by philosophers over the last two millennia: namely, that no rational consensus has been secured on *any* substantive, foundational proposition about morality. (2009: 7-8)

The idea here is that if there were some (objective) fact of the matter that could help us adjudicate not just disputes between, say, cultures regarding this or that practice but among competing ethical theories themselves—disputes, that is, not about *what* things are good, but about *why* good things are good—it is utterly implausible to suppose that two thousand years of dedicated work by the sharpest and most talented thinkers could have failed so miserably to discover it. The best explanation, therefore, for this long history of embarrassing failure is that no such fact of the matter exists. Of course, the “perfect moral skeptic” I have in mind may readily admit that this explanation is a compelling one, but he will insist on drawing our attention to the gap that remains between any *explanation*, even the best one currently on offer, and conclusive *demonstration* of the metaphysical thesis Nietzsche is said here to affirm. I turn now to an examination of why the argument from disagreement should motivate suspension rather than anti-realism.

### **III. Moral Disagreement in the Sceptics**

The argument from disagreement is well-known in contemporary metaethics, but as Leiter has suggested, what makes Nietzsche’s version of it unique is primarily its focus, not on the incompatibility of “first-order” moral judgments, but on the “amazingly intractable”

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<sup>7</sup> See e.g. GS 43, “*What laws betray*,” in which Nietzsche discusses laws of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Muslim sect of the Wahhabis, some customs of the Romans, and how these appear to contemporary European sensibilities.

differences between the “philosophical theories about morality that purport to license [those] particular judgments by answering foundational questions. A philosophical theory, for purposes here, is a discursive and systematic account of correct moral judgment and action...” (2009: 10-11). This emphasis gives Nietzsche’s treatment of the argument from disagreement greater philosophical depth and interest than its modern competitors: it threatens the very project of theorizing philosophically about morality. But this challenge is not unprecedented; indeed, it goes back to antiquity. Leiter recognizes this and includes, as a supporting passage that he says is representative of Nietzsche’s remarks about moral philosophy and moral philosophers and that “bears directly on the argument ... at issue here,” a fragment from Nietzsche’s notebooks from the spring of 1888 (2009: 13).<sup>8</sup> Under the heading, “Philosophy as *décadence*,” Nietzsche observes:

It is a remarkable moment: the Sophists touch on the first *critique of morality*, the first *insight* into morality ...

— they place the plurality (the local conditionedness) of moral value judgments alongside one another

— they intimate that every morality [can be] justified dialectically, — that it makes no difference: that is, they conjecture how every foundation of a morality must necessarily be *sophistic* —

— a proposition that has subsequently been demonstrated in the grandest style by the ancient philosophers from Plato onwards (down to Kant)

— they postulate as the first truth that ‘a morality in itself’, a ‘good in itself’ does not exist, that it is fraudulent to speak of ‘truth’ in this domain (KSA 13: 14 [116])<sup>9</sup>

The Greek Sophists, as Leiter points out, capture Nietzsche’s attention for their clever deployment of the fact of disagreement to challenge not just this or that moral judgment, but all attempts to offer reasons for morality.

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<sup>8</sup> I should note that this is certainly not Leiter’s only textual support for his claim about Nietzsche’s use of arguments from disagreement; it is the first of several passages he cites, all the rest of which are from Nietzsche’s published work. I share Leiter’s methodological scruples about the cautious use of the unpublished writings. Here, however, he has selected a passage that is clearly consistent with the position Nietzsche is committed to in print, that bears on the issue in a particularly clear way, and that does provide additional insight into the importance of the argument, as well as its structure and source. I focus on it here because I take it to be even more helpful in sorting out Nietzsche’s view than Leiter (2009) makes clear.

<sup>9</sup> I am indebted to Greg Moore for translation advice on this passage; cf. WP 428.

However, it is important to note that according to Nietzsche here the Sophists just touch upon [*streifen*] this insight; they don't invent it. Rather, what the Sophists display in making this move is their subtle aptitude for the opportunistic employment of arguments already available and their talent for harnessing the prevalent "Greek instinct" of their time to their own advantage. The real provenance—historical and philosophical—of the argument from disagreement is Skeptical (Pyrrhonian, in fact). Also called the "mode deriving from dispute," it belongs to the "Five Modes" attributed to Agrippa; according to this mode, Sextus explains, "we find that undecidable dissension about the matter proposed has come about both in ordinary life and among philosophers. Because of this we are not able either to choose or to rule out anything, and we end up with suspension of judgment" (PH 1: 165). Nietzsche is well aware of the provenance of this argument, as he makes clear in the other half of this notebook fragment (not quoted by Leiter). Picking up at the end of the passage just cited, Nietzsche continues:

Just where was *intellectual integrity* in those days?  
the Greek culture of the Sophists had grown out of every Greek instinct: it belongs as necessarily to the culture of the Periclean age as Plato does *not*: it has its predecessors in Heraclitus, Democritus, in the scientific types of the old philosophy; it finds expression, for example, in the high culture of Thucydides.  
—and it was ultimately proved right: every advance in epistemological and moralistic knowledge [*Erkenntnis*] has *restored* the Sophists ...  
our way of thinking today is to a large degree Heraclitean, Democritean and Protagorean ... it would suffice to say that it [is] *Protagorean*, because Protagoras combined within himself the two elements that are Heraclitus and Democritus  
Plato: a *great Cagliostro*, — think how Epicurus judged him; how Timon, the friend of Pyrrho, judged him — —  
Is perhaps the integrity of Plato beyond doubt? ... But we know at least that he wanted to have *taught* as absolute truth what he did not deem to be even a conditional truth: namely, the special existence and special immortality of 'souls' (ibid.)

That Nietzsche has the Pyrrhonian tradition in view here is evident not just from his passing mention of Pyrrho and Timon (Pyrrho's student). With the exception of Thucydides, virtually *all*

the figures he mentions and sets against Plato in the latter half of this passage, and *that* he sets them against Plato, reveal that this is the case.

First, it is helpful to remember that Heraclitus, Democritus, Protagoras, Pyrrho and Timon are among the dozen or so figures whose biographies are included in Book IX of Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of the Philosophers*, and that in the course of completing his Laertiana, Book IX commanded the lion's share of Nietzsche's attentive study. So these are figures he knows well and whom he is already inclined to think of together. Of course, Heraclitus, Democritus and Protagoras are not themselves Pyrrhonists. Yet the fragments containing Heraclitus' well-known observations about opposites (e.g., "Sea is the most pure and the most polluted water; for fishes it is drinkable and salutary, but for men it is undrinkable and deleterious" [Fr. 61]) drew enough attention for their skeptical overtones even in antiquity that Sextus Empiricus, whose *Outlines of Skepticism* is our best source Pyrrhonism, takes special care to distinguish his practice from the views of "the Heracliteans" (PH 1: 210-12, "That the Skeptical persuasion differs from the philosophy of Heraclitus"; cf. DL 9: 73). The same is true of both Protagoras and Democritus, to whom Sextus devotes independent discussions at the end of the first part of the *Outlines*, distinguishing his position from each of theirs in an effort to forestall confusion (PH 1: 216-19, 1: 213-14; on Democritus, cf. DL 9: 72).<sup>10</sup> In the case of Democritus, the relativism of secondary qualities of objects that is implied by his dictum "by convention sweet, by convention bitter, in reality atoms and void," was the potential source of confusion (in spite of his dogmatic physical theories, which Sextus points out); in the case of Protagoras, one need only examine his defense of the so-called "man-measure" doctrine against Socrates in the *Theaetetus* to understand how he might (mistakenly) be thought in league with

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<sup>10</sup> Here, at the close of Book I, Sextus discusses only three other "persuasions" or schools: Cyrenaicism (1: 215), Academic skepticism, unsurprisingly (1: 220-35), and, somewhat confusingly, Medical Empiricism (1: 236-41).

the Skeptics, for the way in which his doctrine would, like theirs, undermine the metaphysical realism aggressively promoted by Plato.

#### **IV. The Appearance of Moral Anti-realism in the Skeptics**

I have stated that the Skeptics' goal in adducing arguments from disagreement was to undermine the theories of their Dogmatic contemporaries (where "Dogmatist" referred to anyone with "a discursive and systematic account" of things to offer), but they aimed to do so without installing new dogmas in place of old. Surprisingly, on the face of it, the clearest instances of these arguments in the skeptical literature may appear to fail on the latter score. In fact, the texts with which Nietzsche would have been most intimately familiar seem quite friendly to the position I have called 'moral anti-realism'. One of them figures prominently in Diogenes' reconstruction of the life of Pyrrho and his followers. Although Diogenes opens his account by stating, rightly, that the Skeptics "were constantly engaged in overthrowing the dogmas of all schools, but enunciated none themselves" (DL 9: 74), when he turns to matters of "the good," his (admittedly convoluted) reconstruction of the argument sounds Academic rather than Pyrrhonian:

There is nothing good or bad by nature, for if there is anything good or bad by nature, it must be good or bad for all persons alike, just as snow is cold to all. But there is no good or bad which is such to all persons in common; therefore there is no such thing as good or bad by nature. For either all that is thought good by anyone whatever must be called good, or not all. Certainly all cannot be so called; since one and the same thing is thought good by one person and bad by another; for instance, Epicurus thought pleasure good and Antisthenes thought it bad; thus on our supposition it will follow that the same thing is both good and bad. But if we say that not all that anyone thinks good is good, we shall have to judge the different opinions; and this is impossible because of the equal validity of opposing arguments. Therefore the good by nature is unknowable. (DL 9: 101)

Diogenes' gloss, concluding as it does that, "There is nothing good or bad by nature," and that, "Therefore the good by nature is unknowable," sits uneasily with the suspension of judgment

(*epochē*) that is the hallmark of Pyrrhonian skepticism. Curiously, however, so does Sextus' own version of the argument.

In his treatise *Against the Ethicists* (M XI), an indispensable source for evidence about Democritus (on whom Nietzsche worked for many years) and for the argument from disagreement, Sextus Empiricus appears to argue at great length for precisely this conclusion, that “nothing is good or bad by nature” (M XI 68-78).<sup>11</sup> Arguing, as Nietzsche does, not just from the *existence of disagreements* but from their *apparent intractability among philosophers*, Sextus claims that if some *x* were good *by nature*, it would have to be good *universally* (i.e., for all subjects at all times) and its goodness could not fail to be recognized by those who benefitted from it. Therefore, if some *x* is good, but not universally acknowledged as such, it cannot be good *by nature*. He aims to show by example that the things the Dogmatists take to be goods are not universally, but only relationally, good: None of the “things which are said to be preferred,” even health itself, he says, “turn out to be invariably preferred, nor are the things which are said to be dispreferred necessarily dispreferred. At any rate, if healthy people have to serve the tyrant and for this reason be destroyed, while the sick are exempted from this service and thereby also exempted from destruction, the sage will choose being sick on this occasion rather than being healthy” (M XI 65).

Before we examine the Pyrrhonian credentials of this argument, one point warrants emphasis here: As this and other of Sextus' examples show, the Skeptic has no difficulty accepting statements about what is good as long as they are qualified as being “good for” or “in relation to” someone in some particular circumstance (M XI 71); i.e., as long as they are *relational*. The Pyrrhonist can and will readily accept relational first-order statements as reports about the way things appear, and he is satisfied with reports of appearances for all practical

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<sup>11</sup> This is the first and most important of three arguments for this conclusion in M XI.

purposes—including, in Sextus’ own case, medical practice and the preservation of health and well-being.<sup>12</sup> This qualification is crucial to Leiter’s project, part of which is to define accurately the scope of Nietzsche’s “skepticism.” About its scope, he says:

Nietzsche’s central objection to morality—or to what I call ‘morality in the pejorative sense’ (hereafter MPS), to pick out that cluster of values that is the actual target of his critique—is that its cultural prevalence is inhospitable to the flourishing of the highest types of human beings.... If this is Nietzsche’s argument, then it also means that at the core of his critique of MPS is a judgment about *prudential* value (i.e., about what is *good* or *bad* for an agent), namely, the judgment that MPS is *bad for* certain persons because it is an obstacle to their flourishing. And if that judgment is not objectively true, then Nietzsche’s critique of MPS simply has no force.

Of course, Nietzsche also makes affirmative claims that suggest he thinks judgments of prudential value, judgments about what is good and bad for a person are objective. ... Commitment to the objectivity of prudential value is not, however, an ambitious position. Railton dubs it ‘relationalism’ (1986a) and suggests that we ‘think of [non-moral or prudential] goodness as akin to nutritiveness’. ... Indeed, as Railton notes, ‘realism with respect to non-moral [or what I am calling prudential] goodness ... [is] a notion that perfect moral skeptics can admit’ (1986b: 185).” (Leiter 2009: 2-3)

Here, I agree wholeheartedly with Leiter’s claim that at the core of Nietzsche’s critique of morality is a judgment about prudential value, that that judgment is “relational” roughly in the sense meant by Railton, and that such judgments are among those “perfect moral skeptics” can admit (although in a sense intended by neither Railton or Leiter), since—as Leiter correctly observes—commitment to them does not reflect “an ambitious position.”

I shall return to this claim presently, and also to Leiter’s claim that if Nietzsche’s judgment that MPS is bad for certain persons “is not objectively true, then Nietzsche’s critique of MPS simply has no force.” Before that, however, we should return to Sextus’ presentation of the argument from disagreement in *Against the Ethicists* (a version of which we have also seen in Diogenes), because its conclusion that “nothing is good or bad by nature” appears to be in

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<sup>12</sup> “We say then, that the standard [i.e., the criterion of action] of the Skeptical persuasion is what is apparent, implicitly meaning by this the appearances; for they depend on passive and unwilled feelings and are not objects of investigation. ... Thus, attending to what is apparent, we live in accordance with everyday observances, without holding [Dogmatic] opinions—for we are not able to be utterly inactive” (PH 1: 21-23).

tension—if not plainly inconsistent—with the greater degree of caution associated with Pyrrhonism and expressed by Sextus himself in the better-known *Outlines of Skepticism*. In Sextus' case (and in Nietzsche's, I believe) what we must do is treat instances of this argument as components of an overall program with wider and more far-reaching goals. The Pyrrhonists do not pit their *philosophical position* against the *propositions* advanced by Dogmatists so much as they juxtapose their practice to the practice of Dogmatism, inviting comparison and making a judgment not unlike Nietzsche's judgment that they are simply "better off," or "healthier"; they challenge Dogmatism as *a way of life*. Their target, according to Sextus, is in fact "the conceit and rashness of the Dogmatists" (PH 3: 280). This squares nicely an observation Leiter makes about the notebook passage previously under consideration, that in the scathing attitude it expresses toward Plato, "it has many relatives in the corpus and fits with a general picture Nietzsche has of the discursive pretensions of philosophers" (2009: 13). The feature, therefore, that Leiter singles out as peculiar to Nietzsche's version among modern versions of the argument from disagreement—that its force is directed not merely against the claims of moralities but against the philosophers who advance and attempt to justify them—belongs also to the ancient versions of the argument, and not accidentally, but essentially: this feature is also peculiar to the Sceptics' overall project.

In the case of Sextus' *Against the Ethicists*, then, it is crucial to remember its place in Sextus' corpus: it belongs to a series of treatises that attempt to undermine the dominant view promoted by one or another branch of philosophy (in this case, ethical philosophy) where the dominant paradigm is one or another sort of realism. In *Outlines of Skepticism*, Sextus takes care to present two *equipollent* arguments of roughly equal persuasive force, one on each side of every thesis propounded by the Dogmatists, which then bring about suspension of judgment. In

*Against the Ethicists*, he makes the case for moral anti-realism *presupposing a backdrop of varieties of moral realism*. In the later, more perspicuous and sophisticated *Outlines of Skepticism*,<sup>13</sup> Sextus also takes care to remind his readers frequently that although his statements and the vehemence of his arguments may appear to have him advancing a position, this is only an appearance and the Sceptics' arguments are always proffered "indifferently" and "without holding opinions" (e.g., PH 1: 24, 202-05, 207-08). In *Against the Ethicists*, Sextus does not issue the same reminders, but we must remember that the work belongs to a series that is bookended by these programmatic statements. The same basic story, I argue, can be told about Nietzsche.

## **V. Our "Objectivity" and the Opposition to Moral Realism**

There is a sense in which the Sophists would, at any rate, be uneasy partners for Nietzsche if he were out to argue for moral anti-realism, as Leiter would have it. For although Nietzsche says that the Sophists' exploitation of the fact of moral disagreement "intimates that every morality [can be] justified dialectically," and that "they postulate as the first truth that 'a morality in itself', a 'good in itself' does not exist," Nietzsche surely realizes (as we must realize) that their reasons for doing so have nothing to do with vindicating an anti-realist position—or any other metaphysical position, for that matter. *They're Sophists*; beyond winning the argument, they don't *have* an agenda. They're unscrupulous and ruthless mercenaries, shameless opportunists ready to don any cloak and assume any position for the sake of winning the argument—which they do for sport, or for hire. This is clearly part of what Nietzsche *likes*

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<sup>13</sup> Richard Bett (1997) has argued persuasively in the introduction to his translation of M XI that PH is better seen as the culmination and summary of Sextus' Pyrrhonism, and placed therefore at the end of the canon, than as an earlier, sketchy version of the practice he refines later.

about them, but it will not make them ready allies in the project of vindicating any truths or judgments, objective or otherwise; indeed, they could not be less interested in objective truths.

Strictly speaking, neither do the Skeptics have an agenda, at least not in the sense of a discursive and systematic account they wish to promote. What they do have on their side however, as Nietzsche highlights in the unpublished fragment we examined earlier, is “intellectual integrity.” This virtue (if we can call it that), which I take to be related closely to the “honesty” Nietzsche prizes and the “intellectual conscience” (or “well-constitutedness”) he denies especially to Christians (A 52), is one Nietzsche associates constantly with skepticism, the entertaining of doubts, and the avoidance of conviction.<sup>14</sup> Skeptics, Nietzsche says, are “the decent type in the history of philosophy [while] the rest are ignorant of the first requirements of intellectual integrity” (A 12); and they are “the only honorable type among the equivocal, quinquivocal tribe of philosophers!” (EH ‘Clever’ 3). On the other hand, the lack of “integrity” is something with which he charges Plato, who is surely among those implicated in Nietzsche’s claim that he mistrusts all systematizers and avoids them, stating famously (or by now, perhaps, infamously) that, “the will to a system is a lack of integrity” (TI ‘Maxims’ 26). At any rate, in the notebook passage we considered earlier, Nietzsche makes abundantly clear that Plato, “a *great Cagliostro*,” stands utterly in opposition to the forces of intellectual integrity, under which heading he ranges the Skeptics and their close cousins.

As we have seen, the “Greek instincts” that Nietzsche sets opposite Plato are Skeptical instincts, and so their opposition to him cannot consist simply in identifying Plato’s position and arguing for its converse. Plato is the quintessential dogmatist, the one who “stands truth on her

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<sup>14</sup> See e.g., GS 110, where “honesty and skepticism” appear as a pair; UM 3: 2, where Nietzsche praises the skeptic Michel de Montaigne for his “honesty,” among other things; and A 52, in which he singles out the refusal to engage in doubt of any kind as the hallmark of Christianity’s lack of “*intellectual* well-constitutedness” and praises the practice of *ephexis* (withholding judgment) in interpretation.

head” by “denying *perspective*, the basic condition of all life” (BGE P). Countering Platonic realism with anti-realism can produce nothing more than a mirror image, and Nietzsche must be after more than this, because such a criticism would overlook what Nietzsche’s real criticism of Plato *is* in the first place: that his will to truth, his commitment to a model of ‘explanation’ and conception of ‘knowledge’ that requires transcendental grounds, is *a model of knowledge moralized*—the ascetic ideal in its most virulent and pernicious form. It is Plato’s commitment to *objectivity* itself that is fundamentally ascetic. This is why “the worst, most durable, and most dangerous of all errors so far was a dogmatist’s error—namely, Plato’s invention of the pure spirit and the good as such” (ibid.).

Understanding what this charge means, however, will not be possible without an important distinction Nietzsche makes in the third essay of the *Genealogy*, between a concept of objectivity that bears all the marks of the ascetic ideal and a more modest concept of objectivity of which he takes ownership. GM 3: 12 is a well-worn passage for anyone who has tried to come to grips with Nietzsche’s “perspectivism.”<sup>15</sup> In that section, Nietzsche suggests an analogy between cognition (or “knowing”) and vision, the upshot of which is as follows: We’re embodied creatures. For us, to see an object is to see it from whatever point of view we happen to occupy. If we want to improve our visual representation of the thing, we can walk around it, turn it over, put it under the microscope, bombard it with x-rays and (depending on the object) cut it open and peer inside. And “*the more eyes, different eyes, we know how to bring to bear on one and the same matter,*” that much more complete will our representation be (GM 3: 12). Clearly, there is a natural limit to this completeness, in the sense that no accumulation of “views” of an object will ever “add up” to or amount to an “objective” view, if by that we mean a view

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<sup>15</sup> For an extended treatment of this passage and of the issue of “perspectivism” as a form of Skepticism in Nietzsche, see Berry (2005).

that is not *from* any standpoint in particular. The notion of a view from nowhere is incoherent, as Nietzsche makes plain: “here it is demanded that we think an eye that cannot possibly be thought, an eye that must not have any direction...; thus, what is demanded here is always an absurdity and non-concept of an eye” (ibid.). If we appreciate fully the absurdity Nietzsche exposes in this idea, we will see that it would be lunatic to adopt a “view from nowhere” as our *goal* in visual representation, as an ideal *for us*.

The situation is the same with respect to cognition: we can, by investigating and acquiring more “perspectives,” make epistemic gains. Indeed, “*the more* affects we allow to speak about a matter,” and the more we hone “the capacity to have [our] pro and contra *in [our] power*, and to shift them in and out: so that [we know] how to make precisely the *difference* in perspectives and affective interpretations useful for knowledge,” the better off we will be, both practically and epistemically. But here, too, there are limits. As in the case of vision, if we have set our sites on “objectivity,” understood as “disinterested contemplation (which is a non-concept and an absurdity)” and the property of some “pure, will-less, painless, timeless subject of knowledge,” then we have, quite perversely, adopted as a goal for ourselves an ideal incompatible with the kinds of creatures we are. Crucially, however, this is not tantamount to claiming, with the Academic skeptics of antiquity, that knowledge is impossible for us. That claim requires accepting a model of knowledge (an understanding of the concept ‘knowledge’) that contains an absurdity; it retains as a goal, as a legitimate aim, “objectivity” in the sense Nietzsche intends to criticize, and then reports on our inability to achieve it. The Pyrrhonists, however, do no such thing; that would give too much of the game away to the Platonists.

What Nietzsche’s “perspectivism” therefore demands is an overhaul of our concepts of ‘knowledge’ and ‘explanation’, considered as the goal of scientific (or philosophic) inquiry.

Specifically, what is needed is to sever them from ‘objectivity’ in the ascetic sense; and what Nietzsche envisions here, I believe, is just what is beginning to be thought through by some recent philosophers of science. In their paper “Thinking About Mechanisms,” for instance, Machamer et. al (2000) offer an account of mechanistic ‘explanation’ stripped of its metaphysical pretensions.<sup>16</sup> As they define them, “mechanisms are entities and activities organized such that they are productive of regular changes from start or set-up to finish or termination conditions” (2000: 3). Now, we will be tempted to say that the *regularity itself* is the real *explanandum*, and that without a notion of what underwrites the regularity, the mechanistic description on offer cannot count as a genuine explanation. It is the purported necessity or the law-like connection between the start and the termination that we are interested in; it is in those things that *causation* consists. But Machamer et. al (2000) resist this temptation:

A mechanism is the series of activities of entities that bring about the finish or termination conditions in a regular way. These regularities are non-accidental and support counterfactuals to the extent that they describe activities. For example, if this single base in DNA were changed and the protein synthesis mechanism operated as usual, then the protein produced would have an active site that binds more tightly. This counterfactual justifies talking about mechanisms and their activities with some sort of necessity. No philosophical work is done by positing some further thing, a law, that underwrites the productivity of activities. (2000: 7-8)

On this analysis, the task of scientific explanation is accomplished when we have accurately identified the entities involved in a process under investigation and discovered and described the regularities in the activities (understood functionally) involved in that process. If this analysis seems to condemn us to a sort of Humean skepticism that makes *adequate explanation* a chimera, it is only because we (again perversely) continue to accept a model of ‘explanation’ that is as conceptually confused as the notion of “an eye that must not have any direction.” It is in the acceptance of a model of ‘explanation’ that requires an extra-physical, “magic” ingredient, one

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<sup>16</sup> I am grateful to Daniel Burnston for pointing me toward some of the relevant literature on this issue. See also William Bechtel and Robert N. McCauley’s recent defenses of a ‘heuristic identity theory’.

accessible and verifiable only by a “pure, will-less, painless, timeless subject of knowing,” that science today is “not the opposite of that ascetic ideal but rather *its most recent and noblest form*” (GM 3: 23); and, we might add, in some sense still a form of crypto-Platonism. In the closing sections of the *Genealogy* (3: 23-28), he asserts that these two, “science and the ascetic ideal, they do, after all, stand on one and the same ground—I have already suggested that this is so—: namely on the same overestimation of truth” (GM 3: 25). This point about ‘objectivity’ is, for Nietzsche, not an aside, but essential to his critical project, oriented as it is toward exposing the sickness in the ascetic ideal.

## **VI. Conclusion**

The upshot of all this is that, on Leiter’s reading, it must be an objective (metaphysical) fact that there are no objective (moral) facts. That is the thesis he takes to be supported by the argument from disagreement, since that thesis is supposed to be the best explanation of the phenomena. Leiter’s conclusion is that Nietzsche is a skeptic (or rather, an anti-realist) about the objectivity of morality. But if I am right, what Nietzsche is a skeptic about, in the genuine sense of the word ‘skeptic’, is *objectivity simpliciter*. So Nietzsche cannot affirm the metaphysical thesis that there are no moral properties or facts. His only option, in order to oppose Plato without becoming just Plato’s mirror-image (the anti-Plato, the one who says, “whatever Plato’s got, we think the opposite!”) is not to adopt *any* of the metaphysical positions in this debate, but to eschew the debate altogether. That is what he does in the interest of intellectual “cleanliness.”

I opened with the suggestion that we will preserve an important and philosophically interesting avenue of response by restoring the proper meaning of ‘skeptic’ to the claim that, “Nietzsche is a skeptic about the objectivity of morality.” But I suspect that, if there is resistance

to accepting the Skeptical reading of Nietzsche, some of it will be generated by an intuition that skepticism—the genuine agnosticism of the Pyrrhonist—is not in fact particularly interesting, philosophically speaking. Perhaps the Skeptic’s “*ou mallon*” (his “no more this than that”) will look to some like a shoulder-shrugging gesture, a refusal to take any real stand, a betrayal of indifference or indecisiveness or squeamishness. This picture, however, does not do justice to the Greek Skeptics, whose texts demonstrate that honest, genuine and sustained suspension of judgment (*epochē*) is if anything *more* and not less difficult to come by than credulity. And it does not do justice to the way Nietzsche understands the Skeptics. While I cannot adequately vindicate the subtlety and sophistication of the Pyrrhonists’ position here, I will suggest that theirs is the task Nietzsche presents as one of the most difficult to accomplish and an undertaking not for the faint of heart: to find oneself on open seas, to have abandoned land, and to feel comfortable—and not only comfortable but *joyful*, having overcome the “metaphysical need,” that is to say, the need for the firm ground of some position or other, where so many would rather will nothing (i.e., insist that there is a “nothing” where the thing-in-itself or moral properties and facts should be) than not will (i.e., suspend judgment).

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