

# Anti-foundationalist Practices of Truth: Foucault, Nietzsche, and James

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In a 2003 paper, Michael Peters argues that, on the issue of knowledge, “Foucault’s innovation was to historicize ‘truth’, first, materially in discourse as ‘regimes of truth’ and, second, in practices as ‘games of truth’” (Peters 2003: 208). As Peters also points out, this innovation is grounded in Nietzsche’s conception of truth, and especially in his view that knowledge is strongly intertwined with human practices (in fact, it might be argued that for Nietzsche, knowledge can be defined only with reference to those practices). It is indeed well known that Nietzsche was both a key point of reference and an inspiration for Foucault’s lectures on the “Will to Know”, delivered in 1970/1971, in which the latter defended an early anti-foundationalism and anti-essentialism about truth. To this I would like to add another element that can be stressed in order to clarify Foucault’s early view of truth, on the one hand, and to shed light on the kind of relationship between truth and practice that might be outlined based on Foucault’s remarks from the 1970s, on the other hand. As will be argued, that relationship can be seen as the expression of a broad pragmatist approach to knowledge and truth, which apparently characterizes Nietzsche’s conception as well. In this paper, I will elaborate on this and reflect on the attention to the practical dimension that – each in his own way – Foucault, Nietzsche, and the classic pragmatist thinker William James pay when

confronted with the challenge of providing a non-sceptical response to the relativist stance on truth that arose in the post-Kantian age. I will focus in particular on the extent to which these three authors conceived of the practical framework as the only one that allows us to meaningfully address and determine truth.

## 1. Games of truth

In a 1977 interview, Michel Foucault addresses the issue of “Truth and Power” and reveals that one of the main problems that he aimed to deal with in his works was that of “seeing historically how effects of truth are produced within discourses which in themselves are neither true nor false” (Foucault 1980: 118). This observation allows us to see that, for Foucault, “truth” is not a property inherent in our discursive practices, for it does not pertain to them essentially. On the contrary, truth is a product of those practices; more precisely, it is an *effect* of them. Furthermore, truth is an effect that can be appreciated historically, that is, if we observe how it is produced in concrete human cultural or political activities.<sup>1</sup> Among these activities, Foucault focuses especially on power relations, which for him represent the actual framework for a meaningful determination of truth. In fact, he maintains that “truth isn’t outside power, or lacking in power ... Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power” (Foucault 1980: 131). On this basis, Foucault defines what he calls “regimes of truth”, which are the framework of any determination of knowledge and truth. These regimes are in fact “the types of discourse which [each society] accepts and makes function as true”; furthermore, they are “the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth” (ibid.). As can easily be appreciated, there is a relativist element at the basis of Foucault’s considerations,

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<sup>1</sup> Similarly, in *The Archeology of Knowledge*, Foucault defended this “neutral” conception of knowledge by arguing that knowledge is, first of all, “a group of elements, formed in a regular manner by discursive practice” and “the field of coordination and subordination of statements in which concepts appear, and are defined and transformed” (Foucault 1972: 182-183. Insofar as no particular value can be ascribed to the elements in themselves, isolated by the discursive practice connecting them, we may talk of a “neutral” conception). Furthermore, Foucault argues that knowledge is “that of which one can speak in a discursive practice, and which is specified by that fact” (ibid.). According to Peters (2003: 210), this shows that for Foucault “knowledge is not the sum of what is thought to be true, but rather the whole set of practices that are distinctive of a particular domain”.

for on his view there is no unique regime of truth but rather a variety of regimes, each of which depends on the society in which the discourses are actually practiced.

Importantly, given the aim of the present paper, Foucault focuses on the *earthly*, i.e. *human*, character of truth, which is not situated in a metaphysical realm, waiting to be discovered or grasped by the knowing subject. For him, truth arises from human discursive activity and has no ontological foundation that might be conceived as independent of that activity itself. Foucault is extremely clear on this in the conclusion of the 1977 interview, where an at least mildly instrumentalist (and hence pragmatist, as I shall argue later) view of truth is revealed. “By truth,” observes Foucault, “I do not mean ‘the ensemble of truths which are to be discovered and accepted’, but rather ‘the ensemble of rules according to which the true and the false are separated and specific effects of power attached to the true’” (Foucault 1980: 132). For Foucault, what may be known as true or false depends on procedures, or practices, for the production of “systems of power”, systems whose effects are also fundamental to determining truth. There is an actual (not vicious but virtuous) circularity in Foucault’s conception of “regimes of truth ... which [are] so essential to the structure and functioning of our society” (ibid.). These regimes in fact express the “circular relation” that links truth “with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it” (Foucault 1980: 133). Accordingly, these regimes express the “rules” that must be known in order to navigate within a social, cultural and political context, thus providing us with a framework for the new kind of knowledge that Foucault aims to outline. As noted above, this knowledge cannot be metaphysical in the traditional sense of the term; rather, it is instrumental and pragmatic insofar as it is grounded in the meaning-endowing discursive relations that are actually practiced.

In an interview recorded in 1984, Foucault explains that he sometimes uses the concept of a “game” to mean the “ensemble of rules for the production of truth” (Fornet-Betancour *et al.* 1988: 15; on this cf. Peters 2003: 211). The idea of “games of truth” in fact appears in a series of lectures titled “Truth and Juridical Forms”, which Foucault gave in Rio de Janeiro in 1973, and it is worth considering not only because it sheds further light on the issue that I am exploring but also because it directly links Foucault’s conception of truth to Nietzsche’s thought.

In the first of these lectures, Foucault in fact elaborates on Nietzsche's perspectival conception of knowledge in order to outline his own view that "there are in society ... places where truth is formed, where a certain number of games are defined – games through which one sees ... certain types of knowledge come into being" (Foucault 2001: 4). Among these games we find the juridical forms that Foucault explores in his paper and that he describes as "practices ... governed by rules but also constantly modified through the course of history, ... by which our society defined ... forms of knowledge and, consequently, relations between man and truth" (ibid.). The fundamental Nietzschean idea that inspires this conception is that truth has no metaphysical essence; it has no *origin (Ursprung)* but is rather an *invention (Erfindung)* (Foucault 2001: 6).<sup>2</sup> In other words, it is impossible to discover or reveal any essential content of knowledge claims; the only thing that we can grasp is their surface. In other words, we are confined within the boundaries of our own discursive activity. Knowledge, continues Foucault, is not a question of congruence between what we say and the object of our assertions. Rather, it is a game of domination that we play with what will always remain separated by us (Foucault 2001: 12). Furthermore, it can be argued that

there is not an essence of knowledge, of the universal conditions of knowledge; rather, knowledge is always the historical and circumstantial result of conditions outside the domain of knowledge. In reality, knowledge is an event that falls under the category of an activity. ... Knowledge is not a faculty or a universal structure. Even when it uses a certain number of elements that may pass for universals, knowledge will only belong to the order of results, events, effects. (Foucault 2001: 13-14)

What can be inferred from this excerpt is that, in Foucault, there is a shift from the ontological problem to the dimension of human activity. The very notion of knowledge – and together with it the concept of truth – is no longer conceived as a fixed object of inquiry; rather, it becomes an event, a function: the function of performing discursive relations between agents of social groups. Accordingly, we must not search for truth outside or behind these relations. Truth is *invented* or *created* by these relations themselves and has no meaning if considered independently of them. Thus, Foucault maintains that if we want to consistently address this

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<sup>2</sup> These Nietzschean notions are thoroughly explored in the important paper *Nietzsche, la généalogie, l'histoire* published by Foucault in 1971.

issue, we need to focus on the game that is constantly played at the level of political and economic practices, which are the actual “means by which subjects of knowledge are formed, and hence truth relations” (Foucault 2001: 15).

How can we relate this conception of a practice of truth with Nietzsche’s view? And what does it have to do with pragmatism, as I have tentatively suggested? In the following sections, I will attempt to answer these questions.

## 2. The will to know

As Foucault observes in “Truth and Juridical Forms”, “what I say here won’t mean anything if it isn’t connected to Nietzsche’s work, which seems to me to be the best, the most effective, the most pertinent of the models that one can draw upon” (Foucault 2001: 5).<sup>3</sup> In fact, the view that truth is not an object of inquiry but rather an event or a function can be found in an unpublished note from 1887 that deeply inspired Foucault, where Nietzsche argues that

truth is not something that’s there and must be found out, discovered, but something *that must be made* and that provides the name for a *process* – or rather for a will to overcome, a will that left to itself has no end: inserting truth as a *processus in infinitum*, an *active determining*, not a becoming conscious of something that is “in itself” fixed and determinate. (PF 1887, 9[91], in Nietzsche 1967, vol. 12)<sup>4</sup>

This is indeed an interesting passage that shows that Nietzsche reflected on the idea that, in order to address the issue of truth properly, we must shift from the ontological to the functional plane. We must take a closer look at the Nietzschean origins of Foucault’s conception of knowledge if we are to fully appreciate it, however. This can be easily done by considering Foucault’s lectures on “The Will to Know” given at the *Collège de France* from 1970 to 1971.<sup>5</sup> In fact, in these lectures we find the theoretical principles of Foucault’s later reflections on knowledge (*savoir*), principles that are expressly grounded in Nietzschean foundations. Among the various elements of interest that pertain to these lectures, I would like to stress the fact that, starting from Nietzsche, Foucault elaborates the sort of *anti-*

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<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, Foucault’s final remark in the 1977 interview is that “the political question is not error, illusion, alienated consciousness or ideology; it is truth itself. Hence the importance of Nietzsche”.

<sup>4</sup> This fragment is quoted in Foucault 2013: 214.

<sup>5</sup> An interesting account of these lectures is provided in Patton 2018.

*foundationalist* or *anti-essentialist* conception of knowledge and truth that he defends in the texts considered in the previous section.

For Foucault, Nietzsche represents a final step in the history of Western practices of knowledge, namely the moment where knowledge is finally separated from the dogmatic (Aristotelian) conception of truth. Various stimulated by different spheres of scientific knowledge such as biology, history and philology, Nietzsche was able to engage in “critical” reflection on knowledge and to treat from a different perspective an issue that had traditionally been addressed in metaphysical terms (cf. Foucault 2013: 27). Nietzsche’s criticism (with ‘criticism’ understood here in a Kantian sense) makes dynamic something that had always been viewed as fixed; it transforms the plane of discovery into invention and creation, revealing its inherent illusory and erroneous matrix. By attributing a dynamic aspect to truth, that is, by referring it to the plane of action and becoming, from which emanate the multiple ways in which humans categorize reality, Nietzsche allows Foucault to consider the notion of truth no longer (or no longer primarily) as an inert object of inquiry but rather as “an effect of a struggle at the level of discursive practices” (Foucault 2013: 195). What Foucault has in mind when he talks of “struggle” is basically Nietzsche’s notion of the *will to power*. Inspired by that notion, Foucault argues that “the will to know (*savoir*) refers not to knowledge (*connaissance*) but to something different; that behind the Will to know there is not a sort of pre-existing knowledge ... but instinct, struggle” (Foucault 2013: 197). “The Will to know”, he continues, “is not originally linked to the Truth” in Nietzsche; “the Will to know composes illusions, fabricates lies, accumulates errors, and is deployed in a space of fiction where the truth itself is only an effect” (ibid.). Thus, knowledge, traditionally conceived as fixed and inert, is put in motion, as it were. Instead of a path leading to something that is “there” and that we can discover through inquiry, there is now a practice of elaboration of truth, a *process of truth-making*: “The Will to know does not assume the pre-existence of a knowledge already there; truth is not given in advance; it is produced as an event. ... Truth is only an effect of fiction and error” (Foucault 2013: 198).

These observations can easily be compared with those considered above. When combined, they allow us to outline a conception that has a pragmatist flavour insofar as it faces an anti-foundationalist stance in a non-sceptical way. I will return to this below, but allow me to

anticipate here that pragmatism (at least in its original form) should be seen as an approach to philosophical issues that attempts to provide an alternative to the epistemic relativism peculiar to the post-Kantian era. Pragmatism originated as an attempt to satisfy a philosophical need while avoiding scepticism and nihilism, namely the need to determine new, non-dogmatic, non-metaphysical principles for meaningful evaluation. Once it was established that such dogmatic principles in fact do not exist, or at least that we have no access to them, the only option left to us – if we do not want to give up and admit that *no principles at all* can ever be encountered – is to leave aside the metaphysical plane and look at the concrete dimension of human activity, that is, at *human practices*. Therefore, our evaluative criteria must shift from the relationship between the judging subject and the object to the act of judging itself; from the essence to the function; from the fact to the interpretation; from the ontological status of what we believe to have value (e.g. what we believe to be good or to be true) to the practical consequences of that belief for our concrete lives, activity and behaviour.

This is precisely the view that Foucault attributes to Nietzsche's conception of truth and his idea that the very notion of knowledge must be reconceived in perspectival, i.e. non-dogmatic, terms.<sup>6</sup> As noted above, for Foucault, Nietzsche in fact tries to do away with the traditional conception of knowledge and truth by elaborating a relational model that allows us to conceive of truth as an ever-lasting *process* (Foucault 2013: 214). In the final lecture of the 1970–1971 course,<sup>7</sup> Foucault further stresses this and deals with the idea of knowledge as *invention*, which he would later address in 1973, in contrast to the idea of a possible static reference or *origin* of our knowledge claims (Foucault 2013: 203). For Foucault, knowledge “is not joined to the structure of the world as a reading, a decipherment, a perception, or a self-evidence”, because “things are not made to be seen or known” and, most importantly, they “do not have a hidden meaning to be deciphered” or “an essence that constitutes their intelligible *nervure*” (ibid.). Thus, knowledge does not lead us beyond the veil of appearances;

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<sup>6</sup> To avoid any misunderstanding, let me be clear on the fact that Foucault does not make any reference to pragmatism. He only attributes to Nietzsche an anti-essentialist conception of knowledge and the idea that the latter can be meaningfully conceived only with relation to human (power, discursive, social, etc.) practices.

<sup>7</sup> Due to technical problems, we do not have a transcription of this lecture. The editors of the volume in which the course on “The Will to Truth” was published substituted this lecture with a paper on the same issue that Foucault delivered at McGill University (Montreal) in 1971.

it does not reveal any ontological foundation hidden by that veil (Foucault 2013: 205). On the contrary, “knowledge is the result of a complex operation” (Foucault 2013: 204) which is confined to the level of appearances. This is not the end of our journey, for Foucault, but rather the beginning of a process of perspectival re-configuration of the very level of appearances. Inspired by Nietzsche’s view of the dichotomy between the “true” and the “apparent” world, a dichotomy that is destined to collapse under the pressure of the perspectival approach that Nietzsche defends in his late writings (cf. *Twilight of the Idols*, “How the ‘true world’ finally became a fable”, and Foucault 2013: 206), Foucault maintains a strong anti-essentialist conception of truth. In Nietzsche he in fact finds the idea that “there is no ontology of truth”, given that “all truth is deployed in the non-truth; truth is non-true” (Foucault 2013: 216-217).<sup>8</sup> This view, connected with the principle of the will to power, allows Foucault to elaborate a model of knowledge as a “historical process” and a “network of relations” (Foucault 2013: 214 and 210, respectively), a model that defines knowledge and truth in a new way insofar as the epistemic plane out of which they both arise and with reference to which their meaning is assessed is dynamic and therefore always changing. Accordingly, Foucault argues that “knowledge will always be perspective, incomplete; ... it will never be adequate to its object”, nor will it ever be “rewarded with access to being or the essence”. On the contrary, knowledge constantly “gives rise to new appearances, sets them against one another and beyond one another” (Foucault 2013: 206).

With this I hope to have adequately outlined Foucault’s (early) anti-foundational conception of truth and the theoretical basis of his conception of “regimes” or “games of truth”, as well as the idea that knowledge can be meaningfully assessed only as the effect of human (political) practices. It is now time to say something about Nietzsche on this matter.

### **3. An instrumentalist criterion of truth**

Foucault’s interpretation of Nietzsche’s view of truth touches on interesting issues that deserve to be addressed in further detail, albeit briefly. The question of truth is indeed one of the most-discussed topics in Nietzsche scholarship – and for good reason, since it is

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<sup>8</sup> A few pages prior, Foucault also observes that “truth is added to knowledge, later – without knowledge being destined to truth, without truth being the essence of knowledge” (Foucault 2013: 207).



crucially related to a series of philosophical reflections that Nietzsche developed throughout his life. For reasons of space, I will limit myself to the consideration of a few elements that seem to me to be the most relevant to the aim of this paper. More precisely, I will focus on the anti-foundationalist and instrumentalist conception of truth that Nietzsche consistently defends in *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense* and in *The Gay Science* 354 (among other texts). My interest in these writings is twofold: first, they are among the works to which Foucault himself refers and upon which he elaborates his view of knowledge (*The Gay Science* 354, in particular, is a key point of reference for the notion of perspectivism); second, in these texts Nietzsche reflects on the relationship between language/meaning and the social or communitarian dimension, as well as the dependence of the former on the latter, defending the idea that knowledge and truth are in fact the product of non-epistemic conditions.

The 1873 unpublished work *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense* is a decisive point of reference for Foucault's view on knowledge as invention (Foucault 2013: 202 and 2001: 6). In this text, Nietzsche conveys his critical attitude towards the idea that language is "the full and adequate expression of all realities" (Nietzsche 1999: 143). For him, language is only a matter of legislation; its origins rest in the establishment of conventions and designations which may be fruitful for the preservation of social groups (ibid.). Within this picture, words are mere "tokens of designation", and what counts as the "truth" or a "lie" depends on *how we use* these tokens (ibid.). Nietzsche further defends the metaphorical value of "truths" insofar as they are the mere translation of neural stimulations into concepts "which, after they have been in use for a long time, strike a people as firmly established, canonical, and binding" (Nietzsche 1999: 146). Notably, Nietzsche conceives of this translation as a creative determination, not as the sort of direct mirroring that is at work in the correspondence conception of truth endorsed by common sense naïve realism (cf. *Human, all too Human* I, § 11). Nietzsche is quite clear on this and argues, for example, that "where words are concerned, what matters is never truth, never the full and adequate expression" (Nietzsche 1999: 144). Furthermore, he remarks that truthfulness is only a *moral obligation* imposed by society, "i.e. the obligation to use the customary metaphors, or ... firmly established conventions" (Nietzsche 1999: 146). But if our judgements are based on social or cultural agreement, then, contrary to what is commonly believed, the value of truth and lies is not

fixed and unchanging, nor can it be assessed with reference to a metaphysical essence of our judgements. Rather, its value depends on the context within which these evaluations are made, which is *a practical human context*.

This is but the first stage of a long-lasting reflection that Nietzsche would carry out throughout his life and that was imbued with a post-Kantian epistemology. *On Truth and Lie* was in fact inspired by the works of Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Lange, whose engagement with Kant was profound, as we know. The main question they both raise – in quite different ways and with quite different results – is that of the relationship between the phenomenal world of our daily human experience and the realm of “things in themselves”. Is that realm really out there? Can we grasp it? Or is it a mere play on words, an illusion, a concept that we ourselves created in an attempt to give meaning to something that we do not fully understand or that we simply need to categorize in order to navigate easily in the world of experience? The evolutionary and instrumentalist approach to this issue is indeed endorsed by Nietzsche in a series of writings, starting from *Human, All too Human*, § 16, where he remarks that “we have been the colourists” of that marvellous painting “that we call the world, which is in fact the outcome of a host of intellectual error and fantasies which have gradually arisen and grown entwined with one another in the course of the overall evolution of the organic being, and are now inherited by us as the accumulated treasure of the entire past – as treasure: for the value of our humanity depends upon it” (Nietzsche 1996: 20). Similarly, in § 110 of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche maintains that during the evolutionary history of humankind “the intellect produced nothing but errors; some of them turned out to be useful and species-preserving. ... Such erroneous articles of faith were passed on by inheritance further and further, and finally almost became part of the basic endowment of the species” (Nietzsche 2001: 110). These “basic errors” have been “incorporated since time immemorial”, and consequently “even in knowledge those propositions became the norms according to which one determined ‘true’ and ‘untrue’” (Ibid.). However, “the *strength* of knowledge lies not in its degree of truth, but in its age, its embeddedness, its character of condition of life” (Nietzsche 2001: 111). What Nietzsche is trying to stress here is that we should *not* believe our world to be literally as *we* categorize it; we should *not* mistake a *human representation* of the world for a *truthful, i.e. adequate, description* of it. In other words,

we should *not* treat our human, all too human “criterion of truth” as a “criterion of reality”; instead, we should understand that the “categories of reason” on which we place so much trust provide us with a mere “adjustment of the world for utilitarian ends” (PF 1888, 14[153], in Nietzsche 1967, vol. 13). Therefore, what we ordinarily call “truths” are only conventional and provisional resting points in our active relationship with the world, and their meaning resides only in that relationship and the concrete behaviour that follows from it.

These early considerations, which provide the basis for Nietzsche’s later attempt to reassess the value of the principles of our world-description based on a non-essentialist justification of their meaning,<sup>9</sup> are further developed in the important § 354 of *The Gay Science*. Here, Nietzsche conceives of consciousness as the product of the biological history of humankind, arguing that “consciousness is just a net connecting one person with another ... [which] has developed only under the pressure of the need to communicate” (Nietzsche 2001: 212). Nietzsche’s fundamental idea is that thinking is an activity that takes place at the unconscious level, independently of our awareness of it. In fact, he argues that we are unaware of most of our thought, while “the thinking which becomes conscious is only the smallest part of it ... – for only that conscious thinking takes place in words, that is, in communication symbols. ... In short, the development of language and the development of consciousness ... go hand in hand” (Nietzsche 2001: 213). This is already of some interest for our purposes here; indeed, it allows us to argue that Nietzsche agrees that we should give thought to the social foundation of our linguistic practices, focusing especially on how language works as a means of communication. Nietzsche indeed remarks that “language serves as a bridge between persons”, also claiming that this connection is made possible through the invention of “signs”, i.e. words, which are what actually convey knowledge.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The *Revaluation of all values* of which Nietzsche speaks, for example, in the *Genealogy of Morals* and *Twilight of the Idols* may actually be interpreted as an attempt to provide a historico-critical analysis of the “old truths” that constitute the frame of reference of our being-in-the-world. In Nietzschean terms, we might say that the truths (or “eternal idols”, as he also calls them) in which we fervently believe are merely an expression of our creative engagement with the world and that the reason we believe in them is the important role they have played in the natural and cultural history of humankind. Furthermore, they have no hidden essence, nothing that could justify their value once and for all. In fact, they are hollow, for Nietzsche; accordingly, he argues that, as a philosopher, one should reveal this lack of content by “sounding them out” (cf. *Twilight of the Idols, Preface*).

<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, the issue of signs and interpretations is addressed in a lecture on Nietzsche that Foucault gave in Montreal (Foucault 2013: 212-213). This is a topic that we also find at work in Foucault’s critique of Kant in both his *Introduction to Kant’s Anthropology* and in *The Order of Things*, as argued by Alan Schrift (2018: 60).

Based on this instrumentalist conception of language, in the final part of *The Gay Science* 354, Nietzsche argues for a contextualization of knowledge within the human world-picture and a consequent reevaluation of the value of “truth”. Both of these elements are implied in Nietzsche’s perspectivism, a proper definition of which can be found in this text:<sup>11</sup> “This is what I consider to be true phenomenalism and perspectivism: that due to the nature of animal consciousness, the world of which we can become conscious is merely a surface- and sign-world ... – that everything which enters consciousness thereby becomes ... a sign” (Nietzsche 2001, p. 213).<sup>12</sup> Thus, Nietzsche maintains that we are only conscious of those thoughts that reach the higher (superficial) level of our mental awareness, and only these thoughts are therefore translated into words, i.e. communication symbols. These words – which do not reproduce the world adequately but only provide us with the instruments we need to navigate it efficiently – are the frame of reference of our further action and behaviour. Put differently, they represent the perspective on the world that we share as members of a social or cultural community.

These premises imply an important consequence: if our engagement with states of affairs can only be perspectival in the aforementioned sense, if there is no way for us to access the world directly and to describe it literally (or “truthfully”, according to the correspondence theory of truth), then our very concept of “knowledge” must be reconceived. Accordingly, in *The Gay Science* 354, Nietzsche argues that “we simply have no organ for knowing, for ‘truth’: we ‘know’ (or believe or imagine) exactly as much as is useful to the human herd, to the species” (Nietzsche 2001: 214). By stating this, Nietzsche apparently agrees with Foucault that

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Finally, it may be worth stressing that in *The Order of Things* Foucault views Nietzsche “as the precursor of the *epistémè* of the twentieth century, the *epistémè* that erupted with the question of language as ‘an enigmatic multiplicity that must be mastered’ (Foucault 1970: 350). For Foucault, it was ‘Nietzsche the philologist’ who first connected ‘the philosophical task with a radical reflection upon language’ (ibid.)” (Schrift 2018: 64).

<sup>11</sup> Nietzsche uses the term “*Perspektivismus*” only once in his published writings, namely in *The Gay Science* 354. Of course, there are other important passages where Nietzsche deals with the perspectival character of life and with perspectival seeing (cf. e.g. the preface to *Beyond Good and Evil* and *Genealogy of Morality* III, § 12), but I am firmly convinced that how this issue is addressed in *The Gay Science* is especially significant for appreciating Nietzsche’s view on the issue (I have tried to defend my view, e.g., in Gori 2019a, chap. 3).

<sup>12</sup> This passage also implies one of the most delicate questions concerning Nietzsche’s view of knowledge and truth, namely his “falsification thesis”. I must regretfully leave this important issue to the side here, for I simply do not have enough space to deal with it exhaustively. On this, see the seminal (albeit controversial) work that gave rise to this discussion (Clark 1990) and some of the papers in which this issue is addressed (e.g. Hussain 2004, Andresen 2013, Nehamas 2015, Remhof 2016, and Gori 2019b).

“knowledge” is a question of discursive practices and that what may be known as true or false depends on the rules governing those practices. There are no abstract epistemic conditions that allow us to assess the value of our knowledge claims but only practical frameworks hosting networks of relations that produce truth and untruth. It would therefore be appropriate to give up the ordinary idea of knowledge as an adequate description of the world and instead endorse a contextualist view which focuses on the dependence of our judgements on their frame of reference (whether biological, historical, cultural, etc.). This framework is the terrain on which the game of truth is actually played.<sup>13</sup>

#### 4. Beliefs and actions

From what has been seen thus far, we may say that for both Nietzsche and Foucault one must give up the ordinary notion of truth conceived as a matter of grasping independent states of affairs. Rather, truth is the product of an activity of knowledge *production* based on human relations. The *practice of truth* thus substitutes a purely theoretical conception of truth. That is, the value of truth does not reside in the adequacy of our knowledge claims with regard to their object, but rather on the *effects* that the very act of knowing, the *practice* of knowing, has on us. It is on this basis that, as noted above, it may be possible to draw a connection with a general pragmatist attitude.

What is relevant for my purposes here is that, when it comes to the assessment of judgement claims (which include truth-value claims), in pragmatism we find an endorsement of the same anti-foundationalist shift towards practice that is exemplified in the early Foucault. Put generally, pragmatism can be seen first and foremost as an attitude or an approach towards philosophical issues, namely the attitude of considering the human viewpoint as the sole reference and actual justification of our evaluations. Furthermore, as argued by Hilary Putnam in a 1992 lecture, we may say that “a central – perhaps *the* central – emphasis [of pragmatism] is the emphasis on the primacy of practice” (Putnam 1995: 733). That is to say,

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<sup>13</sup> The relativization of the value of our knowledge claims implied in this view does not necessarily lead to nihilism about values, for Nietzsche. In fact, he argues that truth and falsehood can still be adopted as meaningful categories, but only if we conceive of them in a new, re-valued way – that is, only if we view them as the result of perspectival judgements couched in shared linguistic practices (on this, cf. e.g. *Beyond Good and Evil*, § 34).

pragmatist thinkers tend to think of ideas, concepts, beliefs, and theories not on the model of pictorial representations of reality but as tools or instruments that we deploy in our engagement with the world.<sup>14</sup> For them, things have no meaning in themselves independently of our judging activity; there is no hidden essence we might reach, and the only value we can attribute to states of affairs is a *human* value that can be assessed only within the boundaries of our daily practices (which can be individual, social, cultural, etc.). Thus, what is important, what *makes* these ideas, beliefs, etc., significant, is their *effects* on our practical behaviour or the consequences of the practical activities we perform on their basis.

Pragmatism is therefore much more nuanced and philosophically significant than the “mythical pragmatism (which the real pragmatists all scorned) which says ‘It’s true (for you) if it is good for you’” (Putnam 1995: 51). This sort of utilitarianism does not correspond to the pragmatist attitude, nor does it express the aim of the pragmatist thinker. As remarked by David Lapoujade, “pragmatism ... is the symptom of a profound break,” a “profound loss of faith that translates into a profound crisis of action” (Lapoujade 2020: 5). That crisis is grounded in the potentially nihilistic idea that there is nothing in which we may believe: everything is meaningless. Pragmatism attempts to deal positively with this problem by arguing that if the traditional principles for meaningful evaluation prove to be ill-founded, there has to be another way to avoid complete disorientation. In the face of the consequences of anti-essentialist and instrumentalist commitments about evaluation claims, pragmatist thinkers do not surrender to relativism. Rather, they search for consistent principles of evaluation in the realm of human praxis, thus giving *practical* meaning to something that has lost all *metaphysical* meaning. What we might call the practical plane of reference can change depending on the interests and aims of the philosopher who endorses this attitude. It could

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<sup>14</sup> On this, Todd May (2011: 56) observes that, for pragmatist thinkers, “a truth is to be conceived as a belief that helps us navigate the world more efficiently to our purposes” (incidentally, I made use of this metaphor repeatedly in the previous sections). May also reports Richard Rorty’s idea that “[William] James’s point [when defining truth as ‘what is good in the way of belief’] was that there *is* nothing deeper to be said: truth is not the sort of thing which *has* an essence” (Rorty 1982: 162). In fact, May concludes (2011: 56), “we discover truths when we recognize that certain beliefs are better to have than others, because they fit better with our attempt to live”. Interestingly, May also argues that “in this intertwining of truth, inferential structure, and living we find the relation of Foucault to pragmatism”, as we can appreciate from Foucault’s claims in the 1977 interview considered above (May 2011: 57). Indeed, “what Foucault is getting at is not truth per se but instead beliefs that are justified within a particular political and epistemic structure” (ibid.).

be the individual life of each of us; it could be the social community; it could be the broader plane of power relations; and so on. The conception of a “practice” that we actually adopt is of secondary importance, the crucial element being the shift towards a non-sceptical relativism about judgement claims based on the primacy of practice over theory.<sup>15</sup>

In the papers in which William James first outlines pragmatism (based on the definition provided by Charles Peirce), this approach to the sceptical relativism that follows from an anti-foundationalist stance is in fact expressed quite clearly. For James, critical inquiry into human judgement shows us that the traditional essentialist conception of it is no longer plausible and that we need a new framework and a new method for meaningfully assessing both our ethical and our epistemic values. This framework, for James, is human experience, or even better, human life and its practical activity. In other words, truth – as much as any other value – is only produced in practice; it is *the effect of human practices*.

Let me argue this in more detail. In an 1891 paper on “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life”, James explores the issue of the relativism of ethical values and defends the idea that “there is no such thing possible as an ethical philosophy dogmatically made up in advance” (James 1977: 610). For James, any ethical evaluation is the product of a sentient being; therefore, ethical values do not reside in the inner essence of events but are the product of a human interpretation of facts which are in themselves neither good nor bad, i.e. valueless. As James argues, “goodness, badness, and obligation must be *realized* somewhere in order to really exist ... Their only habitat is a mind which feels them” (James 1977: 614). It is only when someone feels something to be good that “he *makes* it good”, James continues; but if we trespass the boundaries of our experience we shall find no “moral ‘nature of things’ existing antecedently to the concrete thinkers themselves with their ideals” (James 1977: 616). James was apparently confronted with an anti-essentialist stance about moral values. For him, these values “mean no absolute natures, independent of personal support” (James 199: 618); they have no meaning in themselves, in fact, but their significance can only result from an active

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<sup>15</sup> This does not mean that “practical” must be conceived as opposed to “theoretical”, though. The “practical” consequences that pragmatist thinkers consider relevant for assessing the value of a belief or idea can in fact refer to the domain of theoretical reflection. What is crucial is the focus on the *effects* that follow from that belief, which has no value in itself but only in a course of action. Therefore, following Lapoujade (2020: 33), we can say that for pragmatism “‘practical’ is opposed not to ‘theoretical’, but to the vague or abstract”. On this cf. the eighth chapter of James’s *The Meaning of Truth*.

determination performed by a human subject. Values are *made* by us; more precisely, they are *realized in* human practices. James further argues that the same can be said of truth. In fact, truth is a kind of evaluation which has only traditionally been conceived as supposing “a standard outside of the thinker to which he must conform” (James 1977: 615). “Truth can only exist in act”, observes James (1977: 619). But in what act? Even if we accept the shift from the abstract to the practical plane, what is the standard of our evaluation? Should our own ideals count as lawgiving ones? Of course not – provided we would like to “avoid complete moral scepticism on the one hand, and on the other escape bringing a wayward personal standard of our own along with us” (James 1977: 620). What is needed is therefore a method for assessing values in a new way, a test that allows us to determine, in any situation, what can be meaningfully *held as* good, true, etc.

Jamesian pragmatism has been developed to fulfil this need and to provide us with a non-dogmatic principle of evaluation. The early definition of this approach can be found in the seminal paper “Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results” published in 1898. Here, James makes use of Charles Peirce’s principle that “beliefs are rules for action; and the whole function of thinking is but one step in the production of habits of action. If there were any part of a thought that made no difference in the thought’s practical consequences, then that part would be no proper element of thought’s significance” (James 1977: 348).<sup>16</sup> The focus of philosophical investigation therefore shifts from abstract theory to the plane of concrete praxis. A belief is significant only if it determines a relevant action; if not, it has no value. “Thus,” James continues, “to develop a thought’s meaning we need only determine what conduct it is fitted to produce; that conduct is for us its sole significance” (ibid.). Accordingly,

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<sup>16</sup> Elaborating on this Peircean element, Rossella Fabbrichesi defends the consistency between the late Foucault and pragmatism. For her, Foucault’s conception of *parrhēsia* “should not be interpreted as the necessity to *speak the truth*, in [an] epistemological or analytic sense, but as the ‘courage’ to *act upon what is truthfully held*, to ‘work out’ the effects of truth so understood. In this way, truth is no longer only speech but becomes *pragma*. This point is obviously related to the issue of the *practices* of truth, at the intersection among living praxes, ethical habits, and bodily dispositions through which knowledge is put to practice” (Fabbrichesi 2015: 262). The issue of *parrhēsia*, which involves the ethical and practical implications of truth-telling, with a special emphasis on the relationship between belief and truth (cf. e.g. Peters 2003: 212), is of course important for reflection on Foucault’s conception of truth in relation to practice, on the one hand, and for further comparing his approach with the pragmatists’, on the other. In fact, the idea that *parrhēsia* is a “practice of truth-belief” (an idea based on the view that Foucaultian “truth-telling” can be interpreted as focused on the idea of acting on what is truthfully held) could be a promising topic for future research.



we must give up the notion that an object is known when we manage to elaborate an idea that is adequate to the state of affairs. The traditional view of truth as correspondence must in fact be abandoned, and we should at least re-configure that notion in functional terms. In other words, we should no longer ask “What *is* true?” but rather “How is truth *made*?”, and our interests must therefore reside in the consequences of our *taking* an idea *for true* (on this cf. Lapoujade 2020: 35). What is important, for James, is not an idea in itself but its experiential, i.e. practical, fruitfulness: “To attain perfect clearness in our thoughts of an object, then, we need only consider what effects of a conceivably practical kind the object may involve – what sensations we are to expect from it, and what reactions we must prepare. Our conception of these effects, then, is for us the whole of our conception of the object, so far as that conception has positive significance at all” (James 1977: 348).

Based on this, James develops the famous definition of the pragmatic method that he would later publish in *Pragmatism*. In the 1898 paper, he in fact argues that in order to investigate a conception, you must “ask yourself right off, ‘What is it *known as*? In what facts does it result? What is its *cash-value*, in terms of particular experience? And what special difference would come into the world according as it were true or false?’” (James 1977: 360). As noted above, this can only misleadingly be read as the expression of a sterile utilitarianism. The issue is actually deeply philosophical, concerned with an anti-foundationalism about values and the problem of providing consistent principles of assessment. What is remarkable, then, is firstly the move made by James, the strategy that he adopts when faced with that issue, and secondly the consequent (re)definition of the notion of truth in practical terms. In his 1907 book, James argues that we must deal with ideas in terms of function, not form: “The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events. Its verity *is* in fact an event, a process: the process namely of its verifying itself, its *very-fication*. Its validity is the process of its *valid-ation*” (James 1977: 430). There is no separation of the activity of knowledge and the determination of truth; both elements are the expression of an event that we ourselves enact and that represents the only meaningful reference of our evaluations. For James, “verify[ing] an idea consists of exploring the context associated with the orientation given by the idea” (Lapoujade 2020: 33); that is to say, there is no hidden essence that can confirm the validity of that idea, but only the

practical plane of our actual experience and activity. Accordingly, James also maintains that “*true ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify. False ideas are those that we can not.* That is the practical difference it makes to us to have true ideas; that, therefore, is the meaning of truth, for it is all that truth is known-as” (ibid.).

With this I hope to have outlined the basic features of a pragmatist conception of truth, which hinges on a processual or functional view of truth in contrast to the traditional dogmatic conception. According to this view, truth is produced within practices that in themselves are neither true nor false but in light of which we can assess meaningful – albeit provisional – evaluations. What may be *known as* true or false in fact depends on these practices insofar as we can only appreciate an idea or a belief if we look at the *effects* it has on our further experience. Theoretically, we must leave aside the abstract plane of pure epistemology and instead move to the dimension of our practical activity – where, as we have seen, truths are actually *realized*.

## 5. Conclusion

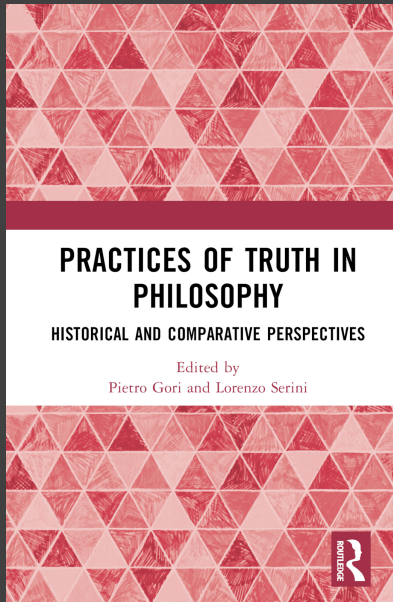
In a 2011 paper that attempts to situate Foucault within pragmatist thinkers such as James, Dewey, and Rorty, Todd May observes that “seeing Foucault’s work engaged with [pragmatism] does not permit us to surpass it, but instead to add a dimension to its already rich tradition ... which has offered us a powerful philosophical perspective on the intertwining of our selves and our world” (May 2011: 61-62). I would like to build on this remark in order to provide a few final comments to my paper. In exploring the early Foucault’s problematization of truth while stressing the broad pragmatist attitude that can be found at the core of both his and Nietzsche’s approach, my intention was limited to connecting different authors who developed similar (but not identical) views on an issue that was crucial for all of them. This connection was intended to enhance the various aspects of a question that Foucault, Nietzsche and James stressed in different ways, according to their respective aims and from their different viewpoints. As I have tried to show, despite the dissimilarities between their views, they held something in common, namely the idea that philosophical inquiry into truth must shift its focus from the epistemic to the practical plane if it is to achieve significant results. This shift was the expression of a dramatic change in the

history of Western philosophy, one which was due to the crisis that arose in the post-Kantian era, when philosophers had to face the difficult challenge of living in a world deprived of metaphysical principles.

Nietzsche was famously one of the first authors to deal with this issue at length, in an attempt to outline a path for future philosophers based on a perspectival, i.e. non-dogmatic, appreciation of the problem of “the value of values” (cf. *On the Genealogy of Morals, Preface*) and a contextualization of that problem within the human, all too human relationship with the world. A few years later, James would address the same problem in search of an evaluative method that avoided sterile relativism and scepticism; as we have seen, he found that method in the pragmatic consideration of the effects of evaluation on our practical activity. Finally, building on Nietzsche’s view, Foucault explored the same issue and, like Nietzsche and James, argued that knowledge and truth are the product of a network of relations that occur at any stage of our cultural history. What can be said conclusively is that each of these thinkers agreed that the only path open to philosophy – if it wished to face the core question of Western civilization and help us to orient ourselves within a relativist framework – was to abandon the traditional view of truth as a static object of inquiry and to endorse the idea that truth is a *process*, a mere *effect* of human activity. It is *we* who make things true; it is *we* who give meaning to the events that constitute the context of our daily praxes. The value we attribute to things therefore depends only on our *practical* engagement with them.

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