

NIETZSCHE, PERSPECTIVISM, AND MENTAL HEALTH

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IN HIS ARTICLE "Perspectivism and Psychodynamic Psychotherapy," Ronald Lehrer argues that many contemporary psychoanalysts have adopted a Nietzsche-style perspectivism in their practice, and Lehrer offers both a critical exegesis of Nietzsche's views and an evaluation of their usefulness in clinical psychology. We think that Lehrer fails to appreciate how radical Nietzsche's position really is, and that he underestimates its power and defensibility. Moreover, Lehrer does not discuss an aspect of Nietzsche's perspectivism, namely the bundle theory of the self, which is especially relevant for psychiatry.

There are two sorts of perspectivism implicit in Lehrer's discussion. Let us call the first *modest perspectivism*. According to this idea, there is a mind-independent reality with well-defined objects and objective causal relations that obtain among them. However, as cognitively limited creatures, we have access to reality only through a number of different methods, approaches, theories, paradigms, and the like. Each of these cognitive methods is incapable of disclosing the full truth about the world. As Nietzsche wrote in *On the Genealogy of Morals* (essay III, §12), "the more eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our 'concept' of this thing, our 'objectivity' be." In other words, it is only through the recognition that no ap-

proach, no matter how successful, is completely satisfactory, that we are able to overthrow rigid methodological dogmatism and embrace the perspectivity of knowledge.

Let us call the second variety of perspectivism *radical perspectivism*. According to radical perspectivism, truth itself is somehow indexed to points of view, or to interpretations. There is no objective body of the facts that exists independently of some specific perspective taken on them. Nor are there well-individuated objects in the world apart from some particular cognizing of them. This is not idealism—the world isn't just in our minds, and we do not "eat ideas," nor are we "clothed in ideas," as Berkeley famously claimed. Rather, in itself the world is chaotic and without an intrinsic structure. What structure we discern is due to our idiosyncratic perceptual mechanisms coupled with what interpretations we find useful (for survival, or for the promotion of power). Causal relations, too, while not invented out of whole cloth, are also not wholly objective facts about the world that we discover. If a forest catches fire, there is no objective way to decide that it was caused by the lightning, instead of being caused by the presence of oxygen, or the abundance of dry wood, or high winds.

Modest perspectivism has the virtue of being exceedingly ecumenical. Outside of a few die-

hard fundamentalists, who really wants to claim that they alone have found the one shining path to the truth? Even radical perspectivists, who reject the thesis that reality is mind-independent, are attracted to the idea that no cognitive method reigns supreme. As Nietzsche wrote in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (book III, §11.2), “‘This is my way; where is yours?’—thus I answered those who asked me ‘the way.’ For the way—that does not exist.” Lehrer does not stop here, however. He also contends that modest perspectivism is the only plausible form of perspectivism, and it is Nietzsche’s view to boot. It is worth acknowledging that with respect to the latter claim, Lehrer is not alone. Respected Nietzsche scholars Richard Schacht (1995, 91–92) and Bernd Magnus (1988, 152–53) offer similar interpretations. Nevertheless, we will argue that Nietzsche’s perspectivism is both more radical and more defensible than Lehrer recognizes.

THREE ASPECTS OF RADICAL PERSPECTIVISM

There are three components of radical perspectivism that Lehrer singles out for criticism: truth, the ontology of objects, and causality. We will take these in turn and (1) offer reasons to think that Nietzsche adopted radical perspectivism with respect to each; (2) summarize Lehrer’s criticisms; and (3) sketch a Nietzschean reply.

In *Human, All Too Human* (§2), Nietzsche wrote that “there are no eternal facts, nor are there any absolute truths.” This passage alone indicates that his criticism of traditional conceptions of truth ran a good bit deeper than Lehrer’s modest perspectivism allows. Nevertheless Nietzsche did believe that there are truths of a sort—he was not a nihilist—and he routinely praised truth and the search for truth. One example is in *The Antichrist* (§50) where he wrote, “Truth has had to be fought for every step of the way, almost everything else dear to our hearts, on which our love and our trust in life depend, has had to be sacrificed to it. Greatness of soul is needed for it: the service of truth is the hardest service.” The conception of truth that Nietzsche promoted, we contend, is perspectival truth. Which propositions are true and which false is partly a function of which perspective is taken on the proposition.

Lehrer raises a classic objection to this theory of truth, namely whether the theory itself is true, and in what sense. How can one consistently deny that there are absolute truths without tacitly promoting that very denial as expressing an absolute truth? Nietzsche was sensitive to this charge, and wrote in *Beyond Good and Evil* (§22), “Supposing that this also is only an interpretation—and you will be eager enough to make this objection?—well, so much the better.” This hints at a common rejoinder to the self-reference problem that Lehrer raises: truth perspectivism itself is merely perspectivally true. This response cannot work, for various complicated reasons that we do not have the space to address.¹ Yet there is a reply to Lehrer’s objection that is successful. This is to interpret Nietzsche as advocating weak truth-perspectivism, according to which there is at least one statement such that there is some perspective in which it is true, and some perspective in which it is untrue. It is consistent with weak perspectivism that some statements have the same truth value in all perspectives, that is, one can maintain that very many—nearly all—statements have their truth values perspectivally, and yet hold that nevertheless some statements have their truth values absolutely. In other words, some statements have an invariant truth value across all or in all perspectives, and some do not. The thesis of weak truth-perspectivism itself can then be taken as absolutely true, or true in all perspectives. In brief, Lehrer is mistaken when he writes that we must accept “the unavoidable assumption of the existence of brute facts existing independently of representation and perspective.” We need only assume that there are some brute facts of this sort. We need not assume that all truths are absolute.

If Nietzsche accepts a theory of truth according to which many propositions have their truth values partly in virtue of some perspective, what kind of ontology does he propose to go along with this revisionist view? Clearly not one in which objects are Kantian *dingen-an-sich*, that are stable and well-individuated over time. Remember that Heraclitus is one of the few metaphysicians about whom Nietzsche has anything positive to say. In *The Twilight of the Idols* (III, §5) he calls it “error” and “prejudice” to “posit

unity, identity, duration, substance, cause, materiality, being." Belief in such things is no more than a convenient "fiction," without which "man could not live" (*Beyond Good and Evil*, §4). Instead of promulgating more of these "errors," Nietzsche offered a bundle theory of objects. According to this theory (which, we confess, was more extensively developed in Nietzsche's unpublished notebooks than it was in the books he saw to press), objects are collections or aggregates of non-substances. Traditional bundle theories consider objects to be bundles of properties. Nietzsche took them to be bundles of what he called "power quanta."² So, for example, there is no absolute fact about whether the constellation Orion is an object. Whether it is partly a function of the perspective taken on its component parts. For Nietzsche, this object perspectivism goes all the way down.

Lehrer objects that "If I regard the perspectives and related interpretations I use as only useful fictions, then it would appear that I have given up all knowledge claims. . . ." Any particular interpretation of a patient and any psychotherapeutic treatment become insulated from empirical evidence. Therapy becomes a hermetic discipline.

In reply, we do not think that either Nietzsche's bundle ontology, or his perspectival theory of truth eliminate the possibility of knowledge. Kant thought that the faculty of understanding actively legislates the way in which we experience the world; in a similar way, Nietzsche regards interpretation as playing an active, creative role. Likewise, just as Kant regarded the raw data of empirical phenomena as essentially unordered and subject to human categorization, so too Nietzsche thinks that interpretations "impose upon chaos as much regularity and form as our practical needs require" (*The Will to Power* §515). Yet this does not mean that "knowledge" becomes fabrication out of whole cloth. Knowledge is true belief in which the belief has a certain sensitivity to the truth; but for Nietzsche truth itself is relativized to perspectives. As Nietzsche writes in *The Will to Power* (§495), "we can comprehend only a world that we ourselves have made." Yet having made this world, we can have knowledge of it.

We also think that Lehrer underestimates the possibilities of a perspectivist view of causality. Lehrer repeatedly distinguishes between interpretations and their role in understanding and causation and its role in explanation. Such a distinction suggests that he thinks that the two are contraries. Yet this is not the case for Nietzsche. Perhaps surprisingly, Nietzsche does away with the distinction altogether by making causation a kind of interpretation. He proceeds along two fronts in this undertaking. First, he criticizes every view of causation that treats it as either a nomological relation among events, a necessary relation among events, or a mechanistic relation among events.

Having dumped the three most popular philosophical views about the nature of causation, he then articulates an alternative perspectivist view of causation according to which it is a kind of interpretation that events, however complex, take upon one another (see *Beyond Good and Evil* §22, §36; *On the Genealogy of Morals*, essay I, §13). Nietzsche considers that this view has the virtue of not forcing a blunt dichotomy between the world as it is in itself and experience of it. Were we to offer a slogan for his position, we might say that the way that the world is in itself is only that there is no way that the world is in itself.

Lehrer's insistence that "we . . . want knowledge about . . . causal relations, not useful fictions" is, by Nietzsche's lights, a false dichotomy. No firm distinction exists between a causal explanation that gives us knowledge and an interpretive understanding that gives us only useful fictions. According to Nietzsche, all knowledge is perspectival and all causal relations are perspectival, so there is for him no contrast between knowledge and causation, on the one hand, and interpretation and fictionality, on the other. Knowledge, causation, explanation, utility are all of a piece for Nietzsche, and all find a place under the umbrella of perspectivism.

Lest it be thought that such a view of causation relativizes causal explanation to the imaginative fantasies of subjective creations, it is helpful to keep in mind that the failure of any sort of entity or relation to exist nonperspectivally does

not entail that existence becomes wholly subjective or arbitrary. There are for Nietzsche, as Lehrer recognizes, intersubjective and cross-perspectival criteria for soundness, validity, truth, and explanation. Nietzsche's position on causality is no different: the perspectivity of causal relations is consistent with there being causal perspectives among entities that either obtain or fail to obtain independently of any individual human's desires, interests, or perspectives. That is just to say that since human perspectives are not the only perspectives, it is a mistake to think that causal relations are projected into the world only by humans, or by any particular human.

We are not taking sides as to whether Nietzsche's radical perspectivism is correct or whether Lehrer's modest perspectivism is correct. But Lehrer's foe is more wily and elusive than he imagines.

THE PERSPECTIVIST SELF

Finally, let us offer a few brief reflections on the role that perspectivism might play in psychotherapy. The test for a good therapeutic approach is whether it is of benefit to the patient, whether it enhances the patient's life. Nietzsche cheerfully welcomes reevaluations and reconsiderations of what is life-affirming. He writes in *Beyond Good and Evil* (§2), "for all the value that the true, the truthful, the selfless may deserve, it would still be possible that a higher and more fundamental value for life might have to be ascribed to deception, selfishness, and lust." Lehrer might rejoin that this "value for life," or the nature of health, constitutes a nonperspectival bedrock for Nietzsche. We do not think this is the case, however. To see why, we must first understand Nietzsche's analysis of the self.

Nietzsche's view of the self is a member of a venerable tradition in philosophy according to which the self is a complex or bundle of desires, thoughts, emotions, moods, wonderings, hopes, fears, lusts, drives, and so forth, and not something distinct from them. The constituents of the Nietzschean bundle-self are not properties, as some philosophers would have it, but drives (*Triebe*). Of course, as should be expected from a thinker as idiosyncratic as Nietzsche, the drives he cites are a peculiar lot: in addition to drives for the famous four Fs

(food, fighting, fleeing, and procreation), there are drives to humor, political democracy, beauty, pride, enterprise, the unreal, the revolutionary, and even negation. It will no doubt be recognized that some of the Nietzschean drives are distinctly cognitive. But this is consistent with Nietzsche's overall perspectivist project: he takes even cognitive capacities to be a set of relations between drives and not something distinct from them.

The plausibility of this view we leave open. Yet it is pertinent to note some of the implications of Nietzsche's bundle theory of the self. First, there is no non-perspectival identity across time for Nietzschean selves. Since such a self is composed of ever-changing drives, there is no completely objective identification of a person over time. This is not to say that there is no ordering of the drives or that there is no constancy in the composition of a bundle-self. Pretty clearly, some drives are less important than others, and some drives remain in the set that composes the self for long periods of time. But whatever importance a drive has in the composition of a self will be a function of some other drive or set of them adjudicating it, and whatever longevity a particular drive has in the composition of a self is contingent and always subject to reevaluation or even elimination.

Another consequence of Nietzsche's perspectivist bundle theory of the self is that the category of mental health is not fixed. Nietzsche recognizes that there are different kinds of mental health and that some of them are inconsistent with each other. He writes in *The Gay Science* (§120),

There is no health as such, and all attempts to define a thing that way have been wretched failures. Even the determination of what is healthy for your body depends on your goal, your horizon, your energies, your impulses, your errors, and above all on the ideals and phantasms of your soul. Thus there are innumerable healths of the body; and the more we allow the unique and incomparable to raise its head again, and the more we abjure the dogma of the "equality of men," the more must the concept of a normal health, along with a normal diet and the normal course of an illness, be abandoned by medical men. Only then would the time have come to reflect on the health and illness of the soul, and to find the peculiar virtue of each man in the health of his soul. In one person, of course, this health could look like its opposite in another person.

Nietzsche's bundle theory of the self works hand-in-glove with his perspectivist view of mental health. The bundle theory provides a conception of the self that is flexible enough for the interpretive complexity of a perspectivist view of mental health.

The implications of Nietzsche's perspectivist conceptions of the self and its health for therapeutic practice are, pretty obviously, radical; even more radical than Lehrer suggests. Although we agree with Lehrer that Nietzsche's perspectivism requires of therapists that they recognize that a patient's constitution is historical and subject to change over time, we would add that for Nietzsche a therapist must also realize that "mental health" is partly a function of a patient's own perspectival interpretations of his or her own historical constitution. Moreover, what is healthy for one patient may not be healthy for another, not simply because there are different standards of mental health, but more importantly because there can be for Nietzsche no single normal development of the human psyche.

Nietzsche considers persons to be a maddening confusion of willfulness and passivity, autonomous behavior and herdish capitulation, reasonability and blind insurgency. We can, if we wish, impose some order on the welter of drives of which we are composed. Indeed, Nietzsche suggests that such an imposition of order is necessary for a flourishing life (see *Beyond Good and Evil*, §188). But there are so many ways of doing so—ways inconsistent with each other—that nowhere will we find a set of them that is "normal."

NOTES

1. For a discussion of these and related issues, see Hales and Welshon (1994) and Hales (1997).

2. Further explanation of this unusual view can be found in Welshon (1996).

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