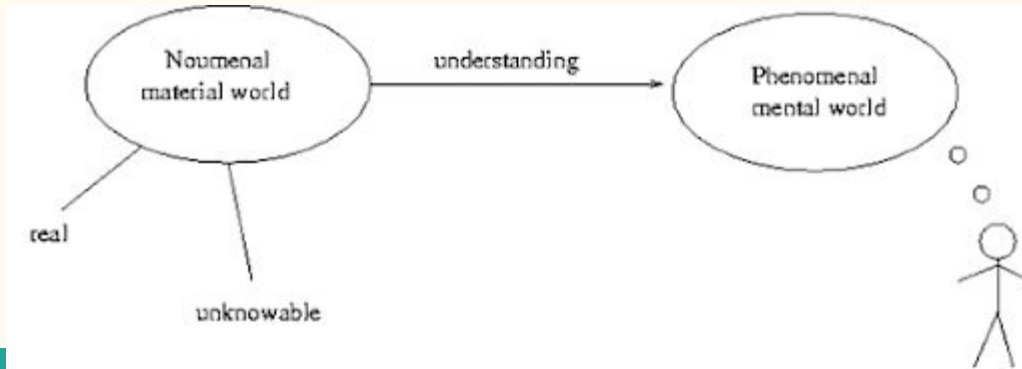Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900)

Gentrain
Stephanie Spoto
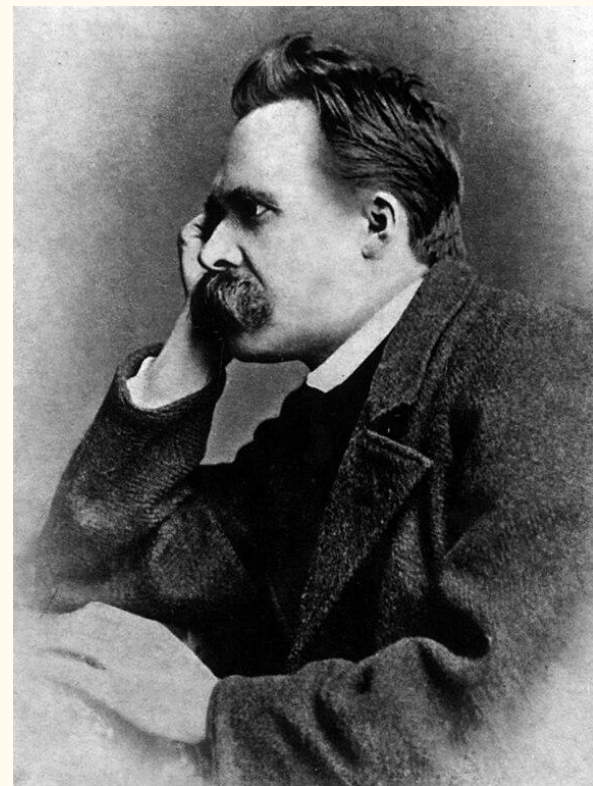
Nietzsche "On Truth and Lies"

- A response to Kant's distinction between noumena and phenomena
  - Noumena: things in themselves
  - Phenomena: the appearance of things
- Nietzsche ascribes to this distinction between things and appearances → claims the unknowability of noumena
- Generally truth considered: how things are apart of human perception or ideas
  - Nietzsche: there is no Truth
  - Nietzsche: "if Kant is right, then the sciences are wrong" (from "The Philosopher") → scientific claims pretend to reflect independent reality not one as understood through the filter of experience/perception/etc.

Two major distinctions between Kant and Nietzsche:

- Kant's a priori are fixed universal principles; Nietzsche says they relate to human drives, motivations, and interests
- Nietzsche emphasizes the importance of language ("logic is merely slavery within the fetters of language") → different languages arrive at different logical 'truths' → language is merely metaphorical
- We must believe *a priori* judgements "for the sake of the preservation of creatures like ourselves"
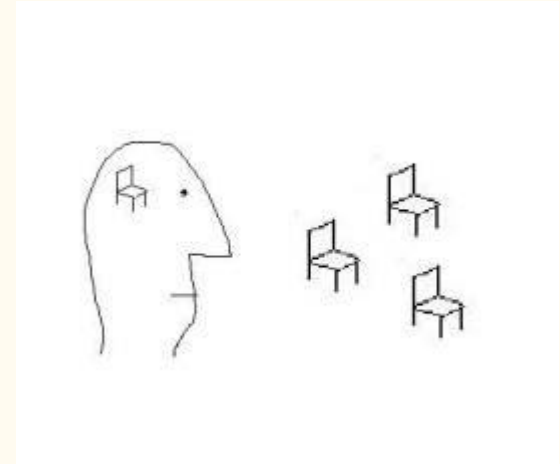
"Once upon a time, in some out of the way corner of that universe which is dispersed into numberless twinkling solar systems, there was a star upon which clever beasts invented knowing. That was the most arrogant and mendacious minute of "world history," but nevertheless, it was only a minute. After nature had drawn a few breaths, the star cooled and congealed, and the clever beasts had to die. One might invent such a fable, and yet he still would not have adequately illustrated how miserable, how shadowy and transient, how aimless and arbitrary the human intellect looks within nature. There were eternities during which it did not exist. And when it is all over with the human intellect, nothing will have happened. For this intellect has no additional mission which would lead it beyond human life. Rather, it is human, and only its possessor and begetter takes it so solemnly – as though the world's axis turned within it. But if we could communicate with the gnat, we would learn that he likewise flies through the air with the same solemnity, that he feels the flying center of the universe within himself. There is nothing so reprehensible and unimportant in nature that it would not immediately well up like a balloon at the slightest puff of this power of knowing. And just as every porter wants to have an admirer, so even the proudest of men, the philosopher, supposes that he sees on all sides the eyes of the universe telescopically focused upon his action and thought".

Nietzsche and Nihilism

- Nihilism is the belief that all values are baseless → nothing can be known or communicated
- Associated with extreme pessimism and a radical skepticism
- Few philosophers would claim to be nihilists → but often associated with Friedrich Nietzsche
- Nietzsche argued that Nihilism's corrosive effects would eventually destroy all moral, religious, and metaphysical convictions
- Nihilistic themes: epistemological failure, value destruction, and cosmic purposelessness
- 20th C: these themes have preoccupied artists, social critics, and philosophers
- Existentialists helped popularize tenets of nihilism but wanted to blunt its destructive potential
- Important for postmodernism

"[Men] are deeply immersed in illusions and in dream images; their eyes merely glide over the surface of things and see 'forms.' Their senses nowhere lead to truth; on the contrary, they are content to receive stimuli and, as it were, to engage in a groping game on the backs of things. Moreover, man permits himself be deceived in his dreams every night of his life".

bellum omni contra

"Insofar as the individual wants to maintain himself against other individuals, he will under natural circumstances employ the intellect mainly for dissimulation. But at the same time, from boredom and necessity, man wishes to exist socially and with the herd; therefore, he need to make peace and strives accordingly to banish from his world at least the most flagrant *bellum omni contra* omnes. This peace treaty brings in its wake something which appears to be the first step towards acquiring that puzzling truth drive: to wit, that which shall count as 'truth' from now on is established. That is to say, a uniformly valid and binding designation is invented for things, and this legislation of language likewise establishes the first laws of truth. For the contrast between truth and lie arises here for the first time"

Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* and Human Nature

- 1651, Hobbes published *Leviathan* → political treatise which argued for absolute power in the monarchy
- In order to combat "the state of nature" which is "war of all against all" (*bellum omni contra omnes*) → in the state of nature human life is "nasty, brutish, and short"
- There is no greatest good: no society should seek the greatest good because there is no agreement about what that is
- There is, however, a greatest evil: a violent death → we give up our freedom and anything the sovereign demands in order to avoid this greatest evil

Language and metaphor are arbitrary

"What is a word? It is the copy in sound of a nerve stimulus. But the further inference from the nerve stimulus to a cause outside of us is already the result of a false and unjustifiable application of the principle of sufficient reason. If truth alone had been the deciding factor in the genesis of language, and if the standpoint of certainty had been decisive for designations, then how could we still dare to say 'the stone is hard,' as if 'hard' were something otherwise familiar to us, and not merely a totally subjective stimulation! We separate things according the gender [in German], designating a tree as masculine and the plant as feminine. What arbitrary assignments! How far this oversteps the canons of certainty! We speak of a 'snake': this designation touches only upon its ability to twist itself and could therefore also fit a worm. What arbitrary differentiations! What one-sided preferences, first for this, then for that property of a thing! The various languages placed side by side show that with words it is never a question of truth, never a question of adequate expression; otherwise there would not be so many languages"

What then is truth?

"What then is truth? A movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding. Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions; they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and now are considered as metal and no longer as coins."

Nihilism and Skepticism

- Skepticism concerned with philosophical theorization → what can we know?
- For Hume, this did not impact the practice of everyday life
- Nihilists consider not theory but life praxis → loss of direction of practical living
- Nietzsche: Nihilism and Skepticism are on two different levels but intimately related:
  - Skepticism: Loss of epistemic certainty (loss of Truth)
  - Nihilism: Loss of meaning and values

God is Dead

"After Buddha was dead people showed his shadow for centuries afterwards in a cave, — an immense frightful shadow. God is dead: but as the human race is constituted, there will perhaps be caves for millenniums yet, in which people will show his shadow. — And we — we have still to overcome his shadow!"

The Gay Science