

Nietzsche's Theory of Mind: Consciousness and Conceptualization

Paul Katsafanas

Judging from what has been made of it so far, Nietzsche's theory of consciousness consists of a number of theses which fit together uncomfortably. According to commentators as diverse as Gilles Deleuze and Brian Leiter, Nietzsche argues that consciousness is epiphenomenal.¹ Yet, in a variety of ways and a range of places, Nietzsche seems to commit himself to the claim that conscious states are causally efficacious. Consciousness is dangerous, he writes,² which is an odd thing to say of an epiphenomenon; if a thing is dangerous, then it surely *does something*. To make matters worse, Nietzsche repeatedly warns us that consciousness falsifies; in a characteristic passage, he writes, 'all becoming conscious involves a great and thorough corruption, falsification, reduction to superficialities, and generalization' (GS 354). Whatever the precise meaning of this claim may be, the regularity of its occurrence and the stress which Nietzsche places upon it make it obvious that the claim deeply troubles him. If consciousness is an epiphenomenon, though, why should we care whether it falsifies? What difference could this falsification possibly make? Indeed, in what sense could an epiphenomenon falsify anything in the first place? And, to add even more obscurity to the mix, Nietzsche sometimes claims that consciousness is nothing more than a 'relation of drives'.

Consciousness is an epiphenomenon; consciousness is dangerous; consciousness falsifies; consciousness is a relation of drives. With claims that seem as inconsistent, muddled, and obscure as these, it is no surprise that Nietzsche's theory of consciousness has not received much sustained attention. What may be surprising, though, is that Nietzsche actually does have a coherent and novel account of consciousness. This essay aims to explicate the account and examine its motivations, by clarifying the distinction between conscious and unconscious states in Nietzsche's work, and by exploring the way in which these conscious and unconscious states relate.

Nietzsche's account has four principal components. First, Nietzsche claims that consciousness is not an essential property of the mental; the majority of mental states are unconscious. It might be natural to suppose that these unconscious states will be things such as dispositions, drives, and urges. Not so: Nietzsche claims that there are unconscious thoughts, emotions, and perceptions. What, then, distinguishes conscious states from unconscious ones? This brings us to the second and most fundamental component of Nietzsche's account: a mental state is conscious if its content is conceptually articulated, whereas a state is unconscious if its content is nonconceptually articulated. We will have to spend

some time examining just what this means. Once we do so, we will come to the third component of Nietzsche's account: his notorious claim that consciousness is superficial and falsifying. Conscious states involve the conceptualization of the object of awareness. Nietzsche argues that the content of an unconscious state can be conceptualized in a variety of ways, so that a given unconscious state could give rise to a variety of different conscious states. Accordingly, consciousness is superficial in the sense that a conscious mental state inevitably gives a partial rendering of the content of an unconscious state. But, fourth, conscious states are not mere epiphenomena, and this opens the way to a type of falsification. Roughly, the idea is that conscious states causally interact with unconscious states, altering the unconscious states in a variety of ways; but, since the conscious states are already simplified versions of the unconscious states, this alteration of the unconscious states often results in unconscious experience coming to represent the world in inaccurate ways.

1. Consciousness Is Not an Essential Property of the Mental

It is easy to establish Nietzsche's commitment to the claim that consciousness is not an essential property of the mental, so that there are unconscious mental states. In the *Gay Science* §357, Nietzsche praises

Leibniz's incomparable insight . . . that consciousness is merely an accidens of representation [Vorstellung] and not its necessary and essential attribute; that, in other words, what we call consciousness constitutes only one state of our spiritual and psychic world . . . and not by any means the whole of it.

A few sections earlier, he remarks:

We could think, feel, will, and remember, and we could also 'act' in every sense of that word, and yet none of all this would have to 'enter our consciousness' . . . (GS 354)³

But what is a conscious mental state? If we can think and even feel without doing so consciously, then what distinguishes conscious thinking and conscious feeling from their unconscious counterparts?⁴

2. The Nature of Consciousness

2.1 Conscious States are States with Conceptually Articulated Content

It would be natural to draw the distinction between conscious and unconscious states in terms of *awareness*. In ordinary discourse, we often use 'conscious of' interchangeably with 'aware of'; in many contexts, the statements 'he's conscious of the tree' and 'he's aware of the tree' register no difference in meaning. This might lead us to think the distinction between conscious and unconscious states

is that conscious states involve awareness of some object, whereas unconscious states do not. However, that cannot be right, for we will see that Nietzsche believes that there are unconscious *perceptions*. A perception is a type of awareness of the world, so by countenancing unconscious perceptions Nietzsche allows that we can be unconsciously aware. Accordingly, the contrast between the conscious and the unconscious cannot be drawn in terms of awareness of the world. What, then, could the distinction be?⁵

Nietzsche's most explicit and detailed discussion of the nature of consciousness comes in a section from the fifth book of the *Gay Science*, in which he links consciousness to language:

Man, like every living being, thinks continually without knowing it [denkt immerfort, aber weiss es nicht]; the thinking that rises to *consciousness* is only the smallest part of all this—the most superficial and worst part—for only this conscious thinking *occurs in words, which is to say signs of communication* [denn allein dieses bewusste Denken *geschieht in Worten, das heisst in Mittheilungszeichen*], and this fact uncovers the origin of consciousness. In brief, the development of language and the development of consciousness (*not of Reason but merely of the way Reason enters consciousness*) go hand in hand . . . (GS 354)

The central claim in this passage is that conscious thinking, and only conscious thinking, occurs in words.⁶ This claim will suggest, to many readers, that Nietzsche believes there is a language of thought in which conscious thinking occurs. But that is not what Nietzsche means, or at least it is not all of what he means. For Nietzsche, there is an essential connection between words and *concepts*. Nietzsche tells us that words are 'signs for concepts' (BGE 268). That is, words express or signify concepts. As a result, there can be no words without concepts, for words just are expressions of concepts. Nor can there be concepts without words: 'concepts are possible only when there are words' (WP 506). Why is this? As we will see in the next section, concepts enter into systematic relations with one another, and Nietzsche thinks that possessing a concept is, in part, understanding the concept's place in this system of relations. For example, possessing the concept DOG is, in part, understanding the relations between the concepts DOG and ANIMAL. Since grasping these systematic relations requires the ability to express or refer to the concepts, and since words are that which express concepts, a being can be credited with conceptual capacities only if the being can use words.⁷

Thus, for Nietzsche words and concepts go hand in hand; to think in words is to think by means of concepts. Accordingly, in writing that conscious thinking occurs in words, Nietzsche is claiming that conscious thinking is conceptually articulated. In other words, conscious mental states have conceptually articulated content. Further, since Nietzsche claims that conscious states, and only conscious states, have conceptually articulated content, it follows that unconscious mental states do not have conceptually articulated content; unconscious states must have a type of nonconceptual content.⁸ Accordingly, the distinction between conscious

and unconscious states is coextensive with the distinction between mental states which have conceptually articulated content and mental states which have nonconceptual content.⁹

But what is it for a mental state to have conceptually articulated content? First, a word on contents. Contents have conditions of adequacy or correctness. These conditions are fulfilled when the intentional object of the mental state has the properties that the content represents it as having. Now, to claim that a state has conceptually articulated content is to make a claim about the *kind* of content that the state has. In particular, it is to make two claims about this content: first, the content is composed of simpler parts, namely concepts; second, these concepts are structured or composed in a certain way in order to constitute the content. For example, consider the belief *that the cat is white*. The content of this belief appears to be conceptually articulated; the content appears to be composed of two concepts, CAT and WHITE, which are structured in a certain way, namely in a subject-predicate fashion, in order to form the belief.

If a mental state has conceptually articulated content, an important consequence follows: as the content is composed of certain concepts, a person who lacked the relevant concepts could not entertain the mental state. For example, someone who lacked the concept CAT or the concept WHITE could not believe *that the cat is white*, for she would lack the resources needed to formulate the belief.

In contrast, consider a perception of a white cat, and suppose that the content of this perception is not conceptually articulated. Arguably, someone who lacks the concepts CAT and WHITE could still have a perception that represents the white cat; for example, a newborn baby can look at a white cat, and her perception will represent the white cat. The newborn lacks the concepts CAT and WHITE, so the content of her perception cannot be conceptually articulated; the constituents of her perception's content cannot be concepts. Nevertheless, the newborn perceives the white cat, and her perception has definite, structured content, for her perception is different from her perception of a black cat, and different again from her perception of a white dog. To put it only somewhat more clearly: the content of her perception is not conceptually articulated, but it is phenomenally articulated.

To say that a state has conceptually articulated content, then, is to say that the state's content has concepts as constituents, so that entertaining the mental state requires possession of the relevant concepts. To say that a mental state has nonconceptual content is to say that the state's content does not have concepts as constituents, so that entertaining the mental state does not require possession of concepts. Of course, these definitions place a great deal of weight upon the notion of a *concept*, so we need to understand just what Nietzsche takes a concept to be. We turn to this in the next section.

2.2 'Conscious' and 'Unconscious' Are Properties Applicable to All Mental States

What we have seen so far might lead us to believe that Nietzsche thinks that some types of mental states, such as beliefs, have conceptually articulated content

and are therefore always conscious, whereas other types of mental states, such as perceptions, have nonconceptual content and are therefore always unconscious. That, however, is not Nietzsche's view. Nietzsche thinks that all types of mental states can be either conscious or unconscious—that thoughts, emotions, desires, perceptions, and so forth, can be either conscious or unconscious. He writes, 'we could think, feel, will, and remember, and we could also "act" in every sense of that word, and yet none of all this would have to "enter our consciousness"' (GS 354). Nietzsche here countenances both conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions. A few lines later, he discusses 'the emergence of our sense impressions into our own consciousness', implying that there are both conscious and unconscious perceptions.¹⁰

On Nietzsche's view, then, there will be both conceptual and nonconceptual versions of each kind of mental state. How are we to make sense of this? How can the same kind of mental state sometimes have, and sometimes lack, conceptually articulated content?

We can begin to answer this question by considering perceptions. To see what Nietzsche has in mind, it will be helpful to recall the positions of two of his major philosophical influences: Schopenhauer and the neo-Kantian F.A. Lange, both of whose works Nietzsche read avidly.

The idea that perceptions have conceptually articulated content is discussed by Lange at great length. Though the details of Lange's neo-Kantian position need not detain us here, what is relevant for our purposes is Lange's claim that the output of our sense organs is conceptually articulated, where the most basic articulation is that which is described by Kant's Categories. In other words, data from sense impressions is structured to form a perception, where the structuring involves conceptualization (cf. Lange 1950, Book II, Section 3).

Schopenhauer rejects this idea, calling it

Kant's great mistake ... he did not properly separate perceptual knowledge from abstract knowledge [that is, knowledge involving conceptually articulated states]; from this there arose a terrible confusion. (*The World as Will and Representation* [hereafter WWR], vol. I, 437)

The distinction between mental states with conceptually articulated content and mental states with nonconceptual content is fundamental in Schopenhauer's account of the mental. He starts with the idea that only human beings have conceptual capacities: 'concepts form a peculiar class, existing only in the mind of man, and differing entirely from the representations of perception' (WWR, vol. I, 39). This is why Schopenhauer finds it important to distinguish states with nonconceptual content from states with conceptually articulated content: the former will be entertained by both human beings and the other animals, while the latter will be unique to human beings. Since animals perceive the world, but do not possess conceptual capacities, the content of perceptions must be nonconceptual. Schopenhauer puts it succinctly: 'the animal feels and perceives; man, in addition, *thinks* and *knows*' (WWR, vol. I, 37).¹¹

Nietzsche, familiar with these accounts, sees each of them as incomplete. Nietzsche agrees with Schopenhauer that some perceptions have nonconceptual content, but he also wants to say, with Lange, that other perceptions have conceptually articulated content. How can he do so?

An easy way to make sense of Nietzsche's claims would be to say that perceptions with nonconceptual content have indefinite, unstructured content: the content of an unconscious perception is mere data which has yet to be structured or articulated in a determinate way; it might, perhaps, be nothing more than an undifferentiated field of colors and shapes. By contrast, perceptions with conceptually articulated content would have definite, structured content; they resolve the undifferentiated colors and shapes into objects. My unconscious perception represents, say, a bunch of black and white blobs surrounded by green, while my conscious perception represents a dalmatian playing on the grass.¹²

That might be a natural way to interpret Nietzsche's claim, but it is not the right way. It is crucial to understand that perceptions with nonconceptual content still have definite, structured content—just not *conceptually* structured or articulated content.¹³ Nietzsche's insight, garnered from Lange, is that the sense organs just by themselves generate perceptions with determinately structured or articulated content. For Lange, this means that the output of the sense organs is conceptually articulated. Nietzsche, however, recognizes that the perceptual content could be determinately structured in a way that does not involve concepts; there is no need to attribute conceptual capacities to a being in order to make sense of the fact that the being has perceptions with determinately structured content. This is an insight that Schopenhauer stressed: the other animals perceive the world, but lack concepts; thus, perceptions with nonconceptual yet determinately structured content must be possible. These perceptions with nonconceptual yet articulated content are Nietzsche's unconscious perceptions.

So conscious perceptions do not differ from unconscious perceptions in that the former have structured content while the latter lack structured content; rather, they differ in the kind of structure that they have. In other words, it is not just that unconscious states are *not conceptually articulated*, but that they are *nonconceptually articulated*. Of course, everything now rests on how we explicate this difference in structure.

The movement from an unconscious state to a conscious state is the process of *conceptualization*. That is, a state becomes conscious once its content has been conceptualized.¹⁴ So an unconscious perception becomes a conscious perception once the perceptual content has been conceptualized. But what, exactly, does this mean?

Let's see what Nietzsche has in mind. In WP 515, Nietzsche claims that we sometimes 'see things coarsely and made equal', where this type of seeing involves 'subsuming' and 'schematizing' the perceived object. Nietzsche elaborates upon this idea in his published works, writing that our conscious experience presents 'a surface- and sign-world, a world generalized and made

meaner [eine Oberflächen- und Zeichenwelt, eine verallgemeinerte, eine vergemeinerte Welt]' (GS 354). Again, he writes,

Our eye finds it more comfortable to respond to a given stimulus by reproducing once more an image [Bild] that it has produced many times before, instead of registering what is new and different. (BGE 192)

He goes on to provide an example, writing that we often

do not see a tree exactly and completely with reference to leaves, twigs, color, and form; it is so very much easier for us simply to improvise an approximation of a tree [ein Ungefähr von Baum hin zu phantasiren]. (BGE 192)

Nietzsche's idea is that our perceptions sometimes represent objects in a way that is not sensitive to all of the detail of the object, but is instead sensitive only to the general type to which the object belongs. This type of perception represents the tree as an instance of the concept TREE, rather than representing it in its individual detail; it does so by emphasizing certain general features of trees at the expense of the individual details of this particular tree.

Perceptual content would be conceptualized if the perceived object were represented as an instance of some concept, that is, as a token of some type. And this is just what the remarks above suggest: some of our perceptions represent their objects as instantiating certain concepts. However, as WP 515 and BGE 192 make clear, not all of our perceptions do so; some perceptions represent their objects in a definite way, but do not represent them as instantiating concepts.

This gives us a way to make sense of Nietzsche's remarks: unconscious perceptions have nonconceptually articulated content, in the sense that they represent their objects in a definite way, but do not represent them as instantiating concepts; conscious perceptions have conceptually articulated content, in the sense that they represent their objects as instantiating concepts.

An example will make this clearer. A brown shape moves jerkily across the path; Sally sees it as a leaf caught in the breeze, Sam sees it as a cockroach. Note that these are not judgments; we do not want to consider a case in which Sally and Sam see a brown thing, and then infer that it is a leaf or a cockroach. Rather, Sally immediately sees the brown thing as a leaf, Sam immediately sees it as a cockroach. Manifestly, these are quite similar perceptions in one way, and quite different perceptions in another way. Sally and Sam both see an object of a certain size, shape, color, and so on, and for that reason it is natural to suppose that their perceptions share at least some of the same content; but they conceptualize the object in quite different ways, and for that reason their perceptions differ in content. There is a clear sense in which it is misleading to overlook this difference, to say simply that Sally sees a scuttling brown thing; she does see that, but she sees it *as a leaf*. If you ask her what she saw, that is what she will say: a leaf. She could of course give a fuller description, saying that she saw a mottled

brown thing jerking along in the breeze; but what was salient to her was not a mottled brown scuttling thing, but something simpler, a leaf.

Nietzsche believes that this is a perfectly ordinary phenomenon. Walking down a familiar street, one sees cars, trees, people, grass, one feels the wind on one's face, one hears the hum of traffic and conversation; but one need see none of the details of these things—one need not consciously perceive the color of the cars, the shape of the trees, the words of the conversations. One can turn one's attention to these things: one can consider the way that the breeze brushes against one's face, the type of car before one, the intricate shape of the trees, and then these things may be conceptualized; it may be that turning one's attention to a thing involves conceptualizing the thing in some way or other. Nevertheless, Nietzsche takes it to be obvious that our perceptual experience is rife with features that in the normal case remain unconceptualized. This is why he says 'the world of which we can become conscious is only a surface- and sign-world, a world generalized' (GS 354).

Of course, this way of looking at things is bound to raise some suspicions. As noted above, contents have conditions of correctness or adequacy. Accordingly, every representation must represent its object in a determinate manner; otherwise the representation would not be assessable for adequacy. From this, we might conclude that all representation must involve the instantiation of concepts; for it might seem that for a content to be determinate just is for the content to be conceptually articulated.¹⁵ Or, to make the same point in a rather different way, we might simply note that perceptions involve discriminatory abilities, abilities to distinguish one thing from another thing. Dogs, for example, can distinguish food from enemies; that is why they eat the former, and bark at the latter. So dogs must perceive food *as food*, and enemies *as enemies*. Consequently, all perceiving *x* must be perceiving *x* as an instance of some concept *F*, and as a result all perceptions must have conceptually articulated content.

Now, if all that were meant by the claim that perceptions have conceptually articulated content were that perceptions involve discriminatory abilities, no one would ever object. *Of course* perceptions involve discriminatory abilities; we lose any grip on what a perception is supposed to be if it does not involve differential responses to different stimuli. But concept possession, for Nietzsche, involves much more than a mere discriminatory ability. One does not possess or apply the concept FOOD merely because one is able to discriminate edible and inedible items. When you think about it, the claim that concept possession involves only discriminatory abilities is absurd: are we to credit even the humble amoeba with the concept FOOD, merely because it reacts differentially to edible and inedible items?

Concepts must be more than mere discriminatory abilities. For Nietzsche, concepts are *classificatory* abilities; possessing a concept involves the ability to classify various objects as falling under the concept. For example, possessing the concept FOOD involves the ability to classify ice cream, sushi, and other types of food as falling under the concept. This might seem like a mere discriminatory

ability, but it is not, for the following reasons: concepts are systematically related to other concepts, and concepts can be employed in non-perceptual contexts.¹⁶ This is what is meant by saying that concepts are classificatory capacities. A dog, or an amoeba for that matter, can distinguish food and non-food, in the sense that it can respond differentially to the two types of object. But a human being can do something more. First, she can relate the concept FOOD to other concepts, for her concept FOOD is part of a whole system of concepts which stand in various relations to one another. Second, these concepts can be employed in non-perceptual contexts. A human being can relate concepts even when instances of the concepts are not present: she can think 'sushi is a type of food', 'food is nourishing', 'some food tastes better than other food', and so on. This is what Nietzsche and Schopenhauer sometimes call *abstract* thinking, by which they mean thinking which is not anchored to a perceptual context, thinking which involves more than mere discrimination.¹⁷ For Nietzsche, then, concepts are classificatory capacities, in the sense that concepts have systematic structures and can be employed in non-perceptual contexts.

In sum, Nietzsche's account of concept possession involves three features: a person possesses a concept F if and only if she can discriminate instances of F (*a* is F, or *Fa*), she can employ F in conjunction with other concepts (*Fa* and *Ga*, all F's are G's, etc.), and she can employ F when instances of F are not perceptually present (F's are G's, etc.). There is not anything unusual in all of this; it is a fairly standard account of concepts, requiring discriminatory abilities, inter-conceptual relations, and the capacity for abstract thought.

So Nietzsche's claim that there are both conceptually and nonconceptually articulated perceptual contents amounts to this: some perceptions involve a classifying awareness, which presents objects as instances of concepts that the perceiver can employ in abstract thought; other perceptions involve an awareness of objects which does not present objects as instances of concepts that the perceiver can employ in abstract thought. Or, put differently, conscious perceptions involve a classifying awareness, whereas unconscious perceptions involve only a discriminatory ability, only a perceptual sensitivity to features of the environment.¹⁸

Thus, Nietzsche's claim that conscious perception takes the form of words makes perfect sense: conscious perception has conceptually articulated content, for conscious perception involves categorization or classification of the perceived object, whereas unconscious perception, lacking any such conceptualization of the perceived object, has nonconceptually articulated content.¹⁹

Recall that Nietzsche extends this sort of account to *all* mental states; not only perceptions, but also emotions and thoughts, can have either conceptually or nonconceptually articulated content. Just as in the case of perceptions, the conscious state will be formed by conceptualizing the content of the unconscious state. Unfortunately, I lack the space to treat emotions and thoughts in depth, so in what follows I will simply outline the general account to which Nietzsche seems committed.

A number of philosophers have attempted to understand emotions as *judgments*. In these accounts, my being angry at Bob would consist of my forming certain types of judgments about Bob: I am angry at Bob, Bob has wronged me, Bob should not have done what he did, and so on. This type of account of emotions would explain how emotions could be conceptually articulated: judgments are conceptually articulated, so insofar as emotions are judgments, emotions will be conceptually articulated. On the other hand, it is easy to see how there could be nonconceptually articulated emotions: there are characteristic feelings, as well as dispositions in behavior and thought, that are associated with particular emotions; we could identify nonconceptually articulated emotions with these feelings and dispositions. (This must remain rather vague for the moment, but we will return to it in section 4).²⁰

This leaves us with Nietzsche's last category, thoughts. We can easily see how a thought, such as a belief, could have conceptually articulated content: the belief *that my car is parked on Main Street*, for example, seems to be conceptually articulated, for it involves concepts such as CAR, PARKED, and STREET. Indeed, we might have trouble seeing how a belief could possibly be nonconceptually articulated.

Again, Schopenhauer proves helpful. Schopenhauer claims that non-human animals think in nonconceptually articulated ways, by means of mental images. Human beings share this capacity with the other animals: we, too, sometimes think in mental images. For example, suppose that I am looking for my car, and form a mental image of my car parked on Main Street. This thought represents my car on Main Street—that is why, after forming the mental image, I head toward Main Street. Thus, it is just another version—a nonconceptually articulated version—of the conceptually articulated thought *that my car is parked on Main Street*.²¹

2.3 *Consciousness as a Property Without Consciousness as a Substantive Faculty*

We may well agree that we have both conceptually and nonconceptually articulated mental states, but we are bound to be puzzled by Nietzsche's identification of conceptually articulated mental states with conscious states, and nonconceptually articulated states with unconscious states. As we noted earlier, we tend to think of consciousness in terms of awareness. But Nietzsche's account of consciousness is not primarily concerned with this matter.

If Nietzsche simply ignored this point, we would be justified in thinking that his position did not engage with our own, that he offered arguments about the type of content that various mental states have, but not about *consciousness* at all. In fact, though, Nietzsche has a great deal to say about our tendency to identify consciousness and awareness, for he thinks the picture of the mind which motivates this identification is deeply mistaken. In this section, we will see that Nietzsche thinks that what makes us link consciousness and awareness is a tacit commitment to a view of the mind in which an inner eye, a conscious Ego,

surveys mental states. This view is tied naturally to a model of consciousness in which conscious states are the ones falling under the gaze of that inner eye. Nietzsche has done as much as anyone to combat that view, though, and we will have to do our best to understand his objections.

To get our bearings, it will be helpful to begin by considering Brian Leiter's analysis of Nietzsche's view of consciousness (Leiter 2001). I believe that Leiter's analysis goes wrong in significant ways, and seeing how it goes wrong will help us to uncover some tacit commitments that tend to distort our thinking about consciousness.

According to Leiter, Nietzsche thinks that 'conscious states are only causally efficacious in virtue of type-facts about the person', where 'type-facts' are 'either *physiological* facts about the person, or facts about the person's unconscious drives and affects' (294). In other words, anything that seems to be caused by a conscious state is actually caused either by some physiological state or by some unconscious state. Leiter sums up this position by saying that consciousness is 'epiphenomenal', by which he means that conscious states are never causally efficacious in their own right; whenever a conscious state seems to be causing something, the causal chain has actually been initiated by an unconscious state or a physiological state (294).

Leiter writes that Nietzsche's 'strongest argument' for this conclusion is his

argument against the *causal autonomy* of consciousness: namely, that 'a thought comes when "it" wishes, and not when "I" wish'. But if that is right—as it surely is—and if actions are apparently caused by thoughts (by particular beliefs and desires), then it follows that actions are not caused by our conscious mental states, but rather by whatever it is (i.e. type facts) that determines the 'thoughts' that enter consciousness. (295; the quotation is from BGE 17)

In other words, Leiter takes the claim that thoughts come when they wish, rather than when I wish, to establish the epiphenomenality of consciousness. No doubt that inference could be questioned in a number of ways, but what I wish to focus on here is Leiter's reliance upon BGE 17. Let us recover the context of the quotation:

A thought comes when 'it' wishes, not when 'I' wish, so that it is a falsification of the facts of the case to say that the subject 'I' is the condition of the predicate 'think'. *It* thinks; but that this 'it' is precisely the famous old 'Ego' is, to put it mildly, only a supposition, an assertion, and assuredly not an 'immediate certainty'. After all, one has even gone too far with this 'it thinks'—even the 'it' contains an interpretation of the process and does not belong to the process itself. (BGE 17)

Nietzsche is not concerned, here, with the question of whether conscious states are causally efficacious in their own right. Rather, he is attacking the idea that

there is a substantive faculty, an Ego, standing behind conscious thoughts and generating them *ex nihilo*.

Oddly, the other sections that Leiter quotes are similarly unsupportive of his claim that consciousness is epiphenomenal.²² Indeed, we will see in Section 4 that there is a great deal of evidence that Nietzsche believes that conscious states *are* causally efficacious. So why does Leiter think that consciousness is epiphenomenal? The sections that Leiter quotes are revealing: he picks sections in which Nietzsche is attacking *consciousness as a substantive faculty*, and takes these attacks to be directed at *consciousness as a property of mental states*. That is, the section upon which Leiter places so much weight is a section in which Nietzsche denies the existence of a faculty which produces conscious thoughts *ex nihilo*. But we should not assume that the denial of such a faculty is equivalent to the claim that conscious mental states are epiphenomenal, for Nietzsche offers an account of conscious states which avoids any commitment to such a faculty.

It can be very natural to think of our own mental lives in terms of a substantive faculty, something which generates thoughts, something which is or has an 'inner eye' surveying our mental states, something which is a seat of awareness. Nietzsche sometimes calls this faculty the Ego, and sometimes calls it Consciousness. And he thinks that models of the mind that admit this faculty are altogether mistaken.

The number of passages which deny that there is any such thing as an Ego is large indeed.²³ 'And as for the *Ego!*', Nietzsche never tires of emphasizing, 'That has become a fable, a fiction, a play on words: it has altogether ceased to think, feel, or will!' (TI VI.3). Why does Nietzsche reject the idea of an Ego? His most important, most frequently voiced objection to treating consciousness as a faculty is simply that doing so involves countenancing an entity which plays no role in our best scientific and philosophical explanations. That is why he says, in the above section, that the Ego has ceased to think, feel, or will; our best accounts of thinking, feeling, and willing do not mention an Ego. In other words, the Ego is a fictional concept; nothing corresponds to it. We can capture this position by saying, as Nietzsche occasionally does, that the Ego is 'epiphenomenal'.²⁴

Commentators have often misinterpreted this point, thinking that an attack on consciousness as a faculty is equivalent to an attack on consciousness as a property of mental states. Not so. As Nietzsche notes, there are legitimate ways to conceive of consciousness. In BGE 12, for example, he points out that although an adequate understanding of psychology and physics should abolish belief in the Ego as a substantive faculty, this needn't entail a complete repudiation of the Ego. Instead, we can conceive of the Ego in a new way: 'soul as subject-multiplicity [Subjekts-Vielheit]' and 'soul as social structure of the drives and affects' are among Nietzsche's suggestions in this section. What would it mean to conceive of the Ego as a 'subject-multiplicity' or 'social structure'? Most obviously, it would involve abandoning the idea that there is a discrete, substantive faculty standing behind our mental lives: rather than assuming that 'consciousness' refers to a unitary faculty, we should treat 'consciousness' as referring to the sum total of conscious mental states. So (part of) what Nietzsche means when he says that

consciousness is a multiplicity is that there is no faculty named Consciousness, which stands apart from our conscious mental states; rather, there is only a host of conscious mental states.

Once we appreciate the way in which Nietzsche rejects the substantive faculty of Consciousness, it becomes easier to see that this faculty can be divorced from consciousness as a property of mental states. Put simply, Nietzsche's repeated arguments to the effect that the Ego (consciousness as a substantive faculty) is epiphenomenal should not be mistaken as arguments for the epiphenomenality of conscious mental states. Whether the Ego is epiphenomenal is simply irrelevant with respect to the question of whether conscious states are epiphenomenal.

Irrelevant, that is, unless we subscribe to a model of consciousness on which conscious mental states are those states standing in a special relation to the Ego. For if we accept the idea of the Ego, which is or has an 'inner eye' surveying mental states, it can be natural to think of the states which fall under its gaze as the conscious ones, and the states outside of its gaze as the unconscious ones. If we accepted that model of consciousness, in which conscious states are inextricably linked to a substantive faculty of Consciousness, then, of course, the epiphenomenality of the substantive faculty would have implications for the causal efficacy of the conscious states.

I have mentioned Leiter's essay in order to bring out that point. In particular, Leiter's essay reveals the way in which we tend to think of consciousness as a substantive faculty, and to think of conscious mental states as somehow tied to this faculty. These assumptions are rarely made explicit, but they tend to be so deeply ingrained that even a paper such as Leiter's, which in other places is quite sensitive to the texts, can be misled by them. But Nietzsche rejects both of these assumptions. For Nietzsche, to say that a state is conscious or unconscious is not to say something about the relation in which the state stands to the Ego, but is, instead, to say something about the nature of the state itself.²⁵

In sum, then, Nietzsche claims that there are conscious states, and that these conscious states are causally efficacious, but that there is no faculty called Consciousness; when Nietzsche attacks the causal efficacy of Consciousness, he directs his attacks at this faculty, not at conscious mental states. It is worth noting that this strategy has familiar analogues in Nietzsche's writings: for example, Nietzsche thoroughly rejects the Kantian notion of the Will as a substantive faculty, but he never denies that there is such a thing as willing.²⁶ For Nietzsche, there is willing without Wills, and there are conscious states without a substantive faculty of Consciousness.

2.4 Why Accept Nietzsche's Account?

Given the considerations discussed above, we can see that Nietzsche's identification of the conscious/unconscious distinction with the conceptual/nonconceptual distinction is not so strange after all; if we give up the picture

motivating the idea that only conscious states involve awareness, then we do not seem to have any principled reason for being bothered by his account. Indeed, we can see how Nietzsche's view naturally results from an abandonment of these intuitions. First, consciousness is not an essential property of the mental, so we cannot simply identify consciousness with the mental; thus, we need an account of what consciousness is. But, second, conscious states cannot be states of which I am aware, for there is no inner eye, no Ego, to become aware of mental states. So conscious states must just be different kinds of states than unconscious ones; they must have a different structure or character.

Of course, we might accept Nietzsche's dissociation of consciousness and awareness, but still not see any reason to identify conscious states with conceptually articulated states. We need independent reasons for doing so. And, in fact, Nietzsche has at least two such reasons.

First, Nietzsche follows Schopenhauer in thinking that while many animals have minds, only human beings are conscious. He also thinks that language, and thus conceptual vocabularies, are unique to human beings. Thus, the most obvious distinction between the minds of human beings and the minds of other animals is our ability to form conceptually articulated states. If we are looking for a distinction in the mental, then, the natural place to draw it is between conceptually and nonconceptually articulated states.

Second, and more importantly, while Nietzsche does not follow everyday intuitions in associating consciousness with awareness, on Nietzsche's account conscious states are *accessible* to us in a way that unconscious states are not; in particular, they are *communicable*. Nietzsche links consciousness not only to language, but also to the need for communication. When a mental state becomes conscious, Nietzsche notes that it is 'fixed', and therefore capable of being 'communicate[d] to others' (GS 354). The idea is that communicating a thought to another person requires conceptualizing the content of the mental state, for the content must be expressed linguistically, and so must be conceptually articulated. So, for example, if I happen to be perceiving a tree, and someone asks me what I am perceiving, I will say something like 'I am perceiving a tree'; and this requires that the perceptual content be conceptualized, representing the tree as an instance of the concept TREE.

3. Consciousness is Superficial

3.1 Conceptualization and Falsification

With this account of consciousness in hand, we can proceed to analyze Nietzsche's notorious claim that consciousness is superficial, distorting, and falsifying. When Nietzsche makes this claim, he has two things in mind. First, conscious states do not capture all of the content of their unconscious counterparts. Second, conscious states causally interact with unconscious states, and this interaction alters the unconscious states in certain ways. In this section, we will address the first claim; in section 4, we turn to the second claim.

In a characteristic passage, Nietzsche writes 'all becoming conscious involves a great and thorough corruption, falsification, reduction to superficialities, and generalization' (GS 354). The motivation for this claim is the idea that the content of our experiences outstrips our ability to conceptualize it; in other words, the contents of our unconscious states are not fully preserved in our conscious states. Consider a perceptual experience. I am looking out my window; outside is a tree. Now imagine what an exhaustive report of the content of my perception would look like. Imagine trying to capture all the detail of the perception: the gnarls and curls of the tree's bark are catching the rays of the afternoon sunlight, producing an interplay of shapes and shadows that I cannot describe in anything approaching adequate detail. The leaves, some dried in the winter, others beginning to blossom, display a multitude of colors for which I have no names. These shapes and colors possess a wealth of detail that seems orders of magnitude beyond anything that I can express with my conceptual vocabulary.

Further, the problem does not seem to be that I lack concepts which I could, in principle, gain. For suppose that I took a photograph of the tree, and set about trying to describe it in all its detail, availing myself of dictionaries, color charts, and so forth. No matter how much time I took, I think we share a strong intuition that I would be unable to capture all of the detail of the experience. It seems that it is not just that *I* lack the concepts required to convey the content, but that no description, no matter how compendious, could capture all of the detail. Give a person the descriptive resources of the entire English language; give her unlimited time to devote to describing her perception of a tree. I think we share a strong intuition that she would fail. It is not just that we cannot imagine what it would be like to possess the wealth of concepts that would be needed to capture all of the content of this experience, but that there seems to be something incoherent in the idea of doing so.²⁷

These are the sorts of considerations that are motivating Nietzsche; experience seems to outstrip our conceptual resources, so that our conceptually articulated mental states can only constitute the smallest portion of our experience, 'the most superficial and worst part' (GS 354). My unconscious perception of the tree contains a wealth of detail that can never be fully captured by my conscious perception of that tree. In this sense, my conscious perception is superficial and generalized relative to my unconscious perception.

Part of what Nietzsche is concerned with when he writes that consciousness is superficial or falsifying is that our concepts in this way limit our conscious experiences.²⁸

Now, we might think that if this is the only way in which consciousness falsifies experience, then falsification isn't so bad after all. For the falsification seems to be nothing more than incompleteness. As a result, it seems that by increasing our conceptual vocabulary, our conscious experiences can become ever more subtle and refined. There seems to be no principled reason for believing that we could not, in time, develop a conceptual vocabulary that would be rich and detailed enough to capture the full content of unconscious experience.

But Nietzsche would deny that we are capable of doing so, for a variety of reasons that we will address in the next section, reasons involving his account of concept acquisition and his perspectivism. First, conceptual vocabularies and individual concepts are not primarily designed to correspond to the world with a high degree of accuracy, but are instead designed to facilitate social interactions. Second, even if we wished to make our concepts correspond more accurately to the world, we would encounter problems with perspectivism.

3.2 *The Limitations of Concepts*

Nietzsche's first reason for rejecting the claim that we could develop a conceptual vocabulary capable of capturing the full content of our unconscious experience relies upon an intuitive point: we acquire those concepts that we find useful or needful, so that concept acquisition is not primarily driven by a desire to acquire maximally specific concepts, but instead by social need. Of course, Nietzsche allows that in certain contexts we do seek concepts with greater specificity and accuracy; he notes that scientists, philosophers, and writers often engage in developing such concepts. His point, though, is that this desire for accuracy is not the *only* factor at work in concept acquisition, nor is it even the most important factor. Indeed, some of these other factors tend to cut against our desire for accuracy.

Nietzsche writes,

It seems to me as if the subtlety and strength of consciousness always were proportionate to a man's (or animal's) *capacity for communication*, and as if this capacity in turn were proportionate to the *need for communication* . . . *consciousness has developed only under the pressure of the need for communication* . . . [and] it developed only in proportion to the degree of [its] utility. (GS 354)

Now that we understand conscious states as states with conceptually articulated content, we can rephrase Nietzsche's points. Consciousness requires conceptual resources, and Nietzsche links these resources to language and the need for communication. A linguistic community has at its disposal a certain number of concepts, and Nietzsche thinks that a principal factor governing the acquisition or invention of new concepts is *need*; the community invents those concept-words that it requires to function properly. For, Nietzsche goes on to note, the primary function of consciousness is *social*: 'consciousness is really only a net of communication between human beings . . . a solitary human being . . . would not have needed it'. Consciousness functions as a 'net of communication' in that it enables collaborative activities, such as planning and mutual aid. But, Nietzsche notes, in engaging in these sorts of activities, one needs to communicate *quickly* and *efficiently*. Hesitation and the transmission of excessive amounts of information hinder these sorts of activities (cf. GS 111). Thus,

Nietzsche's thought is that the need for speed and efficiency cut against the desire for maximal accuracy and specificity.

The point of this section, then, is that concepts are not primarily designed to portray their objects accurately; rather, they are designed to facilitate human interaction. It might be true that we could refine our conceptual vocabulary, so that it would be better attuned to its objects, but concept acquisition is a pragmatic matter, and in general we have no need for concepts which are maximally attuned to the features of the world; indeed, maximally specific concepts might even hinder consciousness' social function.

Nietzsche has another, deeper objection to the idea that we could develop a conceptual vocabulary that would enable us to conceptualize every element of our unconscious experience. This objection involves his perspectivism.²⁹ A 'perspective' can be understood as a series of foundational beliefs and standards of justification.³⁰ Perspectivism is a claim about justification: standards of epistemic justification are internal to particular perspectives, so that there is no perspective-independent epistemology which could specify standards of justification applicable to all perspectives.

Perspectivism provides another challenge to the idea that we could generate concepts rich and detailed enough to capture every element of our unconscious experience. Though I lack the space to address this issue in detail, Nietzsche believes that meanings of concepts and inter-conceptual relations are determined in a holistic fashion, so that, to adopt a metaphor from Quine, conceptual frameworks are responsive to experience only at their edges; there are many different, mutually incompatible ways of cashing out the content of unconscious experience (cf. BGE 20). When we put this claim together with the perspectivist thesis that there is no way to say that one of these ways is the 'right way', we end up with the following result: even if we could acquire concepts that were maximally specific, the meanings of these concepts and the inter-conceptual relations would be determined in a holistic fashion, as part of a framework of concepts, foundational beliefs, and standards of justification. So the concepts would be maximally specific from the standpoint of a series of beliefs and standards of justification, but there are always other foundational beliefs and standards of justification that we could adopt, and doing so would lead to a different set of maximally specific concepts. If this is right, the content of unconscious experience could be conceptualized in an indefinitely large number of mutually incompatible ways, and none of these ways would be the 'right' or 'best' way.³¹

This is an important point, for it enables us to see that Nietzsche's account need not be a version of what has come to be called the 'Myth of the Given' (McDowell 1994). While Nietzsche does think that conceptualized perceptual content is selective, leaving out various nonconceptual elements, his theory actually does not require that there be elements of experience which cannot be conceptualized. For suppose that Nietzsche accepted the idea that every element of an experience can be conceptualized. He could still claim all of the following: first, conceptualizing elements of a perceptual experience emphasizes certain aspects of the experience and neglects others; second, different conceptualizations of the same intentional objects are always possible; third, there is no

standard by which one of these conceptualizations can be judged to be the right or best one. Put differently, Nietzsche's driving idea is not primarily that the full content of experience cannot be conceptualized, but rather that the content of experience can always be conceptualized in a number of different ways. The following sections address this idea.

4. Consciousness is Falsifying

4.1 Causal Influence and Falsification

Part of what Nietzsche means when he says that consciousness is superficial or falsifying is that conscious states capture a partial version of the content of unconscious experience. But Nietzsche also means something else by this claim. The idea will need quite a bit of analysis, but it is very roughly as follows: conscious states causally interact with unconscious states, altering the unconscious states in a variety of ways; but, since the conscious states are already simplified versions of the unconscious states, this alteration of the unconscious states often results in unconscious experience coming to portray the world in inaccurate ways. In order to understand this claim, we will have to spend some time examining the precise ways in which conscious states interact with unconscious ones.

Of course, some commentators have claimed that Nietzsche thinks consciousness is epiphenomenal. I cannot address this point in detail here, but these interpretations are not well-founded. As we saw in section 2.3, these interpretations tend to spring from a conflation of Nietzsche's claim that Consciousness as a faculty as epiphenomenal with the distinct claim that conscious states are epiphenomenal. Aside from that, there is a large amount of textual evidence showing that Nietzsche is committed to the claim that conscious states are causally efficacious, evidence of two types. First, many of his most familiar arguments seem to require that conscious states be causally efficacious; for example, *Zarathustra*, which Nietzsche regarded as his greatest work, revolves around the idea that consciously entertaining a certain thought (the 'Eternal Recurrence'), and bearing a certain conscious attitude toward that thought, have the most diverse range of consequences. Second, a large number of individual passages explicitly claim that conscious states are causally efficacious; for example, consider D 38, which bears the title 'Drives transformed by moral judgments', and discusses the way in which conscious thoughts about a drive or attitude cause changes in that attitude.

Our goal in this section will be to uncover the particular ways in which conscious states causally interact with other mental states. In doing so, we will come across a great deal of evidence that Nietzsche believes that conscious states are causally efficacious. Without further mention of epiphenomenalism, then, we will proceed to these matters.

The most sustained and detailed account of the causal influence that conscious states exert on other mental states is given in *On the Genealogy of Morality*. The

whole of the discussions of *ressentiment* and guilt are relevant, but I will address only a portion of the latter discussion. This discussion concerns the way in which the feeling of indebtedness is transformed into the feeling of guilt. What the discussion will reveal is the way in which differing conceptualizations of an underlying unconscious state create profound changes in that unconscious state, as well as in the mental economy as a whole.

We will see that there are three main types of causal influence which conscious states exert on other mental states. First, conscious states sometimes create new unconscious states. Second, this creation of new unconscious states sometimes results in existing unconscious states being altered so that their content comes to correspond more closely to that of their conscious counterparts. Third, when a state becomes conscious it enters into new relations with other mental states, and thereby alters a person's mental economy as a whole.

4.2 *The Conceptualization of the Bad Conscience as Guilt*

In *Genealogy II*, Nietzsche introduces the concept of 'bad conscience'. What is the bad conscience? Nietzsche explicates this concept as follows: 'I regard the bad conscience as the serious illness that man was bound to contract under the stress of the most fundamental change he ever experienced—that change which occurred when he found himself finally inclosed within the walls of society and peace' (II.16). What was this change? Nietzsche argues that among the drives³² that human beings possess are drives expressed in 'hostility, cruelty, joy in persecuting, in attacking, in change, in destruction' (II.16). Once a person becomes a member of a society, these drives can no longer be allowed to discharge freely. But Nietzsche claims that drives have a definite quantity of force, and this force cannot be straightforwardly eliminated, but only restrained or redirected.³³ For a reason that we will examine in a moment, Nietzsche uses the term 'internalization' to refer to the restraint and redirection of these drives.

'Bad conscience' refers to a form of pain, of mental anguish, which results from the internalization of these instincts. As Nietzsche writes,

This instinct for freedom [i.e., this desire to discharge one's drives] forcibly made latent . . . this instinct for freedom pushed back and repressed, incarcerated within and finally able to discharge and vent only upon itself: that, and that alone, is what the bad conscience is in its beginnings. (II.17)

In other words, internalizing these pain-inducing instincts results in a feeling of anguish which Nietzsche terms 'the bad conscience'. The bad conscience, then, is the feeling engendered by internalization of instincts.

But how *exactly* does the internalization of instincts generate a bad conscience? It is important to note, as has not often been done in the secondary literature, that not *all* instincts are internalized in this way. Nietzsche is careful to stress that it is the instincts of 'hostility, cruelty, joy in persecuting, in attacking, in change, in

destruction' which are internalized (II.16). But *other* instincts are not internalized: instincts for social bonding, for food, for sex, and so on, are not thwarted but are, at least in some respects, aided by the establishment of a community. This is a crucial point, for it helps to make sense of characterizations of the person in society such as 'an animal soul turned against itself, *taking sides against itself*' (II.16, emphasis added), and as a 'soul voluntarily *at odds with itself*' (II.18, emphasis added). The person in society views part of himself, his aggressive instincts, as a great danger, both to himself and to the society of which he is a member. He experiences a profound conflict: some of his instincts push him toward the formation of society,³⁴ others threaten to tear that society apart or, if internalized, to cause him great pain. The soul of this person is 'at odds with itself', and therefore needs to 'take sides against' a part of itself while accepting the other part. This is a form of partial self-condemnation.

With this in mind, we can now analyze the concept of 'internalization'. The person entering a society finds that his aggressive instincts cannot be satisfied, but must be restrained. They still rage just as powerfully, and still demand satisfaction, so preventing their discharge is painful. Now, what prevents the aggressive instincts from discharging? The social instincts. Our instincts for community, if they are to be satisfied, necessitate the restraint of the aggressive instincts. So the person in society experiences a profound conflict, which just by itself generates pain, the pain of being impelled in opposing directions.

And this is where the internalization comes in: paradoxically, the internalization of the aggressive instincts consists in the repression of the aggressive instincts by the social instincts, which, in this act of repression, express the aggressive instincts in a new, internalized form. More slowly: the aggressive instincts originally find expression in making others suffer. The social instincts stifle this outward expression of the aggressive instincts, and the resulting internal discord and refusal to let certain drives discharge generates profound suffering. So the social instincts come to include, as an essential component, a drive to repress the outwardly-directed aggressive instincts; and this new drive causes intense suffering. This new, pain-inducing drive is just the aggressive instincts themselves, in an internalized form. The internalization of the aggressive instincts, then, consists in the aggressive instincts' finding expression in the social instincts' repression and condemnation of the outwardly-directed aggressive instincts.

The bad conscience is a medley of all of this: the pain engendered by the internalization of the aggressive instincts, the feeling of being turned against a part of oneself, the feeling of internal discord, the feeling of being a threat to oneself, and the feeling of being a threat to society. Fundamentally, then, the bad conscience is a complex affect, engendered by the feeling of the instincts' being at odds with one another.

Recall the purpose of the Second Essay: Nietzsche wants to account for the transformation of the feeling of indebtedness into the feeling of guilt. The feeling of indebtedness is simply an awareness of one's unfulfilled obligations, whereas the feeling of guilt is a painful awareness of one's culpable failure to fulfill one's

obligations. So how, exactly, is the feeling of indebtedness transformed into the feeling of guilt? Nietzsche writes that this happens through the 'pushing back' of the concepts 'debt' and 'duty' into the bad conscience (II.21). Nietzsche goes on to explain what he means by this. A religion, such as the Judeo-Christian religion, transforms the ideas of debt and duty to one's community into the ideas of debt and duty to one's God. This happens when religions teach us that the bad conscience, the profoundly painful affect resulting from the internalization of the aggressive instincts, is actually the feeling of *guilt*—guilt which results not from internalization, but from a recognition of one's failure to fulfill one's obligations, in particular one's obligations to God.

Nietzsche's analysis of these matters is far more subtle than my brief summary has suggested, but for our purposes this greatly simplified version will suffice. The essential idea is simply that the profound suffering which is bad conscience is conceptualized as a sense of indebtedness and a culpable failure to fulfill one's obligations. That is, bad conscience, the complex affect resulting from the internalization of aggressive instincts, is interpreted as the feeling of guilt which results from our sinful nature.

What is relevant for our purposes is the interplay of the conscious and unconscious. *Bad conscience* names an unconscious state of profound suffering. Bad conscience is conceptualized as guilt: that is, the unconscious bad conscience gives rise to the conscious emotion of guilt. And this has profound consequences, consequences that simply cannot be overemphasized by Nietzsche, who writes that once a person's bad conscience becomes conscious as guilt, 'the bad conscience is firmly rooted, eating into him and spreading within him like a polyp...' (II.21). He goes on to write that the person who interprets bad conscience as guilt resulting from sin, 'when he stills the pain of the wound *he at the same time infects the wound*' (III.15). A bit later, he says that by reinterpreting the bad conscience as guilt,

The old depression, heaviness, and weariness were indeed *overcome* through this system of procedures ... one no longer protested against pain, one *thirsted* for pain; 'more pain! more pain!' the desire of his disciples and initiates has cried for centuries. Every painful orgy of feeling, everything that shattered, bowled over, crushed, enraptured, transported ... (III.20)

And Nietzsche continues in the next section: this reinterpretation 'tamed', 'weakened', 'discouraged', 'made refined', 'made effete', and so on (III.21).

All of these profound consequences result merely from coming to conceptualize an unconscious feeling in a new way.³⁵ In other words, the becoming conscious of the bad conscience as guilt, instead of its becoming conscious in terms of some other, non-moral concept, results in the most diverse range of consequences. In the quotations above, Nietzsche claims

that the becoming conscious of the bad conscience as guilt leads to all of the following:

- (1) It causes the bad conscience to become 'more firmly rooted' and 'to spread' (II.21 and III.15).
- (2) It eliminates the depression engendered by the thought that one's suffering is senseless (III.15, III.20).
- (3) It creates a craving for new types of suffering (III.20).

Here, we can see that all three types of causal influence are at work: the conscious state alters unconscious states (1 and 2), it creates a new unconscious state (3), and the bad conscience, once it becomes conscious as guilt, clearly enters into a host of relations with other conscious states.

In II.21, Nietzsche offers a more detailed explanation of what he means by (1): when the bad conscience becomes conscious as guilt, this 'preclude[s], pessimistically, once and for all, the prospect of a final discharge'. Nietzsche makes it clear that the bad conscience is not a fixed, ineradicable condition. He claims that the ancient Greeks reduced the severity of bad conscience through their religious interpretations (II.23), and in the concluding sections of the Second Essay, he urges us toward 'a great health' which would result from dissociating the bad conscience from its moral interpretation as guilt. So Nietzsche believes that there are a variety of ways in which the bad conscience can be weakened, but conceptualizing it as guilt has exactly the opposite effect.

Let's look at this more closely. Under the influence of various religions, people interpret the pain engendered by socialization as being the result of their sinful nature. In other words, our bad conscience becomes conscious as guilt, and we think that this guilt results from our sinfulness. What makes us sinful? Our animal nature, our natural instincts. We feel guilty merely because we possess these instincts. Although he is not explicit about this, what Nietzsche seems to have in mind when he says that the bad conscience 'spreads' is that the bad conscience originally results from the restriction of our aggressive instincts, but that ascetic religions preach the extirpation of *all* natural instincts. Interpreting the bad conscience as guilt, a person attempts to stifle not just his aggressive instincts, but also instincts such as the sex drive. More and more instincts are stifled, and the bad conscience spreads, increasing in severity. As an ever-growing number of instincts are stifled, the pain engendered by the stifling of instincts and the setting of instincts at odds with one another—the bad conscience – increases; since the bad conscience is conceptualized as guilt, the conscious feeling of guilt increases proportionally. The point is made familiar by history, as Nietzsche is fond of pointing out: the ascetic, the one who struggles most vehemently with his instincts, is also the one who does not experience a diminishing, but rather an ever-increasing sense of guiltiness.

So when the bad conscience becomes conscious as guilt, this causes the bad conscience to spread and grow in intensity. Contrast this with someone whose bad conscience becomes conscious not as guilt, but in terms of some other

concept. Nietzsche's discussions of the ancient Greeks make it clear that he believes that the pain engendered by the internalization of the aggressive instincts is something that can be diminished by sublimating those aggressive instincts into forms that benefit, rather than harm, the individual in society. According to Nietzsche, the ancient Greeks found an outlet for their aggressive instincts in the *agon*, the contest.³⁶ Nietzsche believes that many signal achievements of Greek culture were a result of the stress that the community placed upon the *agon*. Everywhere in Greek culture Nietzsche finds the *agon*: in institutions within which the poets and playwrights competed, in the striving of city against city, in the philosophers' struggles with their rivals. He notes that 'not only Aristotle but the whole of Greek antiquity thinks differently from us about hatred and envy', judging them to be, in some forms, good and worthy of the gods (HC, p. 35).

Nietzsche argues that this focus on competition, this 'drive to distinction', is a manifestation of the aggressive instincts, for it involves a desire to know that another person suffers on account of oneself (D 113). He remarks that the drive to distinction rests in a desire 'to make the sight of us *painful* to another and to awaken in him the feeling of envy and of his own impotence and degradation . . .' (D 30). So the *agon*, responsible for so much that was valuable in Greek culture, was a result of the refinement and redirection of the aggressive instincts. And what profound results it had: 'the animal in man felt deified and did not lacerate itself, did not rage against itself!' (GM II.23). The ancient Greeks warded off the pain of the bad conscience by redirecting their aggressive instincts into socially acceptable activities.

No doubt there is a certain amount that is fanciful in Nietzsche's analysis of Greek culture; no doubt the brevity of my summary has greatly exaggerated this failing. Set that aside; it does not matter. The important point is that the ancient Greeks differed from their successors in that the Greeks conceptualized the bad conscience not as guilt, but as something else—as a spur to agonistic activities, as the motivating twinge of envy, or desire, or eros, or hatred. This differing conceptualization prevents the bad conscience from developing in intensity, and has a host of other effects which Nietzsche analyzes at great length. Alternately, the person whose bad conscience becomes conscious as guilt experiences a conflict within—a conflict which is heightened and encouraged, rather than redirected or sublimated.

Nietzsche's point, then, is that the way in which an unconscious state, such as the bad conscience, becomes conscious has profound and lasting effects on us. The way in which a state becomes conscious has the most diverse and far-reaching range of consequences.

4.3 How This Relates to the Claim that Consciousness Falsifies

What we have seen in this section is that conscious states causally interact with unconscious states in a variety of ways, by creating new unconscious states and by altering existing unconscious states. When Nietzsche writes that conscious-

ness is falsifying, and in particular when he writes that consciousness is dangerous, he sometimes has this sort of interaction in mind: conscious states introduce distortions into the mental economy as a whole. Put differently, someone who had only unconscious states would perceive and interact with the world in ways that were more directly responsive to the actual features of the world than would someone with conscious states. For example, consider the person whose bad conscience becomes conscious as guilt. This person heightens and strengthens his internal discord in ways that are not responsive to features of his environment, but are instead responsive to a particular, theoretically-loaded interpretation of that environment. This sort of reaction could not occur for someone who lacked conscious states; a non-human animal, such as a dog, could not have this sort of reaction. Thus, a being with conscious mental states reacts to its environment in ways that are less directly responsive to the features of that environment than does a being with only unconscious mental states. In this sense, consciousness falsifies, or, perhaps more aptly, consciousness *distorts*. Nietzsche believes that these distortions are profound—indeed, that they are even in certain respects dangerous—which makes him deeply ambivalent about the role that consciousness plays for our species: our consciousness makes us ‘the sick animal’, desperate and uncertain yet ‘pregnant with a future’ (GM II.16).

5. Conclusion

I hope to have to shown that Nietzsche’s seemingly disparate and incompatible claims about consciousness actually constitute a unified, coherent theory. The key to making sense of his claims is, as we have seen, understanding exactly what Nietzsche means by ‘consciousness’. In particular, Nietzsche identifies conscious states with states that have conceptually articulated content, and unconscious states with states that have nonconceptually articulated content. Once this point is recognized and its full implications are appreciated, the many claims that Nietzsche makes about consciousness fall into place. In particular, his claims about falsification cease to be mysterious. Consciousness falsifies in two senses. First, conscious states inevitably give a selective or partial rendering of the content of unconscious states. Second, conscious states causally interact with unconscious states, leading to distortions in the way that we perceive and interact with the world—distortions, that is, relative to the way that we would perceive and interact with the world if we had only unconscious mental states.

There is much that is novel in Nietzsche’s account of consciousness, such as the dissociation of consciousness and awareness, and the emphasis on the distorting effects of conceptually articulated modes of thinking. I hope to have clarified these aspects, so fundamental in Nietzsche’s philosophy and yet at the same time so abstruse. But there is also much that my account has left untouched, for I have sought only to develop the basic framework of Nietzsche’s theory of mind. Many tantalizing aspects remain unexplored. In closing, I wish to mention just one of these: I have not explicitly discussed the mechanisms by means of

which conscious states arise. Conscious states are somehow generated by unconscious states, and the exact mechanisms involved in this process deserve sustained attention. In particular, it is clear that Nietzsche accepts the idea, associated with Freud, that there are unconscious states that are in some sense inaccessible to us. On the other hand, other unconscious states readily give rise to conscious counterparts, and in that sense are accessible to us. What is responsible for this difference? And, in general, what causes certain contents of unconscious states to become conscious, while other contents remain unconscious? Nietzsche makes many remarks that bear on these issues, remarks which contain a wealth of insights and deserve examination.³⁷

Paul Katsafanas
Harvard University
Department of Philosophy
208 Emerson Hall
Cambridge, MA 02138
USA
katsafan@fas.harvard.edu

NOTES

¹ Where 'epiphenomenalism' is the claim that conscious states never act as causes, though they appear to do so. See Deleuze 1983: 39–40 and Leiter 2001: 291.

² GS 11, GS 354 (see the References for a key to these abbreviations). When quoting from Nietzsche's works, I use the translations listed in the References, though I have sometimes made minor modifications for the sake of clarity. When I do so, I include the German in brackets.

³ There are a number of other sections in which Nietzsche discusses the existence of unconscious mental states. Some of the more notable ones are: D 115, 119, 129; GS 11, 333, 355; BGE 20, 32, 191, 192, 230; GM II and III; TI VI.3–5; EH II.9; WP 477, 523, 524, 528, 569, 674, 707. Commentators often identify unconscious states either with physiological states (e.g., Deleuze 1983: 39–40) or with drives, urges, and instincts (e.g., Leiter 2001: 294). The texts do not support either of these readings: as the passages noted above make clear, Nietzsche does not identify unconscious states with physiological states, and, though he sometimes speaks of unconscious drives and urges, he does not restrict unconscious states to drives and urges.

⁴ We may also wonder what makes an unconscious state a *mental* state, rather than, say, a physiological state. Nietzsche's use of the term 'Vorstellung' in GS 357 is illuminating in this regard. 'Vorstellung' is perhaps best translated in this context by 'representation', for Nietzsche's point is that consciousness is not a necessary attribute of representationality, or, as we might put it in more modern terms, intentionality. This gives us an idea of why unconscious states are mental states: the mark of the mental is intentionality. (Of course, more would have to be said to distinguish mental intentionality from other forms of intentionality, but I will not address these matters here.)

⁵ We might also be tempted to define conscious states as mental states of which we are aware, thereby associating consciousness with an *introspective* awareness. In a later section, we will see that Nietzsche rejects this view.

⁶ Nietzsche begins to develop this view at least as early as *Daybreak*. In D 115 he is already linking consciousness and language: 'We are none of us that which we appear to be in accordance with the states for which alone we have *consciousness and words*' (emphasis added). In D 257, he claims 'we have at any moment only the thought for which we have at hand the words'.

⁷ In connecting words and concepts, Nietzsche is drawing on Schopenhauer, who discusses this issue repeatedly. See, for example, *The Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason* (hereafter FR) §26, where Schopenhauer writes that concepts are not perceptible, and so 'would slip entirely from consciousness and be absolutely of no avail for the thought operations . . . if they were not fixed and retained in our senses by arbitrary signs. Such signs are words'. He goes on to note that words 'always express universal representations, concepts'.

⁸ Perhaps another possibility is that unconscious states have no content at all. This point will be addressed in the next section.

⁹ Explicit discussions of conceptual and nonconceptual content can be traced back at least as far as Schopenhauer's *Fourfold Root* (originally published in 1813). More recently, a large literature has developed around the question of whether perceptual content is conceptual or nonconceptual. In what follows, I draw on some of these discussions, most notably Evans 1983, McDowell 1994, Peacocke 1998 and 2001, and Smith 2002; however, it should be emphasized that everything that I am about to say can be found, already, in Schopenhauer, whose work Nietzsche knew thoroughly.

¹⁰ Although many authors use 'sense impression' [*Sinneseindruck*] to denote a physiological state, the context of this quotation makes it clear that Nietzsche intends to denote a mental state.

¹¹ Schopenhauer often captures this distinction by speaking of two modes of the mental: Reason, which is a conceptually articulated mode of thinking, and Understanding, which is a nonconceptually articulated mode of thinking. Reason includes mental states such as beliefs and judgments, whereas Understanding contains states such as emotions and perceptions. See WWR, vol. I, 35–40, for the distinction between Reason and Understanding.

¹² Perhaps even speaking of 'blobs' goes too far, by implying that the perceptual content is spatially structured.

¹³ See, for example, WP 528, where Nietzsche notes that a mental state 'which removes itself from our consciousness and for that reason becomes obscure *can* on that account be perfectly clear in itself'. Nietzsche is pointing out that unconscious mental states can have content that is just as structured and just as definite as the content of conscious states.

¹⁴ See the final paragraphs of GS 354, where Nietzsche emphasizes that a state's content becomes conscious when it is 'translated back into the perspective of the herd', that is, translated into concept-words shared by a linguistic community. Although I lack the space to address this point, note also that conceptualization is (usually) not a *reflective* process, but is in general an automatic process (cf. GS 354 and D 119, among many other sections).

¹⁵ But this is a mistake; for accounts of the way in which content could be nonconceptual, yet determinate, see Peacocke 1992 and Stalnaker 2003.

¹⁶ This is why Nietzsche so frequently mentions concepts and 'systems' or 'schemas' in the same breath. BGE 20 is characteristic: Nietzsche notes that 'concepts are not anything capricious or autonomously evolving, but grow up in connection and relationship with each other', and he goes on to discuss 'the innate systematic structure and relationship of these concepts'. Cf. WP 503, 513, 515, 521, 522, 569.

¹⁷ For Schopenhauer, see FR §26–28 and WWR, vol. I, §8–9. For Nietzsche, the most explicit discussion of these matters occurs in the unpublished essay 'Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense'. Nietzsche later abandons many of the views that he expresses in this essay, and in particular he later rejects his early explanation of the interaction between concepts and the world (see Clark 1990). However, Nietzsche's accounts of the nature of concepts themselves, and of the systematic interactions between concepts, seem to remain essentially unchanged throughout his works, as a comparison of 'Truth and Lie' to the passages cited in the previous note reveals.

¹⁸ Though the remarks in the preceding paragraphs should assuage some of the common worries about nonconceptual content, this is not the place to offer a full-fledged defense of the idea of nonconceptual content. For that, many of the works listed in note 9 are helpful; see especially the third chapter of Smith 2002. It is worth noting, though, that another line of resistance to the idea that there can be nonconceptual content is the claim that only conceptualized elements can be reasons for judgments (see McDowell 1994). Nietzsche in one way agrees with this, and in another way disagrees. He agrees that conscious judgments employ only conceptualized elements; but in many places he claims that this is distinctive 'not of Reason but merely of the way Reason enters consciousness' (GS 354). That is, he claims that relations among unconscious thoughts occur, and that these relations can be understood as a different type of 'judgment'. So Nietzsche would entirely agree with McDowell that conscious judgment employs only the conceptual; but he would argue that there are other forms of 'judgment'.

¹⁹ There are a number of passages that support this interpretation. Perhaps the most important ones are GS 354, BGE 192, and WP 515, parts of which were discussed above. See also GS 114, BGE 230, and WP 569, which present similar accounts. In his published works, Nietzsche rarely engages in explicit discussions of the distinction between conscious and unconscious states; I therefore take it to be of the first importance that these few explicit discussions, such as GS 354, strongly support the interpretation that I am advancing.

²⁰ See, for example, TI VI.4–6, where Nietzsche notes that feelings become conscious only when we have furnished them with some kind of explanation. What Nietzsche seems to be suggesting is that, for example, the feeling of anger becomes conscious when we entertain a judgment such as 'He has wronged me'. Note also that, as Poellner quite rightly points out (1995: 225), it is striking that although Nietzsche completely rejects the distinction between non-perspectival facts and perspective-laden interpretations, he consistently stresses the distinction between facts about phenomenal states and the interpretations of these states—that is, between feelings and their conceptualized counterparts, judgments.

²¹ Thus, mental imagery may be one form of thinking which has nonconceptually articulated content. More generally, I believe Nietzsche envisions unconscious thought in roughly the way that Hume envisions thought in general: unconscious thoughts are ideas which enter into relations of association. Or, to put this in more familiar Nietzschean terms, he seems to envision unconscious thinking as a form of mental activity which is properly specified in terms of the relations among 'drives' and ideas which do not have conceptually articulated contents.

²² In particular, Leiter cites TI VI.3, which attacks the concept of the Will as a discrete faculty; D 129, which stresses that unconscious states play a role in motivating us, but does not claim that conscious states do not play such a role; and GS 333, which merely states that most thinking is unconscious, and says nothing about the causal efficacy of conscious states. Leiter does quote one section that makes a claim about the causal efficacy of

conscious states, namely WP 478, which could (but needn't) be read as suggesting that conscious states do not enter into causal relations, but which, on that reading, would be inconsistent with a variety of other published and unpublished writings.

²³ A few of the most relevant remarks from the later works are: BGE 12, 16, 17, 54; GM I.13; TI III.5, VI.3.

²⁴ Though note that this use of 'epiphenomenal' differs slightly from the standard usage. Normally, epiphenomenalism is a denial of causal efficacy. Nietzsche certainly means to deny the causal efficacy of the Ego, but this follows from the stronger fact that he denies the Ego's existence.

²⁵ Anderson 2002 offers an account of Nietzsche's view of consciousness which bears some similarities to my own but differs dramatically on this point. Though I believe Anderson would agree that all conscious states have conceptually articulated content, for Anderson this is not what makes them conscious states. Rather, what makes a state conscious is the fact that it is (potentially) an object of introspective awareness: a state is conscious if I am (potentially) aware of it. In contrast, unconscious states are states of which I cannot become aware. These claims are not made fully explicit in his article, but they are clearly present, as when Anderson distinguishes 'imperceptible, or unconscious' mental states from states 'of which we are aware', or conscious states (97). Anderson goes on to claim that Nietzsche's unconscious states are Leibnizian *petites perceptions*. Anderson's account is in many ways insightful, and I have learned from it. However, the account suffers from two significant problems, which I believe render it untenable. First, as we have been discussing above, Nietzsche does not identify consciousness with an introspective awareness. Second, there is simply no textual support for the claim that Nietzsche's unconscious states are *petites perceptions*. Anderson's sole support for this claim is the fact that Nietzsche praises 'Leibniz's incomparable insight ... that consciousness is merely an *accidens* of representation, and *not* its necessary and essential attribute' (GS 357). Anderson takes this to imply that Nietzsche accepts Leibniz's account of unconscious *petites perceptions*. But Nietzsche explicitly tells us which insight he is praising: *that there are unconscious mental states*. To praise this insight is hardly to accept Leibniz's account of the *nature* of these unconscious states. Indeed, in the same section, Nietzsche goes on to praise Kant's insight that the concept 'causality' is applicable only in the phenomenal world, and Hegel's insight that concepts have their meanings determined in a holistic and historically contingent fashion. It goes without saying, though, that Nietzsche rejects the particular ways in which Kant and Hegel develop these insights. In each case, he is praising a general insight, without accepting the particular ways in which the respective philosophers developed these insights. The fact that Nietzsche praises Leibniz's recognition that there are unconscious mental states no more implies that he accepts the theory of *petites perceptions* than his praise of Hegel's recognition that concepts have their meanings determined holistically implies that he accepts Hegel's claim that the evolution of these concepts is the process of the Absolute coming to know itself.

²⁶ The best account of this point of which I am aware is Williams 1994.

²⁷ Of course, McDowell 1994 famously rejects a version of this argument, by arguing that anyone who has the idea of 'being colored' can, on any occasion in which she encounters a color sample that is supposedly finer than her conceptual capacities, give linguistic expression to her conceptual capacity, by uttering 'that color'. (Similar points are meant to apply to 'that shape', 'that texture', and so forth.) This point is controversial, and I cannot here assess its merit; but it is important to note that even if the point is granted, it does not undermine Nietzsche's account. See the end of section 3.2.

²⁸ In an influential work, Clark 1990 argues that Nietzsche abandons his 'falsification thesis' in his later works, which might lead us to think that Nietzsche eventually gives up his claim that consciousness falsifies experience. The 'falsification thesis' which Clark discusses, though, is actually distinct from the claims about consciousness that we are addressing. Falsification, on Clark's reading, is the claim that the 'apparent world' falsifies the 'true world'. While Nietzsche accepts the apparent world/true world dichotomy in his early works, he explicitly rejects the dichotomy in his later works. Consequently, he must abandon this falsification thesis. However, the claim that *conscious* states falsify does not involve a commitment to a true world/apparent world ontology, for conscious states falsify unconscious states. In other words, to say that conscious states are falsifying or superficial relative to unconscious states avoids commitment to a dual-world ontology, for conscious and unconscious states are directed at the same world. While Nietzsche does give up his earlier claim that the true world is falsified by the apparent world, he never gives up his claim that conscious states are superficial or falsifying relative to unconscious ones. For an extended discussion of this point, see Anderson (2002: 102–112).

²⁹ The interpretation of Nietzsche's perspectivism raises a host of exegetical and philosophical difficulties. This is not the place to go into them. Instead, I will provide a brief and (hopefully) uncontroversial outline of Nietzsche's perspectivism, and indicate how it bears on the matter at hand. There is a large literature on perspectivism. Clark 1990 and Reginster 2000 are particularly helpful, and in what follows I draw on them.

³⁰ This is a bit of a simplification—perspectives will also include certain sorts of valuations—but it will be adequate for our purposes.

³¹ There is a deeper issue lurking here. Conscious states, being conceptualized, enter into a system of rational relations such as justification, probabilification, and implication. Nietzsche consistently emphasizes that this system of rational relations might well differ from the system of relations governing the unconscious states (see note 18). If so, the falsification will be even more profound. I lack the space for a proper analysis of this point, so I must pass over it here.

³² We can think of a 'drive' as an instinct. The two are actually distinct, but for the purposes of this essay the differences will not be relevant. See Richardson 1996: 21 and Assou 2000: 51–94 for insightful discussions of drives.

³³ For an explicit discussion of the ways in which a drive's force can be altered, weakened, and redirected, see D 109. For a discussion of the distinction between the quantity of a drive's force and the direction of a drive's force, see GS 360.

³⁴ Nietzsche characteristically emphasizes the role of the aggressive drives and minimalizes the role of the other drives; thus, in II.17 and elsewhere, he accounts for the origin of society not as a product of various social drives, but as a result of one group conquering and enslaving another group. This strategy allows Nietzsche to emphasize certain points which play a crucial role in GM II and III, but which are not relevant here. Unfortunately, this strategy can obscure the fact that even this conquering group is a *group*, a society that has banded together in order to fulfill various drives, and therefore exercises some restraints on its aggressive instincts. See II.16 and the beginning of II.17.

³⁵ Of course, there are a variety of other factors at work here: the story that Nietzsche tells in *Genealogy* II involves a range of social and religious factors. But what needs to be stressed is that these are all factors explaining *why* the bad conscience becomes conscious as guilt. The reasons *why* the bad conscience becomes conscious in a certain way is less important than the question of what *effect* the becoming conscious of the bad conscience as guilt has on us. Underlying all of the arguments in GM II, at the very heart of the processes which Nietzsche is exploring, is the claim that the becoming conscious of the bad

conscience as guilt (regardless of the historical and religious reasons for which this occurs) has, just by itself, a profound and lasting impact.

³⁶ See HC, BGE 229, GM II.23–25 and TI X.1–5.

³⁷ I owe great thanks to Alison Simmons, who provided extensive comments on several drafts of this essay, and spent many hours discussing these issues with me. Thanks also to Don Rutherford, Susanna Siegel, Danielle Slevens, and an anonymous referee of this journal for their helpful written comments. I presented an early version of this paper at the Metaphysics and Epistemology Reading Group at Harvard and MIT in May 2003, and I thank the participants for the rewarding discussion that ensued.

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List of Abbreviations of Nietzsche's Works:

- A *The Antichrist*, trans. W. Kaufmann (Viking, 1954)
 BGE *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Kaufmann (Modern Library, 1968)
 D *Daybreak*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge University Press, 1982)
 EH *Ecce Homo*, trans. Kaufmann (Modern Library, 1968)
 GM *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Kaufmann (Modern Library, 1968)
 GS *The Gay Science*, trans. Kaufmann (Vintage, 1974)
 HC 'Homer's Contest', trans. Kaufmann (Viking, 1954)
 HH *Human, All Too Human*, trans. Hollingdale (Cambridge University Press, 1986)
 TI *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. Kaufmann (Viking, 1954)
 WP *The Will to Power*, trans. Kaufmann and Hollingdale (Vintage, 1967)

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