

What is Decadent Philosophy? (Conference version)

Decadence of the French Nietzsche (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield)

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Abstract

Decadence in philosophy is the reversal between thinking and truth: philosophical truths valued only insofar as they provoke more philosophical thought.

Keywords

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It's hard to read Descartes—at least those parts where he's asking if he really has a body and doubting that other people exist—without wanting to deliver a sharp elbow to his nose. That'd take care of the doubting; it wouldn't do much for philosophy, though. And I don't mean it wouldn't do much because there's some flaw in the painful nose argument. The real problem—the debility ruining *any* convincing argument—is that philosophy isn't geared to prove things, it's geared to generate more proving.

Rhetorical question: which professor is most likely to win a notable academic chair? The one meticulously assembling descriptions telling us how the world is, or the one producing truths that make a lot of others want to respond, want to debate about how the world is?

The reason the answer's obvious can be stated neatly. Philosophy isn't the love of truth, it's wanting thinking. So, the best philosopher isn't the one accurately theorizing about the world but the one whose ideas stimulate the most subsequent theorizing, the hottest discussion in conferences, the fastest

responses in academic journals, the highest number of footnotes in books written by others. This is why earnest attempts to prove things, to set matters to rest—I'm thinking of Thomas Nagel's precious *The Last Word*—seem so quaint, so misguided even if they're persuasive.

The fact that quaintness exists in philosophy carries an implication: the replacement of truths that are correct with truths that are provocative at the core of philosophical desire has been insufficiently absorbed into the discipline. There's a troubling tendency among philosophers to talk as though they're concerned by correctness, to carry on as though they really want to *truly explain* experience. Of course amongst ourselves we all know this is just posing, as surely as we also know that the most reliable way to generate interest in what we're doing is to make claims that do, in fact, seem right.

Still, the space between what we say we want and what we really do want, and the failure to close it—the failure to simply and publicly agree that I'm like everyone else here in that I don't care whether my assertions are true, I'm only concerned about whether you'll be talking about them tomorrow—the failure to make that explicit has retarded some philosophical advances that could be quite easily realized.

One of the advances concerns contemporary Nietzscheanism and the notoriously—though only incidentally—wrong mantra that there are no facts, only interpretations. The qualification “incidentally” is appropriate here since no one fails to see that “everything's interpretation” immediately contradicts itself: if the phrase gets used, it's as intellectual shorthand, as a way of not getting bogged down in detailing for the hundredth time all the little and great reasons for the persistent *suspicion* that perfect objectivity won't be reached and therefore everything's interpretation.

This assumption, however, regarding the use of “everything's interpretation” appears incorrect. I don't know how else to explain why so many anti-Nietzscheans take so much trouble and amounts of their readers' time to ponderously explain the proposition's self-refutation. A remarkable example from an extremely widely read collection of essays, *Why We Are Not Nietzscheans*:

The proposition 'a' is logically equivalent to the metalinguistic proposition “'a' is true” (Tarski). To say with Nietzsche that “there is no truth” is to

say “It is true that nothing is true,” which is not, *stricto sensu*, paradoxical, but equivalent to the statement p: “All sentences are false,” which cannot be true (because if p is true, it is false). [Ferry, Luc and Renault, Alain, *Why We Are Not Nietzscheans*, trans. De Loaiza (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 13. As another, similar example, there is Comte-Sponville’s essay in *Why We Are Not Nietzscheans*, pages 52-55, as well as Thomas Nagel constantly throughout his *The Last Word*.]

While it’s not a metalinguistic proposition and I can’t appeal to Tarski, it’s nonetheless reasonable, I hope, to assert that Alain Boyer wouldn’t have published these not entirely elegant but nonetheless highly logical and persuasive sentences (assuming a metalinguistic proposition can safely be inked onto a piece of paper) if he didn’t have good reason to suppose the existence of theorists who have trouble figuring out that “There’s no truth, everything’s interpretation” can’t be true. Wherever they are, they locate a place where Boyer’s argument deserves cautious attention.

Which catches Nietzscheanism in a predicament, one far more threatening than the verifiable incorrectness of the movement’s guiding conviction. The problem is that Nietzscheans—along with everyone else pretending they’re pursuing one or another kind of truth—don’t have any choice but to *respect* Boyer. I mean philosophy conceived as loving truth forces the concession that Boyer’s argument is legitimate, even valuable because it’s admirably tight, seamlessly presented. And that brings the problem into full view. The desire driving any philosophy guided by truth forces philosophers to embrace triviality as long as what’s trivial happens to be right.

On the other side, those who raise thinking above truth don’t—*can’t*—have this problem. Since banal truths unmistakably enervate thought, and since Boyer’s anti-Nietzschean argument is so listless that its most challenging aspect is decoding the jargon (metalinguistic, *stricto sensu*), those who want only thinking can not only shamelessly skip over Boyer’s sentences, they’re impelled, even compelled by their own guiding desire to encounter other philosophical readings that better stimulate their primary and guiding aspiration.

This significant advantage held over those clinging to the image of philosophy as wanting truth can be amplified on the most human and telling level, simple pride. Returning to the beginning, the difficulty philosophers

oriented by truth face is that they have no choice but to respectfully consider Boyer's argument. Which means belittling their own capacities as can be easily gauged if you happen to have teenage children and try explaining to one of them that your job is to make judgments about "The proposition 'a' is logically equivalent to. . . ." There's no need, though, for philosophers to find themselves so reduced in their progeny's estimation. No need because the privileging of thinking's acceleration over any truth's instantiation efficiently removes consideration of Boyer's sentences from the philosopher's job description.

Broadening the point, this predicament Boyer set in front of current Nietzscheanism is a specific version of a thick, practical obstacle occasionally blocking all philosophers: what's to be done with conference presentations, journal articles and books that are right and persuasive but perfectly obvious, painfully belabored, boring? Surely we want to dismiss them, but how can that be justified? How can we establish as something more than juvenile impatience the refusal to read beyond the first pages of, say, Thomas Nagel's *The Last Word* when the pages so clearly reveal that the whole book will amount to little more than a multiple chaptered repetition of Boyer's already monotonously prolonged argument? Within philosophy conceived as love of truth, it's difficult to satisfactorily answer that question; it's difficult to justify the decision to ignore what's right. It's not at all difficult, though, when philosophers recognize and accept that they're devoted to thought.

As a note here, despite simple appearances the real reason "There are no facts, everything's interpretation," isn't wrong is that the very question of wrong or right isn't philosophy. Since philosophy concerns inspiring thinking, the only demand properly made of any truth claim is that it do that. Questions about whether the claim happens to be correct, consequently, drop to meaninglessness.

Put differently, because any research library abundantly teaches (through reams of printed pages) that the truth "Everything's interpretation" urgently stimulates philosophical thinking, the answer to the right/wrong question is clear. The claim "everything's interpretation" is right, and it's right—it's a good truth—even though we all know it's a contradiction.

Much more could be added about the virtues of explicitly changing philosophy's

definition. For example the old Nietzschean tension between his insistence that there are no model philosophers (because everything's interpretation), and his equally forceful contention that the Overman is the future's model philosopher, can be resolved in only a few steps.

It's more important to repeat, however, that solving this kind of problem is an irksome distraction. More, any effort to lay a question to rest, to settle an issue, to quiet a debate is necessarily a distraction or worse since philosophy's guiding endeavor is the opposite of all those things.

That's not to say, though, that there's no place in philosophy for answering questions. There is, it's just that the range is narrow: it's all those questions—all those truths waiting to be said—that *serve* thought, that participate in the generation of thinking. Two quick examples:

1. Which drives thinking most aggressively: the hope for universal truth in the Platonic mold, or limited interpretations as Nietzsche proposed?
2. About rhetoric and presentation, are the truths found in written dialogues more provocative than those found in aphorisms, or than those extending as gracefully developing monographs?

The list could be drawn out further, but the numbers don't matter so much as the way it's used, and the list is used to underline the following central affirmation. There is no attempt here to remove truths from philosophy. What's occurring is far more insidious, truths are being maintained, but *only* to provoke thought. Truths exist, but truth doesn't.

Next, turning from truths toward the act of thinking produces a different line of questions aimed more directly into philosophy's essence.

1. What kind of writing stirs thought? Is it the careful progression from a thesis statement to a complex outline for a book and then contained segments of argumentation managed serially? Or, is it scattering: writing five lines here, ten there and then letting something larger emerge from the impulses?

2. What kind of reading incites thought, a few canonized texts within a narrow field of interests, or, vagabond studies across disciplines and genres? And need whole books be mastered or should opportunistic eyes skip through the pages?

3. In *Persecution and the Art of Writing* Leo Strauss shows how the pressures of censorship squeeze work forward. But maybe it's the absence (or collapse) of monitoring authority that invigorates philosophical labor: Paris 1968.

4. Economic questions. How many books have been lost by the drowning of great talents in the indolence of overflowing luxury? How many didn't get written because the potential author was busy washing plates?

5. Does talking about philosophy with others foster thought? Deleuze and Guattari join Socrates on the yes side. It's difficult, though, to imagine Nietzsche working productively with someone else.

6. What about pryingly personal (or, somewhat less intriguingly, biological) factors? Foucault, we know, taught that any discussion of truth connected with "the body, the nervous system, nutrition, digestion and energies." [Foucault, Michel, "Nietzsche Genealogy, History," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), p. 89.] Moving this over to the contemporary interest, we've all passed hours or more not eating because it makes us heavy and distracts us from our studies. And some of us commit our written work to the morning when, presumably, we're most sharp and alert. That doesn't close off another possibility, though: philosophizing progresses fastest late, during those tired hours when we let our guard down and write whatever comes to mind with the idea that tomorrow it can all be cleaned up.

7. Another personal factor, and the last I'll mention today, was raised for me by the now deceased Kant scholar Salim Kemal. He occasionally interrupted his eminently sober conversation with the surprising insistence that he couldn't write with a computer. His work, he said, literally flowed along with his fingers and hand when recording ideas

with a pen, but when pecking on a machine he couldn't advance; instead of one notion leading to another, each seemed final, like an insuperable obstacle to more progress that day.

It shouldn't seem odd that a paper on philosophy concludes with a question about whether philosophizing should be done with a pen. Similarly it's not at all sad that a deceased philosopher isn't being remembered for the truths he produced, instead for the velocity of his thought. There's nothing strange or sad here because both the pen and the memory are far closer to philosophy than any truth.

As for words, they too can be philosophy: all the questions I've just listed along with the paragraphs preceding them are, or, at least they're philosophy to the extent they're subjected to the same judgment they describe. Stronger, to the extent they are so judged everything I've said today is proven true.

This conclusion affirms another, probably the most worrisome philosophy could produce. The only reason we have truths is *for* something else, to serve something else. Worse, to serve what had always been the most servile, philosophical thought.

And while our shared discipline probably had to culminate this way, not with vindication but as a collapsing perversion of its entire history, it's nonetheless difficult to avoid finding—just as it's uncomfortable to admit feeling—a tinge of alleviation. Surely it has gone on too long, our obsession with the questions of truth. Too well we know them: should we want objective knowledge, and where is it found? Or, should it be tentative interpretations, and what are the rules for their creation? No matter the answers, what's most disheartening is how the questions have constrained, how tightly they've bound us to labor in accordance with the dictates of truth.

Doubtless, the stifling will continue, some even in the most severe and humiliating form: there'll always be philosophers announcing that the statement "nothing's true" can't be true.

So too we expect no departure from the oppressive tedium of those accusing Nietzsche and his contemporary followers of resisting what should prove irresistible.

No matter how long the scolding and frustration continue though, *we* will no longer be affected. No longer because matters are far worse than our

adversaries realize. It's not that we've rejected their kind of truth, it's that we no longer respect the demands of any truth. We don't because philosophy is desiring thought.

END