



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE

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Narrative Section of a Successful Application

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Note: The attachment only contains the grant narrative and selected portions, not the entire funded application. In addition, certain portions may have been redacted to protect the privacy interests of an individual and/or to protect confidential commercial and financial information and/or to protect copyrighted materials.

Project Title: Nietzsche and the Ancient Skeptical Tradition

Institution: Georgia State University

Project Director: Jessica N. Berry

Grant Program: Fellowships Program

Project Narrative:

‘Nietzsche and the Ancient Skeptical Tradition’

Friedrich Nietzsche is notorious for his rhetorically and philosophically dramatic statements concerning truth: that “truths are illusions we have forgotten are illusions,” and that “facts are precisely what there are not, there are only interpretations.” Such proclamations have caused Nietzsche to be labeled a ‘postmodernist’, a ‘relativist’, a ‘pessimist’ about truth, even an ‘epistemological nihilist’; but perhaps most frequently Nietzsche is characterized as a *skeptic*. With the exception of a handful of short discussions, however, this affiliation between Nietzsche and skepticism has generally been alleged without any head-on engagement with philosophical skepticism, its history, or its methodological commitments. Most recent discussions use ‘skepticism’ in a fairly casual sense, as a non-technical term requiring no special treatment or explanation. Since it typically denotes little more than a somewhat radical and mostly negative attitude toward the existence of facts or the possibility of human knowledge, the question, “what *kind* of skepticism?” has not yet been raised in the literature. Nietzsche scholars have in particular failed to take account of the rich and substantial philosophical difference between the skepticism that originated in ancient Greece and its modern, post-Cartesian derivatives. The oversight is significant, for at least two reasons. The first is that Nietzsche, who was trained as a professor of classical philology and maintained a fascination with Greek literature, culture, and philosophy throughout his productive academic life, clearly appreciated the difference. Second, since ‘skepticism’ in the ancient sense is incompatible with ‘relativism’ and many other positions commonly attributed to Nietzsche, appreciating properly his understanding of and debt to the Greek skeptics will force us to re-evaluate a good deal of what has been written of one of the last century’s most influential thinkers.

The impact of Nietzsche’s engagement with the Greek skeptics has never been systematically explored in a book-length work. Here I propose to bring together under the title *Nietzsche and the Ancient Skeptical Tradition* my previous research on Nietzsche and the Greek skeptics, expanding on published articles and papers presented over the last several years. Much of this story has been told piecemeal in my publications to date, yet scholars in the field have encouraged me to bring these disparate parts together in a sustained, book-length argument. My project has generated substantial interest among scholars on Nietzsche, but it has also appealed to specialists in Ancient philosophy and to those who have interests in epistemology and skepticism more broadly construed—in short, those who have not thought Nietzsche had anything of philosophical value to say on the subject of truth or knowledge. This work fills a gap in the literature on Nietzsche by demonstrating precisely how an understanding of ancient skepticism—the Pyrrhonian tradition in particular—promises to illuminate Nietzsche’s own reflections on truth, knowledge, and ultimately, the nature and value of philosophic inquiry.

More specifically, the proposed book promises an original contribution to the field in two ways: first and most obviously, from the standpoint of the history of philosophy. While there are a handful of volumes that take up Nietzsche’s intellectual relationship with Socrates and Plato, or “the Greeks” more generally, the treatment is often philosophically too thin or too broad and not philologically sensitive, which limits the value of the works for those interested in Nietzsche and has made them downright unappealing to specialists in Ancient philosophy.¹ I propose to correct these problems, at least with respect to Nietzsche and the Hellenistic skeptics, with this more focused volume. Second, my research engages with the extant literature on Nietzsche’s epistemology and his views on truth, but offers a reading that is novel and that challenges many widely-respected works on the topic (e.g., Wilcox (1974), Grimm (1977), Cox (1999)), including works that are considered ground-breaking and highly cogent interpretations, such as Maudemarie Clark’s (1990) *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy*. Reading

¹ Recent exceptions include Bett (2000a), and Porter (2000a and 2000b). Otherwise, Schlechta (1948) is a useful volume, but seriously dated. Tejera (1987) and Dannhauser (1974) are dated as well; in addition, the philosophical handling of Nietzsche is in each of these works uneven, and neither work handles the Greek texts in a way that meets the standards of contemporary specialists in Ancient philosophy. The most recent treatment, by Wilkerson (2006), is certainly less dated, but it suffers from weaknesses similar to the other treatments.

Nietzsche's work on the model of the Pyrrhonian skeptics helps to illuminate his provocative but often opaque remarks on the very topics that have so revitalized Nietzsche scholarship in the last twenty years.

Finally, this reading will afford us deeper insight into Nietzsche's ethics, since the Greek skeptics (like Nietzsche) take up the position they do as a means of promoting well-being and psychological health. Thus, it will help to recover a portrait of Nietzsche as a philosophical psychologist and ethical naturalist that has been too often obscured by commentaries on his thought. The Pyrrhonian skeptics have also been described as ethical naturalists: like so many of their Hellenistic contemporaries (most notably the Stoics and Epicureans), they present a robust account of the good for human beings and a series of recommendations or practical suggestions for attaining it. Their conception of the good identifies it with psychological balance or equanimity, *ataraxia*—commonly, though in some cases misleadingly translated as 'tranquility'. The Pyrrhonian formula for realizing this state, however, often raises eyebrows, for the skeptic argues that the good we seek will be the result of a total suspension of belief, especially with regard to claims that take us beyond what our best empirical evidence could support. The skeptic, aptly captured by Nietzsche's description of the "philosopher of the future," is "curious to a vice, an investigator to the point of cruelty," and sets out in good faith to satisfy his curiosity. Soon, however, he discovers that he consistently comes across *equipollent* arguments: arguments of roughly equal persuasive force for and against just about any claim. In light of this discovery, the skeptic finds himself psychologically compelled to suspend judgment on the issues he investigates, a state upon which psychological well-being follows fortuitously, "like a shadow follows a body." Maintaining his state of equanimity requires the skeptic to maintain his suspension of judgment, which in turn requires, perhaps contrary to our expectations, that he continue actively to investigate the matters that concerned him initially. This restless intellectual curiosity is in fact the hallmark of Pyrrhonian skepticism, for while everyone else has given up inquiring, either because they take themselves to have definitive answers to their questions or because they have succumbed to epistemological hopelessness and decided their questions are unanswerable (a condition Nietzsche would characterize as a kind of intellectual death), the skeptic alone remains engaged with the world and open to the *possibility* of truth—though he no longer stakes his happiness on its attainment.

The plan for the book includes two introductory chapters: one will lay out a brief account of Pyrrhonism and its history, for the purposes of familiarizing non-specialists in Ancient philosophy with some of its salient features; and another will recount the historical evidence for Nietzsche's own familiarity with the relevant sources of this tradition, including for instance his doctoral work and subsequent publications on the 3rd century doxographer Diogenes Laertius, in which he carefully examines Diogenes' accounts of the lives of the skeptic Pyrrho and his followers. The research for these chapters is complete, and I have a draft of each. The core of the book comprises four chapters, drawing upon articles I have published since the completion of my doctoral research. Here, with an eye toward showing how the skeptical strains of Nietzsche's position gain in strength, subtlety, and coherence over the course of his career, I will present them together, organized roughly chronologically: The early chapters will investigate skeptical themes in the writings of the young Nietzsche, concentrating on his treatment of truth in the infamous (unpublished) essay "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense," and on the naturalism that first emerges in *Human, All too Human*. In later chapters, I examine central features of Nietzsche's middle and late works, including his ethical views and his mature views on truth. Here, for example, I advance a reading of Nietzsche's much-discussed 'perspectivism'—the cornerstone of many postmodern interpretations of his thought—that demonstrates how Nietzsche's claim that there is "only a perspective seeing, only a perspective knowing" does not commit him to an inescapable subjectivism or relativism. Rather, he notices, in a way strongly reminiscent of Diogenes Laertius' presentation of the classic arguments of the Pyrrhonists, that if we have a number of possible cognitions of the same object and no agreed-upon criterion by which to adjudicate disputes about which of them is closest to reality, then we are compelled to suspend judgment and, in a term Nietzsche himself uses, embrace *ephexis* (suspension of judgment) in interpretation. Thus, Nietzsche's position is not that of an atheist about truth

(“there is no truth, since there are hidden things-in-themselves to which our beliefs could never correspond”), as has often been supposed, but that of a principled agnostic. Finally, after making the case for Nietzsche’s use of this skeptical mode of reasoning, I expand on what is distinctly ‘Greek’ about Nietzsche’s skepticism by exploring *via* his interest in the pre-Platonic philosopher Democritus of Abdera (who is sometimes included as one of the earliest influences on the skeptical tradition) the connections between Nietzsche’s epistemology and his ethics. The Pyrrhonists forge a strong connection between what we believe and how we live, how healthy we are as human creatures; Nietzsche, I argue, has exactly the same ends in view.

The last two chapters of the book should be of the broadest philosophical interest. In one, I will defend my interpretation against an important objection—the *prima facie* incompatibility between skepticism and naturalism, both of which I attribute to Nietzsche. Here I will draw upon my presentation of this crucial argument at a workshop on ‘Nietzsche and Naturalism’ sponsored by the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. In the final chapter, I will demonstrate some of the philosophical merits of this version of skepticism on its own terms, which will strengthen the case for reading Nietzsche on the model of the Pyrrhonian skeptics and underscore the importance of understanding his epistemological views to the project of reading his moral philosophy properly. It would be useful to be able to show, for example, how Nietzsche’s position reveals the internal instability of views like one recently defended by Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (2006) in *Moral Scepticisms*: While Sinnott-Armstrong advances a recognizably Pyrrhonian account of the level at which our moral claims may be said to lack justification, his conclusion that we may nevertheless be entitled to maintain our conventional and pre-established views about right and wrong leaves intact systems of moral belief and practice that Nietzsche diagnoses as pernicious and unhealthy—a betrayal of the ethical aims of the very skeptics who inspire Sinnott-Armstrong’s position.

My primary task during this semester of grant support will be to complete the research for and produce a draft of this final chapter. I will devote the first eight to ten weeks of the grant period to research, engaging the contemporary literature on skepticism and moral philosophy in order to characterize Nietzsche’s views in terms most relevant for the current debate and stake out in Nietzschean terms a position in epistemology and moral psychology that I hope will interest readers beyond this immediate area of specialization. During the next six to eight weeks, I will bring the results of this research together and draft the chapter. Since this is roughly the pace at which each of the other seven chapters has been researched and drafted, I am confident that a teaching release of this duration will afford me the opportunity to bring this chapter to completion. In the remaining time, I will also be able to make significant progress toward carrying the drafts of these eight chapters to final copy, bridging the gaps between chapters, eliminating overlap between one and another (where, for instance, each free-standing article has required its own broad-strokes account of the relevant features of Pyrrhonism, I will here be able to devote an introductory chapter to their thorough discussion), and strengthening those arguments to which I have been able to entertain objections and comments from colleagues and reviewers over the years. A manuscript version of *Nietzsche and the Ancient Skeptical Tradition* has been solicited by one academic press, and a proposal for the book is currently under review at another. That the book has an audience is clear. An NEH grant for the spring will allow me to deliver to that audience in the timeliest fashion a persuasive, novel, and provocative reading of Nietzsche’s philosophy.

Project Bibliography:
'Nietzsche and the Ancient Skeptical Tradition'

In addition to primary texts in Nietzsche (published and unpublished in 'Sämtliche Werke, Kritische Studienausgabe', ed. by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1980)), and in Hellenistic philosophy (particularly Sextus Empiricus and Diogenes Laertius) the following works are among those important to my project:

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