



Shy and Ticklish Truths as Species of Scientific and Artistic Perception

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Abstract

To evidence the human condition must be to provide an account of the manifold modalities of experience: 'Evidence' must include different kinds of humanly experienced truths. However, the question is how does one extend the way in which the 'evidential' is broadly understood so that it encompasses the range of ways and kinds of knowing as practised in people's everyday lives and as pertaining to those lives. Borrowing phrasing from Nietzsche, this article focuses in particular on species of human truth that might be described as being 'shyer' or more 'ticklish' than others, and that are only humanly accessible when 'taken by surprise', or 'glanced at, flashed at'. Part I of the article explores the sense that might be made of the notion of 'ticklish truths'. Part II then considers the wider implications of giving due to a panoply of modes of human knowing. The aim of the article is to recognize a 'gay science' (Nietzsche) not as an eccentric construction of merely poetic insights and expressions, but as a necessary part of the fundamentals of knowledge. It is a truth of the human condition that its truths are grounded in a personal embodiment of individuality, ontogeny, momentariness and situationality.

Is it a fact that a thing has been misunderstood and unrecognised when it has only been touched upon in passing, glanced at, flashed at? Must one absolutely sit upon it in the first place? Must one have brooded on it as on an egg? *Diu noctuque incubando* [Incubating it day and night], as Newton said of himself? At least there are truths of a peculiar shyness and ticklishness which one can only get hold of suddenly, and in no other way, which one must either take by surprise, or leave alone. (Nietzsche, 2001, #381)

This provocative quotation originates in Friedrich Nietzsche's 1882/1887 publication, *The Gay Science* (2001). The title of the book refers specifically to the art of poetry, in particular as it was practiced in Provence in the twelfth century by troubadours. The troubadours were singers, knights and free spirits all at once and Nietzsche saw in their unity-in-diversity a

kind of human wholeness-in-practice. Broadly speaking, a gay science was a programme of human knowing which made manifest at one and the same time knowledge-practices that were rigorous, controlled and disciplined, which figured as part of their practitioner's personal exercise of power, which were hence life-enhancing, and whose inventiveness was magnificent. Nietzsche's own attitude to the possibility, indeed the necessity, of the gay science he depicted in his text, and rediscovering as human practice, was to find it true and valorous and imbued with personality.

Nietzsche's view of the troubadours provides a point of entry into a discussion of lived experience (and its evidencing) which is sensitive to a phenomenological wholeness. 'Evidence' of the truth of the human condition needs to provide an account of the whole of human experience. This evidence must therefore include different kinds of humanly experienced truths.

This does not involve disparaging science, instead one wishes knowledge to abide by Popperian notions of the necessity of processes of observation and criticism (Popper, 1980). However, one would also extend the way in which the evidential is understood so that it can be taught to also include a range of ways and kinds of knowing as practiced in people's everyday lives and as pertaining to those lives.

The opening quotation is provocative because it anticipates certain truths as being 'shyer', and more 'ticklish' than others. These truths are only humanly accessible when "taken by surprise ... got hold of suddenly ... touched upon in passing ... glanced at and flashed at" (Nietzsche, 2001, p. 381). I find that this quotation attests to the qualia of human existence, and in the first part of this article I explore this idea. Nietzsche's (2001) allusive remark is tantalizing; enticing but also elusive. The first part of the article looks at how I make sense of this remark. It asks: What kinds of things might be known to be true only when taken by surprise or flashed at? In Part II of the article I consider the quotation's possible wider implications for giving due to a panoply of modes of human knowing.

Part I and Part II are different in style. Part I might be considered an indulgence; it is personal, it follows its own pace, and it is not particular with regard to genre. I allow myself this indulgence because it flows from a close reading of Nietzsche and is premised on certain questions. I ask myself: Why does his remark entice? How do I delve deeply into its elusiveness? I enter into the conceit of thinking that in seeking to know the implications of his text I might engage in a writing that borrows from his sense of gaiety.

The weight of evidence that I find accruing from a close reading of Nietzsche's remark, the concerted ways in which 'shy' and 'ticklish' truths can be made part of (my) human experience, makes Part I a worthy counterweight to Part II. If this is the complexity of human knowledge-practices — the weightiness of what is shy and ticklish — then 'science' per se must be extended to incorporate this 'gaiety'. The objective of the article is that 'gay science' be appreciated not as a philosophical-historical curiosity or as an eccentric construction of merely poetic insights and expressions, but as a necessary part of the fundamentals of knowledge. 'Science' is understood also to incorporate individual, unique, 'artistic' perception.

Part 1: Twelve truths of the moment

There are twelve ways in which I can make sense of Nietzsche's remark. In the sections below I briefly outline each of these, and give each a name.

1. *The constant movement of the world and its contents*

It can be argued that truths can only be touched in passing because the world is in constant movement and I am moving with it. This brings to mind Heraclitus's image of the river that cannot be stopped; as well as Archimedes's idea that no worldly fulcrum by which the world itself can be levered is possible. The truth is therefore passing: I can appreciate the passing of reality but in such a way that I can never stand on a stable point of perception that is not itself in movement. Any embodied human insight must perforce be transitory.

Thus, I cannot know my daughter except as a constantly ageing individual and through my constantly ageing eyes. Yet she is also real at every moment. There is a truth about her nature at a moment that is only true of that moment and can only be appreciated at that moment. In addition, the nature of the father that gains access to that momentary truth is also momentary.

2. *The fullness of each moment*

I can also say that truths can only be touched in passing because the fullness of each moment is lost in the next moment. We are conscious in moments of moments but our memory of moments is distinct from and different to that momentary consciousness. This memory is different in nature. Each instant represents a little universe of sensations and ideas irrevocably forgotten in the next instant. For example, we do not recall pain or even pleasure with the intensity of the moment in which it was first experienced. Instead, we are ourselves carried along Heraclitus's river in a stream of consciousness.

Thus, although nothing might seem more obvious, tangible, and absolutely true than the present moment, that moment is wholly elusive to anything but itself. However fine the artistry of representing the momentary, be it the verbalization of Virginia Woolf or the musicalization of Ralph Vaughan Williams (cf. Kundera, 1990, p. 24), the process of recollecting the moment that has gone is distinct in nature from the immediate truth of that moment.

3. *The ontogenic nature of experience*

What we know to be true can also be incremental in nature. In other words, one truth enables another, laying the groundwork, acting as the teething-stone. It is because I know one thing that I grow to know another. However, this makes the character of each truth that is known a ticklish one; it is a truth that is true of a particular stage of life. The relation of one truth to consequent ones can be varied and diverse.

For example, what I know of my body, its needs and capabilities and fulfilments at 25 years of age is contradicted by what I know at 50 years of age. What I appreciate of the world around me at age 25 is radically different to my appreciations at age 50; it is different because I have grown to be different and my engagements become different. Alternatively, as I become aware of cruelty or tyranny or sophistry at one stage of my life my sensitivity to it may grow and my appreciation may become more subtle and discriminating: I become a pedant on the subject of sophistry at age 50 because of my initiation at age 25.

“What we call basic truths are simply the ones we discover after all the others” writes Albert Camus in *The Fall* (1972, p. 84). Although this may be how we depict or justify it to ourselves, the process is actually more one of ontogenic development; that is, different truths are known as we grow through our lives. Stefan Zweig (1960, pp. 8-9) reflected that youth may have little time for mildness and skepticism, while freedom may seem self-evident until one experiences a time of war, unreason and brutality. However, the stability of words such as courage, responsibility and health would seem to belie our incremental understandings of the concepts they refer to as the truths of our lives age and change.

4. The uniqueness of things

If each moment of experience is discrete, and therefore distinct from that which precedes and follows it, then I can also recognize how everything in the world is itself only, and cannot be generalized and also should not be confused with any other thing. The truth of a thing-in-itself is therefore ‘shy’ or ‘ticklish’ inasmuch as it will not show itself in any other context but its own. I must embrace a thing and its truth as a unity or not at all, and I cannot relate it to anything else. As T. S. Eliot (1971) observed, “any vital truth is incapable of being applied to another case [for] the essential is unique (p. 8). According to Eliot (1971), the quality of vital essentiality renders this kind of truth difficult and neglected. It is useless for clerical docketing, for bureaucracy, and for all manner of cause-and-effect explanations. However, he also insisted that it is fundamental to human experience; it is even foundational of the human condition.

Eliot (1971) suggested that one consider the case of one’s spouse’s ‘nerves’ as a malady. This is an intensity of experience that has no logic, no nature but its own. One dwells in it, whether as a ‘patient’ or as a ‘carer’, as if in a life-time of its own: Its pain, its fullness. However, the fullness might equally be part of a moment of epiphany. A moment of recognizing one’s individual power. A moment of loving another. A moment of coming face-to-face with a favourite

painting in an art gallery. A moment of burying a deceased loved one. In that moment, one enters into the truth of a thing that is wholly itself, a whole in itself, something that is suddenly there and then not there. One finds oneself cognizant of a thing that does not appear as a trace in anything else.

5. The mystery of things

There are other things that one experiences whose shyness is such that you are barely cognizant of them at all except as an other or as a mystery. In this case, one’s relationship, if one can call it that, is with an absence or a lack of comprehension. Consider, for instance, human individuality and its gratuitousness. It is impossible to translate one life into another, and it is impossible to be conscious in a life other than one’s own. I am true in myself and as myself but no one else can know this truth and I can know no one else’s truth. Kierkegaard (1941) concluded that “subjectivity is the truth” (p. 118). This pure, passionate, unique quality has an ‘intransigence’ (or ticklishness) not only in the face of the objectivity of external relations but also in the face of internal objectivity. Existence is a narrow, inward personal adventure in which human beings not only embody a truth that is no one else’s and can be no one else’s, but also are embodiments of such seeming infinite depth that consciousness has no external guarantee outside itself and no place to rest within itself. This evokes questions such as: Am I sane? Am I real? Am I I?

Nothing appears as obvious and immediate and full as self-consciousness, which is the consciousness of individual selfhood to itself, and yet no amount of brooding will make this truth anything but ticklish and shy. There is nothing to which consciousness can relate to assure itself of its own truth or of anything else it determines.

6. The ambiguity of symbols

Only living is like living, as Kierkegaard (1941) insisted, and this reality cannot be reduced to language or even to thought or sensation (because it is all of these at once, and more). The means, primarily words and other symbolic forms, by which we can enunciate conscious truths are insufficient to the reality of experience. In the same way, the systems of ideas, the sciences and humanistic schema, which we devise to assimilate experience actually transform it in their indirect and impersonal and abstract renderings.

Yet we spend life-times in the attempt to communicate our solitariness. There are sciences and arts, and the deliverances they have secured - the rational interventions and the aesthetic performances -

through a translation in to and out from personal consciousness. Nietzsche (1968, p. 482) argued that “we set up a word at the point at which ignorance begins, at which we can see no further, e.g., the word ‘I’, the word ‘do’, the word ‘suffer’ - these are perhaps the horizon of our knowledge, but not ‘truths’”. However, from this horizon it is sometimes possible to ‘glance’ or ‘flash’ at the ticklish truths of human embodiment. The words, the symbolic renderings, do not speak directly or definitively to the human truths of individual embodiment and yet they can act as triggers or as vehicles of surprise. With critical and creative effort and with good will, as Karl Popper concluded (1997), truthful appreciations are often possible that are far-reaching, even if not perfect. Symbols can evoke or spark an insight in flashes.

7. The parochialism of habit

It can also be said that truth can only be glanced at or touched upon in passing because we are commonly immersed in routines of common sense and habit, communalism, nepotism, pride and self-interest that obscure knowledge and its possible true accessing. Iris Murdoch (2001) asserts that to identify the human being as a rational and moral agent, or as a burrowing pinpoint of consciousness ever willing on principle to step back and look at life ironically, critically, and dispassionately, is to ignore the common-sensical background to our conscious lives which effects a cosy and convenient and myopic ground to everyday understanding. Truth is shy and we shy away from truth insofar as we dwell in habitual environments of parochial and self-serving convention, environments that are also the means through which we have learned to make do.

Even if we make an effort to be self-ironical, to inspect carefully the grounds of our everyday being, introspection is no simple tool. Through introspection we encounter the ‘onion’ of the self, the kaleidoscope, the manifold of identity, the versions and layers and moments of consciousness. Truth flashes at us across the ramparts of routine, habit, convention and self-fulfilling expectations.

8. The recourse to myopia

The way in which an everyday, habitual consciousness can act as a buffer or a filter to the truth can occasion both a healthy self-defense and a xenophobic short-sightedness. C. P. Snow (1976) asks the question of how many others we can truly care for as we do ourselves. He argues that the number is very small and that one’s own passing illness, for instance, figures more prominently than others’ fatality. The question is thus whether this ‘shyness’ to truth is a necessary part of individual health and activity.

According to Primo Levi (1996) “[i]f we had to and were able to suffer the sufferings of everyone, we could not live” (p. 39). At best we extend our pity towards the single named victim - the Anne Frank or the John Uncas (Mohican) - while expending less emotion on the myriads and millions who remain in shadow.

We glance at the truth, such as the truth of others’ suffering, only in passing because otherwise the enormity can be too great to bear. The ‘camp dust’, as Russian-liberal discourse came to describe the denizens of the Lager and Gulag, are also the ‘dark people’. The truth can be too painful, too enormous, for an individual to concentrate on with any concerted or conscious effort. It is unbearable to health.

9. The recourse to the banal

The finality or enormity of any truth, including one’s own, can be unbearable to dwell in and on as an everyday accompaniment. It is difficult to function under the constant shadow of death or suffering, or of awareness of atrocity, and the smallness and partiality of everyday awareness can be a necessary, defensive practice. One might say that a certain degree of blitheness, even blindness, with regards to tragedy and even to the contingency, finiteness and complexity of life is necessary to enable action and equanimity. A constant self-consciousness, a constant weighing of options or a constant awareness of different possible perspectives and points of view can make decisiveness, even decision, impossible.

In this vein, Charlotte Delbo (1995) described certain truths as ‘useless’. For example, what use was her knowledge as a result of experiences in Auschwitz-Birkenau as a Communist member of the French Resistance, that hunger made human eyes sparkle while thirst dulled them; or that at night one hoped for life but come the morning one hoped for death. Delbo (1995) concluded that this kind of knowledge must be unrehearsed and unlearned if one wished to go on living. Such evil truth must be left alone beyond the Lager if one wished to maintain the capacity to proceed with a banal life, an equanimous round of experience and relations. There are incongruous contexts in human life and that which is true in one context or register, such as the tragic and atrocious, must be rendered ‘shy’ to others if nausea is not to seep between them in a debilitating, immobilizing fashion.

10. The ethics of partiality

If to know the truth about something is, in a way, to become apprised of its nature or to know something of its entirety, then it is possible to define a sense in which it becomes immoral to know. In this way to

know is to be morally compromised if 'knowing' includes 'understanding'; because one then 'understands' the wicked and unjust. This is a kind of human truth that is important to encompass but only in short measure or in passing.

In a way, a full understanding must necessarily entail a measure of condoning. For example, it is possible to use the fact that a perpetrator of child-abuse was also a victim as a mitigating factor. One could also say that the dictatorial tyrant of family, community or nation-state was prey to a clinical depression, to the brainwashing of a religious cult, or to a misguided paternalism. Primo Levi (1987) stated that understanding carries with it the risk of a kind of moral infection, since to understand is also to compass and hence to identify with the human actions involved. It might remain a civilised duty to know and reflect on what happened but words and deeds that are 'inhuman' or 'counterhuman' in their incivility, wholly without rationality or sympathy, must not be 'understood'. One takes such truths by surprise - takes oneself by surprise - so that they both speak to a commonly shared humanity and insight into the individual self while also positing a way of behaving that is irredeemable.

11. The norm of personality

Knowing as a kind of moral work can also be said to entail an enormous effort of attention since ordinarily one is caught up with one's own personal way of being. One can engineer congruence between self and world such that one's perceptive capacities are focused, trained on or aligned to a particular other, and the knowing of a particular truth can result. However, I imagine that this effort cannot be sustained for long because of the power necessary to achieve it. Things fly away from consciousness, from our focused attention and our capacity to engage, and our minds switch back to themselves. Leonard Woolf (1969) used the image of a force field around a person that acts as a magnetised reflection of the individual's ego. Everything and everyone that enters the force field of the self is given a meaning and value that is imbued with a "curious and strong quality or aura of me myself" (p. 143). To see truths beyond this egocentricity is to practise an attentiveness towards the other that escapes our own phenomenological gravity; sudden flashes of apperception that are difficult to sustain.

Thomas Hardy (2004) spoke of "moments of vision" (p. 6), a sudden and brief illumination whose seemingly magic intensity gave to the world a transparency, one that penetrated to the depths as if it were a dart. However, such insight is momentary, the truth a sudden flash, and soon one's efforts wane and vision returns to a cloudier norm.

12. The complexity of reality

There is perhaps a size to reality and a complexity and diversity that makes its holistic apprehension difficult if not impossible. We gain an appreciation of its truth only in a piecemeal fashion, we see only part at a time - we see reality 'in flashes'. Salman Rushdie (1991) worried that this inevitably made us "partial beings, in all the senses of that phrase" (p. 12), with perceptions that were always fractured and never whole. We know that we depend on the meanings that we make of our world - meanings that we are prepared to 'defend fiercely', 'even to the death' - but at the same time our meanings are inexorably a "shaky edifice [constructed] out of scraps [and] inadequate materials" (Rushdie, 1991, p. 12).

However, while our glimpsing of sections or fragments only of entire truths may mislead (as in the joke of the people who come upon an elephant for the first time and in the dark construe a variety of whole objects from their partial encounters), it need not be the case that what we know in flashes, as parts, is untrue merely because it is incomplete. The snapshot is not untrue; it may be a partial apprehension of the complex whole but such partiality can be a sufficient, even necessary, route to understanding, affording an initial and continuing orientation to the undefined tangle of the world. The glance at the truth offers a flash of insight that serves as a working hypothesis from which the true whole may eventually be deduced. The key lies in the relationship one holds to the glanced at truth, as an hypothesis always calling for being complexified.

Part II: Two cultures

Although the above list is not exhaustive it does raise the question of what it adds up to besides being a personal reaction to Nietzsche's writing. My contention is that although the list is polythetic and informed by a variety of aspects of the self, it indicates that truths of the human condition are significantly lodged in a personal embodiment of individuality, ontogeny, momentariness and positioning. Thus, one of the species of truths to which human beings have access is shy and ticklish and this deserves our appreciation, our respect and our subtle evidencing.

In his Rede Lecture of 1959 at Cambridge, entitled 'The two cultures and the scientific revolution,' C. P. Snow expounded the now famous thesis that a gulf in understanding and respect exists between scientists and literary intellectuals in the modern Western world. This breakdown in communication between the sciences and the humanities has resulted in two cultures existing side by side. However, the parallelism is not benign and could even prove fatal

for our world as it may result in a practical, intellectual and creative loss. The power of science is such that its magnanimous deployment could eradicate the divide between the world's rich and poor, between the disenfranchised and free, and improve the well-being of all. Remaining innocent of this potential is criminal; it is both a hindrance to solving the world's problems and conducive to the barbaric mis-use of science (a mis-use that culminated in Auschwitz). Snow (1959) ponders how many literary intellectuals could describe the Second Law of Thermodynamics, although this is the scientific equivalent of asking, 'Have you read a work of Shakespeare?' He concludes, "So the great edifice of modern physics goes up, and the majority of the cleverest people in the western world have about as much insight into it as their Neolithic ancestors would have had" (1959 p. 16).

Snow's (1959) argument is relevant here for three reasons. The first reason is related to Roger Kimball's (1994 p. 10) reflection on the resonance that exists between the divide Snow (1959) identified and that which today distinguishes a 'scientific' viewpoint in academic culture (characterized by an expectation that an observer can objectively make unbiased and non-culturally embedded observations about nature) from a social-scientific and 'constructivist' viewpoint (characterized by a view of the scientific method as embedded within language and culture, even to the point of necessitating an outright rejection of empiricism and the idea of factual truth). The second reason involves an acknowledgement of Snow's (1959) insight and pre-science. Snow (1959) underscored the transformative power of science and warned of its easy mis-use in the hands of the morally incompetent. Thus, the espousing of an 'innocent' quietude by literary intellectuals and the relativism and multiculturalism of social constructivism provides little censure or defence against the suicide bomber and terrorist.

The third reason for Snow's (1959) relevance is less benign as it concerns his utilitarian depiction of scientific praxis. Snow (1959, pp. 6-7) argues that the scientist is careful to differentiate between "the individual condition of man and his social condition". The former condition may continually be characterised by a kind of irredeemable, tragic loneliness. Thus, we live alone in our bodies (with the possible exception of triumphal moments of love and creativity) and we die alone. However, the social condition is not irredeemable because the general or average conditions of human life can alter and can be improved. The social condition should therefore be the scientist's concern - he should strive to ameliorate the average condition of humanity so that hunger, disease and ignorance might be increasingly overcome.

Snow (1959) has been criticised for this utilitarian distinction, particularly by F. R. Leavis (1972), who writes, "What is the 'social condition' that has nothing to do with the 'individual condition'? ... Only in living individuals is life there' (p. 53). I believe that Snow's (1959) view is indicative of a continuing definition of 'scientific soundness' as entailing a level of generality and abstraction and enumeration that succeeds in replacing the individual with the social, the unique with the statistically significant. The following definition is characteristic: "The term *evidence-based practice* (EBP) or *empirically-supported treatment* (EST) refers to preferential use of mental and behavioral health interventions for which systematic empirical research has provided evidence of statistically significant effectiveness as treatments for specific problems' (Dickerson & Sharfstein, 2010, p. 382). In contrast, the concern of the present article, and of this special edition as a whole, is to point towards notions of evidencing human truths that are both 'empirical' and 'scientific' and yet do not necessarily narrowly concern averaging, replication and easy retrieval. These human truths are just as valuable as 'scientific' truths for facilitating health interventions as well as all manner of other purposes, including aesthetics.

Nietzsche represents a very significant protagonist in the context of this argument. Nietzsche, the famous debunker of authority – debunker of truths based merely on tradition, convention, hearsay, herd-like temerity and mimesis (his catchphrase "God is dead" also appears in *The Gay Science*, 2001, p. 125) - was both a respecter of scientific method and a purveyor of different species of evidential truth, including the pragmatic and the poetic. Nietzsche understands the term science to mean rigorous thinking. The scientific methodology thus includes cautious restraint, circumspection and scepticism concerning existing pieties, as well as a willingness to constantly experiment with alternative ways of being. Science is distinguished from lower forms of culture such as religion, which involve 'symbols and forms' and are enslaved to prior convictions and result in a debilitating descent into dogma. Science has the ability to illuminate our traditional human practices of symbolic construction (that is, constructing the world-as-idea) and "for moments at least [assist us in] lifting ourselves above the whole process" (Nietzsche, 1994 p. 15). A real supra-human world does exist and it is Nietzsche's (1994) prognosis that "the steady and arduous progress of science ... will ultimately celebrate its greatest triumph in an *ontogeny of thought*" (p. 24, emphasis in original). Thus, Nietzsche (1994) argues, although religion and the arts may be "a flower of civilization" they do not approach "*the root of the world* [or the] the true essence of the world and knowledge of it" (p. 33, emphasis in original). Science can lead to the

acquisition of indisputable truths that outlast all sceptical storms and on the basis of which one may decide to found 'eternal' works.

However, it is at this point that Nietzsche (1994) introduces a principle that complexifies, if not contradicts, his previously stated position. While on the one hand it is true that scientific methodology can deliver us ineluctable truths, such as truths concerning "the dietetics of health" (p. 27), on the other hand "the entire scientific procedure has pursued the task of dissolving everything thing-like (material) into movements" (p. 27). Through language, humans invent entities and unities where none actually exist. Concepts such as identity, individuality, thinghood, cause and effect exist within linguistic traditions of concept and conviction. The very concept of 'number' is an invention whose (fictional) premise is that there are things that repeat themselves identically or similarly and which can therefore be counted. However, there are no 'things' and nothing is 'identical'. "To a world that is not our idea, the laws of number are completely inapplicable: they are valid only in the human world" (Nietzsche, 1994 p. 27). Thus, for 'moments at least' science lifts us above the process of symbolic constructionism to reveal the true nature of the world to be one of movement and flux.

According to Nietzsche the solution to this complexity lies in the notion of momentariness. Science lifts us momentarily above human worlds of symbol, concept and conviction to an appreciation of the essential and eternal that concerns motion and flux. It teaches us that all our language of thinghood and identity is metaphor, illusion and interpretation. It teaches us that there is only flux, forever. However, this truth is unpleasant and is conducive to debilitation and nihilism. Human beings need meaningfulness or else there is only nausea. Science also teaches us that some of our metaphors, illusions and interpretations can be more compensatory, comforting and empowering than others, and that we have the capability to make the world into an idea that fulfils us.

In other words, life is fluxional and meaningless and for moments we can know and accept this. However, we still are capable and needful of creating sublime illusions with which to tolerate reality's unpleasantness. An example of this is the 'truths' (the fictions) by which we live in terms of their being 'better' or 'worse' in their usefulness. Language is a creative and plastic medium and we therefore need to ask ourselves whether the discourse we use, with its particular concepts and relations ('individual', 'sickness', 'statistical significance'), assist us towards leading lives of empowerment and fulfilment instead of lives of enslavement and resentment.

'Science' is that which reminds us that all human culture is fictional, illusory. Nietzsche (2001) advises us against descending into the 'religious' trap of mistaking the humanly constructed for the truth. Instead, we need to repossess ourselves of language as a creative, compensatory tool (rather than being possessed by language) so that we can experiment creatively with ways of being that provide personal fulfilment. Nietzsche (2001) dubbed this our acting as "the poets of our life" (#299). Whether in the most mundane matter or the most consequential, human beings must seize the moment and be the individual artists of an original life. The individual might ask: "Does this suit as a truth for me? I shall try it". [Here are] human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who gives himself or herself laws, who creates himself or herself" (Nietzsche, 2001, #335).

In this argument it is possible to recognise the route between Nietzsche and existentialism ("Man defines himself by his project", Sartre, 1963, p. 150). However, the argument can also be used to facilitate what I take to be the issue of the subtilising of evidence concerning the human condition. Two things need to be considered. The first concerns the way in which the language and concepts of what we take to be scientific practice can have a constructive character of a particular moral kind. We can ask whether the enumeration and the statistical construction of a phenomenon contain the appropriate moral weight. We can ask whether it is sufficiently empowering, to always construe the world as if its truths replicated one another in this way. Thus, according to Nietzsche, once the historical individual, that temporary consciousness of flux, is made part of the picture the objective reality and moral quality of science are altered. This is in keeping with Iris Murdoch's (2001) statement that "love is knowledge of the individual" (pp. 25-7). Second, Nietzsche shows how the language and concepts that we take to be true are instrumental phenomena with practical consequences. This is summed up by W. I. Thomas's (Thomas & Thomas, 1928) aphorism: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (pp. 571-572). Human beings inhabit their truths and all manner of outcomes and behaviours, from placebo-based healthiness to suicide bombing, are consequent upon the fictions that individuals make out to be factual (whether deemed to be independent of their will or not). Our human reflexivity makes us infinitely more complex creatures compared with that which lacks consciousness. To insist on perceiving the real in relation to the progressing life of the conscious individual can make a more empowering, fulfilling truth.

Where does this leave my argument? Iris Murdoch (2001) insists that there are not 'two cultures', the scientific and the literary, instead there is only one

human intellectual domain. Science is an interesting and important and potentially dangerous section but “the most essential and fundamental” (Murdoch, 2001, p. 33) is our apprising ourselves of how to understand concrete human situations, to assess and define live personalities. That is why “it is and always will be more important to know about Shakespeare than to know about any scientist” (Murdoch, 2001, p. 33). This need not be taken as Murdoch’s tit-for-tat (literary-intellectual) riposte to Snow’s (1959) comments. Rather it points to a vision of the narrowly ‘scientific’, the specifically enumerative, statistical and average, woven into a broader ‘philosophical anthropology’ (Sartre 1963). What is seen as true of the human condition centrally concerns the ontogeny of thought; that is, how we come to the consciousness that we have. The root of the world, its eternal essence, is that life is fluxional and meaningless. Our human capacity to inhabit a scientific consciousness, for moments at least, enables us to appreciate this eternal flux and essential meaninglessness. As humans we are also capable of creating sublime illusions by virtue of which we are able to tolerate reality’s unpleasantness. We act as the poets of our lives and inhabit an artistic consciousness. These can be seen as two aspects of our human embodiment, our human nature (as against the two ‘cultures’), we are thus capable of deploying both scientific and artistic truths in our lives. However, according to Nietzsche both these types of truth are mediated in vital ways by our bodies. Hence the importance of estimating “the dietetics of health” (Nietzsche, 1994, p. 27), or the body’s optimal functioning.

In order to inaugurate the best of our humanity, Nietzsche wrote (1979 p. 101), “one must first convince the body ... the right place [to begin] is the body, demeanour, diet, physiology”. It is in this way that I would incorporate Nietzsche’s (2001) insight concerning shy and ticklish truths, and make my own argument concerning the place of such truths in an attempt to do justice to the complexities of human experience in a social-scientific framework. The experience of shy and ticklish truths is an aspect of human consciousness. Such truths are polythetic, they lead to both scientific truths and poetic truths. While some shy and ticklish truthful perceptions pertain to the artistic construction of a life of meaning that is an individual’s personal life-project (Rapport 2003) others pertain to scientific insights concerning the eternal nature of our fluxional universe.

What is required of a social science is an inquiry into the ontogeny of human thought that includes different species of perception. I believe that one possible species of perception involves a perception that touches upon reality in passing, that glances at it or flashes at it, and so comes upon truths, both scientific and artistic, that are shy and ticklish. To paraphrase Nietzsche one final time: The variegated nature of human consciousness is profound and in order to appreciate both how it partakes of the fluxional universe and how it construes fictional identities for itself is to marshal evidence that includes the ‘flashy’, the ‘ticklish’ and the ‘shy’.

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