The Gay Science marks the transition from Nietzsche’s positivist middle works to the mature philosophy for which he is best known. It contains his first discussion of the theory of eternal recurrence along with his first announcement of the death of God, and it also hints at the theory of will to power that would be expressed more directly just a year later in Thus Spoke Zarathustra. But it is not just this position in Nietzsche’s corpus that distinguishes The Gay Science. The book also employs the widest variety of genres of any of Nietzsche’s works. In its second edition, it comprises a retrospective preface, a ‘prelude’ in rhymes, five separate ‘books’ composed of numbered sections ranging in length from a single sentence to a couple of pages, and an appendix of ‘songs’. Nietzsche says little concerning this diversity of styles, leaving it to the reader to determine how everything fits together. In addition, The Gay Science is the only work that Nietzsche expanded significantly in its second edition. While other books received a new preface or foreword, or were combined into a single volume in later editions, the first edition of The Gay Science was expanded through the addition of the entire fifth book and the appendix. Nietzsche must have come to regard the first edition as incomplete. Another distinctive feature of the work, and perhaps the most important, is its focus on the aims, methods, and motives of philosophy itself. When Nietzsche asks whether there could be such a thing as ‘gay science’, and suggests we might want or even need such a practice, he is calling into question the traditional picture of philosophical activity and suggesting an alternative. While it’s clear from reading any of Nietzsche’s philosophical writings that he is not trying to be straightforwardly ‘scientific’ – and that his methods and aspirations differ radically from both the system-building of nineteenth-century German idealism and the ‘rigorous science’ of early twentieth-century phenomenology – his reasons for writing as he does are on display most clearly in The Gay Science.

I will begin by considering Nietzsche’s notion of gay science itself, and this discussion will shape the commentary on the five books of The Gay Science that follows. But the reader should keep in mind that approaching the book in this way inevitably leaves out much of value. I hope that my treatment of some central themes will serve as a model for the reader’s own engagement with great diversity of styles, subjects and questions that constitute The Gay Science.
What is gay science?

When Nietzsche tells the reader that ‘this entire book is really nothing but an amusement’ (GS P: 1), it is important to keep in mind that a philosopher’s amusement (and especially Nietzsche’s amusement) may bear little resemblance to that of the average person. But can a philosopher’s amusement still be something philosophical? Or is anything lighthearted and gay necessarily frivolous – a mere diversion from the serious business of pursuing the truth? These questions lie at the heart of The Gay Science.

The title of this work will probably strike the reader as an oxymoron. The rigour, focus, and precision we associate with ‘science’ (and which a German would associate even more strongly with ‘Wissenschaft’) would seem to exclude from the realm of science any activity marked by the lightheartedness, merry-making, or jauntiness suggested by the German term translated as ‘gay’ – ‘fröhlich’. In a laboratory, such activities would at best serve as means to relax and recuperate from the hard work of scientific investigation, and at worst would threaten to undermine the scientific process. But in either case, to frolic about is not to engage in science (the etymological relation between ‘frolic’ and ‘fröhlich’ is pertinent here). Is the same true of philosophy? According to Nietzsche, most philosophers are prejudiced against the very idea of a gay science: ‘“Where laughter and gaiety are found, thinking is good for nothing” – that is the prejudice of [a] serious beast against all “gay science”. Well then, let us prove it a prejudice!’ (GS 327). Could it be that the philosophical activity of uncovering and assessing the prejudices that shape our lives is itself shaped by a prejudice concerning the methods appropriate to engaging in this activity? The most direct way to prove that this is so is to produce something that is both lighthearted and undeniably philosophical, and this is what Nietzsche sets out to do in The Gay Science, which is thus both about philosophical methodology and, one hopes, an instance of a novel philosophical activity. By engaging in the experiment of producing a work that employs poems, songs, jokes, and quips for the sake of making philosophical progress, Nietzsche aims to demonstrate that philosophy need not be an absolutely serious business (see GS 51 for some relevant remarks on experimentation). He is also interested in establishing the stronger claim that philosophy is at its best when laughter and wisdom ‘form an alliance’ (GS 1) and ‘artistic energies’ supplement and shape scientific thought (GS 113). It is up to the reader to evaluate whether Nietzsche’s experiment is a success, but in order to facilitate this evaluation I will note a few potential benefits of a gay philosophy.

First of all, since laughter is undeniably invigorating, the gaiety of this book could play an instrumental role in our philosophical activity by making our minds move in potentially productive ways. Nietzsche often contrasts his own playful writing with the brooding (GS 381), mechanical (GS 327) or passive (GS Rhyme 44) work of others. Philosophy is arguably in need of vigour because too much of it is done by sedentary people in unremarkable settings such as classrooms, libraries, or offices. Nietzsche himself did much of his thinking while hiking in the Alps or strolling through Genoa (see GS 291), and he regarded a lively state of body and mind as essential to philosophy (GS 280). Gay writing could put us in this state.

Second, a lighthearted philosopher freed from the serious business of producing arguments, objections, and replies could be more likely to hit upon or elicit questions that open up new fields of investigation. Consider the following passage.

The joyless one. – One single joyless person is enough to create constant sullenness and dark skies for an entire household, and only a miracle can cause that one person to be lacking! Happiness is not nearly as contagious a disease – why is that?

(GS 239)
Yes, why is that? Nietzsche offers no explanation for this difference between joylessness and happiness, but his posing of the question should lead us to reflect on how emotions are shared, how they originate and fade away, and perhaps on why some emotions are especially fragile. There are many questions in *The Gay Science*, and most of them are honest questions posed to us as readers, not riddles to be solved by producing Nietzsche’s preferred answer (in this way, the book resembles Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*). Some sections pose questions that Nietzsche himself tackles in later works. For example, his call to consider the history of punishment and cruelty (GS 7) clearly anticipates central themes of *On the Genealogy of Morals*. And some questions that interest Nietzsche are only implicit in the work. Consider Nietzsche’s appeal to a saying he attributes to Homer — ‘the bards tell many a lie’ — to support his claim that philosophers should not support their claims by appealing to the sayings of poets (GS 84). What are we to make of this? That Nietzsche does not regard himself as a philosopher, or Homer as a poet? That the rules that apply to other philosophers do not apply to Nietzsche? Perhaps the reader’s formulation of questions concerning the demarcation of intellectual activity is one intended result of this passage.

Nietzsche’s characterization of gay science as a ‘saturnalia’ of the mind (GS P: 1) points to a third benefit. Just as the Roman festival of Saturnalia exhibited the contingency of social mores by temporarily permitting their violation, the carnivalesque spirit of *The Gay Science* stands opposed to the view of ‘moralties and religions’ (described in GS 1) that our practices are grounded in timeless, authoritative norms that are independent of culture and history. The opposition between the moral or religious stance that ‘there is something one is absolutely forbidden [. . .] to laugh at’ (GS 1) and Nietzsche’s willingness to interrogate anything at all through laughter and mockery appears throughout this book. If Nietzsche succeeds in using lightheartedness to achieve a critical distance from the practices and beliefs that shape our day-to-day lives, that attitude clearly ought to have a place in philosophy. And lightheartedness would at the very least be more pleasant to experience than the sickness, malaise, and despair that Nietzsche also regards as capable of uncovering contingency in our lives (see D 114).

A fourth potential benefit of lighthearted philosophical activity is its potential to put us in touch with (more of) the truth. Nietzsche remarks that the seriousness typical of philosophical activity might disclose to us only some of the truths relevant to life: ‘it can happen that it is precisely with his ardent seriousness that someone betrays how shallow and undemanding his mind has been in playing the field of knowledge so far’ (GS 88). Lightheartedness benefits the truth-seeking person both by disclosing new truths (GS 380–81) and by enabling that person to endure or even embrace particularly troubling aspects of existence (GS 107). According to Nietzsche, the lightheartedness that discloses truths and makes them bearable is characteristic of a sphere of human life often regarded as antagonistic to philosophical thought, namely the arts. Throughout *The Gay Science*, we are told that the playful reinterpretation and recombination of reality characteristic of the production of art can facilitate our pursuit of truth by providing us with novel perspectives on phenomena that interest us. Just this, according to Nietzsche, is ‘what one should learn from artists’ (GS 299).

If gay science has these benefits, then it is arguably the best sort of philosophy. Nietzsche will later draw this conclusion explicitly. Just after announcing yet again his own preference for gay science, he attacks Hobbes for having (allegedly) said that ‘laughing is a bad infirmity of human nature, which every thinking mind will strive to overcome’, and Nietzsche postulates in opposition ‘an order of rank among philosophers depending on the rank of their laughter’ (BGE 294). That laughter, truthfulness and wisdom are intertwined and interdependent is a central theme of *The Gay Science*. 
The first section of The Gay Science begins on a serious note by postulating a single end beneath the diversity of human endeavours: ‘to do what benefits the preservation of the human race’ (GS 1). In addition to signaling Nietzsche’s naturalistic commitment to understanding human behaviour as a special case of animal behaviour, this remark also introduces a general theme of the work, namely the lack of fit between our self-image and the facts of our situation. In this case, Nietzsche is suggesting that while we commonly take our own behaviour, or the behaviour of others, to be unreasonable, evil, or selfish – and for this reason contrary to the interests of the species – it is all ultimately in service of preserving the human ‘herd’. As a result of our misconception, we cannot possibly ‘laugh from the whole truth’ of our situation as we perhaps ought to. We simply are not in touch with it.

In this section, Nietzsche is primarily concerned with our relation to ‘moralties and religions’ championed by ‘teachers of the purpose of existence’ – characters who are said to preserve the species by providing allegedly timeless accounts of the goodness of human action and human life in general. Their accounts of why a human being ‘ought to advance himself and his neighbor’, or why ‘life is worth living’, preserve the species by motivating us, reassuring us, and providing us with confidence and a sense of purpose. But according to Nietzsche, all of these moral or religious pictures of human life eventually lose their grip on us and are ‘vanquished by laughter’. This feature of Nietzsche’s socio-biological account of our beliefs seems plausible enough when we consider the vast range of views in morality and religion that have come on the scene and perished over the course of human history. But implicit in this discussion is a more pressing question concerning our present way of life – why think that it is any more resilient or authoritative? Nietzsche concludes by finally posing the question of where ‘we’ might stand in relation to the rise and fall of moralities and religions that impute a purpose to existence. While readers of Nietzsche are likely inclined to locate themselves outside this cycle, one aim of the book is to suggest that we are likely mistaken about this, and that we may also be mistaken about what exactly is involved in living ‘outside’ morality or religion.

The second section, entitled ‘Intellectual conscience’, expands on the theme of self-misunderstanding. Here Nietzsche states incredulously that most people lack an intellectual conscience: ‘I mean: to the great majority it is not contemptible to believe this or that and to live accordingly without first becoming aware of the final and most certain reasons pro and con’ (GS 2). This remark clearly signals Nietzsche’s commitment to living his intellectual life in a responsible manner, but he is equally concerned with his tendency to impute his own commitments, tendencies, and feelings to others. Nietzsche concludes: ‘Some folly keeps persuading me that every person has this feeling, simply as human. That is my type of injustice’ (GS 2). Here again he is hinting at our tendency to project into the world what is idiosyncratic in ourselves, in our culture, or in our species. In the case of Nietzsche’s injustice, which he offers up as an example for the reader, this tendency is a matter of understanding the common person, who is said to lack an intellectual conscience, only as a pale shadow of himself (see also GS 166). Like other rare, noble persons, Nietzsche often lacks a proper estimate of ‘the rule’ of human behaviour, or his relation to it (GS 3).

Book 1 emphasizes the importance for philosophy of what is common to us as modern human animals. Nietzsche notes that ‘everything usual, near, and indispensable, in short, that which most preserved the species, and in general the rule of humanity hitherto, was inequitably judged and on the whole slandered in favour of the exceptions’, and he has high praise for those who become ‘the advocate of the rule’ (GS 55). This is a matter of recognizing just how
much of what we value in our lives is grounded in common, all-too-human dispositions. But what exactly are these dispositions? Nietzsche provides some details when he remarks that he has discovered that ‘the ancient humanity and animality, indeed the whole prehistory and past of all sentient being, continues within me to fabulate, to love, to hate, and to infer’ (GS 54). What Nietzsche has in common with other humans and animals – the rule of sentient life – underlies his own imagination, passion, and reason. This means that self-knowledge is, to a large extent, a matter of knowing the rule – a fact that underlies Nietzsche’s later interest in generating a psychology of the average person (see BGE 26) and a genealogy of our shared moral practices (see GM P: 1–2). The Gay Science serves as the starting point for these projects insofar as it provides concrete examples of how theoretical reason (GS 111) and our altruistic practical tendencies (GS 116–19) were shaped by evolutionary forces. I will consider both cases in my discussion of Book 3. Here in Book 1 Nietzsche aims only to provide further evidence of the importance of knowing the rule of sentient life by pointing to the limits of self-knowledge through introspection (GS 8, 11, 15), and by beginning to articulate very general theses concerning the behaviour of living beings that will shape his later accounts of human psychology.

Already in Book 1 there are hints of Nietzsche’s thesis that all human action exhibits a will to power. He states, for example, that when we aim to benefit or harm others, our actions are in truth concerned only with making manifest whatever power we have in relation to them (GS 13). As is often the case, this discussion presents specific psychological insights (e.g. that an inclination to harm others derives from a lack of power) in order to support a very general claim about human motivation. Other reflections on our aims as living beings stress the tension between these aims and the demands of moral thought (GS 26). In the second edition of The Gay Science, Nietzsche will identify the will to power as the most fundamental character of life – the will of a living being considered merely as such (GS 349). But in 1882 that view is just beginning to take form.

**Book 2**

The first section of Book 2 addresses ‘realists’ who believe that their rational control over their passions enables them to apprehend objects as they really are, independent of human desire, prejudice, or fantasy. Nietzsche ridicules these figures for thinking that their self-understanding as sober-minded realists corresponds to the truth of their situation. In keeping with his discussion of our common humanity and animality in GS 54, Nietzsche tells them, ‘you still carry around the valuations of things that originate in the passions and loves of former centuries’ (GS 57). For Nietzsche, the ‘sobriety’ of these figures is in truth a love of reality, while the reality they love is itself constituted by arational attitudes and dispositions within them that have grown and changed over time. This position, in combination with Nietzsche’s earlier denial of a thing-in-itself lurking behind appearances (GS 54), generates an unusual position on the metaphysics of objects, according to which everything that exists outside our sensory experience depends in some way on us for its existence. But Nietzsche does not bother to articulate this subjective idealism in any detail. And he seems to have little interest in reconciling this position with his naturalistic accounts of human behaviour. Instead, he concludes by considering the relation that he (and those like him) bear to these realists: ‘There is no “reality” for us – and not for you either, you sober ones – we are not nearly as strange to one another as you think, and perhaps our good will to transcend drunkennes is just as respectable as your belief that you are altogether incapable of drunkennes’ (GS 57). The suggestion here is that a person inclined towards Nietzsche’s assessment of these realists ought to worry that her own self-understanding is susceptible to the same sort of error and ignorance found in the naïve realist.
The following section draws a conclusion concerning the reality described in GS 57. Since the real changes as our subjective attitudes and dispositions change, it is in principle malleable for beings like us: ‘In the long run it is enough to create new names and valuations and appearances of truth in order to create new “things”’ (GS 58). This creation is also a destruction of reality as it was previously constituted: ‘Only as creators can we destroy!’ Nietzsche is suggesting that if we were able to ‘transcend drunkenness’ and thereby survey the human tendencies that play a role in constituting objects, reality itself could in principle shift in response to intentional changes to those tendencies. But how could we create new ‘names’, ‘valuations’, and ‘appearances’? Nietzsche answers this question indirectly by shifting his focus to the activity he most strongly associates with a gay attitude towards ourselves and our lives, namely the arts.

Nietzsche’s remarks on art and the arts are rather diverse and consider, for example, the relation of poetry to other genres (GS 92), the varieties of garrulousness in writing (GS 97), individual artists such as Shakespeare (GS 98) and Wagner (GS 99), and what is distinctive in German art (GS 103–5). These remarks emerge from a more general concern with grasping and expanding the roles of art in human life. If one wanted to express in a single sentence Nietzsche’s position on what art (considered both as activity and as product) can do for the philosopher, it would be this: art enables us to see things differently. By drawing our attention to phenomena and possibilities that we would otherwise overlook, it expands the scope of philosophy. And more specifically, art enables us to shift the relations of human beings to their environments in such a way that reality takes new and potentially invigorating forms. This use of art appears most clearly in Book 3, where Nietzsche reminds us that ‘only we have created the world that concerns human beings’ (GS 301) and encourages us to become the ‘poets of our lives’ (GS 299). To be sure, the playful recombination of reality is just one possible role that art might play for us, and Nietzsche recognizes that it can also provide a release from a tedious life (GS 86) or glorify what we currently find most valuable in life (GS 78, 85, 370). But it is art’s ability to create new ‘things’ by playfully reconfiguring reality as we know it that is essential to Nietzsche’s articulation of a gay science.

*The Gay Science* takes a serious turn in the final section of Book 2, entitled ‘Our ultimate gratitude to art’. Out of the blue, Nietzsche proclaims that only art is capable of serving as a counter-force to our honest, scientific pursuit of the truth concerning our situation, which would otherwise result in ‘nausea and suicide’ (GS 107). Thus, we ought to be grateful to art, according to Nietzsche, because it plays a necessary role in preserving us in existence. But why think that honest pursuit of the truth would lead to suicidal despair? Nietzsche identifies the ‘insight into delusion and error as a condition of cognitive and sensate existence’ that is provided by ‘science’ as the source of this despair, but he offers no further explanation. Perhaps the reader is to reflect on the potential disappointment of the ‘realists’ of GS 57. Or perhaps the announcement of the death of God that opens the next book is intended to substantiate this point. In either case, the following remark indicates how art might enable us to avoid nausea and suicide: ‘As an aesthetic phenomenon existence is still bearable to us, and art furnishes us with the eye and hand and above all the good conscience to be able to make such a phenomenon of ourselves’ (GS 107). There are echoes here of Nietzsche’s central claim, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, that it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified (BT 5). By this he means, roughly, that a person who grasps the deep truth of her situation can continue to regard her life as worth living only if her view of that situation is shaped by the two artistic drives described in that work, the Apollonian and the Dionysian. While Book 5 of *The Gay Science* contains some interesting reflections on the pessimistic position of *The Birth of Tragedy* (see GS 357, 370), Nietzsche has left behind much of the theoretical apparatus of that work – the Schopenhauerian metaphysics, the talk of two

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*Scott Jenkins*
opposed drives – and at the same time expanded his account of how a person might take an aesthetic stance towards herself and her life. His talk of viewing oneself ‘from an artistic distance’ (GS 107) serves only as a placeholder for the various artistic techniques for seeing things differently.

**Book 3**

Book 3 begins with the announcement for which Nietzsche is best known – ‘God is dead’. The phrase appears twice in Book 3, once in Nietzsche’s own voice (GS 108), and once in the words of a ‘madman’ who uses a lantern to search for God in a brightly lit marketplace (GS 125). I will begin with a brief discussion of the second appearance of the phrase because it suggests a point that is absolutely essential to understanding the sense Nietzsche attaches to the death of God. Here is Nietzsche’s description of the madman’s reception in the marketplace.

> Since many of those who did not believe in God were standing around together just then, he caused great laughter. Has he been lost, then? asked one. Did he lose his way like a child? asked another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone to sea? Emigrated? – Thus they shouted and laughed, one interrupting the other. The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. ‘Where is God?’ he cried; ‘I’ll tell you! We have killed him – you and I!’

(GS 125)

These people addressed by the madman are not just non-believers; they have a complete lack of regard for religious life, and they amuse themselves by comparing God to a confused child. That the madmen proceeds to tell just these people that God is dead tells us that his words are very different from an expression of atheism. While popular culture typically presents Nietzsche’s proclamation that God is dead as directed at pious persons or their churches, Nietzsche’s words are actually directed at an atheist in the ‘marketplace’ of modern, secular life. It is this person – the sort of person who is drawn to read Nietzsche – who fails to realize that God is dead. But what does this even mean? And why is the madman carrying a lantern in the daylight?

The madman’s words and actions make more sense in the context of Nietzsche’s first announcement of the death of God. Here is the complete text of the first section of Book 3.

> New battles. – After Buddha was dead, they still showed his shadow in a cave for centuries – a tremendous, gruesome shadow. God is dead; but given the way people are, there may still for millennia be caves in which they show his shadow. – And we – we must still defeat his shadow as well!

(GS 108)

Talk of shadows shown in caves should bring to mind Plato’s allegory of the cave, in which persons who initially regard mere shadows as ultimately real later come to see that these shadows depend upon other entities that are more fundamental and also ‘higher’, i.e. more valuable. The experience through which Nietzsche and his madman guide us is quite different. What we are to discover behind the shadows is only the empty space of the God that is dead and remains dead. There is something not just paradoxical but incoherent about a shadow cast by nothing, and Nietzsche is suggesting that some parts of the world inhabited by modern atheists are similarly incoherent. They make no sense independent of the view that the world is the manifestation of a more fundamental, timeless order (such as Plato’s forms or the mind of God) that both explains the phenomena we encounter and determines how we ought to engage
with them. Thus, what the people in the marketplace fail to realize is that their own lives are actually incoherent without the faith they have left behind. And the madman is a madman only because his perception of the situation he shares with others is so different from their perception that he seems to them to be insane (see GS 76).

This relation of the atheists in the marketplace to the madman serves as a model for the relation of Nietzsche’s readers to Nietzsche. While we likely take our modern worldview and practices to be more coherent now that various bits of faith and superstition have been excised from them, Nietzsche is asserting that at some deep level our lives fail to make sense. He suggests, beginning in GS 109, that the standards of thought and action constitutive of modern life – truthfulness and morality – have no foundation independent of the generally theological worldview that we have left behind.

Nietzsche begins his examination of scientific truthfulness by urging us to beware of anthropomorphizing nature by thinking of it as a living being, machine, or artwork – indeed, as having any discernible order whatsoever. In opposition to this view, he maintains that ‘the total character of the world [. . .] is for all eternity chaos, not in the sense of a lack of necessity but of a lack of order, organization, form, [etc.]’ (GS 109). Nietzsche’s claim that the world is ‘chaos’ is itself anthropomorphic, but not objectionably so; it is the negative claim that the world lacks the order that we are moved to ascribe to it when we engage in theoretical activity. Nietzsche’s right to postulate this lack derives exclusively from his insight into the human and animal origins of our shared worldview.

The course of Nietzsche’s reflection shifts when he asks, at the end of GS 109, ‘when may we begin to naturalize humanity with a pure, newly discovered, newly redeemed nature?’ The project of identifying and eliminating shadows of God is now to be pursued within psychology, with a special emphasis on cognitive capacities that play a significant role in our construction of a worldview. Nietzsche considers the origin of knowledge (GS 110), the origin of logic (GS 111), and the origin of causal explanation (GS 112), and in all three contexts he aims to undermine the assumption that our cognitive dispositions – which have been shaped by our evolutionary and cultural history – are uniquely suited to disclosing the ultimate structure of reality. To consider just one point from this discussion, Nietzsche maintains that our standards of logic, which he understands quite generally as rules governing what follows from what, leave us opposed to the sceptical suspension of judgement because survival depends upon making judgements on weak evidence: ‘No living being would be preserved had not the opposite disposition – to affirm rather than suspend judgment, to err and make things up rather than wait, to agree rather than deny, to pass judgment rather than be just – been bred to become extraordinarily strong’ (GS 111). A cognitive tendency (or associated logical standard) that exists because it increases the chances of survival is unlikely to be ideally suited to disclosing the truth. The conclusion of these reflections is summed up in the final line of GS 121: ‘Life is not an argument; the conditions of life might include error’. That a concept, belief, or logical standard is so deeply embedded in our lives that it serves as a ‘condition of life’ typically leads us to believe that it simply must connect us with the world as it truly is. This assumption might be reasonable if we had any right to believe existence answers to our needs, or is designed for our sake, but those beliefs are just shadows of God.

Nietzsche’s remarks on morality in Book 3 similarly maintain that the moral standards we regard as authoritative have a long, complicated history that connects them with the survival of the species, social group, or ‘herd’. The main target in GS 116–19 is altruism, which Nietzsche regards as a disposition in the individual that benefits only the larger group: ‘With morality the individual is instructed to be a function of the herd and to ascribe value to himself only
as a function’ (GS 116). The idea that our standards of right and wrong, and the ‘pangs of conscience’ we experience when we violate them (GS 117), are at root just a ‘herd instinct in the individual’ (GS 116) appears already in the opening sentences of GS 1. This picture of morality, which contrasts sharply with the Christian or Platonist account, enables the individual to call into question the authority of the moral demand that we concern ourselves with the well-being of others. Nietzsche is also suspicious of a more individualistic ethics that understands virtuous actions as those that promote the health of the soul; he maintains that even if a person could conceive of his own health in enough detail to make its pursuit possible, ‘the great question would still remain whether we can do without illness, even for the development of our virtue’ (GS 120). Why think that virtue could require illness? Nietzsche suggests (probably speaking from personal experience – see Ecce Homo) that illness facilitates the acquisition of knowledge and self-knowledge that is constitutive of the virtue of some persons. In such cases, the pursuit of health leads away from virtue, and could even indicate cowardice in the healthy person.

These remarks only scratch the surface of Nietzsche’s critique of science and morality, but instead of considering further details of this critique, I want to consider instead why just these topics appear in his discussion of the death of God. Traditionally, doctrines of the True and the Good have guided human life by providing all persons with objective standards of correctness in thought and action. These standards provide a basic orientation for the person who asks ‘How should I live?’ But if a modern, secular person comes to regard her allegiance to these standards as essentially involving a shadow of God, the practical question of how to go on in life becomes much more difficult to answer. This is why Nietzsche turns to navigational metaphors, telling us that ‘we have forsaken the land and gone to sea [and] have demolished the land behind us’ (GS 124). Placed on this unbounded sea, and freed from the constraints of timeless standards of thought or action, we may travel wherever we wish without fear of crashing into a rocky shore. But this increase in our freedom of navigation comes at a high price. There now seems to be no reason to travel in one direction rather than another. We might now wish for some land to serve as an objective point of orientation, but the section concludes, ‘Woe, when homesickness for the land overcomes you, as if there had been more freedom there – and there is no more “land!” ’ (GS 124). Similarly, the madman fuels our anxiety when he asks, ‘Is there still an up and a down? Aren’t we straying as though through an infinite nothing?’ (GS 125). This state of anxious disorientation threatens to undermine our sense that anything at all is worth doing.²

So how are we to deal with the problem of lacking orientation in our lives following the death of God? This, for Nietzsche, is the central question that confronts us as philosophers who cannot return to ancient or modern doctrines of the True and the Good (as he will put the point at the beginning of the fifth book, for us, ‘belief in God has become unbelievable’ (GS 343)). Nietzsche provides no straightforward answer to this question, but he does point to the general form that he believes such an answer must take. The madman asks, of our unintentional killing of God, ‘Do we not ourselves have to become gods merely to appear worthy of it?’ (GS 125). One traditional mark of divinity is self-sufficiency. God depends upon nothing else for his existence, and God’s legislation of what ought to be is unconstrained by any pre-existing standards. Perhaps, then, our orientation in life is to emerge from some creative legislation of our own – it is to be made, not discovered. Nietzsche later expands on this theme, wondering whether ‘religion could have been the strange means of making it possible one day for a few individuals to enjoy the whole self-sufficiency of a god and all his power of self-redemption’ (GS 300). Poem number 13 from the Prelude also provides a wonderful
metaphor for this general idea. Entitled ‘For Dancers’, it reads (in a literal translation that does not preserve the rhyme of ‘Eis’, ‘Paradies’, and ‘weiss’), ‘Smooth ice/is paradise/for those who know how to dance well’. Only the friction between our feet and the ground prevents us from falling as we dance, so smooth ice would seem to be the worst surface for dancing. But the poem claims it to be paradise for one who truly knows how to dance, which prompts the question of how one could possibly dance on a frictionless surface. We might imagine a dancer with perfect balance, for whom every ‘slip’ is turned into a step in the dance by the design of his next movement. And just as we can imagine a competent dancer coming to rely on less and less friction, we might imagine a human being becoming more and more self-sufficient as his dependence on external standards of thought and action decreases.

**Book 4**

In Book 4 Nietzsche presents a collection of reflections on self-knowledge and self-cultivation bookended by two discussions of a topic central to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* – the affirmation of life. He begins by expressing a wish.

I want to learn more and more how to see what is necessary in things as what is beautiful in them – thus I will be one of those who make things beautiful. *Amor fati*: let that be my love from now on! [ . . . ] And, all in all and on the whole: some day I want only to be a Yes-sayer!

*(GS 276)*

*Amor fati*, the love of fate, is a love of everything that is necessary in our lives. Nietzsche wishes to cultivate this love, which is one way of affirming something, because he believes that this attitude can actually make things beautiful. As noted above, the idea that the value of things is malleable, and not an objective, timeless property of them, is a central theme of this book (see also GS 299 and GS 301). And already in the second section of Book 4, we find Nietzsche regarding as beautiful something that appeared distressing in Book 3. What he now sees as the ‘beautiful chaos of existence’ (GS 277) is the very same disturbing chaos that lurked behind the ‘aesthetic anthropomorphisms’ that were exposed as shadows of God (GS 109). The world that was previously taken to be an organized collection of purposes now appears beautiful to Nietzsche precisely because it lacks any intrinsic values or purposes that might constrain human life.

The activity of gay science is itself an excellent example of seeing as beautiful some aspect of our existence that is both necessary and difficult to affirm. A philosopher who delights in posing questions and engaging with new philosophical problems has already taken one important step towards affirming what is necessary in existence because the world arguably offers up to us limitless possibilities for this activity. One way to appreciate this point is to consider Schopenhauer’s quite different attitude towards the world so conceived.

If the world were not something that, practically expressed, ought not to be, it would also not be theoretically a problem. On the contrary, its existence would either require no explanation at all, since it would be so entirely self-evident that astonishment at it and enquiry about it could not arise in any mind; or its purpose would present itself unmistakably. But instead of this it is indeed an insoluble problem, since even the most perfect philosophy will always contain an unexplained element.

*(Schopenhauer [1844] 1969: 579)*
According to Schopenhauer, the fact that the world appears to us an insoluble problem or ‘unfathomable and ever-disquieting riddle’ is a sign that it is no good – that we would be wrong to love it or affirm it (ibid.: 171). A good world, for Schopenhauer, could be comprehended with such completeness and clarity that we would be certain of its ultimate nature. It would leave us with no unanswered questions and would thereby free us from the endless toil of producing imperfect works of philosophy that demonstrate the need for more imperfect works of philosophy. Spelling out Schopenhauer’s reasons for attributing a low value to this never-ending cycle would take us deep into his theory of the will, and its difference from Nietzsche’s theory of will to power. I will set aside this issue and simply contrast Schopenhauer’s valuation with that of the philosopher who practices gay science. Assuming that Schopenhauer is right to say that even the best work in philosophy leaves us with unresolved questions (a reasonable assumption given the history of philosophy from Thales to the present), a philosopher who delights in posing new questions and engaging with them in novel ways would have only the highest esteem for a world that presents itself as an unfathomable riddle. Such a philosopher would place the highest value on the activity of philosophical exploration that Nietzsche often champions (GS 283, 289, 324). In this way, engaging in gay science is part of Nietzsche’s project of affirming what is necessary in things.  

Where parts of existence are contingent and malleable, saying ‘yes’ to them can involve modifying them to make them pleasing to the eye. Book 4 again appeals to aesthetic notions in order to explain how a person could come to affirm himself as a particular individual. Nietzsche remarks, ‘For one thing is needful: that a human being should attain satisfaction with himself – be it through this or that poetry or art’ (GS 290). Coming to affirm oneself as a person who exhibits particular aesthetic qualities is what Nietzsche calls ‘giving style’ to one’s character. This is actually a two-step process. It requires, first, that a person gain knowledge of everything ‘lawful and necessary’ in nature, as well as everything particular and distinctive in himself (GS 335). The role played by this sort of knowledge is supposed to be evident from the failures of the past: ‘hitherto all valuations and ideals have been built on ignorance of physics or in contradiction to it’ (GS 335). The thought here is that persons who either lack knowledge of nature (‘physis’ in Greek) or find themselves in the grips of a supernatural interpretation of the world are highly unlikely to produce ideals that are actually in the interest of animals like ourselves – just as persons lacking knowledge of the properties of wood, stone, and concrete are highly unlikely to produce useful architectural plans. Construction requires that one possess knowledge of the materials employed, and acquiring knowledge of the basic qualities and tendencies of the human animal is a central task of Nietzsche’s moral psychology. Such knowledge then enables a person to take the second step of ‘giving style’ to his character by molding it in accordance with an aesthetic ideal (GS 290). Malleable aspects of one’s character are modified to fit a given ‘style’, while more recalcitrant aspects are reinterpreted and redeemed through being given a new, aesthetic sense. It is a sign of Nietzsche’s immoralism that the goal of this process is not to produce any particular sort of character: ‘In the end, when the work is complete, it becomes clear how it was the force of a single taste that ruled and shaped everything great and small – whether the taste was good or bad means less than one may think; it’s enough that it was one taste!’ (GS 290). What matters to Nietzsche is only the possibility of affirming oneself.

The last three sections of Book 4, which were the last three sections of the first edition of The Gay Science, set the stage for the work that follows – Thus Spoke Zarathustra. GS 340, entitled ‘The dying Socrates’, presents an interpretation of Socrates’ last words as described in Plato’s Phaedo, ‘I owe Asclepius a rooster’. Since Asclepius is the god of healing, Nietzsche concludes that Socrates was a pessimist who regarded human life as a disease – the sort of thing
that by its very nature ought to come to an end. Since even Socrates, among the greatest persons in the ancient world, was incapable of affirming existence as it is, Nietzsche concludes this section with the exclamation ‘we must overcome even the Greeks!’ GS 341 then presents the doctrine of eternal recurrence, and GS 342 is nearly identical to the first section of the Prologue to Thus Spoke Zarathustra. Considered together, these three sections suggest that the doctrine of eternal recurrence, as presented in The Gay Science and Thus Spoke Zarathustra, is to play an integral role in the process of overcoming a pessimistic valuation of existence and thereby becoming only a ‘yes-sayer’.⁴

But what exactly is the doctrine of eternal recurrence? While the doctrine does appear in passing in GS 109 and GS 285, only GS 341 presents it in any detail. There Nietzsche asks you, the reader, how you would react if a ‘demon’ were to tell you that you must live your life infinitely many times because everything in existence is repeated infinitely many times, in exactly the same way. This thought of recurrence is to play some role in eliciting (and perhaps in cultivating) your attitude towards existence. Nietzsche describes just two reactions to this thought: crushing despair or unalloyed elation at the thought of everything in existence being repeated infinitely many times. However we understand the thought of eternal recurrence – as knowledge of the temporal structure of the cosmos, as a rogue belief implanted by this demon, or as a thought merely entertained by a philosopher – it is intended to have great practical significance. It both weighs on us in our practical lives and measures our ability to say ‘yes’ to everything in existence. Nietzsche asks the reader, ‘how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to long for nothing more fervently than for this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?’ (GS 341). Only the person who wholeheartedly affirms both herself as an individual and what is necessary in things can long for everything in existence to be repeated. This longing, which stands opposed to Socrates’ pessimistic curse on life, will reappear in some important scenes in Thus Spoke Zarathustra.

Book 5

The title of Book 5 is ‘We Fearless Ones’. Fearlessness is commonly regarded as a virtue – a matter of resolutely facing up to a challenge – but as the book’s epigraph from Turenne reminds the reader, fearlessness could also indicate a failure to grasp the danger of one’s situation. Book 5 thus begins by posing the question of whether ‘our’ fearlessness is courageous or foolish, that is, whether our philosophical activity is possible only due to a lack of appreciation for the dangers associated with an unrestricted questioning of the beliefs and values that guide our lives. As Nietzsche asks in connection with the ‘darkening’ of European life following the death of God, ‘why is it that even we look forward to this darkening without any genuine involvement and above all without worry and fear for ourselves?’ (GS 343). The next section, entitled ‘In what way we, too, are still pious’, suggests that this attitude is an instance of ignorant foolishness. Piety is just the sort of state that can be undermined by a gay science that calls everything into question. Thus if ‘our’ way of life is grounded in piety, we ought to be afraid that it will fall apart and leave us in a state of anxious disorientation.

In GS 344 Nietzsche argues that we are still pious insofar as our scientific activity, in which we pursue the truth at all costs, is grounded in the belief that ‘Nothing is more necessary than truth; and in relation to it, everything else has only secondary value’. He calls this belief a ‘conviction’ to suggest that an investigation into its grounds and origins will reveal them to be less than respectable. So why do we take the truth to be so valuable that we ought to sacrifice any other goods for its sake? Nietzsche approaches this question in two different ways. First, he treats this conviction as a belief to be justified and asks what other beliefs might justify it.
And he suggests that the only belief that might do so is the mere faith that ‘God is truth; that truth is divine’ (GS 344). In other words, pursuing the truth at all costs is reasonable only if we have good reason to believe that the world has been ordered in such a way that knowledge is always in our best interest. But following the death of God, we have no reason to believe this. Nietzsche then takes a psychological approach to our pursuit of truth by asking why we are inclined to affirm this groundless article of faith. He suggests that such a faith answers to a common human need for a reliable orientation in life: ‘The extent to which one needs a faith in order to flourish, how much that is “firm” and that one does not want shaken because one clings to it — that is a measure of the degree of one’s strength (or, to speak more clearly, one’s weakness)’ (GS 347). According to Nietzsche, ‘we fearless ones’ take it to be our duty to identify and destroy the elements of faith that lurk within the modern European worldview only because we share with other persons of faith (a group that in GS 347 includes Christians, Buddhists, German patriots and Russian nihilists) a need for some unconditional ‘Thou Shalt’ to structure our lives. This means that our faith in the value of truth is grounded in a common human tendency to hold comforting beliefs independent of evidence and argument, or even contrary to them. Thus, ‘our’ project of pursuing the truth by believing in accordance with evidence and argument destroys its own foundations.5

Where does this leave the philosophical project of pursuing the truth? It is important to note that Nietzsche’s critique of ‘our’ pursuit of truth does not show that it would be wrong for a person to pursue the truth at all costs. It simply does not follow from the fact that our truthfulness is ungrounded that there is no way to ground the project of pursuing the truth. Furthermore, by ridiculing the scholarly goal of certainty (GS 366, 373) and praising a lighthearted (GS 380) or playful (GS 382) pursuit of truth, Book 5 continues to develop the notion of gay science. Nietzsche even puts his own truthfulness on display for the reader by describing the ‘great love’ through which he, like other great thinkers, ‘has a personal relationship to his problems and finds in them his destiny, his distress, and his greatest happiness’ (GS 345). This remark recalls the Provençal subtitle of the book, ‘La gaya scienza’, which originally designated the musical, poetic art of medieval troubadours. Just as these troubadours used their art in pursuit of the women they loved, Nietzsche practices gay science in pursuit of truth and wisdom (both of which are denoted by feminine nouns in the German language). That philosophical truthfulness is not a duty but instead a passion is among the most important themes of The Gay Science.

Notes

1 For discussion of this point, see Clark (1990: ch. 4).
2 Reginster (2006: ch. 2) provides a useful account of this sort of disorientation.
3 See Reginster (2013) and Jenkins (2016) for further discussion of the relation between Nietzsche’s pursuit of truth and his goal of life affirmation.
4 For more on Nietzsche’s notion of affirmation, see Richardson (2015).
5 See Jenkins (2012) for a detailed account of GS 344 and related passages.

References

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