Lovers of Wisdom,

The consensus so far among almost all IQ learners this term is that Nietzsche's essay "On Thales" is very hard reading. Some folks blame Nietzsche for lousy writing. Some just express puzzlement as to how on earth anyone could make sense out such a mess. I have mixed reactions.

One on hand I am sympathetic. Philosophy is hardly ever easy because philosophers deliberately pick topics that are not understood and perplexing already. Philosophers do not write to entertain an audience. Nor is popularity a reliable indicator of philosophical value. Therefore, philosophers frequently write to the topic (i.e. to try to stay true to the subject matter) rather than the reader. Interestingly, Nietzsche (as well as Hume, Kierkegaard, William James, Daniel Dennett, and some others) is an exception to this. He really did have a sense of his audience and intended to change the direction of Western culture. Now, he does not make this effort by being friendly and kind to the reader. On the contrary, he challenges, attacks, accuses, undermines, and even insults the conventional views of the culture. Consequently, he pushes readers and many resent him for it. The quickest and most general way to reject a writer's ideas is to judge them a bad writer (i.e. boring, confusing, obscene, etc.). It is almost an automatic reaction for us. So, I really do understand how it is that Nietzsche presents a difficulty for many of you as readers.

On the other hand, I am intrigued. My friends, the second most important goal in this course is to increase your ability to read, analyze, and interpret complex and difficult texts. The value of the philosophical literature, and just about any advanced intellectual material, depends on that. Given that goal, struggling with challenging texts is a reasonable activity. "On Thales" is a fairly challenging text and some of you are struggling with it. That's ok.

Please recognize that the statement "I do not understand" is not a complaint against a text or a situation or a person or a phenomenon. To say "I do not understand" is a revelation about yourself. As such, it is always an opportunity for you to grow as an individual. Oh, perhaps you will never understand the thing that puzzles you. It may be too vast an issue or you might not pursue that issue any further. In any event, you will have some new data about yourself. Running into the limits of your own understanding is vital to the effort of figuring out the content and structure of your own mind (which is goal number one in InterQuest). So, Nietzsche makes your head hurt? Lucky you! This is an opportunity to take a look at how your head works!

Consider what French historian, Lucien Febvre, had to say about the task of understanding;

"To comprehend is not to clarify, or simplify, or reduce things to a perfectly clear logical scheme. To comprehend is to complicate, to augment in depth. It is to widen on all sides. It is to vivify."

So here is the key to your next steps in understanding (the text and yourself): take it in parts. Be suspicious of your own motives when you find yourself thinking; "I don't understand any of this!!" Is that really so for any of these texts? That you do not understand a single word or a single sentence?

Look again. Slow down. Forget about tests and credits (those values have nothing, absolutely nothing, to do with truth and inderstanding).

Look again: Nietzsche starts right off by asking whether we should even think seriously about Thales' statement; "All is water." After all, some of you regard that claim as obviously false given modern science. So why bother thinking about it further? Nietzsche provides an immediate and concise explanation;

"Is it really necessary to stop there and become serious? Yes, and for three reasons:"

Then he lists those three reasons straight out. Each reason is distinct (and also related to the other two). Each reason is plainly stated, and each remaining part of the first paragraph and then the whole essay quite deliberately points back to one of these three.

Oh, I completely agree that Nietzsche pushes the allegories and hyperbole to an extreme. He does so with a purpose, and may or may not successful in that purpose. Yet, all of that is quite a ways off from the present task that you have.

Do you want to understand the text better, or at least test the limits of your understanding? Find each of the three reasons that Nietzsche gives. Write down each of them separately. Expand on each of them by seeing how far you can explain why it is that the given statement should be a reason for taking the claim "All is water" seriously as philosophy.

This effort can take you quite a ways. If you succeed at it, then you will understand or comprehend in the sense that Lucien Febvre means in the above quote. Such an understanding is the next step to connecting the remaining parts of the essay (but, alas, we have so little time), and then Nietzsche's other works, and then to the philosophy of the 19th century, and then....so it goes.

Start small, focus well, you will get far.

In good spirit,

Jon