

## On Truth and Lie in the Non-moral Sense

Friedrich Nietzsche (written in 1873)

[A modification of the translation (by Maximilian Mügge) in *Early Greek Philosophy and Other Essays*, The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche, Oscar Levy (ed.), vol. 2, pt. 1, (tr.) (Macmillan, 1911), pp. 171-192]

IN some remote corner of the universe, poured out flickering [1.1] in innumerable solar-systems, there was once a star upon which clever animals invented cognition. It was the most arrogant, most mendacious moment in world history, but yet only a moment. After Nature had taken a few breaths, the star solidified and the clever animals had to die.—Someone might write a fable along these lines, and yet he would not have illustrated sufficiently how pitiful, how shadowy and fleeting, how aimless and arbitrary an exception the human intellect forms within Nature. There were eternities during which it did not exist; and, when it has passed away again, nothing will have happened—because there is for that intellect no further mission leading beyond human life. On the contrary, it is human, and none but its owner and procreator regards it so pathetically as to suppose that the world revolves around it. If, however, we and the gnat could understand each other we would learn that it is also with this pathos that it swims through the air and feels in itself the flying centre of the world. Nothing in Nature is so abject or insignificant that it will not, with a little whiff of this power of intellect, immediately swell up like a balloon; and, just as any porter wants to have his admirer, so the very proudest man, the philosopher, thinks he sees from all sides the eyes of the universe telescopically directed upon his actions and thoughts.

It is remarkable that this is accomplished by the intellect, [1.2] which after all has been added on to the most unfortunate, the most delicate, the most transient beings only as an expedient, in order to detain them for a moment in existence, from which without that addition they would have every reason to flee as swiftly as Lessing's son.[\*] The arrogance connected with cognition and sensation, spreading blinding fog over the eyes and senses of humans, deceives them therefore as to the value of existence owing to the fact that it bears within itself the most flattering evaluation of cognition. Its most general effect is

deception—but even its most particular effects bear something of the same character.

[\* Lessing wrote to a friend after a son was born and died the same day, “Was it not understanding, that they had to drag him into the world with a pair of forceps? that he so soon suspected the evil of this world? Was it not understanding, that he seized the first opportunity to get away from it?”]

The intellect, as a means for the preservation of the [1.3] individual, develops its chief power in dissimulation; for this is means through which the feebler, and less robust individuals preserve themselves, since it has been denied them to fight the battle of existence with horns or the sharp teeth of beasts of prey. In humans this art of dissimulation reaches its peak: here, deception, flattery, lying and cheating, talking behind the back, posing, living in borrowed splendor, masking, the cloak of convention, playacting before others and before oneself, in short, the continual fluttering around the *one* flame vanity is so much the rule and the law that hardly anything is more incomprehensible than how an honest and pure drive to truth could have arisen among humans. They are deeply immersed in illusions and dream-images; their eyes glide only over the surface of things and see “forms”; their sensation nowhere leads to truth, but contents itself with receiving stimuli and, so to say, with playing groping game on the back of things. In addition to that, man allows his dreams to lie to him at night throughout a lifetime, without his moral sense ever trying to prevent them; whereas men are said to exist who by strength of will have eliminated snoring. What indeed *do* humans know about themselves? Are they able even once to see themselves completely, laid out as in an illuminated glass case! Does not nature keep secret from them most everything about themselves, even about their bodies, to banish and lock them up in a proud, illusory consciousness, aloof from the twists of the intestines, the quick flow of the bloodstream, the intricate vibrations of the fibres? Nature threw away the key; and woe to the fateful curiosity which might be able for a moment to look out and down through a crevice in the chamber of consciousness, and discover that humans are resting on the pitiless, the greedy, the insatiable, the murderous, indifferent to their own ignorance and, as it were, hanging in dreams on the back of a tiger. From where in the whole world, in this situation, comes the drive to truth?

So far as the individual tries to preserve himself against [1.4] other individuals, in the natural state of things he uses the intellect in most cases only for dissimulation; since, however, humans both from necessity and boredom want to exist socially and in herds, they need a peace treaty and endeavor to eliminate at least the starkest *bellum omnium contra omnes* [\*] from their world. This first conclusion of peace brings with it something that looks like the first step towards the attainment of that mysterious drive for truth. For that which henceforth is to be “truth” is now fixed; that is, a uniformly valid and binding designation of things is invented, and legislating language also yields the first laws of truth: since here, for the first time, originates the contrast between truth and lie. The liar uses the valid designations, words, in order to make the unreal appear as real; e.g., he says, “I am rich,” whereas the right designation for his state would be, precisely, “poor.” He abuses the fixed conventions by convenient switching or even inversion of names. If he does this in a selfish and moreover harmful fashion, society will no longer trust him and will therefore exclude him. In this way humans avoid not so much being defrauded, as being injured by fraud; they hate, also at this stage, at bottom not deception, but the bad, hostile consequences of certain kinds of deception. And it is only in a similarly limited sense that humans desire truth: he desires the agreeable, life-preserving consequences of truth; he is indifferent towards pure knowledge without effects; he is even hostile towards possibly harmful or destructive truths. And, furthermore, what of those conventions of language? Are they perhaps products of knowledge, of the love of truth; do the designations and the things match? Is language the adequate expression of all realities?

[\* War of all against all.]

Only through forgetfulness could humans ever come to [1.5] imagine that they possesses “truth” to the degree just described. If he does not mean to content himself with truth in the form of tautology, that is, with empty husks, he will always buy illusions for truths. What is a word? The image of a nerve stimulus in sounds. But to infer a cause outside us from the a nerve stimulus is already the result of a false and unjustifiable application of the principle of sufficient reason. How should we dare, if truth alone had been decisive in the genesis of language, if the viewpoint of

certainty had alone been decisive with designations, how dare we indeed say: the stone is hard, as if “hard” was known to us otherwise, and not merely as an entirely subjective stimulus? We divide things according to genders; we designate the tree as masculine, the plant as feminine:[\*] what arbitrary assignments! How far flown beyond the canon of certainty! We speak of a “snake”; the designation fits nothing but the winding movement, and could therefore also apply to a worm. What arbitrary demarcations! what one-sided preferences given sometimes to this, sometimes to that quality of a thing! Different languages placed side by side show that with words it is never truth, never adequate expression that matters: for otherwise there would not be so many languages. The “thing-in-itself” (it is just this which would be the pure truth without effects) is quite incomprehensible to even the creator of language and is utterly unworthy of striving. He designates only the relations of things to humans and for their expression he calls to his help the most daring metaphors. A nerve-stimulus, first transformed into an image! First metaphor. The image is then imitated by a sound! Second metaphor. And each time a complete leap from one sphere into the midst of another, new one. One can imagine a man who is quite deaf and has never had a sensation of tone and of music; just as this man will possibly marvel at Chladnian sound figures in sand, will discover their cause in the vibrations of the string, and will then proclaim that now he knows what people call “sound”; this is just what happens to us all with language. When we talk about trees, colours, snow and flowers, we believe we know something about the things themselves and yet possess nothing but metaphors of the things that do not in the least correspond to the original entities. Just as the sound shows itself as a figure in sand, in the same way the mysterious *X* of the thing-in-itself is seen first as nerve-stimulus, then as image, and finally as sound. At any rate the genesis of language does not proceed on logical lines, and the whole stock in which and with which the man of truth, the researcher, the philosopher works and builds, originates, if not from Cloud-cuckoo-land, at any rate not from the essence of things.

[\* In German *tree* (*der Baum*) is masculine, and *plant* (*die Pflanze*) is feminine.]

Let us consider especially the formation of concepts. Every word immediately becomes a concept not by having to serve as something of a memory of the unique and utterly individualized original experience to which it owes its origin, but by having at the same time to fit innumerable, more or less similar—that is, strictly speaking never equal, therefore altogether unequal—cases. Every concept originates through equating the unequal. As certainly as no one leaf is exactly similar to any other, so certain is it that the concept “leaf” has been formed through an arbitrary omission of these individual differences, through a forgetting of the differentiating qualities, and it awakens the notion that in nature there is, besides the leaves, a something that would be “leaf,” a sort of primal form from which all leaves were woven, drawn, marked out, coloured, crinkled, painted, but by unskilled hands, so that no copy had turned out correct and trustworthy as a true copy of the primal form. We call a man “honest”; we ask, “Why has he acted so honestly today?” Our customary answer runs, “Because of his honesty.” Honesty! That means again: “the leaf” is the cause of leaves. We know nothing at all about an essential quality that might be called honesty, but we do know about numerous individualised, and therefore unequal actions, which we equate by omission of the unequal, and now designate as honest actions; finally out of them we formulate a *qualitas occulta*[\*] with the name “honesty.” Overlooking the individual and real furnishes us with the concept, as it also gives us the form; whereas nature knows of no forms and concepts, and therefore knows no species but only an *X*, to us inaccessible and indefinable. For our antithesis of individual and species is anthropomorphic too and does not come from the essence of things, although we also do not dare to say that it does not correspond to it; for that would be a dogmatic assertion and as such just as undemonstrable as its contrary.

[\* Occult—i.e., hidden—quality.]

What therefore is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms: in short a sum of human relations that have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, metamorphosed, adorned, and after long usage seem to a nation fixed, canonic and binding; truths are illusions of which one has forgotten that they are illusions; metaphors that have become worn out and sensuously powerless; coins that have lost their

stamp and now are no longer of account as coins but merely as metal.

Still we do not yet know where the drive to truth comes from, for up to now we have heard only about the obligation which society imposes in order to exist: to be truthful, that is, to use the usual metaphors, or, expressed morally, the obligation to lie according to a fixed convention, to lie as a herd in a style binding for all. Now humans of course forget that this is how things are; they therefore lie unconsciously in the way described and according to habits of centuries’ standing—and precisely *through this unconsciousness*, precisely through this forgetting, they arrive at a sense for truth. Through this feeling of being obliged to designate one thing as “red” another as “cold,” a third one as “dumb,” awakes a moral impulse concerning truth. Out of the antithesis “liar” whom nobody trusts, whom all exclude, humans demonstrate to themselves the venerableness, reliability, usefulness of truth. Now as “*rational*” beings they submit their actions to the rule of abstractions; they no longer allow themselves to be carried away by sudden impressions, by sensations; they first generalize all these impressions into paler, cooler concepts, in order to attach to them the vehicle of their lives and actions. Everything which makes humans stand out in bold relief against animals depends on this ability to volatilize perceptual metaphors into a schema, thus dissolving an image into a concept. For within the realm of those schemata something becomes possible that never could succeed under the perceptual first impressions: to build up a pyramidal order with castes and grades, to create a new world of laws, privileges, sub-orders, delimitations, which now stands opposite the other perceptual world of first impressions and assumes the appearance of being the more fixed, general, known, human of the two and therefore the regulating and imperative one. Whereas every perceptual metaphor is individual and without its equal and therefore always knows how to escape any classification, the great edifice of ideas shows the rigid regularity of a Roman *columbarium*[\*] and in logic breathes forth the sternness and coolness which is peculiar to mathematics. He who has been breathed upon by this coolness will scarcely believe, that the concept too, bony and eight-cornered as a die, and as transposable, remains however only as the *residue of a metaphor*, and that the illusion produced by the

artistic metamorphosis of a nerve-stimulus into images is, if not the mother, then the grandmother of every concept. Now in this game of dice, “truth” means to use every die as it is designated, to count its points exactly, to form correct classifications, and never to violate the order of castes and the sequences of rank. Just as the Romans and Etruscans for their benefit cut up the sky by means of rigid mathematical lines and confined a god into a space delimited in this way, as in a *templum*, so every people has above it such a mathematically divided heaven of concepts, and it understands the demand for truth to mean that every concept’s god is to be looked for only in *his* sphere. One may here well admire humanity as a powerful architectural genius who succeeds in piling up an infinitely complex cathedral of ideas on a movable foundation and as it were on running water; of course in order to obtain hold on such a foundation it must be as an edifice piled up out of cobwebs, so fragile as to be carried away by the waves, so firm as not to be blown asunder by every wind. As an architectural genius the human rises by this standard high above the bee; it builds with wax, which it gathers from nature; he with the much more delicate material of ideas, which he must first manufacture within himself. He is very much to be admired here—but not for his drive to truth, to the pure cognition of things. If somebody hides a thing behind a bush, seeks it again and finds it in the same place, then there is not much to boast of in this seeking and finding; but this is how matters stand with the seeking and finding of “truth” within the realm of reason. If I make the definition of a mammal and then declare after inspecting a camel, “Behold a mammal,” then no doubt a truth is thereby brought to light, but it is of very limited value, I mean it is anthropomorphic through and through, and does not contain one single point which is “true-in-itself,” real and generally valid, apart from humans. The seeker after such truths seeks at the bottom only the metamorphosis of the world in humans, he strives for an understanding of the world as a human-like thing and gains himself at best the feeling of an assimilation. Similarly, as the astrologer contemplated the stars in the service of humans and in connection with their happiness and unhappiness, such a seeker contemplates the whole world as related to humans, as the infinitely protracted echo of an original sound, that of humanity, as the multiplied copy of the one arch-type, that of humanity. His

procedure is to apply man as the measure of all things, whereby he starts from the error of believing that he has these things immediately before him as pure objects. He therefore forgets that the original perceptual metaphors are metaphors, and takes them for the things themselves.

[\* A place for storing urns with ashes of the dead (the term was originally meant housing for doves and pigeons).]

Only by forgetting that primitive world of metaphors, only [1.9] because the original mass of similes and percepts pouring forth as a fiery liquid out of the primal faculty of human fancy has become hard and rigid, only by the invincible faith, that *this* sun, *this* window, *this* table is a truth in itself: in short only by the fact that man forgets himself as subject, and what is more as an *artistically creating* subject: only by all this does he live with some repose, safety and order. If he were able to get out of the prison walls of this faith, even for an instant only, his “self-consciousness” would be destroyed at once. Already it costs him some trouble to admit to himself that the insect and the bird perceive a world different from his own, and that the question which of the two perceptions of the world is more accurate is a quite senseless one since to decide this question it would be necessary to apply the standard of *right perception*, i.e., to apply a standard which *does not exist*. On the whole it seems to me that the “right perception”—which would mean the adequate expression of an object in the subject—is a nonentity full of contradictions: for between two utterly different spheres, as between subject and object, there is no causality, no accuracy, no expression, but at the utmost an *aesthetical* relation, I mean a suggestive metamorphosis, a stammering translation into quite a distinct foreign language, for which purpose however there is needed at any rate an intermediate sphere, an intermediate force, freely composing and freely inventing. The word “phenomenon” contains many seductions, and on that account I avoid it as much as possible, for it is not true that the essence of things appears in the empirical world. A painter who had no hands and wanted to express the picture distinctly present to his mind by the agency of song, would still reveal much more with this permutation of spheres, than the empirical world reveals about the essence of things. The very relation of a nerve-stimulus to the produced image is in itself no necessary one; but if the same image has

been reproduced millions of times and has been the inheritance of many successive generations of humans, and in the end appears each time to all mankind as the result of the same cause, then it attains finally for humans the same importance as if it were *the* unique, necessary image and as if that relation between the original nerve-stimulus and the image produced were a close relation of causality: just as a dream eternally repeated, would be perceived and judged as though real. But that a metaphor becomes hard and rigid does not at all guarantee the necessity and exclusive justification of that metaphor.

Surely every human being who is at home with such [1.10] considerations has felt a deep distrust against any idealism of that kind, as often as he has distinctly convinced himself of the eternal rigidity, omnipresence, and infallibility of nature's laws: he has arrived at the conclusion that as far as we can penetrate the heights of the telescopic and the depths of the microscopic world, everything is quite secure, complete, infinite, determined, and continuous. Science will have to dig in these shafts eternally and successfully and all things found are sure to have to harmonise and not to contradict one another. How little does this resemble a product of fancy, for if it were one it would necessarily betray somewhere its nature of appearance and unreality. Against this it may be objected in the first place that if each of us still had for himself a different sensibility, if we were ourselves only able to perceive sometimes as a bird, sometimes as a worm, sometimes as a plant, or if one of us saw the same stimulus as red, another as blue, if a third person even perceived it as a tone, then nobody would talk of such an orderliness of nature, but would conceive of her only as an extremely subjective structure. Secondly, what is, for us in general, a law of nature? It is not known in itself but only in its effects, that is to say in its relations to other laws of nature, which again are known to us only as sums of relations. Therefore all these relations refer only one to another and are absolutely incomprehensible to us in their essence; only that which we contribute—time, space, *i.e.*, relations of succession and number—is really known to us in them. Everything wonderful however, that we marvel at in the laws of nature, everything that demands an explanation and might seduce us into distrusting idealism, lies really and solely in the mathematical rigour and

inviolability of the conceptions of time and space. These however we produce within ourselves and throw them forth with that necessity with which the spider spins; since we are compelled to conceive all things under these forms only, then it is no longer wonderful that in all things we actually conceive none but these forms; for they all must bear within themselves the laws of number, and number is precisely the most marvellous in all things. All obedience to law which impresses us so forcibly in the orbits of stars and in chemical processes coincides at the bottom with those qualities which we ourselves attach to those things, so that it is we who thereby make the impression upon ourselves. Whence it clearly follows that that artistic formation of metaphors, with which every sensation in us begins, already presupposes those forms, and is therefore only consummated within them; only out of the steady persistence of these primal forms is the possibility explained, how out of the metaphors themselves a structure of concepts could in its turn be compiled. For the latter is an imitation of the relations of time, space and number on the foundation of metaphors.

## 2

As we saw, it is *language* which has worked originally at [2.1] the construction of concepts; in later times it is *science*. Just as the bee works at the same time at the cells and fills them with honey, thus science works irresistibly at that great columbarium of concepts, the cemetery of perceptions, builds ever newer and higher stories; supports, purifies, renews the old cells, and endeavours above all to fill that gigantic framework and to arrange within it the whole of the empirical world, *i.e.*, the anthropomorphic world. And as the man of action binds his life to reason and its concepts, in order to avoid being swept away and losing himself, so the seeker after truth builds his hut close to the towering edifice of science in order to collaborate with it and to find protection. And he needs protection. For there are awful powers which continually press upon him, and which against the "truth" of science hold out "truths" fashioned in quite another way, bearing devices of the most heterogeneous character.

That drive to form metaphors, that fundamental drive of [2.2] humanity, which we cannot reckon away for one moment—for we would thereby reckon away humans themselves—is in truth

not defeated nor even subdued by the fact that out of its evaporated products, the concepts, a regular and rigid new world has been built as a stronghold for it. This drive seeks for itself a new realm of action and another channel, and finds it in *myth* and more generally in *art*. This drive constantly confuses the classifications and cells of concepts, by putting up new figures of speech, metaphors, metonymies; it constantly shows its passionate longing for shaping the existing world of waking man as motley, irregular, inconsequentially incoherent, attractive, and eternally new as the world of dreams is. For indeed, waking man is in himself only clear about his being awake through the rigid and orderly web of concepts, and it is for this very reason that he sometimes comes to believe that he was dreaming when that web of concepts has for a moment been torn by Art. Pascal is quite right, when he asserts, that if the same dream came to us every night we should be just as much occupied by it as by the things which we see every day; to quote his words, “If an hand-worker were certain that he would dream every night for fully twelve hours that he was a king, I believe that he would be just as happy as a king who dreams every night for twelve hours that he is an hand-worker.” The waking day of a people mystically excitable, let us say of the earlier Greeks, is in fact through the continually working miracle that myth presupposes, more akin to the dream than to the day of the thinker sobered by science. If every tree may at some time talk as a nymph, or a god under the disguise of a bull, carry away virgins, if the goddess Athene herself be suddenly seen as she drives with a beautiful team, accompanied by Pisistratus, through the markets of Athens—and every honest Athenian did believe this—at any moment, as in a dream, everything is possible; and all nature swarms around humans as if she were nothing but the masquerade of the gods, who found it a huge joke to deceive humans by assuming all possible forms.

Humans themselves, however, have an invincible tendency [2.3] to let themselves be deceived, and they are like one enchanted with happiness when the rhapsodist narrates to him epic romances in such a way that they appear real or when the actor on the stage makes the king appear more kingly than reality shows him. The intellect, that master of dissimulation, is free and dismissed from its service as slave, so long as it is able to deceive without *injuring*, and then it celebrates its Saturnalia.

Never is it richer, prouder, more luxuriant, more skilful and daring; with a creator’s delight it throws metaphors into confusion, shifts the boundary stones of the abstractions describing a river, for instance, as a mobile way which carries humans to destinations where they would otherwise walk. Now it has thrown off its shoulders the emblem of servitude. Usually with gloomy officiousness it endeavours to point out the way to a poor individual who desires existence, and it fares forth for plunder and booty like a servant for his master, but now it itself has become a master and may wipe from its countenance the expression of neediness. Whatever it now does, compared with its former doings, bears within itself dissimulation, just as its former doings bore the character of distortion. It copies human life, but takes it for a good thing and seems to rest quite satisfied with it. That enormous framework and hoarding of concepts, by clinging to which needy humans save themselves through their lives, is to the freed intellect only a scaffolding and a toy for its most daring feats, and when it smashes it to pieces, throws it into confusion, and then puts it together ironically, pairing the strangest, separating the nearest items, then it shows that it has no use for those makeshifts of misery, and that it is now no longer led by concepts but by intuitions. From these intuitions no regular road leads into the land of the spectral schemata, the abstractions, for words are not made for them, when man sees them he is dumb, or speaks in forbidden metaphors and in unheard of combinations of concepts, in order to correspond creatively with the impression of the powerful present intuition, at least by destroying and jeering at the old barriers of concepts.

There are ages, when the rational and the intuitive man [2.4] stand side by side, the one full of fear of the intuition, the other full of scorn for the abstraction; the latter just as irrational as the former is inartistic. Both desire to rule over life; the one by knowing how to meet the most important needs with foresight, prudence, regularity; the other as an “over-joyous” hero by ignoring those needs and taking that life only as real which simulates appearance and beauty. Wherever intuitive man, as for instance in the earlier history of Greece, brandishes his weapons more powerfully and victoriously than his opponent, there under favourable conditions a culture can develop and art can establish her rule over life. That dissembling, that denying of neediness,

that splendour of metaphorical notions and especially that directness of dissimulation accompany all utterances of such a life. Neither the house, nor the step, nor the clothing, nor the earthen jug suggest that necessity invented them; it seems as if they all were intended as the expressions of a sublime happiness, an olympic cloudlessness, and as it were a playing at seriousness. Whereas the man guided by concepts and abstractions only wards off misfortune by means of them, without even for himself forcing happiness out of the abstractions; whereas he strives after the greatest possible freedom from pains, the intuitive man dwelling in the midst of culture has from his intuitions a harvest: besides the warding off of evil, he attains a continuous in-pouring of enlightenment, enlivenment and redemption. Of course when he *does* suffer, he suffers more: and he even suffers more frequently since he cannot learn from experience, but again and again falls into the same ditch into which he has fallen before. In suffering he is just as irrational as in happiness; he cries aloud and finds no consolation. How different matters are in the same misfortune with the Stoic, taught by experience and ruling himself by concepts! He who otherwise only looks for uprightness, truth, freedom from deceptions and shelter from ensnaring and sudden attack, in his misfortune performs the masterpiece of dissimulation, just as the other did in his happiness; he shows no twitching mobile human face but as it were a mask with dignified, harmonious features; he does not cry out and does not even alter his voice; when a heavy thundercloud bursts upon him, he wraps himself up in his cloak and with slow and measured step walks away from under it.