

On Truth and Lie in the Non-moral [*außermoralischen*] 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 in innumerable shimmering solar-systems, there was once a star upon which clever animals invented cognition. It was the most arrogant, most dishonest moment in “world history,” but yet only a moment. After Nature had drawn 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 broader mission extending beyond human life. On the contrary, it is human, and none but its owner and producer regards it with such feeling as to suppose that the world revolves around it. But if we could communicate with the gnat, we would learn that it swims through the air with the same sense and feels in itself the flying center of the world. Nothing in Nature is so despicable and 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 be admired by someone, so the very proudest man, the philosopher, thinks he sees the eyes of the universe, from all sides, directed telescopically on his actions and thoughts.

It is remarkable that this is accomplished by the intellect, 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 died shortly after birth that his son showed “so much understanding”: “Was it not understanding, that they had to drag him into the world with iron forceps? ... that he seized the first opportunity to get away from it?”]

The intellect, as a means for the preservation of the 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, the human allows his dreams to lie to him at night throughout a lifetime, without his moral sense ever trying to prevent them; whereas people are said to exist who by strength of will have eliminated snoring. What do humans actually 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 other individuals, in the natural state of things he uses the intellect in most cases only for dissimulation; since, however, the human, both from necessity and boredom, wants to exist socially and in herds, he needs a peace treaty and endeavors to eliminate at least the starkest *bellum omnium contra omnes* [war of all against all] to disappear from his 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?

Only through forgetfulness could humans ever come to imagine that they possess “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 [*der Baum*] as masculine, the plant [*die Pflanze*] 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 person who is profoundly deaf and has never had a sensation of tone and of music; just as this person will possibly marvel at Chladni[*] 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.

[* The reference is to Ernst Chladni (1756-1827), who developed a technique for displaying patterns of vibration of a surface in sand placed on it.

† The reference is ultimately to the *Clouds* of Aristophanes, the comic playwright of the late 5th and early 4th centuries BCE, but perhaps more immediately to Schopenhauer’s use of the term to speak of philosophical discussions of the super-sensible.]

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* [“occult” (i.e., hidden) quality] with the name “honesty.”

Overlooking the individual and real furnishes us with the concept, [1.7] 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.

What therefore is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, [1.8] 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 concepts 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* [temple], 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, which succeeds in piling up an infinitely complex dome of concepts on a movable foundation and, as it were, on running water, as a powerful architectural genius. 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. In this way the human as an architectural genius rises high above the bee; she builds with wax, which she brings together out of nature; he with the much more delicate material of concepts, which he must first manufacture within himself. He is very much to be admired here—but not on account of his impulse for truth, his bent for pure cognition of things. If somebody hides a thing behind a bush, seeks it again and finds it in the selfsame place, then there is not much to boast of, respecting this seeking and finding; thus, however, matters stand with the seeking and finding of “truth” within the realm of reason. If I make the definition of the mammal and then declare after inspecting a camel, “See, a mammal,” then no doubt a truth is brought to light thereby, 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 universally valid, apart from people. The seeker after such truths seeks at the bottom only the metamorphosis of the world in humanity, he strives for an understanding of the world as a human-like thing and by this wins at best the feeling of an assimilation. Similarly, as the astrologer contemplated the stars in the service of people 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, of humanity, as the multiplied copy of one original image, 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 metaphors of perception are metaphors, and takes them for the things themselves.

[* A place for storing urns with ashes of the dead; the term was originally used for the housing of doves and pigeons and was transferred because of a similarity of appearance, so you might think of our term ‘pigeon-hole’.]

Only by forgetting that primitive world of metaphors, only by the [1.9] congelation and coagulation of an original mass of similes and concepts pouring forth as a fiery liquid out of the primal faculty of human fancy, 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, does he live with some repose, safety and determination. If he were able to get out of the prison walls of this faith, even for an instant only, his “self-consciousness” [*Selbstbewußtsein**] 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 world-perceptions is more accurate, is quite a 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 *aesthetic* 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 image produced is in itself not a necessary one; but if the same image has been reproduced millions of times and has been the inheritance of many human generations, and in the end appears each time to all mankind as the result of the same cause, then it attains finally for the human 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 the hardening and stiffening of a metaphor does not at all guarantee the necessity and exclusive justification of that metaphor.

[* Nietzsche may be playing on an ambiguity in this German term, which can mean ‘self-assurance’ as well as ‘self-consciousness’.]

Surely every human being who is at home with such considerations [1.10] has felt a deep distrust of any idealism of that kind, once he has clearly convinced himself of the eternal rigidity, omnipresence, and infallibility of nature’s laws; he has concluded that as far as we can penetrate the heights of the telescopic and the depths of the microscopic world, everything is so secure, complete, infinite, lawful, and without gaps that science will mine these shafts successfully to eternity and everything found will be in agreement and without self-contradiction. How little does this resemble a product of fantasy; for, if it were that, it would somewhere let the illusion and unreality be guessed. Against this it may be objected in the first place that if each of us had for himself a different sensibility, if we ourselves were 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, and a third heard it as a tone, then nobody would talk of such lawfulness of nature, but would conceive of her only as an extremely subjective structure. Secondly, what is at all, for us, 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, in their essence, thoroughly incomprehensible to us; only what we contribute—time, space, so relations of succession and number—are really known to us in them. Everything wonderful, however, that we marvel at precisely in laws of nature, everything that de-

mands an explanation and might seduce us into distrusting idealism, lies really and solely in the mathematical rigour and inviolability of the representations of time and space. But we produce these within ourselves and from ourselves with the necessity with which the spider spins; if 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 exactly what is most marvellous in all things. All lawfulness which so impresses us 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 we impress ourselves with that. From this, of course it follows that the artistic formation of metaphor, with which every sensation in us begins, already presupposes those forms, and is therefore only carried out in them; only from the firm persistence of these primal forms is it explained how it is possible that afterwards out of the metaphors themselves a structure of concepts could in turn be constituted. For the latter is an imitation of the relations of time, space and number relations on the basis of metaphor.

2

As we saw, what worked originally at the construction of concepts [2.1] was originally *language*, in later times *science*. Just as the bee works at the same time at the cells and fills them with honey, so science works irresistibly at that great columbarium of concepts, the cemetery of perceptions, builds ever newer and higher storeys, 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 under its existing bulwarks. And he needs protection, for there are awful powers which continually press upon him, and which counter the “truth” of science with differently fashioned “truths,” with the most varied shield emblems.

That drive to form metaphors, that fundamental human drive which [2.2] we cannot reckon away for one moment—for thereby we should reckon away humanity itself—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 sphere of action and another channel, and

finds it in *Myth* and generally in *Art*. This drive continually confuses the columns and cells of the concepts, by putting up new figures of speech, metaphors, metonymies, it continually shows the desire to shape the existing world of waking as colorfully irregular, inconsequentially incoherent, charmingly and eternally new, as the world of dreams. Actually, the waking human is only clear about his being awake through the rigid and regular 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 right when he maintains 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: he says, “If an artisan 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 artisan.”[*] The waking day of a mythically aroused people, for instance the earlier Greeks, is in fact through the incessantly effective wonder, as myth takes it, more akin to dream than to the day of the scientifically sobered. If every tree may at some time speak as a nymph or a god carry away virgins under the disguise of a bull, if the goddess Athene herself be suddenly seen as she drives with a beautiful team, accompanied by Pisistratus, through the markets of Athens—and the honest Athenian believed this—then at any moment, as in a dream, everything is possible, and all nature swarms around people as if she were nothing but the masquerade of the gods, for whom it was just a joke to deceive mortals by taking on all shapes.

[* From Pascal, *Pensées*, VI, 386.]

However, humans themselves have an invincible penchant to let [2.3] themselves be deceived and are as if enchanted with happiness when the rhapsodist narrates epic tales as though true or when the actor on the stage plays the king more kingly than he is shown by reality. Intellect, that master of pretence, is free and released from his slavery when he is able to deceive without *harming*, and then celebrates his Saturnalia.[*] Never is he more luxuriant, richer, prouder, more skilful and more audacious; with creative delight he jumbles up metaphors and moves the boundary stones of abstractions, so that for instance he designates the stream as the moving path which carries people where they would otherwise walk. Now he has thrown off the mark of servitude; usually with gloomy officiousness he endeavours to point out to a poor individual longing for existence the path and tools, and as a servant for his master, sets out for robber’s loot and booty, but now he

has become master and may wipe from his face the expression of neediness. Whatever he now does bears the mark pretence in comparison with his earlier actions, just as his earlier actions bore the mark of strain. He copies human life, but takes it for a good thing and seems to rest quite satisfied with it. That enormous beam-and-plank framework of concepts, by clinging to which the needy human saves himself through his life, is to the liberated intellect only a scaffolding and a plaything for his most daring feats, and when he smashes it, mixes it up, and puts it together again ironically, pairing the most foreign things and separating the nearest, then he shows that he has no use for those makeshifts of neediness, and that he is now no longer led by concepts but by intuitions. From these intuitions no regular path leads into the land of ghostly schemata, the abstractions; words are not made for them, the human falling silent when seeing them, or speaking in forbidden metaphors and outrageous conceptual constructions in order, by at least smashing and mocking the old conceptual barriers, to accord creatively with the impression made by the powerful present intuition.

[* We are probably intended to think of the overturning of social norms (among them, those defining the roles of master and slave) that occurred during this Roman festival.]

There are ages, when the rational and the intuitive human stand side by side, the one in fear of intuition, the with scorn for abstraction; the latter is 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 precautions, prudence, regularity, the other as an “overjoyous [*überfroher*] hero”[*] by ignoring those needs and taking as real only life disguised with radiance and beauty. Wherever the intuitive human, as for instance in the earlier history of Greece, brandishes his weapons more powerfully and victoriously than his opponent, under favourable conditions, a culture can take shape and art can establish her rule over life: that pretence, that denying of neediness, that brilliance of metaphorical appearances and especially that directness of deception accompany all expressions of such a life. Neither the house, nor the walk, nor the clothing, nor the clay 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 with seriousness. While the human guided by concepts and abstractions only wards off misfortune by means of them, without forcing happiness out of abstractions, while he strives after the greatest possible freedom from pains, the intuitive human, dwelling in the midst of a culture, harvests directly from his intu-

itions, besides resistance to evil, a continuous stream of enlightenment, vitality, release. Of course, he suffers more, *when* he suffers, and he even suffers more frequently since he does not understand how to learn from experience, and again and again falls in the same ditch he has fallen in. In suffering he is just as irrational as in happiness; he cries out loudly and has no consolation. How different stand things in the same misfortune of the stoical human, taught by experience and ruling himself by concepts! He who otherwise only looks for uprightness, truth, freedom from deceptions, and protection from surprise attack, in his misfortune performs a masterpiece of pretence, just as the other did in happiness; he shows no twitching mobile human face but, as it were, a mask with dignified symmetry of features; he does not cry out and does not even alter his voice; when a heavy thundercloud pours on him, he wraps himself up in his cloak and with slow steps walks away from under it.

[* The quotation is from Wagner, *Götterdämmerung* (act 3).]