Nietzsche: On Truth and Lies In A Nonmoral Sense

Key Themes

Some Themes of “On Truth and Lies”

1. All knowledge and truth is anthropomorphic. All truth is thoroughly anthropomorphic and contains not a single point which is “true in itself” or really and universally valid apart from man (p. 85).

2. The origin of the knowledge drive can be found in the nature of the human species—we have been denied the chance to wage the battle for existence with horns or with the sharp teeth of beast of prey (p. 80); man wishes to exist socially and with the herd (p. 81).

3. There is no drive for pure truth or knowledge. All drives are connected to pleasure and displeasure. “There is no drive toward knowledge and truth, but merely a drive toward belief in truth. Pure knowledge has no drive” (p. 88).

4. Truth and language are fundamentally social conventions which have their origins in metaphor and are arbitrary and subjective. Language is not about adequately mirroring the world. “The genesis of language does not proceed logically in any case, and all the material within which and with which the man of truth, the scientist, and the philosopher later work and build, if not derived from never-never land, is at least not derived from the essence of things” (p. 83).

5. Every concept arises from the equation of unequal things. The formation of concepts requires illusion, forgetfulness, dissimulation.

6. Over time, we forget the origin of truth in metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms, they congeal and harden, are taken for granted, and we come to assume that they necessarily describe the way the world really is (i.e., God the father, man the machine).

7. Art treats illusion as illusion and has no desire to entice us into belief.

8. Nietzsche contrasts the liberated intellect of the intuitive person with the rational person guided by concepts.

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The intellect as insignificant in the grand scheme of things
The first point that Nietzsche seems to argue is that the intellect is not as significant as we sometimes think. He begins with a story: “once upon a time…” Think about what this implies regarding his approach to epistemology. What is the purpose of the story he invents? To disclose how miserable, shadowy, transient, aimless and arbitrary the intellect looks in nature. Nietzsche downgrades the significance of the intellect. We are too proud and are deceived about the value of the intellect. “For this pride contains within itself the most flattering estimation of the value of knowing.” (80)

Rather than celebrating the intellect (Plato, Descartes), Nietzsche questions its purpose
We have been denied the chance to wage the battle for existence with horns or with the sharp teeth of beasts of prey. We are unfortunate, delicate, and ephemeral beings and the intellect is a device for detaining us a minute within existence. Without the intellect, we would not have lasted. Regularly he compares what we do to what animals do:

- “We produce these representations in and from ourselves with the same necessity with which the spider spins” (87).
- “Whereas the bee builds with wax that he gathers from nature, man builds with the far more delicate conceptual material which he first has to manufacture from himself” (85).
- “Just as the bee simultaneously constructs cells and fills them with honey, so science works unceasingly on this great columbarium of concepts…” (88).

So Nietzsche compares the human intellect and its product to the constructions of animals, suggesting that he is naturalizing epistemology, perhaps in a more radical way than Hume.

The theme of concealment and dissimulation: “the intellect unfolds its principle powers in dissimulation” (80)
Nietzsche suggests that many things are concealed from us. He talks about our engaging in dissimulation. He refers to deception, flattering, playing a role for others and for oneself. Where Descartes and Hume point to the intellect’s ability to perceive truth, Nietzsche characterizes it in terms of its power of dissimulation.

“What does man actually know about himself? Is he, indeed, ever able to perceive himself completely, as if laid out in a lighted display case? Does nature not conceal most things from him…in order to confine and lock him with a proud, deceptive consciousness…” (80).

We have been thinking about the pursuit of truth and knowledge and the value of both and Nietzsche immediately questions the value of truth. His key question doesn’t seem to be “what is the truth?” but “where does the truth drive come from?” “There is almost nothing which is less comprehensible than how an honest and pure drive for truth could have arisen among them” (80). And again: “where in the world could the drive for truth
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have come from?” (80). This is Nietzsche’s key epistemological issue. His question is more about origins, perhaps origins of a psychological phenomenon. We also need to understand why Nietzsche thinks that delusion is so central to epistemology.

The first step toward acquiring the truth drive: man wishes to exist socially

While we might want to maintain ourselves against others through dissimulation, we also wish to exist socially and with the herd. In order to do this we need to make peace and this peace brings with it the first step toward acquiring the truth drive: that which shall count as truth from now on is established. Society imposes a duty on us in order to exist. To be truthful is to employ the usual metaphors. We have the duty to lie according to a fixed convention, to lie with the herd and in a manner binding upon everyone (81).

Later he suggests that “the man of action binds his life to reason and its concepts so that he will not be swept away and lost…” (88). In aphorism 177 he suggests that the welfare of men depends on illusions which is opposed to truthfulness.

What are the implications of this view? Nietzsche proposes that it is not deception itself which we wish to avoid and it is not “pure knowledge” we wish. Rather, we simply desire “the pleasant, life-preserving consequences of truth” (81). Truth is not as important as the belief that we posses the truth: “all possession of truth is at bottom nothing but a belief that one possesses truth” (94). “There is no drive toward knowledge and truth, but merely a drive toward belief in truth. Pure knowledge has no drive” (95). So Nietzsche is already undermining the drive for pure knowledge and truth. We are not motivated by pure knowledge, which has no consequences. We can see this by thinking that human beings are hostilely inclined toward truths which are harmful and destructive.

Language does not mirror reality but constructs it through the use of metaphor and other rhetorical tropes

The formation of metaphors is the fundamental human drive, “which one cannot for a single instant dispense with in thought, for one would thereby dispense with man himself” (88-9). Language is essentially metaphorical and does not capture the true nature of reality. It is essentially metaphoric, conventional, arbitrary, subjective. He wants to banish any notion of language or mind or thought as capturing the thing-in-itself. We come to possess “the truth” only when, through the process of forgetting, we lose the origin of language and words. Forgetfulness is at the origins of language and truth. What suggests to us that language is not about adequately mirroring the world?

- If language was about truth and certainty, then how could we ever comprehend a claim like “the stone is hard,” which is essentially subjective (82).
- We make arbitrary differentiations and assignments in language that exhibit one-sided preferences (gender of words) (82).
- “The various languages placed side by side show that with words it is never a question of truth, never a question of adequate expression; otherwise there would not be so many languages.” (82)
- Language is essentially metaphoric: A word is the copy in sound of a nerve stimulus. “To begin with, a nerve stimulus is transferred into an image: first
metaphor. The image, in turn, is imitated in a sound: second metaphor. And each
time there is a complete overleaping of one sphere, right into the middle of an
entirely new and different one.”

So in employing language we don’t really know anything about the way the world really
is: we possess nothing but metaphors for things—metaphors which correspond in no way
to the original entities” (83).

**Concept formation**

N demonstrates another way in which language doesn’t capture the essence of things. He
argues that concepts must fit cases which are never equal and thus altogether unequal.
“Every concept arises from the equation of unequal things.” He uses as an example
“leaf.” He mentions as well as the quality “honesty”: “we do know of countless
individualized and consequently unequal actions which we equate by omitting the aspects
in which they are unequal and which we now designate as ‘honest’ actions.” (83) “The
illusion which is involved in the artistic transference of a nerve stimulus into images is, if
not the mother, then the grandmother of every single concept.” (85) This account of
honesty can also work as an account of one’s sexual identity: the notion of the
homosexual, which involves creating an essence or identity for the individual. Nature, he
writes, is acquainted with no forms and no concepts, “but only with an X which remains
inaccessible and undefinable for us” (83).

**Nietzsche’s definition of truth**

Nietzsche’s account of concept formation leads to his definition of truth in terms of
metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms. “Truths are illusions which are have
forgotten are illusions; metaphors which have become worn our and drained of sensuous
force.” A key passage in which Nietzsche articulates the process by which truths are the
result of congealed metaphors comes on page 86:

“It is only by forgetting this primitive world of metaphor that human beings can
live with any repose or security: only by means of the petrification and
coagulation of a mass of images which original streamed from the primal faculty
of human imagination like a fiery liquid, only in the invincible faith that this sun,
this window, this table is a truth in itself, in short, only by forgetting that he
himself is an artistically creating subject, does man live with any repose, security,
consistency” (86)

In a sense, Nietzsche reverses Descartes’ foundationalism by suggesting that the drive for
truth is based on falsehood, lies, and forgetfulness.

“Here one may certainly admire man as a might genius of construction, who
succeeds in piling up an infinitely complicated dome of concepts upon an unstable
foundation, and, as it were, on running water.” (85)

Nietzsche also rejects the notion of “true in itself” that is central to Descartes’ project. All
truth is anthropomorphistic. Our truths are of limited value: “it is a thoroughly
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anthropomorphic truth which contains not a single point which would be ‘true in itself’ or really and universally valid apart from man” (85). So in part the origin of the drive for truth is based on our habits which are centuries old which we have forgotten are mere habits and we take to be truths. “He forgets that the original perceptual metaphors are metaphors and takes them to be the things themselves” (86). But as Nietzsche points out, in a nod to Descartes:

“…An eternally repeated dream would certainly be felt and judged to be reality. But the hardening and congealing of a metaphor guarantees absolutely nothing concerning its necessity and exclusive justification.” (87)

Correct perception

We would like to think that we perceive the way the world really is and that through a correctly carried out epistemological project (such as a Cartesian or Humean project) we can attain knowledge. Nietzsche argues, however, that even to use language or to search for truth is already to be implicated in a humanly constructed (anthropomorphic) world. The insect or the bird perceives a world entirely different from our own. Is one perception more correct than another? Such a question requires a criterion of correct perception (recall Pritchard’s account of the criterion of knowledge) and Nietzsche argues there is no criterion available. For such a criterion to be available we would somehow have to be able to step outside of our own perspective and measure it objectively, from a “God’s eye point of view.” But there is no God’s eye point of view. Knowledge is human-all-too-human.

“The correct perception” (the adequate expression of an object in the subject) is a contradictory impossibility: “For between two absolutely different spheres, between subject and object, there is no causality, no correctness, and no expression; there is, at most, an aesthetic relation: I mean, a suggestive transference, a stammering translation into a completely foreign tongue—for which there is required, in any case, a freely inventive intermediary sphere and mediating force.” This is the heart of Nietzsche’s account of metaphor and the role of the artistically creating subject. We need to think more about the role of metaphor in thought and how metaphor works, especially Nietzsche’s repeated observations regarding the artistic and creative process of metaphor formation, something which he seemingly values. After all, Nietzsche claims that the “drive toward the formation of metaphors is the fundamental human drive” (88).

Nietzsche questions the objectivity of science

Language begins work on the construction of concepts but then Nietzsche suggests this work is taken over in later ages by science (“science” in German refers to rigorous, systematic, disciplined inquiry as such, and is by no means synonymous with “natural science.” Mathematics, history, and philosophy are all “sciences” in the fullest sense of the German word.) So the sciences work on a framework already constructed by the metaphoric processes of language: building new, higher stories and shoring up, cleaning, and renovating the old cells. So the empirical world disclosed by the sciences is already the anthropomorphic world created by the illusions and deceptions of metaphor and language. The world that science constructs (not very different than the world the bee
Nietzsche's account of art and myth and the liberated intellect

The second part of this essay contrasts the scientific world of concepts, which is regular and rigid, with the mythic and artistic world. The drive to form metaphors is not vanquished by science. Nietzsche refers to powers which oppose scientific “truth” with completely different kinds of truths. While the world of concepts becomes a prison, the drive seeks a new realm in myth and art. The drive is still there, existing as an ardent desire to refashion the world, transforming the world into something like a world of dreams (colorful, irregular, lacking in results and coherence). The web of concepts formed by science and the ossified world of metaphor is torn apart by art and myth. Where the scientist tries to bring order to the world of concepts, art and myth continually confuses the conceptual categories and cells by bringing forward new transferences, metaphors, and metonymies.

Through fables, art, myth the world of the settled metaphors is shaken up a bit. Perhaps this is why he begins this essay with a fable. Art throws off the bondage of science and dead metaphors. It liberates the intellect and released from slavery it is never more luxuriant, richer, prouder, more clever, and more daring. Through art and metaphor, the intellect throws the token bondage from itself. So we get the contrast between the needy man who clings to the rigid world of concepts in order to preserve himself and the audacious liberated intellect.

“That immense framework and planking of concepts to which the needy man clings his whole life long in order to preserve himself is nothing but a scaffolding and toy for the most audacious feats of the liberated intellect. And when it smashes this framework to pieces, throws it into confusion, and puts it back together in an ironic fashion, pairing the most alien things and separating the closest, it is demonstrating that it has no need of these makeshifts of indigence and that it will now be guided by intuitions rather than by concepts.” (90)

The significance of art as truthful illusion

We get a sense of why Nietzsche thinks art is significant in aphorism 184 (page 96) where he argues that art treats illusion as illusion and therefore it does not wish to deceive, it is true. Art works through deception. We know that the images produced by the imagination do not correspond to reality. “I believe in them only as images, and not as realities.” If one took it for reality, then it would cease to be art. “Artistic pleasure is the greatest kind of pleasure, because it speaks the truth quite generally in the form of lies” (96). Nietzsche refers to the significance of art as truthful illusion (97).

“Pure disinterested contemplation is possible only in regard to illusions which have been recognized as illusions, illusions which have no desire to entice us into belief and to this extent do not stimulate our wills at all.” (97)