

## **FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE "TRUTH AND LIES IN A NON-MORAL SENSE" (1873)**

In this essay, which is central to an understanding of his ideas in numerous other spheres (e.g. on morality), Nietzsche is responding to claims made during the so-called 'modern' period of philosophy by thinkers ranging from Descartes to Kant that man is progressing towards enlightenment by accumulating ever more accurate glimpses into the true nature of things. Nietzsche targets Kant's theory of knowledge in particular – his view that our knowledge of things is guaranteed by the existence of certain transcendental categories inherent in the minds of human beings, especially the categories of space and time and sub-categories such as those of cause and effect. He also has in mind Kant's German heirs, the so-called German Idealists like Hegel, who interpreted Kant's remarks to suggest the existence of a transcendental self or soul at man's core. Nietzsche argues that our conception of the human intellect is extremely self-deceptive in that we pride ourselves on both the range and depth of our knowledge which in fact is contradicted by the limited nature of what we in fact do know. Moreover, the pride connected with knowing deceives man with regard to the value of both existence and knowing. There are, in other words, ethical implications to this epistemological arrogance: man has imposed certain values (the view that some things and courses of action are inherently valuable or worthwhile, and others not) on a world inherently resistant to such interpretations. To put this another way, we read things into or impose meaning on the world where there is no such meaning or rational purpose. Nietzsche contends that there is a political motivation, what he calls the 'will to power,' lurking behind claims about man's enlightenment: historically, where the 'stronger' are physically equipped for combat and thus need no other devices to ensure their superior social status, the claim to knowledge of the truth is a device of the 'weaker' (intellectuals fall into this category) to ensure gain social ascendancy via dissimulation and pretence.

Nietzsche is opposed, firstly, to the Empiricists and their view that knowledge is derived from the senses. He points out that mankind perceives only the forms or surface of things: our "senses nowhere lead to the truth" (80) but merely "engage in a groping game on the backs of things" (80). He is also opposed to the claims of Rationalists like Descartes for whom self-awareness (consciousness of a stable, immutable, transcendental self) is the a priori foundation upon which knowledge of other things is erected. Man's self-knowledge is limited in that he is unable to perceive himself completely because he has been taught to look past the body in search of a soul, a transcendental principle to his identity when, in fact, his entire being, including his consciousness and self-consciousness, is anchored in his physiology. Nature, he writes, conceals most things from him concerning his body, locking him within a "proud, deceptive consciousness, aloof from the coils of the bowels, the rapid flow of the blood stream, and the intricate quivering of the fibres!" (80). Ironically, moreover, the "drive for truth" (80) which man possesses may be tantamount to a "fatal curiosity" (80) in that ultimately it uncovers at the root of his being only all that is "[p]itiless, greedy, insatiable, and murderous" (80).

Nietzsche then argues that though pretence forms an important part of all social relations (in our effort to gain the upper hand over others, we try to impose our version of thing and events), the fact that man must coexist with others implies the necessity of establishing the truth upon which all agree, in other words, the formation of a consensus: a "uniformly valid and binding designation is established for things, and this legislation of language likewise establishes the first laws of truth" (81). The question that consequently looms in importance is whether our linguistic designations of things are congruent with or accurately correspond to our perception of the things themselves. Nietzsche has in mind Locke's views on the link between our sensory apprehension of objects, language and knowledge: he felt that there is a pretty straightforward relationship between objects in the external world (cause) and the sense impressions which they produce within us (their effect). In Nietzsche's view, the word is a copy in sound of the stimulus which our encounter with an object enacts upon a nerve. In other words, we feel something in some way and then translate that into a sound-image of that feeling. However, Nietzsche argues that any inference from a feeling internal to our bodies (the effect) to a possible cause outside of ourselves is a tenuous one and remains in the realm of pure conjecture. (Nietzsche is influenced in this regard by another Empiricist, David Hume, who sought to undermine our confidence in the existence of cause and effect relationships – he argued that there is no proof of relationships of consequence, only of succession, that is, that something precedes something else.) Moreover, even if a cause and effect relation could be established, it remains to be established whether we can ever *objectively* apprehend the properties of an external object: the qualities inherent in things, for example, the hardness of a stone, may very well

be, he contends, a totally subjective perception.

Nietzsche then makes a famous claim: language does not designate or label the things themselves in some objective, impersonal way (in this schema, words are merely mirrors held up to things). At best, it designates only the relations of men to things, that is, how we subjectively conceptualise things. The key device to this end is metaphor, a rhetorical trope for the direct comparison of two seemingly unrelated subjects – typically, a first object is described as being or having the properties of a second object). Metaphor is, in Nietzsche's view, at the core of our purported knowledge of things. To be precise, we never know a thing as it really is as much as we conceptualise it in a certain light, in relation to something else. There is a chain of effects: the 'mysterious x,' as he puts it, of the thing in itself gives rise to a nerve stimulus (in other words, it affects our senses in some way perhaps because we see it or smell it, for example) which in turn gives rise to a mental image (this is metaphor # 1 because it is not the thing itself but something which stands for the thing) which is in turn associated with or denoted by a sound (metaphor #2). As a result, we "believe that we know something about these things themselves . . . and yet we possess nothing but metaphors for things--metaphors which correspond in no way to the original entities" (82-3). Nietzsche's notion of the inherent metaphoricity of knowledge has been tremendously influential upon subsequent Continental epistemological and linguistic theories.

Nietzsche argues that our concepts or ideas are usually the result of procrustean acts of signification, fitted not to a unique occasion but designed to forcibly equate several similar but unequal occasions by the arbitrary discarding of individual differences. Out of this arose the notion of the Ideal Forms of which things in this world are imperfect imitations (Socrates and Plato are two of Nietzsche's favourite targets), a view that remained profoundly influential on subsequent generations of philosophers. For example, Socrates asserted the existence in a transcendental realm of, for example, the original leaf (a perfect idea of 'leaf-ness') out of which all actual leaves are made or the ideal form of honesty. However, we really know nothing whatsoever about an essential and absolute quality called honesty, only countless individualised and thus unequal actions which we equate by omitting those aspects in which they are unequal. All such correlations are anthropomorphic (that is, they reveal more about the humans who come up with such claims) and do not derive from the things in themselves which forever remain inaccessible to us.

It is in the light of the above that Nietzsche offers a celebrated dismissal of the notion that we can ever know the absolute truth: it is nothing more than a movable host of metaphors, metonymies and anthropomorphisms . . . a sum of human relations . . . poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical and binding. Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions . . . metaphors that have become worn out and drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins. (84)

This is why Nietzsche concludes that we are all accordingly bound by a duty, paradoxically, to lie according to fixed convention. To be truthful is, in other words, merely to use the accepted conventions in designating the world which have no claim to accuracy. The immediate perceptual impression of a thing is subjected to an abstraction, he writes, the image of thing acquired in this way dissolved into a concept which may have no likeness to the thing. Vivid first impressions give way inevitably to conceptual schemata or paradigms of interpretation which form a pyramid-like order according to castes and degrees: a world of laws, privileges, subordinations, and clearly marked boundaries--a new world . . . which now confronts that other vivid world of first impressions as more solid, more universal, better known, and more human than the immediately perceived world, and thus as the regulative and imperative world. (84)

In short, the moral impulse in regard to truth arises from the obligation to designate things in predetermined ways that have little or no bearing on the things themselves.

To conceptualise, therefore, is equivalent to classify and rank things. Comparing the production of knowledge to a game of chance, Nietzsche asserts that in the "conceptual crap game" (85), truth means "using every die in the designated manner . . . fashioning the right categories, and never violating the order of caste and class rank" (85). The fashioning of truth, in other words, is equivalent to a game at which we succeed when we follow the rules. However, Nietzsche warns that the complicated dome of concepts is built on an unstable foundation. Where bees build things out of wax, men manufacture the truth out of conceptual material, ideas that have no bearing upon the things themselves. As a result, knowledge is

'finding' something that man himself has put there. Truth is, consequently, anthropomorphic in that it "contains not a single point which would be 'true in itself' or really and universally valid apart from men" (85) and their conceptions.

In conclusion, Nietzsche's point is that man is the measure of all things. Truth-claims are arrived at through a process based on the forgetting of the inherent metaphoricity of knowledge. Man lives in repose only by forgetting that he is an artistically creating subject and the production of knowledge a poetic exercise. There is no adequate reflection of the essence of an object in the consciousness of the subject: at most, there is an aesthetic or metaphorical relation. The hardening and congealing of metaphor via repetition guarantees its being taken for granted as the truth. Idealism and subjectivism are often unpopular viewpoints. However, Nietzsche insists, all we can know about the objects or laws of nature are those categories of time and space, relations of succession and extension, as well as those sub-categories (e.g. of cause and effect) which we bring to them. Because we are forced to comprehend all things under these forms, we actually comprehend nothing but these forms. These categories, it should be noted, do not originate in some transcendental self, as Kant claims. Rather, they are derived from the structures of language which we must employ in our cognition of things, language being an entirely material phenomenon.