
The following is meant to serve as a guide for listeners of the *The Partially Examined Life*, a podcast in which a few participants periodically read and discuss a philosophical text. In what follows I give a basic summary of Friedrich Nietzsche’s *On Truth and Lie in the Extra-Moral Sense*, which we discuss in *Episode 61: Nietzsche on Truth and Skepticism*.

**Introduction**

Nietzsche’s question in *On Truth and Lie in the Extra-Moral Sense* is how a drive for truth could ever have arisen when the purpose of our intellects is the development of social strategies for survival, strategies that are grounded in various forms of deception and self-deception (including the “forgetting” of our own impulses). What does Nietzsche mean by “drive for truth,” and what does it mean for some truths (and lies) to be “extra-moral” or “nonmoral”?

Nonmoral truths turn out to stand in opposition to the drive for truth, despite the fact that they are implicated in its origins. We seek nonmoral truths initially for the sake of survival – for their “pleasant, life-affirming consequences”; and subsequently as part of the more positive “celebration of life” that we see in artistic activity. By contrast, the drive for truth involves scientific and philosophical pretensions to absolute truths that are “beyond human life” – which is to say not relativized to our limited cognitive capacities and interests. They are moralized just to the extent that they posit values that serve some purpose other than life and seek something that transcends the objects of our biologically conditioned impulses, whether “the good” (in our ethical concerns) or absolute truth (in our scientific and philosophical pursuits). In Kantian terms (and we shall see that Nietzsche’s epistemology in this essay is heavily influenced by Kant): nonmoral truths concern the appearances – and acknowledge them as such – whereas the drive to truth seeks and confuses the appearances with things-in-themselves (leading to various sorts of errors). So the drive for truth here looks something like Kant’s Reason before its excesses have been curtailed by critique.

**Summary**

**1: How the Drive for Truth Arises in a Self-Deceiving Intellect**

**The Problem**

It is difficult to explain the drive to truth when the human intellect functions to deceive us. This deception has a few sources:

1. **Contingency**: The intellect cannot transcend its specifically human interests in order to obtain an inhumanly objective standpoint (it has “no additional mission which would lead beyond human life”).

2. **Pride:** The pride in possession of the intellect and high estimation of the value of knowing and sensing is “like a blinding fog over the eyes and senses of men.”

3. **Dissimulation and Forgetting:** The function of the intellect is self-preservation by means other than the exercise of physical force, including the establishment of a social existence. Fulfilling this function requires dissimulation (flattering, lying, wearing a mask, playing a role, and so on). It also requires “forgetting” – in a way evocative of Freudian repression – our “pitiless, greedy, insatiable, and murderous” impulses.

4. **Language** (see below).

5. **Concept Formation** and the nature of knowledge (see below).

Because of these sources of deception, human beings are “deeply immersed in illusions and in dream images,” “their senses nowhere lead to truth,” and it is difficult to see where a drive for truth could have come from.

**The Social Root of Truth-Seeking**

The moralized drive for truth actually has its origins in the nonmoral distinction between truth and lie: we seek truth originally as a means to self-preservation, because being deceived can have painful or deadly consequences. Laws and social mores are designed to facilitate peace and prevent conflict, and language and logic are a sub-type of such customs and exist for the same purposes.

**Language**

But language (fourth source of deception) is not an “adequate expression of all realities.” A word is a “copy” of a “nerve stimulus,” and we cannot infer a cause of stimuli outside of ourselves. A word like “hard” describes not an in-itself property of a stone but the nature of our reaction to a stimulus – a “totally subjective stimulation,” or our relation to some mysterious X; but things-in-themselves are incomprehensible. As such, words and images are metaphors for things but “correspond in no way to the original entities.” [Note that Nietzsche’s reference to an “X” is reminiscent of Kant’s “object = x” in *The Critique of Pure Reason*, or the concept of a unified thing underlying our manifold sense impressions – something like Aristotelian “substance,” but supplied by the subject. It is “X” because while it regularly accompanies our representations, it has no determinate content other than the vague notion that there is something extra-mental that explains the unity of our representations. Consequently, it cannot be an object of knowledge: “It is easily seen that this object must be thought only as something in general = x, since outside our knowledge we have nothing which we could set over against this knowledge as corresponding to it” (A 104). We might think that our representation of an “object=x” is actually grounded in extra-mental entities – “things-in-themselves,” but properly speaking we have to remain agnostic about their existence and can have no knowledge of them].

**Concept Formation: Nietzsche’s Neo-Kantian Account of Knowledge**

**Concept Formation: Equating Unequals**

Nor is concept formation (fifth source of deception) adequate to reality. Concept words do not refer to entities (for example forms), and when we subsume individuals under them we ignore their differences, treating unequal things as equal. There are no forms, concepts or species, but really just an indefinable and inaccessible X.

**Suppression of Knowledge of Our Creative Role: Unconscious Lying According to Fixed Convention**

We have forgotten about the falsifying nature of language and concept formation: truths are “illusions which we have forgotten are illusions,” metaphors that we have forgotten are metaphors. To be truthful in the moralized sense is just to employ the usual metaphors, or to lie according to fixed convention. This lying is unconscious, and “unconscious forgetfulness” allows us to deceive ourselves into believing that our lies are truths.

**Moving from Impressions to Concepts**

In creating concepts we no longer live merely in the world of impressions and intuitions, and no longer get “carried away” away by them. Instead of allowing ourselves to be moved merely instinctively by impressions, as an animal might be, we become guided in our behavior by a hierarchical system of concepts and abstractions that schematize these impressions. These concepts come to seem more familiar to us than the “immediately perceived world”; and whereas each “perceptual metaphor” was radically different from every other, the system of concepts – our “construction” – is regular, rigid, logical, and “cool.” Concepts are nevertheless the residue of metaphors.

**Getting Back What We Put In**

In an off-handed reference to Kant, Nietzsche suggests that the notion of objectivity that remains once we are denied access to things-in-themselves is weak: “someone hides something behind a bush and looks for it again in the same place and finds it there as well.” For Kant, objectivity involved the correct application of concepts to appearances that we ourselves have constructed according to those concepts. What Kant called “appearances” are not the “impressions” that Nietzsche talks about in this essay, but rather “objects” (which is not to say things-in-themselves) that include both conceptual and sense data. When Nietzsche talks about impressions, he is talking about raw sense data before it has been altered conceptually – what Kant calls the “manifold” (although according to Kant we could never even be aware of such a thing prior to the application of concepts). In this sense, what we call the world is entirely anthropomorphic: what we find in objects is what we have contributed. And yet we delude ourselves into thinking objects as they appear to us are things-in-themselves.
Confusing Objects for Things-in-themselves

We enter into this world of concepts and forget that we have constructed everyday objects from this “primitive world of metaphor” in order to provide ourselves with consistency and security – because the primitive world is disordered and chaotic. In a description again evocative of the Kantian manifold, Nietzsche calls this world a “coagulation of a mass of images.” At a naïve level, we treat objects – tables and chairs, for instance – as things-in-themselves to which we have immediate access, which are given to us unaltered from the outside world. But in fact all that is “given” is the chaotic world of images to which we have to give order by stamping ourselves on it – as “artistically creating” subjects – by means of concepts. Other animals with other cognitive faculties might create entirely different worlds by ordering impressions differently. Further, the idea of immediate access to things-in-themselves – or correspondence between our representations and things-in-themselves – cannot be made sense of. The only possible relationship we could have to things-in-themselves is “aesthetic,” in the sense of our constructive activity in giving concepts to impressions. Further, we cannot conceive of ourselves as inferentially knowing something about things-in-themselves insofar as they are the cause of our impressions: causality is just one of the concepts that comes from us.

Idealism: The Coherence and Regularity Come from Us

These views seem to imply some sort of idealism, a position belied by the coherence of our experience and the success of scientific pursuits: these do not resemble the more chaotic products of the imagination that we see for instance in dreams. The coherence of our experience seems to be anchored in something mind-independent, and if it weren’t we would see dream-like signs of illusion. But this coherence in fact comes from us – we “impress ourselves in this way.” That’s something that would be clearer to us if we were able to inhabit the cognitive worlds of other animals and see how different they are. The regularity of nature in fact is the regularity of our own concept formation, and what we know of nature – time and space and causality – are forms and concepts we provide (and in fact, our concepts arise as metaphors for perceptual forms).

2. The Persistence of the Metaphorical Drive in Art and Myth

In Science the Truth Drive Breaks Free from our Initial Concern with Survival

Science continues to elaborate the anthropomorphic framework of concepts that began with language. Whereas human beings originally form concepts for practical purposes – for the sake of stability and safety – in science concept-formation takes on a life of its own. The edifice of concepts becomes a source of safety for the scientist from “different kinds of truths” opposed to scientific truth.

**The Metaphorical Drive Continues Alongside the Truth Drive**

Despite our framework of concepts, the drive to metaphor formation continues to be the “fundamental human drive.” While this drive produces the very concepts that imprison it, it also seeks an outlet in myth and art. It brings about new metaphors that undermine the existing system of concepts, always threatening to refashion it into something like the more chaotic and colorful world we see in dreams.

**Art and Myth as Outlets for the Metaphorical Drive**

The outlets of myth and art allow deception without the injury that truth-seeking original arose to avoid. In art and myth, this drive is “released from its former slavery and celebrates its Saturnalia.” But the dissimulation here is conscious rather than unconscious, and it arises not to avoid the dangerous elements of life but to celebrate life as something good. The framework of concepts then becomes a scaffolding providing a foundational point of departure for the free play of the artistic imagination.

**The Social Coexistence of the Scientific and Artistic**

Likewise, in societies we see these two strands – the metaphorical and truth-seeking drives – existing side by side, embodied in the artist and the scientist. It is possible that the artistic strand can obtain the upper hand in a society – “as was perhaps the case in ancient Greece,” as indicated by the fact that so much of what the culture produced was not merely a matter of necessity (“neither the hose, nor the gait, nor the clothes, nor the clay jugs give evidence of having been invented because of a pressing need”). This artistic stance is critical to human happiness; where concepts and abstractions are designed merely to avoid misfortune and pain, art aims at something more positive: happiness, cheer, and redemption. The fortunes of the artistic human being are more volatile, but the scientific human being sacrifices the highs along with the lows.

**176 to 187: The Truth Drive is Both Ascetic and Eudaimonic**

The welfare of human beings requires untruth, and so the truth drive can be ascetic and destructive. But the truth drive is also eudaimonic – or happiness-seeking – insofar as pleasure must be the basis of every drive. Its eudemonic components include, beyond its utility in survival described above: the feelings of power from having knowledge or the belief that one possesses the truth and discovered it; the pure pleasure of thinking; the fact that it may be a source of prestige; and pleasure in resisting one’s impulses.

Artistic activities simultaneously satisfy both eudaimonic drives (for illusion and truth): “Artistic pleasure is the greatest kind of pleasure because it speaks the truth quite generally in the form of lies,” treating illusion as illusion.
Discussion

The Origins of the Truth Drive

So what is the origin of the drive for the truth in an intellect that functions to deceive?

Early on in his essay Nietzsche seems to have given us an answer: the drive for truth has its origins in the nonmoral distinction between truth and lie required for self-preservation. But this answer turns out to be too vague, and the rest of the essay is spent making it more specific by appropriating the drive to truth not—as one might expect—to nonmoral truth, but rather to nonmoral lie.

It turns out that the origin of the truth drive, in an intellect driven to deceive, is this very drive to dissimulation (including self-deception and the deception of others). Truth in the moralized sense is just lie in the nonmoral sense, once our awareness of nonmoral lie as such has become unconscious: which is to say, once we have forgotten that such lies are lies, and forgotten the fact that our drive to absolute truth is constructed from the impulse to dissimulation that grounds social life. Another way of saying this is that the intellect’s drive to dissimulation, when turned inward, has a self-cancelling effect: the drive to truth arises when the drive to dissimulation deceives itself. Language and concepts are just sophisticated means to such dissimulation: they are barriers interposed—for our own safety—between us and the dangerous world of raw impression (external stimulus) and raw impulse (internal stimulus). To put this in Freudian terms indebted to Nietzsche, they are critical defenses of the ego, and their function in organizing experience is to avoid danger and extinguish anxiety.

But crucially, concepts are also expressions of the primitive drives and impressions they serve to organize. The “fundamental human drive” to metaphor—an artistic drive—weaves and so imprisons itself in the conceptual web that leads to science. At the same time, this fundamental drive continues to attempt to break free from these constraints—by seeking outlets in myth and art, which can subvert the existing system of concepts. This artistic impulse is superior to the truth drive in that its dissimulation is no longer unconscious, and it abandons any pretensions to things-in-themselves or absolute truth: in this sense, we get the counterintuitive result that art’s dissimulation is actually aligned to nonmoral truth (here Nietzsche directly counters the traditional Platonic account of artistic falsehood). In abandoning the pretense to absolute truth, the artistic drive satisfies both our drive to dissimulate and our drive for truth (by speaking “the truth quite generally in the form of lies”). In doing so, it can take us from the narrower goal of avoiding danger (the primary function of concepts) to a more expressive, less constrained celebration of life—something that human flourishing cannot do without.

Nietzsche’s Skepticism
We might find it confusing that Nietzsche is using Kantian epistemology to come to such skeptical conclusions. After all, Kant was trying to safeguard knowledge and objectivity in the face of Hume’s skepticism. Kant does not lament the lack of correspondence of concepts to things-in-themselves, claiming that we cannot even make sense of such correspondence. In this essay, Nietzsche seems at times to make a similar claim – that no sense can be made of correspondence to things-in-themselves; but at others he seems to take the inconsistent position that correspondence is necessary to truth, and that the very thing that Kant believes gives us objectivity – our relationship to appearances – leaves us mired in a sea of lies, since we are cut off from the only thing that could ground truth: things-in-themselves. Nietzsche seems to identify appearance and lie in a way that is inconsistent with Kant and leaves him open to charges of relativism. We could save Nietzsche from this inconsistency by interpreting him as suggesting that appearances do not becomes lies until they are confused with things-in-themselves. If so, he is simply offering a very Kantian critique of the errors of Reason, with the innovative suggestion that an authentic relationship to appearances – one that doesn’t confuse them with things-in-themselves – must be essentially aesthetic or artistic.