

Nietzsche On Truth

Truth, for Nietzsche, depends on the correspondence between a linguistic sign and what it signifies; it is to use terms in their conventional way. Nietzsche does not believe that we can encounter the true, mind-independent object, but rather, only its representation in our experience. When we speak of things we do not refer to objects as they are apart from us, but instead the objects as they are appropriated to us and made intelligible by being presented first in terms of subjective experience and then also in terms of our capacity for language and concept formation. Nietzsche describes truth as a sum of metaphors that have been consolidated through habit, and whose dependence on human subjectivity has been forgotten. He provides us with two senses in which truth operates as a metaphor.

In *On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense*, Nietzsche explored the relationship between truth and language as an appropriation of the world into a human form. He asks:

“Are designations congruent with things? Is language an adequate expression of all realities?”¹ Here Nietzsche is questioning the common philosophical assumption of direct realism, the notion that the objects of our perception are the objects themselves, unmediated by a human agent. The experience of an object is distinct from the object itself; as such, the subject refers not to the objects themselves, but to the objects as they are represented in experience. These experiences will always be presented in terms of how the human mind structures experience; since they depend on a subject’s ability to cognize objects and represent them in the mind, they are essentially different from the object as they exists independently of the mind. Nietzsche refers to this as the “first metaphor” involved in the process of conceptualizing.

“This creator only designates the relations of things to men...To begin with, a nerve stimulus is transferred into an image”.²

1 Nietzsche, Friedrich, *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*, p2.

2 Ibid, p1.

The object and its representation are two entirely different things. We do not perceive the causal connection *in experience* between the object *outside* of experience and the object *of* experience.

After the object has been represented in the mind of the subject, it is removed once more still by being referred to by a word. Nietzsche refers to this as the ‘second metaphor’. We designate sounds to denote objects of a like kind, but do not perceive a causal relation between the word and the object. It appears that there is no a priori basis upon which we attach linguistic signs to the things we wish to denote with them. In other words, we possess no way of, through reasoning alone, determining which sign designates an object. If designations *were* necessarily congruent with things, we would not expect to experience any of the misunderstandings that we do with our language, as objects would cause the signs used to refer to them.

So we find two senses in which metaphors are created: first, at the moment of the translation from external objects to that of mental phenomena. The second metaphor arises in the linking between a phenomena of this sort and a linguistic sign. The function of this sign is to denote objects of a similar kind; to *unite them under a single concept in spite of their differences*.

“Every concept arises from the equation of unequal things...the concept ‘leaf’ is formed by arbitrarily discarding these individual differences and by forgetting the distinguishing aspects”.³

Nietzsche is espousing a nominalist perspective on metaphysics. He does not believe in the existence of the abstract class such as ‘Leaf’; he only asserts the existence of particular, unequal things. Concepts are formed from the enumeration of all of our particular resembling experiences. This means that, contrary to the metaphysics of prior philosophers (e.g. Plato, and Kant), Nietzsche holds that particular objects of experience precede and give rise to the universalizing concept. Because of this, there is no way to adequately understand particular object by reference to its universalized concept; the correct objects of our knowledge are the real particulars of the world, not the abstract concept formed afterward. Knowledge, then, is not knowledge of the object in itself, arrived at through contemplation

3 Ibid, p3.

of its concept. Knowledge is arrived at through experience with particulars in the world; it is knowledge from a *perspective*. This is the position that Nietzsche takes in the third essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals*:

“There is *only* a perspective seeing, *only* a perspective ‘knowing’; and the *more* affects we allow to speak about one thing, the *more* eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our ‘concept’ of this thing, our ‘objectivity’, be”.⁴

Here we see that, for Nietzsche, knowledge is something essentially anthropomorphic. To occupy an “objective” standpoint, one would have to get outside of the human perspective entirely. Because of this limit in our cognitive faculties, human beings do not have access to objective, impartial knowledge, but instead only the array of human perspectives. However, Nietzsche doubts that objective, impartial truth is valuable in itself considering how any ‘objective’ truth is categorically divorced from human affairs. His primary concern is that of the aesthetic experience of the object and how it relates to humankind and their goals; he goes so far as to call the objectivity of human intellect a ‘nonsensical absurdity’, implying that knowledge is never this pure and disinterested pursuit but is always motivated by the will of human beings.

What is true becomes consolidated through repetition and enforcement. Nietzsche suggests that the designations of language originally came about through the master’s will; those who were capable of asserting their will and making their word true through actions were the original designators of meaning:

“The lordly right of giving names extends so far that one should allow oneself to conceive the origin of language itself as an expression of power on the part of the rulers: they say this *is* this and this”⁵.

The masters create a designation that is bound to things through a sign. This is primarily accomplished, according to Nietzsche, through their superiority in power, wealth, resourcefulness, etc. Here there is an important connection between language and action; the master is one who can craft language and action to conform to one another. They are powerful enough to keep their promises and ensure that

⁴ Nietzsche, Friedrich, *On the Genealogy of Morals, Third Essay, Section 12*, p119.

⁵ Ibid, *First Essay, Section 2*, p26.

their word obtains in the world. In contrast, Nietzsche characterizes the common individual as impotent and incapable of making their will obtain. Out of the inability of the weaker strata grows a vengeful hatred toward the rulers and their conceptions. It is here that the slave revolt in morality occurs; the reversal of values and re-appropriation of the terms synonymous with 'good' and 'bad' to something synonymous with 'evil', and 'good', respectively. It is important to note that slave morality became victorious by appropriating the meanings of existing terms. The slave *lies* by claiming to be good and by that means disrupts the prior meaning of the term.

Throughout *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*, Nietzsche contrasts the human perspective to that of other animals, and asks us whether we consider any one to be the real perspective. This is consistent with his analogy of lambs and birds of prey and the differing perspective that they take on the predatory process; neither the perspective of the lamb nor the bird of prey nor the human is sufficient to be called 'objective'. Human beings trick themselves into thinking that they have direct access to objects, first in the initial perception of the object, and then again in the designation of an object with a word and a concept. It is only by means of forgetting the insight that we bring much to bear on what is true through these two metaphorical transformations that we come to think that we have any grasp on what truth is. It is precisely our present intuitions that are always a danger to our conceptions of things thus far:

“This drive continually confuses the conceptual categories and cells by bringing forward new transferences, metaphors, and metonymies. It continually manifests an ardent desire to refashion the world which presents itself to waking man...”⁶

Truth is using a particular linguistic sign that is associated with an object, but the formation of these concepts and their organization and association with their linguistic sign is beholden to our subjective intuitions. Because of this, Nietzsche refers to our process of metaphor formation as an *aesthetic relation*⁷, as something essentially anthropomorphic. If truth is predicated on the ability for individuals to create such metaphors, then the disappearance of humankind would seem to imply to disappearance

⁶ Nietzsche, Friedrich, *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*, p7.

⁷ Ibid, p5.

of human knowledge altogether. This is a notion that Nietzsche deals with in the beginning of *On Truth and Lies*. He mentions that human knowing is a transient and arrogant ordeal, and that all things would feel a similar sense of pride in being placed within a perspective. A perspective is all that we are afforded even when we come to believe that we have transcended it. Just as a gnat experiences only the world from themselves, we too feel, as Nietzsche put it: “..as though the world’s axis turned within...”.⁸

8 Nietzsche, Friedrich, *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*, p1.