

ON TRUTH AND LIE
IN AN EXTRA-MORAL
SENSE



FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

TRANS. A. K. M. ADAM

ON TRUTH AND LIE IN AN EXTRA-MORAL SENSE



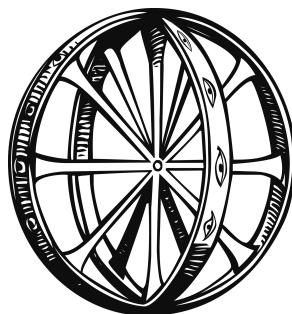
FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

TRANS. A. K. M. ADAM

Translation by A. K. M. Adam from 'Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinne' in Projekt Gutenberg - DE.
<https://gutenberg.spiegel.de/buch/uber-wahrheit-und-luge-im-aussermoralischen-sinne-3243/1>

This translation is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

Titling set in Hesse Antiqua
Text in Scala 12/16



Edition 1.0, April 2019

Oxford: Quadriga, 2019

ON TRUTH AND LIE IN AN EXTRA-MORAL SENSE



In some remote corner of the universe which opens out and twinkles in innumerable solar systems, there was once a star upon which clever animals invented knowledge. It was the most arrogant and untruthful minute in world history; but it was only a minute. After Nature had drawn several breaths, it chilled the star, and the clever animals had to die.

One could invent such a fable and still not have illustrated sufficiently how miserable, how insubstantial and ephemeral, how pointless and arbitrary the human intellect appears next to Nature. There were eternities in which it did not exist; when it is all over with again, nothing will have happened. Because there is no further mission which leads beyond human life for any intellect. Rather, it is human, and only its owner and producer so pathetically takes it as if the world rotates around it. If, however, we and the gnat could understand one another, we would perceive that even the gnat floats through the air with the same pathos and imagines itself the flying centre of the world. Nothing in Nature is so reprehensible and small that it will not, through a little puff of that power of knowledge, immediately swell up like a balloon; and as every porter wants to have his admirers, so the most vain human being—the philosopher—supposes that he sees the eyes of the universe

telescopically directed at his behaviour and thoughts from all sides.

It is remarkable that the intellect should bring this about; after all, it was given only as a stopgap to the most unfortunate, delicate, transitory beings in order to sustain them for a minute of existence, from which otherwise, without that extra gift, they would have every reason to fly as rapidly as Lessing's son. That arrogance, bound up with knowledge and perception, a masking mist which lies over the human eyes and senses, thus deceives them concerning the value of existence, owing to the fact that it bears within itself the most flattering appreciation of knowledge itself. Its most general effect is deception—but even the most particular effects bear something of a similar character within themselves.

The intellect, as a means for the preservation of the individual, develops its principal power in dissimulation; then this is the means through which the weaker, less robust individuals preserve themselves as some they are denied the chance to conduct the battle for existence with horns or carnivores' sharp teeth. This art of dissimulation comes to its peak in humans; here the deception, flattery, lies and treachery, the behind-the-back comment, self-promotion, life in borrowed glamour, masquerade, concealed convention, role-playing for others and for one's own self—in short, the incessant fluttering about around the single flame of vanity are so much the rule and the law that almost nothing is more inconceivable than how an honest and pure urge toward the truth could arise among humans. They are deeply immersed in illusions and dream-images, their eye slides around over the surfaces of things and sees "forms," their perception nowhere leads to truth, but rather contents itself with receiving stimuli and as in blind-man's-bluff, with playing with the backs of things. Besides, people allow themselves to be lied to in dreams at night throughout a lifetime,

without their moral sense ever trying to stop this, whereas there are reputed to be people who through sheer will power have overcome snoring. What do people actually know about themselves! Have they the capacity to see themselves completely, even only once, as if they were lying within a glass case? Doesn't Nature conceal most things from them, even about their own bodies, the winding intestines, the rushing flow of the bloodstream, the tangled fibres' quivers, in order to banish and confine them in a proud charlatan's consciousness! She threw away the key, and woe to the fatal curiosity which once might see outward and downward through a crevice in the chamber of consciousness, and which presently guesses that it is resting on the merciless, greedy, insatiable, murderous among humans, indifferent to his ignorance, and like one who hangs on the back of a tiger in dreams. Whence in all the world, under these circumstances, comes the urge to truth?

Insofar as the individual wants to preserve itself over against other individuals, in a state of nature it uses intellectual matters mostly just for deception; since, however, humans want to exist socially, like herds, mostly out of necessity and boredom combined, they need a peace treaty and try at least to banish the most important bellum omnium contra omnes from their world. This peace treaty involves what appears to be the first step toward the acquisition of that puzzling urge towards truth. Now, that is, it is established what will be "truth" hereafter; in other words, a uniform, valid and compulsory designation of the matter has been devised, and the linguistic legislation yields the first laws of truth: for the contrast between truth and lie arises here first. The liar uses the valid designation, the words, in order to make the unreal appear to be real; for example, one says, "I am rich," when "poor" would be the correct designation for one's precise state. One misuses the established conventions

through arbitrary exchanges or even reversals of the names. If one does this in self-interested and other harmful ways, the society will no longer trust one and will exclude one. Thereby humans don't flee fraud so much as being harmed by fraud; what they hate at this level is not deception, but the unpleasant, hostile consequences of certain types of deceptions. In a similarly narrow sense people also want only the truth: they demand the agreeable, life-affirming consequences of the truth, but they are indifferent to pure inconsequential knowledge; they are even hostilely disposed toward truths which might be harmful and destructive. And furthermore, what about linguistic conventions? Are they really products of knowledge, of the truth-sense, are the designations identical to the things? Is language the adequate expression of all realities?

People can come to imagine that they possess a "truth" to the extent just designated only through forgetfulness. If one doesn't want to content oneself with truth in the form of a tautology, that is, with empty shells, one has constantly to deal in illusions for truths. What is a word? The representation of a nerve-stimulus in sound. But it would already be the result of a false and unjustified application of the principle of sufficient reason to infer a cause outside us from the nerve-stimulus. How dare we, if truth alone had been decisive about the genesis of language, if the criterion of certainty alone had been decisive about designations, how dare we say, "the stone is hard," as if the word "hard" were otherwise known to us, and not only as an entirely subjective sensation! We classify things according to [grammatical] genders, we designate a tree as masculine, a plant as feminine: what high-handed figuration! How far-flown beyond the canons of certainty! We speak of a "snake": the designation matches nothing but the twistiness, so one could apply it also to a worm. What high-handed differentiations, what biased

favouritism, now this now the other quality of things! The different languages, set beside one another, show that neither the truth, nor an adequate expression depends on words; for otherwise there would not be so many languages. The “thing-in-itself” (exactly that which would be a pure, inconsequential truth) is in fact entirely incomprehensible to the shapers of language, and is not in the least worth the effort. They designate only the relations of things to humans, and appropriate the most audacious metaphors to help express them. A nerve-stimulus, in the beginning figured into an image! First metaphor. The image then imitated in a sound! Second metaphor. And every time, a leap beyond one sphere into the midst of one which is entirely other and new. One can imagine a person who is entirely deaf and had never had a perception of tone or music; how such a person marvels at, say, Chladni's sound-figures in the sand, finds their cause in the vibrations of the string, and then will swear that he must know what people call “tone”—so it is with all of us and language. We believe we know something about the things themselves if we speak about trees, colours, snow, and flowers, and yet we possess nothing but metaphors for things, which by no means correspond to the original essences. As the tone appears as the sand-figure, so the enigmatic X of the thing-in-itself appears once as nerve-stimulus, then as image, finally as sound. In any case, therefore, the origin of language did not happen logically, and the whole substance in which and with which the person of truth, the researcher, the philosopher fashion and build comes, if not from Cuckoonebulopolis, then in any case not from the essence of things.

Let us think especially, however, about the formation of concepts. Every word immediately becomes a concept this way: it is supposed to serve not just as a reminder of the primitive experience to which it owes its origin, which is unique and in every way individualised, but

has simultaneously to suit countless more-or-less similar (that is, strictly speaking, never alike, therefore absolutely unlike) cases. Every concept originates from the making-similar of dissimilars. Just as surely as no leaf is ever entirely like another, so surely the concept “Leaf” is formed by arbitrarily abandoning these individual differences, by forgetting the distinctions, and now the representation arises as if there were in nature a “leaf” apart from leaves, something like a primitive form, after which all leaves were woven, designed, calibrated, coloured, crimped, and decorated, but by maladroit hands, so that no correct and reliable example might result as a faithful replica of the primitive form. We call someone “honest”; “why has he acted so honestly today?” we ask. Our answer usually runs, “Because of his honesty.” Honesty! One more version of “the ‘leaf’ is the cause of the leaves.” We know absolutely nothing about an essential quality called “honesty,” but rather just numerous individualised, thus different, actions which we make similar by overlooking their dissimilarities, and then designate as honest actions; in the end, we formulate from them a qualitas occulta with the name, “Honesty.” Overlooking individuals and reality gives us the concept, as it also gives us the form, whereas nature knows no concepts or forms, thus also no categories, but rather only an X, inaccessible to us and undefinable. Then also, our contrast between individuals and categories is anthropomorphic, and comes not from the essence of things, though we do not also venture to say that it does not correspond to them; that would be a dogmatic claim, and just as undemonstrable as its contrary.

What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, anthropomorphisms, in short a totality of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and decorated, and which after long use people think are fixed, canonical,

and binding. Truths are illusions which people have forgotten are illusions, metaphors which have become worn-out and impossible to perceive, coins whose imprints have worn off and which now are useful only as metal, no longer as coins.

But we still don't know whence the urge to truth comes. Up to now we have only heard about the commitment which a community imposes in order to exist: to be truthful, that is, to use the usual metaphors, therefore (expressed in moral terms): to lie according to the fixed conventions, to lie, herd-like, in a style which is binding for everyone. Now, people freely forget that that's the way things are; therefore one lies in the designated way, unconsciously, after centuries of habituation—and precisely from this unconsciousness, precisely from this forgetting comes the sentiment for truth. From this feeling of obligation to designate one thing "red," another "cold," a third "mute," arises a moral urge relating to the truth: from the contrast of liar, whom no one trusts, whom all ostracise, people demonstrate to themselves the honourableness, the trustworthiness, and usefulness of the truth. Now they put forth their action as "rational" beings under the dominion of abstractions; they no longer permit themselves to be carried away by sudden impressions, by intuitions, they generalise all these impressions first by way of more faded, cooler concepts in order to tie them to the engine of their lives and actions. Everything that distinguishes people from animals depends upon this capacity to evaporate vivid metaphors into schemas, to dissolve images into concepts. It is precisely in the field of these schemata that something is possible which might never succeed with regard to vivid first impressions: to construct a pyramidal arrangement of castes and levels, to create a new world of laws, privileges, subordinations, boundary determinations, which now steps in front of the other vivid world of first impressions, as

the more certain, more universal, better-known, and more human, and therefore as the regulative and imperative world. While each perception-metaphor is individual and without equivalent, thus always knowing how to escape every classification, the great structure of concepts shows the frozen regularity of a Roman columbarium and logic exhales that rigour and chilliness characteristic of mathematics. Whoever has this chilly temperament will hardly believe that even the concept, bony and cubical as a die and just as variable, still only remains as the residuum of a metaphor, and that illusion of the artistic transfiguration of nerve-stimuli into images is, if not the mother, then the grandmother of any concept. In this dice-game of concepts, what is called “truth” is: using any die as designated, counting its spots exactly, forming the correct categories, and never transgressing against the caste system or the sequence of the order of precedence. As the Romans and the Etruscans sliced the heavens with rigid mathematical lines, and consigned a god to a space thus delimited, as to a templum, so every race has such a mathematically-divided heaven-concept and now uses the demand for truth to mean that each god-concept should be sought only in his sphere. Here one may certainly wonder at humanity as at a powerful construction genius who succeeds in piecing together an infinitely complicated conceptual cathedral upon moving foundations and, as it were, on flowing water; of course, in order to take hold on such a foundation, it must be a construction as of spider’s silk, delicate enough to be carried along with the wave, secure enough not to be blown apart by every wind. As a construction genius, humans in this way far surpass the bees; the latter build out of wax, which they put together from nature, while the former build form the far more delicate stuff of concepts, which they must first fabricate from themselves. Here they are very much to be

wondered at—but not on account of their urge for truth, for the pure knowledge of things. If someone hides something behind a bush, then seeks and finds it just there, then this search and discovery are nothing much to praise; so it is regarding the search for and discovery of “truth” within the rational-region. If I define “mammal” and then declare, after inspecting a camel, “See, a mammal,” a truth will thereby have been brought to light, but it is of marginal value. I mean, it is anthropomorphic through and through, and contains not a single point which would be “true in itself,” really and universally valid, apart from humanity. The inquirer after such truths basically seeks only the transformation of the world into humanity; one strives for an understanding of the world as a human thing and at best forces in oneself a feeling of assimilation. Like astrologers who observe the stars in the service of humanity and in connection with its well-being and suffering, so such inquirers observe the whole world as it bears on humanity; as the infinite broken echo [*Nachklang*] of a primal sound [*Urklang*]: humanity; as the reproduced replica [*Abbild*] of one primal image [*Urbild*]: humanity. Their policy is to take humanity as the measure of all things; in so doing, they proceed from the error of believing that they have the unmediated thing before them, as pure object. Thus they forget the metaphoricality of the original perception-metaphor and take it as the thing itself.

Only by forgetting that primitive metaphor-world, only by the hardening and stiffening of an original welter of images gushing forth in molten fluidity out of the primal capacity of human fantasy, only by the unconquerable belief that this sun, this window, this table might be truth in itself, in short, only by humanity’s forgetting itself as subjects, and indeed as artistically creating subjects, do they live with some calm, security, and consistency; if they could be

outside the prison-walls of this belief for only a moment, it would be all over for their “self-consciousness.” Already this costs them trouble of admitting to themselves that the insect or the bird perceives an entirely different world from that of humanity, and the question of which of the two perceived worlds is correct, is entirely meaningless, since it would have to be measured by the standard of correct perception, that is, with a non-existent standard. Actually, however, it seems to me that “the correct perception” (which would have to mean, “the adequate expression of an object in the subject”) is a contradictory no-thing. Between two absolutely different spheres, as between subject and object, there is no causality, no correctness, no expression, but rather at most an æsthetic relation; I mean a suggestive transference, a stammering translation into an entirely foreign language, for which, however, in any case a mediating sphere and a mediating power, freely rhetoricising and freely inventing, are needed. The word “appearance” contains many seductions; that’s why I avoid it as much as possible, since it is not true that the thing’s essence appears in the empirical world. A painter who loses both hands and wants to express in song the image which occurs to her will disclose still more by this exchange of spheres than the empirical world discloses of the essence of things. Even the relation of the nerve-stimulus to the image brought forth is in itself nothing essential; if, however, the self-same image has been brought forth a million times and has been bequeathed through many generations of people, indeed at last appears to the entirety of humanity as the result of the same occasion, then it finally acquires the same meaning for humanity, as if it were the unique necessary image and as if that relation of the original nerve-stimulus to the image brought forth were a strict causal relationship. as a dream, constantly repeated, would be perceived and judged as reality

through and through. But the hardening and stiffening of a metaphor guarantees nothing as far as the necessity and conclusive justification of this metaphor.

It is certain that all people who are accustomed to such observations have felt a deep mistrust for every idealism of this kind, as often as they absolutely satisfied themselves of the eternal consistency, ubiquity, and regularity of the laws of nature. “Here everything, as far as we press, from the heights of the telescopic world to the depths of the microscopic world, is so secure, perfected, infinite, law-like, without lack; science will always have to dig these holes with results, and everything that is found will be consistent and will not contradict itself. How little is this like a product of fantasy; for if it were such, it would, after all, have to disclose its simulation and unreality somewhere.” Against this, it can be said that were everyone to have a different sense-perception for him- or herself; could we ourselves perceive sometimes as a bird, sometimes as a worm, sometimes as a plant; or were one of us to see the same stimulus as red, another as blue, a third even hear it as a tone, then no one would ever talk about the law-likeness of nature, but rather they would grasp it only as a most highly subjective creation. So, then, what is a law of nature really, for us? It is not known to us in itself, but rather only in its effects, that is, in its relations to other laws of nature which again are known to us only as a sum of relations. Therefore all these relations still only further refer to one another and their essences are to us thoroughly incomprehensible, only that which we import—time, space, thus the succession of relations and quantity—is really known to us. Everything wonderful, however, which we behold in the law of nature, which demands our explanation and which could seduce us into the mistrust of idealism, lies precisely and entirely only in the mathematical strictness and

inviolability of the notions of time and space. We produce these, however, in ourselves and out of ourselves with the same necessity with which the spider spins; if we are forced to apprehend all things only under these forms, then it is not so surprising that we apprehend only these forms in all things. They all must bear the law of numbers in themselves, and it is precisely number that is most astonishing in things. All the regularity which impresses us so in the stars' courses and in chemical processes fundamentally coincides with those characteristics which we ourselves import into things, so that we thereby impress ourselves. Thus it follows from this, indeed, that that artistic formation of metaphor with which each of our perceptions begins, already presupposed those forms and therefore is completed with them. Only from the firm persistence of these primal forms accounts for the possibility that still further on a building of concepts could be constituted from the metaphors themselves. This is, namely, a counterfeit of time-, space-, and numerical-relations from the ground of metaphors.

2

As we have seen, originally language, and in later times, science, works on the construction of concepts. As the bee builds the cells and at the same time fills the cells with honey, so science works ceaselessly on its great columbarium of concepts, the tomb of intuition, always building new and higher floors, shoring up, purifying, renovating the old cells, and is concerned above all to fill up that monstrous heaped-up substructure and to set the entire empirical world, that is, the anthropomorphic world, in order. If even active humans bind their lives to reason and its concepts, in order not to be washed away and not to disappear, then the inquirers build

their hut close to the tower-building of science in order to be able to assist in it and to find themselves a refuge under the extant completed part. And they need a refuge since there are frightening powers which continually throng in upon them, and the scientific “truth” contrasts with a “truth” of an entirely different kind, which bears the most dissimilar trademark.

That urge to metaphor formation—that fundamental urge of humanity, which one cannot count out for a moment, since one would then be counting out humanity itself—is in truth not overcome and is hardly even tamed, thanks to the fact that a regular and rigid new world is built out of its desiccated products, the concepts, as a fortress for humanity. It seeks a new region for its activities and another channel and it finds it in myth and actually in art. It continually tangles the categories and cells of concepts, because it puts forth new figurations, metaphors, metonyms, it continually shows the lust to fashion the extant world of the awake person to be irregularly variegated, disjointedly incoherent, fascinating and always new, as is the world of dreams. Waking people are, in themselves, only fully aware that they are awake through the rigid and regular network of concepts, and for that reason they sometimes even come to the belief that they are dreaming if that network of concepts is torn apart by art. Pascal was right to claim that if the same dream came to us every night, we would be as much absorbed with it as with things which we see every day. “If a mechanic were sure to dream every night twelve complete hours straight through, that he were king, then I believe,” says Pascal, “that he would be just as fortunate as a king who dreamed, every night for twelve hours, that he was a mechanic.” The waking day of a mythically aroused people such as the ancient Greeks, is, through the continuous effect of marvel as it appropriates

the myth, is, as a matter of fact, more like a dream than it is like the day of a scientifically down-to-earth thinker. If any tree could speak as a nymph some day, or a God in a bull's skin could drag a young woman away, if the goddess Athena herself is suddenly seen as she drives through the markets of Athens with a beautiful team of horses, in Pisistratus's company—and an honest Athenian believes it—then anything is possible in any moment, as in a dream, and all Nature swarms around people as if it were only a masquerade of the gods, who only make a joke of deceiving humanity in all shapes.

Humans themselves, however, have an unconquerable tendency to let themselves be deceived, and are like people enchanted by good fortune if the rhapsode narrates an epic tale to them as true, or if a player in a play acts the king's role still more regally than reality shows the king to be. The intellect, that master of dissimulation, is free and is released from its former slave-labor, so long as it can deceive without harm; then it celebrates its Saturnalia. It is never more wanton, richer, more arrogant, cleverer and more audacious; with creative delight it jumbles up metaphors and shifts the boundary-markers of abstractions, so that, for example, it designates the stream as the moving path which carries people places they otherwise walk. Now it has thrown off the sign of its servitude; formerly concerned to show with gloomier officiousness the path and the tool to some poor individual who lusts after Being, and like a servant of a master who is setting out for plunder and loot, now it has become the lord and may wipe off the expression of indigence from its face. Whatever it does now, in comparison with its former conduct, everything conveys dissimulation in itself, as the earlier bore distortion in itself. It copies human life, but takes this as a good thing, and appears to be quite content with it. That monstrous beam-and board-structure of concepts, which needy people clamp onto to

save their lives, is only a scaffolding and a toy for the liberated intellect, for its most audacious stunts; and if the liberated intellect destroys it, jumbles it up, ironically puts it together again, uniting the most disparate and separating neighbours, then it reveals that it doesn't need that stopgap of the needy and that it now is led not by concepts but rather by intuitions. No regular path leads from these intuitions to the land of spectral schemata, of abstractions; words are not made for them, people are speechless when they see them, or they speak in pure forbidden metaphors and in unheard-of conceptual-couplings, in order at least to correspond creatively to the impression of the powerful contemporary intuition through the demolition and derision of the old conceptual barriers.

There are epochs in which the rational person and the intuitive stood side by side, the one anxious about intuition, the other with disdain for abstraction—the latter as irrational as the former was uncreative. Both long to dominate life: this first, since it knows how to counter the principal necessities through precaution, cleverness, and regularity; the second, since, as an “overjoyous hero,” it does not see those needs and only takes as real the life which is refigured as appearance and beauty. Where once the intuitive people wielded their weapons more powerfully and triumphantly than their opponents, somewhat as in more ancient Greece, in the most favourable case a culture can form and establish the dominance of art over life; that dissimulation, that denial of indigence, that brilliance of the metaphorical perceptions and, generally, that immediacy of deception accompanies all manifestations of such a life. Neither the house, nor the pace, nor the clothing, nor the clay jar reveal that severe need concocted them; it seems as if they all were intended to express a sublime felicity and an olympian serenity and—as it were—a game with serious things. While the people who

are guided by concepts and abstractions only repulse misfortune with these, without forcing good fortune for themselves out of the abstractions, while they aspire after the most freedom from pain, the intuitive people, standing in the middle of culture, already reap a continually inflowing illumination, amusement, redemption, over and above the repulsion of evils. Of course they suffer violently, when they suffer; indeed, they suffer even more often, since they don't understand how to learn from experience and always fall into the same pits into which they have fallen before. They are then just as irrational in suffering as in felicity, they shout out loud and are inconsolable. How different things are with the Stoics under similar mischances, having learned from experience, people dominating themselves with concepts! They who normally seek only sincerity, truth, freedom from deceptions and protection from beguiling assaults, now, in misfortune, bring forth the masterpiece of dissimulation, as the former does in good fortune; they wear no twitching, mobile human face, but rather as it were a mask with dignified symmetry of features. They don't shout and don't once vary their voices; when a proper thunder-cloud empties itself over them, then they wrap themselves in their cloaks and walk from under it with unhurried stride.

Friedrich Nietzsche, 1873