

ON TRUTH AND LYING IN AN EXTRA-MORAL SENSE (1873)

In some remote corner of the universe that is poured out in countless flickering solar systems, there once was a star on which clever animals invented knowledge. That was the most arrogant and the most untruthful moment in "world history"—yet indeed only a moment. After nature had taken a few breaths, the star froze over and the clever animals had to die.

Someone could invent such a fable and still not have illustrated adequately how pitiful, how shadowy and fleeting, how purposeless and arbitrary the human intellect appears within nature. There were eternities when it did not exist; and someday when it no longer is there, not much will have changed. For that intellect has no further mission leading beyond human life. It is utterly human, and only its owner and producer takes it with such pathos as if the whole world hinged upon it. But if we could communicate with the gnat, we would learn that it too swims through the air with this same pathos and feels within itself the flying center of this world. Nothing in nature is so contemptible and insignificant that it would not immediately be swollen up like a balloon by the slightest touch of that power of knowledge; and just as every cargo-carrier wants to have his admirer, so too the proudest man of all, the philosopher, believes he sees the eyes of the universe focused telescopically from all directions upon his actions and thoughts.

It is remarkable that the intellect manages to do this, for in reality this faculty is given only as a help to the most unfortunate, most delicate, and most perishable creature, in order to preserve it for a moment in an existence out of which it would otherwise, like Lessing's son, have every reason to flee.¹ The arrogance associated with knowledge and sensation lays a blinding fog over man's eyes and senses and deceives him about the value of existence by instilling in him a most flattering estimation of this faculty of knowledge. Its most universal effect is deception—but even its most specific effects have something of this same deceptiveness.

The intellect, as a means of preserving the individual, develops its

main powers in dissimulation; for this is the means by which the weaker, less robust individuals survive, since in the struggle for existence they are denied the horns and the sharp teeth of beasts of prey. This art of dissimulation reaches its peak in man; here deception, flattery, lying and cheating, slander, false pretenses, living on borrowed glory, masquerading, conventions of concealment, playacting before others and before oneself, in sum, the constant fluttering about the flame of vanity, is so much the rule and the law that almost nothing is more incomprehensible than how an honest and pure desire for truth could arise among men. They are deeply immersed in delusions and phantasmagoria; their eye merely glides around the surface of things and sees "forms"; their perception leads nowhere to the truth, but is satisfied with receiving stimuli and, as it were, playing a groping game on the back of things. Moreover, at night, for a whole life long, man lets himself be lied to in dreams, and his moral feeling does not seek to prevent this, although there are said to be men who can overcome snoring by sheer willpower. For what does man really know about himself! If only he could ever see himself perfectly, as if displayed in an illuminated showcase! Does not nature keep nearly everything secret from him, even about his own body, in order to hold him fast under the spell of a proud, delusionary consciousness, unmindful of the windings of his entrails, the swift flow of his bloodstream, the intricate quiverings of his tissues! She threw away the key; and woe to the fateful curiosity that ever succeeded in peering through a crack out of the room of consciousness and downward, suddenly realizing that man is based on a lack of mercy, insatiable greed, murder, on the indifference that stems from ignorance, as it were clinging to a tiger's back in dreams. Given this state of affairs, where in the world does the desire for truth originate?

Since the individual wants to preserve himself against other individuals, in the natural state man uses the intellect mostly for dissimulation. But at the same time, because man, out of necessity and boredom, wants to live socially in the herd, he needs a peace agreement, and he tries to eliminate at least the crudest forms of the *bellum omnium contra omnes* [war of all against all].² But this peaceful agreement apparently leads to the first step toward man's acquisition of his mysterious desire for truth. For what "truth" will be from now on is fixed; a uniformly valid and binding terminology for things is invented and the legislation of language also enacts the first laws of truth. For now, for the first time, the distinction between truth and

lying arises. The liar uses the valid terms, the words, to make the unreal appear real; for instance, he says, "I am rich," when "poor" would be the right term. He misuses established conventions by arbitrary substitutions and even reversals of names. When he does this in a selfish and damaging manner, society will no longer trust him and so it will exclude him from its presence. But men flee not so much being deceived as being harmed by deceit. What they hate is really not so much deception as the bad, hostile consequences of certain kinds of deceptions. Man also wants truth in a similar, restricted sense. He longs for the pleasant, life-preserving consequences of truth; he is indifferent to pure, inconsequential knowledge; toward truths which are perhaps even damaging and destructive, he is hostile. And furthermore, what is the situation with those conventions of language? Are they perhaps products of knowledge, of the sense for truth? Do terms coincide with things? Is language the adequate expression of all realities?

Only by forgetfulness can man ever come to believe that he has truth to the above-designated degree. Unless he wants to settle for truth in the form of tautology, i.e., for empty husks, he will perpetually exchange truths for illusions. What is a word? The portrayal of nerve stimuli in sounds. But to conclude from a nerve stimulus to a cause outside ourselves is already the result of a false and unjustified application of the law of causality. What would allow us, if the truth about the origin of language, the viewpoint of the certainty of terms, were alone decisive, what would allow us to say, "The stone is hard," as if "hard" were known to us otherwise than as a subjective stimulation! We arrange things by genders, we designate the tree [*der Baum*] as masculine, the plant [*die Pflanze*] as feminine: what arbitrary transferences! How far-flung beyond the canon of certitude! We speak of a "serpent"; the term applies to nothing but its winding, and so it would apply equally to the worm. What arbitrary delimitations, what one-sided preferences for one trait or another of a thing! The various languages, juxtaposed, show that words are never concerned with truth, never with adequate expression; otherwise there would not be so many languages. The "thing-in-itself" (which would be pure, disinterested truth) is also absolutely incomprehensible to the creator of language and not worth seeking. He designates only the relations of things to men, and to express these relations he uses the boldest metaphors. First, he translates a nerve stimulus into an image! That is the first metaphor. Then, the image must be reshaped into a sound! The second metaphor. And each time there is a com-

plete overlapping of spheres—from one sphere to the center of a totally different, new one. Imagine a person who is completely deaf and never has had a sensation of sound and music. How this person marvels at the Chladnean sound-figures in the sand, identifying their cause as the trembling of the strings, then swearing that now he must know what people call "sound."³ That is the situation of all of us with language. When we speak of trees, colors, snow, and flowers, we believe we know something about the things themselves, although what we have are just metaphors of things, which do not correspond at all to the original entities. Like sound in the sand-figure, so the mysterious *x* of the thing appears first as a nerve stimulus, then as an image, and finally as a sound. In any case, the origin of language is not a logical process, and the whole material in and with which the man of truth, the scientist, the philosopher, works and builds, stems, if not from a never-never land, in any case not from the essence of things.

Let us think in particular of the formation of concepts. Every word becomes a concept as soon as it is supposed to serve not merely as a reminder of the unique, absolutely individualized original experience, to which it owes its origin, but at the same time to fit countless, more or less similar cases, which, strictly speaking, are never identical, and hence absolutely dissimilar. Every concept originates by the equation of the dissimilar. Just as no leaf is ever exactly the same as any other, certainly the concept "leaf" is formed by arbitrarily dropping those individual differences, by forgetting the distinguishing factors, and this gives rise to the idea that besides leaves there is in nature such a thing as the "leaf," i.e., an original form according to which all leaves are supposedly woven, sketched, circled off, colored, curled, painted, but by awkward hands, so that not a single specimen turns out correctly and reliably as a true copy of the original form. We call a person "honest." We ask, "Why did he act so honestly today?" Our answer usually goes: "Because of his honesty." Honesty! that means once more: the "leaf" is the cause of the leaves. For we know nothing of an essential quality called honesty; what we know are numerous, individualized, hence dissimilar, actions which we equate by omitting the dissimilar and then referring to them as honest actions. Last of all, we formulate out of them a *qualitas occulta* with the name "honesty."

Overlooking the individual and the real gives us the concept, just as it also gives us the form, whereas nature knows no forms and concepts, hence also no species, but only an *x* that is inaccessible and

indefinable for us. For even our distinction between individual and species is anthropomorphic and does not stem from the essence of things, although we also do not dare to say that it does *not* correspond to it. For that would be a dogmatic assertion, and as such just as unprovable as its opposite.

What is truth? a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, anthropomorphisms, in short, a sum of human relations which were poetically and rhetorically heightened, transferred, and adorned, and after long use seem solid, canonical, and binding to a nation. Truths are illusions about which it has been forgotten that they *are* illusions, worn-out metaphors without sensory impact, coins which have lost their image and now can be used only as metal, and no longer as coins. We still do not know where the desire for truth originates; for until now we have heard only of the obligation which society, in order to exist, imposes: to be truthful, i.e., to use the customary metaphors, or in moral terms, the obligation to lie according to an established convention, to lie collectively in a style that is mandatory for everyone. Now, of course, man forgets that this is his situation; so he lies in the designated manner unconsciously and according to centuries-old habits—and precisely *by this unconsciousness*, by this forgetting, he arrives at his sense of truth. The sense of being obliged to call one thing “red,” another “cold,” a third one “mute,” gives rise to a moral feeling with respect to truth. By contrast with the liar, whom no one trusts, whom all ostracize, man proves for himself the honorableness, the familiarity, the usefulness of truth. As a “*rational*” being, he now puts his actions under the rule of abstractions; he no longer lets himself be carried away by sudden impressions, by intuitions; he first universalizes these impressions into less colorful, cooler concepts, in order to hitch the wagon of his life and actions to them. Everything that sets man off from the animal depends upon this capacity to dilute the concrete metaphors into a schema; for in the realm of such schemata, something is possible that might never succeed under the intuited first impressions: to build up a pyramidal order according to castes and classes, a new world of laws, privileges, subordinations, boundary determinations, which now stands opposite the other, concrete world of primary impressions, as the more solid, more universal, more familiar, more human, and therefore as the regulatory and imperative world. Whereas any intuitive metaphor is individual and unique and therefore always eludes any commentary, the great structure of concepts displays the rigid regularity

of a Roman columbarium and has an aura of that severity and coldness typical of mathematics. Whoever feels the breath of that coldness will scarcely believe that even the concept, bony and cube-shaped like a die, and equally rotatable, is just what is left over as the *residue of a metaphor*, and that the illusion of the artistic transference of a nerve stimulus into images is, if not the mother, then the grandmother, of any concept. Within this dice game of concepts, however, “truth” means: to use each die as designated, count its spots accurately, forming the correct labels, and never violating the caste system and sequence of rank classifications. As the Romans and Etruscans carved up the sky into rigid mathematical sectors and assigned a god to each delimited space as in a temple, so every nation has such a mathematically divided conceptual sky above it and understands by the demand for truth that each conceptual god must be sought only in *his* own sphere. In this respect man can probably be admired as a mighty architectural genius who succeeds in building an infinitely complicated conceptual cathedral on foundations that move like flowing water; of course, in order to anchor itself to such a foundation, the building must be light as gossamer—delicate enough to be carried along by the wave, yet strong enough not to be blown apart by the wind. As an architectural genius, man excels the bee; for it builds out of wax which it collects from nature, while man builds out of the much more delicate material of the concepts, which he must fabricate out of his own self. In this respect he is quite admirable, but not because of his desire for truth, for pure knowledge of things. If someone hides an object behind a bush, then seeks and finds it there, that seeking and finding is not very laudable: but that is the way it is with the seeking and finding of “truth” within the rational sphere. If I define the mammal and then after examining a camel declare, “See, a mammal,” a truth is brought to light, but it is of limited value. I mean, it is anthropomorphic through and through and contains not a single point that would be “true in itself,” real, and universally valid, apart from man. The investigator into such truths is basically seeking just the metamorphosis of the world into man; he is struggling to understand the world as a human-like thing and acquires at best a feeling of assimilation. Just as the astrologer observes the stars in the service of men and in connection with their joys and sorrows, so such an investigator observes the whole world as linked with man; as the infinitely refracted echo of a primeval sound, man; as the reproduction and copy of an archetype, man. His

procedure is to hold man up as the measure of all things, but his point of departure is the error of believing that he has these things before him as pure objects. He thus forgets that the original intuitive metaphors *are* indeed metaphors and takes them for the things themselves.

Only by forgetting that primitive metaphor-world, only by the hardening and rigidification of the mass of images that originally gushed forth as hot magma out of the primeval faculty of human fantasy, only by the invincible belief that *this* sun, *this* window, *this* table is a truth-in-itself, in short, only insofar as man forgets himself as a subject, indeed as an *artistically creative* subject, does he live with some calm, security, and consistency. If he could even for one moment escape from the prison walls of this belief, then his high opinion of himself would be dashed immediately. Even this costs him effort: to admit to himself that the insect or the bird perceives a completely different world than man does, and that the question which of the two world-perceptions is more right is a completely senseless one, since it could be decided only by the criterion of the *right perception*, i.e., by a standard *which does not exist*. Basically the right perception—that would mean the adequate expression of an object in the subject—seems to me to be a self-contradictory absurdity. For between two absolutely different spheres such as subject and object, there can be no expression, but at most an *aesthetic* stance, I mean an allusive transference, a stammering translation into a completely foreign medium. For this, however, in any case a freely fictionalizing and freely inventive middle sphere and middle faculty is necessary. The word “appearance” contains many seductions; and so I avoid it as much as possible. For it is not true that the essence of things appears in the empirical world. A painter who had lost his hands and sought to express the picture he envisaged by means of song, would still reveal more by this exchange of spheres than the empirical world reveals of the essence of things. Even the relation of a nerve stimulus to the produced picture is intrinsically not a necessary one; but when the same image has been produced millions of times and has been passed down through many generations of men, indeed ultimately appearing to all mankind as the result of the same occasion, in the end it has for man the same significance as if it were the only necessary image and as if that relationship of the original nerve stimulus to the produced image were a strictly causal relationship—just as a dream, eternally repeated, absolutely would be felt

and judged as reality. But the hardening and solidification of a metaphor is not at all a guarantee of the necessity and exclusive justification of this metaphor.

Certainly, every person who is familiar with such meditations has felt a deep distrust for that sort of idealism, as often as he has very clearly convinced himself of the eternal coherence, omnipresence, and infallibility of the laws of nature. He drew the conclusion: everything here, as far as we can penetrate, to the heights of the telescopic world or to the depths of the microscopic world, is constructed so securely, endlessly, regularly, and without gaps; science will have to dig successfully in these shafts forever, and everything it finds will coincide and not contradict itself. How little this resembles a product of fantasy; for if it were that, it would surely betray its illusoriness and unreality at some point. Against this reasoning, the following can be said: if we had, each taken singly, a varying sensory perception, we could see now like a bird, now like a worm, now like a plant; or if one of us saw the same stimulus as red, another as blue, while a third heard it even as a sound, then no one would speak of such a regularity of nature, but they would grasp it only as a highly subjective formation. What, then, is for us a law of nature? It is not known to us as such, but only in its effects, i.e., in its relations to other natural laws, which in turn are known to us only as relations. All these relations thus always refer back only to one another and are absolutely incomprehensible to us in their essence; what we add to them—time, space, hence relations of succession and numbers—is all we know about them. Everything marvelous that we admire in the laws of nature and that promotes our explanation and could mislead us into distrusting idealism, consists exclusively of the mathematical stringency and inviolability of time- and space-perceptions. But we produce these perceptions within ourselves and out of ourselves with the same necessity as a spider spins its web. If we are compelled to grasp all things only under these forms, then it is not surprising that in all things we really grasp only these forms: for they all must carry the laws of number in themselves, and number is the very thing that is most astonishing about things. All the regularity which so impresses us about the course of the stars and in the chemical process coincides fundamentally with the properties which we ourselves project into things, so that we impress ourself with it. It follows from this, to be sure, that the artistic metaphor-formation with which every perception begins in us, already presupposed those

forms, and hence is carried out in them. Only the fixed persistence of these original forms explains the possibility that later a structure of concepts was to be constructed again out of the metaphors themselves. For this is an imitation of the time-, space- and number-relations on the ground of the metaphors.

2

Language, as we saw, and later *science*, works at the structure of concepts. As the bee simultaneously builds the cells and fills them with honey, so science works incessantly at the great columbarium of the concepts, the sepulcher of intuition, forever constructing new and ever higher levels, buttressing, cleaning, renovating old cells, and striving especially to fill this enormous towering edifice and to arrange the whole empirical, i.e., anthropomorphic, world in it. If even the man of action binds his life to reason and its concepts in order not to be swept away by the current and to lose himself, the researcher builds his hut right next to the towering structure of science in order to help with it and to find shelter himself under the existing fortification. And he does need shelter; for there are terrible powers which constantly press upon him, and which run counter to scientific truth with truths of quite another kind and under a different aegis.

That drive to form metaphors, that fundamental desire in man, which cannot be discounted for one moment, because that would amount to ignoring man himself, is in truth not overcome and indeed hardly restrained by the fact that out of its diminished products, the concepts, a regular and rigid new world is built up for him as a prison fortress. It seeks a new province for its activities and a different riverbed and generally finds it in *myth* and in *art*. It constantly confuses the categories and cells of the concepts by presenting new transferences, metaphors, and metonyms; constantly showing the desire to shape the existing world of the wideawake person to be variegatedly irregular and disinterestedly incoherent, exciting and eternally new, as is the world of dreams. Actually, the wideawake person is certain that he is awake only because of the rigidly regular web of concepts, and so he sometimes comes to believe that he is dreaming when at times that web of concepts is torn apart by art. Pascal is right when he states that if we had the same dream every night we would be as preoccupied with it as by the things we see

every day: "If the craftsman were certain to dream every night for a full twelve hours that he is a king, then I believe," says Pascal, "he would be just as happy as a king who dreamed every night for twelve hours that he is a craftsman." The waking day of a mythically excited nation, the ancient Greeks for instance, is, by the constant action of marvels, indeed more like a dream than like the day of the scientifically sober thinker. When any tree may begin anytime to speak as a nymph, or a god in the guise of a bull can abduct a maiden, when the goddess Athena herself is suddenly seen driving through the marketplaces of Athens on a beautiful team of horses in the company of Pisistratus—as the honest Athenian believed—then at any moment, as in a dream, anything is possible, and all nature crowds around man as if it were only the masquerade of the gods, who only make a joke of deceiving man in all forms.

Man, however, has an unconquerable tendency to let himself be deceived and he is as if enchanted with happiness when the rhapsodist tells him epic legends as true or the actor in a drama plays the king more regally than any real monarch does. As long as it can deceive without harm, the intellect, that master of deception, is free and released from its usual servile tasks, and that is when it celebrates its Saturnalia; never is it more luxuriant, richer, prouder, more skillful and bold. With creative nonchalance it scrambles the metaphors and shifts the boundary-stones of abstraction, so that, e.g., it calls the river a moving road that carries man to where he otherwise walks. Otherwise busy with melancholy business, it has now cast off the mark of subservience in order to show a poor devil who is avid for life the path and the means of attaining it. And like a servant whose master is setting out on a campaign seeking booty and plunder, it has now become the master and can wipe the look of poverty from its features. Which it now does. Compared with its former activities, everything contains dissimulation, just as the former life contained distortion. It copies human life, taking it for a good thing, and seems quite satisfied with it. That enormous structure of beams and boards of the concepts, to which the poor man clings for dear life, is for the liberated intellect just a scaffolding and plaything for his boldest artifices. And when he smashes it apart, scattering it, and then ironically puts it together again, joining the most remote and separating what is closest, he reveals that he does not need the emergency aid of poverty, and that he is now guided not by concepts but by intuitions. From these intuitions no regular road leads to the land

of ghostly schemata, of abstractions. The word is not made for these intuitions; man falls silent when he sees them, or he speaks in sheer forbidden metaphors and unheard of conceptual compounds, in order at least by smashing and scorning the old conceptual barricades to correspond creatively to the impressions of the mighty present intuition.

There are ages in which the rational man and the intuitive man stand side by side, one in fear of intuition, the other with mockery for abstraction; the latter being just as unreasonable as the former is unartistic. Both desire to master life; the one by managing to meet his main needs with foresight, prudence, reliability; the other, as an "overjoyous" hero, by not seeing those needs and considering only life, disguised as illusion and beauty, to be real. Where once the intuitive man, as in more ancient Greece, bore his weapons more powerfully and victoriously than his adversary, in favorable cases a culture can form and the domination of art over life be established. That dissimulation, that denial of poverty, that splendor of metaphorical intuitions and, in general, that immediacy of delusion accompanies all manifestations of such a life. Neither the house, nor the stride, nor the clothing, nor the clay jug betray the fact that need invented them; they seem intended to express an exalted happiness and an Olympian serenity and, as it were, a playing with serious matters. While the man guided by concepts and abstractions merely wards off misfortune by means of them, without extracting happiness for himself from them as he seeks the greatest freedom from pain, the intuitive man, standing in the midst of culture, in addition to warding off harm, reaps from his intuitions a continuously streaming clarification, cheerfulness, redemption. Of course, he suffers more violently when he does suffer; indeed, he also suffers more often, because he does not know how to learn from experience and he falls again and again into the same pit into which he fell before. He is then just as unreasonable in sorrow as in happiness; he cries out loudly and cannot be consoled. How differently stands the stoic person who has learned from experience and controls himself by reason! He who otherwise seeks only honesty, truth, freedom from delusions, and protection from enthralling seizures, now, in misfortune, produces a masterpiece of dissimulation, as the former did in happiness; he does not wear a quivering and mobile human face but, as it were, a mask with dignified harmony of features, he does not scream and does not

even raise his voice. When a real storm cloud pours down upon him, he wraps himself in his overcoat and walks away under the rain with slow strides.

NOTES

1. Lessing, in a letter to J. J. Eschenburg dated December 31, 1777, thus mourns the death of his newborn son.
2. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chapter 18.
3. E. F. F. Chladni, the German physicist, used visual means of demonstrating sound. See his *Neue Beiträge zur Akustik* (1817).

Friedrich Nietzsche on Rhetoric and Language

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