

NIETZSCHE’S “TRUTH AND LIES”

[Nietzsche’nin “Doğruluk ve Yalanlar”ı]

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to take Nietzsche’s unpublished short essay “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense” in its entirety and to see whether it is possible to see it as an elaboration of single argument. According to this argument, since life of the individual and continuation of society is the main motive, language is not created for the things as they are, for the ultimate truth of world but for designating how we are related to things. Our anatomy, all our representational acts from the basic and ordinary perceptions to the higher level of concept formation in language is always limited or deficient. The legislation of language as corresponding to things or so called literal language is a lie which is accepted by all of us for the sake of security and continuity of social life. But, for Nietzsche, at the same time, language understood in this way becomes not the sole but one of the important elements that helps to create new, different worlds and experiences.

Keywords: Nietzsche, language, perception, truth, society.

ÖZET

Bu makalenin amacı Nietzsche'nin yayımlanmamış kısa makalesi "Ahlakdışı Anlamda Doğruluk ve Yalanlar Üzerine"yi bütünlüğü içinde ele alıp onu tek bir argümanın ayrıntılarıyla sunulması olarak anlamının olanaklı olup olmadığını görmektir. Bu argümana göre bireyin yaşamı ve toplumun devamı esas güdü olduğundan, dil şeylerin oldukları halleri, dünyanın nihai hakikati için değil şeylerle nasıl ilişkilendiğimizi ortaya koymak için yaratılmıştır. Anatomimiz, en basit ve sıradan algılarımızdan daha üst düzey kavram oluşturmaya kadar tüm temsil edici eylemlerimiz her zaman sınırlı ve kusurludur. Dilin şeylere tekabül ettiği şekilde yasalaştırılması ya da literal dil hepimiz tarafından sosyal yaşamın güvenliği ve devamı için kabul edilmiş bir yalandır. Ama Nietzsche için dil aynı zamanda yeni, farklı dünyalar ve deneyimlerin yaratılmasında yardım eden tek olmasa da önemli öğelerden biridir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Nietzsche, dil, algı, doğruluk, toplum.

Nietzsche's begins with a short fable to his unpublished but "reworked and polished" (Clark, p. 64) essay "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense" (1873) (hereafter TL) which he once referred as "an essay I have kept secret"¹: "Once upon a time, in some out of the way corner of that universe which is dispersed into numberless twinkling solar systems, there was a star upon which clever beasts invented knowing." (Nietzsche, 1992b, p. 79) This fable was narrated in a little longer form in Nietzsche's another essay "On the Pathos of Truth" (hereafter PT), which was written one year earlier, in 1872. This fable is obviously a fable of human beings, world, or universe, or of any star or planet in the universe in which there is life. There are many arguments in TL that can be related many discussions in several branches of philosophy. As a way of reading and investigating, these arguments can be taken in isolation from one another and analyzed in depth in relation to other theories. What is to be tried here however is to take TL in its entirety and to see whether it is possible to see TL as an elaboration of

¹ In original, the quotation is that "... eben in jener Zeit entstand ein geheim gehaltenes Schriftstück ..." Friedrich Nietzsche, *KGW 4/3:3-11*; quoted and translated by Waite (1996), p. 255.

single argument. So the question is whether we can extract a coherent picture of what TL tries to tell us without losing ourselves in many references to the problems of philosophy of language and epistemology. So, for this purpose, we need to complete the fable, which was telling us the invention of knowing. Knowing on that star was invented by a species of beasts, “clever beasts.” The star or planet on which these beasts invented knowing was one of stars belonging to the one of the infinite number of solar systems shining throughout the universe. Let us learn what happened to those beasts without breaking the fable any more and also completing it with the earlier version in PT.

That was the most arrogant and mendacious minute of “world history,” but nevertheless, it was only a minute. After nature had drawn a few breaths, the star cooled and congealed, and the clever beasts had to die. (Nietzsche, 1990b, p. 79)

The time had come too, for although they boasted of how much they had understood, in the end they discovered to their great annoyance that they had understood everything falsely. They died, and in dying they cursed truth. Such was the nature of these desperate beasts who had invented knowing. (Nietzsche, 1992a, p. 65)

The import of this fable is the position or situation of “the human intellect” within the entire universe or nature (Nietzsche 1992b, p. 79). The human intellect or knowing has no superior position in nature than the ability of any other beast, such as flying of a “gnat” (ibid). So the arrogance accompanying the act of knowing does not have a basis with respect to what knowing achieves in nature. Human beings will die if, for example, the world is hit by a big comet or if the sun starts to wane and, before dying, humanity will have time to realize that “they had understood everything falsely” if they do not stop the solemnity and accept, in Nietzsche’s words, the miserableness, shadowiness, transience, aimlessness and arbitrariness of the human intellect (Nietzsche, 1992a, p. 65). “One might invent such a fable,” says Nietzsche “and yet he still would not have adequately illustrated how miserable, how shadowy and transient, how aimless and arbitrary the human intellect looks within nature” (1992b, p. 80). The unhappy end of this fable is the message that “[t]his would be man’s fate if he were nothing but a knowing animal.” (Nietzsche, 1992a, p. 65) The pride which takes its source from “this power of knowing” results in “deception” about everything around us, including ourselves (Nietzsche, 1992b, p. 79, 80). Firstly, when human beings are busy of praising themselves of what they know, they overlook, disregard or forget what they do not and cannot know due to the limitations of their senses. What they

know is just a very eminently little when compared with the size of what they do not and cannot know. And secondly knowledge is invented to substitute what is missing in man “to wage the battle for existence”; such as, “horns” or “sharp teeth” (ibid, p. 80). If human beings had possessed horns or sharp teeth, they would not need to invent knowing for “detaining them a minute within existence” (ibid, p. 79). Living things struggle and fight in order to continue their existence. Knowing or intellect, according to Nietzsche, are invented “merely as a device” for this universal battle of existence (ibid). So deception, the “art of dissimulation” results from his ignorance of that he is incapable of knowing most of the things compared with what he knows and ignorance of that knowledge has an instrumental character “for the preserving of the individual” (ibid, p. 80). This is the overall picture of human knowledge and in this picture there cannot be seen any sign of “an honest and pure drive for truth” (ibid). So we must search for the origin of the drive for truth somewhere else in the details of this picture.

“*[T]hat* which shall count as ‘truth’ ... is established” because of the need for peace among a group of people. Nietzsche in TL affirms that the “peace pact” is the basic condition of the possibility of a society to continue its existence, and in order for this pact to be valid man must forget his original nature, which is “*bellum omni contra omnes*” (“war of each against all”) (ibid, p. 81, n7). The requirement of this sociality, of the peace pact, is “legislation of language” meaning that “uniformly valid and binding designations ... for things” must be established or “invented” (ibid).² So there appeared languages, which are a kind of game of matching words for things. Whoever violates intentionally the rules of language, by matching words with the things for which they are not designated, will be the liar. Violating the rules of language will destruct the unity, the peace, the total agreement of society. So liars are excluded from the society for the sake of society, not for the sake of pure truth. Moreover, Nietzsche suggests, human beings are “indifferent toward pure knowledge which has no consequences” (ibid).

Since life of the individual and continuation of society is the main motive, language is not created for the things as they are or for the ultimate truth of world but for designating how we are related to things or vice versa. So matching was not originally between things and words but between words and “the relations of things to men” (ibid, p. 82). This leads to two important consequences which, in my view, avoid some misunderstandings about the metaphorical character of language emphasized by Nietzsche.

² See also Douglas Thomas, *Reading Nietzsche Rhetorically* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1999), p. 137.

1. Creation of language does not follow a route that lies between objects and perceivers. Rather the route is a reciprocal movement between so called perceiver and indefinable, indefinite X or “the mysterious X of the thing in itself” (ibid, p. 83). Starting from the point of basic perception which is considered as the cornerstone of language, the idea of correspondence is refused by Nietzsche.
2. Language is, at most, an expression of the way how we relate to “an X which remains inaccessible and undefinable for us” (ibid). Human intellect relates to that X from the perspective of our needs and drives. Although there are no equals or identicals in our experience, we create a conceptual world. So that we organize particulars according to how we perceive and use them. And then we took this conceptually organized world as the reality. However, since concepts are our creation, they are far away from “the essence of things” (ibid).

For Nietzsche, the thing in itself is inaccessible primarily because of our limited and deficient anatomy or bodily perceptual system. Perception comes first, language or conceptualization comes after. Creation of a concept is a result of an operation of human intellect on its particular experiences. This mental operation starts with the cutting off the differences of these particulars. This cutting off is necessary for grouping, for example millions of different leafs under the concept of leaf; so that they can be seen as the same. So in creating concepts we change and destroy our original experience which is composed only of particulars.

Given that we have no way to access or define the essence of things, Nietzsche warns us about the two opposite assertions: 1) “[O]ur contrast between individual and species ... does not correspond to the essence of things,” 2) Concepts, forms or species “originate in the essence of things.” According to Nietzsche these are both “indemonstrable.” (ibid, p. 83, 84) If anyone argues that categories of individual and species originate in things he must have accepted a form of correspondence between the world in itself and our representation of it, since origination in essence of things means or implies a kind of correspondence relation, strong or weak, direct or indirect. This assumption of correspondence is what is on the target in TL. So what Nietzsche tries to explain until here is just to show that the second assertion – that the concepts originate in the world – is groundless, not because its contrary is true but because it is by itself indemonstrable.

Of course, such an argument was not first elaborated by Nietzsche, and has nothing original, but “the uniqueness of Nietzsche’s contribution,” writes Weineck, calling attention to the very crucial point, lies “at his description of the representational act” (Weineck, p. 95). What is this uniqueness? We cannot demonstrate that language originates in the thing in itself, since our anatomy, all our representational acts from the simple ordinary perceptions to the higher level of concept formation in language is always limited or deficient, so depends on “totally subjective stimulation[s],” “arbitrary differentiations” and “one-sided preferences” (Nietzsche, 1992b, p. 82). The critical point is that for Nietzsche human intellect converts “a nerve stimulus” into an idea; this is the very beginning of metaphoric creation (ibid). Because we have only an idea that result from the structure of my nerves. Even also I cannot fully know the structure of my nerves, how many impulses they take, how much of these impulses are represented in the idea. Moreover I cannot figure out the process by which these impulses form an idea in my mind. So Nietzsche concludes that the relation of the ideas, the end products of perception, are metaphors. Nervous system of human body, together with the mind, in a mysterious process, creates ideas. So the idea stands for the thing in itself. In other words, idea is the metaphor for the thing in itself about which we know nothing. So there is no celebration of metaphor in TL. As we have said earlier, metaphors are expressions of our limited perceptual nature, so they are also limited and perspectival. Words are just second level metaphors that stands for the ideas, because it is obvious that the in most of the cases there is no similarity between the idea and its name, the word. Words are created in a specific moment by a specific human being and when they are used “millions of times” by “many generations” they become fixed concepts (ibid, p. 87). In TL what is tried to be developed is mainly metaphoric structure of our perceptions. Given that there is no direct or “strictly causal” relation between outer world and our perception of it, there remains only one alternative; viz. “artistic” relation, and this artistic relation starts not from the realm of language, but from the very first nerve stimulus of perception (ibid, p. 87, 88).

This is essentially a strong skeptical view about human knowledge. What differentiates Nietzsche from a skeptic is that while being aware of this skeptical foundation of all knowledge, Nietzsche offers an alternative understanding of truth. In other words, for him, the absence of correspondence between idea and reality does not necessarily bring about the total resignation from the area of truth. A skeptic would have stopped talking and writing at this point, because anything he has said would be false and groundless. But Nietzsche continues without a moment of hesitation and asks candidly “What then is truth?” (ibid, p. 84) Skepticism is not a barricade that closes Nietzsche’s way, but he uses it as a basic element to get out of our tragic fable. Clever beasts “discovered ... that they had understood

everything falsely” and this was the moment in which they fall into skepticism (Nietzsche 1992a, p. 65). In that case we would have two choices; we can either “curse truth” like the clever beasts have done in the fable, or we can still ask frankly what truth is, even if it is acquainted under the shadow of an unavoidable skepticism (ibid). Bernard Williams’ interpretation about the “deniers” of truth may help us to evaluate the overall tendency of Nietzsche including that is found in his TL: “Although Nietzsche was keenly alive to what concerns the deniers, he was an opponent of them. The indifference to truthfulness which they encourage would be for him merely an aspect of nihilism” (Williams, p. 18). So, as a determined warrior against nihilism, Nietzsche says the following:

What then is truth? A movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been 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; they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins (Nietzsche, 1992b, p. 84).

This is a very famous quotation used in many books and articles written on Nietzsche’s philosophy. But the quotation taken in isolation does not fully show how Nietzsche came to this point and how also he continues from that point on. By itself this quotation seems to be about a character of language that is effective on the constitution of truths. However, metaphorical nature of language is first of all the result of the limited, perspectival, subjective structure of our perceptions and then becomes the cause of the further development of society and individual. After this historical formation of truths as forgotten illusions comes the construction of ‘schemata’ into which these seemingly fixed metaphors are accommodated. These schemata, according to Nietzsche, is specific to or distinctive only of human beings: “Everything which distinguishes man from the animals depends upon this ability to volatilize perceptual metaphors in a schema, and thus to dissolve an image into a concept” (ibid). So schematic or conceptual thinking is what has made possible the creation of “regulative and imperative world,” which is characterized by Nietzsche as “more solid, more universal, better known, and more human than the immediately perceived world” (ibid). It can be clearly seen that in these parts of the essay Nietzsche has a very positive attitude towards the history of humanity. However, he carefully emphasizes that the achievements of humanity have nothing to do with “his drive for truth or for pure knowledge of things”

(ibid, p. 85). These achievements are achievements when they are evaluated with respect to their original aim or purpose, which was “the creation of a new world of laws, privileges, subordinations, and clearly marked boundaries” (ibid, p. 84). This world was created and the mission was exactly achieved. On the other hand, Nietzsche asserts that nothing regarding to pure knowledge of things is accomplished. The created world does not indicate that humanity has been successful in attaining truth, but it has been successful just in attaining a more human, organized and secure world.

The second part of the essay does not continue to investigate where the drive for truth comes from. Because the answer seems very clear: “The drive toward the formation of metaphors is the fundamental human drive, which one cannot for a single instant dispense with in thought, for one would thereby dispense with man himself” (ibid, p. 88). Human beings has become human beings only by forming and creating metaphors, not by discovering “knowledge” or “truth”; since truth is nothing other than another metaphor, “which we have forgotten” that it is a metaphor (ibid, p. 84). However, realization of this situation does not change anything for “the liberated intellect” (ibid, p. 88). Pairs of opposed characters occupy the second part of the essay: “man of action” and “scientific investigator,” “the needy man” and “the liberated intellect,” and “the rational man” and “the intuitive man.” (ibid, p. 88, 90) In these oppositions lies the non-moral irony of human beings: we live with the help of lies, illusions, deceptions; and this situation remains always the same regardless of the fact that we are artists or scientists, philosophers or politicians. It is clear that, Nietzsche is not a supporter of any of the positions. We know that Nietzsche is generally an adherent of art and a critic of dogmatic rationality and science, and how must we deal with such a contradiction? The title of the essay gives us a clue by emphasizing the *nonmorality* of the concern here. When morality comes into the scene or is taken into account, Nietzsche would say a lot for the opposed characters in his essay. But within a nonmoral evaluation, both artist and scientist are parts of the nature and belong to society. In that sense, both continue to lie whether or not they use established web of concepts or break it into pieces. And I insist that the core of the argument is this and Nietzsche continued to hold this view throughout his life, at least implicitly in his later works. For example, Nietzsche wrote in *Gay Science* the following:

The human being inventing signs is at the same time the human being who becomes ever more keenly conscious of himself. It was only as a social animal that man acquired self-consciousness ... My idea is, as you see, that consciousness does not really belong to man's individual existence but rather to his social or herd nature; that, as follows from this, it has

developed subtlety only insofar as this is required by social or herd utility.
(Nietzsche, 1974, p. 299)

So after TL, Nietzsche extended the argument that the issue of truth is always in the area of language, and language originates in the sociality, not in a subjective, individual choice. He extended this to the issue of consciousness also. Consciousness comes into existence with ‘the legislation of language’ which is also simultaneous with the ‘invention of truth’ as a lie. So an escape from lie is impossible.

Usually, one takes consciousness itself as the general sensorium and supreme court; nonetheless, it is only a means of communication: it is evolved through social intercourse and with a view to the interests of social intercourse—“Intercourse” here understood to include the influences of the outer world and the reactions they compel on our side; also our effect upon the outer world. It is not the directing agent, but an organ of the directing agent. (Nietzsche, 1968, p. 284)

We know that Nietzsche is characterized by the view which is called perspectivism. His perspectivism is closely related with his views on truth, will to power and on the structure of human perception. If we take perspectivism being the assertion that truths are determined by the “interpretation of the world” according to “our needs” and “our drives,” we can easily see the connection of TL and Nietzsche’s perspectivism (ibid, p. 267). In *Will to Power* we see nearly a summary of TL in the following way as one of the items that determine our psychology, a fragment written fourteen years later than TL:

Our psychological perspective is determined by the following:

1. that communication is necessary, and that for there to be communication something has to be firm, simplified, capable of precision (above all in the [so-called] identical case). For it to be communicable, however, it must be experienced as adapted, as “recognizable.” The material of the senses adapted by the understanding, reduced to rough outlines, made similar, subsumed under related matters. Thus the fuzziness and chaos of sense impressions are, as it were, logicized ... (ibid, p. 306-307)

There are two interpretations that seem to me as wrongly determining the core idea of TL. One of them, for example Wilcox³ and Clark's⁴ interpretation, concentrates upon the question of *thing in itself* and refuses the validity of this essay only because of the fact that Nietzsche has in his later writings denied any possibility of the idea of thing in itself, however in this essay he seems to be accepting that thing-in-itself exists. This is a sound criticism but does not help us to see the core idea behind the essay, since the central issue in the essay is not the existence or non-existence of thing-in-itself. The main idea is that truth emerged as a lie simultaneously with construction of society and legislation of language. Grimm mentions such a criticism while he notes its doubtful character. This criticism argues that Nietzsche's assertions are meaningful "only if one accepts the existence of and extra-cognitive world of things in themselves (itself a questionable assumption)"⁵ (Grimm, 1977, p. 98). Grimm defends Nietzsche by reference to his later works in which he rejects any form of the idea of thing in itself. But a better defense would be to show that the denial of thing in itself in Nietzsche's later works does not destroy the central argument of the essay. Because the denial of the thing in itself was the denial of the independently existing world of things apart from our creation and TL was just the story of how we created a world out of our drives.

What about the strong nominalist claims in TL? Nominalism is the view that in reality there exists only particulars and universals are mere naming conventions; this is exactly what is defended in the first part of TL. It can be objected that the acceptance of the reality of particulars is an acceptance of the view that thing in itself consists of particulars. Nevertheless, Nietzsche's nominalism is not in such a form but remains within the area of experience only. For me, Nietzsche has never quitted nominalism in the sense that our experience is obviously always experience of becoming, of flux, of non-identical cases; not in the sense that there exist experience-independent individuals or particulars. The important point is that it is impossible for language to reflect the flux which is found in our original experience.

Second interpretation wrongly determining the core idea of TL, which is widely held and also shared by Clark, concentrates upon the assertion that all language is metaphorical.⁶ TL is accepted to be the

³ See John T. Wilcox, *Truth and Value in Nietzsche: A Study of His Metaethics and Epistemology* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, c1982), pp. 114-124.

⁴ See Maudemarie Clark, "The Development of Nietzsche's Later Position," in *Nietzsche*, ed. John Richardson and Brian Leiter (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 59-84. Also see Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy*, pp. 77-93.

⁵ Such a criticism can also be found in Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy*, p. 120: "In TL, the thesis made sense because Nietzsche claimed that our representations fail to correspond to the thing-in-itself. But if there are only representations, to what could they fail to correspond? What is left to be falsified?"

⁶ See Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy*, pp. 69-77. As we see Clark seems to have taken both points of view that wrongly determine the main idea of TL.

elaboration of this single argument. However, as we have seen, the legislation of language as corresponding to things or so called literal language is a lie which is accepted by all for the sake of security and continuity of social life.⁷ Nietzsche does not try to prove that all language is metaphorical but accepts this as an obvious nature of language. Creating metaphors is not limited in the area of language, it is the basic structure of our sense experience, idea formation and creation of words. In short, human beings create metaphors in perception and in language. Then they forget this metaphorical creation and use old metaphors as literal expressions. Moreover, for Nietzsche this process is not only inescapable but also necessary, since we are condemned to create metaphors and to forget this creation throughout centuries and by this way we evolve our consciousness and we create great art.

The aesthetic state possesses a superabundance of means of communication, together with an extreme receptivity for stimuli and signs. It constitutes the high point of communication and transmission between living creatures—it is the source of languages. This is where languages originate: the languages of tone as well as the languages of gestures and glances... Every mature art has a host of conventions as its basis—in so far as it is a language. Convention is the condition of great art, not an obstacle— (Nietzsche 1968, p. 427-428)

TL stands as an important essay that constitute one of the basis of Nietzsche's philosophy. He made use of the central thesis of TL which we discussed above in his later works. The arguments defended in TL, however, do not have a centrality in Nietzsche's huge area of interest and because of this it may seem that TL does not truly represent his philosophy. But a careful investigation upon the arguments in TL is very important for understanding his later works and his perspectivism. As in *Will to Power*, also in *Gay Science* published in 1882 we find nearly another summary of TL that emphasizes the importance of legislation of language:

⁷ Against these two general tendencies that I oppose, there are some alternative interpretations of TL that I suggest which can be found in the following works: Megill, Allan, *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987). Behler, Ernst, "Nietzsche's Conception of Irony." In *Nietzsche, Philosophy and the Arts*, eds. S. Kemal, I. Gaskell and D. W. Conway (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 13-36. Weineck, *The Abyss Above*, 91-110. Murphy, Tim. *Nietzsche, Metaphor and Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 26-36. And for detailed examination of TL see Sarah Kofman, *Nietzsche and Metaphor* (London: Athlone Press, c1993) and Paul De Man, *Allegories of reading: figural language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

...what things *are called* is more important than what they are. The reputation, name and appearance, the usual measure and weight of a thing, what it counts for—originally almost wrong and arbitrary, thrown over things like a dress and altogether foreign to their nature and even to their skin—all this grows from generation unto generation, merely because people believe in it, until it gradually grows to be part of the thing and turns into its very body. What at first was appearance becomes in the end, almost invariably, the essence and is effective as such. How foolish it would be to suppose that one only needs to point out this origin and this misty shroud of delusion in order to destroy the world that counts for real, so called “*reality*.” We can destroy only as creators.—But let us not forget this either: it is enough to create new names and estimations and probabilities in order to create in the long run new “things.” (Nietzsche, 1974, p. 121-122)

It is impossible to decide whether or not there is a correspondence between the things and our perceptions of them or whether or not our conceptualizations conform to the reality. But as we seen in the above quotation Nietzsche does not draw skeptical consequences from this fact. Instead Nietzsche replaces the believed in correspondence relation with the creative metaphorical relation. Indemonstrability of correspondence thesis and our bodies’ limited perceptual system leads to the following conclusion: Our perceptions are metaphors for things and our concepts are just pragmatic linguistic tools used for easier, safer and more peaceful social life. So language understood in this way becomes not the sole but one of the elements that helps to create new, different worlds and experiences. Same language, same words, same rules will create the same world continuously. If we want a different world, we need poetry, we need art, we need new concepts and new philosophies so that there will be a space in us for totally new experiences.

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