

**On *Truth* and *Lie* in a Rhetorical Sense;
Semantic Perils in Nietzschean Thought**

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A dominant theme for Friedrich Nietzsche, one that he often employs to punctuate and dramatise key theoretical concerns, is the distinction between “truth” and “lie.” While Nietzsche’s “truth/lie thematic” finds expression through a number of concepts on the nature of human deceit, its role within his philosophy may be organised in accordance with three major fields of investigation: morality (where the lie is exaggerated and polemicalised), the critique of knowledge (which advances the notion of truth as fiction), and aesthetics (where the lie is recast into a positive sense).

Although this tripartite framework is heuristic, its value for the examination of the truth/lie thematic is twofold: it clarifies the essential problems in Nietzsche’s philosophical treatment and application of this theme – which upon a cursory analysis appear confused and unproductive – while at the same time providing a perspective that foregrounds the cumulative effect of his thought – a dissolution of the conventional semantic integrity distinguishing “truth” from “lie.”

This paper examines the semantic innovation in Nietzsche’s truth/lie thematic, an approach that calls into question the positions of interpretation adopted in his philosophy. While Nietzsche’s semantic transformation of truth and lie serves to undermine dogmatic systems of thought, his ultimate advocacy of “art” nullifies all claims to “truth” conceived in any traditional

philosophical sense.

In this manner, the semantic question of truth and lie becomes one concerning the rhetorical dimensions of his philosophy, posing a self-reflexive dilemma that remains for post-structuralist interpreters of Nietzsche to work through. These latter, whose radicalism does not always remain “faithful” to Nietzsche’s own, are faced with a problematic that endangers the Nietzschean licence and argumentative strength of their thought. Their encounter with Nietzsche is therefore a hazardous enterprise, whose stakes can be defined by careful attention to the philosophical claims of “truth.”

This paper adopts four discernable phases in Nietzsche’s thought to arrive at the heuristic registers referred to above and the theoretical distinctions they bring to light. The first of these periods, roughly spanning the years 1872–1873, introduces the value of artistic deception over scientific distortion in the affirmation of life. The second emerges between 1874 and 1881, where the notion of a human self-sacrifice for knowledge problematises the will to truth as a kind of will to death. The last two trends, less temporally than theoretically distinct, develop the critique of scientific knowledge and the revaluation of moral values. These four phases give rise to the internal problem of truth and lie in Nietzsche’s thought, a topic discussed with reference to recent Nietzschean positions in the final two sections of the paper.

Apolline Illusion and Dionysiac Truth: The Value of “Art” as an Affirmation of Life

In his first major work, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), Nietzsche designates the dual conceptions of the “Apolline” and the “Dionysiac” as the two opposable yet complementary forces underpinning the artistic evolution of Western civilisation. Here, the Apolline principle of *illusion* imparts a fictitious quality to human consciousness and culture.¹ Yet this dream state is nonetheless affirmed by Nietzsche, who explains how its healing, soporific power nurtures and conditions humanity to endure the otherwise intolerable gulf of the Dionysiac.

Within this schema, the Dionysiac – portrayed as the “primal Oneness, eternally suffering and contradictory”² – epitomises Nietzsche’s early romanticism. Through an employment of truth and lie, he contests the notion that modern cultural forms are able to express this core of “universal existence”: merely opening out towards the evanescent realm of phenomenal perception, they permit no access to the “deeper region” of Dionysiac metaphysical being. Nietzsche thus posits a fundamental disparity between

“authentic, natural truth,” and “the lie of culture masquerading as the sole reality” – a comparison he redoubles as a “contrast between the eternal core of things, the thing in itself, and the entire world of phenomena.”³

This conceptual framework stands incongruent in relation to Nietzsche’s later thought, since the Dionysiac “thing in itself” – which is opposed to, indeed unattainable through, the Apolline world of phenomena – represents a form of transcendental idealism. In other words, to venerate Attic tragedy as a synergy of Dionysiac and Apolline forces – to privilege in its revelation of “otherworldly” Dionysiac knowledge a cultural practice that nonetheless remains safely “veiled” by the Apolline illusion – is strikingly romantic, even quasi-religious, for a thinker who would later adopt an iconoclastic position regarding all claims to transcendent knowledge.

Nonetheless, Nietzsche’s early formulations manifest the elements of an emerging critical approach: the attempted invalidation of scientific optimism whose emblem is the vilified Socrates. At the conclusion of the first version of *The Birth of Tragedy*,⁴ Nietzsche alludes to the inevitable tension between pure knowledge and human life by arguing that “theoretical man,” in naïvely attempting to conceptualise the world solely through abstract logical terms, runs aground upon the necessarily “human, all-too-human” pre-conditions of knowledge:

Spurred on by its powerful illusion, science is rushing irresistibly to its limits, where the optimism essential to logic collapses. For the periphery of the circle of science has an infinite number of points, and while it is as yet impossible to tell how the circle could ever be fully measured, the noble, gifted man ... inevitably reaches that peripheral boundary, where he finds himself staring into the ineffable. If he sees here, to his dismay, how logic twists around itself and finally bites itself in the tail, there dawns a new form of knowledge, tragic knowledge, which needs art as both protection and remedy, if we are to bear it.⁵

The imagery of the snake biting its own tail symbolises the fundamental requirement of human belief in logic: belief as an “irrational” element that undermines logic from within.⁶ With this critique, Nietzsche implies that “pessimistic” art, specifically Greek tragedy, is the more “honest” human pursuit when compared to science: embracing the illusory and deceptive conditions of existence, art-forms such as Greek tragedy rise above scientific optimism and its unconscious presuppositions that remain mendacious, deceitful, and ultimately self-destructive.

In his essay written the following year, “On Truth and Lies in a Non-moral Sense” (1873), Nietzsche reiterates the dissimulation and deception

fundamental to the human condition. However, instead of positing the existence of a “thing in itself,” here he stops short at the phenomenal field of perception. Nietzsche argues that, in the passage from sensation to language, phenomena trigger the “metaphorical” processes of nerve stimulation that generate the visual and sound “images” constitutive of language use. Thus knowledge or experience of a “thing” can never establish its “essence” but rather, formulated in and through language, only ever derive from this kind of creative human interpretation of the phenomenal world.

Nietzsche’s line of argument is here over-coded by the problem of truth and lie in the realm of language. Attempting to undermine various pre-conceptions of truth predominant in scientific discourse,⁷ he recasts the debate as a question of the metaphorical genesis of language and, subsequently, the rhetorical or “artistic” dimension of all truth. No longer thought to be the sovereign seat of rationality and logic, any sense of truth must be conceived through its originary deception and illusion – through the simulated reality that humanity experiences in its relationship with things:

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 been drained of all sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins.⁸

Thus for Nietzsche, constituted through metaphors that have gradually been overlooked as such, scientific language builds an edifice of concepts upon thoroughly unscientific foundations. While such fictitious constructions provide security and consistency to human life, they inevitably betray a fundamental deceit that mistakes “illusions and anthropomorphisms” for “truths and correct perceptions,” with the criteria for the latter remaining unavailable. In the absence of such criteria, Nietzsche denounces scientific abstraction and its denial of an artistic vitality to the human experience of the sensory world.⁹

Therefore, rather than embracing the phenomenal field of transitory illusions, humanity’s industry towards an eternal conceptual fortress represents for Nietzsche a form of blind naïveté and delusion: fundamentally, it is a misrepresentation of the nature of “truth.” In order to emphasise and embellish this point, he draws a distinction between the “slavish” man of rigidified concepts – whose activity and thought is distinguished by *Verzerrung* (distortion) – and the “free” intellect as master of *Verstellung*

(dissimulation, pretence, affectation). Nietzsche's romanticism also returns in this rivalry between the orderly, logical world of concepts and the powerful "intuitions" that break apart and rearrange these conceptual barriers.¹⁰

By maintaining this precipitous opposition between the "rational" and the "intuitive," Nietzsche degrades the value of reason in sustaining human life. Yet, while his language and argument appear quixotic, it is in this early phase of his thought that Nietzsche establishes the comprehensive sense of "art" that remains productive throughout his philosophical development. For Nietzsche, consecrated as the practice of both artistry and artifice, art eternally redeems humanity in confronting the inscrutability of existence.

The Dialectic of Knowledge and Life: Humanity's Self-Sacrifice for Truth

The first major shift in Nietzsche's treatment of truth and lie is marked by a concerted examination of the tension between human life and scientific knowledge – a problem that receives explicit attention in the essay "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life" (1874). Here, Nietzsche describes humanity's need for security and rest that is afforded through belief in the eternal and the stable. However, in a kind of theoretical about-face, it is the drive to knowledge – the "*concept-quake* caused by science"¹¹ – that is now considered disruptive and dangerous for human life. Hence the fundamental question for Nietzsche is phrased in the following terms:

Is life to dominate knowledge and science, or is knowledge to dominate life? Which of these two forces is the higher and more decisive? There can be no doubt: life is the higher, the dominating force, for knowledge which annihilated life would have annihilated itself with it. Knowledge presupposes life and thus has in the preservation of life the same interest as any creature has in its own continued existence.¹²

Here Nietzsche resolves upon life as the overriding influence; it is life that supplies the pre-conditions to all human knowledge, serving as its continuous source of sustenance. This point of view provides Nietzsche with a further insight: if science and its desire for knowledge inevitably fall under the dominion of life, then the quest for truth can no longer be considered uncontaminated by human interest. Consequently, he explains, the will to knowledge is constituted through a co-mingling of diverse – yet very human – impulses and drives in the man of science. Taken as a symptom of prevailing cultural values, the scholar is transfigured by the ostensible purity of

scientific research, such that the component drives underlying his will to truth become obscured from critical view.¹³

Yet in *Human, All Too Human* (1878-80), Nietzsche speculates upon the possibility of knowledge purged of all human instincts and aesthetic illusions. Ineradicably breaking with his earlier metaphysical conceptions, and no longer sympathetic to the intoxicating quality of art, Nietzsche renounces any “eternalising” or “essentialising” of truth. Instead, he advocates an historical-philosophical science disciplined in hard-won, simple, and unpretentious knowledge.¹⁴

In this movement, the fundamental problem addressed by Nietzsche is that of the “illogical” requirements and pre-conditions of human life.¹⁵ Portraying religion and art as the chief historical agents to propagate anaesthetising illusions and errors, he warns that over time human ignorance has reached such a point that there “arises the danger that man may bleed to death from knowledge of truth.”¹⁶ Reversing his previous position, Nietzsche now appears to privilege the scientist and seeker after knowledge – with his “simple and sober methods and results” – over the delusions and deceptions of the artist, whose “glittering, profound interpretations of life” are predicated upon “the fantastic, mythical, uncertain, extreme.”¹⁷

For Nietzsche, a sceptical critical method, in its ability to see through the errors essential for human happiness, is best equipped for the discovery of pure and unadulterated knowledge. Yet even the suspicious ascetic mind needs a certain degree of pleasure: he therefore proposes that a double-brain, containing both the heat of “illusions, onesidednesses, passions,” together with the cool reason of science, is required to preserve a human *interest* in truth.¹⁸

Developing this dialectic further still, with *Daybreak* (1881) Nietzsche introduces the prospect of humanity’s self-sacrifice for knowledge. While failing to substantiate the reasons why “knowledge of truth would remain as the one tremendous goal commensurate with such a sacrifice,” Nietzsche suggests that the extent of humanity’s self-experimentation has yet to be fully realised.¹⁹ Here, he eschews the various “cures” through which humanity has hitherto disguised error as a form of truth: for Nietzsche, strong inquisitors and truth-seekers ought to be free of all such consolation.²⁰ At the zenith of his exaltation for knowledge “at any price,” Nietzsche forbids the return of humanity to happier stages of “barbaric” ignorance, arguing that:

our *drive to knowledge* has become too strong for us to be able to want happiness without knowledge or the happiness of a strong, firmly rooted delusion; even to imagine such a state of things is pain-

ful to us! ... Knowledge has in us been transformed into a passion which shrinks at no sacrifice and at bottom fears nothing but its own extinction ... Yes, we hate barbarism – we would all prefer the destruction of mankind to a regression of knowledge! And finally: if mankind does not perish of a *passion* it will perish of a *weakness*: which do you prefer? This is the main question. Do we desire for mankind an end in fire and light or one in the sand?²¹

It appears that with this zeal and fervour Nietzsche transforms truth – which remains throughout his thought an unknown, perhaps unknowable, quantity in a history constituted through delusion and error – into an elusive and strangely utopian ideal. For Michel Foucault, this Nietzschean problem is emblematic of a new kind of philosophical dilemma, thematising the “instinctive violence” in the desire to know [*vouloir-savoir*] that threatens to sacrifice the human subject of knowledge [*connaissance*].²² Yet, despite its definitive position within Foucault’s interpretation, Nietzsche’s outlook here remains “experimental” and incomplete.

Truth Subordinate to the Criterion of “Power”: The Critique of Scientific Knowledge as Fiction

Developing the truth/lie thematic further still, Nietzsche supplants the motif of a human self-sacrifice for knowledge with his conception of *The Gay Science* (1882), a move that serves to alleviate all “nauseating” knowledge of life as an effective antidote to forms of moral weight and burden.²³ This opposition between the light-hearted and the grave is extended in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-5), where the moral and gregarious “spirit of gravity” – with its fetters of received knowledge and judgement – is counterposed to the individual’s light, bird-like spirit of questioning and self-valuation.²⁴

Yet for Nietzsche, the individual pursuit towards the realisation of truth involves both scepticism and self-sacrifice. Thus in the words of Zarathustra: “Commanding is more difficult than obeying ... In all commanding there appeared to me an experiment and a risk: and the living creature always risks himself when he commands.”²⁵ The individual truth-seeker has here become both jovial and daring; pre-supposing that wisdom is false where it does not also occasion dancing and laughter,²⁶ Nietzsche advocates a progressive self-sacrifice for truth without entailing – as necessity – a wholesale destruction of the subject of knowledge.

He is now animated by a new “spirit,” combining his former enthusiasms into an apparently paradoxical conception of life and truth: “Spirit is

the life that itself strikes into life: through its own torment it increases its own knowledge."²⁷ Through this, his celebrated notion of *self-overcoming*, Nietzsche proposes that a self-destructive instinct is inexorably at work in the will to knowledge, conquering all that survives through human weakness.

It is therefore not the "virtues" of religious piety, moral obedience, or scientific sobriety that validate claims to truth; rather, the governing criterion now explicitly acknowledged by Nietzsche is that of strength or "power."²⁸ Approached by way of self-overcoming, "truth" becomes a function of the capacity of the individual to receive life unadulterated by comforting conceptual fallacies and moral delusions. Nietzsche deliberates upon this standard of measure in a passage from *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886):

No one is likely to consider a doctrine true merely because it makes happy or makes virtuous ... Something might be true although at the same time harmful and dangerous in the highest degree; indeed, it could pertain to the fundamental nature of existence that a complete knowledge of it would destroy one – so that the strength of a spirit could be measured by how much "truth" it could take, more clearly, to what degree it *needed* it attenuated, veiled, sweetened, blunted, and falsified.²⁹

Even in this now rare suggestion of its existence as a somehow "positive" attribute of knowledge, truth is always approached by Nietzsche speculatively – its definition always given negatively. Such is the state of affairs in his criticism of scientific knowledge. Rejecting the assertion that science has in any way succeeded in establishing truth, Nietzsche explains how the reputedly "objective" knowledge of science has, in fact, evolved: through a simplification of the world in terms of humanity's own subjective coordinates and necessarily partial perspectives on life.³⁰

He describes the "strange simplification and falsification mankind lives in" that is due to an intellectual "divine desire for wanton gambolling and false conclusions!" For Nietzsche, science and its concepts have merely taught us:

how to retain our ignorance so as to enjoy an almost inconceivable freedom, frivolity, impetuosity, bravery, cheerfulness of life, so as to enjoy life! And only on this now firm and granite basis of ignorance has knowledge hitherto been able to rise up, the will to knowledge on the basis of a far more powerful will, the will to non-knowledge, to the uncertain, to the untrue! ... [H]ere and there we grasp that fact and laugh at how it is precisely the best knowledge that wants most to hold us in this *simplified*, altogether artificial, fabricated, falsified

world, how it is willy-nilly in love with error because, as a living being, it is – in love with life!³¹

In Nietzsche's critical reevaluation of science, the standards formerly believed central to scientific research – reality and truth – are replaced with criteria pertaining to human interest and utility. His line of questioning no longer concerns the truth of a doctrine, but rather “to what extent it is life-advancing, life-preserving.” In a world where he conceives the entirety of truth to be precluded from the narrow confines of human understanding, Nietzsche explains that the fallacies of science must be affirmed: for “without granting as true the fictions of logic, without measuring reality against the purely invented world of the unconditional and self-identical, without a continual falsification of the world by means of numbers, mankind could not live.” Testifying to the semantic innovation in his treatment of truth and lie, he declares that to “recognize untruth as a condition of life: that, to be sure, means to resist customary value-sentiments in a dangerous fashion; and a philosophy which ventures to do so places itself, by that act alone, beyond good and evil.”³²

With this emphatic self-referential statement, it becomes apparent to what extent Nietzsche's thematic of truth and lie falls back upon the dialectic of death and life, in relation to which it has become indissociable as rhetorical device and means of expression. However, as Nietzsche's critique of science intensifies, so does the improbability of all claims to truth, including his own. Formulating power as the overriding principle of life, Nietzsche calls for a reevaluation of the will to truth³³ – yet in the process the function of “truth” within his own philosophy becomes increasingly problematic.

Moral Deception and the “Holy Lie”: Fictitious Foundations for the Judgement of Truth

In the most polemical phase of the thematic, Nietzsche inaugurates a reevaluation of the religious and moral sense of truth, employing the terminology of truth and lie in an exaggerated and often-disparaging manner.³⁴ With his work *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), Nietzsche sets into opposition “noble” and “slave” systems of moral judgement, where this dichotomous terminology incorporates in its turn an active and reactive typological conception of power.³⁵

In the case of slave morality, a malignant creativity serves to generate the evaluative perspective of the “herd” – one that is originally predicated upon an exclusion and negation of the more powerful other. All slave morals are thus for Nietzsche interpretations fabricated through the reactivity of

ressentiment.³⁶ By contrast, noble values express an active use of interpretation: “The well bred *felt* themselves to be ‘the fortunate’; they did not have to construe their fortune artificially through a glance at their enemies, to persuade themselves of it, to *convince themselves through lying* (as all men of *ressentiment* usually do).”³⁷ The “good” of the nobleman represents a primary and thus active status of interpretation, while the “evil” of the herd is a reactive concept – the “foundational myth” of slave morality.

For Nietzsche, the morality of the herd establishes an order of constraining fictions, such as the paralogism of force separated from what it can do.³⁸ Nietzsche pushes his “physiological” understanding of culture to the forefront in his explanation of these fictions; prevalent in juridical and religious institutions, they arise wherever the reactive type successfully fashions limitation and weakness as moderation and strength. In the interests of the slave’s own survival and self-defence, a constitutional physiological inability for action here becomes not only sanctioned but sanctified. The “cleverness” of the slavish:

has, thanks to the forgery and self-deception of impotence, clothed itself in the magnificence of self-abnegating, calm, and patient virtue, exactly as if the weakness of the weak man itself ... were a free achievement, something willed, chosen, a *deed*, a *merit*. Bound to do so by his instinct of self-preservation and self-affirmation, which habitually sanctifies every lie, this kind of man discovered his faith in the indifferent, freely choosing “subject.”³⁹

For Nietzsche, belief in the fiction of the subject organises a *ressentiment* towards the active forces of noble morality. With the mediation of the “priestly type,” an overall reactive organisation of faith is developed through the foundation and deployment of religious fictions: the “ascetic ideals.” Yet, according to Nietzsche, the ascetic life as a value is nothing but paradox and contradiction. It sustains, in place of an active and creative orientation, a congestion of the physiological source of power, bringing about a perversion of the concepts of false and true: “That which is most harmful to life is here called ‘true,’ that which enhances, intensifies, affirms, justifies it and causes it to triumph is called ‘false.’”⁴⁰

Ascetic ideals operate with reference to the “next world” by a correlative repudiation of this world, the body, and sensibility. In his employment of these ideals, the priestly type is fortified by the power of what Nietzsche terms the “holy lie.” A principle of religious authority, the holy lie orchestrates observance to totalising fictions as an exclusionary form of faith.⁴¹ Yet, since the distinction between truth and lie remains undecidable for Nietzsche, there are no legitimate grounds upon which the priest can lay

claim to any ultimate meaning or universal truth:

There are questions whose truth or untruth *cannot* be decided by man; all the supreme questions, all the supreme problems of value are beyond human reason ... Moral: the priest does *not* lie – the question “true” or “untrue” does not *arise* in such things as priests speak of; these things do not permit of lying at all. For in order to lie one would have to be able to decide *what* is true here. But this is precisely what mankind *cannot* do ... [The] right to lie and the *shrewdness* of a “revelation” pertains to the type priest ... The “Law,” the “will of God,” the “sacred book,” “inspiration” – all merely words for the conditions *under* which the priest comes to power, *by* which he maintains his power, these concepts are to be found at the basis of all priest organizations, all priestly or priestly-philosophical power-structures. The “holy lie” – common to Confucius, the Law-Book of Manu, Mohammed, the Christian Church – : it is not lacking in Plato. “The truth exists”: this means, wherever it is heard, *the priest is lying*.⁴²

While Nietzsche’s application of the lie here escalates into a vitriolic attack upon all “fraudulent” religious interpretations of truth, his critique of morality is governed by the same principles underlying his epistemological critique of science – exposing the fictionalising trends in human interpretation that distort the dimension of power in the artificial element of truth and lie. Yet, in his denunciation of the “holy lie,” Nietzsche’s very exaggeration of moral duplicity induces a concession that he was hitherto seemingly reluctant to permit: the impossibility of being able to affirm, predetermine, or circumscribe the value of “truth,” which remains problematic in establishing the authority of his own philosophical position.

The Interpretive Stakes of Truth and Lie: Positioning Nietzsche in Post-Structuralism

In the absence of being able to uncritically affirm truth, posing its very value as a problem in itself may be considered the “dramatic” culmination of Nietzsche’s thematic on truth and lie. This presentation on the problematic of truth is encompassed in a key passage from book five of *The Gay Science* (1887), “How we, too, are still pious,” where Nietzsche questions the “morality” of the scientific will to truth in its opposition to a world that is apparently “not moral.”⁴³

Here, Nietzsche once again frames his thematic of truth and lie in terms of the dialectic of life and death, where science, in its quest for

knowledge, is considered *in potentia* to be something “that is hostile to life and destructive. – ‘Will to truth’ – that might be a concealed will to death.”⁴⁴ Through this problematisation of the will to truth, Nietzsche attempts to unveil an idealism fundamental to the scientific faith; the morality of science affirms *another world*, acting in “bad faith” by negating “our” world of delusion and error:

It is still a *metaphysical faith* upon which our faith in science rests – that even we seekers after knowledge today, we godless anti-metaphysicians still take our fire, too, from the flame lit by a faith that is thousands of years old, that Christian faith which was also the faith of Plato, that God is the truth, that truth is divine. – But what if this should become more and more incredible, if nothing should prove to be divine any more unless it were error, blindness, the lie – if God himself should prove to be our most enduring lie?⁴⁵

The interpretation given to this passage is pivotal: not only does it shape the overall construal of Nietzsche’s treatment of truth and lie, it also determines how the “problematical” status of the thematic will function within those philosophical positions inspired by his thought. The stakes of this interpretative venture are therefore inseparable from the question of a fidelity to Nietzsche in post-structuralism, where these recent uses of Nietzsche are at risk of falling prey to the metaphysical duality of truth and appearance.

Foucault identifies Nietzsche’s position on the will to truth with the revelation of a self-destructive principle of knowledge. This perspective, however, fails to adequately address Nietzsche’s affirmation of the lie in his conception of art – an affirmation that is fundamental to his critique of both science and morality. Similarly, in the field of Nietzsche scholarship, Walter Kaufmann identifies the belief in truth described in the passage with Nietzsche’s own philosophical stance.⁴⁶ In this interpretation, Kaufmann’s disregard for the problematisation of truth – one that provides the cornerstone to Nietzsche’s argument – is untenable. As Nietzsche explains: belief in truth is an age-old faith in a lie, thus to be “pious” in the sense developed in the passage is to be morally naïve, world-denying, and credulous of a false philosophical-religious construct.

This critical tone is recognised by other prominent interpreters of Nietzsche, most notably Gilles Deleuze. Paying specific attention to the passage in question, Deleuze charts Nietzsche’s progression from the speculative position (“what is the value of truth?”), to the erroneous moral opposition (“true world versus world of deception”), to the ascetic contradiction (“denial of *our* world of illusion”).⁴⁷ Yet, while he does perceive the

stakes of Nietzsche's argument, and also develops his critique of the scientific "faith," Deleuze does not always successfully account for the problematic status of the thematic, categorically situating Nietzsche's thought in the artistic realm of illusion and deception.⁴⁸

In this movement, which betrays Deleuze's own position more than that of his subject,⁴⁹ the *intrinsic* problem of truth for Nietzsche's philosophy is overlooked. Maintaining the supremacy of the will to power over the will to truth, Deleuze claims that "Nietzsche snatches thought from the element of truth and falsity. He turns it into an interpretation and an evaluation, interpretation of forces, evaluation of power."⁵⁰ However, Deleuze's emphasis on Nietzsche's critical project results in his neglecting the foundation of truth required for its justification – a sense of "the real" that remains elusive and ideal for Nietzsche, but one never totally absent from his thought.

This qualification is provided by Clément Rosset, who nonetheless finds no disagreement or contradiction within Nietzsche's philosophy on this issue. For Rosset, Nietzsche's affirmation of the real, "based on no avowed reasoning," is without philosophical substance or support: it "cannot appeal to any thought on which to stand and in which to find the outline of a foundation ... The fulcrum on which the system rests is thus simultaneously highly operative and almost invisible ... remain[ing] outside the purview of its own invocation."⁵¹ Despite this admission, Rosset maintains that truth and lie function as oppositional terms in Nietzsche's philosophy, the task of which remains to critically differentiate the "false" affirmations of reality from the "true."⁵²

Jacques Derrida attempts to circumvent the perils which plague the interpretations of Nietzsche outlined above. His approach – developing the "question of style" as applied to the "allegorical" figure of woman/truth – maintains the irrelevancy of all oppositional, hermeneutic, or systematic interpretations of Nietzsche.⁵³ Rather than positioning Nietzsche on either side of the metaphysical duality of truth and appearance, Derrida insists upon the *undecidable* quality of his thought: "The question of the woman suspends the decidable opposition of true and non-true and inaugurates the epochal regime of quotation marks which is to be enforced for every concept belonging to the system of philosophical decidability. The hermeneutic project which postulates a true sense of the text is disqualified under this regime."⁵⁴

Our understanding of the thematic, while avoiding a mere repetition of this Derridean position, will nonetheless refrain from positing any decidable opposition of truth and lie in Nietzsche's text. Rather, it would appear that Nietzsche's thematic – resisting those interpretations that align it with either the will to truth or the affirmation of appearance – is immersed in a kind of

equivocation. Kaufmann approaches this problem through his self-reflexive treatment of Nietzsche's conception of the will to power:

Nietzsche asserts that any attempt to understand the universe is prompted by man's will to power. If so, it would seem that his own conception of the will to power must be admitted by him to be a creation of his will to power. Is not Nietzsche therefore in the predicament of Epimenides, the Cretan? If his assertion is correct, it is a fiction.⁵⁵

Here we have what may be termed the *Nietzschean knot*; in the self-reflexive collapse of the oppositional operation of truth and lie, the arguments Nietzsche develops are nullified and break down, or else necessitate a different interpretative approach. Where truth and lie are employed in an antagonistic or hierarchical sense, one can now only assume the influence of rhetoric, dramatisation, and fiction. If Nietzsche's thematic has established anything, it is the abolition – through the “sacrifice” enacted in his own thought – of the conventional philosophical ground upon which to differentiate falsity from truth.

Rhetoric, Fiction, and the Extra-Moral Lie:

The Value of “Art” in Nietzschean Thought

From this perspective, we inevitably turn to the status of “art” and the various fictional, rhetorical, and narrative modes adopted in Nietzsche's work.⁵⁶ Given the predicament of the *Nietzschean knot*, we may question the relationship between these stylistic elements and Nietzsche's overall treatment of truth and lie. Through this approach, the development of the thematic can be considered in connection with Nietzsche's various forms of artistry which, testifying to the rhetorical dimension of language rather than an absolute conception of truth, commit him to a defence and vindication of the “lie.”

This question lends itself to another regarding the “artistic” status of post-structuralist interpretations of Nietzsche: granted the predominance of rhetoric and “style” in the work of the German philosopher, do these critical thinkers – who, according to Rosset, radicalise his ideas beyond any recognition of their original motivation⁵⁷ – utilise Nietzsche as a rhetorical device and figure for their own thought? This problem is particularly relevant in the case of Deleuze, who incorporates the proper name of Nietzsche – together with some of his central terms – into the conceptual framework of his own discourse, thereby augmenting its powers of persuasion.

While the question is not clearly addressed within the work of Deleuze,

instances of rhetorical self-reflection are present – if fleeting – in Nietzsche. Engaging in ironic play with conceptual truth, Nietzsche ultimately concedes the interpretive and artistic foundation of his philosophical position.⁵⁸ Likewise, in the character of *Zarathustra* – a fictionalisation of his philosophical thought – the self-contradiction inherent in Nietzsche's presentation of truth and lie is facetiously confessed.⁵⁹

In his later thought, Nietzsche justifies this advocacy of “art” through its power to redouble human interpretation in the interests of life-affirmation. Modifying his earlier sense of the term, Nietzsche now considers the artist a *Dionysiac* spirit who counter-poses the spirit of mendacious life-denial – one equally prevalent in the holy lie and the scientific will to truth. Combating this “symptom of *declining* life,” manifested wherever the world is divided into the “real” and the “apparent,” the “artist places a higher value on appearance than on reality ... [for] ‘appearance’ here signifies reality *once more*, only selected, strengthened, corrected ... [It] is precisely he who *affirms* all that is questionable and terrible in existence, he is *Dionysian*.”⁶⁰

While it would be incorrect to claim that Nietzsche was altogether consistent in this approach, one could ask whether his philosophy, as an affirmation of art, is projected outside the oppositional structure of truth versus lie, or reality versus appearance? Alternatively, and to reframe the question: in what manner is Nietzsche's thematic conveyed in a non-moral, perhaps extra-moral, sense? The three heuristic registers (moral, epistemological, aesthetic) outlined in the introduction of this essay can help to clarify the problem.

Although riddled with internal contradictions – not the least being an indefensible idealisation of truth as a perilous, if not unattainable, individual goal – Nietzsche's thematic extends the conventional semantic frameworks of both “truth” and “lie.” Through his critical methodology of a revaluation of values, Nietzsche declares the domains of morality and science to be predicated upon fiction: it is thus an all-embracing conception of “art” that is established through the thematic, one that challenges any traditional *moral* or *epistemological* employment of truth and lie.

In his final affirmation of art, Nietzsche develops the “extra-moral lie” as a creative concept of “truth” whose standard of measure – power – is projected beyond the oppositional structure of moral valuation. While confronting the insuperable epistemological predicament established through his critique of science – the incapacity of the will to knowledge to ever realise a presupposed transcendence of truth – Nietzsche affirms the lie of the artist, ultimately his own, as one endlessly advancing the growth of power for human life. Yet, in this movement, the thematic on truth and lie endangers the conditions required for its own *philosophical* existence. This prob-

lem of interpretation thus remains an essential concern for all critical approaches that base themselves upon Nietzsche's thought.

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NOTES

¹ See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*, trans. S. Whiteside, ed. M. Tanner (Melbourne: Penguin Books, 1993), pp. 14-16.

² Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, p. 25.

³ Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, p. 41.

⁴ The original version of *Birth of Tragedy* was entitled *Socrates and Greek Tragedy*, and concluded after section 15 of the work. The final version contains additional material beyond this point.

⁵ Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, pp. 74-5.

⁶ Nietzsche's drafts and notebooks from this period are invaluable in providing material on his formulation of such epistemological problems, as well as the notions of "tragic knowledge" and the "tragic philosopher." See the compilation volume – Friedrich Nietzsche, *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the early 1870s*, trans. and ed. D. Breazeale (New Jersey: Humanities Press International, 1994) – especially the drafts of "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense" and "The Philosopher: Reflections on the Struggle between Art and Knowledge."

⁷ Commonly used throughout all of Nietzsche's major texts in their examination of the value of science, the German *Wissenschaft* refers to systematic, rigorous, disciplined inquiry in general and not merely to the "natural" sciences. In this sense, the "sciences" of philosophy, philology, and history are subjected to Nietzsche's overall critique of knowledge.

⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense", in *Philosophy and Truth*, p. 84.

⁹ See Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies", p. 86.

¹⁰ See Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies", p. 90. See also Ernst Behler, "On Truth and Lie in an Aesthetic Sense", ed. M. P. Clark, in *Revenge of the Aesthetic: The Place of Literature in Theory Today* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 76. Behler identifies this phase of Nietzsche's thought with the romantic tradition, describing his 1873 essay as "surely the most intensified expression of the romantic theory of language."

¹¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life", trans. R. J. Hollingdale, ed. D. Breazeale, in *Untimely Meditations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 120.

¹² Nietzsche, "Uses and Disadvantages of History", p. 121.

- ¹³ See Friedrich Nietzsche, "Schopenhauer as Educator", in *Untimely Meditations*, pp. 169-73.
- ¹⁴ See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 12-14.
- ¹⁵ See Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, pp. 27-9.
- ¹⁶ Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, p. 60. It should be observed that such a "dramatic" statement is intended solely for rhetorical purposes; indeed, the opposite claim is made in a later, more "cynical," aphorism. See Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, p. 182: "Truth. – No one now dies of fatal truths: there are too many antidotes to them."
- ¹⁷ Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, p. 80. A similar reversal also occurs on the level of Nietzsche's application of truth and lie. While maintaining his description of the artist as a master of "deception," this generally takes on a disparaging tone – Nietzsche considers the artist more "backward" in comparison to the scientist and his project of enlightenment. See Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, pp. 80-1, 248, 260.
- ¹⁸ Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, p. 119.
- ¹⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, eds. M. Clark and B. Leiter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 31. See also Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, p. 501.
- ²⁰ See Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, pp. 181-2.
- ²¹ Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, p. 184.
- ²² See Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History", trans. D. F. Brouchard and S. Simon, ed. J. D. Faubion, in *Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology* (Melbourne: Penguin Books, 1998), pp. 387-9. At the end of Foucault's essay, a comparison is drawn between Nietzsche's views on historical truth that were first outlined in the "untimely meditations," and this proposition on knowledge voiced several times in *Daybreak*. In his elaboration of the latter, Foucault takes a momentary and rather extreme phase of Nietzsche's thought in order to encapsulate a kind of philosophical legacy. While his exposition on "genealogy" is valid in itself, it tends to overlook the complicated development in Nietzsche's treatment of truth and lie. Foucault's final deduction, which is presented as an apparently definitive Nietzschean position on knowledge and truth, therefore comes at the expense of a more thoroughgoing examination of his later and more mature work – especially as it addresses the deceptive "human" side of the truth/lie thematic, where illusions and lies are affirmed in the name of "art."
- ²³ See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), pp. 163-4.
- ²⁴ See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Melbourne: Penguin Books, 1969), pp. 210-15.
- ²⁵ Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, p. 137.
- ²⁶ See Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, pp. 227-8.
- ²⁷ Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, p. 127. See also Patrick Keane, "On Truth and Lie in

Nietzsche", *Salmagundi*, 29 (1975), pp. 82-9.

- ²⁸ See Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, p. 138, as Zarathustra explains his doctrine of the "will to power," wherein "power" is superordinate to the scientific "will to truth": "And you too, enlightened man, are only a path and footstep of my will: truly, my will to power walks with the feet of your will to truth!"
- ²⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Melbourne: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 68. This approach towards truth is reiterated in Friedrich Nietzsche, "Ecce Homo", trans. J. Norman, eds. A. Ridley and J. Norman, in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 72, where Nietzsche states: "How much truth can a spirit tolerate, how much truth is it willing to risk? This increasingly became the real measure of value for me ... Every achievement, every step forward in knowledge, comes from *courage*, from harshness towards yourself, from cleanliness with respect to yourself."
- ³⁰ See Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, pp. 33-54; Friedrich Nietzsche, "Twilight of the Idols", trans. R. J. Hollingdale, in *Twilight of the Idols/The Antichrist* (Melbourne: Penguin Books, 1990), pp. 45-9. Nietzsche's formulation of the perspective character of human understanding is a vital element in his theory of knowledge. It also explains much of the motivation behind his critique of the belief systems prevalent in scientific and religious thought. While beyond the confines of this paper, a detailed investigation and explication of Nietzsche's "doctrine" of perspectivism is provided by Christoph Cox in a well-informed article. See Christoph Cox, "The 'Subject' of Nietzsche's Perspectivism", *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 35 (1997), pp. 269-91.
- ³¹ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 55.
- ³² Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, pp. 35-6.
- ³³ See Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 33; Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. D. Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 128.
- ³⁴ See Keane, "Truth and Lie in Nietzsche", for whom Nietzsche's rhetorical vehemence in his "moral" treatment of the lie is a paradoxical but important concern.
- ³⁵ The terms "active" and "reactive" are central to the interpretation Gilles Deleuze gives of Nietzsche's philosophy, which relies heavily upon the *Genealogy* as one of Nietzsche's most integral texts. See Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. H. Tomlinson (London: Continuum, 2002).
- ³⁶ See Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 22.
- ³⁷ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 23.
- ³⁸ See Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 29: for Nietzsche, the slavish system of evaluation "distinguishes strength from expressions of strength, as if behind the strong individual there were an indifferent substratum which was at *liberty* to express or not express strength. But no such substratum exists; there is no 'being' behind doing, acting, becoming; 'the doer' is merely a fiction imposed on the doing – the doing itself is everything." See also Nietzsche, "Twilight", pp. 64-5; Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, pp. 121-4.
- ³⁹ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 30.

- ⁴⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Antichrist", in *Twilight/Antichrist*, p. 132. See also Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 97: "An ascetic life is a contradiction in terms: a particular kind of *ressentiment* rules there, that of an unsatisfied instinct and will to power which seeks not to master some isolated aspect of life but rather life itself, its deepest, strongest, most fundamental conditions; an attempt is made to use strength to dam up the very source of strength; a green and cunning gaze is directed against thriving physiological growth."
- ⁴¹ See Nietzsche, "Antichrist", p. 132.
- ⁴² Nietzsche, "Antichrist", pp. 186-7. For a related passage explaining the origins of the "holy lie" in the will to power, see Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, ed. W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), pp. 91-2.
- ⁴³ See Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, p. 282: "'Why do you not want to deceive?' especially if it should seem – and it does seem! – as if life aimed at semblance, meaning error, deception, simulation, delusion, self-delusion."
- ⁴⁴ Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, p. 282.
- ⁴⁵ Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, p. 283. See also Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 126, where scientific atheists – as apparent "counter-idealists" to moral self-denial – are condemned as the last remaining adherents and most spiritualised representatives of the ascetic ideal in contemporary culture. Thus, rather than exercising independence from the ascetic ideal and the moral tendency towards world-renunciation, for Nietzsche: "These men are far from *free* spirits: *for they still believe in the truth!*"
- ⁴⁶ See Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 359: "That is how Nietzsche considers himself 'still pious'; that is Nietzsche's faith." Both in this, his principal work on Nietzsche, and in his footnotes to *The Gay Science*, Kaufmann argues for an interpretation of the passage that supports the major themes he develops in his exegesis of Nietzschean thought. However, this reading is explicitly contradicted, not only by the actual argument in *The Gay Science*, but also in *Genealogy*, pp. 125-8.
- ⁴⁷ See Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, pp. 94-7.
- ⁴⁸ See, for example, Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, p. 103: "The power of falsehood must be taken as far as a *will* to deceive ... It is *art* which invents the lies that raise falsehood to this highest affirmative power, that turns the will to deceive into something which is affirmed in the power of falsehood."
- ⁴⁹ Deleuze's reading of Nietzsche over-states his affirmation of art and thus misrepresents the overall development of the truth/lie thematic – at times radicalising Nietzsche's thought to the detriment of textual accuracy. This is evident in footnote 29 (see p. 210) of chapter 3 (see p. 105) of his *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, where Deleuze refers to passage 146 from *Human, All Too Human* to corroborate his philosophical claims. This quotation is cited out of context: Deleuze attempts to use it as confirmation of Nietzsche's affirmation of the work of art and its "higher power" of the false, whereas art and the artist tend to take on a derogatory tone in that particular work. The entire chapter "From the Souls of Artists and Writers" –

from which passage 146 is selected by Deleuze – could be cited as evidence counter to his contentions, although it is far from an unequivocal treatment of art (as Deleuze seems to imply with his reference).

Deleuze can here be seen to impose his own interpretation onto Nietzsche's text, such that his accusation against Martin Heidegger – who apparently provides “an interpretation of Nietzschean philosophy closer to his own thought than to Nietzsche's” – can be equally well applied to Deleuze himself. See footnote 31 in chapter 5 of Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, p. 220.

⁵⁰ Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, p. xiii.

⁵¹ Clément Rosset, *Joyful Cruelty: Towards a Philosophy of the Real*, trans. and ed. D. F. Bell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 32-3.

⁵² See Rosset, *Joyful Cruelty*, pp. 46, 61.

⁵³ See Jacques Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*, trans. B. Harlow (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1979), pp. 94-101.

⁵⁴ Derrida, *Spurs*, pp. 106-7. Beyond this brief text – his only work dedicated to Nietzsche's philosophy – Derrida has written a number of essays which display the influence of Nietzsche upon his thought. See, for example, Jacques Derrida, “History of the Lie: Prolegomena”, trans. and ed. P. Kamuf, in *Without Alibi* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 28-70, and Jacques Derrida, “Loving in Friendship: Perhaps – the Noun and the Adverb”, trans. G. Collins, in *Politics of Friendship* (London and New York: Verso, 1997), pp. 26-48.

⁵⁵ Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, p. 204.

⁵⁶ In the early essay “On Truth and Lies,” Nietzsche introduces his piece with a cosmological fable of humanity, beginning with the words “Once upon a time ...” See Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lies”, p. 79. This kind of “story-telling” is prevalent throughout his work. For other interesting narrative devices, see Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, pp. 31-2; Nietzsche, “Twilight”, pp. 50-1. See also Gary Shapiro, *Nietzschean Narratives* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

⁵⁷ See Rosset, *Joyful Cruelty*, p. 43.

⁵⁸ This self-reflexive movement occurs in both the “artistic” and “theoretical” texts of Nietzsche (the distinction between the two becoming impossible to maintain). See Friedrich Nietzsche, “Only a Fool! Only a Poet!”, trans. D. Wynard, *The Malahat Review*, 24 (1972), pp. 47-9; Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, p. 140; Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, pp. 52-3.

⁵⁹ See Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, p. 149: speaking to a disciple, Zarathustra asks him “‘What did Zarathustra once say to you? That the poets lie too much? – But Zarathustra too is a poet. Do you now believe that he spoke the truth?’ ... But granted that someone has said in all seriousness that the poets lie too much: he is right – we do lie too much.”

⁶⁰ Nietzsche, “Twilight”, p. 49.