



Received: 21-01-2023  
Accepted: 01-03-2023

## International Journal of Advanced Multidisciplinary Research and Studies

ISSN: 2583-049X

### A critical analysis of 'On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense', Nietzsche's optimistic pessimism

Peyman Salehi

Department of English literature, Faculty of the foreign languages, Isfahan University, Isfahan, Iran

Corresponding Author: **Peyman Salehi**

#### Abstract

Nietzsche's philosophical stance of optimistic pessimism, as illustrated in his seminal work, 'On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense', posits that the process of individual thought and the attainment of consciousness, which led to self-awareness, was a tragic misstep in human evolution, implying that this realization came to constitute a fundamental predicament for human existence. Nietzsche's exploration of the arbitrariness of truth, which he argues is inherently contingent upon the shaping power of language, is thus predicated upon a radical critique of the epistemological foundations of Western thought, and his skepticism towards truth serves as a cornerstone of his philosophical worldview. Moreover, the connections between Nietzsche's ideas and the work of postmodern

thinkers such as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, justify the notion that Nietzsche's critique of truth, and his emphasis on the role of power and language in shaping reality, anticipates many of the central concerns of poststructuralist thought. The alternative explorations of Nietzsche's ideas can better inform contemporary debates about the nature of truth and the social structures that work to constrain our understanding of reality. Overall, the paper offers a nuanced yet fundamental analysis of Nietzsche's complex and multifaceted philosophical stance, putting forth a critical perspective on his arguments, in order to highlight the potential dangers of nihilism and skepticism that can arise from a categorical rejection of truth.

**Keywords:** Nietzsche, On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense, Consciousness, Truth, language, Derrida

'It is only by means of forgetfulness that man can ever reach the point of fancying himself to possess a "truth" of the grade just indicated. If he will not be satisfied with truth in the form of tautology, that is to say, if he will not be content with empty husks, then he will always exchange truths for illusions. What is a word? It is the copy in sound of a nerve stimulus. But the further inference from the nerve stimulus to a cause outside of us is already the result of a false and unjustifiable application of the principle of sufficient reason. If truth alone had been the deciding factor in the genesis of language, and if the standpoint of certainty had been decisive for designations, then how could we still dare to say "the stone is hard," as if "hard" were something otherwise familiar to us, and not merely a totally subjective stimulation!'<sup>1</sup>  
(Nietzsche – 1873)

'To say of history, of the world, or reality, that they always appear in an experience, hence in a movement of interpretation'<sup>2</sup>  
(Derrida – 1998)

In 1826, Henriette Cornier, a poor young domestic servant, offered to look after a neighbor's nineteen-month-old daughter. She then took the child into a room, decapitated her with a large knife, and then stayed with the corpse. When the mother came looking for her daughter, Cornier nonchalantly informed her that the girl was very dead. The mother, unbelieving, tried to enter

<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. 2012. *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense* (North Charleston, SC: Createspace Independent Publishing Platform)

<sup>2</sup> Derrida. 1988. *Limited Inc* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press)

the room, but Cornier took the head, wrapped it in an apron, and threw it into the hallway. When the authorities later came to arrest Cornier, they enquired as to why she had done such a gruesome act of savagery. 'An idea', she reportedly replied.<sup>3</sup>

In evolutionary terms, having an independent idea, an indication of advanced cerebral activity, symptomizes self-awareness and consciousness, both anathema to Nietzsche's ideological pessimism. Engraved within his arguments as a tragic misstep in evolution, being self-aware and the selfishness it ensued was abhorrent to Nietzsche and in fact, being averse or at least resentful toward such phenomena is the prerequisite of truly comprehending his work. To him, the process of thought created all that came to doom mankind. To him, all the pagan Gods and false religions, all the blindly followed blood-soaked traditions of the past, all the illusions and superstitions and righteous massacres around the globe, started when one of our ancestors decided to forego instinct and think independently.<sup>4</sup> How did such monumental breakthrough transpire anyway?

### Standing on two feet

Around 3.8 billion years ago, life was evolved on this planet in the form of RNA molecules, taking another 2.9 million years to be evolved into multi-cell organisms.<sup>5</sup> This inexhaustible course of evolution culminated in our distant unintelligent ancestors achieving the infamous consciousness about 5 million years ago, altering the course of planetary history forever. Subsequent to the development of consciousness, Homo sapiens,<sup>6</sup> commonly known as modern humans, were first evolved into existence around 300 thousand years ago, and gained the capacity for language (and therefore, for lying) just around 50 thousand years ago.<sup>7</sup>

As human beings climbed the ladder of consciousness, they began to contemplate the truth of life and what it represents. A life in which, by the virtue of the very thing that made them the dominant life form on the planet, they felt completely isolated and secluded. In their sacred mission to unveil the higher meaning of life, humans attempted to fathom the nature of existence as a systematic process leading to an ultimate destination, be it via writing a book about the dead in Egypt,<sup>8</sup> or by fantasizing about achieving

God-like status in the afterlife.<sup>9</sup> This process is then followed by a misguided consensus among the population, confirming the sanctity of the fabricated ideology, and denouncing all that dare to have faith otherwise. Nietzsche delineates this tragically misguided endeavor, by asserting that:

'This peace treaty brings in its wake something which appears to be the first step toward acquiring that puzzling truth drive: to wit, that which shall count as "truth" from now on is established. That is to say, a uniformly valid and binding designation is invented for things, and this legislation of language likewise establishes the first laws of truth. For the contrast between truth and lie arises here for the first time. The liar is a person who uses the valid designations, the words, in order to make something which is unreal appear to be real'.<sup>10</sup>

The entire notion of a strategically fabricated truth, insisted upon by Nietzsche, is fascinatingly compatible with Derrida's deconstructionist views, as he claimed 'to say of history, of the world, or reality, that they always appear in an experience, hence in a movement of interpretation'.<sup>11</sup> Thus, it is evident that Long after Nietzsche, Derrida too came to disregard the notion of an objective metaphysical truth. Citing Foucault's work that claimed 'we must not imagine the world turns towards us a legible face which we would only have to decipher',<sup>12</sup> Derrida argued that not only does the human mind subconsciously alter and reinterpret any given truth, but it arbitrarily proceeds to fill in the gaps to make it more convincing as well.<sup>13</sup> This assertion then led to the notion that truth is mostly produced and not discovered, due to the fact that language itself, at least in part, constitutes and defines entities, and has a direct role in shaping reality. Derrida warns the population about the notion of truth and what social structures will commit in the name of it, since he saw the whole process as a monolithic system designed to ensure the enslavement of the mind, and the isolation of anyone who 'dreams of deciphering a truth

<sup>3</sup> Mohler, Sadie. 2014. "Criminally Insane: Discursive Mutations of the Dangerous Individual," *CTSJ: Journal of Undergraduate Research*, 4.ctsj/vol4/iss1 <<https://scholar.oxy.edu/handle/20.500.12711/4276>>

<sup>4</sup> "Nietzsche and the Critique of Religion." 2019. in *Nietzsche and The Antichrist: Religion, Politics, and Culture in Late Modernity* (Bloomsbury Academic)

<sup>5</sup> Smith, Eric, and Harold J. Morowitz. 2016. *The Origin and Nature of Life on Earth: The Emergence of the Fourth Geosphere* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press)

<sup>6</sup> 'Homo Sapiens' is the only extant human species on earth. The name is Latin for *wise man*, and was introduced in 1758 by Carl Linnaeus.

<sup>7</sup> Smith, Eric, and Harold J. Morowitz. 2016. *The Origin and Nature of Life on Earth: The Emergence of the Fourth Geosphere* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press)

<sup>8</sup> The Book of the Dead is an ancient Egyptian funerary text generally written on papyrus and used from the beginning of

the New Kingdom (around 1550 BCE) to around 50 BCE. The original Egyptian name for the text is translated as "The book of Coming Forth by Day" or "The book of Emerging Forth into the Light". It's a collection of texts, consisting of a number of magic spells intended to assist a dead person's journey through the 'Duat', or the underworld, and into the afterlife. It was written by many priests over a period of about 1,000 years.

<sup>9</sup> Fagan, Brian, and Chris Scarre. 2015. *Ancient Civilizations*, 3rd edn (London, England: Routledge)

<sup>10</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. 2012. *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense* (North Charleston, SC: Createspace Independent Publishing Platform)

<sup>11</sup> Derrida. 1988. *Limited Inc* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press)

<sup>12</sup> Connolly, William E. 1985. "Taylor, Foucault, and Otherness," *Political Theory*, 13.3: 365-76 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/191237>>

<sup>13</sup> Derrida. 1988. *Limited Inc* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press)

or an origin which escapes the order of the sign'.<sup>14</sup> This is precisely what Nietzsche hoped for the population to realize, as his entire philosophy was predicated upon the arbitrariness of the Truth.

In his famed paper, Nietzsche implies that the process of ensuing individual thought, itself being the outcome of achieving consciousness, kickstarted the quest for unveiling the Truth. A quest that, as he puts it, is 'the duty to lie according to a fixed convention, to lie with the herd and in a manner binding upon everyone'.<sup>15</sup> Metaphors taken as tangible proof, and illusions painted as divine epiphanies, are the substantiations upon which Nietzsche builds his argument, yet, when scrutinized properly, one would realize that it is not the search of truth that Nietzsche ridicules and abhors, it is the truth itself, or rather, the lack of it. There is no truth according to him, there never has been, and so in piercing through this universal delusion, Nietzsche declared that the search for a higher meaning has always been pointless, and that 'God is dead'.<sup>16</sup> According to Nietzsche, a sacred metaphor, no matter how many times repeated out loud will never be more than just a metaphor, adding that:

'It is this way with all of us concerning language; we believe that we know something about the things themselves when we speak of trees, colors, snow, and flowers; and yet we possess nothing but metaphors for things—metaphors which correspond in no way to the original entities.'<sup>17</sup>

Many have come to maintain that Nietzsche's aggressive measures in pointing out the futility of human ideological structure highlights just how liberated his mind was, but contemplated closely, his magnificent observations seem more detrimental to his psyche than many are willing to admit.

### The price to pay

Just for the sake of getting the full picture, try to take this fact into consideration. According to proven scientific research, 99.9% of an atom is simply an empty abyss, and since atoms make up literally everything, the physical presence of every entity in the universe is virtually nonexistent. This means that all the tangible objects at one's disposal, along with one's entire existence is 99.9% empty blackness.<sup>18</sup> Scientifically speaking, this indicates that considering the amount of empty space in each atom, our

<sup>14</sup> Derrida, Professor Jacques. 1978. *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press).

<sup>15</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. 2012. *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense* (North Charleston, SC: Createspace Independent Publishing Platform).

<sup>16</sup> Ure, Michael. 2019. *Nietzsche's The Gay Science: An Introduction* (Cambridge University Press). The phrase first appeared in Nietzsche's 1882 collection *The Gay Science*. However, it is most famously associated with Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, which is most responsible for making the phrase popular.

<sup>17</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. 2012. *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense* (North Charleston, SC: Createspace Independent Publishing Platform).

<sup>18</sup> Profumo, Stefano. 2017. *Introduction to Particle Dark Matter, An* (London, England: World Scientific Europe).

physical existence is so mathematically insignificant, that it would seem logical to have it overlooked.<sup>19</sup> Contemplated deeply and frequently, such discoveries are capable of rendering one's entire belief system null and void.

Such a bitter truth of soul-crushing magnitude, such a painful collapse of the whole edifice of reality, is indeed close to what Nietzsche underwent in his enlightenment. A cogent nihilism of such proportions doesn't only liberate the mortal mind, since it also torments it beyond comprehension. It doesn't only make one proud of his awakening, for it makes one absolutely disgusted by everything that leads to it as well. Thus, Nietzsche was not a heathen corrupting our faithful minds as one would portray him to be, he was simply a troubled genius that as a result of his invaluable contribution to the enlightenment of the minds of an entire species, was crushed under his own forbidden knowledge.

Not before long, Nietzsche came to realize that acquiring such damning knowledge was only possible due to his ability to contemplate the inner workings of the human mind, an ability he was bound to inherit the moment our ancestors became self-aware. Consciousness, self-awareness, and the search for the Truth, are all the same unsanctified curses to Nietzsche, and he resents them as much as he resents himself for acknowledging them. He loathes our futile illusions of divinity just as much as he loathes human self-consciousness that opened the door to this perpetual nightmare. The anthropomorphizing of truth, and the hereditary ignorance throughout human history, bear witness to all that Nietzsche makes a case for, but they also substantiate how he refused to face a crucial point.

### The illusion of progress

The chronological pattern that Nietzsche delineates for the history of the search for Truth, consists of three stages. These include evolution and then self-awareness as the first stage, the search for Truth and meaning as the second, and the birth of metaphors and sacred illusions as the final and everlasting stage.<sup>20</sup> Bear in mind that Nietzsche perceived human beings to be perpetually trapped in the final stage, with each generation inheriting the fabricated notions that were created and perfected by the last. Building on Nietzsche's model, it would seem that his chronological pattern would benefit from a few additional stages, properly placed in subsequent to the last stage he proposed. These include:

1. Comprehending the inanity and the inadequateness of the hereditary metaphors and ideologies.
2. Rejecting the now-obsolete notions of Truth, and lapsing into the subsequent nihilism.
3. Struggling to handle the futility and the preposterousness of existence.
4. Reverting to the same disproven metaphors again with a shattered and unreliable faith.
5. The birth of hypocrisy and sacred bloodshed, justified as righteous and divine.

<sup>19</sup> Profumo, Stefano. 2017. *Introduction to Particle Dark Matter, An* (London, England: World Scientific Europe).

<sup>20</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. 2012. *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense* (North Charleston, SC: Createspace Independent Publishing Platform).

The way this seems to be, is as if Nietzsche need not bother showing how ludicrous the search for truth and meaning has been, since deep down, nobody actually bought the Truth wholeheartedly. As a matter of fact, when the pandemonium wreaked upon this planet is observed, all in the name of a Pagan God or a Saint, or in the name of the crusade for the pure supreme Truth, it is clearly manifested that this relentless struggle only poisoned the already moribund morals of our species. The sagas, legends, pagan Gods, and Demons that mankind made in his own image, and 'sought only within his own sphere',<sup>21</sup> had already failed from the beginning, but humans managed to do what they do best in the midst of chaos, exploiting the opportunity provided.

In asserting that 'There is always something political in the very project of attempting to fix the contexts of utterances. The question can be raised, not whether a politics is implied (it always is), but which politics is implied in such a practice of contextualization', Derrida fiercely argued that the social and the hereditary notions of knowledge and truth are mostly fabricated entities designed to be collectively accepted in a society, in order to enhance the power and prominence of a certain class within that society known as the 'elites'.<sup>22</sup> As a pioneer in this school of thought, Nietzsche introduced the same reconceptualization of truth and reality long before Derrida, shedding light on how Truth and metaphors have come to enslave the masses.<sup>23</sup> What Nietzsche refused to reflect upon thoroughly though, was how the absolute majority of the masses were just as corrupt, ruthless, and selfish as the elites, perpetually committing numerous atrocities in the hopes of joining this elite social class that they supposedly abhorred.

### Optimistic pessimism

Critically speaking, while unveiling the notions of cherished lies and sacred ignorance, Nietzsche proceeds to somehow lift the burden of human platitude and lunacy, and attribute it to the human propensity for believing illusive pagan fabrications, as indicated in his assertion that 'man has an invincible inclination to allow himself to be deceived and is, as it were, enchanted with happiness when the rhapsodist tells him epic fables as if they were true, or when the actor in the theater acts more royally than any real king'.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, he is breathtakingly optimistic in his pessimism, and tacitly implies that upon disregarding their ancient Pagan superstitions, humans would be provided a chance to finally be moral and free. Much to his chagrin, that is simply not how human nature has evolved.

There is an inclination among scholars, specially within the illuminated cycle of philosophers, to look over the fact that Homo sapiens came to rule this planet because they were, and still are, vicious, brutal, and merciless. Put in evolutionary terms, one of the most important reasons for

the survival of modern humans, is the fact that our ancestors were better at trickery, carnage and slaughter than our distant cousins, meaning the less evolved species.<sup>25</sup> Modern humans, as they gradually evolved to become the apex predators of the planet (due to their inventions), didn't initially create the Pagan Gods and metaphors to become moral or limited, as they came up with such notions solely to justify their cruel nature. This in turn suggests that the Pagan Gods or the Truth didn't enslave us, since we simply gave birth to them and utilized them as reasons for bloodshed. To illustrate, note that the Mayans sacrificed enemies and ate their hearts to supposedly please their pagan Gods, the Egyptians buried slaves alive so as to own them in the divine underworld, and the Vikings ravaged England, ostensibly to satisfy the pagan Gods and gain entrance to Valhalla.<sup>26</sup>

After objective scrutiny, it would be manifest that most of the followers of different versions of pagan 'Truth', ultimately came to commit some sort of atrocity as a sacred duty to their Pagan God, and as a righteous act. Note that even nihilists and atheists like Stalin killed and suppressed according to some 'sacred undisputable Truth' they supposedly held in mind. With that in perspective, it is now evident that our primordial nature had evolved to be ruthless and bloodthirsty, and so became our pagan Gods and pagan Truths, and fortunately or not, it was never the other way around. Bear in mind that we, as a species, were the ones who enslaved our fabricated pagan Gods and used them to justify our rage and greed, effectively permeating our societies with false notions, so as to enslave our malleable middle and lower classes.

### Conclusion

Time and again, Nietzsche portrayed the search for the ever-elusive Truth as a pernicious disease, and we can never return this huge favor. But note that he did overlook the depth of the valley he warned us about, since the pagan Truth, along with all the sacred pagan lies and texts it ensued, was never the disease itself, but only a superficial symptom of a particular cancer. The cancer being the untamed human nature, and its undying thirst for cruelty. But fret not over these somber words of damnation, for it is only after acknowledging a bitter truth that one can start to alter it. Nietzsche's words are essential in facing, owning, and hopefully altering the savage nature we inherited, as he asserts that 'He does not cry; he does not even alter his voice. When a real storm cloud thunders above him, he wraps himself in his cloak, and with slow steps he walks from beneath it'.<sup>27</sup>

### References

1. Derrida, Jacques. Limited Inc (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press), 1988.

<sup>21</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. 2012. *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense* (North Charleston, SC: Createspace Independent Publishing Platform).

<sup>22</sup> Derrida. 1988. *Limited Inc* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press).

<sup>23</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. 2012. *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense* (North Charleston, SC: Createspace Independent Publishing Platform).

<sup>24</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. 2012. *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense* (North Charleston, SC: Createspace Independent Publishing Platform).

<sup>25</sup> Smith, Eric, and Harold J. Morowitz. 2016. *The Origin and Nature of Life on Earth: The Emergence of the Fourth Geosphere* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press)

<sup>26</sup> Fagan, Brian, and Chris Scarre. 2015. *Ancient Civilizations*, 3rd edn (London, England: Routledge)

<sup>27</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. 2012. *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense* (North Charleston, SC: Createspace Independent Publishing Platform)

2. Derrida, Jacques. *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press), 1978.
3. Fagan, Brian, Chris Scarre. *Ancient Civilizations*, 3rd edn (London, England: Routledge), 2015.
4. Mohler, Sadie. *Criminally Insane: Discursive Mutations of the Dangerous Individual*, *CTSJ: Journal of Undergraduate Research*, 2014. 4.ctsj/vol4/iss1 <<https://scholar.oxy.edu/handle/20.500.12711/4276>>
5. "Nietzsche and the Critique of Religion." in *Nietzsche and The Antichrist : Religion, Politics, and Culture in Late Modernity* (Bloomsbury Academic), 2019.
6. Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. *The Antichrist*, trans. by Anthony M. Ludovici (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books), 2000.
7. Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense* (North Charleston, SC: Createspace Independent Publishing Platform), 2012.
8. Profumo, Stefano. *Introduction to Particle Dark Matter*, An (London, England: World Scientific Europe), 2017.
9. Smith, Eric, Harold Morowitz J. *The Origin and Nature of Life on Earth: The Emergence of the Fourth Geosphere* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press), 2016.
10. Ure, Michael. *Nietzsche's The Gay Science: An Introduction* (Cambridge University Press), 2019.