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And now the telling of...

The Value of Truth and Its Pursuit

Caroline Rubach

Assigned in COM 587 (Rhetorical Theory): Professor Justin Kirk

Introduction

Upon first attempt, defining the concept of truth may appear to be a fairly manageable task. As one begins to gather words to form a more encompassing, accurate categorization, however, words begin to fail as the concept seems to stretch wider and deeper than it first appeared. In this process, truth proves to be more than just facts or the accumulation of wisdom and knowledge. Instead, it lends itself to be a complex concept that requires grappling and wrestling with, and not always on unified terms.

Within the dynamic concept of truth, there exists a tension between the underlying assumptions through which truth can be understood. Depending on one's perception of what truth is, it can be assumed to imply relative and multiple truths, signaled by the use of lower-case "t" truth, or universal truth, signaled by the use of capital "T" Truth. Whether discussing truth with a lens of universal Truth or relative truth, discussing the topic is like cutting into an onion: initially, we believe we are working with one thing in itself; but with the first slice, we realize all the layers involved and the questions that continue to emerge as we approach the center. Perhaps the most important question one will face is whether the search for truth is even valuable at all. The way that humans go about answering this is through language.

Language is one of the strongest tools humans possess for dissecting this question and for co-creating ideas that get closer to answers.

Regardless of the specific ideas and potential answers that are created through discussions and dialogues, the question remains, and philosophers continue in their work. As C.S. Lewis writes, "Do what they will, then, we remain conscious of a desire which no natural happiness will satisfy" (*Weight of Glory*, 1949, p. 4). This desire for something more is why humans continue to ask questions and why the discussion surrounding truth and its curious nature perseveres, especially considering that on its deepest level, this question is rooted in the purpose of human existence. Accordingly, the value of truth and of seeking it out is an important rhetorical question to be investigated.

Many philosophers have conducted thorough investigations and have declared their theories on what the value of truth is. However, with no consensus reached, every woman and man must choose for themselves whether to believe in the value of truth and in searching for it. One's answer to this question will heavily influence the way that they live and the values they live with. Philosophers like Nietzsche think that truth, being lower-case "t" truth, exists but is not inherently valuable. In what follows, I argue that, as the works of C.S. Lewis and others support, objective and universal Truth exists, is inherently valuable, and is worth seeking out. First, I analyze the contrasting theories of Nietzsche and of Plato regarding the definition of truth and its value, or lack thereof. Next I examine multiple texts by C.S. Lewis to present his theory of truth and its value,

exhibiting similarities to Platonic theory and acting as a counter-example to Nietzschean theory. Finally, I offer implications of Lewis' work to the field of rhetoric.

Theory

Nietzsche

To understand Nietzsche's theory of truth, one must understand the context that shaped his understanding on the matter. Nietzsche, a German philosopher and scholar in the latter half of the 19th century, was highly influenced by the writings of Arthur Schopenhauer, an early 19th century German philosopher with a pessimistic worldview. One of Schopenhauer's central works is called *The World as Will and Representation*, which focuses on the will of man as being the fundamental nature of human beings. Although Nietzsche increasingly gained intellectual independence from Schopenhauer as his career progressed, Grace Neal Dolson from Duke University notes that, "the notion of the primal nature of the will [remains] the connecting link between Nietzsche and Schopenhauer" (p. 244). This attention on the omnipresence of the "will to power" in the life of mankind is a key focal point in Nietzsche's later works; the will to power "appears not only as the formula for all existence, but as the criterion of value as well" (p. 244).

Nietzsche unpacks the values underlying modern-day civilization. He sees individuality and the will for power as a reality of human existence and he views human beings and their claims to knowledge as illegitimate and dishonest. In his work entitled *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*, Nietzsche implies that humans fabricate what they know when he calls humans "clever beasts who invented knowing" (p. 79). Furthering this highly pessimistic view of human nature, he writes, "One might invent such a fable 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" (p. 79). This is the proper context for understanding Nietzsche's pessimistic approach to truth and its value.

Furthermore, a passage from the same text provides significant insight into the way that Nietzsche views humans in their relation to truth and their search for it:

Deception, flattering, lying... putting up a false front, living in borrowed splendor, wearing a mask... in short, a continuous fluttering around the solitary flame of vanity is so much the rule and the law among men that there is almost nothing which is less comprehensible than how an honest and pure drive for truth could have arisen among them. They are deeply immersed in illusions and in dream images; their eyes merely glide over the surface of things and see 'forms.' Their senses nowhere lead to truth; on the contrary, they are content to receive stimuli and, as it were, to engage in a groping game on the backs of things. (p. 80)

Nietzsche believes that humans' drive for truth stems from a social contract that we have with one another. He argues that, "from boredom and necessity, man wished to exist socially and with the herd" (p. 81). According to Nietzsche, this contract is the first step for humanity towards acquiring a drive for truth, defining truth as a "uniformly valid and binding designation... invented for things, and this legislation of language likewise establishes the first laws of truth" (p. 81). Conversely, he defines lying as the act of making something that is not real appear to be real (p. 81).

Nietzsche argues that humans do not care much for truth at all, but rather only care for it so much as they want to avoid the negative and painful consequences of

deception, or even to enjoy the positive consequences of it, rather than wanting truth for truth itself (p. 81). This theory implies that enjoying something for its consequences is looked down upon and is not a pure enough intention. Overall, Nietzsche reiterates that truth is a manmade concept, and that “truths are illusions which we have forgotten... illusions... metaphors... drained of [their] sensuous force” (p. 84).

Clearly, Nietzsche’s view of humans in relation to truth paints a pitiful picture. It assumes that humans have fabricated knowledge and they do not care to know truth. As for the nature of truth itself, Nietzsche believes that it, along with the world in general, is highly subjective and lies completely in interpretations. In other words, he believes in lower-case “t” truths, or relative truths, depending on the perspective that one is coming from and the interpretation one assigns. In his eyes, there is no one objective and universal truth, but there is “at most, an aesthetic relation [between subject and object]” (p. 86).

In his work *The Will to Power* (1968), Nietzsche’s fascination of the opposing viewpoint shows in his contrasting aversion to adopting any one view of the world as objective and universally true (p. 262). According to Nietzsche’s theory regarding meaning in the world, it is our needs that interpret the world. He argues that “every drive is a lust to rule; each one has a perspective that it would like to compel all other drives to accept as a norm” (p. 267). According to Nietzsche, one can assign meaning through interpretation; but just as there are countless interpretations, there will be countless meanings, deeming these meanings only as products of our imposing will and nothing more. Nietzsche argues that there is no one true essence of

something, because essence can vary depending on the situation.

Overall, Nietzsche believes in a highly subjective world where humans cannot truly have knowledge, and where truth is “constructed of fictitious entities” (p. 306). Through this lens, there is no inherent value of truth because “the value of the world lies in our interpretations” (p. 330). However, Nietzsche can see the value in the belief of truth, in that it allows “appearance [to be] an arranged and simplified world, at which our practical instincts have been at work” (p. 306). Additionally, he writes, “one may certainly admire man as a mighty genius of construction, who succeeds in piling up an infinitely complicated dome of concepts,” albeit upon an “unstable foundation... on running water” (*On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*, p. 85). Humanity’s belief in knowledge and truth allows for people to create a symbolic world in which they can live. Nietzsche recognizes that this has value, even if the knowledge and truth of the world humans believe does not actually have value in itself due to its highly subjective nature.

Nietzsche’s theory of truth represents only one understanding of truth, a highly critical and extremely pessimistic view. However, there exists an opposing theory of truth that proposes not only that objective and universal truth exists, in contrast to Nietzsche’s view, but also that truth is inherently valuable and is worth seeking out. Plato is one example of a philosopher who embodies this view, shown in his Theory of Forms.

Plato

In Plato’s *Theory of Forms*, he argues that this physical world is just a shadow or an image of the ultimate true reality, which he calls the Realm of the Forms (*The Republic*). For example, he asserts that there is a true form of Beauty (*The Symposium*), and all things that

humans perceive as beautiful are perceived as so because of the thread or image of the form of Beauty that runs through these physical shadows here. Humans can perceive these shadows as beautiful because they have an innate understanding of the Forms, but they do not know it directly or intimately. In Plato's eyes, Truth exists in this Realm of the Forms, and the Forms are the Truth that humans see only shadows of in the physical world. So, all interactions with these shadows are engagements with Truth, but not attainments of it.

Plato argues for an objective and universal Truth because there is one Realm of the Forms, which contains the Forms for all things in this physical world, and the Forms are not manipulated by human interpretations, but exist prior to human cognition. Plato's *Theory of Forms*, concerning humans, can be understood as a human's continual struggle in approximating the perfect Form we have in our heads, but which we can neither fully reach nor attain, at least in this physical world. However, regardless of the impossibility of attaining this perfection, or arriving at Truth through the Forms, moving closer and striving for proximity to Truth is extremely valuable and important. Plato's Allegory of the Cave demonstrates the reason for this through powerful imagery.

In Plato's Allegory of the Cave (*The Republic*), Socrates describes prisoners who are chained to the wall of a cave for their entire lives. These prisoners see shadows on the wall that they face, which are created from objects moving in front of the fire behind them, which they cannot see. The prisoners name these shadows and perceive them as reality and they are content with their life in the cave because they do not know any differently. However, one prisoner eventually breaks free from his chains and when he does, he sees the fire and recognizes that what he thought was reality was

not reality at all, but it was a manufactured reality: an illusion created by his senses and perceptions. The reality he perceived was actually a shadow of the true reality behind him, being the fire, or the sun. Plato likens the prisoner who breaks free to philosophers, who see beyond the wall of the cave to see the physical world for the illusion that it is and the reality they encounter outside as the true reality.

Plato continues to describe how the prisoner is dragged from the cave into the sun; once he adjusts, he will go back into the cave to bring others out to see this awe-striking reality. However, those in the cave will see how adjusting to the bright light of the sun has affected him, in an apparently painful way, so they will refuse to go outside the cave. Plato implies the ignorance in this point of view on behalf of the prisoners because they will miss out on this greater reality that they merely do not understand because they do not seek it out. Through this, Plato argues for the inherent value of Truth, and consequently, for the value in seeking it out. Plato supports this by painting a picture of what it will be like to finally reach the true reality, namely Truth, by showing just how ridiculous it would be to miss out on it due to our denial of its value.

Nietzsche argues that the will to power is the criterion of value (*The Will to Power*, p. 244), so truth therefore would have no value if it does not assist in man's pursuit of his will to power. Plato argues otherwise, through the use of imagery and logical appeals, in his telling of the Allegory of the Cave. The audience understands how valuable Truth, or true reality, is because they understand that it would be a shame for the prisoners to remain in their chains out of ignorance and distrust of the value of venturing outside; there would be an obvious loss in doing so. The audience sees the value in seeking out Truth, not because it will assist the

prisoners in their will to power, but because it will give them revelation and it brings them to the Truth of reality. This reveals that Truth has an inherent, essential value for humanity.

Nietzsche and Plato would both agree that there is little drive for truth among humans, or as Nietzsche sees it, no drive at all; they are “content to receive stimuli and, as it were, to engage in a groping game on the backs of things” (*On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*, p. 80). Plato, on the other hand, argues that when humans do break free from the chains and seek out Truth, it is invaluable because it lends to revelation of the objective and universal Truth of reality.

Lastly, Nietzsche claims that there is no one true essence of something, which Plato clearly would refute through his Theory of Forms. Nietzsche also claims that meaning only exists as a will to power, or as a persuasion for others to accept this meaning, consequently leading to power. However, both Plato and, as we shall see, C.S. Lewis argue otherwise that there is meaning beyond the will to power and the true essence of a thing does exist, although perhaps not in this physical world. In the following section, I analyze two of C.S. Lewis’ works to assess his evaluation of and pursuit of Truth through the lens of Platonic forms and as a counter-example to Nietzschean ideas of truth.

C.S. Lewis and Analysis

C.S. Lewis expresses his ideas of Truth throughout all his works, both in the form of nonfiction orations and fiction novels. One essay, originally delivered in oral form, is entitled *The Weight of Glory*, and I use this work to outline his understanding and evaluation of Truth. I will also present material from *Mere Christianity* to provide more evidence of his belief in objective and universal Truth.

During World War II, from 1942 to 1944, Lewis gave a series of radio broadcasts centering on the topic of Christianity during a time of serious adversity and war-weariness. Compilations of these broadcasts eventually turned into his famous book, *Mere Christianity*, which outlines how one can come to believe first in universal morality and then in God without having to let go of logical cognitive processes.

In this book, Lewis affirms the existence of objective and universal Truth by first establishing the existence of universal moral law. He writes, “My argument against God,” when he was a young atheist, “was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line” (*Mere Christianity*). Unlike Nietzsche, who argues that morality and truth are products of human subjectivity, Lewis argues that there is a universal and inherent moral standard by which humans live. He exemplifies this quite simply in saying that a moral relativist “may break his promise to you, but if you try to break on to him he will be complaining, ‘It’s not fair,’ before you can say Jack Robinson” (*Mere Christianity*).

Making this point gives him quite solid ground to build his following claim that there is an objective and universal Truth that is inherent within us, although humans cannot understand where exactly it comes from, and accordingly has a significant value and purpose. He speaks of Truth as something that we long for and do not yet have, as a “far-off country” that we desire to reach. Informed by his Christian beliefs, he views the encounter of Truth as an encounter with God. In Lewis’ eyes, an encounter with Truth is something that God has created us to experience, yet we do not fully experience it in this physical world, we only experience small tastes of it. He alludes in his

writings to his belief that we were created to experience this in full, and that beyond the limitations of this physical world we will be able to do so.

Unlike Nietzsche, Lewis believes that our drive to experience and to know Truth is so powerful that we “betray ourselves like lovers at the mention of a name,” and we cannot hide this desire “because our experience is constantly suggesting it” (*Weight of Glory*, 1949 p. 3). Like Plato’s idea of the Form of Beauty, Lewis says that we are tempted to call this Truth we so desire “Beauty” and to act as if that does it justice, but we know it does not. If it were, and if we were to go back to moments in our past where we labeled this taste of Truth as Beauty, we would find that beauty was not in the thing we associated it with, but it only came through it, “and what came through [it] was longing” (p. 3). Lewis warns that while beauty is a good image of what we really desire, we are poorly mistaken if we take the thing itself, through which we experienced Beauty, to be the thing itself that we desire. He argues that, “they turn [this thing] into [a] dumb idol, breaking the hearts of [its] worshippers” (p. 3).

Like Plato, Lewis uses images when unpacking big concepts in order to create a more thorough and personal understanding of these concepts for his audience. He does this in his book *Mere Christianity* when explaining the costly yet worthy pursuit of seeking Truth and allowing one’s self to be transformed by God in the process of doing so. He writes:

Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what he is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on; you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to

make any sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of – throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were being made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself. (Mere Christianity)

Lewis demonstrates his value for the pursuit of Truth, which he shares with Plato, but he goes even further to argue that when one seeks out Truth, they encounter the Creator of Truth, namely God, and something transformational happens in this encounter. Whereas Plato understands Truth to be the Form of purest reality, Lewis understands Truth to be the essence of God. To his understanding, an encounter with God – His essence and all – will transform the person seeking His Truth.

Nietzsche argues that humans do not care for truth all, but only care for the consequences that come along with it (*On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*, p. 81). He delivers this idea in such a way that clearly communicates his disapproval of it. Lewis, however, would respond with an analogy, in typical fashion, about a boy learning Greek in school to argue that a focus on the consequences, especially initially, does not deem a pursuit as invaluable. In this analogy, a schoolboy is beginning Greek grammar and he can’t possibly look forward to his future adult enjoyment of great Greek poets when he is only first starting off. He must first be motivated by the grades he will receive, by his desire to escape punishment, or even just to please his parents. But as he continues to pursue his studies of Greek grammar, at some indistinguishable point, he “becomes able to desire it for its own sake; indeed, the power of

so desiring it is itself a preliminary reward”
(*Weight of Glory*, 1949 p. 2).

Lewis uses this analogy to impress upon the reader his belief that since we are made for heaven, which is the name he assigns to the true ultimate reality that God created and in which He dwells, we already have the desire for this true and pure reality in us, but it is “not yet attached to the true object itself” (p. 2). Nonetheless, Lewis argues that we indeed have a drive for Truth, whether we can initially identify what we are aiming toward, or not. There is inherent value in the Truth we seek and in our pursuit of it because we have an innate desire or drive for it, which counter one of Nietzsche’s primary assumptions.

Like Plato’s *World of Forms*, Lewis ascribes these tastes or encounters of Truth, like the shadows on the wall, as reflections or images of the true reality. He argues that, “they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited” (p. 3). As Lewis writes, “Our lifelong nostalgia, our longing to be reunited with something in the universe from which we now feel cut off, to be on the inside of some door which we have always seen from the outside, is no mere neurotic fancy, but the truest index of our real situation” (p. 8).

Where Lewis differs from both Plato and Nietzsche is in his belief of our union with the Creator of Truth, which will cause us to eventually embody this true reality that we seek. As he puts it:

We want something else which can hardly be put into words – to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it... We discern the freshness and purity of morning, but they do not make us fresh and pure. We cannot mingle with the splendors we see. (p. 8)

This is the obstacle that keeps us here, in our chains in Plato’s Cave. Lewis assures his audience with conviction: “We are summoned to pass in through Nature, beyond her, into that splendor which she fitfully reflects” (p. 8). Lewis claims that we humans will one day not only mingle with the Truth that taunts us, which we presently only know tastes of, but we will also pass into it and embody it. This affirms the inherent value of Truth and justifies the value in our pursuit of Truth.

Conclusion

Whether one is religious or not, Lewis offers significant insights to the discussion on the inherent value of truth and of its pursuit. Furthermore, he offers invaluable contributions to the field of rhetorical theory.

First, Lewis reminds rhetoricians that a core responsibility of a rhetorician is to remind the audience of the transcendental end toward which humanity is directed. Rhetoric serves as vehicle for both hope and remembrance of overarching shared values. It conjures shared experiences in the mind of the audience, regardless if the values being argued for are agreed upon or not, and this increases the resonance of the message.

Second, rhetoric should be aimed at communicating a bigger picture of truth rather than solely seeking to arrive at a desired outcome. Rhetoricians have a responsibility to lead their audience towards the end goal, giving them the tools along the way that they need to understand where they are going. Philosophers like Quintilian support this understanding of rhetoric as a way to serve the people and spread good and honest messages for their benefit rather than as a way to push a personal or manipulative agenda (The *Institutio Oratoria*). Rhetoricians must work

to protect their audience from manipulation and to promote their personal adoption of the message through free will. Lewis defends this view of rhetoric when he explains where he is going all the while moving towards an end goal.

Third, although many philosophers use the highly metaphorical and symbolic nature of our language as a reason to deem things spoken of as meaningless, Lewis exemplifies the power in speaking symbolically. He does not fear speaking symbolically because he understands that it is very effective to explain abstract concepts by engaging the audience's imaginations. Lewis sees reason as the organ of Truth and imagination as the organ of meaning. This calls rhetoricians to not only deliver content, but to do so in a way that will be meaningful and memorable to the Audience.

Finally, rhetoricians must keep in mind that audiences do not just want to know; audiences, made up of individual humans, want to engage, to interact with, and to be acknowledged as well as to acknowledge. Delivering a message to an audience will have no impact if it is not done so in a way that engages the audience and calls to attention their humanity and their will to choose and to act.

As a concluding thought, I believe that C.S. Lewis would respond to Nietzsche in the following way: "You can't go on 'seeing through' things forever. The whole point of seeing through something is to see something through it. To 'see through' all things is the same as not to see" (*The Abolition of Man*, 2001).

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