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Nietzsche's English Genealogy of Truthfulness

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Abstract: This paper aims to increase our understanding of the genealogical method by taking a developmental approach to Nietzsche's genealogical methodology and reconstructing an early instance of it: Nietzsche's genealogy of truthfulness in *On Truth and Lie*. Placing this essay against complementary remarks from his notebooks, I show that Nietzsche's early use of the genealogical method concerns imagined situations before documented history, aims to reveal practical necessity before contingency, and focuses on vindication before it turns to subversion or problematization. I argue that we understand Nietzsche's later critique of truthfulness better if we place it against the background of his earlier vindictory insight into the practical necessity of cultivating truthfulness in some form; and I suggest that Nietzsche's own mature genealogical method has roots in its supposed contrary, the method of the "English" genealogists.

1 Introduction

Genealogies can take many forms, especially when told in the service of philosophy rather than history. They can string together *documented* facts that are clearly indexed to particular times and places, or present us with *imagined* situations that are nowhere in particular, but that depict, in a helpfully general way, certain generic facts about the human condition; they can be used to reveal the *contingency* of our arrangements, or to reveal their practical *necessity* given certain pressing needs; to *subvert* or at least problematize our arrangements, or to *vindicate* them as apt responses to enduring problems.¹

¹ For examples and further discussion of these various contrasting aspects of genealogies, see Craig 2007; Hoy 2009, 225; Jenkins 2006, 164; Koopman 2009; Millgram 2009, 163 n23; Owen 2010; Paden 2003, 566, Queloz 2017, 2018, 2019a, b, 2020a, b, and Queloz/Cueni 2019. The formulations here and throughout the paper are meant to do justice to the fact that most genealogical stories are not *intrinsically* either vindictory or subversive, and whether they are one

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While none of these contrasts are exclusive and some genealogies may well combine all six aspects, it is clear that Nietzsche's efforts to distance himself from the "English genealogists" in the opening sections of his *Genealogy of Morality* (*GM* P 7, I 2) led him to emphasise the *left-hand* side of each contrast, i. e. the documentary, contingency-revealing, and subversive aspects of genealogy – an emphasis which was then reinforced by Foucault's even more decidedly one-sided rendering of Nietzsche's genealogical method (cf. Foucault 1971). Yet if we take a developmental approach to Nietzsche's genealogical method and look for precursors of it in his earlier writings, we also find Nietzsche deploying the genealogical method in a way that powerfully attracts description in terms of the *right-hand* side of each contrast. A case in point is his early genealogy of truthfulness, which begins to take shape already in the early 1870s and makes up a substantial part of his 1873 essay *On Truth and Lie in an Extramoral Sense*.

Placing Nietzsche's *On Truth and Lie* against the background of complementary remarks from his notebooks, I reconstruct this genealogy in this paper and show that his early use of the genealogical method concerns imagined situations before it turns to documented history, that it aims to reveal practical necessity before contingency, and that it focuses on vindication before it turns to subversion or problematization. I then draw out two implications of this reconstruction: first, that we understand Nietzsche's later critique of truthfulness better if we place it against the background of his earlier vindicatory insight into the necessity of at least some form of truthfulness; and second, that an understanding of the genealogical method that aims to be adequate even to Nietzsche's career alone should eschew a one-sided focus on either the right- or the left-hand side characteristics of genealogy: we will profitably draw on all six aspects already in tracing the development of Nietzsche's own genealogical method, for his mature method has roots in its supposed contrary, the method of the "English" genealogists.

The paper falls into three parts. Section 2 motivates Nietzsche's genealogy of truthfulness, delineates its key steps, and highlights its resemblance to the method of the "English" genealogists. Section 3 assesses the genealogy's evaluative upshot and argues that it amounts in good part to a vindication of truthfulness that is revelatory of practical necessity. Section 4 then investigates the relation of Nietzsche's early genealogy to his later critique of truthfulness.

or the other depends notably on the normative expectations of their audience. I also take it that the relationship between the revelation of contingency/necessity on the one hand and subversion/vindication on the other is far from straightforward: certainly, Nietzsche did not think that revealing contingent origins was in itself subversive (*GS* 345; *eKGWB* 1884, 26[161]; 1885, 2[131]; 1885, 2[189]). I say something about this relation in Queloz (2020b) and Queloz/Cueni 2019. Here I focus on the connection between practical necessity and vindication.

2 Reconstructing Nietzsche's Early Genealogy of Truthfulness

The aim of Nietzsche's genealogy of values in the *Genealogy* is to determine the "value of those values" (*GM* P 6): to discover what these values *do* for creatures like us (*GM* P 3; *BGE* 4). To this end, he offers a genealogy outlining how and why we came to live by them, and how they relate to human psychology. This is an approach Nietzsche had adopted before, in his 1873 essay *On Truth and Lie in an Extramoral Sense*. This essay has received much attention from post-modernists for its discussion of the metaphorical nature of language and thought and the doubts it voices about our ability to achieve truth as correspondence with the world as it really is. But these Neo-Kantian doubts about our access to the world as it is in itself will not be my concern here, except to note that they help explain why Nietzsche is led to inquire into the origins of truthfulness. It is precisely the realisation that the notion of truth as correspondence with the world as it is in itself is beset with difficulties which lends force to the question of *why* we came to be so obsessively truthful. If we do not have access to the truth anyway, why did we ever come to bother about being truthful?

Nietzsche rejects the Aristotelian answer to this question, which is that truthfulness can be taken for granted as naturally given: "Man does not by nature exist in order to know" (*eKGWB* 1872, 19[178]). Although the human intellect may now be thought of as a means of discovering truths (*TL* 1), Nietzsche thinks that its primary function in a bellicose State of Nature must have been deception. This renders it all the more puzzling that truthfulness should have arisen at all. "Deception, flattering, lying, deluding, talking behind the back," Nietzsche writes, is "so much the rule and the law among humans that there is almost nothing which is less comprehensible than how an honest and pure drive to truth could have arisen among them" (*TL* 1). What, then, is "the value of this will" (*TL* 1) to truth, and why should it have arisen?

Nietzsche's early genealogy of truthfulness is an attempt to answer these two questions. Sketches towards such a genealogy appear as early as 1872, and it is developed in *TL* as well as in later notebook entries. Like the *GM*, it "involves a projected or imaginary generic psychology, not properly localized to times, places, or individuals" (Janaway 2007, 11). But it is unlike the *GM*, and more like his genealogy of justice in *HAH*, whose only historical reference is to a situation in which questions of justice precisely failed to arise (Queloz 2017), in that it entirely fails to locate the origins of truthfulness in time and space. It starts out from maximally generic human needs. The gist of this early genealogy is that truthfulness has practical origins in the exigencies of social

life.² In society, truthful utterances need to be distinguished from untruthful, misleading, and dangerous ones. Even if all so-called “truths” fall short of corresponding to the world as it really is – by the standards of metaphysical truth, they are “illusions” and “lies” – the practical demands on coexisting human beings force them to draw some contrast between descriptions of the apparent world that are misleading and dangerous and those that are less so. It is from this pressure that our concern with truth stems. It has its origin not in an epistemological contrast between *truth* and *falsity*, but in a deontological contrast between *truth* and *lie*.³

What renders this early genealogy particularly interesting is that it does not, in the first instance, try to subvert truthfulness by presenting it as the contingent amalgam of incongruent historical forces, but rather tries to make sense of its emergence in terms of its *practical value* and thereby goes some way towards vindicating it as an indispensable solution to a basic problem of life in society. Many other aspects of *TL* are rather less flattering, but these critical remarks sit alongside an under-appreciated vindictory aspect of the text, which is strik-

² As Nehamas notes, *TL* presents the origin of truthfulness as “profoundly practical” – it “locates the origin of the drive for truth and knowledge in our need for social organisation” (Nehamas 2012, 32).

³ Later, Nietzsche became more critical towards the claim that we do not have access to the world as it really is (Anderson 2005; Clark 1990). This is connected to a change in his conception of truth. His early, dismissive remarks about truth feed on a distinction between two kinds of truth: (1) *immanent truth*: truth as correspondence with the world as it appears to us under normal conditions, the world of “life, nature, and history” (*GS* 344); and (2) *metaphysical truth*: truth as correspondence with the True World, the world as it really is, undistorted by contingent human means of perception, individuation and categorisation. Nietzsche seems to imagine the True World along Schopenhauerian lines as a formless, shapeless, unindividuated chaos. This is already apparent in *BT* 12, but see also *TL* 1 and *eKGWB* 1887, 9[106]. The distinction gives Nietzsche room to maintain that so-called “truths” fall short of corresponding to the True World – by the standards of metaphysical truth, they are “illusions” and “lies.” In his mature work, Nietzsche abandoned the distinction between immanent truth and metaphysical truth (see *TI* “True World”). He came to see that the idea that the True World is systematically being *falsified* by our constitution-laden description of it incoherently presupposes a comparison with an unintelligible standard (Williams 2002, 17). Nietzsche’s recognition of the collapse of the distinction between the merely apparent world and the True World is succinctly recorded in his notebooks: “No shadow of a right remains to speak here of *appearance* [...] There is no ‘other,’ no ‘true,’ no essential being – for this would be the expression of a world without action and reaction – The antithesis of the apparent world and the true world is reduced to the antithesis ‘world’ and ‘nothing’” (*eKGWB* 1888, 14[184]). But apart from the way in which his earlier understanding of truth rendered particularly acute the question of why we value the truth, this shift in Nietzsche’s conception of truth is independent from his genealogy of truthfulness.

ingly thrown into relief when placed against the background of Nietzsche's more cogent notebook entries on the topic. Daniel Breazeale maintains that these notes are indispensable to understanding Nietzsche's view of the origin of the will to truth, and that later writings such as *GS* 344 or the *GM* provide no reason to think that Nietzsche ever abandoned these insights (1979, xxxiii n31). I shall vindicate the surmise that an early insight into the practical indispensability of truthfulness endures, although I shall also indicate discontinuities between Nietzsche's early (*TL*) and late (*GS* 344 and *GM*) thought on truthfulness. Of course, piecing together remarks from different sources and periods is methodologically hazardous, especially when it involves pieces from the *Nachlass*, which has a history of being used to distort Nietzsche's published opinions. Yet a reconstruction of Nietzsche's early thought on truthfulness checked against his later remarks seems worth doing nonetheless: on the one hand, drawing out Nietzsche's early insight into the indispensability of truthfulness contributes to explaining why Nietzsche never abandons truthfulness altogether, despite his critique of specific elaborations of it (Gemes 1992, 2006); on the other hand, it offers some insight into how Nietzsche's method developed, which in turn sheds light on a question that has recently attracted much interest in Anglophone philosophy, of how genealogy itself is to be understood.

One last prefatory remark before we turn to the reconstruction of Nietzsche's genealogy of truthfulness. Nietzsche uses a variety of related terms in speaking of truthfulness – “truthfulness,” “the will to truth,” “the love of truth,” “the pathos of truth,” “honesty,” “the drive to truth.” What unifies them is that they express *human concern with the truth*, expressed most basically in one's making an effort to see things as they are, undistorted by wishful thinking, and in one's recoiling from lying and deception.⁴ Disentangling the nuances between these terms in Nietzsche's usage would require a paper of its own, so I shall treat them as synonymous to begin with, and introduce finer distinctions only as required. Two distinctions are, however, worth drawing from the start. The first is the distinction between *truth-seeking* and *truth-telling*. Nietzsche sometimes uses these terms in connection with *epistemic* activities to designate dispositions to *seek* the truth (*eKGWB* 1872, 19[175–77]), and sometimes in connection with *communicative* activities to designate dispositions to *tell* the truth (*eKGWB* 1872, 19[207]).⁵ The second distinction is between truthfulness *as a value* and the value *of* truthfulness, which is a matter of the practical value *of valuing* the truth. To inquire into

⁴ See *eKGWB* 1882, 3[1]; *BGE* 9, 230; *GS* P 4.

⁵ See Richardson 2004, 28–45, for a naturalistic reading of Nietzschean drives as dispositions that were selected for.

the origin and value of truthfulness is thus to inquire into the origin and value, for creatures like us, of a certain set of dispositions.

With these clarifications in place, let us now turn to Nietzsche's account of how the dispositions of truthfulness arose. On the reconstruction I propose, his genealogy involves six steps:

(1) *Entry into Society and Language*: The first step is the entry into society and language. Nietzsche tells us that man, "from boredom and necessity," wishes to "exist socially and with the herd; therefore, he needs to make peace and strives accordingly to banish from his world at least the most flagrant *bellum omni contra omnes*" (TL 1). And it is in entering society that we open the door to truthfulness:

This peace treaty brings in its wake something which appears to be the first step toward acquiring that puzzling truth drive: that which from now on shall count as "truth" is established. 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. (TL 1)

(2) *Emergence of a Prototypical Form of Truth-seeking*: The second step is the emergence of the prototypical form of the "will not to let oneself be deceived" (GS 344), i. e., the disposition to seek out the truth and to get one's beliefs right. Nietzsche argues that the emergence of the will not to let oneself be deceived, which now forms the ground for the scientific pursuit of truth, originally emerged out of a much narrower concern with the *consequences* of deception. Truth-seeking originally arises for instrumental reasons, as a means of satisfying human beings' individual need to avoid, "not deception itself, but rather the unpleasant, adverse consequences of certain kinds of deception;" correspondingly, it is "in a similarly restricted sense that human beings now want nothing but truth: they desire the pleasant, life-preserving consequences of truth; they are indifferent to pure knowledge if it has no consequences" (TL 1). Prudence and mistrust are the individualistic motives that originally drive humans to truthfulness as truth-seeking.

As Nietzsche's notebooks make clear, this includes mistrust towards *oneself*. An inaccurate grasp of one's needs or fears can be as harmful as deception by others: "In dealing with what lies outside, danger and caution demand that one should be on one's guard against deception: as a psychological preconditioning for this, also in dealing with what lies within. Mistrust as the source of truthfulness" (eKGWB 1885, 40[43]). Considerations of utility thus drive the emergence of truthfulness insofar as they drive the cultivation of a prudential disposition to seek out and acquire truths.

(3) *Emergence of a Prototypical Form of Truth-telling*: The third step is the emergence of the prototype of what Nietzsche calls the “will not to deceive” (*GS* 344), i. e., the disposition honestly to tell what one takes to be the truth. Here the individualistic approach pursued so far runs into an obstacle: individuals could not reason their way to truthfulness as truth-telling, because truth-telling is not instrumentally related to the reasons for action individuals can be assumed to have anyway; from the purely instrumental point of view, truth-telling must appear unattractive, since its value largely consists in its value to others. Hence, the reasons one might give in answer to the question “But why not deceive?” must lie in “a completely different area” from those one might give when asked “But why not let oneself be deceived?” (*GS* 344).

Already in 1872, Nietzsche's solution to the problem of truth-telling's emergence is to switch to a *social* point of view. Though the individual has no reason to cultivate truth-telling, there is a *collective need* to do so within society as a whole. Hence, the second stage of truthfulness “makes its appearance as a social need” (*eKGWB* 1872, 19[175]); “necessity produces truthfulness as a society's means of existence” (*eKGWB* 1872, 19[177]). Truth-telling is necessary to society's existence because social cohesion and cooperation would break down in the face of a general fear of being deceived. In one of the earliest notes on the origin of truthfulness, Nietzsche writes: “One anticipates the unpleasant consequences of reciprocal lying. From this there arises the *duty of truth*” (*eKGWB* 1872, 19[97]). As he puts it in *TL*, there is “a duty to be truthful which society imposes in order to exist” (*TL* 1). What one has a duty to do, in particular, is to conform to linguistic convention in order to represent things as one takes them to be. If someone “misuses fixed conventions by means of arbitrary substitutions or even reversals of names,” and “does this in a selfish and moreover harmful manner, society will cease to trust him and will thereby exclude him” (*TL* 1). In a later note, he spells out the imperative which society addresses to the individual thus:

You shall be knowable, express your inner nature by clear and constant signs – otherwise you are dangerous: and if you are evil, your ability to dissimulate is the worst thing for the herd. We despise the secret and unrecognisable. – Consequently you must consider yourself knowable, you may not be concealed from yourself, you may not believe that you change. (*eKGWB* 1883, 24[19])

This last sentence opens up a vista on two further, and connected, thoughts. One is that “‘I do not want to deceive myself’ is included as a special case under the generalisation ‘I do not want to deceive’” (*GS* 344), because a self-deceived informant is as unhelpful as a lying one. The other is that “the demand for truthfulness presupposes the knowability and stability of the person” (*eKGWB* 1883, 24[19]). How so? Nietzsche's answer seems to be that truth-telling can only have practical

value insofar as finding out what individuals *really* believe or desire possesses *predictive value*, and this is only the case if these beliefs and desires display a certain degree of stability. Part of the reason why others want to know *what* I believe and desire is that they want to rely on that information in predicting how I will behave, and they can only do that insofar as my beliefs and desires exhibit some stability. This is an application of the point that rendering the individual fit for coexistence in society involves “*making*” the individual “to a certain degree necessary, uniform, like among like, regular, and accordingly predictable” (*GM II 2*). Moreover, the sincere expression of one’s beliefs and desires *must* exhibit a minimal amount of stability over time if it is to *count* as a sincere expression at all (this is the sense in which truthfulness indeed *presupposes* the stability of the person). The cultivation of truthfulness as truth-telling requires the cultivation, *to a certain degree* – Nietzsche is clear that full-blown essentialism is not called for – of a belief in the *relative* constancy of human beings: “it is the object of education to create in the herd member a *certain degree of belief* in the essence of man: it is *only at this point that this belief is generated*, so that “truthfulness” can then be demanded” (*eKGWB 1883, 24[19]*).

Since Nietzsche holds that it is with the help of the *Sittlichkeit der Sitte* that “man was made truly calculable,” this suggests that truth-telling already formed part of the *Sittlichkeit der Sitte*, and thus of the “true work of man on himself for the longest part of the duration of the human race, his entire *prehistoric work*” (*GM II 2*). Truthfulness, Nietzsche writes in his notebooks, is “the foundation of all contracts” (*eKGWB 1873, 29[8]*), including, as we are now in a position to see, the social contract. Failure to comply with the socially imposed obligation to be truthful leads to social exclusion. It is therefore by way of society’s interest in truthfulness as truth-telling that it also comes to be *in the individual’s interest* to be truthful in this sense: since life in society is preferable to life in a Hobbesian State of Nature, fear of exclusion gives the individual reason to forfeit opportunities to deceive for personal gain. Ultimately, however, it is social considerations of utility that drive the emergence of truthfulness insofar as they drive the cultivation of the disposition to preserve and transmit truths.⁶

It is thus functional demands, first at the level of the individual, and then at the level of society, that explain the emergence of truthfulness as truth-seeking and as truth-telling, respectively. In each case, the motives appealed to are prudential, which imposes *limits* on what forms of truthfulness this account is capable of explaining – limits as to *whom* one is to be truthful towards and *how*

⁶ Pettit 2018, ch. 2, offers a notably similar story about how truth-telling emerges out of the fear of ostracism.

much information one is to convey. It is thus not obvious that one should be truthful towards people outside one's community: "Within a herd, within any community, that is to say *inter pares*, the overestimation of truthfulness makes good sense," namely as a "mutual obligation between equals!" (eKGWB 1885, 40[43]). He spells this out later: "One says what one thinks, one is 'truthful,' only under certain conditions: namely, that one is understood (*inter pares*), and understood charitably (once again *inter pares*). One conceals oneself in presence of the unfamiliar" (eKGWB 1886, 7[6]). The social imperative to be truthful is thus restricted to encounters with one's equals, where equality implies not only sameness of strength, but also of group membership (as Don Corleone puts it in the *Godfather*, never let anyone outside the family know what you are thinking). Even then, there is still a question about how far one must disclose one's thoughts to satisfy the requirements of truthfulness. Clearly, Nietzsche did not think that truthfulness implied complete disclosure: "the demand that one should *denude oneself* with every word one says is a piece of naiveté" (eKGWB 1886, 7[6]).

Originally, then, it stands with truthfulness much as it stands with deceit: it has limited application, and what value it has is the practical value it derives from its consequences. Truthfulness is useful from the point of view of the individual as a means of controlling the world, of avoiding deception, of communicating effectively, and of avoiding exclusion from society; and it is useful from the point of view of society as a means of securing social cohesion, cooperation and stability. In each case, a calculus of utility explains, sustains and justifies truthfulness.

(4) *Forgetting about the Original Function of Truthfulness*: The fourth step in Nietzsche's genealogy is that truthfulness' original function is *forgotten*. Forgetfulness about functional origins is a tendency which Nietzsche also invokes in his account of the origins of justice at HAH I 92, and he seems to regard it as a general human tendency.⁷ People are truthful "in accordance with centuries-old habits" (TL 1) and forget *why* truthfulness as truth-seeking and truth-telling was originally cultivated.

(5) *Moralisation of Truthfulness*: The fifth step is the development of truthfulness from an instrumental into an *independently motivating* reason for action. Our attitude towards truth is not conditional on its possessing instrumental value for us. We are sometimes truthful, not because doing so has beneficial consequences, but *just because that is the kind of action it is*. In these cases we are, as Nietzsche puts it, *unconditionally* truthful. How did such an unconditional drive

⁷ See Queloz 2017.

to truth emerge? This is a question which Nietzsche poignantly raises in Book Five of the *GS*:

Where might science get the unconditional belief or conviction on which it rests, that truth is more important than anything else, than every other conviction? Precisely this conviction could never have originated if truth *and* untruth had constantly made it clear that they were both useful, as they are. So, the faith in science, which after all undeniably exists, cannot owe its origin to such a calculus of utility; rather, it must have originated *in spite of* the fact that the disutility and dangerousness of the “will to truth” or “truth at any price” is proved to it constantly. (*GS* 344)

When Nietzsche stresses the disutility of unconditional truthfulness, one might think he overdoes it a little. After all, truthfulness that is unconstrained by considerations of utility (and thus unconditioned in the sense of not being directly subservient to further aims) might nevertheless have its uses. It is, for instance, one argument for pure as opposed to applied research that the scientific enterprise proves more useful in the long run if it is *not* guided by potentials for useful application. Might such long-term calculations of utility not account for the emergence of unconditional truthfulness? Nietzsche’s answer, it seems to me, must be that it might indeed account for truthfulness that is unconditional in this weak sense, but that the attitude which takes truth to be “more important than anything else” and strives for truth “at any price” (*GS* 344) is unconditional in a further and stronger sense: it considers truth to be not merely an end in itself, but an end to be realised *under any conditions*. We can thus distinguish three forms of truthfulness:

- (i) *Conditional truthfulness*: truth is valued only instrumentally, as a means to an end.
- (ii) *Unconditional truthfulness as a pro tanto reason*: truth is valued in itself as providing a *pro tanto* reason for action.
- (iii) *Unconditional truthfulness as an overriding reason*: truth is valued in itself as providing an *overriding* reason for action – a reason which, even all things considered, trumps every other reason.

Unconditional truthfulness as an overriding reason is what Nietzsche gives voice to when he writes: “*Nothing is more* necessary than truth; and in relation to it, everything else has only secondary value” (*GS* 344). Such an attitude, he thinks, cannot be vindicated by considerations of utility, because “there is no pre-established harmony between the furthering of truth and the well-being of humanity” (*HAH* I 517). Nietzsche quotes a line of Byron’s on this point: “The tree of knowledge is not that of life” (*HAH* I 109). There comes a point where the will to truth comes into *conflict* with life, namely when it can be expressed only at the cost of

the expression and realisation of our other values, our other drives and instincts.⁸ This holds for both the truth-seeking and the truth-telling aspect of truthfulness. Truth-seeking involves what Williams calls an “investigative investment” (Williams 2002, 87) – we sacrifice not only time and energy for it, but also other things that we value, if only because we forfeit the opportunity to pursue those things instead. And because truth-seeking comes at a cost, there is always a question of *how far* the pursuit of the truth about a given matter should be pushed; of when the price of further inquiry and greater certainty is *too high*. Sacrificing everything else to the quest for truth results in the self-abnegating figure of the scholar that Nietzsche criticises in the *GM*'s Third Treatise. Similarly, sacrificing everything else to the demand for truth-telling issues in the equally unattractive figure who would tell the truth even to the murderer at the door (an unconditional form of truth-telling notoriously advocated by Kant, though the example is Augustine's).⁹ How, then, could such unconditional and overriding forms of truthfulness have arisen?

In *TL*, Nietzsche suggests that it is because the prudential motives to truthfulness have moved out of sight with the forgetting of truthfulness' original function that the socially imposed duty to be truthful can generate what Nietzsche calls *moral* motives:

[...] precisely because of this unconsciousness, precisely because of this forgetting, one arrives at the feeling of truth. From the feeling that one is obliged to designate one thing as “red,” another as “cold,” and a third as “mute,” there arises a moral impulse in regard to truth; from its opposite, the liar whom no one trusts and all exclude, human beings demonstrate to themselves just how honourable [...] truth is. (*TL* 1)

⁸ Here, with the conflict between truthfulness and life, we catch a glimpse of where Nietzsche's genealogy of truth connects to his doctrine of the *will to power* – the cluster of ideas which notably involves the claims that “life itself is will to power” (*BGE* 13), and that “the great and small struggle revolves everywhere around preponderance, around growth and expansion, around power and in accordance with the will to power, which is simply the will of life” (*GS* 349). An adherent of this doctrine might see the will to power at work in Nietzsche's account of the emergence of truthfulness, which is presented as standing originally in the service of life or power; similarly, the ensuing account of how truthfulness comes to be pursued at the expense of life might be seen as explaining – and perhaps also as condemning – the respects in which the will to truth came to turn against the will to power out of which it first grew. The connection between the will to truth and the will to power is spelled out in different ways by, e. g., Jenkins 2012, 2016; Reginster 2006, 2013, 2018; Richardson 1996, 2004.

⁹ For a Nietzschean critique of Kant's “fetishization of assertion” and of his commitment to the idea that everyone equally deserves the truth, see Williams 2002, 100–22.

The habit of truthfulness, heretofore understood only as a *prudentially motivated* disposition, is given a moral gloss and becomes a virtue: “our habits become virtues,” Nietzsche suggests, because we “include inviolability within the concept” of the behavioural patterns we are in the habit of engaging in – “because we consider their inviolability to be more important than our own particular welfare” (*eKGWB* 1872, 19[185]). This is the “recoining of habit as virtue, of *Sitte* as *Sittlichkeit*,” which Nietzsche dubs a “fine old – age-old – piece of counterfeiting” (*eKGWB* 1882, 3[1]). The Hegelian phrase *Sittlichkeit der Sitte*, an enduring element in Nietzsche’s later thought, points to the normative force of habits and the weight of precedent, which comes into play whenever the fact that particular patterns of behaviour have been unbroken in the past itself becomes a reason not to break them: “*Sitte* represents the experiences of men of earlier times as to what they supposed useful and harmful – but *the feeling for the Sitte* (*Sittlichkeit*) applies, not to these experiences as such, but to the age, the sanctity, the indiscussability of the *Sitte*. And so this feeling hinders the acquisition of new experiences and the correction of *Sitten*” (*D* 19).¹⁰ Useful dispositions arise because they are useful; but they are held in place by ties which are less conditional than those of prudence: those of moral feeling. It is when habits become anchored in feelings of inviolability that with truthfulness, we “stand on moral ground” (*GS* 344).

(6) *Metaphorical Extension of Truthfulness’ Domain of Application*: The sixth and final step in Nietzsche’s genealogy is the *metaphorical extension* of truthfulness’ domain of application. It is the coupling of the moral notion of truthfulness with what Nietzsche considers to be a “fundamental human drive” – the “drive to form metaphors” (*TL* 2). It is this synthesis which produces the unconditional and disinterested drive to truth or knowledge:

Under certain circumstances, necessity produces truthfulness as a society’s means of existence. Through frequent practice, this drive is reinforced and is now, by means of metastasis, unjustifiably transferred. It becomes an inclination in itself. A quality [i. e. truthfulness] develops out of a practice [developed] for specific cases. – Now we have the drive to knowledge. This generalisation takes place by means of the intervening *concept*. This quality begins with a *false* judgment: – to be true [i. e. truthful] means to be true [i. e. truthful] *always*. From this arises the inclination to live without lies: elimination of all illusions. [...] Two qualities, each required for a different purpose, have produced the inclination to truth – *truthfulness* – and *metaphor*. Thus the intellectual drive is produced by an aesthetically generalised moral phenomenon. (*eKGWB* 1872, 19[177 f.])

¹⁰ These passages illustrate how misleading the translation of *Sitte* and *Sittlichkeit* as “custom” and “morality” can be.

Having been brought into existence by individual fear of deception, augmented by a social imperative not to deceive others, and transformed by forgetfulness and the force of habit into a moral notion, the concept of truthfulness acquires a significance that is independent of individual or social exigencies. This in turn leads to its being applied to circumstances beyond those that drove its emergence. Having made its “appearance as a social need,” “by means of a metastasis, it is then applied to everything, where it is not required” (*eKGWB* 1872, 19[175]). Nietzsche's talk of “metastasis” and “metaphor” indicates that a *transfer* has taken place from the sphere of application in which truthfulness originally had its home and was instrumentally justified to spheres of application where it is no longer instrumentally justified (hence the transfer's description as “unjustifiable”). It is an *aesthetic* generalisation because “between two absolutely different spheres [...] there is no causality, no correctness, no expression, but at most an *aesthetic* way of relating” (*TL* 1) – that is, the generalisation is not *rationaly intelligible*, but is driven only by associative or analogical thinking.

Among the contingent extensions of truthfulness, Nietzsche argues, was the transfer of truthfulness from the *social* to the *natural* sphere. It came to be expected not only that other people would be truthful towards oneself, but that nature would follow suit: one would be granted access not only to the real opinions of other people, but also to the world as it really is – when “man sets up truthfulness as a law for himself, he also believes in the truthfulness of nature towards him” (*eKGWB* 1872, 19[207]). He “transfers his inclination to truth to the world and believes that the world must in turn be true towards him” (*eKGWB* 1872, 19[177]).

With this reconstruction of Nietzsche's genealogy of truthfulness in place, we are in a position to draw out the first main observation about Nietzsche's methodology that I want to make in this paper: that it strikingly resembles just the kind of “English”-style genealogy that Nietzsche distances himself from in the *GM*. “English” genealogies, he remarks there, start out from a hypothesis about the original function of a certain way of valuing, and then suggest that while the valuation solidifies through habit, its function is forgotten, so that it is unjustifiably extended beyond the boundaries of its original functionality (*GM* I 2). Following just this pattern, Nietzsche's genealogy of truthfulness starts out from a hypothesis about the original *function* of the value of truthfulness, and then suggests that while this valuation solidifies through *habit*, its function is *forgotten*, so that it is *erroneously* extended beyond its original domain of application. As both the value and the scope of truthfulness are inflated to the point where it is demanded always and “at any price” (*eKGWB* 1872, 19[97]; *GS* P 344), it becomes a “hypertrophic virtue” (*eKGWB* 1873, 30[2]). The puzzling truth drive is thus “an extension or a solidification of a way of thinking and acting which was necessary

in certain cases” (*eKGWB* 1872, 19[178]). This licenses the conclusion that at least one of Nietzsche’s *own* early genealogies was in the “English” style, explaining the emergence of practices in terms of their original functionality and invoking forgetfulness as the mechanism by which they could subsequently outgrow a merely functional understanding and develop a life of their own. What is less clear is how Nietzsche’s genealogy of truthfulness is supposed to bear on the *value* of truthfulness, so it is to this question that I now turn.

3 The Evaluative Upshot of Nietzsche’s Genealogy

Contrary to his reputation as an arch debunker, Nietzsche’s genealogy displays what at first seems puzzlingly unrelated to human needs as being in fact so related. The generic situation and agents he starts out from are, I contend, best understood as a kind of *idealisation* or *model* that serves to uncover the basic *point* of truthfulness by deriving the need for a prototype of it from more basic needs.¹¹ This gives us a critical grip on truthfulness. It allows us to assess whether we approve of its point in the light of our other commitments, while also driving home the thought that *some* form of truthfulness is required given a commitment to social existence. The model helps us determine which demands are necessary to truthfulness in any form, and which might be reined in without it losing its point – notably with respect to *how much* inquiry and disclosure it requires and *towards whom*.

In relating the virtue of truthfulness to needs, Nietzsche’s treatment of truthfulness is representative of his treatment of virtues more widely: “All virtues arise from pressing needs” (*eKGWB* 1872, 19[175]). Fifteen years later, he still conceives of virtues in functional terms as contributing to the effective operation of society: “I attempt an *economic* justification of virtue. – The task is to make man as useful as possible and to approximate him, as far as possible, to an infallible machine: to this end he must be equipped with the virtues of the machine;” and precisely because the states in which he is useful are not those he would be drawn to out of self-interest, “he must learn to experience the states in which he works in a mechanically useful way as the supremely valuable states” – they must be “enveloped in a higher charm” (*eKGWB* 1887, 10[11]).¹²

¹¹ For further discussion of the interpretation of certain genealogies as a kind of idealisation or model, see Kusch 2009, 2011, and 2013, Kusch/McKenna 2018, and Queloz 2017, 2018, 2019a, 2020a, b, c.

¹² See *TI* “Skirmishes” 29.

What is particularly interesting about this passage is that it forms a *functional* derivation of *non-functional* ways of thinking. It shows how function leads to the veiling of function. Nietzsche explains virtues as emerging out of needs in virtue of the beneficial effects they have when they become habits, and as being best sustained when understood in moral rather than instrumental terms. He does not take this to subvert their status as virtues, but to provide an “economic justification” of virtues: an evaluation in terms of their uses and disadvantages for life which finds them beneficial overall and uses this fact to support an explanation of their emergence.¹³

To this extent, Nietzsche's genealogy constitutes what Bernard Williams calls a *vindictory explanation* of truthfulness (Williams 2002, 36). The genealogy is vindictory in three respects. First, it offers a *negative* vindication of truthfulness: it does not excavate anything to suggest our endorsement of truthfulness to be radically self-deceived, thus clearing truthfulness of suspicion and marking it out as stable under reflection. Second, it offers a *naturalistic* vindication of truthfulness: it enables us to make sense of truthfulness in terms of the rest of nature, in particular in terms of basic needs of cooperation and communication which humans can be assumed to have anyway. Third, the genealogy offers a *pragmatic* vindication of truthfulness by revealing the point of truthfulness, which it is shown to possess relative to needs so basic that they obtain in anything recognizable as a human society. This does not, by itself, provide a reason for the individual to be truthful on a given occasion. But it provides a *collective reason* to cultivate truthfulness in society. It shows that truthfulness is in the common interest.

There is a cut-off point, however; although the genealogy shows to what extent truthfulness responds to practical exigencies, it also indicates in what respects it involves contingent, unjustified aspects. To the extent that the functional requirements to which truthfulness supposedly answers are general enough to suggest that they obtain even today, Nietzsche's genealogy presents truthfulness as something we cannot do without. Truthfulness is shown to be firmly rooted in basic human needs, and is thus “economically” justified as life-serving. To the extent, however, that truthfulness exhibits elements which are not supported by the functional part of the narrative, but only accounted for in principle by the part of the genealogy which acts as a placeholder for complex, contingent historical developments, it is merely allowed for, but not vindicated. With such hypertrophic truthfulness, the risk is that it will be pursued at the cost of other things; indeed, on the assumption that there is no pre-established harmony between the furthering of truth and the furthering of well-being, they are bound to come into

13 I say more about Nietzsche's notion of an “economic justification” in Queloz 2019b.

conflict. Then hypertrophic truthfulness will be life-denying, as Nietzsche suggests when he ascribes to it the motto “*fiat veritas pereat vita*” (*UM* II 4), let truth prevail though life perish.¹⁴

It is worth noting that there is an enduring plausibility to much of Nietzsche’s genealogical story about truthfulness. Writing over a hundred years later, Bernard Williams told much the same story in his book-length genealogy of truthfulness (Williams 2002). Both Nietzsche (*eKGWB* 1885, 40[43]) and Williams (2002, 125) take it to follow from their genealogies that truthfulness must include resistance against deception from “within.” They also both conclude that truthfulness presupposes a belief in what Nietzsche calls the “stability of the person” (*eKGWB* 1883, 24[19]) and Williams the process of “steadying the mind” (Williams 2002, 191): we must cultivate moderately steady outlooks or beliefs, Williams argues, because “there are others who need to rely on our dispositions, and we want them to be able to rely on our dispositions because we, up to a point, want to rely on theirs” (Williams 2002, 192). They also both deem a “blind rage for collecting, a restless raking together of everything that has ever existed” (*UM* II 3) and “terminally mindless fact-acquisition” (Williams 2002, 256) to be a regrettable outgrowth of truth-seeking; Nietzsche warns against the overeager pursuit of scientific progress, maintaining that this would destroy science, “just as a hen perishes if it is compelled to lay eggs too quickly” (*UM* II 7), while Williams makes comparable points about pushing inquisitiveness and suspicion too far (2002, 2f., 15, 212, 301 n44). On the side of truth-telling, they both deny (*contra* Kant) that everyone equally deserves being told the truth (*eKGWB* 1885, 40[43]; Williams 2002, 122), or (*contra* Rousseau) that complete disclosure is required (*eKGWB* 1886, 7[6]; Williams 2002, 85, 109, ch. 8).

Nietzsche’s early genealogy thus identifies the *functionally vindicated prototype* of truthfulness, which includes independently motivating yet not overriding norms of truth-seeking and truth-telling, but marks out all developments beyond that as *prima facie* contingent insofar as they lack a practical rationale. Some of these problematic historical manifestations of the prototype of truthfulness are addressed in later works, particularly in the *GM*, so it is to this later critique of truthfulness that we now turn.

¹⁴ See *eKGWB* 1873, 29[8] and *GM* III 7.

4 Nietzsche's Later Critique of Truthfulness

In the *GM*, Nietzsche writes that if a moralised distinction between truthfulness and lying is available in a socially unequal society, it will be harnessed by the upper caste to articulate their superiority. They will describe themselves as “the truthful ones,” as “distinct from the *lying* common man” (*GM* I 5).¹⁵ Nietzsche also alludes to the historical processes by which truthfulness became tied up with the ascetic ideal, and ultimately came to undermine it from within. But the central feature of the *GM* for our concerns is its critique of hypertrophic truthfulness. Nietzsche takes scholars to task for exercising a form of self-restraint and self-effacement in their striving for objectivity which rivals the priests' asceticism and life-denial.¹⁶

This can be read as a condemnation of a specific form of truthfulness rather than a wholesale rejection of it. Drawing on our earlier distinction between (i) conditional truthfulness, (ii) unconditional truthfulness as a *pro tanto* reason, and (iii) unconditional truthfulness as an *overriding* reason, we can reconcile Nietzsche's vindication with his critique. His early genealogy offers practical reasons why the disposition to truthfulness should be cultivated within a society in *some* form and circumstances, namely those where it has a point, which vindicates (i). He also indicates practical reasons for regarding truthfulness as more than a means to an end, thereby vindicating (ii). What his genealogy does not yield are reasons for regarding truthfulness as an unconditional and overriding reason for action that licenses the attitude of *fiat veritas, pereat vita*, and it is this attitude, i. e. (iii), which Nietzsche warns against as potentially life-endangering in *UM* and *GM*.

There are of course also notable discontinuities between Nietzsche's early and late accounts of truthfulness: *TL*, on the one hand, and *GS* 344 and *GM*, on the other hand, propose different models to explain how the commitment to truthfulness became unconditional. In *TL*, the emergence of truthfulness as an overriding reason is explained by appeal to the metaphorical drive and our forgetfulness about the nature of truth. This explanation in terms of natural propensities to metaphorical transfer and forgetfulness about function is abandoned in the *GM*, where Nietzsche derides this explanatory appeal to forgetfulness as involving a “psychological absurdity” (*GM* I 2f.). Nonetheless, the *GM* still seeks to account for the emergence of a hypertrophic form of truthfulness. It simply

¹⁵ Shapin 1994 lends historical support to this idea.

¹⁶ See Gemes 1992, 2006. Daston/Galison 1992, 83, 121 f., describe the asceticism involved in nineteenth-century science.

replaces the explanation in terms of natural propensities with an explanation in terms of historical contingencies: the *ascetic ideal* as expressed in Christianity is made to take the place of forgetfulness in the earlier explanation, and the respects in which truthfulness is infused with asceticism become the new basis for Nietzsche's reservations about truthfulness.

Yet none of these discontinuities threaten Nietzsche's earlier insights into the positive aspects of truthfulness: the respects in which it answers to genuine needs. Hence, while there are several aspects of his earlier genealogy which the Nietzsche of *GM* would have been critical of – its disregard for history, its reliance on an implausible mechanism of forgetfulness, and its neglect of the role of the ascetic ideal – there is little reason to think he abandoned his earlier insights into the need of any society to cultivate at least *some* form of truthfulness if it is not to dissolve into chaos.

If we take this insight into the need for truthfulness to survive into the period in which Nietzsche writes *GM*, it helps explain why truthfulness emerges unscathed from the otherwise so thorough reevaluation of values that Nietzsche describes as ushering in Slave morality. The “fear-inspiring consistency” with which the “aristocratic value equation (good = noble = powerful = beautiful = happy = beloved of God)” was inverted to suggest that the good and blessed in God are the “miserable,” “poor,” “powerless,” “suffering,” and “ugly” (*GM* I 7) did not go so far as to invert the rank order between truthfulness and lying. Why is truthfulness exempt from this reevaluation?

Nietzsche does not account for this exemption, but our reconstruction of his earlier thoughts on the matter suggests that truthfulness is held in place by *practical exigencies*. Which particular form truthfulness takes is a matter of contingent historical development, but Nietzsche's genealogy has shown that *some* form of truthfulness is necessary to the satisfaction of both individual needs (such as the need to avoid the unpleasant consequences of being deceived) and social needs (such as the need to avoid breakdowns of social cohesion and cooperation). What he has delineated as the prototype of truthfulness is part of the minimal ethical consciousness that renders social coexistence possible in the first place.

This also helps explain why some form of truthfulness survives a second reevaluation of values, namely that envisaged by Nietzsche himself. Nietzsche praises, and remains committed to, a stringent sort of truthfulness – though not as stringent and certainly not as unquestioning as the attitude of *fiat veritas, pereat vita*.¹⁷ Nietzsche's early thought tells us little about why he later valued truthfulness to *the extent* that he did – truthfulness, he later notes, requires “greatness of soul”

17 See Harper 2015; Jenkins 2016; Owen 2003, 2007; Reginster 2013.

(AC 50), and how much truth a spirit can endure is “the real measure of value” (EH P 3). But it does tell us something about why the later Nietzsche continued to hold on to truthfulness in *some* form – why he did not give up on truthfulness. David Owen has offered one explanation along these lines, suggesting that Nietzsche was implicitly concerned with reflective stability: “unless truthfulness is an intrinsic value for Nietzsche, his project of re-evaluation will not possess the right kind of reflective stability” (Owen 2007, 70). It may be true that Nietzsche would be pecking into dust the tree that supports his genealogical inquiry if he were to renounce truthfulness altogether. Yet in the light of the above, we can add a second rationale for Nietzsche's enduring commitment to some form of truthfulness: that he was well aware that the need for truthfulness forms a corollary of the demand for *social* as much as for reflective stability. His earlier derivation of non-hypertrophic truthfulness from basic individual and social needs had made it clear to him that truthfulness was something we could not do without.

5 Conclusion

This reconstruction of an early precursor of Nietzsche's genealogical method has revealed not only a rather different Nietzsche, who has more in common with his supposed “English” counterparts than he lets on, but also a rather different employment of his genealogical method, which shows it to be more of a multi-purpose tool than might perhaps be expected: Nietzsche himself also uses genealogical stories starting from imaginary situations to vindicate and highlight the practical necessity of some of our arrangements. One lesson this holds is that an understanding of the genealogical method that aims to be adequate even to Nietzsche's *oeuvre* alone should eschew a one-sided focus *either* on the documentary, contingency-revealing, and subversive aspects *or* on the imaginary, necessity-revealing, and vindicatory aspects of genealogy. By thinking of genealogy in terms encompassing all of these characteristics, we bring into view comparably neglected genealogies such as Nietzsche's early genealogy of truthfulness, and we become better able to see its continuities and discontinuities with his later genealogy.

Another lesson, reflected in Nietzsche's own development of the genealogical method in the course of his career, is that reflection on generic needs can take us only so far: it can take us from general facts about the human situation to anthropologically necessary responses to them. But if genealogy is to render a phenomenon intelligible in its *actual* form, the identification of a functional prototype through the representation of general requirements will likely have to

lead into an account of its further development in response to historically local needs. Nietzsche acknowledges that reflection alone cannot account for the hypertrophic form of truthfulness, for example. If only schematically, a developmental model of truthfulness needs to heed historically situated developments such as the slave revolt (*GM I*) and the rise of the ascetic ideal (*GM III*).¹⁸

It is in this context that we should see Nietzsche's emphasis on the need to heed the grey documents of history at the beginning of the *Genealogy* (P 7) and his subsequent insouciance towards historical detail. Nietzsche knew well how far he was from writing history in the sense of Wolf, Niebuhr, Ranke, or Mommsen, whose methodology he approved of (Brobjer 2007). His genealogy combines the blue and the grey, the imagined and the documented.

It is perhaps more easily accepted that a genealogy combines the vindicatory and the subversive than that it combines the imagined and the documented. But drawing on imagined situations need not make a genealogy *purely* hypothetical in the way that the justificatory state-of-nature stories about the state in political philosophy perhaps are. Instead of classifying genealogies according to whether they involve imagined or documented elements, we can distinguish genealogies from each other and from other historical approaches in terms of the *questions* to which they form the answer. In Nietzsche's case, the question is: what is the value of a given way of valuing? It is unsurprising that a genealogy seeking to answer this question will be tailored to demands of salience, perspicuity, and persuasiveness that are quite different from the demands on answers to more Hobbesian or Foucauldian questions. The demands raised by the Nietzschean question might be met by offering a model constructed out of a range of resources – not only ascertained facts, but also conjectural hypotheses about how the genealogised item relates to human needs and psychology, and these relations are perhaps best represented using simplifications and distortions. Nietzsche's genealogy of truthfulness is imaginary in this sense: it abstracts from the particulars of given cultural situations in order to highlight generic dynamics explaining why something might have emerged and earned its keep. A genealogy along these lines can still be truthful to what happened even if it resorts to idealised situations, stripped of the specifics of any actual socio-historical situation, in order better to serve its purpose. In combining the documented and the imagined in this way, genealogy

18 That same lesson is also drawn by Williams, who acknowledges that the generic needs favouring the emergence of the concept of truthfulness cannot account for the extension of truthfulness to the distant past (Williams 2002, ch. 7), or for its fashioning into the ideal of personal authenticity (ch. 8). Hence Williams's conclusion that "philosophy, in order to do its business, must move into history" (Williams 2002, 173). See Queloz 2020a for further discussion of this argument.

is no different from art, whose creative liberties can render it more truthful, or science, whose idealising and distorting assumptions can have the same effect. Like art and science, genealogy reminds us that there is such a thing as truthful imagination.¹⁹

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