A CRITICAL COMMENTARY ON NIETZSCHE'S "ON THE ORIGIN OF LANGUAGE"

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While the relationship between language and philosophy was an issue that concerned Nietzsche throughout his writings, the degree with which this concern was expressed varied. While there is an explicit articulation of this relationship in the early writings, the later ones only refer to it infrequently. Among the texts on language from the early writings is *On the Origin of Language* (1869-1870),[1] which antedates the better-known *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense* (1873). There are evident intellectual differences between these two works on language but what is striking is the obvious fascination with Kant in the first and the diminution of this influence in the later text.

In this paper, I shall examine the aforementioned *On the Origin of Language*, a text that, despite belonging to one of the most productive periods of Nietzsche's life, has raised little interest in the discussions concerning Nietzsche's theory of language. One notable exception is the work of Claudia Crawford who, in *The Beginnings of Nietzsche's Theory of Language*,[2] painstakingly traces the background influences of Hartmann, Schopenhauer, Kant, and Gerber on Nietzsche's views on language. Crawford offers a contextual reading that demonstrates both what Nietzsche appropriated from his predecessors and what he then elaborated upon. Her work traces the genealogical 'nodes' that enable us to understand the complexity of Nietzsche's views on language. More recently, Christian J. Emden has described in detail the extent of the scientific and philological texts of the 18th and 19th century upon Nietzsche's writings arguing that with an understanding of these background influences, Nietzsche is not the radical thinker that many have pictured him to be.[3]

In *On the Origin of Language*, Nietzsche offers an analysis of language that is framed within the nature-culture opposition. On reading this

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paper, it is fairly obvious that the terms in this opposition are not simply opposed to each other but rather hierarchically positioned, with the natural valorised in relation to the cultural that, as a result, finds itself in a secondary and inferior place. In this paper, I shall argue that one of the problems with this text is that Nietzsche replicates at a meta-level the very criticism of culture that he articulates: while the text valorises the natural origin and purpose of language in opposition to the cultural misuse of language, such a criticism involves a performative contradiction insofar as Nietzsche uses the same "cultural" language he is critical of. The valorisation of nature can only be conducted from the perspective of culture, a perspective that Nietzsche finds inadequate in the first place.

Riddles and Gifts

An interesting contrast can be made between the opening lines of *On the Origin of Language* and *On Truth and Lies in an Extra-moral Sense*. The latter opens with the convention typically used in fairy-tales, namely "Once upon a time," an opening appropriate to the content of a paper that challenges the certainty of human knowledge. Nietzsche's argument is that the certainty of knowledge is grounded in the view of language as a transparent medium that faithfully represents the world and which therefore allows for the possibility of certain knowledge. By dispelling this view of language Nietzsche concludes that certainty is, in fact, an illusion, a "fairy-tale" needed by the human species to control their environment. By way of contrast, the opening lines of Nietzsche's *On the Origin of Language* frame the question of the origin of language as a riddle: "[a]n old riddle among the Indians, the Greeks, down to the most recent times was: to say with certainty how the origin of language must *not* be conceived." (OL 209; KGW II/2, 185). But why is the question of the origin of language asked in the form of a riddle?

The opening lines indicate that discovering the origin of language is not going to be a simple task. The origin is here being marked out as a singular moment, an original and unrepeatable beginning that challenges any attempt to identify when and where it began. It is perhaps because such an origin lies outside or beyond human memory that the question of the origin of language can only be framed as a riddle: discovering this origin will require a fair amount of ingenuity in much the same way as

a riddle is designed to test the ingenuity of the speaker. And the riddle of the origin of language is not just one riddle from among the many riddles found in any culture, but is universal in that it is asked by different peoples (the Indians, the Greeks, to 'the most recent times'). This "old" riddle, it seems, is as old as the origins of language, an association that should not be surprising since it is only with the possession of a language that riddles can be articulated: the origins of language coincides with the birth of riddles.

The enduring interest in explaining the origin of language is also evidenced in the Genesis narrative of the Old Testament: "The Old Testament is the only religious document with a myth about the origin of language, or something of the sort." (OL 210; KGW II/2, 186) The Old Testament displaces the search for the origin from the form of the riddle to that of mythical narrative, a narrative that is justified on the grounds that the origin of language is so distant and enigmatic that any attempt to deduce its origin using the tools of logic is futile. And there is a further twist in this perennial search for the origin of language: given that human existence is inconceivable without language the question concerning its origin has also been posed at a secular level: "The nations are silent about the origin of language: they cannot imagine the world, the gods, and man without language." (OL 210; KGW II/2, 187) But the secular search for the origin of language ends in failure: silence is the only option and it is revealing that while the human in human existence is inescapably entwined with language, no one seems to be able to explain where it comes from.

The inability to explain the origin of language has led to the conclusion that the fact of language can only be accounted for in terms of divine intervention: it is a "direct gift" from God. The magnitude of the gift of language is such that only a supernatural origin can justify its existence for, in the economy of gift-exchange, the gift of language is one which humanity can never hope to return. Despite being a God-given gift, the collaboration of humanity is required to ensure its referential functioning: "God and man give things their name, which express each thing's relation to man"[4] (OL 210; KGW II/2, 186-187). The problem with this argument is that it presupposes what it wants to argue for: if God and humanity already share the same language, i.e., the possibility of mutual (linguistic) communication, then how is this supposed to

explain the origin of language? The Biblical narrative on the origin of language is similar to the naturalist view presented and dismissed in Plato's *Cratylus*. Language is here understood in terms of naming,[5] but as a theory of language it is inadequate in that it presupposes that the world is already meaningfully categorised and waiting to be named. Given that the Biblical account of language is untenable, Nietzsche rejects the idea that language can have a divine origin.

While the attempt to explain the "riddle" of language by locating a divine origin fails, conventionalism provides another possible explanation by identifying the origin of language as the product of human agreement. Nietzsche mentions two theorists of language who sustained the conventionalist thesis: Maupertuis and Lord Monboddo. Maupertuis (1698-1759) claimed that "gestures and shrieks" lie at the origin of language but these are insufficient for explaining language as a medium for communication since they all remain at a very broad subjective level. As Nietzsche rightly points out, "Not everyone is skilled at correct intonation and precise hearing." (OL 210; KGW II/2, 186)

Lord Monboddo (1714-1799) is described as a "writer of importance" who argued against the idea that there was an original and founding language, a "primeval language," from which all others have been derived. Humanity has frequently invented languages so that the search for the origin of language, rather than designating a singular moment, turns out to be a repetitive event. Ultimately, however, while this explains away the singular event that marks the origin of language, it seems that Lord Monboddo wasn't satisfied with his own theory, writing about it "for twenty one years." The archetype conventionalist finds that conventionalism is unable to pinpoint the origin of language within the human realm: "he [Monboddo] still must resort to superhuman help: the Egyptian demon-kings."(OL 211; KGW II/2, 187) Given the inadequacy of divine and secular explanations for the origin of language, what other possibility remains?

Instinct

For Nietzsche, the only way of explaining the origin of language is by shifting emphasis away from a search that identifies language in terms of its origins diachronically to one that locates it as a feature operating at a

synchronic level, i.e., instinctively. Language is the instinctive and natural feature of humanity that is described in terms of motherhood and childbirth. Nietzsche applauds Herder who uses the figure of the mother to dramatise the necessity of language for humanity: as babies must leave the womb of their mother at the right time, children must learn their language at the right time. Both childbirth and language acquisition are instinctive and these two spheres of human existence belong to the same order of being: "man was born for language." (OL 211; KGW II/2, 187) Human life is the cause of which language is the effect.

Given the thesis on the instinctive origin of language, a paradox presents itself: how does one, positioned within consciousness, prove that which is beyond or outside the realm of consciousness? Nietzsche adopts a negative approach to demonstrate the impossibility of attributing the origin of language to the domain of consciousness, whether this is an attribute of the individual or the group. In the case of the individual, language is too 'complex' a phenomenon — and by this Nietzsche means that language is too sophisticated — to be the product of a solitary individual. In the case of the group, language is too 'unified' a phenomenon and by this Nietzsche wants to show that the differences of opinion between individuals that constitute the group would prevent the creation of a language. Since both of these possibilities — the individual and the social — take consciousness as their starting point, and since they are unacceptable as explanatory models for the origin of language, the "only alternative," Nietzsche concludes, is "instinct, like among the bees — the anthill, etc." (OL 209; KGW II/2, 186)

Animals and insects constantly re-appear throughout the Nietzschean corpus,[6] but in *On the Origin of Language* they are used to show that the best way to understand what is truly human is by analogy with the non-human, animal world. However, this is not 'only' an analogy, but more of a destabilization of the customary contrast and privileging of the human to the animal. Despite the obvious differences between species, the common ground that brings humans and animals together is that of instinct, i.e., that they are all subject to instinctive forces. And opposed to the category of the instinctive, Nietzsche posits the inorganic, inanimate world. It is only by disrupting the lines of demarcation between the human and the animal that the traditional privilege of

humanity as the 'master' of the world, hierarchically situated above the animal world, can be displaced.

Classifying the human and the animal within the category of the instinctive is elaborated upon at the end of *On the Origin of Language* where Nietzsche approves of Schelling who writes, "Language's situation is like that of organic beings; we believe we see them originating blindly and yet we cannot deny the unfathomable intentionality of their formation down to every detail."(OL 211; KGW II/2, 188)[7] All animate and therefore instinctive beings are 'blind' because they do not plan or intend their evolution and yet their development seems so goal-oriented that it is impossible not to admit to some kind of "intentionality." But the evolution of nature and language do not follow any intentionality, for intentions presuppose consciousness or a conscious being that had such intentions, a presupposition that cannot be assumed. This is why the origin of language lies 'beneath' the surface of consciousness, making it "unfathomable." For Schelling, "the deeper we penetrate in it, the more definitely we discover that its depth far exceeds that of the most conscious product."[8] Consciousness is designated in a secondary and inferior position to instinct.

But while 'instinct' is offered as the definitive answer to the riddle of the origin of language, it, in turn, is transformed into another riddle for 'instinct' represents that which functions as though it were conscious but which lies beyond conscious explanations. It is in this respect that we find Nietzsche enthusiastically repeating Kant's fascination with nature as displaying the "remarkable paradox that something can be purposeful without a consciousness." (OL 211; KGW II/2, 188) If the purpose of language is that of communication, then one is justified in expecting some form of consciousness as having created this instrument for communication. But this is an unwarranted expectation: the riddle of instinct, the riddle of how it evolved into a mechanism allowing for human communication, is precisely that it is inexplicable. Within the history of philosophy consciousness had been established as the privileged term in the conscious-instinct opposition. Nietzsche inverts this opposition relocating the causal origins of language in the realm of instinct, while the effect of this realm — language-use — is located in the sphere of consciousness.[9]

Saussure would later describe this as the "faculty" of language, the faculty that humans are born with, and underlying both *langue* and *parole*.[10] The shift from the natural origin of language to its actualisation as a medium of communication is made possible, according to Herder, with the use of exclamations: he had argued that "exclamation" is the "mother" of language since the externalised sounds produced during exclamations at a particular moment in time can be internalised and used in other situations, at other moments in time. Nietzsche rejects this arguing that it is negation that makes communication possible: the possibility of negation opens up the space for the possibility of affirmation. It is the binary values of 'yes' and 'no' that mark the inaugural moment of the social dimension of language as an instrument for communication. In *The Gay Science* Nietzsche develops this account equating the origin of consciousness with the origin of language, and specifically with the need to communicate. (GS §354)

Culture and Communication

Nietzsche's search for the origin of language is instructive as it provides him with a framework with which to conduct an analysis of culture. The discovery of language as a product of nature is transformed into a scathing critique of the state of so-called "advanced" culture. Thus while language is established as the naturally-given predisposition of the human species, the way it is used (or misused) is internally connected to the way a culture appropriates it to suit specific purposes. It is generally assumed that the achievements of a culture parallel the sophistication of the language used in that culture. But while this might seem to be a positive step, Nietzsche interrogates the assumption that the achievements of culture are necessarily an improvement. In a linguistic version of 'golden age' theories, Nietzsche laments the "fall" of language from its natural and 'perfect' origins to an "imperfect" state of cultural sophistication. The feature that justifies Nietzsche's critique of culture is the misuse of linguistic communication, a misuse that alienates man from his own nature and from others. On his analysis, the relation between language and culture is inversely proportional such that progress in the latter is a sign of deterioration in the former. Underlying the discourse of nature versus culture are the values of the pure and the impure, and in

On the Origin of Language the 'purity' of nature is valorised over and above the 'impurity' of culture. What this valorisation amounts to is, in effect, an implicit call for a return to a more natural way of life.

What would this natural way of life entail? And what are the grounds for Nietzsche's claim that linguistic communication is a symptom of human alienation from each other? The starting point is the assumption that it is language that defines humans and which, as a result, makes possible forms of thinking that are not strictly connected to their survival: "it is absolutely impossible to have such a clever thought [Ed: *schaftsinnniges Denken*], for instance, with a language consisting of merely animal sounds [*bloß thierischen Lautsprache*]" (OL 209; KGW II/2, 185). The "merely animal sounds" refer to the way animals communicate in response to their environment, in actualising what nature has designated for their respective species. On the other hand, linguistic communication enables humans to have what Nietzsche describes as 'clever thought': the meaning of 'clever thought' is implied in its opposition to animal forms of communication, for while animal communication is governed by the need to survive, human linguistic communication can engage in abstract speculation. Language therefore marks the boundary between humans and animals such that the simplicity of animal sounds is opposed to abstract, rationalising processes.

The paradox of language is that, while it is language that makes "clever thought" possible, this development is detrimental both to language itself as the medium for communication and, by implication, to humanity as a species, since it is language that defines the species nature of humans in the first place. The deterioration of the French language is a case in point: according to Nietzsche, the subtle distinctions and stylistic devices that characterised French — declensions, neuter, passives, final or stem-syllables — have been eradicated with the development of 'clever thought': "A more highly developed culture is even incapable of preserving from decay what was handed down to it complete." (Ibid.)

But why does this "decay" occur? Why is language transformed from a state of completion to one of decay? The cause of this transformation is the misuse of linguistic communication and Nietzsche understands misuse as a failure to use language according to the purpose that nature

had designated it for. On this essentialist account, there is a connection between the origin of language and its purpose, a connection that is best described in his 1876 essay, *Richard Wagner in Bayreuth*:

> First of all he [Wagner] recognised a state of distress extending as far as civilisation now unites nations: everywhere *language* is sick, and the oppression of this tremendous sickness weighs on the whole of human development. Inasmuch as language has had continually to climb up to the highest rung of achievement possible to it so as to encompass the realm of thought — a realm diametrically opposed to that for the expression of which it was originally supremely adapted, namely the realm of strong feelings — it has during the brief period of contemporary civilisation become exhausted through this excessive effort: so that now it is not longer capable of performing that function for the sake of which alone it exists: to enable suffering mankind to come to an understanding with one another over the simplest needs of life. (RW §5)

The use and misuse of language is grounded in Nietzsche's distinction between the proper use of language to communicate feelings, and the misuse of language to communicate "thought"[11] In the proper use of language, the forigin and the goal coincide with the result that humanity is one with its own nature; with the improper use of language, the failure to fulfil its purpose leads to alienation between members of the community.

Critical Remarks

Nietzsche's critique of culture from a linguistic perspective suffers from a number of difficulties. For a start it would seem that Nietzsche valorises "clever thought" [Ed: *scharfsinniges Denken* (KGW II/2, 185)] as that which — through the medium of language — differentiates humans from other animals. On this account, language and "clever thought" go hand in hand in categorising humans by defining and positioning them in the natural order of things. But having identified the use of language and "clever thought" as the defining feature of humanity, Nietzsche then goes on to claim that when language is used in this way, humanity loses contact with its own nature.

In addition, if philosophical thought — and presumably philosophical thought can be subsumed under "clever thought" [Ed: *scharfsinniges Denken*] — is a symptom of the deterioration of a culture, then

Nietzsche's own text contributes to the furthering of this deterioration. Given his assertion that philosophical thought is inescapably bound to language, Nietzsche's critical interrogation of culture entails the performative contradiction of doing precisely what he is arguing against; to justify the critique of culture, he would have to adopt a position situated beyond language and thought, a position that is impossible to attain. In effect, Nietzsche's text is a furthering of the decadence that he denounces, and this failure to realise the implications of his own argument is also apparent with the way he postulates the opposition between the proper use of language (as the natural expression of feelings) and the improper use of language (for the communication of "clever thought"). If the whole point of the paper is to argue for the return to the proper use of language to express one's emotions, then it seems odd that the opening lines of the paper suggest that the only way to understand the origin of language is through the use of a riddle which, of its nature, belongs to the category of "clever thought."

Although *On The Origin of Language* opens with a riddle, it does not, as is customary, solve the riddle. Or rather, the text ends by producing more riddles for, having discovered that language can be explained as the fundamental attribute of human nature, it is this very attribute that is the very cause of humanity's impoverishment. The alienation of humanity from its own nature takes place through the formation of a type of cultural life that values the use of abstract thought. Despite the marvel that Nietzsche displays towards the human instinct of language, the underlying and recurring motif is the misuse of language as the root cause of humanity's decline. Language presents us not only with a riddle but perhaps, with the greatest of all riddles, for the paradox at the heart of humanity is that that which constitutes the possibility for its greatness is identical to that which contributes to its diminution. I have argued that Nietzsche's attempt to differentiate between the 'pure,' natural, origin of language and its 'impure,' conventional use undermines his own position that favoured the former. By the time of the essay, *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense*, Nietzsche realised the impasse his views generated and soon abandoned them. This might explain why the discussion on instinctive origin of language is downplayed, while the conventional and arbitrary nature of language takes on a more pivotal role.

Endnotes

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, "On The Origin of Language" trans. Sander Gilman, Carol Blair, and David Parent, *Friedrich Nietzsche On Rhetoric and Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 209-211. [The editor notes that this text can be found in the original KGW II/2 (WS 1869-1870), pp. 185-188, the first chapter of Nietzsche's *Lectures on Latin Grammar*. Claudia Crawford also provides a translation of this short text. References to the German have been provided by the editor and page reference are cited in the text following the citation from Gilman, Blair, and Parent. –BB]
2. Claudia Crawford, *The Beginnings of Nietzsche's Theory of Language* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1988). [Nietzsche's work on the origin of language was a prime concern for Ernst Behler in many contexts, see most obviously his "Die Sprachtheorie des frühen Nietzsches" in Tilman Borsche, et al., eds., *"Centauren-Geburten"; Wissenchaft, Kunst und Philosophie beim jungen Nietzsche* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1994), pp. 99-111. See too Hans-Martin Gauger, "Nietzsche zur Genealogie der Sprache" in Joachim Gessinger and Wolfert Von Rahden, eds., *Theorien Vom Ursprung Der Sprache, Volumes 1-2* (Berlin: de Gruyter), pp. 585-606, including an extensive bibliography as well as Glenn Most and Thomas Fries, "Die Quellen von Nietzsches Rhetorik-Vorlesung," in: Josef Kopperschmidt and Helmut Schanze, eds., *Nietzsche oder „Die Sprache ist Rhetorik"* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1994) pp. 17-38 and 251f.–BB]
3. Christian Emden writes: "...these later writings differ crucially from Nietzsche's earlier philological work: although his lectures and notebooks on rhetoric clearly express the importance of language for the formation of cultural trends and even social processes, Nietzsche was still uncertain about the epistemological foundations and anthropological consequences of such a link." *Nietzsche on Language, Consciousness and the Body* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), p.13.
4. See Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books. 1968), §§ 80, 409, 482, 506, 522, 551for the mature Nietzsche's view of language in terms of the way humans relate or interact with the world. Nietzsche writes, "The demand for an adequate mode of expression is senseless: it is of the essence of a language, a means of expression, to express a mere relationship —" (WP §625).
5. The process of naming in language is transformed into an exercise of power. Nietzsche writes, 'The right of masters [lordly right] to confer names extends so far that one should allow oneself to grasp the origin of language itself as the expression of the power of the rulers: they say 'this *is* such and such', they put their seal on each thing and event with a sound and, in the process take possession of it." GM I:2.
6. See, for example, Nietzsche's "On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense" in Gilman, Blair, and Parent, *Friedrich Nietzsche On Rhetoric and Language*, Pp. 246-257.

7. Cited in Nietzsche, "On the Origin of Language," p. 211. Emden refers to this quote and points out that Nietzsche was aware of Schelling through Hartmann, "On the basis of this inconspicuous passage, Nietzsche argues that Schelling's description of language's organic evolution as paralleling the evolution of consciousness is to some extent compatible with his own reflections. That is, Hartmann's reading of Schelling offered Nietzsche the idea of language and thought are congruent." Emden, *Nietzsche on Language, Consciousness and the Body*, p. 39.
8. Cited in Nietzsche, "On the Origin of Language," p. 211.
9. The postulation of instinct as the causal origin of conscious phenomena was the crowning achievement of Hartmann: 'The sphere of Consciousness is like a vine-clad hill which has so often been ploughed up in all direction, that the thought of further labour has become almost loathsome to the public mind; for the looked-for treasure is never found, although rich and unexpected crops have sprung from the well worked soil. Mankind very naturally began its researches in Philosophy with the examination of what was immediately given in Consciousness; may it not now be lured, but the charm of novelty and the hope of a great read, to seek the golden treasure in the mountain's depths, in the noble ores of its rocky beds, rather than on the surface of the fruitful earth?" Hartmann, *The Philosophy of the Unconscious*, trans., C. K. Ogden (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company 1843/1931), p. 2.
10. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Roy Harris (London: Duckworth, 1983), p. 10.
11. Roger Hazelton writes, "Among primitive peoples language has a more vital function. Since among them strong feelings comprise the true province of language, its function becomes the correcting of feeling through its being communicated. as civilization develops, Nietzsche holds, language strains more and more to express the reverse of feeling, namely thought, losing thereby its power to meet the real needs of men wile increasing its tyranny over their actions and in time even their feelings, so that men become 'slaves of words.'" Hazelton, "Nietzsche's Contribution to the Theory of Language," *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 52, No. 1 (Jan 1943): 47-60; here p. 51.