

CRITICAL STRATEGIES: NIETZSCHE'S USE OF METONYMY

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1.0 The Nature of Metonymy

Critics have pointed out¹ that contemporary discussions of figurative discourse focus exclusively on metaphor, neglecting the other tropes that belong to the traditional field of rhetoric. This comment is equally applicable to philosophical discussions of Nietzsche on the metaphoric foundation of language. Nietzsche himself, however, was not so restrictive. In the essay *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*, Nietzsche argues that metonymy² is a key trope in the formation of language, and is itself 'responsible' for the belief in a world independent of any human contribution. A detailed examination of metonymy can also be found in the early lecture notes entitled *Ancient Rhetoric* and in the notebooks of the 1870's. It is therefore surprising how the literature has consistently neglected to examine this trope, for the value Nietzsche attributes to it cannot be underestimated.

Nietzsche adopts Quintillian's definition of metonymy as the 'substitution of the cause for which we say a thing in place of the thing to which we refer'³, recognising its formidable use for the rhetorician. The starting points for metonymic transferences are perceived effects with entities postulated as the cause of these effects: 'the abstracta evoke the illusion that they themselves are these essences which cause the qualities, whereas they

receive a metaphorical reality only from us, because of those characteristics'.⁴ An excellent example of a metonymic transference is provided by Nietzsche himself: we see a courageous man and argue that the abstract entity 'courage' is the cause of his being courageous: 'the *audacia* [courage] causes men to be *audaces* [courageous]'.⁵

The nature of language is intimately related to the trope of metonymy: the numerous actions predicated from the realm of perception is transferred into a single predicate via the abstracting process of language. 'In the realm of the intellect everything qualitative is merely *quantitative*. What leads us to qualities is the concept, the word.'⁶ It is because the mechanism of language – in the process of constituting itself as a language – functions by removing the differences of each individual action that the quality is in effect the concept: a quality or concept is the result of the negation of many quantities. It is because we have become accustomed to taking concepts and qualities for granted that 'we free ourselves from *qualities* only with difficulty.'⁷ Language obstructs us from seeing the difference and uniqueness of each thing.

The emphasis on metonymy at the origins of language is evident throughout the early Nietzschean writings on language. In *The Philosopher*, Nietzsche refers to the view that the human process of organising the multiplicity of perceptions and actions is conducted by 'carving' out linguistic categories and placing the named perception or action within the appropriate category. While this is the commonly held view of language in the nineteenth century, Nietzsche uses this premise to derive the further claim that a number of perceived actions are subsumed under a qualitative name. But in addition the 'quality' is then considered to be the cause of the action. It is this displacement from effect to cause which is metonymic: 'here we have transference: an abstraction holds together innumerable actions and is taken to be their cause.'⁸

The starting point for metonymy – as for synecdoche – is

repeatedly described by Nietzsche as the perception of the physical shape or form of the thing. The perception of the form of the thing is a distinctively human attribute: 'all *shape* appertains to the subject. It is the grasping of *surfaces* by means of mirrors'.⁹ By focusing on the fact that language is concerned with the forms or shapes of things, Nietzsche justifies his claim on the inability of our possessing knowledge of the essence of things.

At the tropic stage, the emphasis on the 'characteristics' is important: Nietzsche claims that it is because of the 'characteristics' which human beings perceive that the process of postulating entities is set off. This is, in effect, a metaphoric process: from the perception of certain 'characteristics' an abstract entity is created as the cause of the 'characteristics'. It is on these grounds that Nietzsche accuses Plato of creating an ideal world on a mistaken understanding of language: 'from the *eide* [originally, shape or form of that which is seen] to *ideai* [ideal forms] by Plato'.¹⁰

However, the metonymic constitution of language is not only a matter of perceiving the forms of things: it is also described as a transference from the realm of sensation to that of concept. In the lecture notes, Nietzsche claims, for example, that in uttering 'the drink is bitter' we should not think of 'bitterness' as though it were one of the drink's essential properties. It is not the drink that is the cause of the bitterness, but we who experience the sensation of bitterness and transfer it to the drink, believing it to be the causal motor. Likewise, we say 'the stone is hard,' as if hard were something otherwise familiar to us and not merely a subjective stimulation.¹¹ Whichever the case, it is clear that in both sensation and perception the metonymic transference consists in starting from the effect and positing an entity as the cause of that effect. Metonymy is the confusion of concepts with things.

The innovation in Nietzsche's considerations on the nature of metonymy is that he considers all synthetic judgements to

be instances of metonymic transferences: here, the 'early' works prove to be invaluable, for a detailed description of why this is the case is provided in the notes of *The Philosopher*. In defining something according to a property which belongs to it, we are in so doing neglecting other properties, a point which Nietzsche constantly re-iterates in his theory of language so as to justify his claim that language does not lead us to essences. Properties, he argues, 'only support relations'.¹²

There are no properties independent of their relationship to the subject, and, just as there are many properties to a thing (in Nietzsche's example, a pencil can be defined according to its property of elongation, i.e., a pencil is an elongated body, but it can also be defined as a coloured body), in the same manner we find many other relations between the subject and the thing. This is why, Nietzsche claims, 'relations can never be the essence [of the thing], but only consequences of this essence. A synthetic judgement describes a thing according to its consequences, i.e., *essence* and *consequences* become *identified*, i.e., a *metonymy*.'¹³ Synthetic judgements are founded on a confusion between the concept and the thing: from the effects (the perceived form) of the thing we formulate a concept which we believe tells us what the essence of the thing is; but this, Nietzsche argues, is clearly not the case, for the realm of the concept and that of the thing can never be equated: 'two different spheres, between which there can never be an equation, are placed next to each other.'¹⁴ The relationship between both spheres is not one of identity, but involves a metaphoric transference from an ontological realm to an abstract-conceptual one.

Given the metaphoric basis of metonymy, Nietzsche asserts that the inferences by which we derive the causes from the effects are ultimately 'illogical'. The metonymic origins of language reveal that rather than being the result of a logical process, its very nature is illogical: 'all *rhetorical figures* (i.e.,

the essence of language) are *logically invalid* inferences. This is the way that reason begins.¹⁵ In effect, Nietzsche is using the nature of language to argue for the primacy of the illogical over the logical. In so doing, he is undermining the mark of rationality and logical thinking which characterises the discourse of philosophy. Since the concept has a metaphoric origin, then the status of philosophy as offering a rational explanation of reality is questioned.

Although the 'early' texts do not attempt to deal with the problems of philosophy, they clearly bring out the direction of Nietzsche's ideas on language and the recognition of how an understanding of the workings of language could help in the resolution of philosophical problems. Thus, Nietzsche claims that metonymy lies at the heart of philosophy: philosophers select the last in a series of perceptions mistakenly transferring them 'into an impersonal world' of concepts.¹⁶ The abstracted concept becomes the cause of the properties perceived: the metonymic structure of language is ultimately, Nietzsche argues, 'responsible' for the belief in the 'popular metaphysics' of causality.

But it is also 'responsible' for the belief in the metaphysical unity of things. In the *Will to Power* Nietzsche implicitly refers to metonymy as a unity imposed upon 'things'. Language, in the process of its own self-constitution, transforms the perceived effects of the thing into a concept. This is how Nietzsche describes metonymy:

'we conceive all the other properties which are present and momentarily latent, as the cause of the emergence of one single property, i.e., we take the sum of its properties – "x" – as the cause of the property "x": which is utterly stupid and mad! All unity is unity ... as a pattern of domination that *signifies* a unity but *is* not a unity.'¹⁷

A 'doubling' process occurs, for first a property of the thing is selected and this, then, is posited as the cause of the other properties. Metonymic transferences are based on a confusion

of the thing with the concept, with the latter achieving an identity as another kind of thing.

2.0 The function of metonymy as a critical instrument

While the early writings of Nietzsche on language specify the nature of metonymy in a strictly rhetorical context, in the later works he is no longer concerned with rhetoric but with the application of metonymy as a critical instrument.¹⁸ Though Nietzsche no longer uses the terminology of metonymy, the application of metonymy is widespread, forming the strategy with which he conducts his critique of philosophy, religion and society. The extent to which Nietzsche considers the recognition of the role of metonymy in the discourse of philosophy is such that in *Twilight of the Idols* it is described as the most 'dangerous error' of reason, as 'reason's intrinsic form of corruption'.¹⁹

Perhaps one of the clearest instances of the abuse of metonymy is the example described by Nietzsche with reference to the claims made by a popular personality of the time. A dietitian called Comaro made the claim that a particular diet – a frugal one – was the cause of a long and happy life. But Nietzsche claims that this is an instance of metonymic transference: it is mistaken to start from the effect – the long and happy life – and postulate the diet as the cause of it. Rather if we consider the requirements of a long life – a slow metabolic rate and small amounts of food – we notice, Nietzsche claims, that these are precisely the characteristics suited to Comaro's physical condition. It was Comaro's physiological nature, i.e., his personal life-requirements, that obliged him to adopt a particular kind of diet. It was not a question of choice, for it was his needs that dictated the kind of diet he required: 'he was not free to eat much or little as he chose, his frugality was *not* an act of 'free will': he became ill when he ate more.'²⁰

What is innovative to the later Nietzsche's use of metonymy is the insistence on the correlation between physiology and metonymy. The body is the site where the mistaking of causes for effects originates:

'if a man is suffering or in a good mood, he has no doubt that he can find the reason for it if only he looks. So he looks for the reason – In truth, he cannot find the reason, because he does not even suspect where he ought to look for it – What happens? – He takes a *consequence* of his condition for its *cause*; e.g., a work undertaken in a good mood (really undertaken because the good mood had provided the courage for it) succeeds: *ecco*, the work is the *reason* for the good mood. – In fact, the success was determined by the same thing that determined the good mood – by the happy co-ordination of physiological forces and systems.'²¹

It is evident that Nietzsche gives great significance to the body in claiming that the externalisation of causes is the product of a physiological condition. Heidegger is simply mistaken when he argues that physiology is an effect of nihilism.²² The contrary is the case: 'nihilism' and 'corruption' are effects of physiological degeneration.

But what is interesting is that although Nietzsche provides an explanation for the 'bad mood' as the product of a 'degenerate' physiology, so too the 'good mood' is explicable in terms of a specific physiological condition. Thus, feeling good or bad depends on the functioning of the physiological system, on 'every sort of restraint, pressure, tension, explosion in the play and counter-play of our organs, likewise and especially the condition of the *nervus sympathicus*'.²³

Given that physiology is offered as the framework within which to interpret feelings, moods and other psychological phenomena, Nietzsche argues that the introduction of psychological explanations to account for physiological conditions is

an example of metonymic transference. In the attempt to account for the way we feel, a rational explanation is sought, which, once established, is posited as the reason, the cause for feeling the way we do. In other words, psychological explanations are introduced in the attempt to explain away what is in effect a physiological condition. The individual who is faced with the need to remove a distressful situation will find some kind of explanation for this situation. Since the removal of the distress produces a pleasurable sensation, what is required is 'a soothing, liberating, alleviating cause.'²⁴

The function of memory is that of remembering known past causes in preference to others so as to get over the distressful situations quickly: what this means is that certain causal explanations are repeatedly selected, dominating some at the expense of others. When 'the banker thinks at once of 'business', the Christian of 'sin', the girl of her 'love','²⁵ previously externalized reasons are recalled to explain physiological conditions: the function of memory in this case is negative, in that the habit of taking certain causes for granted hinders any investigation of the 'real' causes. Rather than seeking out the 'real' physiological causes, Nietzsche claims we introduce 'imaginary causes' as explanations: the difference between both kinds of causes is that the former remain at a physical and therefore unconscious level, while the latter, in becoming conscious, provide a rational justification for feeling the way we do.

The intimate relationship between physiology and metonymy is evidently of great importance for Nietzsche. But whilst this intimacy is not expressed in the early writings on rhetoric or on language, it becomes a predominant feature in his critical writings. The importance of this relationship cannot be underestimated, for it is on the basis of this relationship that the strategy for the critique of philosophy is organised. However, what is strikingly evident is the continuous development from the early Nietzsche to the later one, where the central role of

metonymy in the formation of language is broadened to function as a critical instrument.

3.0 Applications of metonymy

3.1 *The critique of religion*

In his critique of religious morality, Nietzsche explicitly states that metonymic transferences are responsible for its creation: 'one confuses cause and effect: one fails to understand decadence as a physiological condition and mistakes its consequences for the real cause of the indisposition; example: all of religious morality.'²⁶ But the focus of the critique is directed towards the priest-type whose deteriorating physiological condition is such that it leads him to deny the actual world. The priest-type is the causal motor in the generation of religious and moral concepts, inventing 'imaginary causes' – God, the soul, the ego, the spirit, the free or unfree will – as the cause of the individual's feeling in a particular way. But the mistake, according to Nietzsche, is precisely that of neglecting the origins in the physiology of the priest-type: 'the preponderance of feelings of displeasure over feelings of pleasure is the *cause* of a fictitious morality and religion.'²⁷

Because Nietzsche knows – and he stresses the need 'to know, e.g., that one has a nervous system (but no "soul") ... [as] ... the privilege of the best informed'²⁸ – the physiological framework within which both religious and moral propositions are articulated, he is able to show how the priest-type, as one who doesn't know the physiological basis of morality, attempts to provide an 'explanation' of *unpleasant* general feelings:²⁹ they are caused (a) by 'beings hostile to us', by 'evil spirits'; (b) by actions deemed as sinful; (c) as a punishment for our actions; and (d) as a result of an unsuccessful action.

However, just as negative feelings are explained as physiological consequences, the priest-type offers the same kind of explanation for positive ones: thus, we find the 'explanation' of

pleasant general feelings as caused (a) by trusting in God; (b) by the awareness of a good action; (c) as a result of a successful action; (d) by the Christian virtues of faith, hope and charity. Metonymic transferences form the basis of Nietzsche's critique: the list of 'explanations' involves a transference from a sensation to an external location – renamed as something else – with the latter posited as the cause of the sensations: 'morality and religion fall entirely under the *psychology of error*: in every single case cause is mistaken for effect; or the effect of what is *believed* true is mistaken for the truth; or a state of consciousness is mistaken for the causation of this state.'³⁰

Revealing the metonymic basis of religious and moral imperatives constitutes in part Nietzsche's projected reassessment of values:³¹ the imperatives of the type 'do X actions and you will be happy' are translated into 'if you are happy, then you will do X actions'. Because happiness is equated with a healthy physiological condition, it is physiology which becomes the determining factor in the individual's behaviour:

'a well-constituted human being, a "happy one", *must* perform certain actions and instinctively shrinks from other actions, he transports the order of which he is the physiological representative into his actions with other human beings and things. In a formula: his virtue is the *consequence* of his happiness'.³²

This is why Nietzsche emphasises that it is not external 'principles and dogmas' which describe our character: rather, the opposite is the case in that it is our 'nature that is the cause of our thinking and judging thus and thus.'³³ The prescriptive propositions of morality are criticised precisely on this point: they postulate an abstract cause as the ideal towards which man must appropriate himself. But it is not a question of what one ought to become but of what one is: the criterion for judging an action is not whether it is an effect of a virtue or a vice, but whether it is an effect of physiology: 'today we no longer know

how to separate moral and physiological degeneration: the former is merely a symptom-complex of the latter; one is necessarily bad, just as one is necessarily ill'.³⁴ In showing that the performance of an action is not a matter of choice, Nietzsche cancels the distinction between being and willing: we will what we are. Morality is criticised not only for its lack of understanding of what is natural, but because it values that which Nietzsche calls 'anti-nature', sanctifying it with 'the highest honours as morality'.³⁵

Because physiology conditions particular actions, Nietzsche further argues that the concept of free will was invented by theologians to make a person accountable for his or her actions, the ulterior motive being that of '*making mankind dependent on him [theologian]*'.³⁶ It is only by correlating the origin of an action to a person's consciousness, will, intention and motivation that the theologian is able to introduce the concept of punishment. But Nietzsche emphasises that the will is an effect of certain stimuli: it is an 'individual reaction' without the power of causing anything, the will no longer 'effects' anything, no longer 'moves anything'.³⁷ The 'false causality' of the will is that of moving from the actions to the creation of a faculty (the will) as the cause of these actions. It is part of Nietzsche's goal as an 'immoralist' to debunk the concept of free will for it enables him to argue that the concept of guilt and punishment are external and unwarranted impositions of religion and morality onto the human realm.

This unnecessary creation of causes provides an interesting study of the '*rudimentary psychology of the religious man*'.³⁸ because human beings believe that all effects are caused by a will, then the feeling of extreme energy or power leads to the belief that it must be caused by someone, for they are not willed by the agent in the first place. But these feelings of power are the key characteristic of the 'exhausted': their 'highest activity and energy' is misleading for we tend to mistake it for the life of the strong man. This, however, is not the case: the energy of

the exhausted is a 'degeneration effected [by] an excess of spiritual and nervous discharge'.³⁹

The lack of physiological knowledge credits God as the cause of the strong feelings induced in man: the concept of God is created to account for certain inexplicable sensations. In his lack of knowledge, man postulates a being superior to himself as the cause of these feelings: in effect, man moves from psychology to ontology: 'in the psychological concept of God, a condition, in order to appear as effect, is personified as cause.'⁴⁰

In *The Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche introduces the concept of the 'ascetic ideal', linking it to the physiological decline of the priest-type. When the priest rejects the world and life he does so because he considers them as the cause of which his suffering is an effect. But, Nietzsche argues, the opposite is the case, for the cause of the priest's suffering is not something external, but internal: the ascetic ideal is a sign or symptom of 'a partial physiological blocking and exhaustion'.⁴¹ The priest's mistake is that of identifying the world as the cause of his suffering: it is the substitution of cause and effect, i.e., a metonymic transference.

Despite the false interpretation of reality by the priest-type, his role remains an integral part of Christianity. Notwithstanding the 'illusion' of an 'ideal world', the function of the priest-type is that of helping the community. The priest-type redirects the resentment of the sufferers to an external cause, to an Other, and in so doing prevents their resentment from developing into a self-destructive process. The sufferer needs 'some living being or other on whom he can vent his feeling directly or in effigy, under some pretext or other'.⁴²

Physiology is the cause of the resentment which characterises the slave class: Nietzsche explains that the attribution of the cause to an external entity – the noble class – is to be understood as the strategy by which the priest ensures survival of his 'flock', who would otherwise channel their resentment against themselves. Thus, although Nietzsche usually considers the substi-

tution of cause and effect to be mistaken, it does serve a positive life-enhancing role.

Interestingly, whereas in the early writings on language Nietzsche focused on the abstract quality of the noun as misleading man in thinking it was the cause of which he was the effect, in the later writings the emphasis shifts from the abstract quality of nouns to the psychology of man: 'the uneducated man believes that anger is the cause of his being angry, spirit the cause of his thinking, soul the cause of his feeling – in short ... a mass of psychological entities'.⁴³

Despite the shift of emphasis, underlying the psychic elements are the physiological ones. Psychology is a rationalisation of the physiological condition: the psychological element only explains why man needs to postulate the belief in these entities. The 'naive' man is he who transforms imagined causes into 'personal entities': to the Christian, God becomes the cause of man's 'hope, repose [and] the feeling of "redemption"'.⁴⁴

The entire gamut of concepts and morals introduced by religion are in effect an interpretation of a physiological condition: it is the priest who names the defects of his physiological system with 'the sign-language or religio-moral idiosyncrasy – 'repentance', 'sting of conscience', 'temptation by the Devil', 'the proximity of God'.⁴⁵ Re-interpretation is part of the priest-type's agenda: the same physiological condition can be interpreted according to a particular code of behaviour, ' "sin", the priestly version of that animal "bad conscience"'.⁴⁶

It is clear that the origin of these conditions is located within the priest-type: he plays an important role in that he claims to know not only why man is suffering, but provides an explanation and offers a solution to man's pain by identifying ' "guilt" [as] the sole cause of his [man's] suffering'.⁴⁷ Nietzsche's critique reveals that the priest mistakenly names an abstract entity – guilt – as the cause of man's suffering, whereas it is man's physiological condition which is the cause of his suffering: suffering is interpreted, therefore, within a religious framework.

3.2 *The critique of consciousness*

Several of Nietzsche's discussions of topics central to the discourse of philosophy are likewise formulated along a metonymic structure: he considers acts of consciousness as mistakenly involving a metonymic transference, where by starting from the perspective of the effects, consciousness is created as the cause of these effects. The goal of Nietzsche's critique is to remove the privileged position consciousness had acquired since Descartes. Consciousness, it is argued, is not the causal motor in human life, but rather an effect of the primary unconscious realm of physiology. De Man sums up Nietzsche's critique as the attempt to put 'us on our guard against the tendency to hypostatize consciousness into an authoritative ontological category'.⁴⁸

The metonymic structure of consciousness is discussed in terms of its chronological sequence. It is argued that the chronology of causality is inverted, so that 'the cause enters consciousness later than the effect.'⁴⁹ The important point for Nietzsche is that the functions of consciousness – thinking, willing, feeling, and perceiving – are effects and not causes whose origins can be located in consciousness, the experiences of which we are conscious are actually 'terminal phenomena, an end – and cause nothing'.⁵⁰ The extent to which importance is attributed to consciousness is such that it is believed to offer a satisfactory explanation of something, once the cause is postulated as a feature of it.

Nietzsche's critique is therefore an attempt to reverse the primacy of consciousness. By providing specific cases of errors which have been traditionally attributed to consciousness within the discourse of philosophy, he hopes he can re-affirm the unconscious as primary causal motor. Thus, thinking, willing, the emotions and sense perception are subjected to the Nietzschean critique which argues that causes have been confused with their effects.

The critique of thinking is made with reference to the widespread belief that thinking processes take place in consciousness with rationality as the sufficient condition for the explanation of thought. However, a process of what Nietzsche calls 'chronological inversion' takes place: it is the error of locating the justification for a thought within consciousness, whereas its appearance in consciousness is solely an effect. The cause of a thought is not found in consciousness: 'we seek the reason for a thought before we are conscious of it'.⁵¹ The reason is projected as the cause of a thought afterwards: conscious rational explanations are added later: we mistakenly believe that 'the reason enters consciousness first'.⁵²

The critique of willing is directed towards the view which posits the will as the cause of an action. Nietzsche's argument is that the concept of will is formulated on a metonymic error, in that from an effect – the action – we postulate consciousness as the cause which 'wills' the action. But it is our physiology which leads to our actions, not our consciousness. In addition, the widespread misuse of the concept of will has led to serious consequences: the belief in such a thing as the faculty of the will has led to the further belief that a 'will' also exists in the world, 'we have from our personal experience introduced a cause into events in general'.⁵³ The natural world is therefore explained on the basis of a causal framework, which – re-named as 'natural laws' – science will assume as constituting the object of its research.

The critique of the emotions is reductionist in that psychological explanations are replaced with physiological ones. Nietzsche argues that feelings are misunderstood physiological conditions which are subsequently rationalised. By looking for an external cause to explain the effects, 'frequent rushes of blood to the brain accompanied by a choking sensation are interpreted as "anger": persons and things that rouse us to anger are means of relieving our physiological condition'.⁵⁴ The conscious experience of an emotion is justified as the effect of something

other which produces that effect. Although Nietzsche disapproves of the re-location of the cause to the sphere of consciousness, it is clear that such a move is required by some so as to be able to attribute praise or blame accordingly. The function of 'fictionally' postulated external causes is therapeutic in that they relieve the individual of his physiological distress, although this does not negate the fact that, according to Nietzsche, the invention of the cause of the emotions is an 'invention of causes that do not exist'.⁵⁵

The critique of perception is intended to dispel the common sense view that the 'outer world' is the cause of our perceptions of the world being what they are. Rather it is the 'inner world' which conditions our perceptions of the 'outer world': the fragment of outer world of which we are conscious is born after an effect from outside has impressed itself upon us, and is subsequently projected as its 'cause'.⁵⁶ The metonymic transference consists in projecting the effect of a perception as the cause of that perception: it is an error peculiar to mankind which believes that an explanation has been provided when the cause is located within the sphere of consciousness. But this is precisely the point of Nietzsche's critique: to locate the causal factor we must consider the 'excitement of the nerve centres',⁵⁷ i.e., take into account unconscious physiological considerations rather than conscious ones. That these 'errors' are now assumed to be the norm is the result of memory, which searches for the quickest possible explanation, in so doing repeating 'the habit of old interpretations'.⁵⁸

In addition, Nietzsche also argues that we mistakenly attribute sensations such as pain to a particular location of the body 'without [their] being situated there':⁵⁹ in other words, Nietzsche is contesting the view whereby it is consciousness which tells us where the cause of the pain is. Rather, knowledge of where the pain is, is projected afterwards as its cause; in effect, Nietzsche reverses the priority given to consciousness, replacing it with the unconscious, arguing that the value we give

to consciousness is the result of the belief that only conscious causes are appropriate as explanations.

3.3 *The critique of society*

In his critique of society, Nietzsche uses the metonymic structure as the tool for his methodology. Anarchism, socialism, nihilism, pessimism, religious morality and various social problems function as signs of something else, signs of what Nietzsche calls decadence. In other words, the decadence of society is the result of an examination of the social, political or religious movements within it.

Decadence is defined with the terminology of misplaced causality essential to metonymy; thus, Nietzsche writes: 'basic insight regarding the nature of decadence: *its supposed causes are its consequences*.'⁶⁰ The pattern which has characterised the critique of religion and consciousness is repeated: the decaying physiological condition of mankind is the cause for there being these social movements which are a 'sign of decline, an idiosyncrasy'.⁶¹ The essential element in the interpretation of these movements is that they externalise the cause of their ills: the necessity of externalisation is itself the sign which the cultural semiologist must read in order to be able to interpret the condition of society. Thus, Nietzsche's application of metonymy is evident in that an abstract noun⁶² is made the cause of a movement's or individual's decadence: 'vice – the addiction to vice; sickness-sickliness; crime-criminality; celibacy-sterility; hystericism-weakness of the will; alcoholism; pessimism; anarchism; libertism (also of the spirit)'.⁶³

Social movements – anarchist and socialist – are the objects of Nietzsche's critique in *Twilight of the Idols*; the anarchist and socialist demands for equal rights and justice are representative of a particular social formation, 'as the mouthpiece of *declining strata of society*'.⁶⁴ The anarchist/socialist is unaware of why he is suffering, rationalising his suffering so that he 'condemns, calumniates and *befouls society*':⁶⁵ from the effect, Nietzsche

argues that the anarchist/socialist creates a cause of that effect, a responsible 'other' upon whom they can focus their revenge. Revenge and resentment function – as with the Christian – therapeutically, for in the act of judging and punishing, the tension stored within the individual is released, preventing the individual's self-destruction. 'What is common to both [social movements and Christianity], and *unworthy* in both, is that someone has to be to *blame* for the fact that one suffers.'⁶⁶

However, Nietzsche re-iterates that the alleged cures for decadence – changing the nature of society – are useless because the various movements do not understand the basis of their ills. Those who believe that psychological and moral cures influence the physiology of the decadent are mistaken: such cures 'do not change the course of decadence, do not arrest it, are physiologically *naught*.'⁶⁷ This explains why Nietzsche claims that those who consider themselves 'cured' are only deluding themselves. For them the only possible type of cure would be physiological. The paradox of the 'cured' is that in uttering their belief they reveal their delusion: 'the "cured" are merely one type of the degenerates'.⁶⁸

In Nietzsche's diagnosis of the degenerate nature of various movements and individuals which propagate themselves within society, one particular type of individual within society stands out for praise: the genius. It is not the social context which produces the genius, as widely believed, for this is a case of false causality, with the wrong cause – society – postulated as having produced genius. Rather, Nietzsche argues that the genius is the product of an accumulation of energy which has been assembling 'historically and physiologically' such that the social context only functions as a device which triggers off what is already present: thus 'if the tension in the mass has grown too great, the merest accidental stimulus suffices to call the 'genius', the 'deed', the great destiny, into the world'.⁶⁹

It is clear that Nietzsche emphasises the physiological force⁷⁰ as the 'true' causality within the genius: it is his nature which is

the crucial element, and not the social context, for 'the very same milieus can be interpreted and exploited in opposite ways: there are no facts'.⁷¹ In other words, there is no necessary relationship between the social context and the genius, such that one is the cause of the other. Rather, this kind of claim makes the mistake of starting from the effect (genius) and moving to a cause (the social context) of that effect. Here, Nietzsche applies metonymy as a critical tool against the 'neurotic's theory' of the 'milieu' which 'has become sacrosanct and almost scientific'.⁷²

Other than his critique of the social context's relation to the genius, Nietzsche's concern with society is chiefly focused on the nature of movements present within it. The movements which Nietzsche criticizes are decadent precisely because they have not understood their own nature: in attempting to provide reasons for their predicament they have not recognised that their reasons constitute the signs of decadence.

The recognition of the function of language within the Nietzschean corpus has been examined by a number of scholars. But the extent to which rhetorical devices influenced Nietzsche's critical strategies has been neglected. It is with this lacuna in mind that I have tried in this paper to offer a detailed examination of Nietzsche's studies on metonymy and of his subsequent widespread application of those studies as an instrument for the critique of religion, philosophy and society.

Primary Sources

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Notes

1. Culler, for instance, points out that 'our illustrious forbears in the field of rhetoric, [like] Quintillian, would doubtless be delighted at this revival of interest in rhetoric, but they would be puzzled, I believe, at the extraordinary privilege accorded to metaphor ...

- today, however, it is scarcely an exaggeration to say that metaphor is more respectable than rhetoric itself.' 188.
2. Metonymy is defined in terms of its classificatory feature: 'there are four types, corresponding to the four Causes: substitution of cause for effect or effect for cause, proper name for one of its qualities or vice-versa'. Lanham, 102.
 3. Nietzsche 1872-1874, 25.
 4. *ibid.*, 59.
 5. *ibid.*
 6. Nietzsche 1873(a), 25.
 7. *ibid.*, 36.
 8. *ibid.*, 48.
 9. *ibid.*, 42.
 10. Nietzsche 1872-1874, 59.
 11. Nietzsche 1873(b), 25.
 12. Nietzsche 1873(a), 52.
 13. *ibid.*
 14. *ibid.*
 15. *ibid.*, 48.
 16. *ibid.*, 41.
 17. Nietzsche 1888(c), 303.
 18. Schrift, 217. I would like to acknowledge Schrift's work as having provided the cue for this paper.
 19. Nietzsche 1889, 57.
 20. *ibid.*
 21. Nietzsche 1888(c), 132.
 22. Heidegger 1991, 29. ' "corruption", "physiological degeneration", and such are not the causes of nihilism but its effects.'
 23. Nietzsche 1889, 60.
 24. *ibid.*, 61.
 25. *ibid.*, 62.
 26. Nietzsche 1888(c), 27.
 27. Nietzsche 1888(a), 135-6. In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche writes 'every proposition formulated by religion and morality contains it.' 57.
 28. Nietzsche 1888(c), 132.
 29. Nietzsche 1889, 62.
 30. *ibid.*, 62-3.

31. Nietzsche 1888(b), 128. Nietzsche considers the Persian sage, Zarathustra, as the first to have recognised the movement from morality as the effect to metaphysics as the cause of that effect: 'the translation of morality into the realm of metaphysics, as force, cause, end-in-itself, is *his* work'.
32. Nietzsche 1889, 58.
33. Nietzsche 1878, 193.
34. Nietzsche 1888(c), 182.
35. Nietzsche 1888(b), 132.
36. Nietzsche 1889, 63.
37. *ibid.*
38. Nietzsche, 1888(c), 86.
39. *ibid.*, 30.
40. Nietzsche 1888(c), 6.
41. Nietzsche 1887, 256.
42. *ibid.*, 263.
43. Nietzsche 1888(c), 85.
44. *ibid.*
45. Nietzsche 1888(a), 135.
46. Nietzsche 1887, 277.
47. *ibid.*, 263.
48. De Man, P. 1979, 64. Cf. De Man: 'it turns out however that what was assumed to be the objective, external cause is itself the result of an internal effect, and what had been considered to be a cause, is, in fact, the effect of an effect, and what had been considered to be an effect can in its turn seem to function as the cause of its own cause'. 63
49. Nietzsche 1888(c), 265.
50. *ibid.*
51. *ibid.*
52. *ibid.*
53. *ibid.*, 264.
54. *ibid.*, 354.
55. *ibid.*
56. *ibid.*, 265.
57. *ibid.*, 266.
58. *ibid.*
59. *ibid.*, 265.

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60. *ibid*, 25.
 61. *ibid*, 24.
 62. It should be noted that Nietzsche does not always restrict himself to the abstract 'substantive' as the cause; at other times he merely posits an externalised 'other' as the cause, as we shall see with social movements.
 63. Nietzsche 1888(c), 26.
 64. Nietzsche 1889, 96.
 65. *ibid*, 97. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche writes about the 'men without solitude' who 'see in the forms of existing society the cause of practically *all* human failure and misery: which is to stand the truth happily on its head!' Nietzsche 1886, 54.
 66. Nietzsche 1889, 96. See also Nietzsche 1888(c), 201, 400.
 67. Nietzsche 1888(c), 26.
 68. *ibid*.
 69. Nietzsche 1889, 107.
 70. In *Ecce Homo* this physiological force is spelled out as a 'rapid metabolism [and] the possibility of again and again supplying oneself with great, even tremendous quantities of energy.' Nietzsche 1888(b), 55.
 71. Nietzsche 1888(c), 47.
 72. Nietzsche 1889, 107.