

Nietzsche On the relationship between Context, Names and Signs



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Introduction

The role and value of the name originates with Nietzsche's critique of language in *On Truth and Lie in a Nonmoral Sense* (1873). In this early paper, his critique is conducted with the aim of dispelling any account of language as representational and thereby providing us with any certain knowledge of reality. While his account of the formation of language here only deals peripherally with what is entailed by the process of naming, this process is developed into an account that stresses the uses of names and in particular (though not exclusively) on moral names. The analysis of naming is developed twofold into (a) a philosophical critique of moral names and as a (b) semiological interpretation of moral names. These two lines of approach function differently in his corpus: the philosophic critique of moral names shows the way moral names have been used to manipulate others, while the semiological interpretation of moral names focuses in moral names as signs that communicate something about who is using the sign. The focus on usage makes it possible for Nietzsche to conduct a semiological interpretation of society and religion.

In this paper, my aim is the modest one of elaborating upon Nietzsche's thinking on the relationship between context, names and signs. I will start by (1) highlighting what is entailed by the process of naming, and in particular, the creation of moral names; this will be followed by (2) an examination of the way moral names are manipulated by certain interest groups to achieve their goals; and finally, I will (3) introduce Nietzsche's semiological strategy as a way of interpreting moral names.

Naming and Moral Names

In *On Truth and Lie in a Nonmoral Sense*, Nietzsche equates the act of naming with the formation of concepts. The transformation of metaphors into concepts with a shared meaning is the result of mankind's constitution into a community. This transformation creates the possibility of communication since the conventional agreement on the meaning of words is necessary for any communication to take place. This has an important consequence for it is due to man's socio-linguistic nature that the relationship between language, naming and truth is established. At this stage of Nietzsche's writing on language, names function as labels that fix the meaning of concepts. The act of naming the concept becomes that which is socially agreed upon and therefore, of truth. Such agreement is vital for it enables the community to flourish. The liar constitutes a threat to society for he/she displaces the meanings of signs with 'arbitrary substitutions or even reversal of names.'¹ (Nietzsche, 1973, p. 81) However, although naming functions as a kind of labelling it is not the kind of action that can be performed by anyone. Because naming cannot be dissociated from its origins in the community, the act of naming is itself also a manifestation of power. In fact, naming highlights a specific social structure, 'a pyramidal order according to castes and degrees', a

'new world of laws, privileges, subordinations, and clearly marked boundaries...' (Nietzsche, 1873, p.84) While in the *Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense* essay, it is the community that names meanings, in *The Genealogy of Morals* there is a shift away from the community to the rulers of the community. The rulers have the power to name:

The lordly right of bestowing names is such that one would almost be justified in seeing the origin of language itself as an expression of the rulers' power. They say, "This is that or that"; they seal off each thing and action with a sound and thereby take symbolic possession of it. (Nietzsche, 1997, p. 160)

Given this connection between naming and power, what would be the status of those names that are specifically intended to influence behaviour? The analysis of names takes on a further dimension in Nietzsche's project on the 'revaluation of values' where an analysis of moral names now needs to be conducted.

As a point of departure, Nietzsche establishes a connection between moral names and the context of their production. This relationship is essential in that the continuing existence of that society necessitates the removal of individual values and the validation of the social values. We can see a structural parallelism between ordinary language and the language of morality: whilst the concept negates what is individual and promotes what is common, a moral concept is likewise shared by a society. The introduction of moral names is an expression of social values, as opposed to the values that are unique to the individual.

Whenever we encounter a morality, we also encounter valuations and an order of rank of human impulses and actions. These valuations and orders of rank are always expressions of the needs of a community and herd: whatever benefits it most--- and second most, and third most---that is also considered the first standard for the value of all individuals. (Nietzsche, 1882, p. 175)

Elsewhere, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Zarathustra claims that to name a value is to share it with the community or in Nietzsche's terminology, the 'herd': 'you have its name in common with the people and have become of the people and the herd with your virtue!'. (Nietzsche, 1883-5, p.63) This explains Nietzsche's insistence that 'a virtue has to be our invention, our most personal defence and necessity'. (Nietzsche, 1889/1895, p. 131) Within a society, only the names which propagate the existence of the 'herd' are considered prestigious and approvingly named as moral, even though they might have been named differently:

there are certain strong and dangerous drives, such as enterprisingness, foolhardiness, revengefulness, craft, rapacity, ambition, which had hitherto had not only to be honoured from the point of view of their social utility - under different names, naturally, from those chosen here - but also mightily developed and cultivated (because they were constantly needed to protect the community as a whole against the enemies of the community as a whole) the fair, modest, obedient, self-effacing disposition, the *mean and*

average in desires, acquires moral names and honours. (Nietzsche, 1886, p. 104-5)

The introduction of the terminology of 'evil' is the name the community uses to label those individual values which it disapproves of. Given the desire for stability and order, Nietzsche argues that the community privilege their moral values by re-naming the values of the strong as 'evil'. It is within this context that, Nietzsche claims, 'the great epoch of our life are the occasions when we gain the courage to re-baptize our evil qualities as our best qualities'. (Nietzsche, 1886, p. 79) Given that these 'evil' qualities are socially condemned, then the valorisation of these qualities constitutes an affirmation of identity.

The problem with naming is that the social context frames what counts as an interpretation of certain experiences. The 'little man' is he who follows the norms of the 'herd', so that he can only name the experiences of the 'great man' from the perspective of his socially dictated value system. 'When the great man cries out, straightaway the little man comes running; his tongue is hanging from his mouth with lasciviousness. He, however, calls it his "pity".' (Nietzsche, 1883-85, p. 235) This is the mistake Nietzsche wants to highlight: the names that are perceived negatively by the herd might be precisely those which offer the greatest benefit to the individual. The name of the value reveals nothing of whether it is beneficial to the individual or not. 'The poison of which natures perish strengthens the strong---nor do they call it poison.' (Nietzsche, 1882, p. 92)

The persona of Zarathustra is introduced as the prophet who recognises that the negation of individual values is inversely proportional to the values which it is in the interest of society to maintain; his function as a critical interpreter of society involves that of deciphering the role of names within society, of 'unmasking' those virtues and vices which the community advocate so as to promote the survival of the community at the expense of the individual. 'Fundamentally they want one thing most of all: that nobody shall do them harm...this, however is **cowardice**: although it be called 'virtue'. (Nietzsche, 1883-85, p. 190) Renaming involves a kind of undoing: in recognising the reasons for the names of socially approved values to be none other than expressions of the 'herd' values, the role of Zarathustra is given a new dimension in that he opens the way for the individual to 'liberate' himself from his context.

The task of the future, Nietzsche suggests, should be that of recognising moral names for what they are, namely, socially approved values imposed upon the individual. Revealing the 'true' names of the instincts sublimated into a value system involves negating the names of morality and replacing them with other values which exclude any moral connotations,

one should bring to light and honour the names of the instincts that are really at work here after they have been hidden for so long beneath the hypocritical names of virtue...it is a measure of strength how far one can divest oneself of virtue; and a height can be imagined where the concept "virtue" is so understood that it sounds like *virtu*, Renaissance virtue, moraline-free virtue. (Nietzsche, 1888, p. 179)

Virtue need not be dispelled with altogether but rather acknowledged as a possibility that goes beyond the morality of a society; Nietzsche equates the individual with the ultimate and highest expression of life and this individuality expresses itself in its virtues. He concludes that 'if morality ...[is] the

instinct to deny life...[then] [o]ne must destroy morality if one is to liberate life'. (Nietzsche, 1888, p. 189).

The Manipulation of Names

The analysis of the role of the name is one of Nietzsche's strategies in his critique of epistemology. The arbitrariness of language is the central premise in countering the view that there is a world of essences 'outside' language. Given the Kantian division of world into noumenal and phenomenal realms, naming, Nietzsche argues, plays a crucial role in undermining this divide since it is the phenomenal world of appearances which is named with the named appearance eventually functioning as though it was an essence: 'what at first was appearance becomes in the end almost invariably, the essence and is effective as such.' (Nietzsche, 1882, p. 122) In other words, the linguistic description of appearance is forgotten and elevated to the status of a definition capturing the essence of the thing. The point of Nietzsche's critique is that it is misleading to think of the named appearance as an essence: there is no in-itself other than that which is named. The name of the concept, in effect, creates the thing, for it subsumes an object within a category. Naming has had the misleading effect of leading mankind into believing that he has acquired knowledge of things: 'The way men usually are, it takes a name to make something visible for them.' (Nietzsche, 1882, p. 218)

Given the epistemological outlook which frames the Nietzschean discourse, the dimension names have in relation to values is conditioned by this outlook. The nature of naming is such that we are unable to achieve knowledge of the essence of things, but solely a 'partial perception' of them. Likewise, there is no essence of values, but features or aspect of values, 'all names of good and evil are images: they do not speak out, they only hint. He is a fool who seeks knowledge from them'. (Nietzsche, 1883-85, p. 101) Because there is no essence of what it is that constitutes the morally good or evil, Nietzsche re-locates the discourse of morality within the sphere of the social context.

The later Nietzsche is concerned to reveal the extent of how the names of values are subjected to manipulation by religious or social discourses as part of a process of self-justification. Thus, for example, the Shadow tells Zarathustra, 'I have unlearned with you belief in words and values and great names. When the Devil casts his skin does his name not also fall away? For that too is a skin. The Devil himself is perhaps a skin.' (Nietzsche, 1883-85, p. 285) The name functions also as an ideological 'mask' for the perpetuation of those interests which society or religion deem necessary for it to preserve its status. (Nietzsche, 1881, p. 100) This is why Nietzsche considers the naming (and renaming) of moral names as manipulative. Furthermore, in an interesting twist, the designation of socially approved moral names necessitates a certain amount of non-virtuous activity: '**By which means does a virtue come to power?**---By exactly the same means as a political party: the slandering, inculpation, undermining of virtues that oppose it and are already in power, by rebaptizing them, by systematic persecution and mockery. Therefore: through sheer "immorality." ' (Nietzsche, 1888, p. 72) The manipulation of names functions as a strategic device which ensures the success of the community's own values. In Nietzsche's way of thinking, the community is opposed to the individual: the individual is 'strong'

because he acts while the community is 'weak' and 'mediocre' because it can only react to the actions of the strong. The strategy of the community towards the individual is to rename their qualities: the basic tendency of the weak and mediocre of all ages, consequently, to weaken and pull down the stronger: chief means, the moral judgement. The attitude of the stronger toward the weaker is branded; the higher states of the stronger acquire an evil name. (Nietzsche, 1888, p. 189)

The same strategy is applied in the relationship between a religious context and the manipulation of moral names. Thus, certain drives that might be evaluated negatively in the everyday life of a community are renamed and reevaluated positively from within a Christian perspective so as to ensure the dominance of Christian morality.

The same drive evolves into the painful feeling of cowardice under the impress of the reproach custom has imposed upon this drive: or into the pleasant feeling of humility if it happens that a custom such as the Christian has taken it to its heart and called it good.² (Nietzsche, 1881, p. 26)

The force of the context in the manipulation of names is essential to Nietzsche's argument for it reveals the extent to which way names have been arbitrarily manipulated. This is evident, from the genealogical analysis of the theological concepts of 'faith' and 'knowledge' which are the new names of 'instinct' and 'reason'. In the attempt to define what it is that makes us human, Socrates - against the nobility of his time - argued that reason was humanity's defining feature. However, he came to realise that his own judgement in favour of reason was irrational i.e., instinctive. Plato, shifted the perspective arguing that reason was not grounded in instinct, but that reason and instinct collaborated in moving towards one goal, namely that of the good. Theologians, subsequently, adopted the Platonic practice of re-naming, and re-named instinct as faith and reason as knowledge: 'since Plato all theologians and philosophers have followed the same path - that is to say, in moral matters instinct, or as the Christians call it 'faith,' or as I call it 'the herd' '. (Nietzsche, 1886, p. 96) The genealogical analysis of concepts reveals the way concepts have been named and renamed so as to further the interests of specific groups.

Moral Names as Signs

There is another aspect to Nietzsche's analysis of moral names that needs to be examined. So far, the analysis has been conducted at the operations of signs deployed within specific contexts for specific ends. However, there is another type of critique whereby the name functions as a sign in a process that Nietzsche calls 'symptomatology', a process that in contemporary studies would be called semiology.³

Nietzsche explicitly claims that knowing how to interpret signs implies a conceptual framework that allows the interpretation of such signs to take place. The framework he introduces is physiological i.e. a sign is an expression of health or sickness. Adopting this conceptual framework reveals that signs are frequently employed to provide 'masks' for the expression of adverse physiological conditions. This theoretical position is best exemplified in a passage from *Twilight of The Idols*, where the preconditions for a semiological interpretation of moral names are laid out: morality,

never contains anything but nonsense. But as semeiotics it remains of incalculable value: it reveals, to the informed man at least, the most precious

realities of cultures and inner worlds which did not know enough to 'understand' themselves. Morality is merely sign-language, merely symptomatology: one must already know what it is about to derive profit from it. (Nietzsche, 1889/1893, p. 65)

The practice of Nietzschean *semiology* involves the necessity of accepting that (a) names - moral in particular - are signs which do not say anything true of themselves, but (b) which are priceless in giving us knowledge about their uses (social or the individual) and (c) which presuppose that the interpreter already has insight or knowledge of both the nature of the sign and what it reveals i.e., knowledge of physiology as the causal motor in the production of names.

The causal connection between the physiology of the person and the moral names used by that person is immediate and direct. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the relation between a man and his values is the object of Zarathustra's critique on the 'befoulers of noble names': 'now your emasculated leering wants to be called 'contemplation'! And that which lets cowardly eyes touch it shall be christened 'beautiful'!' (Nietzsche, 1883-85, p. 145) The valorisation of the concepts of contemplation and of beauty is a reaction to their weak physiology. This is what the metaphor of emasculation reveals i.e., that an emasculated man tries to overcome his weakness by appropriating beautiful names.

Nietzsche's social critique also utilises semiology as a critical strategy. The valorised 'beautiful names' include 'progress', 'equal rights', 'a free society.' But again, in a reversal of our customary way of thinking, it is precisely because they are so highly valued that they function as signs of the 'deteriorating' physiological condition of society. 'What we find in them is merely an expression--and a masquerade--of a profound weakening, of weariness, of old age, of declining energies'. (Nietzsche, 1882, p. 339) If we accept Nietzsche's physiological criterion, then an unhealthy society is one that prizes certain names as a 'mask' for their 'sick' condition. And his suggestion is that what society needs is someone who can unmask these 'glorious names' revealing them for what they are: not 'glorious' or 'beautiful' but pointers to a sick mankind.

Nietzsche's semiological interpretation also reveals that, given a particular situation, certain names are renamed. Thus, when certain qualities are perceived negatively, these are renamed in order to hide their negativity:

Cruelty has been refined to tragic pity, so that it is denied the name of cruelty. In the same way sexual love has been refined to amour-passion; the slavish disposition to Christian obedience; wretchedness to humility; a pathological condition of the nervus sympathicus, e.g., to pessimism, Pascalism, or Carlylism, etc. (Nietzsche, 1888, p.173)

Those who use 'big moral words' are in effect trying to hide the reality about themselves. They are the kind of individuals who are born 'badly' i.e., with a weak physical constitution, but who, having an education, realise their deficiency. Given that these individuals recognise their condition, morality is employed by them in order to establish their superiority over others. But if we understand that it is their physiological condition which gives rise to their moralising, then Nietzsche claims that their use of morality reveals both an act of self-hatred and an attempt to dominate others: 'the cloak of prudent silence, of affability, of mildness and whatever may be the names of all the other idealistic cloaks in

which incurable self-despisers, as well as the incurably vain strut about.' (48) The worst of these kinds of individuals - and Nietzsche considers St. Augustine to be one of them - is he whom society mistakenly values for his 'wisdom'. But this wisdom is 'false' since it functions as 'a screen above all' for the kind of person - in this case a philosopher - whose physiological condition is in decline, who is 'weary, old, cold, hard'. (Nietzsche, 1882, p. 315)

Nietzsche's interpretative strategy is also deployed in his critique of signs that are used within religious discourses. Such signs can be therapeutic in that they help man forget the feelings of depression which his weak physiological condition has generated. The therapy would entail renaming signs 'a little art of name changing in order to make them seem as blessings things which hitherto they had abominated.' (Nietzsche, 1887, p. 271) It is the priest who stands out for special attention in that it is he who uses names as signs that 'mask' the physiological condition of his followers. And Nietzsche stress the irreducibility of physiology in his explanation of the generation of religious signs: 'If anyone is unable to get rid of a psychological pain, the fault lies not in his "psyche" but, more likely, in his belly...'. (Nietzsche, 1887, p. 266) Given the ill health of the followers, the function of the priest is pivotal in that he recognises their physiological condition and offers an explanation for their suffering by way of consolation. Thus, a religious explanation provides the framework for naming physiological conditions. 'I assume sinfulness is not a basic human condition but merely the ethico-religious interpretation of physiological distemper'. (Nietzsche, 1887, p. 265)

Within the religious framework, the priest is not invulnerable to physiological decline. That he is able to name the physiological condition of others in a religious way is due to himself also being an expression of his own physiological condition. He does not name from a position external to the religious context but rather, is also conditioned by his physiology despite not realising it. Both the priest and his followers are physiologically weak, but the difference between them is that he can name these weaknesses: 'with the aid of the sign-language of religio-moral idiosyncrasy - 'repentance', 'sting of conscience', 'temptation by the Devil', 'the proximity of God', (Nietzsche, 1889/1895, p. 135).

Nietzsche's account shows that names are invaluable in that they provide 'openings' that make possible the interpretation of the context of their production. According to his argument, there is a causal connection between the body (physiology) and names such that the condition of the body is the cause of the names used in these contexts. This causal connection is combined with an interpretative schema (health or sickness) that makes it possible to understand the meaning of these names. Nietzsche's argument depends crucially upon this interpretative schema and whether one accepts it or not, is not the concern of this paper, but clearly it is debatable and has been subjected to rigorous criticism.

Conclusion

The essay *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense* is Nietzsche's only text on language and one that he did not publish; his other writings on language are brief and scattered throughout his corpus. This clearly raises the question of how much importance

one should attribute to his views on language. Despite this lack of - both published and unpublished material - one can argue for a continuing presence of language related concerns throughout his writings. This essay highlights one of those concerns, i.e., the question of linguistic naming and the role of the name in a number of discourses.

In this paper I have demonstrated (1) that the origin of his interest with names can be traced to the early text on language and that (2) this developed into a concern primarily - though not exclusively - with moral names as a tool utilised for the manipulation of others. Finally, (3) the interpretation of moral names is elaborated into a semiological theory that presupposes an understanding of those processes that lead to their production. What this paper shows is that one cannot not agree with Paul Ricoeur's assessment of Nietzsche as a 'master of suspicion.' (Ricoeur, 1970, p. 5)

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1. However, name reversal is not only the privilege of the liar: Nietzsche criticises Strauss's status as a 'classic writer' on the grounds that this status is derived from the arbitrary misuse of names by German society who have agreed to invert the nature and names of things. (Nietzsche, 1983, p 2)

2. Nehemas elaborates, 'In itself the drive has no moral character...the activity produced by a particular drive, if we abstract from the context within which it is performed, is always the same. But once we supply a context, once we introduce a point of view, both the drive and the activity come to possess a specific value.' (Nehemas, 1985, p. 212).

3. Deleuze writes, 'we will never find the sense of something (of a human, a biological or even a physical phenomenon) if we do not know the force which appropriates the thing, which exploits, which takes possession of it or is expressed in it. A phenomenon is not an appearance or even an apparition but a sign, a symptom which finds in it an existing force. The whole of philosophy is a symptomatology, and a semiology.' (Deleuze, 1983, p. 3)

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