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Nietzsche's Philosophy of Language

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Friedrich Nietzsche's descriptions of language not only serve as instrumental supports to many of his larger arguments but also display his fascination with a magical potential of language. Nietzsche's descriptions of language constitute critical components within several of his complex arguments for certain concepts and processes, such as "slave morality" and the adoption of the "Socratic aesthetic." Since Nietzsche's comments on language often serve as supports within his overall discussions, they may go overlooked. This paper seeks to develop a portrait of Nietzsche's philosophy of language, arguing that Nietzsche demonstrates a belief that language serves as a strategic mechanism to continually transform and determine behaviors and values.

This paper will cite and analyze seven separate references to language in three of Nietzsche's published works, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), *The Gay Science* (1882), and *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887), to illuminate Nietzsche's conceptions of language within each. These citations address differing facets and uses of language, such as poetry, grammar, Euripidean theatre, and interpretation. The analysis of these diverse references intends to uncover Nietzsche's understanding of language. Each reference will be understood as serving a specific purpose in developing an argument of this understanding and will be discussed in a way that strives to connect each reference and unfurl an overarching philosophy on language. The analysis will reveal Nietzsche's belief that utility and a will to achieve power or promote a particular value drives the development and use of language; also, language reflects and reveals these agendas. Moreover, such a strategic use and development of language is creative, ongoing, and flexible. Finally, this paper will discuss the implications of Nietzsche's philosophy of language

for everyday life.

In "On the genius of the species," from *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche asserts that consciousness arose from a need to communicate with others. He traces the rise of consciousness to the development of language, writing on page 213, that "the development of language and the development of consciousness go hand in hand." For Nietzsche, language and consciousness are not inherent features of human nature; they developed to serve a necessity and became present within the context of groups to allow individuals to better survive through cooperating with others. Thus, both having consciousness and using language are results of the *need* to communicate with others. He writes, "*consciousness in general has developed only under the pressure of the need to communicate*; that at the outset, consciousness was necessary, was useful, only between persons ... Consciousness is really just a net connecting one person with another."

For Nietzsche, the presence of language created a new conception of the individual. He describes how the rise of language and consciousness made people aware of themselves in relation to others, causing individuals to understand themselves based on their function within a group. Nietzsche writes "My idea is clearly that consciousness actually belongs not to man's existence as an individual but rather to the community - and herd-aspects of his nature ... it is finely developed only in relation to its usefulness to the community or herd; and that consequently each of us, even with the best will in the world to *understand* ourselves as individually as possible, 'to know ourselves', will always bring to consciousness precisely that in ourselves which is 'non-individual', that which is average." In this way, Nietzsche proposes that this new understanding of self mandates that individuals evaluate themselves based

on their role or relationships within a community, thus projecting group identity onto the individual and subjecting him to common values and judgments.

This first language reference lays the basis for Nietzsche's philosophy of language. First, it demonstrates that Nietzsche sees language and the development and use of language as the result of some need or utility. Second, by coupling language and consciousness, Nietzsche implies that the use of language complicates how individuals understand themselves by positing individuals in relation to others.

Section 13 of *On the Genealogy of Morality* builds on this conception of self by describing a critical moment in the history of language and the consequences of it. In this section, Nietzsche describes how a particular manipulation of language created the perceived relationship between subjects and actions. At the beginning of this section, he juxtaposes the current understanding of subject with an early notion of subject that equates humans to animals:

There is nothing strange about the fact that lambs bear a grudge towards large birds of prey: but there is no reason to blame the large birds of prey for carrying off the little lambs. And if the lambs say to each other, "Those birds of prey are evil; and whoever is least like a bird of prey and most like its opposite, a lamb, - is good, isn't he? ... It is just as absurd to ask strength not to express itself as strength, not to be a desire to overthrow, crush, become master, to be a thirst for enemies, resistance, and triumphs, as it is to ask weakness to express itself as strength."¹

Here, Nietzsche identifies the creation of the differentiation between innate qualities (such as strength or weakness) and actions. Nietzsche envisions behavior and actions as expressions of inherent qualities such that actions are mere extensions of self. Thus "asking" the self to express an action unrepresentative of its qualities is absurd.

Nietzsche sees the development of language as the mechanism that created a division between self and actions. He expresses this conclusion by writing, "A quantum of force is just such a quantum of drive, will, action, in fact it is nothing but this driving, willing, and acting, and only the seduction of language (and the fundamental errors of reason petrified within it), which construes and misconstrues all actions as conditional upon an agency, a 'subject', can make it appear otherwise."²

Nietzsche does not specify how language exactly "construes" and "misconstrues" actions, though the development of grammar serves as a possible example of such a mechanism. Grammar creates a separation between subject and action through the use of different particles of speech; the subject (noun) of a sentence performs an action (the verb), for instance. Grammar may seem inherent to language. But Nietzsche implies that this particular accompaniment of language creates enormous potential and consequences for people: envisioning actions as separate from subjects makes individuals responsible for their actions; thus, language changes what action represents, negating his contention that action is just an uncontrollable expression of internal qualities.

Nietzsche's description of this process constitutes the key development and support for his theory of the rise of "slave morality" and the creation of the "evil versus good" framework:

And just as the common people separates lightning from its flash and take the latter to be a deed, something performed by a subject, which is called lightning, popular morality separates strength from the manifestations of strength, as though there were an indifferent substratum behind the strong person which had the freedom to manifest strength or not. But there is no such substratum; there is not 'being' behind the deed, its effect and what becomes of it; 'the doer' is invented as an afterthought- the doing is everything. Basically, the common people double a deed ... they posit the same event, first as cause and then as

its effect ... all our science, it spite of its coolness and freedom from emotion, still stands exposed to the seduction of language.³

In this way, “popular morality” exploits the isolation of subject from action made possible by language and grammar. By making people responsible for controllable actions, morality may deem certain actions evil and others good and hold people accountable for their actions.

This section contributes to Nietzsche’s previous claims that language develops due to utility by adding that certain properties that seem inherent to communication (such as grammar) have the power to inform the way we understand and judge actions and subjects. This creates the potential to use or change language to create or support new concepts, such as responsibility, blame, and guilt that, in turn, have been instrumental to revolutions in social values, such as the rise of “slave morality.” This section envisions specific qualities of language as crucial to keeping the foundations of value systems intact. Furthermore, these two sections reveal that Nietzsche sees plasticity within language that allows it to serve as strategy to pursue an agenda.

This section in *On the Genealogy of Morality* also hints at another critical component of Nietzsche’s philosophy of language: the construction of categories and labels through a process of the reinterpretation of other understandings of concepts or behaviors. Nietzsche refers to this evolution and creation of concepts in the previous citation when writes that the lambs have labeled the behavior of the birds of prey as evil and their own behavior as good; thus, actions that align with particular behaviors fit into either the “good” or “evil” category. Nietzsche further illuminates this concept in his Third Essay in *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Here, he describes the “ascetic priest’s” creation of the concepts “sin” and “guilt,” and the process by which people came to see themselves as sinners. He writes of this process:

The main contrivance which the ascetic priest allowed himself to

use in order to make the human soul resound with every kind of heartrending and ecstatic music was - as everyone knows - his utilization of the feeling of guilt. The previous essay indicated the descent of this feeling briefly- as a piece of animal psychology, no more: there we encountered the feeling of guilt in its raw state, as it were. Only in the hand of the priest, this real artist in the feeling of guilt, did it take shape- and what a shape! ‘Sin’ – for that is the name for the priestly reinterpretation of the greatest event in the history of the sick soul up till now: with sin, we have the most dangerous and disastrous trick of religious interpretation ... the sick man has been made into the sinner’.⁴

Here, Nietzsche refers to two different stages in the development of the concept “guilt,” indicating an early, “raw” stage and its current interpretation, labeled “sin.” The transformation of guilt serves as an example of Nietzsche’s theory of interpretation and labeling. In this case, the ascetic priest began with “raw” guilt, reinterpreted it to serve his own interests, and relabeled it “sin.” This implies an ongoing reinterpretation of concepts to serve the purposes of the interpreter. Note that Nietzsche refers to the ascetic priest as a magician, implying a type of trickery or deceit involved in this process of reinterpretation. This imagery portrays those who participate in reinterpretation as wielding great power, invisible to those affected.

Furthermore, Nietzsche explains that the creation of the sinner became an explanation for suffering. Nietzsche writes, “...and lo and behold! from this magician, the ascetic priest, he receives the first *tip* as to the ‘cause’ of his suffering: he should look within *himself* ... he should understand his suffering itself as a *condition of punishment* ... everywhere, the *will* to misunderstand suffering made into the content of life, suffering reinterpreted as feelings of guilt, fear, punishment.”⁵ Thus, interpretation and labeling not only change the meaning of concepts but also create new explanations for human phenomenon, such as suffering. Nietzsche more carefully examines the capability to destroy old explanations and concepts by replacing them with

new interpretations in Section 58 of *The Gay Science*.

In this section, Nietzsche illustrates the importance of names by explaining that new labels cease to remain the interpretation or categorization of something and instead come to represent what something actually *is*. He writes in *Only as creators!*:

This has caused me the greatest trouble...: to realize that what things are called is unspeakably more important than what they are. The reputation, name, and appearance, the worth, the usual measure and weight of a thing ... has, through the belief in it and its growth from generation to generation, slowly grown onto and into the thing and has become its very body: what started as appearance in the end nearly always becomes essence and effectively acts as its essence!⁶

These two passages represent two important additions to Nietzsche's philosophy of language. First, through interpretation and labeling to represent a new interpretation of a previous concept, names for concepts appear real, inherent, and original. Second, such "essences" may be created or destroyed; that is, although they seem inherent of absolute, the nature by which they were created means that they may be destroyed via a *creative* process of reinterpretation and relabeling. Nietzsche goes on to emphasize the necessity of creation in order to destroy or change concepts or values:

What kind of a fool would believe that it is enough to point to this origin and this misty shroud of delusion in order to destroy the world that counts as 'real', so-called 'reality'! Only as creators can we destroy! – But let us also not forget that in the long run it is enough to create new names and valuations and appearances of truth in order to create new 'things'.⁷

Thus, new concepts and values arise not by pointing out the flaws or non-absolutist nature of current ones, but through re-creating them. In this way,

Nietzsche questions the destruction of concepts; he proposes a more complicated way of envisioning the evolution of ideas and values.

Sections and facets of Nietzsche's philosophy of language thus far form a self-reinforcing hierarchy of language mechanisms that create the potential to dominate through the manipulation of language. Lower levels within the hierarchy support and reinforce higher, more complex levels. For example, language's separation of subject and action creates the potential for the exploitation of guilt because it creates the concept of responsibility by construing actions as dependent on an isolated agent. In turn, this division between subject and action supports the conception of a separate body and self or soul, necessary to the interpretation of suffering as the result of one's self as a sinner. In turn, the ascetic priest reinterprets guilt, labeling it sin and creating the illusion of sin as an inherent and absolute definition of the soul because of the invisible nature of this process. These individual processes create a hierarchal matrix, building on one another and reinforcing each process through repetition and the development of further concepts that rest on a foundation of previous developments.

This proposed hierarchy of language processes also represents a way to envision Nietzsche's theory that every value has a unique "genealogy." Such an interpretation of Nietzsche's comments on language argues that Nietzsche believes in the potential to break down or reform complex values, such as slave morality. Though such values seem absolute and engrained, they may be dismantled through the revelation of the uses of language that make up this hierarchy of supports.

Certain passages and theory from one of Nietzsche's earliest works, *The Birth of Tragedy*, provide examples of the reinforcements that stabilize societal and cultural values and trends in thinking. Specifically, this section shows how different cultural venues for language, such as theatre, support and reflect such values. In Section 12 of this text, Nietzsche presents Euripidean theatre as a representation of the Socratic aesthetic, symbolic of

the greater Socratic revolution of logic and reason. Nietzsche describes the influence of Socrates, writing:

...[after Socrates] for the first time...a common network of thought was stretched over the whole globe, with prospects of encompassing even the laws of the entire solar system; when one considers all this, along with the astonishingly high pyramid of knowledge we have at present, one cannot do other than regard Socrates as the vortex and turning-point of so-called world history.⁸

This turning point made the “...noblest, indeed the only true human vocation” the quest for knowledge and the separation of “...true knowledge from illusion and error.”⁹

Nietzsche claims that the creation and promulgation of Euripidean theatre mirrored and encouraged the values of the Socratic revolution. In this way, Euripides recreated all the elements of tragic theatre to accord with the Socratic principles of logic. In doing so, he invented and implemented a new aesthetic, which Nietzsche calls the Socratic aesthetic. The use of this new aesthetic injected art with Socratic values; for example, Euripidean theatre reflected and reinforced the quest for Socratic logic and reason. Nietzsche writes:

We can therefore now get closer to the nature of aesthetic Socratism, whose supreme law runs roughly like this: ‘In order to be beautiful, everything must be reasonable - a sentence formed in parallel to Socrates’ dictum that ‘Only he who knows is virtuous. With this canon in his hand Euripides measured every single element-language, characters, dramatic construction, choral music - and rectified it in accordance with this principle.’¹⁰

Such changes included the exclusion of the chorus, the invention of an informative prologue, and, making visible the necessary, formal elements of theater, which previously had been “made to appear fortuitous.”

Nietzsche’s account of the evolution of Greek theatre in *The Birth of Tragedy* serves as an example of another component of his philosophy of language. Previous quotations envisioned Nietzsche’s understanding of language as a means to strategically create values, alter conceptions of subjects, and make concepts seem original and absolute. This reference implies that particular styles and trends in cultural uses of language, such as Dionysiac tragedy versus Euripidean tragedy, reflect and empower particular values and trends in thinking. In light of this contribution, Nietzsche seems to believe that language not only serves to strategically create ideas but also represents a cultural mechanism to invisibly communicate and reinforce new ideals (such as a faith in Socratic logic), thereby legitimizing and fortifying such ideas.

Nietzsche provides an interesting corollary to this claim through his commentary on the sound of the German language in Section 104 of *The Gay Science*. Using German language as example, this section asserts that the sound or tone of a language evolves to reflect a culture’s institutions and values; in addition, the sound of a language affects the behaviors and psychologies of the people using the language. Nietzsche argues that the character of the German language derives from the culture’s faith in the institution of courts:

The Germans, with their reverence for everything that came from the court, have deliberately taken the chanceries as their model in everything they had to write, such as letters, documents, wills, and so forth ...Eventually one drew the consequences and started to speak the way one wrote ... one affected a courtly tone when speaking ... a similar yearning for refinement of sound is spreading, and that the Germans are starting to obey a most peculiar ‘acoustic spell’... Something scornful, cold, indifferent, careless in one’s voice ... and I hear the good will to this refinement in the voices of young officials, teachers, women, merchant; even little girls are starting to imitate this officers’ German.¹¹

Moreover, the sound of German language affects its speakers' psychologies and behaviors:

It is certain that the Germans are becoming militarized in the sound of their language; it is probable that once they have got used to speaking in a military tone, they will eventually also start writing that way. For being used to certain sounds has a profound effect on character—one soon has the words and phrases, and finally also the thoughts that fit this sound!¹²

This reflects the former principle discussed in the analysis of Nietzsche's account of the Socratic aesthetic in theater: the style of language, whether in terms of the techniques used in theatre or in the sound of a language, conforms to and echoes the particular values that dominate within a culture at a particular time. In this way, Nietzsche presents language as a mechanism to publicize or teach such values by legitimizing them through their presence in other venues within the society (such as in the sound of a language or in the style of theatre). Nietzsche's portrayal of Euripides's manifestation of the Socratic revolution within his tragedy implies that venues and uses of language may respond immediately to trends in thought. Nietzsche's conclusion in *On the sound of the German language* gives great potential for certain styles within language to ingrain values within peoples' psychologies and bodies. In conclusion, these two sections complicate Nietzsche's philosophy of language by giving language additional power to reflect and teach new values.

A final reference in *The Gay Science* confirms Nietzsche's view that certain uses of language have great potential to enhance how true or absolute something appears. Whereas the past two references portrayed language as having the power to reinforce and teach concepts and values, *On the origin of poetry* strengthens these claims by arguing that certain properties of language somehow enhance the credibility of what is being said or written.

Nietzsche begins this contention by saying that people originally used poetry to communicate with

the gods, giving it an irrational, "superstitious utility." Specifically, Nietzsche says that, "rhythmic quality exercises a magical force."¹³ He continues, "In short: was there anything more *useful* than rhythm to the old superstitious type of human being? One could do everything with it: promote some work magically; compel a god to appear, to be near, to listen; mould the future according to one's own will; discharge some excess from one's soul ...Without verse one was nothing; through verse one became a god."¹⁴

Most interestingly, Nietzsche claims that even today, something sounds truer when spoken in rhythm:

... after millennia of work at fighting such superstition, even the wisest of us occasionally become a fool for rhythm, if only insofar as he feels a thought to be truer when it has a metric form and presents itself with a divine hop, skip, and jump. Is it not amusing that the most serious philosophers, strict as they otherwise are in all matters of certainty, still appeal to the sayings of poets to lend their thoughts force and credibility?¹⁵

Nietzsche's belief that poetry gives words greater authority implies the potential to manipulate conventions of language to make something seem truer. This goes beyond simply having excellent command of a language in order to present convincing arguments. Nietzsche's descriptions in this section imply that certain types of rhetoric have magical quality that escapes rationality.

Readers should not neglect that Nietzsche's understanding of language supports the larger arguments within these works. This paper has hoped not only to illuminate these roles but also to isolate these different references to language to argue for a particular philosophy of language at work. This analysis reveals Nietzsche's view of language as a powerful, manipulative tool that has the potential to alter the way in which people envision themselves and to create value revolutions that govern the way people conduct their lives. Moreover, certain uses of language possess a magical property that can irrationally give concepts more weight and

importance. Also, the sound of language and cultural uses of language serve as mechanisms to transmit new trends in thought. The development and use of language - from the adoption of certain words to the use of rhythm to the type of prologues used in theatre - serve a purpose and operate as part of a broader strategy to achieve power and instill values. The diverse powers attributed to language in these passages demonstrate that changes and developments in language reinforce one another and may be envisioned as a hierarchical matrix that supports and gives rise to complex and seemingly absolute values.

Above all, Nietzsche's philosophy of language inspires optimism because it questions the stability of values by showing that they derive from a series of language processes that may be dismantled by creation and reinterpretation. Creation includes different strategic uses of language, from exploiting poetry to appear wise to transmitting an idea by tailoring theatre conventions to reflect its values. Nietzsche's philosophy of language ultimately inspires readers to action by giving them tools to further their own beliefs by stressing creativity and the powerful, magical potential of language.

11. *The Gay Science*, p. 102
12. *Ibid.*, p. 102
13. *Ibid.*, p. 85
14. *Ibid.*, p. 85
15. *Ibid.*, p. 85

NOTES

1. *Note*: All citations from Nietzsche's enumeration.
Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Genealogy of Morality* Trans. Walter Kauffman, New York: Random House, 1976. p. 26
2. *Ibid.*, p. 24
3. *Ibid.*, p. 24
4. *Ibid.*, p. 104
5. *Ibid.*, p. 104-105
6. Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Gay Science*. Trans. Walter Kaufman. New York: Random House, 1976. p. 70
7. *Ibid.*, p. 70
8. Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy*. Trans. Walter Kaufman, New York: Random House, 1976. p. 74
9. *Ibid.*, p. 74
10. *Ibid.*, p. 62