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Nietzsche on Language and Our Pursuit of Truth

LE QUYEN PHAM

LANGUAGE—how it influences how we perceive the world and what it makes us think and do—is one of the major themes in the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. Language, for Nietzsche, poses fundamental philosophical questions, with implications for our relation to truth and our search to understand what we take to be the kernel of existence underlying the façade of grammar. Drawing materials from across Nietzsche’s many writings, Tracy Strong has created a coherent picture of the philosopher’s understanding of the relation between language, thought, and reality.¹ Strong ascribes to Nietzsche three major claims: that language shapes both knowledge about reality and reality itself, that language bounds our thought, understanding, and behavior within the reality it constructs, and that language necessitates an epistemology of nihilism in which we seek to know what we know cannot be known—namely *the* truth. Strong describes three epistemological prejudices engendered by linguistic categories that condition and limit the way we perceive and understand our world, namely the subject-object distinction, freedom of the will, and the sequencing of cause and effect. The subject-object distinction in turn contributes to the emergence of consciousness as well as an ahistorical view of human nature.

By looking at further passages by Nietzsche overlooked by Strong, I will both refine and extend his interpretation. I will show that all of the so-called prejudices identified above—subjectivity, agency, causality, consciousness, and ahistoricity—arise as consequences of a single feature of

1 Tracy B. Strong, “Language and Nihilism: Nietzsche’s Critique of Epistemology,” *Theory and Society* 3 (1976): 239–263.

grammar, what I will call the subject-predicate sentence. Furthermore, I will expand on a sixth effect of language on our epistemology, one of familiarity, which Strong only briefly mentions. I begin by exploring the metaphysical implications of epistemological readings of Nietzsche's remarks, in order to extend the interpretation from how Nietzsche thinks language creates and informs our *knowledge* of the world to what he may have implied about the *nature* of the world.

LANGUAGE, THOUGHT, AND REALITY

Nietzsche's remarks on language are to be compiled from volumes of his writings, from which one idea is manifest: in using language to talk about reality, we already presuppose reality; we take our language to express truths and the words of our language to be the sound-forms of concepts "out there in the world." Yet we are only a species of "clever animals [which] invented cognition," deceived by our own invention; there is no single truth, no concepts independent of language, no one reality outside of us that causes our cognitive activity. The evidence lies in the simple observation that there are many languages: "Where words are concerned, what matters is never truth, never the full and adequate expression; otherwise there would not be so many languages."² Since there are many languages, and since reality looks different in different languages, if each language captures reality, then either there is no single reality, or each language does not fully and adequately capture reality. Nietzsche seems to lean towards the first possibility: there is no "true," absolute reality; the world that appears to us "is the only world" and "the 'true world' is just a lie added on to it."³ Note that Nietzsche shuns the traditional distinction in philosophy between reality and appearance:

2 Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense," in *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, ed. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs, trans. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 139–153.

3 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols, or How to Philosophize with a Hammer* in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, ed. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 153–230.

for him, what is apparent *is* what is real.

Such a radical view on the effects of language on human epistemology is reminiscent of the Kantian structure of the mental faculty, in which the structure of human cognition determines the structure of experienced reality, in such a way that our experience of what Kant calls “things-in-themselves” contributes to them fundamental features such as substancehood, causality, and necessity. For Nietzsche, however, the direction of determination goes back even further: the categories of language define the structure of human cognition, thereby defining the structure of reality. This, however, does not mean that language shapes thought, which in turn shapes reality, for the human mind has no such power. Rather, language shapes thought, which is *about* reality, the reality it presupposes. In this sense, our epistemology is determined by our language: linguistic capacity is a necessary condition for the possibility of knowledge, and the conceptual apparatus with which we perceive, experience, and hence come to “know” the world is essentially linguistic.

In Strong’s words, “The regularities which are our life are engendered and supported in language.”⁴ Language, for Nietzsche, “serves a double function”: it is both “the means by which we construct the world,” and “the tools by which [we] must deal with the world,” that is, by which we make sense of our life and activity.⁵ The two functions are complementary: linguistic structures provide the framework in which reality is experienced, and the framework within which reality, both human life and activity and the rest of nature, is to be understood.

Note the ambiguity in Strong’s claim that with language “we construct the world,” and that “language makes the world present”: either each language individually creates a world, which becomes “the” world for its speakers, or there is *the* world, which each language reinterprets or reconstructs differently, with that reconstruction then becoming the only world known to its speakers.⁶ In the first interpretation, there is no absolute reality

4 Strong, “Language and Nihilism,” 242.

5 Strong, “Language and Nihilism,” 242.

6 Strong, “Language and Nihilism,” 242.

but only relativized realities. In the second interpretation, there are both an absolute reality and relativized realities. In both interpretations, human understanding is supplied with the presentation of only their relativized world, which contains only relativized truths. Yet we are convinced that there is such a thing as the absolute world: “the mind is only seeking to persuade itself that the world it knows is the one true world. . . . We have projected the world with a distorted lens, yet the vision is taken as real.”⁷

The first, stronger interpretation is more plausible, given Nietzsche’s general philosophical objection to the idea of a “true world.” Languages do not only embody different *worldviews*, but rather they describe different *worlds*. Our reality is *the* reality as our language presents it to us. It is not that we see “the” reality through the colors and shapes of language, but we each see our own reality through the colors and shapes of our own language. There is no single, “true” truth, but only an illusion of one, and a multiplicity of *truths* presented in languages. Nietzsche famously declares: “What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors. . . . Truths are illusions of which we have forgotten that they are illusions.”⁸ Our grasp of truth is legislated or conditioned by the structure of our own language: “The legislation of language also produces the first laws of truth.”⁹

At first, Strong seems committed only to the second, less radical interpretation: the means by which we *construct* reality, language is thus really the veil or lens through which we *see* reality, i.e. think about, understand, form beliefs about, and come to know the “real” reality. In certain passages Nietzsche seems to suggest the same point, that there is a world (“the other world”) besides the world that our language constructs: “Mankind set up in language a separate world beside the other world, a place it took to be so firmly set that, standing upon it, it could lift the rest of the world off its hinges and make itself master of it. . . . [Man] really thought that in language he possessed knowledge of the [‘other’] world.”¹⁰

7 Strong, “Language and Nihilism,” 246.

8 Nietzsche, “On Truth,” 146.

9 Nietzsche, “On Truth,” 143.

10 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), I:§11.

Nevertheless, this other, true world, the presupposed “realm which could not be shaped by language and which would not be co-terminous with language,” would be nonetheless ineffable and hence unknowable, and *therefore*, Strong concludes, there could not possibly be such a world.¹¹ If there were, then it would serve as a “scale” on which languages can be ranked by the degree of correctness in representation. Yet, Strong argues, such a scale would imply an unknowable world, and therefore there can be no such scale, and therefore there is no such world-in-itself.¹² Because we can only think and know through the medium of language (“if there were not language, then one really wouldn’t know what to say about the world”), the forms of reality that lie beneath or beyond linguistic forms are also beyond the reaches of human cognition, in the same way that Kant’s things-in-themselves are beyond the limits of human experience.¹³ The structure of our language may presuppose a reality that is to be known, a “public,” absolute, eternal reality where “Truth” resides, yet such a reality is (“by definition”) not knowable and therefore not possible.¹⁴

Nietzsche gives a similar argument from limitedness for the claim that there is no reference to the true world in language: “The ‘thing-in-itself’...is impossible for even the creator of language to grasp....He designates only the relations of things to human beings.”¹⁵ Because words are created to refer to the contents of human experience, that is, because the creation of words is tied to or limited by human experience, whatever lies beyond experience necessarily cannot be spoken of and therefore cannot appear, even by metaphor, in language. The illusion of a world-in-itself is only a “philosophical mythology ... concealed in language”: “we do not only designate things with [the word and the concept], we think originally that through them we grasp the true in things.”¹⁶

Yet Nietzsche’s claim is stronger: not only do we not find in lan-

11 Strong, “Language and Nihilism,” 243.

12 Strong, “Language and Nihilism,” 245–46.

13 Strong, “Language and Nihilism,” 242.

14 Strong, “Language and Nihilism,” 246.

15 Nietzsche, “On Truth,” 144.

16 Nietzsche, *Human*, “Wanderer,” §11.

guage evidence of an absolute reality, but there is no absolute reality, no one true world. The conclusion of Strong's main argument above from epistemological impossibility to metaphysical impossibility thus seems to be a correct interpretation of Nietzsche. Even when Nietzsche would grant that there is no metaphysical or epistemological contradiction in either the notion of things-in-themselves or that of the one true world, to conclude, as Strong and Nietzsche do, based on the mere fact that they are indescribable, unknowable, or unexperienceable that they cannot exist in any sense, is to subscribe to a materialist and empiricist view of the world, which Nietzsche does and stresses in his philosophy. Kant's things-in-themselves have been rejected by the same line of argument: because things-in-themselves are outside of experience, the notion of them is not even sensible. Of such transcendental objects Nietzsche writes: "Absolutely nothing will be heard, with the associated acoustic illusion that if nothing is heard, *nothing is there*."¹⁷

THE VEIL OF WORDS AND OUR EPISTEMOLOGICAL PREJUDICES

Thus we perceive and know the world only through language; language is our mediation to reality—a relativized, man-made reality, but one which we take to be absolute. The genealogy of language is thus the genealogy of the world, and hence the genealogy of truth (again, both "the world" and "truth" are to be understood in the relativized sense). The trio thing-in-itself–concept–word is often confused: the word signifies the concept, which purportedly captures the putative "thing-in-itself," but the word is often confusedly taken to stand for a thing-in-itself. "We believe that when we speak of trees, colours, snows, and flowers, we have knowledge of the things themselves, and yet we possess only metaphors of things which in no way correspond to the original entities."¹⁸ The "standing for" relation is only a

17 Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo: How to Become What You Are*, in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, ed. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 69–152.

18 Nietzsche, "On Truth," 144.

metaphorical one; it is rather a series of imitations that modify the original in modality. All that we have in the beginning are stimulations of nerves, from which mental “images,” i.e., concepts, form (first metaphor), which are then expressed in sounds, i.e., words (second metaphor). Each step in the transformation has modified the original thing, so that in the end we “know” the sound only by the Chladni sand figures that its vibrations create.¹⁹

Not only does language mediate between us and our reality by way of such metaphors, but it does so in particular ways that constitutively determine our understanding of reality. One aphorism of Nietzsche reads: “Every word is a prejudice.”²⁰ Strong discusses three such “epistemological prejudices” engendered by language that Nietzsche uncovers: subjectivity or what Strong calls the “subject-object distinction,” agency or free will, and causality or conditionality, along with two consequences of the subject-object distinction, namely the “overvaluation” of consciousness and the tendency towards ahistoricity.

These effects of language, while “real,” all seem to be, *pace* Strong, consequences of a single linguistic feature, namely the subject-predicate sentence, the “I do.” Because grammar requires at least a subject and a predicate, in the same sentence we talk about doer (“I”) and deed (“do”) as if they were separate things (which is the effect of subjectivity); the doer appears to be free to perform the deed or not (agency); the doer appears to be the cause and the deed his effect (causality); the doer, in speaking of his own deed, becomes conscious of himself as the agent and cause, i.e. as related to but distinct from his actions (consciousness), and assumes an “I” that does not change with time, while his actions, which are separate from him, do change (ahistoricity).

Thus, the appearance of subjectivity, what Strong terms the “subject-object distinction,” is rather the subject-predicate distinction. The separation is of *the actor from the action* (the verb or verb phrase), i.e. the dancer from the dance, or better, from the dancing—as opposed to that of *the*

19 Nietzsche, “On Truth,” 144.

20 Nietzsche, *Human*, “Wanderer,” 55.

actor from the “actee” or acted (the object), i.e. the dancer from the danced, which is what Strong’s terminology seems to suggest. The former is more general because the separation is present in both transitive actions (actions on an object, e.g., ‘Fire burns people’) and intransitive actions (actions without objects, e.g., ‘Fire burns’).

The separation of the actor from action is underlain by a “substance ontology” (as opposed to a “process ontology”): substance ontology separates the doer from the deed as if they are two separate substances, i.e., entities. The result is a tautology, a doubling of facts, a “*Tun-Tun*” (a doing-doing) that “state[s] the same event twice, once as subject and once as [predicate].”²¹ In Nietzschean terms, we talk as if there is a “being” behind the “doing,” a “doer” behind the “deed” who does and wills the deed. We say, for example, “Fire burns,” as if there is fire and there is burning that is apart from the fire, or “Achilles went to war,” as if going to war is an act performed in exactly the same way by many, one of whom happened to be Achilles.

This subject-predicate (or actor-action or doer-deed) distinction that is inherent in our language is also the source of our epistemological prejudices about causality and free agency. The doer is now separate from his deed, as if he is the *cause* of his deed: “The popular mind...doubles the deed; when it sees the lightning flash, it is the deed of a deed: it posits the same event first as cause and then a second time as its effect.”²² To be the cause of something *else* is to be a *free* cause of that thing, because it is distinct from ourselves and not part of our essence or nature, or so our language makes us believe; hence the accompanying illusion of freedom in action. In the language of the *Genealogy*, it is the illusion that the strong can be taken apart from the expression of his strength, as if he were the cause—and free cause—of his strength, as if he were “free to express strength or not to do so.”²³ We talk about doers and *then* deeds, as if the doer could have

21 Strong, “Language and Nihilism,” 250.

22 Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1989), “First Essay,” §13.

23 Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, “First Essay,” §13.

performed different deeds, and as if he did what he did only because he had chosen to do so. It is in the free agent, then, that we locate the credit or merit: We talk as if fire could have not burned and therefore as if fire is *responsible* for the burning, and we praise or blame Achilles for going to war because we believe he could have freely chosen to act otherwise.

Another potential source, not described by Strong, of the illusion of free will in addition to the subsentential subject-predicate distinction lies in the disjoint nature of language, at the sentential level: “Between this fact and another fact [we imagine] in addition an empty space, [and thus we isolate] every fact.”²⁴ Just as we break up our thought and speech into sentences and paragraphs, so we break up the “continuous flux” of existence into individual facts and groups of facts, and the “continuous, homogeneous, undivided, indivisible flowing” of doing and becoming into individual, isolated deeds. The acts are picked out by language from the chain from which it is inextricable, from the other acts on which it depends and is determined, and in this way are taken to be stand-alone, independent, and hence free acts.

From this appearance of the subject-ego on the surface of the sentence, the “I” that chooses to do things and that is distinct from other subjects, the effects of consciousness and ahistoricity follow. The person who thinks “I think” locates himself in the subject position, in juxtaposition to the predicate, i.e., to what he does as if it were a free and contingent act, as if he were exercising his volition from a motive towards a purpose and doing so in a morally responsible way. He becomes self-conscious and is able to reflect on himself as the agent and cause, both conceptual and moral, of his actions. *He* is unchanging, or so he thinks; his actions are transitory, but it is he who persists through time.

Finally, language produces a familiarity effect. Strong briefly mentions the instinct for reading familiarity in the unfamiliar as the “*Kausalität-Sinn*” (sense of causality), i.e. as part of the explanation why we read cause and effect into events.²⁵ Yet the familiarity effect extends beyond our efforts to comprehend the nature and logic of events. For Strong, the “met-

24 Nietzsche, *Human*, “Wanderer,” §11.

25 Strong, “Language and Nihilism,” 254.

aphorical basis” of our language, i.e. the linguistic mediation between our conceptualizations and our reality as it appears to us, takes on a more political character: “To name is to define and bring under control; the allocation of names creates the world in the image of he who names.”²⁶ This fits in with Nietzsche’s iconoclastic position in *On the Genealogy of Morals*: “...the origin of language itself [is] an expression of power on the part of the rulers: they say ‘this is this and this,’ they seal every thing and event with a sound and, as it were, take possession of it.”²⁷ The strong and brave were the first to set down the signification of sounds, the first creators of language, and in the world that they created, “good” gets to signify what *they* are.

To adopt Deleuze’s political expression: it is the linguistic manifestation of the will to power, of the force of “appropriating, possessing, subjugating, dominating.”²⁸ To “domesticate” new concepts, we coin new terms and borrow expressions from other languages into our own. A concept is no longer foreign or alien when we have a word for it, can identify it and talk about it. A “stronger” language is one with greater expressive power. It absorbs other languages into its vocabulary, coats them in its grammar and phonology, and transforms them into an inherent part of itself. Similarly, a “stronger” philosophy is one which has incorporated within itself many ideas, so that little is left outside its range of discourse. Our philosophical manner of talking and thinking about ideas has thus been that of appropriation and domestication: to refer to novelty in familiar terms, to new things in terms of old things, so that they are no longer surprising or disturbing. By contrast, the world-in-itself, if there is the one, is beyond the possibility of familiarization.

THE PRISON OF WORDS AND THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF NIHILISM

Language and thought, both with a familiarizing tendency, reinterpret real-

26 Strong, “Language and Nihilism,” 256.

27 Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, “First Essay,” §2.

28 Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 42.

ity into what is comprehensible and hence maneuverable. Such prejudiced conceptualizations of the world, the “fictitious categories” based on grammar that we weave into the fabric of the world as if they were “naturally valid,” both bound us and push us in the pursuit of truth and meaning “towards nothing at all.”²⁹ This is what Strong refers to as our epistemology of nihilism within the prison of words: in expressing our “will to truth,” we find “both that there is no truth and that [we] should continue to seek it”; “the present structure of human life forces men to continue searching for that which their understanding tells them is not to be found.”³⁰ We are essentially linguistic *and* moral beings, who cannot help but search for subjects and causes—for the ones responsible—because “we still have faith in grammar” and we cannot stop believing in grammar so long as we cannot cease to be humans who speak, think, and experience the world in language.³¹

On the one hand we do *not* desire to escape, because “survival itself requires such illusions and metaphors,” and because our bodies are so driven that we would rather will to nothingness than not will to anything.³² On the other hand, we *cannot* escape: “the present structure of our thought leads us to approach knowledge and truth in a manner such that we can never be content.”³³ Any manner by which we may attempt to unshackle ourselves will only be a further affirmation of our fetters, because everything we may do is colored by the tincture of words and concepts.³⁴ We cannot act without thinking, and in thinking we think in a certain, ultimately nihilistic, way. Just as burning is the essence of fire, unlike what the linguistic expression “Fire burns” may superficially suggest, so convincing oneself with the thought “I speak” does not make it true that what one does *essentially* does not include speaking; it does not make it true that speech is some accidental activity that is blinding and weighing one down and could be freely given

29 Strong, “Language and Nihilism,” 249.

30 Strong, “Language and Nihilism,” 259.

31 Nietzsche, *Twilight*, “Reason,” §5.

32 Strong, “Language and Nihilism,” 257; Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, “Third Essay,” §1.

33 Strong, “Language and Nihilism,” 257.

34 Strong, “Language and Nihilism,” 259.

up. Any resistance to this fact about our own nature will only result in destructive self-negation, which Nietzsche believes is already an “uncurable sickness” of us “Western humans.”³⁵

Thus “language pulls together and is the world: this language, our world”; the world is “our own making” insofar as we are the maker of our language.³⁶ Our language fundamentally determines and influences the way we see and grasp the world, and our thus linguistically determined consciousness observes the world as causal and itself as free and absolute. In looking at the world in such a way, we embrace an ideology which tells us that there is a genuine reality behind all appearances, a transcendental beyond the natural, a God or Truth that is the primary and original cause of all causes, and to which responsibility for all of being can be attributed—yet in such a self-defeating project we are in error.

Nevertheless, as Strong prefaces his discussion, the dilemma which Nietzsche leaves us with is not without hope of resolution: Nietzsche himself has “dreams of either removing from language those qualities which he saw as the message and herald of nihilism...[or], even more radically, of revolutionizing discourse into a new language which would rest on a radically different grammar.”³⁷ In fact, as Nietzsche himself sees it, his advent in philosophy has already marked the nascent moment of a world in which reality is pictured anew in a language that does not compel us to nihilistic pursuits of Truth.

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35 Strong, “Language and Nihilism,” 259.

36 Strong, “Language and Nihilism,” 255 and 257.

37 Strong, “Language and Nihilism,” 243-44.