

LOOKING AT PHILOSOPHY

The Unbearable Heaviness
of Philosophy Made Lighter

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FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE (1844-1900) was the third post-Kantian who responded to the crisis of his time, not by demanding a new "critique of reason," but by calling for a new kind of human existence. (The other two, as we have seen, were Kierkegaard and Marx.) Nietzsche was a solitary thinker who liked Alpine trails more than the halls of academia (which he abandoned in his mid thirties). He spent most of his life using his authorship in an attempt to triumph over the powerful influences on his childhood: Lutheranism, German nationalism, and the domination of his forceful mother, granny, aunts and sister. (His attempts were more successful in some of

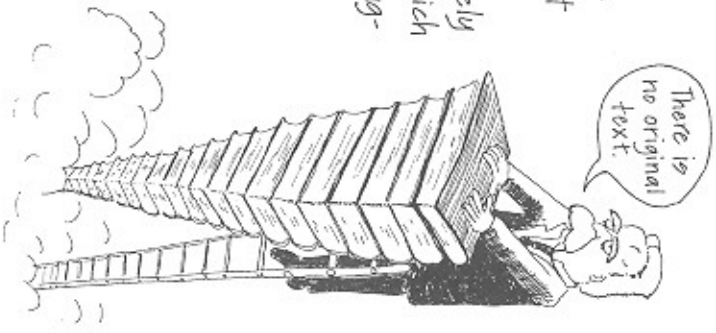
these endeavors than in others.) The material result of his efforts was an unprecedented stream of the most eccentric books ever to have been introduced into the history of philosophy, including such titles as: The Birth of Tragedy, Beyond Good and Evil, The Genealogy of Morals, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, and his outrageous intellectual autobiography, pretentiously titled Ecce Homo ("behold the man" - the phrase with which Pilate introduced Jesus to the masses), with such chapter headings as "Why I Am So Wise," "Why I Am So Clever," and "Why I Write Such Good Books." Nietzsche's short, prolific authorship ended in 1888 with the onset of syphilis - induced insanity.

Nietzsche's epistemological theory constituted a radical return to the Sophistic period. It is usually called "perspectivism." It derived from Nietzsche's early training as a philologist. Philologists, those students of ancient languages, knew that what was called The Bible, The Vedas, The Upanishads or The Iliad were not direct translations of single existing documents; rather, they were compilations of fragments of conflicting evidence derived from a dizzying number of sources. The dream of the philologists was to find the original texts of each of the great scriptures in history. Nietzsche's conclusion as a philologist was that

There is no original text. Each of these books is simply the result of a decision to let a particular interpretation represent an end product, even though in fact that "end product" is merely an emblem of a relationship which exists among a number of fragmentary documents, reports, historical studies, and items of gossip.

Nietzsche translated his philosophical insight into an ontological and epistemological doctrine. Just as in philology there is no original text, so in reality and

Knowledge there is no "pure being" nor "original datum." There are no gods, no Platonic Forms, no substances, no "Things-in-themselves," nor even any "things." There exist only flux and chaos upon which we must impose our will. Therefore, said Nietzsche, there can be no such thing as knowing in the Platonic sense. All "knowing" is inventing, and all inventing is lying. But then, there are lies, and there are lies. Inauthentic



lying is self-deception. According to Nietzsche, self-deceivers are those who "lie traditionally," that is, who lie in terms of established traditions.

Nietzsche's recommendation in the face of what appears to be a condemnation to a life of lying is to "lie creatively," which is to say to invent, or "know" creatively. To do this is to express what Nietzsche, borrowing and subverting a Schopenhauerian idea, calls "will to Power." To express will to Power is to force "reality" to submit to one's own creative might. Nietzsche also calls

will to Power "the urge to freedom."

All of our biological instincts expend themselves as

manifestations of this desire for freedom, even though in most cases these instincts have been constrained by the forces of normalization (themselves other manifestations of will to Power, or, manifestations of the will



Forcing Reality to Bend to One's Will

to Power of others).

Not only our biology, but our thought and language are manifestations of Will to Power. But at the same time, language and thought are the main vehicles of self-deception. According to Nietzsche's radical account of language (reminiscent of Kierkegaard's), language functions precisely by lying, that is, by denying real dissimilarities and inventing fictitious similarities. For example, the only way we can classify as "leaves" all the forms of foliage which sprout from trees and shrubs is by ignoring, and indeed suppressing, the fact that no two of these entities are alike, and by asserting an identity among them which does not in fact



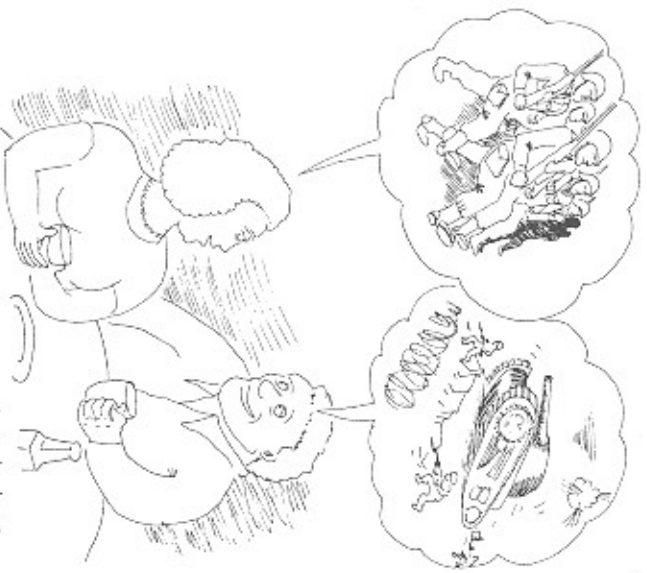
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The Tyranny of Language

exist. So language can be, and usually is, a medium of reification and petrification of being. It produces errors which "tyrannize over us as a condition of life." But the fact that language must lie is also the source of the creative possibilities inherent in language. Nietzsche rejected the traditional view of language, viz., that its poetic function is peripheral to its literal function. He felt that the so-called literal function was merely a sub-class of its poetic nature. Language, according to Nietzsche, is "a mobile army of metaphors, metonymy and anthropomorphisms." [Reminder: A metaphor is

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of both images. ("He likes the bottle too much.") Anthropomorphisms — the projection of human traits onto the non-human world ("The rose is striving to reach the light") — are themselves usually unconscious metaphors or metonyms. [There can be whole chains of metaphors and metonyms which create a poetic rendition of reality. Nietzsche recognized these as felicitous expressions of Will to Power.

a form of speech in which one image replaces another, importing the new meaning into the old context: ("Achilles is a lion in battle.") A metonym is a form of speech in which meaning is displaced from one image onto an adjacent image which now bears the weight

In fact, as Nietzsche understood full well, his own term "Will to Power" was the product of such a metaphorical/metonymical chain of reasoning, as were his other key terms, such as "the Overman," "Eternal Recurrence," and "the Death of God." It follows, then, that a claim of Nietzsche's such as this: "All being is Will to Power," constitutes not a philosophical insight into the ultimate nature of being, but simply another poetic interpretation of being. (When confronted with this charge, Nietzsche responded, "well, all the better!")

If it is true that there are only interpretations, are all interpretations equally valid? It is clear that, in spite of his relativism, Nietzsche did not think so. Only those "lies" which affirm life are truly noble lies for him. All other lies are nihilistic and on the side of death. This is why Will to Power must be full of laughter, dancing, and affirmation, and why we must condemn Platonism ("that fear of time") and Christianity ("Platonism for the masses"), which in longing for another world, deny reality as it is (ie, they refuse to recognize reality as chaos and flux which must be molded in the image of each Will), and thereby long not for being but for nothingness and death. (One smells Hegel in all this, somehow.)