

Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Nihilism and Arbitrariness

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For Nietzsche, knowledge comes from the need for self-preservation. It is will to power. But people at large can't afford to live by Nietzsche's "gay science"--self-preservation is more urgent. His drive towards dissolution meets more powerful forces than it can cope with: law, social inertia. The law code is Apollonian. It holds subjects together with greater force than the centrifugal one exerted by nihilism. Nihilism has no hold to offer, while our culture gives us a ready-made one. Nihilism will be forever on the margins--which is not so terrible. Nietzsche pictures a world full of fictions, of lies and false securities--appearances. But if there are no true securities, then false securities become the true ones, and appearance acquires an unsuspected reality (not at the level Baudrillard would have it, though). "Everything that enters consciousness as 'unity' is already tremendously complex: we always have only a semblance of unity" (*Will to Power* § 489). "There are no facts, everything is in flux, incomprehensible, elusive..." (§604).

But metaphysics is no more guilty than it is innocent. If you do away with a priori unities, you inevitably do away with a priori complexities. The unity is not disintegrated into a "tremendous complexity" ; we will only have this if our analysis needs to describe something as a tremendous complexity. If unities are constituted by the conceptual system we bring to bear on our problems* then there is no sense in criticising metaphysics for its

assumptions.** Of course, Nietzsche's perspective is larger than that of previous philosophers-- but in the last analysis, his opposition to metaphysics will be an axe-grinding against some particular metaphysics, a continuation of metaphysics disguised as an end. His own conclusion, creative play and the grand eternal circle of Becoming is a replay of metaphysics starting with cosmogony, a new institution which does not seem to offer particular advantages over the old one--oh, wait, its is a self-conscious metaphysics, the final synthesis of the history of philosophy after a long antithesis from Plato to Kant. It may be here that Nietzsche and Hegel speak the same language for once.

Nietzsche is at times a clear case of all-or-nothingism: he ignores the real contexts where his dissolutions take place--a context which is not everyday life, political, ethical action. Nihilism is widespread-- in the academy, for instance in the popular version by Stanley Fish.

Wittgenstein is at times dangerously close to Fish's fallacy, "what a sentence means is what it does" -- see for instance *Philosophical Investigations* § 20. Wittgenstein falls into relativism in defining his precarious systems of games and activities, which are never wholly encompassed under a single definition. The arbitrariness of the sign is inflated into an arbitrariness of the relations between sign-systems: the hierarchy between the language-games is ignored.*** All seem to be primary systems for Wittgenstein.



I find Saussure (with all his shortcomings) is somewhat refreshing in contrast: langue as a condition for parole, and its semiotic basis: a system of differences, of gratuitous terms, upholding a system of real, live identities (*Course in General Linguistics*, in *Deconstruction in Context* p. 165). A system which is arbitrary, but cannot be done away with so easily: it is linked to human activity, and solid enough for its purposes--even if it is grounded on nothing, on difference. But is it? How do we perceive these differences? Are they irreducible, original differences? I can't think of difference without

identity. Maybe I will learn. Anyway, Saussure is not Derrida. His differences rest on perceptual patterns of identity which are not exclusively linguistic-- which is why he stops his analysis at this point. He presupposes bio-psychological processes of identification, a solid base for semiotics (cf. p. 147). The void is not so near, after all.

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Notes

* Our conceptual problems, that is, our entanglement in rules-- see Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* § 125. What Wittgenstein seems to be aiming at here is a definition of knowledge as the mutual translatability of the different codes we use to deal with specific problems

** For instance, the thing-in-itself. Nietzsche criticises it, but then he uses it: "Appearance is an arranged and simplified world..." (§568). Because, of course, the world isn't really like that, it is complex *in se*. It seems useless to attack the thing in itself, since this is (ideally even in Kant) a purely regulative concept, an empty place in the theory of knowledge.

*** See, nevertheless, *Philosophical Investigations* § 21, where he makes a tentative attempt at separating locutionary and illocutionary acts.

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