

### **Nietzsche on Language: Before and After Wittgenstein**

There is a temptation to regard Nietzsche as a more Wittgensteinian figure<sup>1</sup> than he might at first appear, as a thinker in whom – despite his highly idiosyncratic concerns and priorities – distinctively Wittgensteinian themes can be discerned.<sup>2</sup> Like all such temptations, however, this one needs to be treated with caution: passing resemblances are all too easy to take for premonitions, and what, when one considers two thinkers in isolation, can look like a relation of the prophetic to the prophesied, often turns out to be the effect of a quite different relation, namely, one in which both thinkers stand to a tradition that they have in common. There is also a question about what the point of a claim such as ‘Nietzsche was more of a Wittgensteinian than he might look’ is meant to be. Here are four possibilities. The point might be to say:

1. ‘Nietzsche and Wittgenstein share certain conclusions; Nietzsche got there first, and Wittgenstein quietly helped himself to (some of) them’ (as one might say that Freud did).
2. ‘Nietzsche and Wittgenstein arrived at (some of) the same conclusions independently, conclusions taken to be distinctively Wittgensteinian, but Nietzsche got there first’ (to describe some of Nietzsche’s thoughts about modern moral philosophy as ‘Anscombesque’ would be an example of this).
3. ‘There are themes and approaches in Nietzsche that are more clearly developed in Wittgenstein, and so respond well to being read in a Wittgensteinian spirit’ (as those who wrongly describe Nietzsche as an ‘existentialist’ must think is true *vis à vis* Sartre).
4. ‘Nietzsche is simply *better* when read as if he were Wittgenstein’ (some Deleuzians appear to have a version of this in mind when they call Nietzsche ‘Deleuzian’).

---

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this essay, the Wittgenstein that is intended is the later one – the Wittgenstein of *Philosophical Investigations* and *On Certainty*. It is unlikely that anyone has ever been tempted to liken Nietzsche to the author of the *Tractatus*, except, perhaps, for reasons having to do with aphorisms, or at any rate with short numbered sections.

<sup>2</sup> For good illustrations of the temptation at work, see, e.g., Randall Havas, *Nietzsche’s Genealogy: Nihilism and the Will to Knowledge* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), and..... By ‘good’, here, incidentally, is meant not merely that these pieces of work are good as illustrations, but that they are good as pieces of work.

Possibility 4 is clearly intellectually and exegetically reprehensible, whoever the philosophers in question are. Possibility 1, in the case of Nietzsche and Wittgenstein, seems to be quite certainly groundless: there is no evidence at all that Wittgenstein took anything from Nietzsche, consciously or unconsciously. Which leaves possibilities 2 and 3, both of which are plainly vulnerable to the worry about premonitions and prophecies mentioned above. So anyone who is sympathetic to the thought that Nietzsche was a more Wittgensteinian figure than he might at first appear to be will have to tread carefully. In the present essay, we try to tread carefully around, or through – or at any rate in the vicinity of – the temptation to think that Nietzsche was more of a Wittgensteinian about *language* than he might at first look.

I A possibly attractive place to start would be with the many passages in which Nietzsche warns us of the ease with which language can lead us astray. So, for example, he claims that our knowledge “is still subject to the seduction of language” (GM I.13), that “under the seduction of words” we are given to making inferences “according to grammatical habit” (BGE 16,17), that “epistemologists... have become entangled in the snares of grammar, which is the metaphysics of the people” (GS 354), and, perhaps most strikingly, that “A philosophical mythology lies concealed in *language* which breaks out again every moment, however careful one may be otherwise” (WS 11). It would certainly be quite difficult to read these passages without being reminded of Wittgenstein – most generally of his comment about the “bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language” (PI 109), and, in the case of the final passage, at least, of his claim that “A *picture* held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably” (PI 115). But there are two reasons, for present purposes, not to lay much weight on these similarities. First, the passages in question are not really about *language*, but are rather about one of the ways in which *philosophy* can go wrong. And second, the kind of warning that Nietzsche gives is entirely continuous with a well-established tradition of issuing just such warnings about the treacherousness of (ordinary) language, examples of which can be found in the work of more or less every major philosopher. So here we have a case of a resemblance that it would probably be unwise to treat as a premonition.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> It is true that the remark about the ‘philosophical mythology’ that lies ‘concealed’ in language is more distinctively Wittgensteinian-seeming than the others; but it is plainly inadequate, by itself, to establish any interesting connection. What, for instance, were the ‘mythology’ and the ‘picture’ supposed to be? Were they the same?

A better place to start is with Walter Kaufmann. As an occasional proponent of possibility 2 – that conclusions taken to be distinctively Wittgensteinian were arrived at by Nietzsche first – he not only shows what some of the motivations to think of Nietzsche as a Wittgensteinian about language might be, but, at the same time, provides a convenient illustration of some of the ways in which commitment to possibility 2 can turn out to be a mistake.

There are two main occasions on which Kaufmann draws attention to what he takes to be anticipations of Wittgenstein in Nietzsche's work.<sup>4</sup> The first, which is quite complicated to set up, goes like this. In the second essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche discusses the development of the notion of punishment, and announces what he calls a “major point of historical method”: that

the cause of the origin of a thing and its eventual utility, its actual employment and place in a system of purposes, lie worlds apart; whatever exists, having somehow come into being, is again and again reinterpreted to new ends, taken over, transformed, and redirected... The ‘evolution’ of a thing, a custom, an organ is [the result of] a succession of more or less profound, more or less mutually independent processes... The form is fluid, but the ‘meaning’ is even more so (GM II.12).

He then picks up on the point in the following section, remarking that the “fluid element” in punishment – “its ‘meaning’” – “finally crystallises into a kind of unity that is hard to disentangle, hard to analyse, and, as must be emphasised especially, totally *indefinable*. (...[A]ll concepts in which an entire process is semiotically concentrated elude definition: only that which has no history is definable)” (GM II.13). To this last remark, Kaufmann appends a footnote, describing it as a “superb epigram that expresses a profound insight”, and directs us to section 33 of *The Wanderer and his Shadow*,<sup>5</sup> the first sentences of which read:

---

<sup>4</sup> Actually, there are three, but one of these need not detain us. In Kaufmann's translation of *The Will to Power*, part of section 585 reads: “*Artists*, an intermediary species: they at least fix an image of that which ought to be; they are productive, to the extent that they actually alter and transform; unlike men of knowledge, who leave everything as it is” – a comment of which Kaufmann claims, in a footnote, that it “invites comparison with Ludwig Wittgenstein's admonition: ‘Philosophy must not in any way, however slight, interfere with the ordinary use of language; in the end philosophy can only describe it... It leaves everything as it is’” (WP, p.318). There is, however, no discernible connection between these passages: Nietzsche is not talking about language, ordinary or otherwise, and his remark about ‘men of knowledge’ is a disparagement of them, not a description of what he takes their proper activity to be. So – since there isn't even a resemblance here to be tempted by – it is unclear what sort of ‘comparison’ Kaufmann might have thought was invited.

<sup>5</sup> GM & EH, p.80n.

The word ‘revenge’ is said so quickly, it almost seems as if it could not contain more than one root concept and feeling. And so people are still trying to find this root –... [a]s if all words were not pockets into which now this and now that has been put, and now many things at once! Thus ‘revenge’, too, is now this and now that, and now something very composite (WS 33).

And to *this*, Kaufmann adds a further footnote: “A remarkably clear and vivid statement”, he says, “of a point that is widely held to be one of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s major contributions to philosophy; cf. Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), sections 65ff.”<sup>6</sup> The relevant sections of the *Investigations* are of course those devoted to family resemblance concepts, and, not unreasonably, Kaufmann concludes his footnote with a reference to the anti-Platonism about meaning that Nietzsche and Wittgenstein (indeed) share.<sup>7</sup>

Kaufmann’s view, then, is that a conclusion about language taken to be distinctively Wittgensteinian was in fact arrived at by Nietzsche first. Let’s agree to regard this view as plausible, at least for the moment (we return to it in section IV, below).

**II** The second place at which Kaufmann hears a premonition of Wittgenstein is in section 354 of *The Gay Science*, which needs to be quoted at some length: Nietzsche ‘surmises’

that *consciousness has developed only under the pressure of the need for communication*; that from the start it was needed and useful only between human beings...; and that it also developed only in proportion to the degree of this utility. Consciousness is really only a net of communication between human beings; it is only as such that it had to develop... As the most endangered animal, man *needed* help and protection, he needed his peers, he had to learn to express his distress and to make himself understood; and for all of this he needed consciousness first of all... In brief,

---

<sup>6</sup> GM & EH, p.180n.

<sup>7</sup> Kaufmann might, incidentally, and with no less plausibility, have referred readers of the passage from GM II.12 cited above to the ‘river-bed’ sections of *On Certainty*: “some propositions, of the form of empirical propositions, were hardened and functioned as channels for such empirical propositions as were not hardened but fluid; and that this relation altered with time, in that fluid propositions hardened, and hard ones became fluid... [Thus] the river-bed of thoughts may shift. But I distinguish between the movement of the waters on the river-bed and the shift of the bed itself; though there is not a sharp division of the one from the other... And the bank of that river consists partly of hard rock,... partly of sand, which now in one place now in another gets washed away, or deposited” (OC, 96-99). The metaphor of ‘fluidity’, at least, ‘invites comparison’.

the development of language and the development of consciousness... go hand in hand... The emergence of our experiences into our own consciousness, the ability to fix them and, as it were, exhibit them externally, increased proportionately with the need to communicate them to *others* by means of signs. The human being inventing signs is at the same time the human being who becomes ever more keenly conscious of himself. It was only as a social animal that man acquired self-consciousness – which he is still in the process of doing, more and more. My idea is, as you see, that consciousness does not really belong to man's individual existence but rather to his social or herd nature; that, as follows from this, it has developed subtly only insofar as this is required by social or herd utility. Consequently, given the best will in the world to understand ourselves as individually as possible,... each of us will always succeed in becoming conscious only of what is not individual but 'average'. Our thoughts are... translated back into the perspective of the herd. Fundamentally, all our actions are altogether incomparably personal, unique, and infinitely individual; there is no doubt of that. But as soon as we translate them into consciousness *they no longer seem to be...* [T]he world of which we can become conscious is only a surface- and sign-world, a world that is made common and meaner... (GS 354).

And at the beginning of the section, clearly intending it to apply to the section as a whole, Kaufmann appends another footnote:

In the 1950s and 1960s many English-speaking philosophers discussed the possibility of a 'private language'. The literature on the subject was dominated by the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) but might have profited from some attention to this section. Whether Wittgenstein knew it is uncertain...<sup>8</sup>

Kaufmann's remark is lapidary, and at first sight it is not obvious what profit he thinks that the 'private language' discussion might have gained from attending to Nietzsche. But his point, surely, must be that Nietzsche here arrived at (a version of) the 'private language argument' *first*, that his claims about language or consciousness belonging to man's 'social or herd nature' – about language's being able to express only what is "average" – anticipate Wittgenstein's thought that the meanings of words cannot be settled by private ('infinitely

---

<sup>8</sup> GS, p.297n.

individual'?) acts of ostensive definition, but must rather be settled in some way that is essentially public, or, as one might put it, 'common'. So again, Kaufmann is canvassing a version of possibility 2.

But it must be eccentric to read GS 354 as an anticipation of the 'private language argument'. Nietzsche's point, after all, would appear to be two-fold: to make an *a priori* evolutionary claim about the co-development of language and consciousness; and to claim that language (or consciousness) therefore, and necessarily, falsifies the reality of inner experience. Given this, two observations would seem to be in order. First, even if the former of Nietzsche's claims is in some sense *consistent* with Wittgenstein's 'private language argument' (and that's a fairly big 'if'), the latter is surely an expression of exactly the sort of intuition that the 'private language argument' is an argument *against*. And, second, the passage is confused: Nietzsche's two claims are incompatible. For, having *insisted* on the practical identity of consciousness with language (the first claim), Nietzsche suddenly turns out to know that (i.e. to be conscious of the fact that), while our 'real' experience of ourselves is 'incomparably personal, unique, and infinitely individual', our 'translation' of that experience into consciousness – into language – makes it 'no longer seem to be'; so that translation, on this view, equals falsification (the second claim). But of course this view is ruled out by Nietzsche's own argument: for the comparison that is supposed to establish the falsification requires that we can know about – that is, be conscious of – our experience as it is independently of its coming to consciousness, of its being articulable in language; and this is something that Nietzsche's position cannot possibly accommodate, and indeed, with some reason, declares to be impossible. So if Nietzsche wants to claim that language and consciousness really are mutually constitutive, a claim that does at least have a certain amount going for it, then not only has he no room for the thought that language must falsify experience, as we have just seen, but he also, and for the same reason, has no room for the thought that the words of a language must somehow stand for 'inner experiences', where these are construed as private – i.e. as logically pre-linguistic – items that one might be said to have succeeded or failed in capturing in words. And it is only in *this* sense, surely, that GS 354 might conceivably be thought to represent a precursor of the 'private language argument' – namely, by accident, as the result of a confusion on Nietzsche's part.

**III** But perhaps this is too quick. Perhaps the passage does express a sort of proto-Wittgensteinian insight, even if it is somewhat obscured by context. And perhaps that is all

that Kaufmann requires. If so, one might expect to find clearer expressions of this ‘insight’ elsewhere in Nietzsche’s work (he rarely said anything only once, after all). One might expect, that is, to find Nietzsche explicitly denying that words stand like names for inner experiences. But when one looks, that is not what one finds. Indeed, what one finds is more or less the reverse, together with exactly the same confusion that shapes the ‘argument’ of GS 354. Consider the following closely related passage from *Beyond Good and Evil* (written in the previous year)<sup>9</sup>:

What does commonness really mean?

Words are acoustic signs for concepts; concepts, however, are more or less precise figurative signs for frequently recurring and simultaneous sensations, for groups of sensations. Using the same words is not enough to ensure mutual understanding: we must also use the same words for the same category of inner experiences; ultimately, we must have the same inner experiences *in common*... [W]hen people have lived for a long time under similar conditions..., then something *comes into being* as a result, something that ‘goes without saying’, a people. In all their souls a similar number of often-recurring experiences has prevailed over others less frequent: because of these experiences, they understand one another quickly, and ever more quickly...; because of this quick understanding, they are connected, closely and ever more closely. The greater the danger, the greater the need to agree quickly and easily about what is necessary; not to be misunderstood in times of danger – people in society find this absolutely crucial... Which of the groups of sensations within a soul come alive most quickly, to speak or command – that decides the overall hierarchy of the soul’s values and ultimately determines its table of goods. A person’s value judgements reveal something about how his soul is *structured*, and what, in its view, constitutes the conditions essential to its life, its real necessity... [This] is as much as to say that the easy *communicability* of necessity (which ultimately means having experienced only average and *common* experiences) must, of all the forces that have hitherto controlled humans, have been the most forceful (BGE 268).

---

<sup>9</sup> Given in Kaufmann’s translation, which in this case is strikingly devoid of Wittgenstein-related footnotes.

One might simply quote the third sentence of this passage, and leave it at that. But in order to bring out the full range and depth of Nietzsche's confusion on this topic, we should ask what the overall point of the passage is supposed to be – an end that is best achieved by working, first, from the outside in, and then backwards.

The passage begins, remember, with the question 'What does commonness really mean?'; and the part of *Beyond Good and Evil* in which it appears, called 'What is Noble?', is devoted to contrasting 'herd', 'slave' or Christian morality with a style of morality – 'noble' morality – that Nietzsche prefers. Throughout this concluding part of *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche is asking himself how, why and under what conditions a morality of 'commonness', of the 'herd', could have arisen and come to be dominant; and section 268 is one of the several places at which he attempts to explain that dominance without referring specifically to the characteristic *content* of 'herd' morality. His idea, clearly enough, is that a morality of the 'herd' must – as a purely formal requirement – answer to, and indeed be a function of, what the largest number of people have in common, where that, in the present passage, is understood as a certain 'structure' of soul. And this structure reveals itself in people's value judgements, those judgements being themselves the expression of what Nietzsche here calls 'groups of sensations', and, earlier in *Beyond Good and Evil*, had called 'crystallisations of value-feelings' (BGE 186). The predominance within a community of a certain hierarchically organised set of value-feelings or sensations, then, is the 'commonness' that underwrites, and finds expression in, *its* version of 'herd' morality, the content of that morality being a function of the particular feelings or sensations, and of the rank-ordering among them, that predominate among those people.

The *explanation* of this predominance is then couched in terms of exigency: it arises from the need to be understood quickly 'in times of danger', so that the shape of a people's evaluative reactions, as one might term them, is determined by the shape of the dangers that standardly confront them, and of their resources for dealing with them. What Nietzsche is offering, then, is an account of the 'commonness' of 'herd' morality that is rooted in the fact that a community standardly has its most urgent predicaments in common, and so that it must, if it is to survive, communicate quickly and effectively in the face of them.

This is all pretty banal stuff, none of it rising much above the level of most arm-chair evolutionary speculation. And what it establishes, on its own terms, is that language, if it is to do the work that the explanation assigns to it, must be thoroughly public – which is unobjectionable enough. But it is just this that Nietzsche appears to think depends on our

using ‘the same words for the same category of inner experiences’, a step that threatens completely to undermine whatever value the rest of what he says in this passage might have had, by suddenly making the public private. Nietzsche can’t be got off the hook here. A possibly tempting move might have been to align these ‘inner experiences’ with the evaluative reactions – with the ‘groups of sensations’ or ‘crystallisations of value-feelings’ – that he mentions later, and so rehabilitate them within a picture that presupposes the publicness of the so-called ‘private’. But this would be special pleading. Nietzsche clearly does mean just what he seems to be saying here. Yet he obviously *oughtn’t* to have meant it. For the fact is that, even on his own terms, what he writes in this passage is quite hopeless.

The ‘commonness’ of ‘herd’ morality, recall – of its characteristic value judgements – is supposed, if we follow the main thrust of Nietzsche’s argument, to be a function of the need to communicate quickly in the face of shared dangers. The ‘herd’ is thus defined in terms of those shared dangers, precisely because it is those dangers that shape the structure of soul that the ‘herd’ have in common. The *conditions* of quick communication, therefore, which is to say of language, have *already* been accounted for: they consist in the shared pressures that come of living in a shared, hazardous environment. And because these pressures are what gives the ‘herd’ its characteristic structure of soul, and so its characteristic experiences of and reactions to its environment, no *further* account of the ‘commonness’ of the language by which the ‘herd’ communicates is required. So Nietzsche’s talk of needing to use the same words to refer to the same inner experiences is redundant, at the very best. But it is also, at the very least, misleading. For it suggests – indeed says – that whether the users of a language do in fact have the relevant ‘inner experiences’ in common, and so use the same words in the same sense, is contingent, even within the community whose language it is. Yet Nietzsche’s own argument rules this out. A language is shared, according to him, not because a group of people just *happen* to have the same ‘inner experiences’, but because their shared structure of soul – the structure that makes them who they are – has been determined by the shared dangers which constitute them as a community in the first place. If Nietzsche’s account of the ‘commonness’ of ‘herd’ morality is to be taken remotely seriously, then, it requires the offending passage – that is, what he says about *language*, specifically – to be more or less completely suppressed. It is not just that the idea of a private language is philosophically indefensible. Rather, it is that Nietzsche himself has – and here gives – reasons (even if not very good ones) to think that language must, in the relevant sense, be public, or be nothing. He does not, however, appear to notice that this is what he has done.

Again, then, the most that we can say is that, to the extent that (some of) Nietzsche's remarks are (in some sense) consistent with what has become known as Wittgenstein's 'private language argument', they are so by accident, and are so in the teeth, as it were, of Nietzsche's much clearer commitment to precisely the picture of meaning that that argument is intended to undermine. Nor did Nietzsche ever shake free of that picture. In *Twilight of the Idols*, for instance, he at last – explicitly – closes down the gap between appearance and reality that he had inherited from Schopenhauer, and which had bedevilled him from the start of his philosophical career: "We have abolished the real world", he writes: "what world is left over? The apparent one, perhaps?... But no! *Together with the real world, we have also abolished the apparent world!*" (TI IV). And with this, one might have thought, would have come a realignment, *mutatis mutandis*, of Nietzsche's thoughts about language. But no. For in *Twilight* we also find this: "In all speaking there is a grain of contempt. Language, so it seems, was invented only for what is mediocre, common, communicable. In language, speakers *vulgarize* themselves right away" (TI IX.26) – the very idea, surely, that underlies and motivates the two passages that we have considered at length, despite its inconsistency with their more Kaufmann-friendly moments. So we can be fairly confident that Kaufmann's claim that Nietzsche got to the 'private language argument' first is false – that possibility 2, in this case at least, is certainly not realised.<sup>10</sup>

**IV** The foregoing discussion establishes two (strongly connected) conclusions: that Nietzsche did not have a prophetic version of the 'private language argument' at his disposal; and that he subscribed to an essentially empiricist account of meaning. [And now, presumably, a short discursion on these, followed by a succinct and pellucid demonstration that the family resemblance stuff is part of the same parcel as the private language argument, and so that Kaufmann's other claim must be rubbish too. I guess that it would also be handy to drop in the names of a couple of other pre-Wittgensteinian anti-Platonists about meaning, just to round things out, or off. Any ideas?]

**V** [A solid thumbs down to possibility 2, at least as far as language is concerned (and hence anything else?). Then perhaps some modestly sympathetic noises about possibility 3...? The following (adjusted a bit from the original paper, and with something else on the end) might be okay here, although it's admittedly a bit semaphoric, and might just be crap:]

---

<sup>10</sup> In the terms used at the beginning of this essay, what we have here is – at the very best – a case of passing resemblance.

Nietzsche does not always worry that language might falsify the reality of our experience – indeed sometimes quite the reverse. So, for instance, in a part of section 354 of *The Gay Science* that we have so far not cited (it comes a little before the worries about falsification begin), Nietzsche claims that there arises

an excess of [the] strength and art of communication – as it were, a capacity that has gradually accumulated and now waits for an heir who might squander it. (Those who are called artists are these heirs; so are orators, preachers, writers – all of them... by their nature squanderers.)

And this ties directly to a theme that is increasingly prominent in Nietzsche's later work – namely, the *expressive* capacity of language, its capacity, in the right mouths and in the presence of the right ears, for an unrivalled precision of articulation. This theme figures large, not only in *The Gay Science*, but also in *Beyond Good and Evil*, where we read, for example, that

there is *art* in every good sentence! Art that wants to be discerned to the extent that the sentence wants to be understood! A misunderstanding about its tempo, for instance, and the sentence itself is misunderstood! To have no doubts as to the rhythmically decisive syllables, to feel breaks in the most stringent of symmetries as deliberate and attractive, to extend a patient and subtle ear to every *staccato* and every *rubato*, guessing the meaning of the order of vowels and diphthongs and how tenderly and richly they can change colour and change it again when put next to each other – who among book-reading Germans... [has] 'the ear for it'[?]'... [A good writer] handles his language like a supple rapier and, from his fingers to his toes, feels the dangerous joy of the quivering, over-sharpened sword that wants to bite, sizzle, cut (BGE 246).

In this and related places, then, we hear a very different sort of thought about language from the one that Nietzsche commits himself to in the passages that we have concentrated upon, an account in which the supreme *adequacy* of language to the task of expression is not only acknowledged, but celebrated.

There are two ways in which one might want to make something of this. The first, drawing on the passage from GM II.12 cited earlier, suggests that Nietzsche is exploiting the difference between ‘the cause of the origin of a thing’ – here, the bare need to communicate – and its eventual employment in a (different) ‘system of purposes’ – here, artistic communication. But this would be to imagine a move from an early stage of communication, at which language falsifies the reality of experience, to a later stage, at which it doesn’t – where the possibility of the earlier stage, for the reasons given in section II, is disallowed by Nietzsche’s own account (whether or not he recognises that fact). So this won’t do. Altogether more promising is the second way, which is built around a contrast between uses of language that are merely instrumental and uses of language that are not. It may be helpful here to remind ourselves of what Wittgenstein says in the *Investigations* about two uses of the word ‘understanding’:

We speak of understanding a sentence in the sense in which it can be replaced by another which says the same; but also in the sense in which it cannot be replaced by any other. (Any more than one musical theme can be replaced by another.) In the one case the thought in the sentence is something common to different sentences; in the other, something that is expressed only by these words in these positions. (Understanding a poem.)... [Together,] these kinds of use of ‘understanding’ make up its meaning, make up my *concept* of understanding (PI, 531-2).

If we read the relevant parts of *Gay Science* 354 against this background – which is to say, if we read it in a Wittgensteinian spirit – we can see Nietzsche as groping his way towards the thought that aesthetic uses of language (uses in which what is to be expressed is ‘incomparably’ unique and invidual) and instrumental uses of language (uses in which what is to be expressed is, in one sense at least, *common*) in fact go together, and indeed make one another possible. Construed in this way, Nietzsche’s complaint, to the extent that he has one, is not that language necessarily falsifies the reality of experience, but, rather, that many or most people are simply too busy or too lazy to bother to use, or to understand, language *expressively* – in such a way, that is, that the reality of experience is revealed by, and is understood to be revealed by, just ‘these words’ in just ‘these positions’. Construed in this way, in other words, Nietzsche’s point is an entirely sensible one, concerning an inadequacy in our appreciation of language, rather than an inadequacy in language itself. But of course

Nietzsche can only be taken in this way at the expense of suppressing what he elsewhere says – and shows every sign of believing – about language’s systematic distortion of the reality of experience.

It may not be unreasonable to prefer the ‘Wittgensteinian’ Nietzsche. There may indeed – as possibility 3 suggests – be themes and approaches in his work that are more fully developed in Wittgenstein, and so that respond well to being read in a Wittgensteinian spirit. But the exercise of that preference needs to be well-modulated – and in ways that go beyond noting, merely, that this or that in Nietzsche’s texts may have to be suppressed. So, for instance, in the present context, one must do more than just note that a Wittgensteinian reading of Nietzsche’s thoughts about the expressive capacities of language requires that his (simultaneous) thoughts about falsification be suppressed: one must also register the quite significant ways in which those latter thoughts are connected to Nietzsche’s responses to ‘the herd’ – to what he terms ‘commonness’ – and so to the elitism that is often attributed to him. And, having registered this, one’s reason for preferring the Wittgensteinian reading had better not be, simply, that one disapproves of elitism (while having a soft-spot for Nietzsche). That would be to slide from possibility 3 to possibility 4. One’s reason, rather, had better be that the Wittgensteinian reading brings out real and independently valuable or interesting strands in Nietzsche’s thought (elitist or not) that his commitment to the logical possibility of a private language threatens to obscure.<sup>11</sup> And, as for Nietzsche on language, so for Nietzsche and Wittgenstein – and the history of philosophy – in general.

---

<sup>11</sup> For indications of what some of those strands might be – with reference to ‘expressiveness’, specifically – see the works cited in footnote 2: Havas, pp.x-y; Owen, pp.x-y.

[Bits and pieces from the original essay, potentially for recycling, but most likely to be ditched:]

One of my most important methods is to imagine a historical development of our ideas different from what has actually occurred. If we do that the problem shows us a quite new side (CV 45e).

Indeed, and to shift ground just a little, to the point at which epistemology and the philosophy of language meet, it is increasingly widely accepted – in some quarters, at least – that the most perspicuous understanding of Nietzsche’s so-called ‘perspectivism’ is one that aligns the notion of a ‘perspective’ closely with Wittgenstein’s idea of a ‘picture’, and so construes a perspective as a system within which, as Wittgenstein puts it, “all confirmation and disconfirmation of a hypothesis takes place”, where this system “is not a more or less arbitrary and doubtful point of departure for all our arguments”, but rather “belongs to the essence of what we call an argument. The system is not so much a point of departure, as the element in which arguments have their life” (OC, 105). Understood in this way, in other words, Nietzsche’s complaint about Christian morality, for instance – that it denies its own status as merely one perspective among others, and insists instead that “I am morality itself and nothing besides is morality!” (BGE 202) – is to be taken as an objection to the fact that the perspective or “*picture*” constitutive of Christian morality holds us, and is in fact intent on holding us, “captive”, that we cannot “get outside of it, for it [lies] in our language and language [seems] to repeat it to us inexorably” (PI, 115). And when Nietzsche calls for a change of moral perspective, he is calling, in effect, for the moral analogue of a change in aspect-perception, of the substitution of one set of principles of judgement for another.

**IV** So: how Wittgensteinian was Nietzsche’s philosophy of language? This answer is – not at all. And this may make you wonder whether I haven’t been wasting your time. But I think that I haven’t been. Nietzsche *does* have enough in common with Wittgenstein for the question to have been worth asking. He shares with Wittgenstein the worry, or the claim, that we can be led to philosophise in unhelpful ways under the seduction of ordinary language. And, because he also claims, with Wittgenstein, that the Platonic search for essentialist definitions of our most important concepts is misconceived, and is misconceived for a quite particular set of reasons, he shares with Wittgenstein, too, the thought that the revision of our ordinary language in line with a more adequate philosophy is neither desirable nor possible.

He also envisages – or so I would claim – a loosely Wittgensteinian epistemology, at any rate to the extent that his talk of perspectives can be captured well in terms of Wittgenstein’s talk of pictures. But none of this adds up to a philosophy of language; and none of it is very much more than peripheral to the central insights into language to be found in Wittgenstein’s later work. The fact is, as I have tried to show, that Nietzsche had at his disposal, and indeed deployed, strands of thought that might, if they had been brought together in the appropriate ways, have yielded some very Wittgensteinian-sounding conclusions – and would certainly have stopped him from saying some very un-Wittgensteinian-sounding things. But the relevant conclusions – that our language is public, or it is nothing; that it makes no sense to say of our language that it systematically falsifies reality – really *are* only Wittgensteinian-sounding. Nietzsche could have drawn these conclusions, that is, and still not have been a Wittgensteinian about language.

The reason for this rather bleak pronouncement is simple, and can be captured in a very familiar metaphor. The depth and force of the later Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language – summarily, that meaning is use – are simply not to be appreciated except by way of a ladder whose rungs consist of Frege, and then of Russell, and then of the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*, all of which can be thrown away, as it were, once one has got to the top. But they can *only* be thrown away then. For the eventual ascent out of meaning-empiricism first requires a journey, by way of those rungs, into the very heart of meaning-empiricism itself, a journey that culminates, in effect, with Wittgenstein’s own original use of the ladder metaphor. In this sense, I would claim, no one *at all* could have been a Wittgensteinian about language before the twentieth century – before this particular rite of passage, this particular ascent of the ladder, had been completed – however much certain nineteenth century remarks about language, including some of Nietzsche’s, might sound like pre-echoes of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy. For here – and whatever Wittgenstein might have thought about the possibility of such a thing – we really do have a case of progress in philosophy, a case in which we understand something better now than we did before, and in which our improved understanding is a consequence of, and could not have been arrived at without, a peculiarly twentieth century development of a peculiarly persistent philosophical error.

To this extent, then, Nietzsche’s remarks about language should no more be said to have anticipated the later Wittgenstein than Democritus’s atomism should be said to have anticipated modern physics, or Aristarchus to have anticipated Copernican heliocentrism. Philosophically, the pre-echoes that we hear are mere coincidence. But even this – if we are interested in Nietzsche – doesn’t leave us entirely empty-handed. It is true that we cannot, as

quite a lot of people would like to, think of Nietzsche as startlingly prophetic or as brilliantly ahead of the game in this respect, as he was in so many others. But we can at least say this: to the very large extent that Nietzsche's better moments and larger thoughts are *consistent* with what we now know, thanks to Wittgenstein, to be true about language, there is no reason to treat those better moments and larger thoughts with scepticism, as there is, for instance, with Hume's, a great philosopher whom the subsequent history of philosophy has more or less consigned *to* the history of philosophy. Wittgenstein may rule; but Nietzsche lives on.

*Maria Alvarez, University of Southampton*

*Aaron Ridley, University of Southampton*