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Comments on Parkhurst's "Nietzsche's Philosophy of Language:
Can Linguistic Idealism Be Resisted?"

William Parkhurst's paper opens with the following claim: "Language...does not penetrate into the realm of truth." My immediate response is to ask, "Is this very statement true?" Thought is contained by language; language is incommensurable with reality. However, if these statements are true, then how can they be true? They explicitly deny that from within language, any truth at all is accessible. So this is the first and overriding problem I see as framing P's overall outlook. This paper makes a lot of statements about language, but because these deny the possibility of truth in general, they also deny their own truth in particular. They aver that we can't get at the thing in itself, but how is Parkhurst making the affirmations he does throughout? How can he adhere to a position of Untrue truth that avoids the conundrum of undoing the foundation of his argument?

The second concern I have with this paper, also from the outset, is the attribution to Nietzsche of the view that language traps thought and truth is thereby impossible to achieve. Parkhurst gives us a tiny caveat that there's a bit of Nietzsche resisting linguistic idealism, but what this means or whether it is possible remains open. So let's ignore any hint of a way out for now. The pressing question is whether Nietzsche agrees with Parkhurst on the prison house of language and the incommensurability of thought and being. Does Nietzsche think truth is

impossible, or disposable? I would rather think Nietzsche prefers truth to be protected rather than destroyed. But Parkhurst only elevates Nietzsche's texts of criticism and destruction. Moreover, I think he might well exaggerate his conclusions about truth in Nietzsche from these texts. Thus, whereas my first question for P is about the conundrum of the proposition that truth is untrue, my second point is that Nietzsche likely would not accept this conundrum as applicable to his own thinking, at least not in the bare-boned way P puts it forth.

The third concern I have with this paper is that P's characterization of a tendency that prevails in Nietzsche scholarship isn't based on any overt connection between the scholarship in question and the general characterization of its views. P has an axe to grind, it seems, but we are given only a vague general claim connecting individualism, mastery, and neo-liberalism. I think P uses this characterization without real purpose, as the relation to his own ideas about Nietzsche never face critique from this alternative viewpoint. P apparently assumes that the two views of N, the so-called "neo-liberal" and his own, are opposed interpretations, but the two are never treated in such a manner as to put each other to the test. P instead simply asserts that his view takes the road less traveled that avoids excesses of autonomy and free will in characterizing Nietzsche. But are these really exclusive alternatives, to elevate autonomy versus to elevate language? My third concern with this paper then is that P presents other commentary in a highly abbreviated fashion in order to attack it. This introduces his own view of Nietzsche, but lacks sufficient relevance to the purpose it is made to serve.

The fourth concern I have with P is how his paper handles Nietzsche's texts. His goal in discussing Nietzsche is clear throughout. P is motivated by the language-thought connection and the thought-reality disconnection discussed at the outset of my comments above. The conclusion has strong influence step-by-step throughout. It shapes the path that P follows. My question is

whether P's path is near or distant to the one Nietzsche takes. The issue is whether P correctly frames the details he takes from Nietzsche. On this issue, I see causes for concern. P says Nietzsche "presented consistently throughout his life. . . the philosophical position that language constrains thinking" (3). Is this claim problematic? It depends on what P wants to get from it. He quotes Nietzsche from the book *Dawn*, followed by a gloss of the quote using the word "determined"—specifically, "language is determined by our social or heard [sic] nature and language determines or constrains what can be thought" (3). This is followed by a similar but slightly stronger restatement of the same main idea, to wit, "Our very grammar determines and constrains our thoughts and philosophical systems ahead of time" (4). Note that the second quote from P says "determines *and* constrains", whereas the first says "determines *or* constrains". Not the same assertion, logic would say. What does Nietzsche himself say on this point? The passage quoted from *Dawn* says "We always express our thoughts with the words that lie ready to hand" (3). Not the same thing as saying that language *determines* what can be thought. Even if the words are the *material* cause of the thoughts, provide the *stuff* of the quotes, it is premature to conclude there are no other causes in addition to language. P also quotes Nietzsche arguing (I'll paraphrase) that the need for communication is the precondition of the development of consciousness. Does this mean communication is determinative of consciousness? I prefer to think of consciousness like a tree and communication like the soil, with the latter being the necessary but not sufficient condition of the former. P also quotes Nietzsche from BGE, where the similar philosophies of India, Greece, and Germany are said to connect through the common grammar. Nietzsche's own words are that "everything lies ready from the beginning for a similar development and sequence of philosophical systems: just as the route to certain other possibilities of interpreting the world seem almost barred" (4). Still, even

with these words of Nietzsche, to say “almost barred” is not the same as “barred”, to say “foreclosed”, or “prohibited”, and “similar development” is not the same as “identical development”. What does P say about all this? He wavers ambivalently between making weaker and stronger claims about the influence of language on thought and ideas. “Our language itself constructs and limits the ... metaphysics or ontologies we can even think” (4), but then, with greater force and certitude, half a page later, P says language is “essentially rhetorical and *cannot* ‘penetrate the realm of truth’” (5). This last statement of refusing truth a penetration of reality comes from Nietzsche own early unpublished essay “The Philosopher”, made extensive use of by P throughout. I think this use would be more interesting if itself given more critique.

In sum, P’s presentation of Nietzsche puts forth a direction worth pursuing. I hope my comments are corrective in a helpful way to P in his pursuit of the importance of language for Nietzsche. To this end, I have directed my attention to four main areas of concern: (a) the untruth of truth, (b) whether the untruth of truth is a view usefully attributable to Nietzsche, (c) the abbreviated and loose use of other Nietzsche scholarship, by P, and (d) the inconsistency and hyperbole of viewing Nietzsche as squeezed into a version unsuited to his own.

One part of Nietzsche that has always stuck with me is related to P, concerning the matter of which ideals Nietzsche rejects or protects. “Unconditional honest atheism... is the only air we breathe, we more spiritual men of this age.” What constitutes spirituality of this kind? Says Nietzsche, “Everywhere ...that the spirit is strong, ...it does without ideals of any kind—*except for its will to truth*” (GM III: 27). The last words are italicized. They are worth repeating. Nietzsche admits no ideals, he says, “*except for...[the] will to truth.*” Sounds right enough to me.

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