

## **The force of plasticity: Some reflections on the concept of rhetorical subjectivity in the works of Friedrich Nietzsche**

### **1.**

Attacks against philosophical subjectivity are one of Nietzsches favorite intellectual exercises. In his writings one encounters them time and again. With his critical statements Nietzsche is aiming at the hypostatization of the subject in rationalist and idealistic philosophy from Descartes to Hegel. He criticizes the fact that these traditions conceived of the real solely as the product of a transcendently cognizing subject, while disregarding all features of reality which arise from mans constitution as a corporeal, sentient being of action.

Despite his criticism of a philosophical conception of the subject, Nietzsche never abandoned the concept of subjectivity. This is demonstrated by his discussion of historicism in the second Untimely Meditation entitled *Of the Use and Disadvantage of History for Life* (1873). For Nietzsche, history underwent a change in the 19th century. It stopped being an instructive power and became an oppressive one. The knowledge which had been amassed posed a threat to the individuals possibilities for living and taking action. For the sake of maintaining his own existence, the individual required spontaneity in order to choose what would serve him and to reject what seemed useless. According to Nietzsche, the individual needed the force of plasticity, i.e. that force which allows for autonomous, individual growth, which enables one to transform what is past and unfamiliar and make it ones own, to heal wounds, to replace what has been lost, to effect ones own reformation of fragmented forms. (HL, KSA 1 [251]) The force of plasticity called for here, which can also belong to a nation or a culture, stands in opposition to history. As a suprahistorical force, it is part of life and embraces creative subjectivity in an aesthetic and - as we shall see - rhetorical sense as well.

I leave out any further consideration about the concept of plasticity in the aesthetical theories of Winckelmann, Friedr. Schlegel, Hegel and Schiller, that exercised an influence on Nietzsches own theory. This would require too much time. Therefore I shall turn at once to the rhetorical aspects of the concept.

### **2.**

As regards the rhetorical background of Nietzsches idea of the force of plasticity, the following remark, to be found among posthumously published notes from the 1870s, is illuminating: History is indeed very dangerous, in that it places all conventions next to one another for purposes of comparison , thus calling upon judgement when dynamis should be decisive. (KSA 7, 29 [121]) One may understand this statement to mean that the danger of viewing life in historical terms lies in the fact that one then regards all appearances as having

equal validity. If this is so, then useful judgements can only be made by means of the selective and formative dynamics of the individual. At this time, the Greek concept of *dynamis* concerned Nietzsche not only in connection with the problem of how to view history, but it also concerned him in his rhetorical studies. In a lecture on Greek rhetoric from 1874, Nietzsche stated, that "*dynamis*" is the term Aristotle used to designate rhetoric. According to Nietzsche this means the power [...] to find out what causes each particular thing to have an effect and make an impression. (Lecture on Classical Rhetoric, Summer 1874, in: Werke Bd. 18 (Bd. 2 of Philologica), ed. by O. Crusius, Leipzig, 1912, pp. 243 and 249). Although Aristotle is merely concerned with identifying a theoretical capacity aimed at knowledge of what rhetoric is, Nietzsche sees that this identification involves at the same time the essential nature of language. He says: [L]anguage has just as little to do with truth, with the essence of things, as rhetoric does; it does not intend to instruct, but rather to transfer subjective states of excitement, subjective assumptions to others. Not the things themselves enter into consciousness, he continues, but rather the attitude which we take to them, the *pithanón*. The full essence of things is never grasped. (Lecture on Classical Rhetoric, in loco citato, pg. 249) Thus what Nietzsche views as essential for *dynamis* or power and rhetoric, is the act of selection and the taking on of a subjective perspective, which come into consciousness and are conveyed to others. These determinations are also central to Nietzsches reflections on the role of the force of plasticity, so essential to life, in his treatise on history.

The question as to the perception of reality becomes even clearer in light of the fact that Nietzsche refers to it in connection with the Greek word *pithanón* (literally what is credible, convincing). This concept stems from Sicilian rhetoric. In Phaedrus Plato has Socrates expressed the view of the teachers of oratory who say that for those who want to become skillful speakers it is by no means necessary to partake of the truth concerning just and good actions [...] because in the courts no one is at all concerned with the truth, but rather only with what is credible. What counts is plausibility (*eikós*), and whoever wants to master the art of oratory must focus on that. Here Socrates is alluding to the Sicilians Korax and Teisias, whose theory of judicial oratory, according to the classical view, was what led to the foundation of rhetoric in the first place. For them reality is a construction that arises from existing signs of what actually happened and from the line of argumentation presented by the speaker. Due to his critical attitude towards rhetoric, Plato never sees it as expressing truth itself, but only the appearance of truth as it makes sense to the mass public.

Not only is plausibility (*eikós*) an aspect of what is convincing (*pithanón*), but also the appearance of things (*phainómenon*), - an idea the Sophist Protagoras speaks of in the so-called *homo-mensura* doctrine. The sentence Man is the measure of all things that are how they are and of things that are not that they are not insists that everything which is given is

determined by the human perspective. This is not meant to be an existential ontological statement on things, but rather a judgement on their relative value in the human world. It is possible however that this expresses a view of the world which does not yet distinguish between the two. In this doctrine, which was formulated by Protagoras, Hegel saw the subjective as that which constitutes reality: Man is the measure of all, - man, that is the subject as such; thus what exists does not exist for itself, but rather for my knowledge of it -, consciousness is essentially what produces the content of what is objective; subjective thought is an essential active force in this process. (Gesch. der Philosophie, Werke Bd. 18, S.430) Hegel's interpretation of the man-measure doctrine reveals its significance for rhetoric as the art of persuasion in that he sees its reality-creating dimension as a power belonging to the subject. Protagoras developed his art of rhetoric from this viewpoint. He found out some of the most effective techniques for judicial and political oratory, such as disputing in both directions (i.e. pro or contra) depending on what use the speaker can make of the one or the other, or - in Nietzsche's words - how to help the weaker case to win by means of dialectic. (Lecture on the History of Greek Eloquence, in: Crusius, in loco citato, vol. 18, pg. 294). Of course, Plato and Aristotle criticized the relativism of this view of the world. Concerning the existence of appearances, which are perceived in a purely sentient way and are subject to fluctuation, they postulated the existence of ideal or logical basic forms which grant certainty to one's perceptions and reveal the true beingness of things.

The third element of *pithanón* or what is convincing is *apáte* or deception, which is produced by the aesthetic means of epideictic oratory. The Sophist Gorgias, the founder of the style of artistic prose which operates with rhetorical figures, conceives of the speech as winning over the soul. It forces the one it has won over to follow what is said and agree with the facts. The speech derives its power from the affective influence of its rhetorical form, for it is capable of abating fear, relieving pain, bringing joy and increasing emotion. Gorgias calls this influence magical saying: [I]f the fascination of [rhetorical] evocation combines with the view (*dóxa*) of the soul, it charms and converts and transforms the soul as if by magic (*goeteía*). Gorgias adopted the oratorical instruments of power from poetry. Thus he claims that mere illusion, deception which produces Attican tragedy, is justified. For Gorgias, oratory, whose intention is to pull the audience on its side, is after all not delivered with a view toward speaking truth, but rather moves consciously within the realm of opinion. In this respect Gorgias also comes to oppose Plato, who perceived beauty as the reflection of an invariable truth or idea. He rejected Gorgianic rhetoric, whose intent was primarily to produce reality, as deceptive illusion and an art of flattery. Traces of Gorgias' teachings may be found in this well-known sentence of Nietzsche from his lecture on rhetoric: Language itself [...] is the result of purely rhetorical arts (Lecture on Classical Rhetoric, in loco citato, pp. 249-251; cf. also pp. 243f.), a

view which he primarily demonstrated with the help of the doctrine of rhetorical figures. Furthermore, it certainly influenced the concept of truth which manifests itself in the essay entitled *On Truth and Lies in an extramoral Sense*, written between 1870 and 1873. Nietzsche says: Then what is truth? A shifty mass of metaphors [...]; all truths are illusions; it is just that we have forgotten that this is so [...]. (*Truth and Lies*, KSA 1 [880f.])

### 3.

For Nietzsche, plasticity not only played an important role in the cultural theory of his treatise on history, but also in his reflections on the history of philosophy. At least that is what some peculiarities in the portrayal of Pre-Socratic philosophers from this period of time indicate. The so-called *Book of Philosophers* originated, as did the essay *On Truth and Lies*, somewhere between 1870 and 1873, i.e. during the same years as the second *Untimely Meditation* did. Some parts of it can be viewed as a concrete formulation of the culture-producing role of the individuals force of plasticity. In this work, Nietzsche considers the representatives of what he regards as the most spirited epoch of Greek philosophy - before, he felt, a certain decadence set in. Here Nietzsche is interested in the question as to how life, philosophy and art can enter into a more profound relationship, form a greater affinity to one another (KSA 8, 6 [17]), in other words, how philosophy can once again be viewed from the perspective of life and art. In Nietzsches eyes, this can be done by depicting philosophers and their teachings using the aesthetic and rhetorical features of plasticity.

A striking example of this approach can be found in the way Nietzsche treats the philosopher Anaxagoras and the orator Pericles as a duo. The Anaxagorean spirit is an artist, he writes, and that is to say the most formidable genius of mechanics and architecture [...]. (*Philosophy in the Tragic Age*, KSA 1 [869]) Yet since Anaxagoras, the philosopher of reason lived, as we know, a secluded life completely devoted to his studies, in Nietzsches depiction the statesman Pericles becomes the greatest Anaxagorean. When he appeared in public as an orator [and] spoke, roared, flashed, devastated and redeemed - then he was the epitome of the Anaxagorean cosmos [and] at the same time the visible incarnation of the constructive force of the intellect. (*Philosophy in the Tragic Age*, KSA 1 [870]) In his depiction, life and philosophy are so closely connected by art that the intellect appears as an artist and orator: as the master-builder who comprehends the world in its beautiful order (cosmos), and as a politician who guides and forms the people with his oration. Thus Anaxagoras and Pericles are theoretical and practical manifestations of the philosophical intellect as it shows itself in oratory. In his lecture on rhetoric, Nietzsche states that the efficacy of Pericles, like that of every true orator, is founded on the *éthos* of the case which he pleads for, i.e. his characteristic style, which is appropriate to the demands of the subject and the external circumstances of the

speech. Nietzsche claims that here Pericles exercises a free plastic force; language is for him a willing material. (Lecture on Classical Rhetoric, in loco citato, pg. 256) (This passage shows what is actually meant by the opposition of plastic or Apollinian and musical or Dionysian art in Nietzsche's book on tragedy: the polarity of ethical and impassioned style.) It is interesting to note that in his lecture on the history of Greek eloquence Nietzsche does not attribute the synthesis of philosopher and orator to philosophy, but rather to rhetoric. The great Pericles, he writes, did not learn oration from the philosopher Anaxagoras, as Plato claims, but rather from the Sophists, particularly Protagoras: [O]nly the liberation of the intellect through higher learning makes such contact between Pericles and Anaxagoras possible in the first place. This higher learning consisted of a body of knowledge bundled together by the art of oratory and dispute as taught by the Sophists.

Whereas in the pair Anaxagoras and Pericles the philosopher took on the role of the orator, the role of the poet is in Nietzsche's view taken by Thales. When Thales says, Everything is water [...], then he tries, as a philosopher, to let the sound of the world as a whole resound from within and to externalize this sound in the form of concepts [...]. Nietzsche sees a parallel between this process and that of the dramatist, who transforms himself into other bodies, speaks through these bodies and yet is capable of projecting this transformation outwards by means of written verses. (Philosophy in the Tragic Age, KSA 1 [817]) Life finds philosophical expression in introspection in that the inner impression is transferred to the exterior, and this is done in a way which is analogous to the poetic method of the dramatist. Here again, the artist serves as the model for the plastic depiction of the philosopher, this time by means of anthropomorphic illusions, through which he, like all human beings, communicates with nature. (KSA 7, 19 [134]) This process of projection may remind us of Protagoras' man-measure doctrine, which puts all things in relation to the subject. In his doctrine there is however an outward-inward movement, whereas in Nietzsche's interpretation of Thales we find an inward-outward movement. The rhetorical perspective is connected with a poetic view of creative subjectivity. Furthermore, Nietzsche designates the rhetorical and aesthetic process of projection itself - in keeping with his theory of metaphor mentioned above - as a basically metaphorical, completely unfaithful transposition into a different sphere and language. (Philosophy in the Tragic Age, KSA 1 [817])

#### 4.

In one of the late posthumous fragments Nietzsche says: [T]he Greek culture of the sophists [...] belongs to the culture of Pericles' age just as inevitably as Plato does not belong to it: its predecessors are Heraclitus, Democritus, the academic types of old philosophy [...]. [A]ll progress in epistemological and moralistic knowledge restored the Sophists... [O]ur modern

way of thinking is extremely Heraclitian, Democritian and Protagorean [...] it would suffice to say that it is Protagorean because Protagoras encompasses both Heraclitus and Democritus. (KSA 13, 14[116]) These statements show the philosophical significance of his early aesthetic and rhetorical conception of the force of plasticity as it was outlined in his treatise on history. Nietzsche conceives of the Pre-Socratics and Sophists world of thought, which were brought in connection with one another in his depiction in the Book of Philosophers, as congenial, and he distinguishes between their philosophy and Platonic/Socratic philosophy. He establishes a separate genealogy for Heraclitus and Protagoras and has Protagoras, as the Sophist most practised in theory and probably the one who was held in highest esteem during antiquity, represent the whole tradition. In terms of his mature philosophy, Democritus is pre-Socratic, but he lived during the era of sophistry and took an interest in ethics and theories of culture as the Sophists did. In the opposition between Pre-Socratism and Platonism which Nietzsche constructed, he reflected on his own attitude towards academic philosophy. His return to the Sophistic world view, which is determined by rhetoric, is in fact motivated by his criticism of academic philosophy. Since antiquity, rhetoric represented the antithesis of philosophy, much longer than the modern discipline of aesthetics did, which Nietzsche had opposed to traditional metaphysics in his book on tragedy. Aesthetics did not emerge as a discipline until the 18th century, and when it did, it adopted rhetorical ideas.

From the perspective of the late Nietzsche, our modern way of thought becomes Protagorean on the basis of the subjectivism of the will to power. Whereas transcendental and idealistic subjectivity had become the victim of philosophical hypostatization, the power of rhetorical subjectivity to constitute reality is one of the propelling forces in the culturally motivated self-creation and self-enhancement of the individual which aims toward the development of the "Übermensch". In his preliminary form he is to be found in the philosopher who takes on the role of the commandor and lawgiver. The first to play this role was Protagoras, one of the legislators in the Athenian colony of Thurii. Their cognition is creation, Nietzsche says of these philosophers. Their act of creation is legislation, their will to truth is - will to power. (JGB, KSA 5 [145]) At this point in Nietzsches work, rhetorical subjectivism replaces transcendental subjectivism. It leaves also behind the Romantic kind of subjectivity, which Friedrich Schlegel had developed in his concept of irony. Perhaps the concept of rhetorical subjectivity offers us an important key - the key to making a suitable interpretation of Nietzsches perspectivism and his affect-oriented epistemology. But for rhetoric, as an instrument of power, such an interpretation would raise some critical questions.

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