

Nietzsche on Language, Consciousness, and the Body
By Christian J. Emden
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Reviewed by Daniel Blue

Philologists use the phrase “Homerum ex Homero” (“Homer out of Homer”) to mean that a writer’s language should be interpreted through other writings by the same author. Thus, one would try to understand a text in Homer by consulting parallel passages in Homer, but not by adducing works by Hesiod or later poets.¹ Until recently, this seemed to be the reigning principle of Nietzsche studies. When attempting to understand a passage in *Beyond Good and Evil* one might bring to bear other passages from that book or related sections from works published by Nietzsche, but references even to the *Nachlaß* were considered suspect and books on Nietzsche and Emerson, Lange, Burckhardt and others tended to be viewed as specialized.

There are sound theoretical reasons for observing such strictures. Nonetheless, in recent years a plethora of studies have emerged, indicating how views of Nietzsche can be supplemented and enlarged by judicious reference to the books he studied and the assumptions of his time. In *Nietzsche on Language, Consciousness, and the Body*, Christian J. Emden has made an interesting, if not always convincing, contribution to this literature.

His title at first seems misleading. For the first two-thirds of the book, Nietzsche’s theory of language is his paramount topic, and while he often brings in issues having to do with consciousness and the body (the secondary elements in his title), these almost always have immediate bearing on Nietzsche’s ideas on language and are rarely explored for their own sake. Only rather late—in the fourth of five chapters—does the book open

into another dimension of thought. There, as will be shown, Emden proposes that Nietzsche extends certain tropes associated with language well beyond the properly linguistic sphere to encompass the neurophysiological and psychological processes of sensation and apprehension. Even in this neurophysiological treatment, however, Emden's departure point is Nietzsche's theory of language. As the author makes clear, the topic of language is central to Nietzsche's vision and involves not only consciousness and the body but issues of logic (concept formation and theories of truth), hermeneutics (interpretation, perspectivism), and psychology (the ways human beings construct a self). By the time Emden has shown the implications for the will to power and *Übermensch*, it is clear that Nietzsche's theory of language is intrinsic to almost all his key views, the signal exception being the eternal recurrence, a topic Emden never mentions.

It is the more regrettable, then, that Nietzsche's single extended text on language ("Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense") leans so heavily on Gustav Gerber's *Die Sprache als Kunst*. While this dependence needs to be acknowledged, Emden believes that Gerber's influence has been exaggerated. Gerber, in his view, stressed the aesthetic dimensions of language, whereas Nietzsche's approach emerged from his historical studies. Indeed, for Emden, interpretations of Nietzsche have in general overstressed the aesthetic aspects of his work to the detriment of its scientific and historicist underpinnings, and its study can be much enriched by consideration of the intellectual and scientific approaches of his time.

Accordingly, the author announces in his introduction that he is less interested in the validity of Nietzsche's ideas than in how they emerged in the context of contemporary intellectual concerns. It is, indeed, Nietzsche's "timeliness" which most

engages him, for, as he observes, “. . . philosophical ideas and arguments do not develop in a historically indeterminate space of pure thought.”ⁱⁱ He also acknowledges that he hopes to use Nietzsche’s indebtedness to contemporary studies as a model through which to explore certain sociological views of Foucault, Bourdieu, and others. These men argued that the various intellectual fields at play during a given historical period intersect in ways that affect the paths of those disciplines’ research. Emden finds in Nietzsche’s work a seismograph of the shifts among the dominant intellectual approaches of his time.

Emden begins this project with an account of Nietzsche’s early views on rhetoric, a field of study out of fashion in Nietzsche’s youth and moribund for decades. In preparing his lecture courses on verbal strategies of the Greeks and Romans, Nietzsche came to believe that the development of philosophic modes of speech were intertwined with those of rhetoric and that (as Emden puts it) “reason begins with rhetoric, and rhetoric itself is largely responsible for the structure, constitution, and development of knowledge”ⁱⁱⁱ The pivotal figures here were Plato, who affected to mistrust rhetoric but who deployed it with cunning effectiveness, and Aristotle who attempted to codify its processes and thereby to establish canons of reasoning. Yet Nietzsche was particularly struck by the Sophists, who exposed the difficulty of distinguishing between philosophizing and persuasive speech. As Emden explains, “Nietzsche’s fervent philosophical interest in the problem of language . . . seems to have emerged, at least initially, in the context of an attempt to account historically for the tense relationship between rhetoric and philosophy in Greek antiquity.”^{iv}

Nietzsche was going against the contemporary grain by studying rhetoric at all, but Emden contends that it at least provided him with a prophylaxis against the “myth of

the given,” that is, “any philosophical discourse that relies on the objectivity and universality of knowledge without realizing its own historicity and indebtedness to language.”^v Locke’s linguistic theories provide an example of the sort of view of language that Nietzsche sought to discredit, and Emden demonstrates its deficiencies and how Nietzsche sought to remedy these.

Emden also toils mightily with Nietzsche’s characterization of language as intrinsically metaphorical, a task in which he has much valuable to say, even if he is eventually forced to concede, “. . . attempts to limit the meaning of metaphor are always flawed and often tautological.”^{vi} This rather dispiriting conclusion does not stop him from continuing to use the term as though it were unproblematic. Thus, he repeatedly makes reference to “metaphor as an explanatory model,”^{vii} although one would think a term that is intrinsically indefinable would have no explanatory power whatever. To be fair, Emden was earlier speaking of metaphor in its linguistic usage, whereas he eventually proposes that Nietzsche extended the term to include physiological transformations as well: “. . . what [Nietzsche] seems to mean, . . . is metaphor as an explanatory model that can comprise the complexity of nervous processes, mental representation, and language, and this model rests on the most basic understanding of metaphor as a form of transferring or transmitting some kind of information, content, or impulse from one level to another . . .”^{viii}

This characterization is a bit unclear and highly questionable. Surely Nietzsche’s point in the “Truth and Lie” essay is not that metaphor functions as “a form of transferring or transmitting some kind of information, content, or impulse from one level to another,” but rather that it provides an illusory cover for the fact that no such transfer

could take place. It is here, by the way, that Emden's anti-aesthetic bias becomes rather questionable, for Nietzsche increasingly came to view concept formation as a creative and artistic act, a view that is carefully and insightfully explored by Johann Figl in his *Dialektik der Gewalt*.^{ix} If Emden's formulation is questionable, however, he does follow it up by suggesting that discussion of Nietzsche's positions, here and elsewhere, can benefit from consideration of the biological sciences of his time. In this instance he finds nineteenth century physiology and such topics as the transfer of electrical energy through neurons to be a propos.^x

As the above suggests, Nietzsche did not conceive language as merely a system of incorporeal signs. Lange, Hartmann, and Schopenhauer had taught him to view it as conditioned by its production by the body, and the philosopher was supported in this belief by the general scientific views of his era. Emden reminds the reader that mid-nineteenth-century biologists engineered a multitude of experiments designed to explore the relationship of neurophysiology and mental phenomena. The best-known example, Broca's work on aphasia, had demonstrated a linkage between the use of language and a specific area of the brain. Nietzsche kept abreast of such research, although he was reluctant to indulge in the facile reductionism common at the time. As Emden frequently points out, he struggled to account for the intertwining of language and body without collapsing either into the other.

For most of his book Emden views Nietzsche in the light of two kinds of resources: the ancients, whose work he taught for nearly a decade, and the natural scientists who made such important discoveries during his own era. Only in the final chapter is a move made from these two sources to address a third. If Nietzsche indeed

refused to reduce language to a function of physiology, he was nonetheless forced to account for their interaction over time and the capacity of humanity to change. In order to preserve both aspects (language as a product of the body and language as a mode of creative interpretation) and at the same time to acknowledge their interplay under various conditions, Nietzsche turned to such proto-anthropologists as Blumenbach, Herder, and Humboldt, and to their successors, who were devoting so much energy and thought to the peoples outside the European mainstream. Emden proposes that “. . . Nietzsche thus sought to found his philosophical critique on an essentially anthropological insight—namely, the overlap of nature and culture as exemplified by the physiological background of human knowledge.”^{xi} Memory provided a key to this overlap, Emden argues, for it clearly had an organic basis (as experiments on aphasia had disclosed) yet was also aligned with language and its role in the transmission of social institutions. “Like Herder before him, then, Nietzsche suggests that the history of culture must take account of natural history, and memory is the place where the evolution of organic life meets the development of mental existence.”^{xii} Emden closes his book with a treatment of Nietzsche’s views on truth and morality.

The above summary presents the barest outline of Emden’s findings and in the interests of space omits qualifying discussions that are essential to his argument. Also absent are discussions of the scientific and linguistic researches of Nietzsche’s time as well as the philosopher’s own views on such topics as interpretation, truth, and construction of the self. It must also be acknowledged that the above may be deficient for quite another reason. This reviewer has often found Emden’s presentation so fluid and provisional, that it is often difficult to grasp either his meaning or what his final position

might be. That a discerning and industrious intelligence is at work throughout cannot be doubted. That it has worked through and distilled its insights into a form worthy of their own importance is more open to query.

It must be said that Emden has set himself a task of forbidding difficulty. On the one hand he seeks to exposit Nietzsche's theories of language, consciousness, and the body, any one of which would prove formidable to accomplish and which as a triple ambition verges on the impossible. Yet he has tried to do even more, describing—often in detail—shifts in scholarly and scientific practices in the middle to late nineteenth century. To cap it all, he attempts to show how Nietzsche's ideas either arose in response to or were colored by these changes. To do all this in a single book—and to add as subtext an attempt to work through certain approaches associated with Bourdieu and Foucault—would demand prodigious learning, which Emden has, and a mastery of literary and intellectual structure, which in this text, at least, is less evident.

It demands yet another element, and that is a clear and consistently observed methodology. The book's deficiency in this regard can be illustrated in a single statement, which moreover enunciates a central ambition of the book: ““If we wish to better understand how Nietzsche sought to formulate the relationships among language, consciousness, and the body, we must map the ambiguities of his writings onto the epistemic constellations that shaped the cultural consciousness and intellectual outlook of the later nineteenth century.”^{xiii} This rather exciting if nebulous statement exposes the nub of Emden's problem. Nietzsche's theory of language (not to mention consciousness and body) is already vague and difficult to define. Emden proposes further to compare it with a field designated by “epistemic constellation,” a resonant and intellectually inviting

term, which is, however, every bit as vague as the Nietzschean writings that he hopes to illuminate. As a result he finds himself in the position of trying to “map” one ill-defined homologue onto another that is equally diffuse. We must not ask for degrees of precision inappropriate to the material. We can, however, request that if Emden wishes to compare two bodies of work, he define the terms of comparison and show that he has met them.

As a point of contrast, one might mention a similar claim made in Claudia Crawford’s *The Beginnings of Nietzsche’s Theory of Language*,^{xiv} a work Emden does not mention. Crawford too believed that Nietzsche’s work was heavily indebted to works by contemporaries, notably Lange, Fischer, Hartmann, and Gerber, with strong contributions by Schopenhauer and Kant. In her case, she directly linked individual statements by Nietzsche to specific texts by these authors. This was an act of genuine mapping in the sense of establishing that the items to be compared were homologues and that there existed some one-to-one correspondence between them. It is connections of this specificity that Emden seems unable to provide.

One might also compare *Nietzsche on Language, Consciousness, and the Body* with its successor, Emden’s *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of History*. In that work also, the author is at pains to show how Nietzsche’s ideas and writings fit into the ideological battles of his time. In the latter case, however, the subject matters at issue were history and politics, disciplines that lay at the heart of Nietzsche’s project virtually from the beginning. The reader can see quite directly how Nietzsche struggled with historicist issues, and thanks to Emden’s illuminating contextual framing, which is far more fluid and assured than that presented in the earlier work, the reader can see that politics too was on his mind at least from *The Birth of Tragedy* onward. One does not

need to speak of mapping when one can see the author immediately grappling with the issues at hand.

Physiology and the biological sciences, by contrast, entered Nietzsche's published work obliquely and with little explicit acknowledgement. Indeed, virtually all the citations Emden quotes are from the *Nachlaß* and would not have been available to the public during Nietzsche's own time or in the immediate aftermath. As a result, the influence of biology, while unquestionably pervasive in Nietzsche's work, is so little self-evident, at least in the canonic texts, that decades elapsed before most scholars recognized their presence at all. The process of showing that they influenced the philosopher not just in the better known passages (in the first parts of *Beyond Good and Evil*, for example) but throughout his writings calls for far more sustained and explicit exposition than Emden provides.

Ultimately, it must be said that Emden has a plausible thesis, has done an enormous amount of spadework, and has given his subject matter careful and insightful attention. Anyone interested in Nietzsche's theory of language or the ways he sought to incorporate physiology into his work will find this text obligatory reading. Nonetheless, the volume as completed does not do justice to its own achievements. As has already been indicated, Emden's later book, *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of History*, displays none of the aforementioned failings. One therefore awaits the day when he will return to the insights of this study and refashion them in a way that gives them their due. Until that time readers will find in *Nietzsche on Language, Consciousness, and the Body* a suggestive and frequently informative book, which promises much, delivers much, yet leaves the reader wondering at the gap between.

ⁱ The methodology is often attributed to Aristarchus, who would have used it against Crates and the Pergamene school, which attempted to interpret Homer allegorically. See, for example, Christian Benne, *Nietzsche und die historisch-kritische Philologie*. Monographien und Texte zur Nietzsche-Forschung, Bd. 49 (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2005): 38-9.

ⁱⁱ Christian J. Emden, *Nietzsche on Language, Consciousness, and the Body* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005): 1.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*, 11.

^{iv} *Ibid*, 27.

^v *Ibid*, 33.

^{vi} *Ibid*, 88.

^{vii} *Ibid*, 88, 93, 106, *inter alia*.

^{viii} *Ibid*, 106.

^{ix} Johann Figl, *Dialektik der Gewalt: Nietzsches Hermeneutische Religionsphilosophie mit Berücksichtigung unveröffentlichter Manuskripte* (Düsseldorf: Patmos Verlag, 1984): 131-162.

^x It bears saying that Gregory Moore has written a book-length study that also contextualizes Nietzsche in the biological (and, in Moore's case, sociological) views of his time. See Gregory Moore, *Nietzsche, Biology and Metaphor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). The two treatments, however, consider Nietzsche's thought from different angles, and Moore has little to say on the linguistic issue, which is of such paramount importance for Emden.

^{xi} Emden, *Op. Cit.* 134.

^{xii} *Ibid*, 151.

^{xiii} *Ibid*, 5.

^{xiv} Claudia Crawford, *The Beginnings of Nietzsche's Theory of Language* (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1988).