

Rhythm from Art to Philosophy - Nietzsche (1867-1888) - part 11

Wednesday 1 June 2016, by [Pascal Michon](#)

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Eurythmy as Enhancement of Life

Naturally, one question remains: what criteria could be used to judge and choose if every value, every affirmation pertains to the historical sphere? Is there still a possibility to produce an ethics—and a politics—in and from a totally immanent world? My thesis, based on the evidence presented above, is that Nietzsche was precisely working on this problem at the end of his life and that he was not far from the idea that *due to* our nature of *speaking living beings* our immanent world is not closed upon itself: since man is a *language-and-rhythm fashioning creature*, he is quite capable to overcome determinisms and become *subject of his life*, even if he remains prone to *subject himself* to his own rhythmic productions.

This goes against many interpretations, including Heidegger's primarily ontological evaluation, Derrida's grammatological reading and Deleuze's naturalistic version. However, the question motivating the letter to Carl Fuchs does not concern neither being, nor writing, nor nature; instead, it primarily aims at spoken language, history and ethics.

This little piece of evidence offers us a precious insight on a very disputed question. It is well known that at the end of his intellectual career Nietzsche developed a new ethics based on *life*. In many texts, the criterion he uses to judge aesthetic, cultural, religious, philosophical or social matters seems very simple: is something favorable or opposed to the development of life? Wagner's drama, for instance, is condemned because it has depressive effects on its public, whereas Bizet's opera is praised because it expresses the joy and power of affirmation of life. But ever since the end of the 19th century, common readers as much as specialists have had difficulties to give a complete account of this criterion which involves both life as biological or physiological course, and life as existence or personal and maybe social experience. When the former has been given precedence, Nietzsche's late philosophy has been reduced to a simplistic naturalism; when the latter was considered as the true core of Nietzsche's view, as in existentialist interpretations, one did not understand Nietzsche's insistence on natural dynamics and the role they play in his ethics.

The notes on rhythm and the radical primacy of language they presuppose shed some light on this difficult question by better articulating this two *membra disjecta* of Nietzsche's late philosophy. By showing the rhythmic impact of the will to power on the development of language as well as the rhythmic conditions of the development of thought and expression of emotions set in return by each specific language and culture, they suggest that there is no language nor speech devoid of any basis in biological-physiological life, but also and more surprisingly, no biological-physiological life, at least for humans, independent of any culture and any language. *Human life develops as a constant*

interaction of linguistic-poetic and biological-physiological dynamics and their common ground, their possibility to interact is rhythm. Therefore, its value depends on that of the rhythms which organize it.

No wonder then that Nietzsche pays particular attention to the rhythmic traces in particular languages of forces coming from the people, but also to the fashioning back of those forces, in individuals as much as collectives, by the dominant rhythms in one particular culture and language, in one particular period of time. Here, we see again the typical Nietzschean scheme involving two interacting dynamics, but now the enhancement of human life has become the criterion of good and bad rhythms. As anyone can realize reading his last texts on the subject, Nietzsche is not supporting a relativist view according to which any rhythm would be as good as any other.

In the letter to Carl Fuchs, the different values given to each rhythmic type appear only in conclusion and in a slightly ironical way: whereas “our kind of rhythmic belongs to pathology,” the “ancient [rhythmic]” supported “ethos,” i.e. properly ethics. In other words, according to Nietzsche his rhythmic studies have shown that the modern rhythmic conditions of thought and expression of emotion determined by modern languages and cultures deserve to be firmly criticized for their inefficient and autistic symbolization drives. Whereas ancient rhythmic conditions were ethically much more favorable to man because they fostered transsubjectivity (*ethos*) and hampered the development of hysterical subjectivities (*pathos*), modern conditions make, on the contrary, the symbolization process of affects foster subjectivities closed in on themselves (*pathos*) and hamper the emergence of shareable transsubjects (*ethos*). In this sense, contrary to *The Birth of Tragedy*, the notes on rhythm and their late final conclusion sketch a radically historical ethics *based on life*, which in this instance means as much *biological and physiological* as *linguistic and poetic* life.

This view of Nietzsche’s late ethics which bridges nature and culture, body and language, natural science and poetics, could be deemed fragile, if there were no other text in which he would defend the same kind of argument. But, in an unpublished fragment dated from the winter 1883-1884 where he comes back to the issue of power of rhythm, Nietzsche suggests that, as any other living beings, man is composed of a bunch of “forces, connected by a common nutritional process,” which *opposes*, *reformulates* and *evaluates* all other forces he has to deal with. But between emotion/action and thinking/evaluation, in his case, imagination enters into play. Man feels sensations and immediately acts accordingly as by a kind of involuntary reflex, but before reflecting upon what happens, that is according to Nietzsche evaluating what is good or bad for himself, he first “reshapes” the forces he is facing by projecting “forms and rhythm” on them. Man is therefore “a form- and rhythm-fashioning creature.”

What we call “life” is a multitude of forces, connected by a common nutritional process. All so-called feeling, imagining, and thinking belong to this nutritional process, as means of its accomplishment, that is, (1) an opposition against all other forces; (2) a reformulation [*Zurechtmachen*] of them according to forms and rhythms [*nach Gestalten und Rhythmen*] ; (3) an evaluation of incorporation versus separation.

1. Man [*der Mensch*] is a *form-fashioning* creature [*ein formenbildendes Geschöpf*]. Man believes in “being” and things because he is a form- and rhythm-fashioning creature [*ein formen- und rhythmusbildendes Geschöpf*].

The shapes and forms which we see, and in which we believe to possess the things, are not all at hand [*vorhanden*]. We make it easier for us and connect whatever “impressions” through figures that we create.

He who closes his eyes discovers that a form-fashioning drive [*formenbildender Trieb*] is continually exercising itself, and that innumerable things are tried out without corresponding to any reality.

2. Man is a *rhythm-fashioning* creature [*ein rhythmien-bildendes Geschöpf*]. He introduces all becoming [*alles Geschehen*] into these rhythms, it is a way to possess the “impressions.”

3. Man is an *opposing* force [*eine widerstrebende Kraft*]: regarding all other forces.

His means of *feeding* himself and assimilating things is to bring them into “forms” and rhythms: *comprehension* [is] first of all only *creation* [Schaffen] of the “things.” *Knowledge* [is] a means of *nutrition*.

(eKGWB/NF-1883,24[14] — Winter 1883-1884, my trans.)

This sheds some light on the very peculiar anthropology that supports Nietzsche’s late ethics. This anthropology is radically and simultaneously natural and historical. On the one hand, there is no such thing as a universal being that would be called Man and that would remain the same throughout time and space. Man is primarily a living being among myriads of others, each composed of myriads of forces, and which has to deal with them in order to perpetuate itself. But, on the other hand, man does not dissolve either in the flow of the natural becoming. Thanks to his imagination, which is here equated with his rhythmic power, he projects forms, shapes, figures on the fluid world within which he is bound to live.

In other words, whereas Nietzsche previously considered the power of rhythm as partly interior (*Sprachsinn*), partly exterior to man (feedback rhythmic effects of languages and culture, included music), he now considers it as one of his most essential characters. Man is man because he is endowed with the power to “rhythmize” the world. A few decades later, in a course given around 1938 and published in 1947, Mauss, summing up a large theoretical trend which was developing since the 1900s, will similarly claim that “socially and individually, man is a rhythmic animal” (see Michon, 2015b, 2016).

Nietzsche is no sociologist and remains on the philosophical level. He does not say whether this power makes him particular among the living—probably not—but he makes clear that if there is such thing as man it must rely on a capacity to cope with the becoming and humanize it. Consequently, it is possible to study and judge him by observing: 1. the rhythms that he imposes upon the world; 2. those that the world, as it works, imposes back upon him; 3. all that in respect with the enhancement of his own life. This fragment exposes probably the largest conception of rhythm power ever conceived by Nietzsche. Hence, if rhythm has significant aesthetic effects, it is because it has a more general ethical power: it produces man’s humanity itself.

This claim raises a question though. It is clear that Nietzsche here generalizes a conclusion he already reached while studying poetry and language. But precisely what about them in this new conception of rhythm power? Do they disappear altogether or are they included in it? In the first case, Nietzsche would develop a radical naturalism where language does not count for itself. His late philosophy has often been interpreted in this way, for instance by Deleuze and his followers. In the second case, which I think based on all evidence presented above is the best guess, the Nietzschean apparent late naturalism is actually supported by an implicit anthropology resting on his early findings concerning poetry, language and languages. Man (*Mensch*) as “*formen- und rhythmusbildendes Geschöpf*” is clearly reminiscent of the former “*sprachbildende Mensch* – the language building man.”

To my knowledge, the only specialist who has been aware of this historical-anthropological aspect of Nietzsche’s late philosophy is Angèle Kremer-Marietti, to whom I would like to pay a tribute to end this section. In a text written in the mid 1990s, she rightly underlined the decisive role played by rhythm in Nietzsche’s theory of language as much as in his own writing—something I did not have the opportunity to study and that remains to be done.

Nietzsche pleases us with his rhythmic writing, first developing in the body, then joining the thought, the decision and the will of the Self (the corporeal *cogito*), a writing retaining from rhythm the difference between times, i.e. the purified, “abstracted-like” rhythm, changed into logical thinking, if not a “pre-reflexive cogito.” As an essential trace, the rhythm is not foreign to the meaning of language and allows to disregard the disembodied aspect of the written sentence. Both poor reading and poor writing fail to recognize the intelligent and conscious sign, if they lack right hearing. It is by thinking language as a rhythmic and figural event that Nietzsche builds his theory of meaning, since, as a sign of difference, rhythm in language lets show through the meaning.

Nietzsche’s style reflects his concern, manifested in his writings, for syncope, plural, diversity, musicality, movement, motif with development and deepening, assonance, and finally, as he would say, the whole *ticking* of poetry. But the entire Nietzschean prose and poetry show the power of the free rhythms in writing. In this light, the effect of rhythm involves already by itself a slight modification of the rhythmic movements of life, which Nietzsche tried to precisely identify in his *Rhythmic studies*. (Kremer-Marietti, 1996, my trans.)

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No need to say that Nietzsche’s contribution to rhythmology is one of the most developed in the 19th century but also one of the most obscure and ill-known. I guess there is still much more to discover in his posthumous writings, fragments and letters, even in his published texts, nevertheless, our survey has already shown a certain number of significant points.

1. Contrary to Hegel or other previous Idealist philosophers of the 19th century, but also to Heidegger and a great number of his followers in the 20th century, who developed only abstract and second hand reflections on rhythm, Nietzsche reflects, on the one hand, from his knowledge and

practice of art, writing and music, and on the other hand, from his scientific study of ancient literatures and languages. His rhythmological work is rooted in empirical observation.

2. Some recent commentators have argued, on this basis, that Nietzsche's *Democritea* and *Greek rhythmic* contain what he could not say in *The Birth of Tragedy*, because of his juvenile admiration for Wagner and Schopenhauer, and that these notes show his real thought hidden behind the mask, a kind of early Nietzschean *larvatus prode*. But, even if these studies have been massively and wrongly disregarded by most specialists, we should not exaggerate their consistency. As a matter of fact, Nietzsche never published his numerous notes on pre-Socratics and Greek rhythm, instead he published *The Birth*. From that mere fact we may conclude that he was satisfied with the latter and dissatisfied with the former.

3. One reason for that, in my opinion, is that in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche succeeded—despite some shortcomings concerning language and poetry that we noticed—in producing a consistent theory of *rhuthmos*, something he came close to in his speculations on pre-Socratics only in the *Time Atomistic* dated from 1873, without yet being able to develop it in full form, and in his notes on Greek rhythmic only in the last letter to Carl Fuchs dated from 1888, which was *de facto* limited in size and in any case not meant to be published. The divergence and temporal discontinuities between each of the three orientations of his initial project—aesthetics, ontology, philology—obviously impeded a common publication.

4. Furthermore, there are reasons to believe that, apart from the sheer size of the project, the impossibility to make theory of art, ontology, and poetics fuse together in a single perspective was the expression of deeper problems that Nietzsche did not manage to resolve and that we must be aware of. I would like to suggest in this regard a double hypothesis.

One wonders if the first reason why he never achieved the “philosophy of rhythm” he was aiming at, was not the weight of the part of the post-Aristotle Greek tradition itself upon which he relied to contest the modern metric but which did not enable him not to really get back to the pre-Socratics and to firmly establish the alternative *rhuthmology* he was hoping for. As we have seen, the texts on Heraclitus, the *Democritea* and the *Notebooks on Rhythmic* all point towards a conception of rhythm based on *rhuthmos*. But, Aristoxenus, the main *Rhythmiker* that Nietzsche opposes to the following *Metriker*, was a keen disciple of Aristotle, whose conception of rhythm was framed equally by the Platonic model of rhythm and the Aristotelian hylomorphic concept of individuation that both hampered any *rhuthmic* conception of becoming (see vol. 1, chap. 3).

In addition, Aristotle himself was responsible for the original split between poetics, which he genially founded, and atomism, which he simultaneously so unfortunately rejected. In this regard, it was probably impossible to come back to the pre-Socratic *rhuthmology*, without having first brought to light these conflicting orientations in Aristotle's work, his strong dependence upon Plato during his youth, as well as his later more mature and innovative contributions. There was—and there still is—no access to alternative rhythmologies to the Platonic model without a comprehensive critique of Aristotle's thought.

5. Although he never achieved his project of “philosophy of rhythm,” his notes as well as his published essays provide us with a bunch of illuminating analyses and theoretical propositions. I

won't repeat here all results that can be found in each section of this chapter. I will mention only two remarkable achievements among others: the elaboration of an unfinished yet promising *rhuthmic ontology* inspired by the study of the pre-Socratic philosophers, especially Heraclitus and Democritus, and the *historical anthropology of rhythm* that his philological research on Greek rhythmic drove him to substitute to his former metaphysics of art dominated by melody and harmony. In short, if Nietzsche did not entirely succeed in combining the *Democritean naturalistic* and the *Aristotelian poetic paradigms*, he faced the problem with enough rigor and obstinacy to open a lot of new paths that certainly still remain nowadays to be explored.

6. The fruitfulness of Nietzsche's *rhuthmic* strategy appears quite paradoxically through a very small fragment which ends his *Rhythmic Researches*. This text resonates simultaneously with parts of his own reflection on art as a model of endless process of creation and destruction exposed in *The Birth of Tragedy*, his meditation on being as artistic process and work exposed in the sections on Heraclitus in *The Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, and his speculation on time elaborated in his *Time Atomistic*.

The rhythm is an attempt at *individuation*. For rhythm to exist, there must be multiplicity and becoming. Here the quest for beauty reveals itself as the motive for individuation. Rhythm is the form of becoming, in general the *form of the phenomenal world*. (*Rhythmische Untersuchungen*, KGAI3, p. 338, my trans.)

Based on his use of the term "individuation," it has been said that Nietzsche one more time exposed in this passage his Aristoxenian conception of rhythm. But I think something different is here emerging. Nietzsche comes maybe closest to a *rhuthmology* that would be consistent with his other essays. Rhythm is not any longer considered in an Aristotelian manner as a form, an *eidos*, a final cause, applied to the matter of time, itself considered as only passive potentiality. It now *includes* and *entails* "multiplicity and becoming." It is the "form of becoming" itself, the form of the "phenomenal" flow, i.e. properly a "way of flowing." The hylomorphic scheme is superseded. Rhythm is in itself "an attempt at individuation" which has through "the search for beauty" a poetic stake, i.e. a human and historical end. Rhythm takes, finally, the figure of a *rhuthmos* in the sense that was rediscovered by poets and writers from Diderot to Hölderlin. It can be traced back as well to Spinoza and Leibniz (Michon, 2015a, p. 27-29).

7. Due to lack of space, I could not specifically study Nietzsche's late doctrines of "will to power" and "eternal return," but both may certainly be considered as the result of a life-long rhythmological research. Our investigation has shown that they cannot be correctly assessed without reconnecting them to Nietzsche's former studies, on the one hand on pre-Socratics, especially on Democritus, and on the other hand, on rhythm and language. If we do so, the logical inconsistencies pointed out by Heidegger partly fade away and ironically Heidegger's own contradictions appear more bluntly. Furthermore, such studies reveal that Nietzsche's project, while he pointed towards a renewed ontology, had at the same time a historical-anthropological background that has been completely suppressed in his study by Heidegger, who was building a purely ontological war machine against "anthropology" and "Modernity."

Nietzsche's critique of metaphysics does not only presuppose, as Kant's or Heidegger's, to look back to purely subjective or purely ontological conditions. His peculiar way to address this issue is made

possible because, unlike Kant, he seriously takes language, languages, art, and works of art, into account, but he does not endow them either with the mystical and cosmic status they have for Heidegger. This surprising but powerful stand explains why, contrary to the opinion of many critics who usually disregard this aspect, his work opens onto non-Platonic aesthetics and ethics of rhythm which still remain rooted in the human and historical sphere, i.e. in anthropology.

[*Next chapter*](#)