

Nietzsche and the idea of a history of the genesis of thought **Research proposal by Emmanuel Salanskis**

In *Human, all too human* (1878) the first of Nietzsche's aphoristic works that he wrote in the aftermath of his break with Wagner, Nietzsche proposed an entirely new research program that confirmed his rejection of Schopenhauer's metaphysics. Rather than viewing man and his mental abilities as immutable givens which can provide access to the timeless "thing in itself", Nietzsche takes a resolutely historical approach to the world of representation. He argues that this developmental perspective changes the nature of the problem, by showing that :

That which we humans call life and experience - has gradually *become*, is indeed still fully in the course of becoming, and should thus not be regarded as a fixed object¹.

This stance was the rationale for his program to explore the "history of the genesis of thought" (*Entstehungsgeschichte des Denkens*) whose goal was to trace the process through which our existence takes on its hues². However, this enterprise cannot be understood without a grasp of the theoretical evolutionary framework behind it. Nietzsche did not simply intend to document the variety of cultural perspectives on the world, as illustrated by the several thousand years of history "we more or less know about"³. Rather, he wanted to shed light on the innate structures of human psychology, by showing that they are the outcome of biological heredity shaped by evolution on an infinitely greater time scale. His view thus anticipated contemporary trends in Evolutionary Psychology in many ways and deserves to be examined in its own right- a topic rarely addressed in the secondary literature.

Two traditional misinterpretations of *Entstehungsgeschichte des Denkens* are primarily responsible for eclipsing its evolutionary dimension. The first, expressed by Heidegger in his 1930 course, characterized Nietzsche's concept of Becoming as purely metaphysical, dismissed his rejection of the "an sich" and failed to acknowledge the fact that Nietzsche aimed to conduct a concrete historical investigation⁴. The second crucial misinterpretation involves substituting this ontological approach by a purely anthropological reading: this error of interpretation is already hinted at in Jaspers, who deliberately reduced the "historical philosophy"⁵ of *Human all too Human* to an overview of the origins of civilization⁶.

However closer scrutiny of the texts shows that Nietzsche rejected considerations on being as being, as well as all theoretical distinctions between human culture and animal instinct, consistent with his basic postulate of a *gesammte Entwicklung der organischen Wesen* :

With all these conceptions the steady and laborious process of science, which will one day celebrate its greatest triumph in a *history of the genesis of thought*, will in the end decisively have done; for the outcome of this history may well be the conclusion: That which we now call the world is the outcome of a host of errors and fantasies which have gradually arisen and grown entwined with one another in the course of the overall evolution of the organic being, and are now inherited by us as the accumulated treasure of the entire past – as treasure: for the value of our humanity depends on it⁷.

1 See F. Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human. A Book for Free Spirits*, §16, transl. R.J. Hollingdale, Cambridge : Cambridge University Press 1996, (henceforth HTH), p. 20.

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See F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science, with a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, §7, transl. Walter Kaufmann, New York : Vintage Books, 1974 (henceforth GS), p. 67-69.

3 See HTH, §2, p. 13.

4 See M. Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, Stuttgart : Klett-Cotta, 1961, Erster Band, in particular p. 16.

5 See HTH, §1, p. 12.

6 See K. Jaspers, *Nietzsche : an introduction to the understanding of his philosophical activity*, trans. Ch. F. Wallraff and F. J. Schmitz, Baltimore : John Hopkins University Press, 1997, p. 234 : « the starting point of [the] development [underlined by Nietzsche] is man as a wild and lawless natural force ».

7 See HTH, §16, p. 20.

This passage links evolution (*Entwicklung*) and heredity (*Vererbung*) to depict a psychological continuity of the living world, and as such shows that as early as 1878 Nietzsche had assimilated one of the key points of Darwinian Theory – even though he characteristically refrained from referring to the principle of natural selection. It is well known that Darwin ended his *Origin of the Species* by predicting that psychology would be completely transformed by evolution :

In the distant future, I see open fields for far more important researches. Psychology will be based on a new foundation, that of the necessary acquirement of each mental power and capacity by gradation. Light will be thrown on the origin of man and his history⁸.

Because Nietzsche never read Darwin's *magnum opus* first hand either in English or in translation and because he made vigorous attempts to distance himself from Darwinism in his 1888 writings⁹, his interest in biological heredity that shapes our perception of the world has sometimes been attributed to the short-lived influence of his friend Paul Rée¹⁰. It is true that in the preface to his book *The Origin of Moral Sensations*, Rée clearly took sides with the naturalism of Lamarck and Darwin, and also tried to draw psychological conclusions from the theory of evolution¹¹. This explains why Nietzsche's *Human all too Human* was castigated as being "Rée-alism" by numerous readers¹², as though he had briefly been converted to the idea that man descends from the apes before recovering his philosophical bearings.

Several more in-depth studies on Nietzsche's attitude toward Darwin have nevertheless concluded that this was not the case¹³. In particular they show that Nietzsche's early interest in evolution goes back to his first reading of Lange's *History of Materialism* in 1866. When reading part II chapter IV of this work entitled "Darwin and Teleology" as a student in Leipzig, Nietzsche discovered a biological doctrine that undermined Schopenhauer's Fixism: he describes his enthusiasm for Lange in his correspondence of the time¹⁴ and never ceased to reflect on the implications of the "fluidity of all concepts, types and species" for his philosophy of culture¹⁵. A particularly telling reference can be found in a posthumous fragment dated 1872 – when he was working on his two first *Untimely Meditations*, where Nietzsche clearly acknowledges the validity of the evolutionary perspective :

The appalling consequence of Darwinism, which I actually believe is true. Everything we venerate is based on moral, artistic, religious, etc. qualities which we consider to be eternal. Instincts do not help us take a single step forward toward explaining purposiveness. For these instincts are the outcome of infinitely long processes¹⁶.

Since the purpose of the analyses in *Human all too Human* is to retrace the genesis of human instincts, it seems crucial to acknowledge the continuity of Nietzsche's reasoning on this point. The later criticisms of Darwin in the 1888 texts are less a denial of evolution than a refusal to view

8 See Ch. Darwin, *On the origin of species by means of natural selection, or the preservation of favoured races in the struggle for life*. London : John Murray, 1859, p. 488.

9 See F. Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, « Skirmishes of an Untimely Man », §14, in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce homo, Twilight of the idols and other writings*, transl. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2005, (henceforth TI) p. 188-189, as well as F. Nietzsche, *Ecce homo*, « Why I write such good books », §1, trans. Walter Kaufmann, New York : Random House, 1967 (henceforth EH), p. 259.

10 See B. Donnellan, « Nietzsche and Paul Rée: Cooperation and Conflict », in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 43, No. 4 (Oct. - Dec., 1982), University of Pennsylvania Press, p. 601.

11 See P. Rée, *Der Ursprung der moralischen Empfindungen*, Chemnitz : Verlag von Ernst Schmeitzner, 1877, p. VIII.

12 See EH, « Why I write such good books », §1, p. 288-289.

13 See in particular W. Stegmaier, « Darwin, Darwinismus, Nietzsche. Zum Problem der Evolution », in *Nietzsche-Studien*, Band 16, Berlin / New York : de Gruyter, 1987, p. 264-287, as well as G. Stack, *Lange and Nietzsche*, Berlin / New York : de Gruyter, 1983, p. 156 sq.

14 See letter to Gersdorff dated February 16, 1868.

15 See F. Nietzsche, *Untimely meditations*, "The Advantages and Disadvantages of History for Life", §9, trans. by R. J. Hollingdale, Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1997, I, p. 112.

16 See F. Nietzsche, *KSA*, 7, 19[132], p. 461. (This passage was translated from German for this proposal and for illustrative purposes only).

natural selection as its main driving force¹⁷. The philosopher of the *revaluation of all values* thus positions himself as a theoretician of the same biological history, and concurrently puts forward the notion of the will to power as one possible key to interpretation that lessens the importance of adaptation of living things to their environment¹⁸. By doing so, it is likely that Nietzsche underestimated his real kinship with the author of the *Origin of the Species*: he in particular seems to be unaware of the deeply Darwinian nature of his methodological belief that "the cause of the origin of a thing and its eventual utility [...] lie worlds apart"¹⁹. Recent works have gone so far as to suggest, and fairly convincingly, that Nietzsche only wanted to differentiate himself so vigorously from the Darwinian school because he was aware of having borrowed significantly from Darwinian literature²⁰ – starting with the German word *Züchtung*, which Heinrich Georg Bronn used in 1980 to translate the word "selection"²¹.

Does all this imply that Nietzsche's thought is simply a philosophical interpretation of Darwinism? This reading appears to be overstating the case: not only does it fail to do justice to the notion of will to power but it also comes close to committing a historical misinterpretation as regards initial reactions to Darwin's theory. Nietzsche was not the only contemporary of Darwin to have accepted the *explicandum* of descent with modification, while at the same time rejecting natural selection as its *explicans*²². Rather, this stance was fairly widespread in Germany, where the biological works of Goethe had laid the groundwork for an acceptance of the *Origin of the Species* as a contribution to the Transformist school rather than as its foundation²³. This explains why it is so important to revisit a period of time in the history of ideas when the connection between Darwinism and Evolutionism was not straightforward, to better ascertain the stakes involved in Nietzsche's *Entstehungsgeschichte des Denkens*. Consistent with the theoretical orientations of the neo-Lamarckian biologists he preferred to read²⁴ Nietzsche was above all interested in the mechanisms of variation and heredity which gave rise to human psychology, and was critical of attempts to apply the concept of natural selection to man :

The struggle for existence is not the important principle! Growth of the stable force through the individual's sense of community, [but] the possibility of achieving superior goals, through degenerating natures and partial weakening of the stable force²⁵.

Thus arguments that suggest Nietzsche was a neo-Darwinian thinker seem unfounded, since they do

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See TI, §14, p. 188 : « As far as the famous "struggle for existence" is concerned, this seems to me to be more of an opinion than a proven fact at the moment. It takes place, but as an exception [...] ».

18 See F. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, II, §12, trans. Walter Kaufmann, New York : Random House, 1967, (henceforth GM), p. 76-79.

19 See GM, II, §12, p. 77, as well as D. Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea : Evolution and the Meanings of Life*, London : Penguin Books, 1996, p. 465.

20 See J. Richardson, *Nietzsche's New Darwinism*, New York : Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 3.

21 See Th. Hoquet, *Darwin contre Darwin. Comment lire L'origine des espèces ?*, Paris, Seuil, 2009, p. 63. Bronn, the first German translator of the *Origin of the Species* translated the full title of the book as : *Über die Entstehung der Arten im Thier- und Pflanzenreich durch natürliche Züchtung, oder Erhaltung der vervollkommneten Rassen im Kampf um's Dasein*.

22 See K. Waters, « The arguments in the *Origin of Species* », in *The Cambridge Companion to Darwin*, ed. by J. Hodge and G. Radick, Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 116 : « [...] the *Origin* persuaded many readers to accept the "evolution" idea but not the "by means of natural selection" part of Darwin's view ».

23 The first three presentations of the theory of natural selection which Nietzsche was familiar with all stress its ties to Goethe and Lamarck. See F.-A. Lange, *Geschichte des Materialismus und Kritik seiner Bedeutung in der Gegenwart*, Leipzig : Reclam, 1875, p. 316-317 et p. 325 ; D. Strauss, *Der alte und der neue Glaube : ein Bekenntnis*, Bonn : Verlag von Emil Strauss, 1881, §55-56, p. 181-187 ; E. von Hartmann, *Philosophie des Unbewussten*, Leipzig : Hermann Haacke, 1889, Dritter Teil : « Das Unbewusste und der Darwinismus », p. 46 sq.

24 See J. Gayon, « Nietzsche and Darwin », in *Biology and the Foundation of Ethics*, ed. by J. Maienschein and M. Ruse, Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 159.

25 See F. Nietzsche, *KSA*, 8, 12[22], p. 258. (This passage was translated from German for this proposal and for illustrative purposes only.)

not deal with the dual logical structure of Darwinian theory and can only justify their approach by exaggerating the role played by selection in Nietzsche's genealogy²⁶. Although Nietzsche did intend to study the hereditary psychological endowment willed to us by our close and distant forebears, he did not think that the key outcome of this transmission was a selection of organisms best adapted to their environment.

It could of course be claimed that this is a weakness in Nietzsche's philosophy, since the doubts he expressed as regards the mechanism of selection forced him to fall back on the Lamarckian theory of acquired traits, which today is considered scientifically invalid. But although Nietzsche at times reasoned about *Vererbung* in terms which appear obsolete to us, how can we account for the fact that he provides a description of the genesis of thought which jibes to a startling degree with today's evolutionary epistemology²⁷? Why does he stress the selective advantage of certain inherited cognitive abilities? And how can he avoid contradicting himself but still underscore the cruel elimination of organisms endowed with different modes of representation? The passage quoted below from *Gay Science* is particularly illustrative of these analyses and their Darwinian tonality :

Over immense periods of time, the intellect produced nothing but errors. A few of these proved to be useful and helped to preserve the species: those who hit upon or inherited these had better luck in their struggle for themselves and their progeny. Such erroneous articles of faith, which were continually inherited, until they became almost part of the basic endowment of the species, include the following: that there are enduring things; that there are equal things; that there are things, substances, bodies; that a thing is what it appears to be; that our will is free; that what is good for me is also good in itself²⁸.

For transcendental reasons which I have analyzed elsewhere²⁹ Nietzsche does not infer from the usefulness of a belief that it is true, and thus rejects the cornerstone of pragmatic epistemology. But while arguing that a metaphysically erroneous representation can very well be efficient, Nietzsche seems to be favorably inclined toward the principal of natural selection: he recognizes that the "articles of faith" elaborated by the intellect are only transmitted through heredity when they serve the organism in its struggle to survive and reproduce. Along these same lines, any number of texts could be quoted in which Nietzsche argues that reason, the categories of understanding and the a-priori forms of sensibility came into being because they are life-sustaining³⁰. Thus, were there two Nietzsches, as John Richardson claims, one of which, the dominant one, criticized Darwin while the other – the recessive one, was its disciple³¹? And is the second Nietzsche the only one of interest to the contemporary reader ?

My claim is that these two Nietzsches are in fact one: the author of *Gay Science* is clearly an evolutionary epistemologist, but once again, one should not yield to the temptation to see Darwinian selection as the driving force behind his *Entwicklungsgeschichte*. From a Nietzschean point of view, evolution is less the history of the struggle of individuals to gain access to limited resources than that of a series of psychological innovations that did or did not prove their vital worth. Naturally, during this process, defective variations emerged and were rapidly eliminated. Nietzsche states for this reason that "innumerable beings who made inferences in a way different from ours perished"³². Nothing, however, including in the texts written in the early 1880s, indicates that the disappearance of these forms was the result of their defeat in a biological struggle: consistent with the logic of the

26 In particular see the extremely interesting work by John Richardson cited above.

27 See P. Poellner, *Nietzsche and Metaphysics*, Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1995, « Nietzsche and Evolutionary Epistemology », p. 138-149, as well as J. Gayon, « Nietzsche and Darwin », op. cit., p. 191-192.

28 See GS, §110, p. 170.

29 See E. Salanskis, « Nietzsche et la fiction de l'inconditionné », in *Nietzsche-Studien*, Band 39, Berlin / New York : de Gruyter, 2010, p. 309-332.

30 See for example F. Nietzsche, *KSA* 13, 14[152], p. 334.

31 See J. Richardson, *Nietzsche's New Darwinism*, op. cit., p. 45-66.

32 See GS, §111, p. 171.

will to power that he was elaborating in his notebooks at this same period of time³³ Nietzsche stresses the specific obstacles that each mode of life must overcome to dominate in its realm, and which make its preservation more or less likely. It is duration, and not victory over biological competitors which alone demonstrates that a form of existence is viable.

Without strictly speaking being a Darwinian, Nietzsche thus defines a research program in which an evolutionary epistemologist today could feel at home. This aspect of his work has only begun to be given the attention it deserves in the secondary literature and it warrants a much more detailed and extensive analysis. In addition, it has only rarely been stressed to what extent *Entstehungsgeschichte des Denkens* presents a true evolutionary psychology which goes far beyond a theory of knowledge. Nietzsche in fact was interested in our psychological/emotional/aesthetic inheritance as much, and even more than our intellectual inheritance. He examines human psychological heredity in a way that prefigures both the approach and the findings of modern evolutionary psychology. This includes color vision, landscape perception and all the esthetic emotions which he interprets as *Vererbungen*, as deserving an evolutionary analysis :

The grandiose aspects of Nature, all the higher sensations of what is noble, gracious, beautiful, good, severe, violent, ravishing endowed upon us by Nature, man and history are not immediate sensations but the repercussions of countless errors which have been incorporated into us – everything would be cold and dead without this lengthy schooling. The sharp outlines of a chain of mountains, the clear blending of colors, the difference in enjoyment we feel at each color, are already inheritances (*Erbstücke*)[...] ³⁴.

To explore these notions of man's archaic psychological heredity, I will focus on what is known as Nietzsche's 'middle' period, between 1875 and 1882. During this period Nietzsche, as he stated himself, decided to devote himself to *Naturwissenschaften*³⁵ and his voluminous readings on the subject of the theory of evolution show that the convergence of his ideas and modern scientific discourse are not fortuitous³⁶.

One of these intersecting ideas deserves special analysis. Since Nietzsche's prime concern in exploring human heredity was consistently to define the preconditions for the ethical freedom of the individual, he was particularly attentive to inner tendencies which today prevent us from demonstrating intellectual caution and moral wisdom³⁷. This concern for the problematic endowments of evolution enabled him to strikingly prefigure modern theories of adaptive discordance. These theories claim that many of our biological traits are no longer in synch with our social environment, because our organisms were shaped by the slow action of natural selection whereas our civilization has undergone rapid acceleration in the last several millennia due to phenomena of social transmission³⁸. Even though Nietzsche referred to gradual incorporation rather than progressive selection, he also believed that our lifestyle no longer corresponds to the instinctual system which we inherited from our biological past. This may have been one of the main reasons that prompted Nietzsche to undertake a genealogy of morality: it is thus worth examining it in detail and comparing it when relevant to the current evolutionary stance. The posthumous fragments from the *Gay Science* period provide a whole host of analyses and hypotheses which I would like to bring to light as of next year, to help close this gap in Nietzschean studies.

33 See Th. Brobjer, *Nietzsche's Philosophical Context. An Intellectual Biography*, Urbana and Chicago : University of Illinois Press, 2008, p. 84-87.

34 See F. Nietzsche, *KSA*, 9, 11[302], p. 557. (This passage was translated from German for this proposal and for illustrative purposes only.)

35 See EH, « Why I write such good books », *Human, All Too Human*, §3, p. 285.

36 See Th. Brobjer, *Nietzsche and the "English"*, New York : Humanity Books, 2003, chap. 10 : « Nietzsche's Reading about, Knowledge of, and Relation to Darwinism », p. 235-271.

37 See HTH, §34, p. 29-30, et §107, p. 58-60.

38 See D. Jones, « Evolutionary Psychology », in *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 28 (1999), p. 558.

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Chronogramm of execution

From November to January :

I will make further readings in contemporary and nineteenth-century evolutionary psychology, so as to determine : 1) to what extent Nietzsche is indebted to psychologists of his day (especially to Eduard von Hartmann and Herbert Spencer) in his own hypotheses about psychic evolution and heredity, and 2) to what extent the twentieth-century theories of « adaptive mismatch » echo the second treatise of the *Genealogy of Morals*.

From February to April :

I would like to complete an article I have begun to write on Nietzsche's conception of heredity. My aim is to submit the text to the *Cadernos Nietzsche*, since the editor-in-chief of the journal, Ivo da Silva Junior, has ordered me a contribution this year.

From May to July :

I propose to re-translate in French the posthumous fragments of the period of *The Gay Science*, especially the notebooks M III 1 and NV 7. This work might give rise to the publication of a selection of fragments relating to evolutionary psychology.

From August to October :

I intend to publish an article on Nietzsche's understanding of evolutionary psychology in the *Nietzsche-Studien* to present my results. All the previous work should find its proper employment in this synthesis, and help situate Nietzsche as a precursor of contemporary trends of thought in evolutionary theory.

Plan of research activities in Brazil

- I will take part in the weekly meetings held by the GEN (Grupo de Estudos Nietzsche) under the supervision of Scarlett Marton. The GEN has recently been investigating the relations between culture and biology within Nietzsche's writings, and I hope to be able to contribute to this important topic through my work on the Nietzschean evolutionary psychology. I look forward to discussing

my results with the other GEN members.

- I also would like to present a conference paper on « Nietzsche and Hartmann » to the next edition of Encontros Nietzsche, so as to get involved in new Brazilian and international Nietzsche circles. This would of course represent an opportunity of further publication.

- Finally, Scarlett Marton has asked me to coordinate a research workshop on Nietzsche in the University of São Paulo. I will lecture in French or English, and assume a role of respondent when guest professors are invited to lead a session.