

Between Ocularcentrism and Anti-ocularcentrism: Nietzsche's Concept of Vision

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1. Introduction

This paper discusses Nietzsche's concept of vision.

Nietzsche has two conflicting viewpoints regarding vision. He seems to be a pioneer of anti-ocularcentrism on one hand, but caught in the tradition of ocularcentrism on the other. We would like to contribute to the workshop discussion by arguing about Nietzsche's two-sidedness on this matter.

We would like to focus on Nietzsche's anti-ocularcentrism in section two and his ocularcentrism in section three.

2. Nietzsche's "Anti - ocularcentrism"

In this section, we would like to focus on the anti-ocularcentristic side of Nietzsche.

In Western tradition — Platonism and Christianity —, ocularcentrism has been very important. Martin Jay characterizes modern ocularcentrism as "Cartesian perspectivalism" in *Downcast Eyes*. Modern ocularcentrism premises the fixed simple eye and the simple gaze / viewpoint (perspective). This scopic regime is based on the eye of the mind.

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Plato is an especially important source of this regime. Plato distrusts the eye of the body, even though he evaluates the eye of the mind.¹⁾ This is because he believes the eye of the mind to be able to understand the truth (or “the idea”) and the eye of the body to be unable to do so as well as to be prone to easily making mistakes.

However, Nietzsche strictly criticizes this tradition as well as the eye of the mind, and neither occupies a privileged position for him. This is shown in his criticism of “an eye which cannot be thought at all” in *On the Genealogy of Morality*.²⁾ He states that such an eye is “an eye turned in no direction at all, an eye where the active and interpretative powers are to be suppressed.”³⁾ There is also the Cartesian *cogito* (cognitive subject) under the concept of the eye of the mind. It is well known among those who study Nietzsche that he criticizes this *cogito* and this concept. Nietzsche regards the living body (*Leib*) as more important than the mind. In *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche says the following:

Body am I entirely, and nothing more; and soul is only the name of something in the body.

The body is a big sagacity, a plurality with one sense, a war and a peace, a flock and a shepherd.

An instrument of thy body is also thy little sagacity, my brother, which thou callest “spirit” — a little instrument and plaything of thy big sagacity.⁴⁾

Here the living body (*Leib*)— it is never the same as the material body (*Körper*) — is higher than reason or the soul. Reason is only the “instrument”

or the “plaything” for Nietzsche.

Certainly, Nietzsche evaluates the living body because he criticizes the process of weakness in life (*Leben*) that is caused by Platonism or Christianity. However, when Nietzsche evaluates the living body, he never emphasizes particular senses (sight, hearing, touch, smell and so on). He evaluates the living body as a whole, not a specific part or sense.⁵⁾ Therefore, in spite of Nietzsche’s “perspective” or “perspectivism,” he never focuses on vision alone. “Perspective” and “perspectivism” are certainly derived from painting techniques of the Renaissance and are therefore closely tied with vision. However, Nietzsche is not at all interested in painting,⁶⁾ in spite of his keen interest in art as a whole. He is interested in music and Greek tragedy.

Nietzsche involves the world with the whole body, and his conceptualization of “perspective” and “perspectivism” is based on the living body as a whole. Nietzsche discusses “climate and locality” as well as “meal” in *Ecce homo*.⁷⁾ These items can be treated by the living body as a whole, not by a specific part of body or sense.

3. Nietzsche’s “Ocularcentrism”

On the other hand, Nietzsche has some aspects of ocularcentrism. One of them is his conceptualization of “perspective” and “perspectivism.” As discussed in section two, his conceptualization of “perspective” and “perspectivism” is based on the living body as a whole, but this does not mean that they have no relationship with vision.

Nietzsche defines “perspectivism” as follows:

In so far as the word “knowledge” has any meaning, the world is knowable; but it is interpretable otherwise, it has no meaning behind it, but countless meanings. — “Perspectivism.”⁸⁾

“Perspectivism” is an epistemological concept for Nietzsche, and it loses its direct relationship with perspective as the Renaissance painting technique. However, “perspectivalism as scopic regime” is a persistently visual concept.

“Perspective” has not only referred to the painting technique since its formation. It is also considered a technique that can produce a faithful copy of the “real” world (three-dimensional world) on the canvas or the ground plan (two-dimensional world). In turn, it is considered the way in which can get “truth itself.” This aspect of “perspective” brought about “Cartesian perspectivalism.” Here, the eye of the mind plays a very important role.

Regarding Nietzsche’s “ocularcentrism,” the concept of “optic” is quite important. Nietzsche uses “optic [*Optik*]” in *Beyond Good and Evil* and *Ecce homo* as follows:

It is only the belief in their truth that is necessary as a foreground belief and piece of visual evidence, belonging to the perspectival optics of life.⁹⁾

Looking out from a sick perspective[*kranken-Optik*] toward healthier concepts and values, and again conversely, looking down out of the abundance and self-assurance of a rich life into the secret working of the

instinct of *décadence*, that was my longest exercise, my true experience.¹⁰⁾

As is apparent from these quotations, Nietzsche uses “optic” in the same sense as “perspective.” In fact, we can find the direct expression “the perspective-optic of life [*die Perspektiven-Optik des Lebens*]” in *Beyond Good and Evil*. “Optic” is not limited to the visible alone. But it cannot be separated from the visible at the same time.

The vestige of “vision” remains in Nietzsche’s thought, as Martin Jay points out in chapter three of *Downcast Eyes*.¹¹⁾ In spite of Nietzsche’s aspect of anti-ocularcentrism, he is caught in the tradition of ocularcentrism. In *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche says the following about “perspectival seeing.”

There is only a perspectival seeing, only a perspectival “knowing”; the more affects we are able to put into words about a thing, the more eyes, various eyes we are able to use for the same thing, the more complete will be our “concept” of the thing, our “objectivity.”¹²⁾

Nietzsche uses the terms “viewpoint” and “point of view” frequently. This indicates that he is constrained by ocularcentrism.

4. Conclusion

As has been confirmed, Nietzsche has two conflicting viewpoints on vision. On one hand, he seems to be a precursor of anti-ocularcentrism. By criticizing

the eye of the mind, he criticizes the hierarchy of senses in which vision is the head. All senses have no “order of rank [*Rangordnung*]” in Nietzsche’s philosophy.¹³⁾ On the other hand, he seems to be caught in the tradition of ocularcentrism. Therefore, we think that Nietzsche is not the true pioneer of anti-ocularcentrism. He falls in the transition from ocularcentrism to anti-ocularcentrism.

In conclusion, Nietzsche came too early; as he said, “What I relate is the history of the next two centuries.”¹⁴⁾ Ocularcentrism was quite strong in the nineteenth century, which is why he was caught in its tradition. Bergson was the true pioneer of anti-ocularcentrism in the twentieth century as Jay says the following:

Going beyond the residually visual implications of perspectivism, he [=Bergson] developed a fundamental critique of ocularcentrism that outdistanced even that of Nietzsche.¹⁵⁾

However, if Nietzsche’s criticism of ocularcentrism is incomplete and transitional, nobody can deny his importance to the tradition of anti-ocularcentrism. We think that Nietzsche’s theory of vision is the first-step for re-thinking about anti-ocularcentrism and *Downcast Eyes*.

Notes

- 1) Cf. Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes — The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, University of California Press, 1993, pp. 26-27.
- 2) Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche (tr.: C. Diethel), *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Third Essay, “What do ascetic ideals mean?,” Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 87.
- 3) Ibid.

- 4) Nietzsche (tr.: T. Common), *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, "The Despisers of the body," Pennsylvania State University, Electronic Classics Series, 1999, pp. 40 - 41.
- 5) Cf. Sarah Kofman, *Nietzsche et la métaphore*, Editions Galilée, 1973.
Jay refers to this point in chapter nine of *Downcast Eyes* (p. 511).
- 6) According to "Chronik zu Nietzsches Leben", Nietzsche had not visited the art museum. However, he visited the "Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli" in 1877, and he was impressed with the Greek statues (Cf. M. Montinari, Chronik zu Nietzsches Leben, Nietzsche Sämtliche Werke, G. Colli and M. Montinari (Hrsg.), Kritische Studienausgabe, dtv / de Gruyter, neuausgabe 1999, Bd. 15, S. 72).

On the other hand, his painting of "Löwendenkmal in Luzern" — which was painted after losing his mind — was handed down to posterity.

- 7) Cf. Nietzsche (tr.: T. Wayne), *Ecce homo*, "Why I am so clever" 1 - 2, Algora Publishing, 2004, pp. 23-27.
- 8) W. Kaufmann (ed.), *The Will to Power*, no. 481, Vintage Books, 1968, p. 267 (Nachgelassene Fragmente, Ende 1886 - Frühjahr 1887 7[60] (Nietzsche Werke, Kritische Studienausgabe, Bd. 12, S. 315)).
We do not have an English translation of "Nachgelassene Fragmente". So in spite of many serious philological problems, we use *The Will to Power* (edited by W. Kaufmann) here.
- 9) Nietzsche (tr.: J. Norman), *Beyond Good and Evil* 11, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 13.
- 10) *Ecce homo*, "Why I am so wise" 1, p. 12., and Nietzsche Werke, Kritische Studienausgabe, Bd. 6, S. 266. Here, English translator translated "*Optik*" to "perspective".
- 11) Cf. *Downcast Eyes*, p. 201.
- 12) *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Third Essay 12, p. 87.
Jay referred to this point in chapter three of *Downcast Eyes* (p. 188).
- 13) Cf. Sarah Kofman, *Nietzsche et la métaphore*.
- 14) *The Will to Power*, Preface 2, p. 3 (Nachgelassene Fragmente, November 1887 - März 1888 11[411] (Nietzsche Werke, Kritische Studienausgabe, Bd. 13, S. 189)).
- 15) *Downcast Eyes*, p. 192.

