

## From Philology to Existential Psychology: The Significance of Nietzsche's Early Work

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Nietzsche began his career as a classical philologist, but he rejected the pedantic and strict contemplative stance of his discipline. Nietzsche wanted to replace mere "arm-chair" scholarship with a new "super-philological" approach, that studied antiquity in order to gain insights into contemporary problems and promoted decisive living action in the present. In the course of demonstrating his new approach, Nietzsche transformed traditional philological studies into stimulating psychological analyses that were equally applicable to modern and ancient human behavior. By understanding the philological context of Nietzsche's early work, one can better appreciate the existential psychology he created in the years prior to changing over to philosophy proper. Based on his studies of ancient Greece, Nietzsche adapted a triad of personified metaphors to represent three different psychological mechanisms for dealing with the so-called "horror of existence." "Dionysus" embodied the therapeutic affirmation of life in the face of pain, chaos, and destruction, and symbolized the primitive instinctual nature that is at the core of all cultural creations. "Apollo" symbolized the tendency to cover the horror of existence with pleasant illusions of beauty, while "Socrates" represented the self-delusive capacity to transform existence into a secure intelligible world of order.

By the middle of the 19th century, philology played a central role in German education and university life (Merz, 1904; Pedersen, 1962). Thus, when Friedrich Nietzsche began his career as a philologist in the late 1860s, he was entering a well-established and respected discipline with a long-standing tradition of method, style, and scholarship. As a profession, philologists believed that the very nature, spirit, and history of an ancient civilization could be revealed through a meticulous analysis of the language of that culture. This analysis was primarily accomplished through the study of literature, but

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sometimes also incorporated relevant secondary information, such as archaeological material.

This paper examines how Nietzsche rejected the tedious exegeses conducted by the philological professors because he believed that they sucked the life out of classical literature and art, and perverted the goal of forming an enlightened connection with antiquity. In particular, Nietzsche condemned the pedantic, strictly contemplative stance of the philologists because these "cold demons of knowledge" remained detached from the urgent issues and problems of life (Nietzsche, 1874/1979, p. 36). On the contrary, Nietzsche wanted to completely revolutionize the basic attitude of classical philology and actively employ philology as an instrument to put scholarly reflections into living action.

Other researchers have shown how Nietzsche's early education, university training, and career in philology influenced his subsequent philosophical and psychological work (e.g., O'Flaherty, Sellner, and Helm, 1976). In contrast, this paper explores Nietzsche's earliest philological writing in order to reveal an extraordinary, but virtually unnoticed, existential theory of human psychology and motivation. Compared to his later work, Nietzsche's early philological essays have been greatly overlooked—mainly because the unusual writing style and ancient literary content disguise their relevance to modern psychology. Undoubtedly, most modern psychologists would be quite uninterested in reading an extended essay about the ancient origin of Greek tragedy. Therefore, in order to penetrate the rhetorical style and uncommon literary content of Nietzsche's studies of Greek antiquity, one must first understand the philological concerns that guided his early work—namely, his repudiation of philology as an ineffectual and merely contemplative discipline, and his efforts to revolutionize its methods and approach.

Based on this understanding of Nietzsche's personal and professional motives, the second half of this paper explores how he created an intriguing existential psychology in the course of demonstrating his innovative philological approach. Stated simply, Nietzsche's systematic analysis of the role of art and religion in the evolution of ancient Greek tragedy (as expressed in the tripartite figures of Dionysus, Apollo, and Socrates) constitutes a complete existential theory that encompasses the biological, social, cognitive, and spiritual aspects of human motivation.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, Nietzsche provides

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<sup>1</sup>It should be made very clear that this is an implicit psychological theory, which has been drawn out of Nietzsche's early work rather than his own explicitly stated theory. In other words, the implicit psychological character of Nietzsche's early work was overshadowed by its explicit philological style and subject matter. While Nietzsche's philological work was certainly psychological in character, and was consistent with his later views on human psychology, he definitely did not conceive or intend for these ideas about ancient Greek culture to be used as a psychological theory. Rather, from his presentist vantage point, the author has attempted to raise Nietzsche's philological writings from the level of mere psychological-mindedness to the status of a workable psychological theory of human behavior.

a fascinating example of how turn-of-the-century psychologists utilized their educational training in the classics to develop their own modern psychological theories—two of the foremost examples are, of course, Jung and Freud (Forrester, 1980).

### The Grand Entrance of the “Boy” Professor

[Philologists are] animals that practice dust-eating by profession, and that grub up and eat for the eleventh time what they have already eaten ten times before. (Nietzsche, 1869/1964a, p. 147)

With these piercing words, Nietzsche introduced himself in his inaugural address to the philological faculty of the University of Basel in May 1869. At the young age of twenty-four, Nietzsche had been called to the University of Basel in February of that year, and was appointed as professor three months later. Considering his youth, such an appointment was a great honor, made even more unusual when the University of Leipzig awarded his doctorate without dissertation or examination in March 1869. Nevertheless, as Nietzsche entered the austere halls of academic philology, he already had serious personal and professional doubts about his newly chosen occupation.

To begin with, Nietzsche was carefully groomed from childhood for a philological career, and he was simply following the inclinations of his extended classical training. Nietzsche's classical education began in earnest at age fourteen when his brilliance earned him free entrance into Landesschule Pforta, one of the foremost preparatory schools in Germany. During his six years there, he received a strict regimen of classical study, which stressed Greek, Latin, and classical literature. In September 1864, Nietzsche enrolled at the University of Bonn. At that time, the residency of the eminent philologists Otto Jahn (1813–1869) and Friedrich Ritschl (1806–1876) gave Bonn a prestigious reputation in the field of philology. One year later, Nietzsche followed Professor Ritschl to the University of Leipzig. The professor was quite impressed by Nietzsche's intellect, and encouraged his student to pursue an academic career in philology. Furthermore, by virtue of his influential sponsorship, Ritschl helped young Nietzsche to publish a number of scholarly studies of Greek poetry and drama (Hollingdale, 1965).

However, in the fall of 1865, Nietzsche's thinking was decisively changed when he first read Schopenhauer's (1819/1957) *The World as Will and Idea*. Raised on an exclusive diet of classical Greek and Roman works, Nietzsche was immediately enthralled by the radical ideas of Schopenhauer's “modern” philosophy. For Nietzsche, reading Schopenhauer emphasized the comparative sterility of philology and intensified his misgivings about pursuing a philological career. Furthermore, in the summer of 1866, Nietzsche was profoundly impressed by Lange's (1865/1974) *History of Materialism*, which moved him to “reject the purely historical approach to the Greek philosophers and, instead,

to study them for their 'contemporary' value" (Wingler, 1976, p. 34).

Subsequently, after Nietzsche's classical studies were interrupted by one year of military service (October 1867 to October 1868), Ritschl introduced his student to Richard Wagner (1813-1883) in November 1868. The renowned composer shared Nietzsche's adherence to "Schopenhauerism," and became perhaps the most important influence in Nietzsche's life (Kaufmann, 1974). Nietzsche engaged in many enthusiastic discussions with the older Wagner—discussions which concentrated heavily on defining the essence of art and the problems of creating art—and the two individuals formed an intense friendship that lasted for ten years. Undoubtedly, these exciting intellectual meetings with Wagner contributed greatly to Nietzsche's growing distaste for the way the professors eviscerated art with their detached philological analyses.

Invigorated by his encounters with Schopenhauer, Wagner, and other ideas outside the discipline, Nietzsche's disenchantment with philology was firmly planted and growing. Indeed, his letters in this period are filled with openly contemptuous remarks about philology as the "crabbed study of dead books." For example, in November 1868, Nietzsche wrote a letter to a friend and fellow student of philology in which he described his dread of joining

the seething brood of the philologists of our time, and every day having to observe all their moleish pullulating, the baggy cheeks and the blind eyes, their joy at capturing worms and their indifference to the true problems, the urgent problems of life. (Middleton, 1969, p. 41)

Nevertheless, despite his increasing apprehensions, Nietzsche was ineluctably driven toward a career in philology by (1) the powerful expectations of his extended classical education and training, in general, and (2) by Ritschl's prompting compliments, close supervision, and professional influence, in specific. Moreover, the young scholar could hardly decline the prestigious invitation to a faculty position at the University of Basel.

Thus, when Nietzsche embarked on his career as a philologist at Basel in February 1869, he was troubled by personal and professional misgivings about his discipline. Basically, he wanted to revolutionize philology in order to make it relevant and useful for modern life. In other words, Nietzsche refused to bend himself to fit the decrepit posture of classical philology; rather, he would erect philology to fit his own ideal of a vital, engaged science. At the same time, as a young unproven scholar, Nietzsche was acutely aware of the scrutiny of his peers. He knew that they expected him to "cleverly apply" his philological training to some "little isolated period of the past that is marked out for sacrifice" (Nietzsche, 1874/1979, p. 45). Quite the contrary, Nietzsche caused an immediate stir by using his university inaugural address to boldly challenge the relevance and justification of classical philology itself.

To illustrate his critique of philology, Nietzsche (1869/1964a) selected the long-debated question of Homer. The traditional philological question was

whether the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* were the “original and perfect design” of Homer himself, or the collective work of several Greek authors. For Nietzsche, the philological search for the true author(s) of the Homeric poems was merely an empty search for a “phantom,” which missed the whole point of understanding ancient life through its literature. Alternatively, Nietzsche posited the novel theory that the Homeric epic evolved from generations of storytelling in the oral tradition. He argued that “the infinite profusion of images and incidents in the Homeric epic” revealed that the original stories were only loosely grouped. The written record of the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* emerged much later, at the point where the poems were gathered and systematically arranged in accordance with a new set of aesthetic rules (Nietzsche, 1869/1964a, p. 164).

More important, Nietzsche argued that the *real* problem was the way that philology typically approached an issue such as the works of Homer. He used the Homeric question to frankly demonstrate that classical scholarship was trivial and irrelevant to modern concerns; that it was misdirected as a model for the general public education; and that its stultifying exegeses were counterproductive to the goal of benefiting from the cultural contributions of antiquity. In short, Nietzsche rejected the established, sterile methods of studying classical literature, which tended to mummify the lively spirit of the ancients rather than fire an enthusiasm that propelled *action* for the present and future. For Nietzsche, “action” meant relevance and usefulness for modern problems, not pedantry and insular commentaries on ancient literature in its own right. Nietzsche’s revolutionary plan for philology was to breathe new life into the classics by actually applying them to modern concerns. Nietzsche argued that philology could be influential only by being “untimely” or “unseasonable”—that is, philology must challenge and contradict the unquestioned dogmata of the present world in order to excite the continual growth of new ideas (Nietzsche, 1874/1979, p. 4).

### Nietzsche’s “Untimely Meditations”

Nietzsche’s inaugural address and other writings from the early 1870s can be seen as a systematic two-pronged program to demonstrate his revolutionary approach to philology.<sup>2</sup> The negative or critical component was an attack upon philology as a trivial and merely contemplative endeavor, that had a

<sup>2</sup>While Nietzsche never explicitly labeled his “new” approach to philology, he undoubtedly knew that he was promoting a distinctly different attitude and method for classical study. The author suggests the term “super-philological” to describe Nietzsche’s overall critique and revolutionary program for philology. The term “super-philological” is adapted from Nietzsche’s (1874/1979) own term “super-historical,” which characterized his basic position regarding the proper relationship between present living and the study of the past. “Super-philological” characterizes his view of the proper relationship between present living and the study of classical literature. In each case, studies of the past should be used only to enrich and advance action for the present and future.

malignant influence on the current educational system. The positive component consisted of illustrative examples how to reapproach philological problems in the new manner. This revitalized approach was epitomized in Nietzsche's amazing psychological analysis of Greek art in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872/1967a).

Actually, Nietzsche incorporated *both* the positive and negative components in his inaugural address of 1869: positively, Nietzsche demonstrated a novel approach to a standard philological question by abandoning the typical misguided search for the author of the Homeric epic. Instead, he used "Homer" as an example of the creative interaction between the individual artist and the aesthetic values of the surrounding society. Negatively, Nietzsche made a critical assault on philology and its dominance over educational policy. In fact, the issue of education remained central to Nietzsche in the coming years, especially during the early 1870s. For example, in an unpublished lecture series titled "The Future of Our Educational Institutions," Nietzsche (1872/1964c, p. 55) argued that

The so-called "classical education" which is supposed to be provided by our public school strikes me as something exceedingly doubtful and confused . . . for a "classical education" is something so unheard of, difficult and rare, and exacts such complicated talent, that only ingeniousness or impudence could put it forward as an attainable goal in our public schools.

Thus, Nietzsche rejected the ill-conceived plan to crudely employ the Greeks as an instructional tool for public education, and he attributed this wasteful strategy to the dominant influence of philology. Instead, in the manner of the ancient Greeks, Nietzsche advocated the careful selection and nurturance of a few select students with the greatest potential. Toward this end, he believed the Greeks provided valuable examples of outstanding individuals as well as the finest standard of cultural growth.

Nietzsche continued to expand his critique of philology and the educational system in a series of four published essays known as the *Untimely Meditations* (*Unzeitgemasse Betrachtungen*, 1873-1876). In the first essay, titled *David Strauss, the Confessor and Writer* (1873/1983a), Nietzsche again denounced the policy of educating the masses in the classical tradition. Notably, he published *David Strauss* at a time when his countrypersons were still celebrating German triumph in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. He selected Strauss (a writer who was then enjoying great popular success) as the personification of the pretentious belief that military victory also signaled the ascendancy of German culture. Nietzsche was not at all concerned with Strauss himself; rather his stated aim was to "render ludicrous" the host of complacent German intellectuals, who were then masquerading as authorities on cultural superiority:

I never attack persons; I merely avail myself of the person as of a strong magnifying glass

that allows one to make visible a general but creeping and elusive calamity. Thus I attacked David Strauss—more precisely, the *success* of a senile book with the “cultured” people in Germany: I caught this culture in the act! (Nietzsche, 1908/1967c, p. 232)

The second essay, titled *Of the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life* (1874/1979), was probably the most influential book of the four *Untimely Meditations*. The book presented a stunning attack upon the academic professors as “jaded idlers in the garden of knowledge,” who were “suffering from a malignant historical fever” (Nietzsche, 1874/1979, pp. 3–4). In this essay, Nietzsche distinguished three types of historical study, and demarcated the particular advantage and disadvantage of each.

*Monumental history* concentrates on the great individuals and accomplishments of the past, and inspires us with “the knowledge that the great [action] existed and was therefore possible, and so may be possible again” (p. 14). In its positive form, monumental history can challenge us to strive for the highest levels of achievement in our present tasks. The disadvantage is that “as long as the past is principally used as a model for imitation, it is always in danger of being a little altered and touched up and brought nearer to fiction” (p. 16). Or, worse yet, monumental history’s “extreme admiration of the past” can kill the impulse to action with the awestruck belief that we can never match or exceed such greatness again.

In contrast, *antiquarian history* provides entertaining excursions into the past, which can satisfy one’s sentimental curiosity and imagination. The danger of antiquarian history is that it will undervalue the present in favor of the past, and preserve the past at the expense of creating new ideas:

Antiquarian history degenerates from the moment that it no longer gives a soul and inspiration to the fresh life of the present. . . . The horrid spectacle is seen of the mad collector raking over all the dust heaps of the past. He breathes a moldy air; the antiquarian habit may degrade a considerable talent. . . to a mere insatiable curiosity for everything old; he often sinks so low as to be satisfied with any food; and greedily devours all the scraps that fall from the bibliographic table. (p. 20)

Finally, as the third type, *critical history* demands frank and relentless analysis of the weaknesses and errors of the past. The critical historian “must have the strength to. . . bring the past to the bar of judgment, interrogate it remorselessly, and finally condemn it” (p. 21). The disadvantage of critical history is that it may create a “dangerous condition of irony” (p. 28), meaning that we can “condemn the errors [of the past] and think we have escaped them, [but] we cannot escape the fact that we spring from them” (p. 21). Moreover, at its worst, the overuse of critical history can foster the cynical conviction that every promising intention must ultimately fail.

Contrarily, Nietzsche advocates two “antidotes” to the unrestrained use of history: the “unhistorical” and the “super-historical.” First, he reminds us of

the fundamental *unhistorical* state of animal being—driven by immediate passions and living only in the present moment. While Nietzsche appreciates the potent activating function of biological drives in human behavior, he demonstrates that it is the capacity to live historically (the power of applying experiences of the past to the needs of the present) that distinguishes human being from animal being. In this regard, Nietzsche repudiated the academics, who had forgotten that *historical scholarship must likewise be actively applied to present concerns*: the professors were to “cultivate history not for pure knowledge, but for life!” (p. 10).

Thus Nietzsche promoted the *super-historical* approach, which “look[s] backward at the [past] only to understand the present and stimulate longing for the future” (p. 10). Arm-chair contemplation about the past—without decisive living action in the present—is “like the snake that has swallowed the rabbit whole and lies still in the sun, avoiding all movement not absolutely necessary” (p. 23). For Nietzsche, the super-historiographer explores the events and problems of the past to comprehend human nature and behavior in the present—including his or her own personal relatedness to the world.

Actually, Nietzsche’s critique of history and his call for the super-historical is a model for his critique of philology and his demand for what we can call the *super-philological*.<sup>3</sup> In other words, Nietzsche’s inaugural address, early philological essays, and especially *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872/1967a) can be seen as efforts to demonstrate and implement his alternative super-philological approach. This is a crucial point in understanding and appreciating the significance of Nietzsche’s early writings.

In the third *Untimely Meditation*, *Schopenhauer as Educator* (1874/1965), Nietzsche proposed Schopenhauer as an instructive model of individual greatness and described the favorable and unfavorable conditions for the actualization of genius. He argued that the individual’s pursuit of the ordinary honors and awards of scholarship cannot be enough to transcend his or her basic sense of existential futility and worthlessness. Rather, the life of Schopenhauer illustrates that true fulfillment must derive from obeying the higher purpose of gaining power in order to fully understand and affirm one’s true nature.

The final meditation, *Richard Wagner in Bayreuth* (1876/1983b), is generally regarded as a weak book that is “hardly worthy” of Nietzsche in his early period (Hollingdale, 1973, p. 56). Although Nietzsche (1908/1967c) later recognized how he had endowed both Wagner and Schopenhauer with ideal qualities that neither possessed, *Richard Wagner* remains significant as Nietzsche’s early attempt to find a living example of his ideal among his contemporaries.

<sup>3</sup>The author credits an anonymous reviewer for this insightful observation. Although the label “super-philological” was never used by Nietzsche, the author believes that this term serves as an appropriate summary description of Nietzsche’s innovative approach to philology. The term is based on and consistent with Nietzsche’s own term “super-historical.”



Interestingly, despite all his dissatisfactions with philology, Nietzsche remained an academic professor for ten years. Eventually, he resigned in 1879 because of a multitude of physical problems. The combination of his degenerating health and accelerating creative ambitions forced an urgency upon Nietzsche to travel beyond the narrow secluded courtyard of classical philology. Indeed, in his very next book, *Human, All-Too-Human* (1879/1984), Nietzsche fashioned a complete stylistic transformation as he explicitly entered the domains of philosophy and psychology. In a sense, Nietzsche's unyielding assault upon the values of philology marked the first step in his eventual philosophical assault on *all* the values of modern civilization—the grand program he ultimately proclaimed as the “revaluation of all values” (Nietzsche, 1901/1967b).

In summary, then, Nietzsche's primary goals in the early 1870s were to overthrow the entrenched pedantic model of philology; break its warped influence on educational policy; and replace it with a vital new “super-philology” that actively tackled current issues of living. Undoubtedly, Nietzsche's most brilliant display of the super-philological approach was *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872/1967a), which was published at the height of this period. With this clarification of the context of Nietzsche's super-philological program in mind, we can fully appreciate the rich psychological ideas hidden in this marvelous book.

### **Shattering the Myth of the Rational Greeks: Nietzsche's Theory of the Origin of Greek Tragedy**

In 1872, three years after Nietzsche first shocked his peers with his inaugural address on Homer, the young professor again surprised his contemporaries by tackling one of the foremost issues in philology: the question of the origin of Greek tragedy. Although classicists generally agreed that the tragic art form had emerged in Athens in the sixth century B.C., they disagreed about how and why tragedy had first developed. Basically, the scholarship surrounding this question involved a kind of detective work, whereby philologists searched the literature and language for new clues, or new combinations of old clues, in order to solve the mystery of the origin of Greek tragedy. Nietzsche, however, refused to place his magnifying glass over the usual clues and find the collective fingerprints of all the philologists who had preceded him. From the outset, he realized that rigid adherence to the traditional methods of philology necessarily perpetuated the established theories of Greek tragedy and precluded innovative thinking about the topic.

More important, in accordance with his super-philological goals, Nietzsche wanted to raise the question of Greek tragedy from the dank cellars of academic philology and expose it to the fresh air of modern-day art, philosophy, and psychology. He wanted to break out of the stifling conventions

which dictated that classical philologists should study antiquity, the whole antiquity, and nothing but antiquity. He protested that classical studies could be applied to modern questions as well, and could yield valuable insights for disciplines beyond philology.

In fact, Nietzsche's method of analysis in *The Birth of Tragedy* not only violated the rules of classical scholarship, but it generated an astounding new view of antiquity, which overthrew the pervasive belief in the rationality, "noble simplicity," and "calm grandeur" of the ancient Greeks (Kaufmann, 1967, p. 9). In effect, Nietzsche shattered the established image of the thoughtful, philosophizing Greeks by demonstrating the fundamental role of primitive *irrational* forces in ancient Greek culture (Dodds, 1951). Specifically, Nietzsche explained how the phenomenon of Dionysus-worship revealed the essential psychology of Greek life and he showed how primitive religion formed the inspirational root for all higher Greek art, culture, and science. Indeed, *The Birth of Tragedy* was outrageous and innovative in several important ways: (1) Nietzsche departed from the obligatory procedure of making linguistic dissections of Greek quotes and word derivations; (2) he made the heretical move of applying the contemporary philosophical ideas of Schopenhauer and the musical theories of Wagner (Baeumer, 1976; Jones, 1976; Kaufmann, 1974); and (3) he transformed a traditional philological topic into an active psychological treatment of human nature, which was as applicable to modern society as it was to antiquity.

Not surprisingly, the philological community was immediately upset and threatened by *The Birth of Tragedy* (Gründer, 1969). They rejected Nietzsche's radical revelation that Greek culture sprang from primal irrational forces and objected to his transgressions against the time-honored style and methods of classical philology. In particular, the professors repudiated Nietzsche's use of Schopenhauer and Wagner as a blasphemous violation of accepted methods of study. For example, Wilamowitz (1848-1931) blasted *The Birth of Tragedy* as a "philology devoid of Greek quotations and footnotes," and he condemned Nietzsche's "ignorance and lack of love of truth" (cited in Kaufmann, 1974, p. 5). Nevertheless, in retrospect, Nietzsche's thesis now marks "the turning point in the modern understanding of early Greek thought" (Jones, 1976, p. 1). As described by a recent classicist (Else, 1965, pp. 9-10), Nietzsche's book has had an apocalyptic impact on the field:

Anyone who has read Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music* can recall its first stunning impact upon him. The book projects with unforgettable power the rise of tragedy out of the dark womb of the "Dionysian," that indescribable, all-confounding Primal unity of joy and pain which lies at the heart of life itself. . . . *The Birth of Tragedy* has cast a spell on almost everybody who has dealt with the subject since 1872. Even those who reject Dionysus. . . and look for other points of origin tend to feel. . . that these must belong to the same order of being as Dionysus, that is, that they must go down to the deepest and most primitive levels of Greek religion.

As intimated in the above passage, Nietzsche discovered a potent and fundamental purpose of Dionysian religious rituals, which had never been fully recognized before. In essence, Nietzsche transformed what might have been a routine study of Greek theater (strictly belonging to classical philology) into a modern existential portrayal of the human condition, which had much broader utility. Enlightened by his informal studies of modern philosophy and music, Nietzsche revealed a much deeper level of significance in the philological topic of Greek tragedy. However, to fully appreciate the radical originality of Nietzsche's theory, it is helpful first to briefly examine the general framework for studying the origin of Greek tragedy.

To begin with, it should be remembered that early Greek theater was predominantly composed of music and dance. Its central component was the "chorus"—a large group of singers who offered choral response to various developments in the play. In the earliest forms of Greek theater, the audience would actively participate in the stage drama in the form of a spontaneous, undirected chorus. The audience would vocally, often vociferously, communicate their feelings about the events on stage throughout the performance. Hence, in moments of powerful emotional empathy, the audience could freely erupt into dance, song, or shouting, in order to express their immediate feelings of joy, pain, anger, or horror (Ferguson, 1972).<sup>4</sup>

Nietzsche's historical argument was that the choruses used in Greek tragedy actually originated in the frenzied group ecstasies that occurred during religious celebrations in honor of the god Dionysus. Briefly described, Dionysus-worship was but one of a diversity of religious and agrarian fertility cults, which thrived in Greece and neighboring cultures in the period preceding the appearance of tragedy in the sixth century B.C. (Hunningher, 1961). The crucial point is that the religious rituals used by these cults, Dionysian or otherwise, shared an ecstatic emotional expressiveness from which Greek theater evolved. In this regard, Nietzsche achieved nothing new in showing that the rudiments of theatrical expression (i.e., the combination of joy and anguish that constitutes tragedy) could be found in Dionysian religious festivals.<sup>5</sup>

Nietzsche's originality derived from his unique identification of a cluster of interrelated religio-emotional elements contained in the frenzied orgies of

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<sup>4</sup>Ferguson (1972, p. 13) provides this description of the theater of Dionysus in Athens: "The audience in the theater was volatile, and emotional participation was enormous. We must not imagine a staid northern audience politely clapping, but a swift readiness for tears and laughter, approbation and disapproval. Approval was expressed by shouts, clapping and cries of encore, disapproval by hissing, kicking the benches, and throwing fruit at the performers."

<sup>5</sup>Baeumer (1976, pp. 167; 177) asserts that Nietzsche cannot be granted primacy in his application of Dionysus because there was a long tradition of the Dionysian "in the circles of classical philologists oriented toward the fields of philosophy and literary criticism." Likewise, Weinberg (1976, p. 90) states that "from Heinse to Kleist, Holderlin, Friedrich Schlegel, Schelling, and Friedrich Kreuzer, the figure of Dionysus had obsessed German thought and letters."

Dionysian worship: the complete abandonment of social inhibition; the escape from rational thinking; the wild expression of impulses culminating in a state of total self-forgetfulness; the ecstatic experience of regaining union with the primal essence of nature; the rapid transformation of joyous exuberance into the menacing power of pain and destruction; the comforting redemption from the horrible recognition of human finitude. By relinquishing the cumbersome rules of philological methodology, Nietzsche was able to ask *psychological* questions about his subject. Basically, his innovation was to analyse the emotional function of this passionate, yet complex religious experience, and then explore its relevance for understanding modern human behavior as well. In this way, Nietzsche concluded that Dionysus served, first of all, as a psychological mechanism for dealing with what he called "the horror of existence"—which is a basic problem of *being* for individuals living in any historical age.

For Nietzsche, the so-called *horror of existence* was an inescapable realization for the Greeks. As inquisitive observers of life, the ancients were acutely aware of the frightening uncertainties of human existence. Recognizing that the world is ruled by many uncontrollable and incomprehensible forces (such as storms, disease, famine, and war), the Greeks understood that individual human life was constantly teetering on the precipice of potential destruction. Hence, in those moments when the individual confronts the overwhelming terror of incomprehensible earthly change, the person can only wither before existence in impotent fear and "horror." Nevertheless, by turning to Dionysus, Nietzsche argued that the individual experience of the "horror of existence" could be transformed into an exuberant affirmation of life.

Out of life itself, with all its changes, contradictions, crudities, and its eternal becoming, [Dionysus] can in moments of extreme ecstasy, reveal himself as the god, the comforting redeeming illusion; the basic myth; as that which is indestructible in life beyond all its changes and antagonisms. (Manthey-Zorn, 1975, p. 28)

In other words, even during the most extreme confrontation with the utter uncertainties and pain of existence, the ancient Greek could always find security in the ultimate, undeniable truth of the indestructibility of life. For Nietzsche, this was the crucial therapeutic function of Dionysus in Greek culture (Entralgo, 1970). "Faith" in Dionysus—as expressed in the ecstatic celebration of life amidst pain, futility and chaos—served as a profound and comforting affirmation of individual existence.

The psychology of the orgy as an overflowing feeling of life and energy within which even pain acts as a stimulus provided me with the key to the concept of *tragic* feeling. . . . Affirmation of life even in its strangest and sternest problems. . . that is what I called Dionysian, that is what I recognized as the bridge to the psychology of the tragic poet. Not so as to get rid of pity and terror, not so as to purify oneself of a dangerous emotion through its vehement discharge. . . but, beyond pity and terror, to realize in oneself the eternal joy of becoming that joy which also encompasses *joy in destruction*. . . . (Nietzsche, 1889/1977, pp. 4-5)

In summary, then, Nietzsche made several important psychological observations about the Dionysian experience. The art-deity Dionysus, first of all, embodied the ecstatic community expression of *the lust for life in the face of threatening existence*. Secondly, Nietzsche recognized that it was necessary to abandon social inhibition and rational control in order to achieve the wild Dionysian release. Thirdly, this reckless state of self-forgetfulness reunited the individual with the immediate passionate instincts of biological nature. Thus, in addition to its therapeutic function of affirming life, Dionysus also symbolized the essential instinctual core of human life. Finally, Nietzsche recognized the vital relationship between the Dionysian energies and artistic inspiration: he argued that Dionysus, in conjunction with *Apollo*, constituted the root source of every mythical, artistic, and cultural creation of Greek civilization, not just Greek tragedy.

### Dionysus and Apollo—Metaphoric Representations of Human Psychology

As we have seen, before *The Birth of Tragedy*, most classical scholars professed the notion of “the noble, reasoning Greek,” emphasizing the grace and intelligence of Greek art, science, and philosophy. Nietzsche overturned this established idea by demonstrating that all the art, science and cultural creations of antiquity were fundamentally owing to the *irrational* forces he identified as Dionysian (Dodds, 1951). Nietzsche argued that true art originates in the *spontaneous direct expression of Dionysian impulses, which are beyond rational control* of the individual artist.<sup>6</sup> However, the actual artistic creation only takes form at the point where the Apollonian artist—without denying or diluting the Dionysian forces—begins to mold or shape this chaotic energy into an image or idea. Thus, Nietzsche’s theory of the birth of tragedy was based on a crucial distinction between the art-dieties of Apollo and Dionysus.

Apollo is the creator of the aesthetic forms that define beauty. The Apollonian tendency is characterized by individual restraint and craftsmanship, and is epitomized in dreams and the imagistic art of sculpture. In contrast, Dionysus is characterized by *unrestrained ecstasies and intoxication*, epitomized in the *nonimagistic art of music*. By studying how Dionysus worshippers threw themselves into frenzied orgies of song and dance, Nietzsche understood that “in these paroxysms of intoxication the artistic power of all nature reveals itself” (Nietzsche, 1872/1967a, p. 37). In other words, Dionysus represents those “artistic energies which burst forth from nature herself, *without the mediation of the human artist*” (p. 38). Thus, the Dionysian tendency is the spontaneous

<sup>6</sup>Nietzsche’s view of music (as reflecting natural “Dionysian” impulses that exceed individual rational control) was influenced by Schopenhauer’s (1819/1957) treatment of music in *The World as Will and Idea*. Undoubtedly, Nietzsche’s discussions of music with Wagner also impacted on his theory of art and music.

expression of certain essential biological impulses—exuberant as well as destructive—that can erupt beyond individual control.

Apollo, on the other hand, represents the application of individual control over the artistic impulses of nature. Apollo is the “ruler over the beautiful illusion of the inner world of fantasy” (p. 35). Apollo applies restraint, seeking to control and manipulate the wilder emotions of Dionysus for artistic purposes. Indeed, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche fully realized the dangers of the Dionysian release, which can lead to lascivious and wanton behavior unless it is harnessed by Apollonian restraint. This Apollonian control is evinced even in the act of dreaming. For instance, Nietzsche points out the experience in which a person will actually comfort him/herself within a terrifying dream by saying, “this is but a dream, I will dream on.” Hence, even in the realm of dream-sleep, the Apollonian tendency continues to moderate, conjuring up images and illusions to console and please the individual—what Nietzsche calls the “joyous necessity of the dream experience.” In the same way, the Apollonian comprises the *aesthetic dreams and illusions created by human beings to conceal the true horror and absurdity of existence from themselves*. In Apollo, Nietzsche recognized that people have a “most profound need” to place veils of beauty over the horror of existence, to create “the rapturous vision, the pleasurable illusion” in order to endure existence. Thus, like Dionysus, the Apollonian tendency also serves a vital therapeutic function:

When the danger to man's will is greatest, *art* approaches as a saving sorceress, expert at healing. She alone knows how to turn these nauseous thoughts about horror or absurdity of existence into notions with which one can live. (Nietzsche, 1872/1967a, p. 60)

To illustrate the distinction between Apollo and Dionysus, Nietzsche employed the contemporary example of Beethoven. Nietzsche argued that Beethoven's Ninth Symphony was “unprecedented and unanalyzable in its charms,” but he contended that Beethoven's use of Friedrich von Schiller's poem “Ode to Joy” added nothing to the effect of the piece. If anything, Schiller's poem detracted from the natural beauty of Beethoven's music by trying to manipulate the Dionysian forces of pure music to conform to the Apollonian vision of Schiller's poem.

Music must never become a means in service of the text, but must always defeat the text. . . . Music must become bad when the composer interrupts every Dionysian force rising within himself by an anxious regard for the words and gestures of his marionettes. (Nietzsche, 1871/1964b, p. 43)

*Language*. . . can never by any means disclose the innermost heart of music; language, in its attempt to imitate it, can only be in superficial contact with music; while all the eloquence of lyrical poetry cannot bring the deepest significance of the latter one step nearer to us. . . . Music itself in its absolute sovereignty does not *need* the image and the concept, but merely *endures* them as accompaniments. (Nietzsche, 1872/1967a, pp. 55-56)

For Nietzsche, then, the evolution of Greek art was shaped by the necessary antagonism between the two natural artistic powers that are within all persons—the primary urgency of the Dionysian, and the graceful and controlled beauty of the Apollonian. He asserted that the highest art (e.g., Greek tragedy) involves the perfect union of the Dionysian and Apollonian. Nonetheless, Nietzsche certainly placed greater emphasis on the Dionysian tendency, which is always closer to the primal reality, and is that out of which the Apollonian creates aesthetic form.<sup>7</sup>

The Dionysian and the Apollonian, in the new births ever following and mutually augmenting one another, controlled the Hellenic genius. . . . Despite all its beauty and moderation, [Apollo's] entire existence rested on a hidden substratum of suffering and of knowledge, revealed to him by the Dionysian. And behold: Apollo could not live without Dionysus! (Nietzsche, 1872/1967a, pp. 46–47)

Thus, Nietzsche proposed a distinctly “modern” and existential theory of human motivation in his radical philological study of Greek tragedy. Specifically, he identified two basic psychological mechanisms by which the individual can cope with his or her awareness of the horror, absurdity, and suffering of existence. First, there is the triumphant “yes” to life beyond death, pain, and chaos, which can be achieved in the wild orgiastic expression of one’s Dionysian energies. Second, the person may utilize the Apollonian capacity to mask “the horror of existence” with aesthetic illusions of beauty. At the same time, however, Nietzsche observed that neither the ecstatic Dionysian affirmation of life, nor even the beautiful illusions of Apollo were sufficient for human beings to deal with the horror of existence. Consequently, the Greeks devised yet a third psychological mechanism for dealing with existence, exemplified in “that despotic logician”—Socrates! (p. 92).

### Socrates, Science, and Reason: The Ultimate Delusion

Basically, Nietzsche’s metaphoric “Socrates” is an extension and derivation of the Apollonian function. The Apollonian capacity to veil the horror of existence with pleasant illusions of beauty “has withdrawn into the cocoon of logical schematism” (Nietzsche, 1872/1967a, p. 91). In other words, the Socratic tendency extends the psychological purpose of Apollonian illusions beyond the realm of art—an event Nietzsche (p. 96) identified as “the one turning point and vortex of so-called world history.” For Nietzsche, Socrates

<sup>7</sup>One reviewer pointed out that while Nietzsche always appreciated the mutual *interaction* of Dionysian and Apollonian tendencies in artistic creation, his writings certainly favor the Dionysian during the early phase of his own work. Later, however, Nietzsche entered a middle-phase, where the Apollonian seemed to dominate: for example, he praised such un-Dionysian developments as the neo-classical art of Racine and French culture in the age of Louis XIV. Nietzsche then returned to a Dionysian emphasis during his subsequent *Zarathustra* phase.

epitomized the rationalistic tendency, which seeks to transcend existence by rendering it intelligible—that is, by asserting that the world operates according to rational, ordered laws that can be ascertained through reason. Thus, the Apollonian illusion of beauty is manifested in a new aesthetic of Socratic intelligibility: knowledge of “truth” constitutes “beauty.” With a single grand metaphysical assumption of rationality, “Socratism”<sup>8</sup> conquers the “horror of existence” by transforming the world into an ideal universe of rational order.

On the contrary, Nietzsche held that nature is quite inaccessible to human understanding. In Nietzsche’s view, reality consists of endlessly changing multitudes of individual events, and nature must remain a colossal mystery. Consequently, when faced with the staggering incomprehensibility and meaninglessness of the world, people need to create Apollonian and Socratic “lies” to negate this horrible truth and strengthen their faith in life.

There is only *one* world, and this is false, cruel, contradictory, seductive, without meaning—A world thus constituted is the real world. *We have need of lies* in order to conquer this reality, this “truth,” that is, in order to *live*—That lies are necessary to live is itself part of the terrifying and questionable character of existence.

Metaphysics, morality, religion, science—in [*The Birth of Tragedy*] these things merit consideration only as various forms of lies: with their help one can have *faith* in life. . . all of them only products of [man’s] will to art, to lie, to flight from “truth,” to *negation* of “truth.” This ability itself, thanks to which he violates reality by means of lies, this artistic ability of man *par excellence*. . . In those moments in which man was deceived, in which he duped himself, in which he believes in life: oh how enraptured he feels! What delight! What a feeling of power! (Nietzsche, 1901/1967b, pp. 451–452)

Thus Nietzsche asserted that “the horror of existence” is an inescapable realization of any intelligent observer, and, in turn, the profound fear and existential nausea caused by this disturbing awareness motivates behavior to escape this aversive condition. In this regard, the ancient Greeks found great solace and redemption in Socratism, which offered the seductive promise of absolute understanding and the delightful illusion of mastery over the world. Nietzsche (1872/1967a, p. 95) described this “sublime metaphysical illusion” as “the unshakable faith that [rationality], using the thread of causality, can penetrate the deepest abysses of being, and is capable not only of knowing being but even *correcting* it.” In effect, Socratic rationalism not only allowed the Greeks to deny the horrible uncertainty and absurdity of existence, but it enabled them to actually “correct” existence by changing it into a harmonious universe of rational order that welcomed human understanding and

<sup>8</sup>Nietzsche used the term “Socratism” to characterize the rationalistic tendency itself. For Nietzsche, Socrates was “the embodiment of that rationalism that superceded tragedy” (Kaufmann, 1974, p. 393). Clearly, in figures such as Euripides, the rationalist attitude was already rooted and flourishing in the Greek mind *before Socrates*. Nietzsche (1872/1967a, p. 92), however, selected Socrates because he was the first “unprecedentedly magnificent expression” of the rationalistic tendency. As such, Nietzsche consistently emphasized Socrates over his student Plato, and declined the term “Platonism” to identify the basic rationalistic spirit of science.



control. In this way, the Socratic capacity provided human beings with a secure pride and satisfaction in their self-proclaimed understanding of existence. However, in relishing the remarkable stability and lawfulness which scientists themselves have *attributed* to nature, "man has locked himself up in a cage of proud, delusive knowledge" (Nietzsche, 1873/1964d, p. 175). But, as Nietzsche cautions, "nature has thrown away the key!"

Nietzsche denounced this "delusive knowledge" as nothing more than impotent metaphors that "do not in the least correspond with the original essentials" (Nietzsche, 1873/1964d, p. 178). In other words, human beings forget that they are dealing with the linguistic *metaphors* they themselves have created to understand the world—not with the actual pure events or phenomena, or what Nietzsche called "the original essentials." Moreover, these metaphors become so ingrown in language over the centuries that they lead to natural, but fallacious, assumptions of causality and truth (Nietzsche, 1873/1964d, p. 185). Thus, language facilitates the Socratic tendency by providing an arsenal of linguistic metaphors, which we can readily manipulate and understand, while disguising the fact that we actually comprehend and control very little in life. Hence, by habitually forgetting the frail nature of our "delusive knowledge," the Socratic tendency provides a reassuring sense of certitude in the threatening shadow of existence.

Furthermore, the overprizing of Socratic rationality can be harmful to life to the degree that it denies and devalues the irrational and instinctual (Dionysian) side of human nature. Nietzsche proposed that people are so preoccupied with their illusory images of the beauty of existence (the Apollonian tendency), or so confident of the categories and ordered laws they have applied to the world (the Socratic tendency), that they have lost touch with the primitive power and beauty of their own instinctual natures—the Dionysian experience of life itself.

O thou too proud European of the nineteenth century, art thou not mad? Thy knowledge does not complete Nature, it only kills thine own nature! (Nietzsche, 1874/1979, pp. 55-56)

In *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872/1967a), the figure of Dionysus embodied the essential instinctual and irrational nature of human beings, as well as the joyous affirmation of individual life in the face of disaster, chaos, and human finitude. Indeed, in his subsequent philosophy, Nietzsche (1883/1978) advocated a return to the primacy of the instincts as the way of achieving full vitality, strength, and brilliance. The great individual, or "overman," rejects and transcends the decadent values that weaken the person through the denial of his or her primitive, aggressive, sexual, and exuberant (Dionysian) drives.

In conclusion, Nietzsche argued that by denying the irrational primitive nature of humankind, and by glorifying the illusory "truths" provided by

science, civilization is actually denying life itself, and abandoning the real truth of human existence.

They cry in triumph that "science is now beginning to rule life." Possibly it might; but a life thus ruled is not of much value. It is not such true *life*, and promises much less for the future than the life that used to be guided not by science, but by instincts and powerful illusions. (Nietzsche, 1874/1979, p. 44)

In closing, Nietzsche is here referring to his psychological triumvirate of Socrates (science), Dionysus (instincts), and Apollo (powerful illusions). As we have seen, each one serves as a psychological mechanism for dealing with the "horror of existence." In this quote, however, Nietzsche is saying much more: he compares modern society (with its high esteem for science) to Greek antiquity, and advocates a revitalizing shift *away* from science (Socratism), and back to the values symbolized by Dionysus and Apollo. Above all, he entreats his modern audience to learn from the ancient Greeks, who have shown us how to live with the nausea and incomprehensibility of existence, and yet still enjoy a passionate, unshrinking zest for life. By embracing existence in all its pain, horror, and contradictions, and by giving expression to one's irrational (Dionysian) instincts, the individual achieves an exuberant sense of eternal joy and hope—certainly *not* nihilistic despair! Nietzsche further reminds us of the positive psychological function of Apollonian restraint, which gives conceptual expression to the instincts by channeling them into "powerful illusions"—artistic images and illusions which, in the highest form, celebrate the contradictory joy and anguish of existence (e.g., Greek tragedy).

Nietzsche warns against abandoning the way of life guided by instincts and mythic images in favor of a life ruled by science. In comparing modern social behavior to that of the ancient Greeks, Nietzsche recognized that contemporary society has elevated science (i.e., Socratic rationalism) to the glorified status of an all-comforting god, seemingly capable of yielding answers to all human questions. But, as Nietzsche exhorts, a life ruled by science is "not such true life" because it conceals the horror and uncertainty of existence with delusive attributions of rational order, and it denies the fundamental irrational and instinctive core of human nature. Thus, for Nietzsche, the rationalistic tendency of science leads us to hide from the terrifying shadow of existence—rather than embrace life, boldly and honestly, in the manner of the ancient Greeks.

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