

How Greek Tragedy Inspired Friedrich Nietzsche's Philosophy

from *The Birth of Tragedy* to *Ecce Homo*

Marc Le Voir

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In 1872 Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) wrote *The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music*. Although still heavily anchored to the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), the book makes several important departures that show striking similarities to his later, anti-Schopenhauerian philosophy. These departures are not numerous, but they still provide a window into his later philosophy. This window raises the question: just how much of Nietzsche's later philosophy takes substantial inspiration from the Greek tragedies? Because Nietzsche was a philologist, it is clear that classic Greek literature was important to him. His later philosophy took inspiration from Greek tragedy and pre-Socratic Greek culture as a whole. Tragedy did not provide the primary influence on his philosophy, it was merely a response to the widespread pessimism in Europe at the time. He used elements from Greek tragedy to illustrate ways to combat the pessimism of Schopenhauer, Socrates, Christ, and others.

Nietzsche begins *The Birth* with a discussion of the two forces which combine to form the Attic tragedy, the Apollinian and the Dionysian. Because Apollo is the god of art, music, poetry, light, medicine and soothsaying ("The Olympians"), Nietzsche uses him to describe the tragedy's artistic, poetic and beautiful qualities. Nietzsche uses Dionysus, god of theater, music, wine, ecstasy and drunken madness ("Other Gods"), to describe tragedy's theatrical depictions of suffering.

As Nietzsche points out in *The Birth*, Apollo is the "ruler over the beautiful illusion of the inner world of fantasy" and says that "[t]he higher truth, the perfection of these states in contrast

to the incompletely intelligible everyday world, this deep consciousness of nature, healing in sleep and dreams, is at the same time the symbolical analogue of the soothsaying faculty and of the arts generally, which make life possible and worth living" (*The Birth* 35). It is from these dreams that the plastic arts are created. History has many examples of artists being inspired by their dreams, so it is not surprising for Nietzsche to take dreams as one of the primary influences in classical Greek tragedy.

Nietzsche also relates Apollo to the veil of maya, adopting Schopenhauerian and Eastern language. Nietzsche quotes a long simile from Arthur Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*, relating, "just as in a stormy sea ... a sailor sits in a boat and trusts in his frail bark: so in the midst of a world of torments the individual human being sits quietly, supported by and trusting in the *principium individuationis* [principle of individuation]" (*The Birth* 36). Nietzsche goes on to argue that it is Apollo who allows us to feel calm in a world that is not (*The Birth* 36). Wrapped up in the Apollinian, men listen to the beauty and wisdom of illusion and forget the pain and suffering that exists in the world.

Comforted by the dreamworld, the Apollinian artist chooses to continue his dreams and wishes to spend as much time in dreams as possible. Nietzsche says in *The Birth*: "[O]f the two halves of our existence, the waking and the dreaming states, the former appeals to us as infinitely preferable, more important, excellent, and worthy of being lived, indeed, as that which alone is lived..." (44). It is the perfect images that are Apollinian. These perfect images, which do not exist in the waking world, cause the artist to search his dreams for inspiration, wherein the artist is exposed to the Apollinian world that is full of perfect illusions and prophetic visions. Thus, the Apollinian is responsible for all works of art that we view as perfect and ideal.

Dreams are illusions. Pain is the one thing that disproves the dreamworld. The dreamworld is perfect and lacks any of the pain and suffering that exists in our world. Even though the dreamworld is obviously more pleasurable than the real world, there is still something that causes a person to know what a dream is and to prefer the waking life over the dreamworld. The world is painful, even when we are surrounded by the illusions of Apollo. It is this pain that creates Dionysian art.

The Dionysian is inevitable because humans cannot live in the Apollinian alone. The Dionysian is both pre-Apollinian and extra-Apollinian, being of both the titans and the barbarians (*The Birth* 46). Even though the Apollinian Greek was influenced by solely Apollinian ideas at the outset, the Dionysian was still apparent to that same Greek:

The effects wrought by the *Dionysian* also seemed “titanic” and “barbaric” to the Apollinian Greek; while at the same time he could not conceal from himself that he, too, was inwardly related to these overthrown titans and heroes. Indeed, he had to recognize even more than this: despite all its beauty and moderation, his entire existence rested on a hidden substratum of suffering and of knowledge, revealed to him by the Dionysian. (46)

Thus, the Dionysian influence became a part of most Greek societies. In all of Greece, only Sparta defended the Apollinian well enough to withstand Dionysian influence (*The Birth* 47).

Dionysian art lacks the images of the Apollinian. Whether in the physical arts or the artistic word, the Apollinian deals with images. The Dionysian, which has no images, is embodied in music and emotion alone (*The Birth* 50). The poem and song of prayer were later replaced by the

folk song, which combines both poem and melody in a way that is completely different from the Apollinian. Epic poetry is rigidly Apollinian, following a specific pattern and order: it is without mistake. It embodies a specific image and follows its system without variance. It is created by artists at the height of their ability. Folk music, on the other hand, is created by ordinary people, not artists. It is made by folk sitting by a campfire who do not care if they play perfectly or not. All they care about is having a good time and forgetting about what exists around them for a little while.

The Apollinian and Dionysian have not vanished as artistic influences. In twentieth-century music, the Apollinian still exists in modern art music, typically called “classical” music. An example is the “Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity” movement from Gustav Holst's symphony, *The Planets*. The entire movement embodies the happy illusion that Apollo creates for us. While not being a programmatic piece of music, the movement nonetheless causes images in one's mind. All visual art belongs to the Apollinian.

At the other end of the spectrum is Robert Johnson's “Crossroad Blues.” It is not even necessary to speak English in order to understand what he is expressing: all that one needs to hear is the pain that he and his guitar express. There is nothing in the song but the pain and suffering that went along with what he experienced in his life.

To completely understand how tragedy was born, one must look at its history. The word “tragedy” comes from the Greek word *tragodia*, meaning “song of the goats” (Greenwald 108), perhaps because of the satyrs of Dionysus (as Nietzsche thought) or perhaps because the festival of Dionysus involved a goat sacrifice (Hartnoll 11). Since the origins of tragedy are in goat

songs, Nietzsche turned his eye to the satyric chorus: “[A]ncient tradition ... tells us quite unequivocally *that tragedy arose from the tragic chorus*, and it was originally chorus and nothing but chorus” (*The Birth* 56). Since early tragedy consisted only of the chorus, Nietzsche turned to the chorus to determine the origins of tragedy and its purpose in Greek society.

Nietzsche presents the ideas of other philosophers to discern the purpose of the chorus. First, he presents the ideas of August Wilhelm Schlegel (1767-1845), who said that the chorus played the role of the ideal spectator (*The Birth* 57). This may be true for tragic plays, but it fails to describe the original purpose of the chorus. When tragedy was “chorus and nothing but chorus,” the chorus could not have been the ideal spectator, because there would have nothing for them to observe except themselves (57). Nietzsche goes further in his critique of Schlegel’s ideas, writing:

...we had always believed that the right spectator ... must always remain conscious that he was viewing a work of art and not an empirical reality. But the tragic chorus of the Greeks is forced to recognize real beings in the figures on the stage. The chorus of the Oceanides really believes that it sees before it the Titan Prometheus, and considers itself as real as the god of the scene. But could the highest and purest type of spectator regard Prometheus as bodily present and real, as the Oceanides do? Is it characteristic of the ideal spectator to run onto the stage and free the god from his torments? (57)

Since a spectator would not do these things, the chorus cannot simply play the role of ideal spectator. The problem of constantly realizing that one is observing something is an aesthetic

problem for any spectator. If one were to constantly remember he was watching a play, he would be paying more attention to observing the fact that he was watching a play than he would to observing to the play. This process of maintaining “aesthetic distance” is similar to Jean-Paul Sartre’s theory of reflection from *The Transcendence of the Ego*—that one’s identity only exists upon reflection and does not exist when one is completely engaged in an activity, such as catching a streetcar (Sartre 53). Since the majority of spectators of a well performed play are engulfed by the drama and temporarily lose their identities, they “become,” for a time the ideal spectator.

Nietzsche’s statement that the ideal spectator must always be conscious of the fact that he is a spectator seems to go against what normally occurs during dramatic performances. Indeed, it is against what Nietzsche expects in tragedy and drama: it is against the Dionysian aspect of the art. When describing the primary forces driving the tragedian art form, Nietzsche used Dionysus because drama can produce the same ecstasy that drunken celebration can. Both states produce a total dissolution of the self. On the other side of the stage, one must assume that the goals of the actor are to create a drama so perfect that the crowd is able to forget that it is a crowd watching a play in a theater, and to cause their minds to be so focused on the events before them that they imagine them to be real. The actor attempts to create a Dionysian effect.

The ideal spectator for Nietzsche would be between the Apollinian and the Dionysian. With his notepad and pen, Apollo would sit in the back of the theater and take notes on everything that was going on, whereas Dionysus would be in the front row, so taken by the performance that he would be surprised when the play ended. In contrast with the ideal spectator that Nietzsche used to critique Schlegel, the most perfect spectator would be in the middle of the

audience, so to speak. He would embody the Apollinian/Dionysian duality that Nietzsche applies to the tragedy. He would be lost in the story and dramatization, yet still retain enough of a hold on reality as to appreciate the beauty of the language, the scenery and the acting.

Following the critique of Schlegel's ideas, Nietzsche moves on to Friedrich Schiller's introduction to *The Bride of Messina*. For Schiller (1759-1805) the chorus formed a "living wall that tragedy constructs around itself in order to close itself off from the world of reality and to preserve its ideal domain and its poetical freedom" (Nietzsche's paraphrasing from *The Birth of Tragedy* 58). Nietzsche continues to paraphrase Schiller, who says, "it is not sufficient that one merely tolerates as poetic license what is actually the essence of all poetry. The introduction of the chorus ... is the decisive step by which war is declared openly and honorably against all naturalism in art" (58). Both Schiller's theory and Nietzsche's critique of Schlegel's argument point toward the same thing—dissolving the audience's identity and removing aesthetic distance.

This idea is the "proto-tragedy." With only the satyr chorus, there would be no outsiders to judge what is real or not. This is not to say that any group of actors performing without an audience can achieve the same thing that the satyric chorus did. The satyric chorus would have given what could be called a performance, despite the fact that there would have been no one watching. Modern actors would not perform in quite the same spirit, for they do not remain in character beyond the stage. People playing cards or reading backstage would, in effect, remind the actors that they are actors, in the same way that a bored audience member might.

The satyr is the ideal creature for creating a living wall to surround the tragedy and protect it from the reality around it. On the one hand, the satyr is related to the naturalistic view of life

and visibly resembles the wild beasts of the forest. Satyrs live in the woods and do not care for much else besides bodily pleasure. On the other hand, they are fantastic creatures. Since there are no real satyrs dancing in the forest drinking wine, they also belong to a supernatural, idealistic worldview. The satyric chorus live on a separate plane of existence, which Nietzsche describes in *The Birth*:

It is a domain raised high above the actual paths of mortals. For this chorus the Greek built up the scaffolding of a fictitious *natural state* and placed on it *fictitious* natural beings. On this foundation tragedy developed and so, of course, it could dispense from the beginning with a painstaking portrayal of reality. Yet it is no arbitrary world placed by whim between heaven and earth; rather it is a world with the same reality and credibility that Olympus with its inhabitants possessed for the believing Hellene. (58)

Living in this world between Olympus and earth, the satyrs are the perfect composition for this wall against the outside world. Perhaps this is truly the purpose behind the tragic chorus and the ultimate purpose behind creation of the Greek tragedy, which happened to be realized by a German philosopher just over 2,200 years after the death of Euripides in 406 BCE. Nietzsche sums up Schiller's theory best, saying that the satyr chorus "represents existence more truthfully, really, and completely than the man of culture does who ordinarily considers himself the only reality. The sphere of poetry does not lie outside the world ... it desires to be ... the unvarnished expression of the truth, and must ... discard the mendacious finery of that alleged reality of the man of culture" (61).

Nietzsche continues his discussion of the satyric origins, positing “that the satyr, the fictitious natural being, bears the same relation to the man of culture that Dionysian music bears to civilization” (*The Birth* 59). It is this primordial emotion that propels the perfect spectator, as has been previously discussed. At heart, every civilized being longs to be out in the woods, doing only what he wants, what feels good. Civilization (meaning being civilized) has the tendency to disappear when exposed to Dionysian music. Similarly, the civilized man loses himself in the presence of satyrs: “[T]his is the most immediate effect of the Dionysian tragedy, that ... the gulfs between man and man give way to an overwhelming feeling of unity leading back to the very heart of nature. The metaphysical comfort ... that life is ... indestructibly powerful and pleasurable—this comfort appears in incarnate clarity in the chorus of the satyrs” (59).

The Dionysian elements of tragedy help humans return to their savage origin. Greek tragedy, a mirror for life, simultaneously demonstrates that there is joy and suffering in this world. The poetic attributes and other Apollinian qualities remind us that there is always beauty and other healing qualities in life. It is the fundamental joy of life coupled with the artistic healing factor that makes life worth living. After nearly seven sections of *The Birth*, Nietzsche finally arrives at the ultimate purpose of the tragedy and its chorus in Greek life: “With this chorus the profound Hellene, uniquely susceptible to the tenderest and deepest suffering, comforts himself, having looked so boldly right into the terrible destructiveness of so-called world history as well as the cruelty of nature, and being in danger of longing for a Buddhistic negation of the will. Art saves him, and through art—life” (59).

At its origin, when it consisted solely of satyric dancers, the tragedy was dithyrambic, a

song of praise to Dionysus. “The dithyramb is thus essentially different from all other choral odes. The virgins who proceed solemnly to the temple of Apollo ... still retain their civic names: the dithyrambic chorus is a chorus of transformed characters whose civic past and social status have been totally forgotten” (64). Even though the tragedy moved away from exclusively praising Dionysus, it retained the dithyrambic dissolution of the self from the past. This dithyramb differs from other holy odes in that “all other choral lyric poetry of the Hellenes is merely a tremendous intensification of the Apollinian singer, while in the dithyramb we confront a community of unconscious actors who consider themselves and one another transformed” (64).

Unfortunately, the Dionysian chorus can only provide short moments of ecstasy. The tragedy provides the audience with realizations of both the good and the bad in the world. After the tragedy is done, the audience must go home. At home, the audience is struck with the realization that there are certain aspects in this world that are inevitable, although not in quite the same way that Oedipus was fated to patricide and incest. However, watching Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* can still provide knowledge of inevitability. Nietzsche concludes, then, that “[i]n this sense the Dionysian man resembles Hamlet: both have once looked truly into the essence of things, they have *gained knowledge*, and nausea inhibits action; for their action could not change anything in the eternal nature of things” (60).

Greek tragedy can produce the same sort of existential dilemma that many twentieth-century philosophers considered. Nietzsche does not embark on an elaborate analysis of whether life is worth living, as Albert Camus would later do in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942); instead, he simply answers the question using Schopenhauerian ideas on relief from the pain of the world, saying of the Dionysian man, “when the danger to his will his greatest, art approaches as a

saving sorceress, expert at healing. She alone knows how to turn these thoughts about the horror or absurdity of existence into notions with which one can live" (60).

This idea is almost identical with that of Schopenhauer in *The World as Will and Representation*, who says, "Everywhere music expresses only the quintessence of life and of its events ... It is just this universality that belongs uniquely to music, together with its precise distinctness, that gives it that high value as the panacea of all our sorrows" (261-62). Both philosophers use the idea of art healing the wounds that are inevitable in this world of suffering, thereby indicating that Nietzsche is still within Schopenhauer's gravitational pull, despite the occasional attempt at escape. The primary difference between Nietzsche's ideas and Schopenhauer's lies in their different responses to sorrow in the world.

Schopenhauer's philosophy is closely related to Buddhism. His response to suffering is to desire complete negation, just as Dionysus' companion Silenus (in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*) suggests to King Midas what is most desirable. Nietzsche quotes from Sophocles: "What is best of all is utterly beyond your reach: not to be born, not to be, to be *nothing*. But the second best for you is—to die soon (lines 1224ff, quoted in *The Birth*, p. 42). Nietzsche's response opposes Schopenhauer: "With this chorus the profound Hellene, uniquely susceptible to the tenderest and deepest suffering, comforts himself, having looked so boldly right into the terrible destructiveness of so-called world history as well as the cruelty of nature, and being in danger of longing for a Buddhistic negation of the will. Art saves him, and through art—life" (59).

Like any art form, tragedy changes based on who is writing it and the context in which it is

written. The tragedy of Aeschylus (524-455 BCE) concerns itself more with the gods and titans, and has less to do with actions of everyday people (Hartnoll 14), whereas Sophocles (497-406 BCE) concerns himself more with the affairs of men, in addition to reducing the number of chorus members and making the plots more complex (Hartnoll 14). Euripides (480-406), a contemporary of Sophocles, followed many of the changes that the older tragedian made; however, he also made many of his own. Euripides moved even further away from both the cosmic and the supernatural. As modern theater historian Phyllis Hartnoll says, Euripides' plays "are unusually realistic, no longer pure tragedies, but tragi-comedies, even melodramas" (14). It is these changes that cause Nietzsche to remark that Euripides forced the tragedy to die by suicide (*The Birth* 76).

The theatrical alternative to tragedy, comedy, has origins similar to tragedy, in being caused by the rowdy playfulness of the satyrs at Dionysian festivals (Hartnoll 16). Comedy went through two phases in ancient Greece: Old Comedy, of which the most influential author was Aristophanes (446-386 BCE), and New Comedy, of which Menander (342-291 BCE) was master (Hartnoll 16, 22). Old Comedy was known for being satirical and critical of the politics of the time (Hartnoll 16). New Comedy, on the other hand, was inoffensive, dealing mostly with the comedic situations of everyday life (Hartnoll 21). It is the transformation from tragedy to new comedy that most troubles Nietzsche, who blames the downfall of tragedy on Euripides, saying "It was *Euripides* who fought this death struggle of tragedy" (*The Birth* 76). Nietzsche argues that Euripides' movement towards characters out of everyday situations allowed for the transition to occur (*The Birth* 77). This movement "brought the spectator onto the stage. ... Civic mediocrity ... was given a voice" (*The Birth* 77).

New Comedy, then, is neither Dionysian nor Apollinian. Its script cannot be called poetic or artistic, for it denies the Apollinian elements and its themes are humorous and therefore fail to depict the Dionysian pain inherent to our world. Although Euripides was at the helm when the tragedy sank, he was not the only one in control at the time.

Nietzsche also blames Socrates, wording Socrates' aesthetic law as "to be beautiful everything must be intelligible" (*The Birth* 83-84). This demand for intelligibility is what ultimately doomed tragedy. The addition of the prologue killed the Apollinian art involved. When someone comes on stage and outlines everything that is going to happen, it kills the art behind the story, and reduces it to nothing more than a newspaper article. The Dionysian element is also destroyed by the prologue. The Dionysian element is maintained by forgetting that one is watching a production. The goal is to forget that the satyrs are nothing more than men with beards wearing wooly pants who have horns strapped to their heads. The prologue is someone eternally reminding the audience that they are an audience, thus breaking the fourth wall, not in a humorous way, as is sometimes accomplished, but in an obnoxious way: like a sign at the bottom of a movie screen that says, "You are watching a movie."

The demand for intelligibility also goes against artistic inspiration. Artistic inspiration is rarely something that one can consciously think about. It lacks a source and conscious effort, because it just happens. It is impossible to figure out where people's inspiration comes from. Artists get ideas, either from things in the world or out of thin air. It is unclear how exactly Euripides would have answered a question of this nature. Nietzsche's theory is that "[h]e might have said that Aeschylus, *because* he created unconsciously, did what was *wrong*" (*The Birth* 85). Nietzsche goes on to say that "Plato, too, almost always speaks ironically of the creative

faculty of the poet, insofar as it is not conscious insight, and places it on a par with the gift of the soothsayer and dream-interpreter: the poet is incapable of composing until he has become unconscious and bereft of understanding” (*The Birth* 85-86).

Much of Nietzsche’s early philosophy from *The Birth* is Schopenhauerian in origin and does not have much to do with his later philosophy. However, there are enough times, even in *The Birth of Tragedy*, when he breaks free from Schopenhauer’s grasp and reveals the origins of his later ideas. The primary separation from Schopenhauer occurs when Nietzsche posits the idea that art can provide enough of a salvation from the pain in the world to make it worth living, rather than desiring complete dissolution, as Schopenhauer does (*The Birth* 59). This would later become Nietzsche’s philosophy of *amor fati*, the idea that one should love the things that happen in one’s life, regardless of whether they are good or bad. This idea takes elements from his description of the Dionysian in *The Birth*, namely, the idea that even though there is pain and suffering in the world, there can still be cause for joy and celebration.

This idea of Nietzsche’s is also a part of his views concerning nihilism: that even though there is no hope to be had in the world, one must refuse to be depressed. The section on nihilism shows up in *The Birth* in the section about Hamlet (60). Nietzsche’s conclusion about Hamlet—that he chooses not to act because he knows that killing Claudius will accomplish nothing—seems pessimistic and out of tune with Nietzsche’s later ideas on nihilism. Hamlet does not act in the way that Nietzsche’s later philosophy suggests, because, at the end of the play, he still kills Claudius, even though he knows it will not accomplish anything. After Nietzsche’s section on Hamlet, he explains how one can avoid pessimism in the face of nihilism:

Here, when the danger to his will is greatest, *art* approaches as a saving sorceress, expert at healing. She alone knows how to turn these nauseous thoughts about the horror or absurdity of existence into notions with which one can live: these are the *sublime* as the artistic taming of the horrible, and the *comic* as the artistic discharge of the nausea or absurdity.” (60)

Because Hamlet was not cured by art the way that Nietzsche suggests is possible, the “his” in the previous quotation must only refer to the Dionysian man, since he still has the ability to be saved by art.

One major element of the Dionysian that retains its Schopenhauerian flavoring is the desire for the dissolution of the self. Even though satyrs are supposed to embody the aspects of “yes-saying,” the ecstatic dissolution of the self is a version of “no-saying.” The ideal Dionysian man should still be able to recognize and embrace the pain in the world, even when he is part of an ecstatic dance. Acting to forget about the things in the world seems a desire for negation of the will, proving that, although Nietzsche differed from Schopenhauer on many key respects, he had not yet moved completely away from his influence.

The Gay Science, published first in 1882 and expanded and republished in 1887, deals largely with poetry and art. The title comes from the fourteenth-century poets of Provence, who used the term *gai saber*, gay science, to describe their art (*Gay Science* 5). Walter Kaufmann, Nietzsche’s best English translator, quotes the 1955 edition of the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* which equates science and poetry “The gay science: the art of poetry” (*Gay Science*

6). Although Nietzsche's primary focus is more recent poetry, he focuses as well on the Greek tragedies in some sections, both artistically and philosophically.

Thus, Nietzsche returns to the Dionysian, but changes its meaning in the ten years since *The Birth*. In *The Gay Science*, he says, “[t]here are two kinds of sufferers: first, those who suffer from the *over-fullness of life*—they want a Dionysian art and likewise a tragic insight—and then those who suffer from the *impoverishment of life* and seek rest, stillness, calm seas, redemption from themselves through art and knowledge, or intoxication, convulsions, anesthesia, and madness” (328). This contrast between the Dionysian and pessimism is part of *The Birth*, but it is only part of the definition of the Dionysian. *The Birth* primarily contrasts the Dionysian against the Apollinian, something that is far from pessimistic in origin. The perfect world of art and healing that was described in *The Birth* is completely different from the pessimistic world of depression and retreat from pain that we find in *The Gay Science*, in which Nietzsche uses “Dionysian” as the opposite of the Schopenhauerian, Wagnerian, Epicurean, Christian, and the Romantic. All of these philosophies preach negation and withdrawal, a turning away from the world, rather than embracing it as the Dionysian does. Nietzsche counters:

He that is richest in the fullness of life, the Dionysian god and man, cannot only afford the sight of the terrible and questionable but even the terrible deed and any luxury of destruction, decomposition, and negation. In his case, what is evil, absurd, and ugly seems permissible, owing to an excess of procreation, fertilizing, energies that can still turn any desert into lush farmland. (*The Gay Science* 328)

Thus, in *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche alters his definition of the Dionysian from *The Birth* by embracing life, despite the horrors within it, as his idea of *amor fati*, meaning the love of fate,

maintains: "I want to learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things; then I shall be one of those who make things beautiful. *Amor fati*: let that be my love henceforth! I do not wish to wage war against what is ugly ... all in all and on the whole: some day I wish to be only a Yes-sayer" (*The Gay Science* 223). This idea, which becomes a major portion of Nietzsche's philosophy, is born of the Dionysian influence that Nietzsche earlier found in the Greek tragedies. Indeed, it is probably Nietzsche's love for the Greeks and their ideas that causes him to use the word "fate" in his term. We are all people who can control our lives no more than Oedipus could. All we can do is change our perception of "fate."

It is from this point in his argument that Nietzsche develops his idea of eternal recurrence, which he explains with a story:

What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: "This is your life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence—even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!" Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: "You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine." (273-74)

This idea is much the same as the Stoics had in ancient Greece, except that their eternal return was an actual, metaphysical return and not a metaphorical one that urges people to live life in the best way possible. Indeed, Nietzsche could have changed what the demon said. The demon could have said, "This is your life as you live it and have lived it; you will never get the chance to live again after death. Every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything small or great in your life will be gone. One day, the hourglass of existence will run out and you will be no more!" This is less like torture than eternally living the same life, but it should still evoke the same fear that Nietzsche's example did. Either way, regardless of the metaphysics of it, we should live our lives in the best way that we are physically capable of living them, and we should cherish and enjoy everything that we can. Even though this idea is not tragic in origin, because fate was an idea that existed in Greece outside of the tragedies, it is still relevant in that these ideas are still found in the Greek tragedies. In much the same way that Kafka's existential themes are not unique, they are presented in such an original way that they can be inspiring.

Thus Spoke Zarathustra, written between 1883 and 1885, is Nietzsche's only plot-based book. The plot centers on the travels of the prophet Zarathustra, who preaches his ideas of the overman and the last man, his idea of eternal recurrence, and the fact that God is dead.

In the prologue, Zarathustra leaves his cave of solitude and goes down to the town to preach his ideas of the overman and the last man. Zarathustra says that man will be eventually overcome by the overman, who will view man as man now looks at the apes (*Portable Nietzsche* 124). Nietzsche contrasts the overman with the last man, who, he argues, will move away from all things that make life difficult to a place where he no longer has to worry about keeping warm (*Portable Nietzsche* 129). The last men will also move away from leading and obeying,

eventually becoming one unanimous herd (*Portable Nietzsche* 130). The last man will adopt this easy life, becoming happy from lack of effort (*Portable Nietzsche* 130). The crowd to whom Zarathustra preaches call out, "Turn us into these last men!" (*Portable Nietzsche* 130). On the surface the last man seems contented with his life. He is happy, but only in a numbed sort of way. The overman, on the other hand, is jubilant, embracing life and dancing at every available moment. Thus, one must strive to become an overman, thereby causing the lazy man to desire to become the last man.

The spirit of man must undergo three different changes in order to progress beyond being an ordinary man. First, the spirit must become like a camel and embrace what is most difficult in its journey across the desert of self-overcoming (*Portable Nietzsche* 138). Once in the desert, the spirit must become like a lion and do battle with the dragon of our old values (*Portable Nietzsche* 138). Even though the spirit of the lion has the ability to create freedom from the old value system, it cannot create new values for itself (*Portable Nietzsche* 138-39). And so, the spirit must transform a final time, into an infant, for only an infant has the ability to say "yes" and create his own world (*Portable Nietzsche* 139).

As the book progresses, Nietzsche begins to fill in more and more of the information about the overman, yet he does not say anything specific on the matter, for "[t]here are many ways of overcoming" (*Portable Nietzsche* 311). Nietzsche argues that the overman is not capable of being born at the time of his writing; he will be a product of successive generations striving towards the same goal. The themes and ideas that Nietzsche attaches to the overman are nearly the same as his ideas in *The Gay Science* (1882); namely, that God is dead, that morality is merely a human creation, and that one must live life as though things will eternally recur.

Little from *The Birth* shows up in *Zarathustra*, apart from the Dionysian duality that one must have pain and pleasure at the same time. Nietzsche repeats, for instance, that “[i]t was suffering and incapacity that created all afterworlds— this and that brief madness of bliss which is experienced by those who suffer most deeply” (*Portable Nietzsche* 143).

Zarathustra tries to teach us how to overcome the spirit of gravity, as birds do. We humans are taught from birth concepts of “good” and “evil” (*Portable Nietzsche* 305). These values, coupled with the pain that is inherent in life, cause humans to conclude that “life is a grave burden” (*Portable Nietzsche* 305). This is the spirit of gravity that man must learn to overcome. Zarathustra dances as a way to overcome the spirit of gravity and says, “I would only believe in a god who could dance. And when I saw my devil I found him serious, thorough, profound and solemn: it was the spirit of gravity—through him all things fall. Not by wrath does one kill but laughter. Come, let us kill the spirit of gravity!” (*Portable Nietzsche* 153).

This spirit of dance too has origins in the Greek chorus, who propound dancing and enjoying life despite its harshness. Although one might think that tragedy would increase the effects of the spirit of gravity and cause more suffering in the world, the tragedies can also have the reverse effect. When watching a reminder of one’s own suffering and mortality, there are two responses that one can have. One can either become depressed at the thought of mortal suffering, or one can use that thought as a catalyst toward enjoyment. The overman would not need reminders of his own mortality, because he would be living life to the fullest every day.

The doctrine of eternal recurrence is perhaps Zarathustra’s most illusive idea. Several times he approaches stating it, but refuses and does not fully accept it until the end of the third

part (the original end to the book). Eternal recurrence is first explained by Zarathustra's eagle and serpent, who speak to Zarathustra: "[T]o those who think as we do, all things themselves are dancing: they come and offer their hands and laugh and flee—and come back. Everything goes, everything comes back; eternally rolls the wheel of being" (*Portable Nietzsche* 329). Here Nietzsche expresses this idea as metaphor, rather than theory, as he had in *The Gay Science*. In the third part of *Zarathustra*, soon after his animals explain the doctrine of eternal recurrence, Zarathustra has a conversation with life that leads him to proclaim, again metaphorically, "[H]ow should I not lust after eternity and after the nuptial ring of rings, the ring of recurrence?" (*Portable Nietzsche* 340).

In the fourth part of *Zarathustra*, Zarathustra's teaching causes the ugliest man to say, "I am for the time satisfied that I have lived my whole life. And that I attest so much is still not enough for me. ... 'Was *that* life?' I want to say to death. 'Well then! Once more!'" (*Portable Nietzsche* 429-30). This proclamation reiterates how one might respond to the demon in *The Gay Science*, who tells us that the animals' proclamation is not meant in a metaphysical sense. Zarathustra himself explains the ugliest man's proclamation further by saying, "All joy wants the eternity of all things, wants honey, wants lees, wants drunken midnights, wants tombs, wants tomb-tears' comfort, wants gilded evening glow" (*Portable Nietzsche* 435). Zarathustra goes on to say that joy wants everything, even the pain and suffering of the world (*Portable Nietzsche* 435).

This desire for eternal recurrence has the same tragic origin as fighting against the spirit of gravity. Desiring to live one's life over and over again is the logical conclusion of enjoying every day and living life to the fullest. If one truly lives his life to the fullest, then why would

anyone want to do anything but live that life over and over again for all eternity?

Beyond Good and Evil, published in 1886, presents many formal arguments on morality and how we must look beyond our normal conception of values. This idea would have been furthered in Nietzsche's *Revaluation of All Values*, had he been able to finish more than the first of four essays (*Portable Nietzsche* 565). In *Beyond* he says, "[T]o recognize untruth as a condition of life—that certainly means resisting accustomed value feelings in a dangerous way; and a philosophy that risks this would by that token alone place itself beyond good and evil" (12). Looking at the "accustomed values" in Europe and America, both in Nietzsche's time and at present, one finds both traditional Socratic and Christian values. Since *The Birth of Tragedy* is largely concerned with Greek society prior to the teachings of Socrates or Christ, it shows little similarities to *Beyond Good and Evil*.

An important distinction between the two works is the difference between "beyond" and "before." Nietzsche's goal in *Beyond Good and Evil*, ultimately, is to reduce the effect of Socratic morality on Western Society. In *The Birth*, Nietzsche says, "[T]his is the most immediate effect of the Dionysian tragedy, that ... the gulfs between man and man give way to an overwhelming feeling of unity leading back to the very heart of nature" (59). Nietzsche uses the word *jenseits*, "beyond," in the title *Beyond Good and Evil* because he wants to move to the far side of both. Nietzsche addresses the far side in *Beyond Good and Evil*, calling the prehistoric period "pre-moral" and locating it thusly: "Don't we stand at a threshold of a period which should be designated negatively, to begin with, as *extra-moral*?" (44).

Written in 1887, *On the Genealogy Of Morals*, is composed of three different essays.

The first, “‘Good and Evil,’ ‘Good and Bad,’” concerns the difference between the two terms. Nietzsche uses etymologies of both words in different languages to trace the terms back through their family trees to try to better understand the terms historically. Nietzsche traces “Good and Bad” back to their roots in nobility (*Genealogy* 28). The words that the nobles used to describe themselves came eventually to mean “good.” On the other hand, the words that nobles used to describe the common people came to mean “bad.” “Good,” as a term, was used first among nobles, and “bad,” used second, eventually, came to mean those other than they.

The phrase, “Good and Evil,” was created in the opposite fashion. The slaves and lower classes of society created the word “evil” to describe their enemies, the nobility (*Genealogy* 39). The word “good,” then, was used to describe themselves, or those who were not the enemy. “That lambs dislike great birds of prey does not seem strange: only it gives no ground for reproaching these birds of prey for bearing off little lambs. And if the lambs say among themselves: ‘these birds of prey are evil; and whoever is least like a bird of prey, but rather its opposite—would he not be good?’ there is no reason to find fault with this institution of an ideal” (*Genealogy* 44-45).

The second essay, “‘Guilt,’ ‘Bad Conscience,’ and the Like” attempts to establish the genealogy of these concepts. Guilt, Nietzsche concludes, comes from the relationship between debtor and lender, identical words in German, *Schuld* meaning guilt, and *Schuld* or *Schulden*, meaning debt or debts (*Genealogy* 62-63). Nietzsche takes these terms back to ancient Egypt, where creditors would rob and dismember corpses equivalent to the amount that they were owed

if their debtors died (*Genealogy* 64). Because this action was believed to affect the afterlife, it became a serious punishment and led people to feel guilty.

Bad conscience is born of an instinct for freedom, because man has forced the instinctual animal that he is into a cage (*Genealogy* 85,87). This feeling of *ressentiment* (Nietzsche uses the French word) is caused by man against himself, instead of a third party, as one might assume (*Genealogy* 87). It is this feeling of bad, or guilty, conscience that allows ideas contrary to instinct to flourish, including selflessness and self-sacrifice (*Genealogy* 88).

“What is the Meaning of Ascetic Ideals?”, the third essay, concerns religion and asceticism. The ascetic represents “life *against* life” (*Genealogy* 120). This ideal is led by the ascetic priest, who hates the inherent suffering in life. He aspires to gather a following and convince them of his ideas of life and sin: “‘I suffer: someone must be to blame for it’—thus thinks every sickly sheep. But his shepherd, the ascetic priest, tells him: ‘Quite so, my sheep! someone must be to blame for it: but you yourself are this someone, you alone are to blame for it—you *alone are to blame for yourself!*’” (*Genealogy* 128). Thus the flock gradually becomes sicker and sicker as they continually blame themselves and retreat further from life by seeking only more poison as a cure.

It is this process, caused by the Christian notion of sin, that drives the widespread pessimism of Europe. People forget how enjoy life and think instead of nothing but pain and suffering. Even if they do occasionally think of something enjoyable, their brainwashed, Christian upbringing will punish them and they will retreat once more into misery. Simply put, if Dionysus and the ascetic priest were at a party where wine and cake were offered, Dionysus

would accept gladly, but the ascetic priest would decline and retreat to sit in a corner. Even though every glimpse of Dionysus dancing and being merry would cause the priest to think of the joy that he could be experiencing, were he to join the dance, these same thoughts would shame him into punishing himself for the “sin” of desiring enjoyment.

Twilight of the Idols, written in 1888, with the subtitle, *How One Philosophizes With a Hammer*, is an apt emblem of its contents, in which Nietzsche takes his word-hammer and taps the idols of belief and finds them hollow. In *Twilight*, Nietzsche brings back the Dionysian as a major term, in the same way that he used it in *The Gay Science*. In *The Birth*, Nietzsche had said that recognizing the primal suffering in the world was inevitable (*The Birth* 47); therefore, he gave up on any idea of ignoring the pain in the world and shifted the focus in *Twilight* to the reactions to the pain in the world one could have. To Nietzsche, by 1888, one can either retreat from the world and become pessimistic, as Schopenhauer did, or he can be like a tragic artist, for “[t]he tragic artist was no pessimist: he is precisely the one who says Yes to everything questionable, even to the terrible—he is *Dionysian*” (*Portable Nietzsche* 484).

This idea parallels that of the eternal recurrence. In both cases there is an inevitability, whether it be experiencing pain or life itself. In either case, one has nothing to lose by not enjoying and saying Yes to life. The pessimist is someone who is forced to be at a party and utterly refuses to enjoy himself, just like the ascetic priest. Rather than eating cake and mingling with the crowd, he decides to sit in the corner and tell everyone who will listen how unenjoyable the party is.

Unlike Schopenhauer, who praised art as allowing “liberation from the will,” but believed that, rather than inspiring life, the tragedies had their utility in “evoking resignation” (quoted in *Portable Nietzsche* 529). Nietzsche argues instead that the tragic artist shows “the state *without* fear in the face of the fearful and questionable” (*Portable Nietzsche* 530). Nietzsche further says that the tragic artist demonstrates this to the audience by showing “[c]ourage and freedom of feeling before a powerful enemy, before a sublime calamity, before a problem that arouses dread—this triumphant state is what the tragic artist chooses, what he glorifies” (*Portable Nietzsche* 530). The pessimists do exactly as one might expect: they proclaim that the glass is half empty and only look at the bad things in life, instead of embracing all aspects of life, as the Dionysian man does.

Nietzsche later in *Twilight* describes Goethe (1749-1832) as Dionysian because he conceived of a man “for whom there is no longer anything that is forbidden—unless it be *weakness*” (*Portable Nietzsche* 554). Nietzsche says that “[s]uch a spirit who has *become free* stands amid the cosmos with a joyous and trusting fatalism, in the *faith* that only the particular is loathsome, and that all is redeemed and affirmed in the whole—he *does not negate any more*. Such a faith, however, is the highest of all possible faiths: I have baptized it with the name of *Dionysus*” (*Portable Nietzsche* 554).

Ecce Homo, also written 1888, is Nietzsche’s commentary on his life, his career as a philosopher, and his works. The title, Latin for “behold the man,” is what Pontius Pilate said of Jesus, in John 19:5 (*Ecce Homo* 203). As a retrospective, *Ecce Homo* does not provide new ideas, but merely clarifies and presents a comprehensive look at ideas already presented. For instance, Nietzsche calls his idea of fundamental Yes-saying “the tragic pathos” (*Ecce Homo*

feature remains the ease of metamorphosis, the inability *not* to react” (*Portable Nietzsche* 519).

This language is similar to the proto-tragedy’s satyric chorus that Nietzsche describes in *The Birth*.

Dionysian Yes-saying drives the theory of eternal recurrence. One would never be able to say, “‘Was *that* life?’ I want to say to death. ‘Well then! Once more!’” or say to the demon of eternal recurrence “‘You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine” without Dionysian Yes-saying at the foundation of one’s existence (*Portable Nietzsche* 430 and *The Gay Science* 273-74). Without Yes-saying, one would only be able to throw himself down, gnash his teeth, and curse those who mention eternal recurrence (*Gay Science* 273). Yes-saying is the main idea that Nietzsche uses against the pessimists. His anti-pessimistic portions, meaning the portions of his writing that specifically criticize pessimism, not the parts that are anti-pessimistic in general, demonstrate the influence from the tragedies as well, but his immediate source must be the pessimism that Nietzsche felt pervades Western society. In this way, he is like a physician who recognizes the philosophical origins of the “disease” of pessimism: Schopenhauer, Socratism, and Christianity. The Attic tragedies and their Dionysian Yes-saying appeared to Nietzsche as the best antidote to counter this disease.

The Greek tragedies did not inspire Nietzsche at all in terms of morality, because the tragedies have little to do with modern morality. It is their very lack of similarity to modern morality that inspired Nietzsche to propose Dionysus and his satyrs as solutions to the problem of pessimism. By 1886, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche urges a desire to move forward, as *extra-moral* instead of *pre-moral* (44). There are few similarities between moral arguments and the actions in the tragedies. Although Oedipus goes out of his way to behave in the way that

would normally be called moral, he still ends up killing his father and marrying his mother. Is this because he is an “immoral” person? Absolutely not. It simply happens by accident.

When comparing the differences between everyday occurrences and the events of tragic art, one must keep in mind the primary difference: tragedies are designed to entertain. Thus, tragic art needs to have amazing events that do not follow mundane reality in any way, lest it lose its appeal. Would anyone want to read a version of *Oedipus* in which he is told that he was adopted before he was warned of the prophecy? Or a version of *Antigone* that uses diplomacy to figure out a punishment for Polynices that does not affect burial rights? Or a version of *The Bacchae* in which Pentheus decides that, although he does not worship Dionysus, he has no right to decide who or how others worship? In order to make the tragedies compelling, the authors gave them elements that made them interesting and worth seeing. A byproduct of these sensational elements is that they project conflicted characters, who do not adhere to traditional, Western morality.

Nietzsche's overman is one who embodies all the characteristics of exceptionality. It is he who overcomes the ethical mediocrity by following Dionysus, who says “yes” to life at all times. It is he who “remain[s] faithful to the earth” and denies the preaching of ascetic pessimists (*Portable Nietzsche* 125). The overman is a summation of Nietzsche's philosophy, as inspired by the tragedies of the ancient Greeks. As Nietzsche says in *Ecce Homo*, the “‘Dionysian’ here became a *supreme deed*; measured against that, all the rest of human activity seems poor and relative” (304).

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