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Nietzsche Agonistes:

Strife and Competition in Nietzsche's Reception of Greek Antiquity

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I argue that Nietzsche's reception of ancient Greece, embodied by such diverse historical personalities as Homer, Heraclitus, Socrates, Epicurus, and Thucydides, is structured by his approval of a particular conception of productive strife which he takes to be distinctive of the Greeks. I show that Nietzsche's admiration for Greek antiquity (and his account of its putative decline) is due to what he perceives to be the characteristically Greek capacity to appraise regulated forms of conflict – in particular, competition – as positive. This capacity is most conspicuously realised in the concept of *agon* (ἀγών), the contest-idea of the Greek states of antiquity. I position Nietzsche's interpretation of the metaphysics, ethics, politics, and literature of ancient Greece as essentially conditioned by his positive assessment of the agonal impulse, which he perceives as active on all levels of the Greek cultural output. I argue that, for Nietzsche, the unique achievements of the Greeks (whom he contrasts favourably with modern Europeans) spring in the first instance from the instinct for strife and competition that is embodied in, and regulated by, the social institution of *agon*. This has substantial implications for our interpretation of familiar concepts in Nietzsche's philosophy more broadly, in particular his philosophical psychology and his political philosophy.

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CONTENTS

<i>Abbreviations</i>	7
<i>Introduction</i>	8
Chapter 1: Homer and Competition	21
I. On Homer’s Personality.....	22
II. Competition and the ‘Heroic Code’	25
III. The Two Goddesses	31
Chapter 2: Heraclitus and the Metaphysics of Conflict	37
I. Fire and Contest.....	38
II. Concerning Nietzsche’s Interpretation of Heraclitus	42
III. Was Heraclitus really all that radical?	47
IV. Philosophy as Personality: Heraclitus and Hellenism.....	53
Chapter 3: Socrates, Tragedy, and <i>décadence</i>	59
I. Socrates and Tragedy: ‘a shadow growing ever longer in the evening sun’	60
II. Socrates the Criminal: the influence of Aristophanes.....	69
III. Socratic Moderation as <i>décadence</i>	75
IV. Socrates as Rival	79
Chapter 4: <i>The Soul-Soother of Later Antiquity</i>: Nietzsche on Epicurus and Schopenhauer	82
I. The Storm of the Soul: Epicurus on pleasure.....	84
II. Schopenhauer and Epicurus on Suffering and the Purpose of Philosophy	87
III. Epicurus and Schopenhauer on the ‘Wisdom of Silenus’	90
IV. Competitive Spirits: the <i>agon</i> of the soul.....	94
V. Epicurus as <i>décadent</i> : a late reappraisal?	98
VI. Concluding Remarks.....	101
Chapter 5: <i>Courage in the Face of Reality</i>: Nietzsche on Thucydides and Justice	102
I. Thucydides on Justice.....	104
II. Thucydides the Sophist?.....	108
III. Justice within the State: the Corcyrean <i>stasis</i> and the ineluctable strife of the polis	114
IV. Concluding Remarks.....	123
V. Coda: is Nietzsche’s interpretation credible?	124

Conclusion	128
Bibliography	137

ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are used to refer to works by Nietzsche. For the full details of these works, please see the bibliography. Unless otherwise specified, Roman numerals refer to chapters or major parts of Nietzsche's works, while Arabic numerals refer to sections, not pages (e.g., *GM* III.25 refers to the twenty-fifth section of the third essay of *On the Genealogy of Morality*).

<i>A</i>	<i>Antichrist</i>
<i>BGE</i>	<i>Beyond Good and Evil</i>
<i>BT</i>	<i>The Birth of Tragedy</i>
<i>D</i>	<i>Daybreak</i>
<i>EH</i>	<i>Ecce Homo</i>
<i>eKGWB</i>	<i>Digitale Kritische Gesamtausgabe Werke und Briefe</i>
<i>GS</i>	<i>The Gay Science</i>
<i>HH</i>	<i>Human, All Too Human</i>
<i>GM</i>	<i>On the Genealogy of Morality</i>
<i>NCW</i>	<i>Nietzsche contra Wagner</i>
<i>PPP</i>	'The Pre-Platonic Philosophers'
<i>PTG</i>	<i>Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks</i>
<i>TI</i>	<i>Twilight of the Idols</i>
<i>WP</i>	<i>The Will to Power</i>
<i>Z</i>	<i>Thus Spoke Zarathustra</i>

INTRODUCTION

‘– Old friends! See here! Your faces have gone white,

With love – and pain too!

Just leave in peace: there’s nothing to detain you:

Here in the distant ice-filled rocky height –

This realm belongs to hunters, born to fight!’

- ‘FROM HIGH MOUNTAINS’, *Beyond Good and Evil*

I. We Hyperboreans

In *Antichrist*, Nietzsche tells us that he is a ‘Hyperborean’ (A 1) – a denizen of that mythical land of plenty of the ancient Greek imagination. What are we to make of this strange claim?

Hyperborea, ‘the Land Beyond Boreas (the North Wind)’, has no consistent real-world location in the tradition: Herodotus places it to the north and east of Scythia (Hdt. 4.33.1), Sophocles in some ‘far-distant’ region of Thrace (Soph. *Ant.* 977), and Heraclides Ponticus is supposed to have claimed, quite tantalisingly, that Hyperborea in fact lay beyond the Alps,¹ and that the Hyperboreans were a Celtic tribe responsible for the sack of Rome in the 4th century BCE (Plut. *Cam.* 22.2). The point, from Nietzsche’s perspective, may be that Hyperborea *has no location* that can be reached by ordinary people, an observation that he attributes to Pindar: ‘Neither by land nor by sea will you find the way to the Hyperboreans’ (Pind. P. 10). To this, Nietzsche adds ‘Beyond the North, beyond ice, beyond death – *our* lives, *our* happiness...’. The Hyperborean Nietzsche is similarly dislocated, occupying conceptual co-ordinates that are outside of space and time: while he breathes the frigid air of a mythical, pre-civilised Europe in the mysterious *terra*

¹ This ancient identification of Hyperborea with that region which corresponds to modern-day Switzerland probably did not escape Nietzsche’s notice: his characterisation of Hyperborea as an ice-bound retreat from the placid south-winds of European contentedness puts one in mind of the wintry climes of Silvaplana, ‘Six thousand feet above man and time’ (EH, ‘Thus Spake Zarathustra: A Book for All and None’ 1), where Nietzsche first conceived of the eternal recurrence.

incognita of the Greeks, he also resides in and is writing for an as-yet unrealised future, ‘born posthumously’ into ‘the day after tomorrow’ (A 1).

Nietzsche’s poetic identification with the Hyperboreans of Greek myth should be understood, therefore, as a means of emphasising his remoteness (and the remoteness of his imagined audience, the ‘very few’ for whom he claims to be writing in *Antichrist*) from both the common run of humanity and the complex of values which constitutes its moral consciousness. Nietzsche regards this moral consciousness, which defines in a fundamental sense the collective ‘way of seeing’ of Christian Europe, as being comprised in all its highest desiderata of ‘*values of decadence*’ (A 6). His objection to this (which we might call the ‘moral worldview’ in contrast to the ‘tragic worldview’ which Nietzsche writes about elsewhere) is presented as categorically distinct from a mere difference of opinion concerning the facts: Nietzsche is not in the business of refuting Christian moral theory, that is, in engaging with European philosophy on its own terms, but rather in diagnosing the ‘unhealthy’ form of life of which all moral theorising is merely *symptomatic*. He writes: ‘To be the doctor *here*, to be merciless *here*, to guide the blade *here* – this is for *us* to do, this is *our* love for humanity, this is what makes *us* philosophers, we Hyperboreans!’ (A 7). This symptomatological approach signals Nietzsche’s refusal to accommodate his work to the conventions of philosophical discourse (which he perceives – at least in large part – as emanating pathologically from a hypertrophy of the cognitive faculty beginning with Socrates-Plato). In this Hyperborean mode, Nietzsche feels himself to be engaged with morality from, as it were, the ‘outside’ – from a perspective that is simultaneously pre- and post-Christian.

The temporal ambiguity is accentuated if we consider that Nietzsche’s identification with the Hyperboreans represents a figurative act of distancing from the Greeks as much as it does the moderns: according to Pindar, the Hyperboreans were a ‘sacred race’ unafflicted by ‘sickness or ruinous old age’, whose domain was as inaccessible to the Greeks as ‘the bronze heavens’, the realm of the gods themselves (Pind. P. 10). Nietzsche therefore positions himself (with characteristic and self-conscious immodesty) in the *ne plus ultra* of the Greek imagination, a holy – and wholly alien – place where none save the gorgon-slaying Perseus has ever tread. It is tempting to interpret Nietzsche’s ubiquitous philhellenism as originating in an uncritical and backward-facing nostalgia for pre-Christian Europe, in particular for the so-called ‘master morality’ typified by the barbarian-heroes of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. In truth, his position is much more interesting: while the Greeks provide the context in which Nietzsche must be understood (the Hyperboreans belong, after all, to the inventory of Greek legend), he sees himself as existing in some sense ‘beyond’ them; as attaining to something which they did not. Following Pindar, Nietzsche distinguishes the Greeks, with their peculiar sensitivity to suffering,

from the unreachable and 'joyful' Hyperboreans who 'live without fear of strict Nemesis'. In an aphorism from the second part of *Human, All Too Human*, published nine years before *Antichrist*, he writes:

'THE CHILD'S KINGDOM OF HEAVEN. – The happiness of a child is as much of a myth as the happiness of the Hyperboreans whom the Greeks fabled. The Greeks supposed that, if indeed happiness dwells anywhere on our earth, it must certainly dwell as far as possible from us, perhaps even over yonder at the edge of the world.' (*HH* III.265)

Pindar's account of the unattainable bliss of Hyperborea is a favourite passage of Nietzsche's, surfacing in three separate journal fragments from 1886–1888 before finally appearing in published form in *Antichrist*. It originates in the Tenth Pythian Ode, an epinicion² in honour of Hippocleas, a runner who won the diaulos (400m footrace) at the panhellenic Pythian Games in Delphi. The ode is as much an encomium to contest itself as it is to Hippocleas as an individual contestant – in winning Pythian laurels, Pindar tells us, Hippocleas has reached the uppermost limits of human achievement, beyond which lie only the Hyperboreans, beloved of Apollo, and the gods themselves. In the hour of his victory, the champion of the games brushes up against the indistinct shapes of gods and heroes in a brief flirtation with divinity. The ambiguous position of the victor is conveyed metaphorically in Pindar's poetics: we are told that Hyperborea cannot be reached 'by ship nor on foot' (*P.* 10.29), but the poet nevertheless proceeds to provide access into this obscured space, describing the secluded world of the ageless Hyperboreans, where 'all around swirl the dances of girls, the lyre's loud chords and the cries of flutes'. This brief excursion into what one commentator has called the 'uniquely Greek world of phantasmagoric irreality . . . this mythopoetic never-never land'³, ends abruptly as Pindar moves on to more prosaic matters: one feels that access to this exotic 'other world' can only ever be partial, and at that only temporary. It is in this place, both completely within and utterly beyond the Hellenic world, that Nietzsche situates himself.

Nietzsche's metaphorical withdrawal into the Hyperborean beatitude should be read as establishing an antagonistic distance from the Greeks: he does not approach them with reverent naivety as the model for a post-Christian future, but rather as a standard to be exceeded. Nietzsche, and the audience by which he wishes to be heard, aims not at the heights of Greek achievement, but beyond them to far-distant Hyperborean mountains. Indeed, as we shall see,

² A choral ode composed in honour of a victor at the games (or in war).

³ Hoffman, H., 'Rhyta and Kantharoi in Greek ritual'. *Greek Vases in the J. Paul Getty Museum* vol. 4, 131-66 (1989).

greatness in the Greek case consisted, for Nietzsche, in an ambitious hostility towards everything traditional and well-established:

‘However, the greater and more sublime a Greek is, the brighter the ambitious flame breaks out of him, consuming everyone who runs with him on the same path. Aristotle once made a list of such hostile contestants in the great styles: among them is the most striking example – that even a dead man can still incite a living one to burning jealousy.’ (‘Homer’s Contest’, p. 4)

In this thesis, I will test the hypothesis that the unifying element in those ‘sublime’ Greek individuals whom Nietzsche praises is not any shared bundle of philosophical or artistic doctrines, but rather their energetic commitment to *competition*. This commitment assumes many and varied forms: in Homer’s codification of ruthless struggle as the ethic of Hellenism, in Heraclitus’ transformation of athletic contest into the structuring principle of the universe, and in Socrates’ invention of dialectic, that ‘erotic competition’ (*erotischer Wettbewerb*) in which he alone was unsurpassed, to name a few. I will investigate whether Nietzsche’s philhellenism is best understood not in terms of a static set of values constituting an immortal ‘Greek culture’, of which he approved, but rather as a relish for the dynamism and *élan vital* of a Hellenic world defined by relentless processes of self-overcoming. I will argue that a key ingredient in the (for Nietzsche) peculiarly Greek conceptualisation of strife is the distinction, drawn most notably by Hesiod, between *productive strife* (the ‘good Eris’) and *destructive strife* (‘the bad Eris’). The former is characterised by the regulated contest of social and psychological forces, while the latter is defined by tyrannical moral and political arrangements and degenerate asceticism. If this interpretation is correct, it is unsurprising that Nietzsche should adopt an implicitly critical stance towards Greek antiquity: what better way to honour a culture characterised in its essence by competitiveness than to *compete* with it; to aspire to outdo it?

To support my principal claim – that Nietzsche’s reception of Greek antiquity should be understood in terms of strife (particularly its instantiation as contest) – I present five related studies of his reception of key personalities in the canon: Homer, Heraclitus, Socrates, Epicurus, and Thucydides. I have chosen these five not only because they are some of the individual Greeks about whom Nietzsche has the most to say, but also because together they fill out a general picture of the evaluative position of contest in the ancient Greek world, interrogating its role in ethics, metaphysics, dialectic, philosophical psychology, and politics. Nietzsche’s interpretations of the different functions of contest across these overlapping spheres of concern correspond, also, to different concepts and preoccupations in his philosophy more generally. In

this way, I use an analysis of Nietzsche's reception of particular Greek personalities as a heuristic tool for interpreting important aspects of his philosophy.

II. Chapter summaries

Chapter 1 – Homer and Competition

Nietzsche identifies Homer as the originator of the Hellenic national pedagogy according to which 'every talent must express itself in fighting'.⁴ In Chapter 1, I argue that Homer is the prism through which one can best understand Nietzsche's attitude towards the classics in general and his conception of the *agon* (the social institution of contest peculiar to the ancient Greeks) in particular. I show how the ethical structures implied by the Homeric corpus ground the particular vision of Hellenism which Nietzsche affirms, one characterised by a ceaseless striving for pre-eminence and the pursuit of *kleos*, or 'glory', understood as an inherently competitive good won at the expense of another. This conception of Hellenism as essentially *Homeric* remains uppermost in Nietzsche's thinking at least as late as *The Genealogy of Morals*, where he posits 'Homer *versus* Plato' as 'the complete, the genuine antagonism' (*GM* III.25).

Chapters 1 and 2 explain how Nietzsche regards *strife*, celebrated by Homer, deified by Hesiod in the shape of the two Eris-goddesses, and finally transformed into a universal law by Heraclitus, as the engine of cultural dynamics in the Greece of antiquity: out of the twilight which stretched from the fall of Troy to the dawn of the seventh century, the unbounded glory-hunting and competitiveness of the Iliadic heroes emerged, altered but intact, as a civic virtue regulated by the institutions of the *polis*. This 'good Eris' was the violent and oppositional energy of the competitive instinct rechannelled towards productive ends: namely, the ultimate refinement of sculptural forms and techniques inherited from Persia and Egypt, the invention of tragedy in its most potent iteration, the architectural marvels of the classical period, and even the practice of philosophy in its hitherto most sophisticated form. Nietzsche calls this veneration of strife-as-competition the 'contest-idea [*der Wettkampfgedanke*] of the Greek individual and the Greek state' (*PTG* 5).

It is intuitive to think of harmony, considered under its social aspect, as involving the reconciliation of apparently opposed forces and interests. We might think, for example, of the

⁴ 'Homer's Contest', p.5.

Chinese Communist Party's doctrine of 'Harmonious Society', whereby economic class antagonisms are defused – or, at least, assuaged – as a prophylaxis against civil unrest, or indeed Plato's 'city which would be established in accordance with nature' (Plat. *Rep.* 428e9). Greek society, however, at least in the period which most interests Nietzsche, was defined by an altogether different attitude towards harmony: for the Greeks, following Homer, only when all of the discrete elements which together comprise the *polis* are brought into fierce competition with each other, governed by rigid rules of engagement, is a productive social order achieved. The implied ethical code of the Homeric heroes is characterised by what are sometimes called 'competitive goods'.⁵ Given that *kleos* ('glory', the principal objective of the hero) is understood to exist relationally, that is, in proportion with the *kleos* of other heroes, the magnification of one individual's accomplishments and corresponding increase in his reputation cannot but be attended by the diminishing of another's. It is unsurprising, therefore, that athletic contests and feats of arms lie at the centre of the Homeric worldview. In Chapter 1, I claim that an emphasis on the importance of strife and the productive potential of the 'good Eris' defines the Homeric corpus for Nietzsche and comprises much of the 'gulf' which, in his view, separates modern Europe from Greek antiquity.⁶

The influence of the Homeric celebration of contest remained decisive well into the classical period and beyond – the Socrates of the *Republic* dubs Homer 'the best of poets and the first of tragedians', whom some admire as 'the educator of Greece' and upon whom some think the Greeks should 'model [their] whole lives' (Plat. *Rep.* 606e-607b). The development of the fully-fledged city-states of the 5th century BCE necessarily involved some transformation of the highly individualistic Homeric ethic: more sophisticated social mechanisms would evolve to channel the competitive instinct into productive ends and the single combat of Iliadic hero-warriors would become the highly orchestrated clash of serried ranks of citizen-hoplites. The wrestling contests, dramatic contests, architectural and sculptural contests, races, public debates, inter-party rivalries and almost incessant wars between cities collectively constitute the 'agonistic culture' of the Greeks, and are, for Nietzsche, the bedrock of their success. The unity of such a system depends, I claim, on a delicate balance of forces: should any one element become pre-eminent, the contest itself is dissolved and stagnation follows. Nietzsche is unabashed in expressing his admiration for this cultural trait, and evidently credits to it the flourishing of the Greek world after Homer.

⁵ Kahn, C., 'Pre-Platonic Ethics' in ed. Everson, S., *Ethics* (Companions to Ancient Thought, pp. 27-48), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 30

⁶ 'Homer's Contest', p. 4

By itself, of course, a capacity for violence is not a recipe for cultural flourishing. I will argue that Nietzsche regards strife between people as valuable in the Greek context only when it is superintended by regulating cultural institutions (the panhellenic games, the Dionysia, semi-ritualised hoplite warfare etc.) and involves a measure of balance between contestants: temporary victory in the games, for example, is of course possible, but there is never any danger of a ‘permanent’ victor whose very existence threatens the institution itself. We shall see that the same principle extends into the political sphere, where a certain kind of balance between competing powers is necessary to create the conditions for productive strife, the ‘good Eris’, to thrive.

By the conclusion of Chapter 1, I will have established what it is that Nietzsche referred to as the ‘contest-idea’ of the Greeks, elaborated on its origin in Homer, and established its importance to Nietzsche’s reception of Greek antiquity in its most general form.

Chapter 2 – Nietzsche’s Heraclitus: an ontology of strife

Chapter 2 will show that in Heraclitus, Nietzsche perceives the Greek contest-idea transformed into a system of metaphysics predicated on the ceaseless competition of opposing forces. I will argue, against some recent scholarship on the subject, that Nietzsche endorsed an interpretation of Heraclitus as committed to a ‘doctrine of radical flux’ and that such a doctrine had a substantial influence on major currents in Nietzsche’s own thought.

I will argue that, on Nietzsche’s interpretation, Heraclitus recognised that it is not unbridled conflict which we should regard as desirable or ‘just’, but rather conflict which is regulated by some superintending principle or ‘plan’ which, for Heraclitus, is the role of the ‘*logos*’. In this sense, Heraclitus takes the achievement of the *polis* (the redirection of the agonal impulse into productive ends) and presents it as characteristic of the whole natural order of the universe, where the opposition between forces is regulated by the *logos*. I also explore the idea that Heraclitus’ appeal to Nietzsche can be explained at least in substantial part by his *personality*, as opposed to merely the content of his philosophy. As an iconoclastic, self-isolating individual who ‘consulted himself’ and rejected the socially authoritative tradition of myth set down by Homer and Hesiod, I argue that Heraclitus was an exemplar of the kind of original and counter-cultural genius which Nietzsche thought represented the best of Greek antiquity.

Chapter 3 – Socrates, Tragedy, and *décadence*

In Chapter 3, I investigate the opposition established by the early Nietzsche between Socrates and the spirit of Attic tragedy, positioning Nietzsche's radical account of the experience of tragedy as an aestheticised form of the *agon*. Socrates was hostile to tragedy (and visited a destructive punishment upon it in the form of Euripides⁷, whose work Nietzsche despised) for this reason: it demanded that both Apolline and Dionysiac elements be given equal weight at the level of content and form. This unstable synthesis was intolerable to Nietzsche's Socrates, who wanted to effect an elision of 'rational', 'beautiful', and 'good', and therefore desired the supremacy of reason in all things, even art.

I make the case that Nietzsche's Socrates reinterpreted the *agon* in order to establish a new set of values and was, to this extent, a genius. I explain Nietzsche's hostility towards Socrates in two ways: first, that Socrates was a '*décadent*' insofar as he permitted his reason to tyrannise over the other drives; second, that much of Nietzsche's criticisms of Socrates reveal themselves, upon close examination, to be a covert kind of praise for a respected competitor and *rival*.

I argue that Nietzsche's critique of Socrates – particularly in 'The Problem of Socrates' – is grounded in his philosophical psychology, which presents the human soul as a complex of drives in constant competition with each other. More specifically, I show that Nietzsche regards Socrates as a '*décadent*' chiefly because his emphasis on the pre-eminence of reason was symptomatic of a constitutive inability to regulate the competition of his own drives. Nietzsche's appraisal of Socrates is not unambiguously negative, however: I contend that Socrates in many ways serves as a model for Nietzsche's 'sublime Greek individual', one who effects a radical transvaluation of values in his elevation of a particular kind of *agon*, dialectics, above all else. Against tradition, against poetry, against democracy, Socrates asserts his own system of values, one in which his own particular talents are valued more highly than any others. As we shall see, that Nietzsche brands Socrates as 'anti-Greek' does not, by itself, constitute a criticism: a certain 'anti-Greekness' in the form of a hostility to traditional sources of moral and intellectual authority is a feature shared by many of Nietzsche's favourite Greeks (and, of course, by Nietzsche himself). I suggest that the intensity of Nietzsche's antipathy for Socrates must be

⁷ In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche presents Euripides as inaugurating a new (and, he thinks, degenerate) phase in the development of Greek dramatic art which subverted the fundamental principles of Aeschylean tragedy along what Nietzsche took to be broadly Socratic lines. He perceives a greater concern with verisimilitude and naturalism in Euripides' plays and bemoans a corresponding deprecation in the Apolline and Dionysiac elements (both thematic, at the level of narrative content, and formal, at the level of the function of the chorus). There is a certain irony in Nietzsche's admonition of Euripides for driving Dionysus from the stage when, unlike Aeschylus and Sophocles, Euripides actually depicts Dionysus *on stage* in the *Bacchae*.

understood, at least in part, as animus felt for a respected opponent and *rival*. Recall Nietzsche's claim that 'the greater and more sublime a Greek is, the brighter the ambitious flame breaks out of him, consuming everyone who runs with him on the same path' ('Homer's Contest', p. 4) – in Chapter 3, I argue that Nietzsche is very much enflamed by Socrates, the authority against whom he must distinguish himself.

Chapter 4 – *The soul-soother of later antiquity: Nietzsche on Epicurus and Schopenhauer*

In this chapter, I investigate whether Nietzsche's otherwise rather puzzling admiration for Epicurus can be explained in terms of the role which contest plays in the latter's philosophical psychology. I begin by identifying a major interpretive problem presented by Nietzsche's adulatory attitude towards Epicurus in his middle period, to wit: I make the case that Epicurus' ethics is in several major respects identical to that of Schopenhauer. This is problematic for interpreters of Nietzsche insofar as Schopenhauer's ethics provides the main grounds for Nietzsche's emphatic rejection of him as a life-denying ascetic. How is it then, I ask, that the middle Nietzsche felt he was able to embrace Epicurus? I argue that the difference between Nietzsche's appraisals of Epicurus and Schopenhauer can be accounted for in terms of the difference in their respective responses to suffering in general and psychological *conflict* in particular.

Against Socrates, Epicurus adopted an instrumental conception of the value of truth-seeking: the object of philosophical enquiry on the Epicurean model is not the acquisition of truth for its own sake, but rather the elimination of irrational fears which stand between us and a positive affirmation of existence. I argue that Nietzsche's Epicurus need not carry on the quest for knowledge with the self-destructive determination of an Oedipus but may instead selectively apply philosophical argumentation as a tool in service of happiness. Epicurus may therefore engage in a critical project (the discernment by philosophical introspection of those desires which are superfluous to happiness) without coming into contact with the 'terrible truth' represented by the Wisdom of Silenus: 'The very best thing is utterly beyond your reach: not to have been born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*' (BT 3).

I conclude the chapter with the claim that the Epicurean model of *ataraxia* represents a balancing and rank-ordering of the drives which maps onto Nietzsche's dictum of '[giving] style to one's character' and constitutes a psychologised restatement of the *agon*: the 'commonwealth

of souls’ – given to anarchy in the case of Alcibiades, and to tyranny in Socrates – finds a form of conflictual harmony in Epicurus that Nietzsche is prepared to endorse as a ‘modest asceticism’ and possible remedy for human suffering.

Chapter 5 – *Courage in the face of reality*: Thucydides on Justice

The particular case of Thucydides, and specifically his account of justice conceived as emerging from conditions of strife, provides an important insight into the rather obscure domain of Nietzsche’s political philosophy, illuminating his concept of justice, his views concerning the origin of states, and his perspective on what might nowadays be called ‘international relations’.

In Chapter 5, I show that both in Nietzsche and Thucydides we find a concern with *balance of power* as a precondition of political rights, whether of individuals or of states. This balance of opposing forces is shown in the *History* to regulate the social relationships between cities in a number of different ways: most obviously, parties of approximately equal power (‘peer competitors’, in the language of modern international relations scholarship) have a disincentive to fight each other. Trouble arises when the balance between peer competitors is disrupted and the threat of a universal hegemon emerges (as in the case of imperial Athens – Thucydides tells us that the ‘real cause’ of the Peloponnesian War was ‘the growth in power of Athens, and the alarm this inspired in Lacedaemon’, Thuc. 1.23.6). By the same token, although perhaps unintuitively, weaker polities enjoy limited ‘rights’ insofar as they can make themselves useful to their would-be conquerors (consider the case of Mytilene, a Spartan-aligned polis which the Athenians eventually decided to spare from destruction – the winning argument in the assembly was that Mytilene would be more *useful* to Athens as a tributary client than as a pile of rubble⁸, Thuc. 3.44).

I argue that Nietzsche reads Thucydides as criticising the *hybris* of Athens and Sparta in their conduct during the course of the Peloponnesian War, in that each polity attempted to destroy the agonistic relationship which had long obtained between the *poleis*. The Athenians’ heavy-handed repression and fiscal subjugation of their allied cities in the Delian League prepared the ground for their own reckoning at the hands of the Spartans, culminating in the annihilation of

⁸ Diodotus, the orator who successfully persuades the Athenian citizens to spare Mytilene, puts it bluntly: ‘The question before us as sensible men is not their guilt, but our interests. Though I prove [the Mytileneans] ever so guilty, I shall not, therefore, advise their death, unless it be expedient . . . the question is not justice, but how to make Mytilene useful to Athens.’ (Thuc. 3.44)

their much-vaunted fleet and the utter ruin of their empire. The Spartans, in turn, after their triumph at Aegospotamoi ‘proved their dominance in an even more severe and cruel way’ and thereby ‘brought about their decline’ (‘Homer’s Contest’, p. 7). Nietzsche thought that the delicate web of agonistic relationships was unspun by the growth of Athenian imperial power and its counterpart in Spartan hegemony, culminating in bloodshed and catastrophe of the same order as that which gripped Corcyra⁹, only projected onto the whole of Greece. In the preceding chapters, I develop an interpretation of Nietzsche as perceiving a logic of competition operative at every level of Hellenic culture; in Chapter 5 I show that Nietzsche extended this logic into the sphere of political activity: he presents the balance-of-power politics of the Hellenic city-states as a catalyst to their cultural dynamism and mourns the collapse of that tense system into the pan-Hellenic hegemony precipitated by the Athenian Empire and finally actualised by the invincible Macedonian phalanx. Just as the castrative self-mastery of Socrates – with its pacification of the contest of drives – represents an acute *décadence*, Nietzsche thinks that the crowning of a final victor in the military-diplomatic contest of the Greek cities resulted in the stagnation of that culture. He writes:

‘Sparta and Athens surrender to Persia, as Themistocles and Alcibiades did;¹⁰ they betray the Hellenic once they have given up the contest, the noblest fundamental thought of the Hellenes: and Alexander, the roughened copy and abbreviation of Greek history, now invents the cosmopolitan Hellenes and so-called “Hellenism”.’ (‘Homer’s Contest’, p. 8)

Thucydides’ determination to expound this unsentimental conception of politics as exclusively a matter of the interchange of power, according to which moral considerations are at best otiose, is probably what Nietzsche has in mind when he praises Thucydides for his ‘courage in the face of reality’ (‘What I Owe the Ancients’, 2). Over the course of the chapter, I make the case for attributing to Nietzsche a view of Thucydides – centred on his implied conception of ‘justice’ – as at once quiet on meta-ethical questions and a stern ideological critic, concerned with stripping away layers of moralising and rhetorical distortion to expose an uncomfortable picture of human motivation. The states of Thucydides’ *History* are fascinating to Nietzsche insofar as they represent an externalisation of the fundamentally amoral human instincts: the model of justice

⁹ The city-state of Corcyra fell to an especially bloodthirsty civil conflict (or ‘stasis’) during the Peloponnesian War, in which the rival democratic and oligarchic factions (which supported Athens and Sparta, respectively) killed each other in great numbers. Thucydides’ famous excursus on the Corcyrean stasis (Thuc. 3.82-84) is frequently cited by Nietzsche.

¹⁰ Themistocles and Alcibiades were Athenian generals and statesmen who defected to the Persian Empire after political reversals at home. Themistocles fled to Asia Minor in 472/471 BCE after he was ostracised and implicated in the treason of Pausanias, a Spartan statesman who allegedly conspired with Xerxes I (Thuc 1.37). Alcibiades is particularly notable for defecting first to Sparta in 415 BCE, then to the Persians in 412 BCE, only to be recalled to Athens and restored to offices of distinction and leadership in 403 BCE before finally defecting to Persia a second time in 405 BCE.

which emerges from the dyadic interplay of disputants in the *History* is strictly prudential and fiercely pragmatic, emerging solely from the balance of opposed interests. I present the multivocality of the *History* as constituting a partial basis for Nietzsche's interesting identification of Thucydides with the sophist tradition and consider whether Thucydides' capacity to represent a range of conflicting views as equally compelling may have influenced Nietzsche's so-called 'perspectivism'. Finally, in a short coda I consider the extent to which Nietzsche's interpretation of Thucydides is credible.

III. Objectives

I argue that the character of competition in Nietzsche's thought – and its importance as a heuristic for enriching our understanding of his philosophy – can only be elucidated by a thoroughgoing investigation of his reception of Greek antiquity. The research I have undertaken for this thesis has been in the spirit of this bi-focal approach, combining original interpretations of Nietzsche's reception of the Greeks with recent scholarship on those ancient sources considered in their own right. Through this process, I have developed a new and subtle account of contest as it appears in Nietzsche, outlining its distinctive manifestations in his metaphysics, metaethics, philosophical psychology, and political philosophy. At the centre of this new interpretation is the notion that Nietzsche's conception of contest depends on a dynamic balance between contestants, such that none ever becomes a permanent victor. My aim here is two-fold: both to illuminate concepts in Nietzsche's philosophy by elaborating his (often ambiguous) relationships with key personalities in the canon of Greek philosophy and literature and, by this elaboration, to produce new and interesting readings of the Greek sources themselves. Nietzsche's original perspective on the ancient Greek world provides rich ferment for modern classical scholarship, inviting a return with fresh eyes to some of the most well-explored texts in the canon.

CHAPTER 1

HOMER AND COMPETITION

'The greatest fact in the cultivation of Greece remains that Homer became pan-Hellenic so early. All the spiritual and human freedom the Greeks attained to goes back to this fact. But it was also the actual fatality of Greek cultivation, for Homer by centralising made everything level and dissolved the more serious instincts for independence. From time to time a resistance to Homer arose from out of the deepest foundations of the Hellenic; but he was always victorious. All great spiritual forces exercise beside their liberating effect also a repressive one; but it makes a difference, to be sure, whether it is Homer or the Bible or science that tyrannises over mankind.'

- *Human, All Too Human* I.262

Nietzsche began his academic career with a lecture on the so-called 'Homeric Question' and its bearing on the purpose, reputation, and preoccupations of the discipline of philology. This inaugural address, entitled 'Homer and Classical Philology', established the centrality of Homer to Nietzsche's vision of Greek antiquity and its relationship with modernity, as well as formulating that vision as a maxim, inverting Seneca's complaint in his *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium*: 'Philosophia facta est quæ philologia fuit. [what was philology is now made into philosophy].' Through his consideration of the personality of Homer, Nietzsche signals his intention to regard the role of philology as essentially philosophical in character, that is, as dealing with 'great homogeneous views', before which 'everything individual and isolated is evaporated'.¹¹ For Nietzsche, therefore, study of Homer serves not merely to inform our reception of Greek culture as such, but also as a staging ground for critical analysis of contemporary European culture. His sense of philology as a prism through which to indirectly confront modern philosophical problems, and therefore to regard the putatively discrete disciplines of philology and philosophy as inextricably connected, was not to change.

The continuing relevance of Homer to Nietzsche's developing thought over the next two decades is affirmed again and again – as the archetypal Apolline dreamer in *The Birth of Tragedy* and as 'life's involuntary panegyrist' against the ascetic ideal in *The Genealogy of Morals*, to name but two notable examples. Nietzsche's Homer hovers in a position of chronological and

¹¹ Nietzsche, F.W., 'Homer and Classical Philology', trans. Kennedy, J.M., (Gutenberg, 2006) <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/18188/18188-h/18188-h.htm>.

conceptual ambiguity: he is the herald and moral legislator of that pre-Socratic Greek culture which Nietzsche most reveres, but also a vision into ‘*das vor-Homerische*’, the thrashing, illiterate barbarity of the age which preceded it. The set of values that Homer gave to the Greeks, crystallised in the persons of such mythical heroes as Achilles, Hector, and Odysseus, was defined by the celebration of a particular species of conflict, namely, *competition*. The ancient Greek valorisation of this competitive instinct, taught to them by Homer, formed the basis of their greatness, and conditioned the development of their intellectual culture throughout the period with which Nietzsche is principally concerned.¹²

I. On Homer’s Personality

The name ‘Homer’ has always abounded in mysteries. It is traditional to speak of a single author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* – as one might of Aeschylus as the author of *Persians* and the *Oresteia* – but we cannot be misled by convenience: scholarly discourse on the authorship of the Homeric epics has been convulsed by controversy since antiquity. Was there a genius, *Homeros*, from whose singular imagination the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* first sprung? Could it be, rather, that the distinctive style and thematic preoccupations of each poem demand separate attributions, which is to say, that we must imagine at least two ‘Homers’? Or, less romantic still, that the name ‘Homer’ is a mere by-word for the gradual accretion and creative labours of centuries of lay tradition? If there was such a man as Homer, when was he alive? Should we trust Herodotus and his claim that Homer lived ‘not more than four hundred years before [his] own time’ (c. 850 BCE), or pseudo-Herodotus, who writes that Homer was born 622 years before Xerxes crossed the Hellespont (1102 BCE)? Was he even literate? Is it the case that the repetitive formulae of the epics are suggestive of oral transmission, that ‘Homer makes us Hearers, and Virgil leaves us Readers’, as Pope claims? This species of problem, of which I have here provided only a few representative examples, is generally grouped under the helpful scholarly shorthand of ‘the Homeric Question’.

Friedrich August Wolf’s *Prolegomena ad Homerum* (1795) may be regarded as a significant point of transformation in the study of Homer. Applying recognisably modern methods of textual analysis, Wolf cast a critical eye over the Homeric epics with a view to answering the familiar

¹² Roughly, from the emergence of the *poleis* in the 9th century BCE to the eventual triumph of Socratic philosophy in the 4th century BCE and its political analogue – the victory of Alexander over all the Greek polities. The Homeric influence survived this convulsive transition, of course, but only, Nietzsche says, in a ‘rough, abbreviated form’ and manifested itself in the shape of such anti-Platonic philosophers as Epicurus and Diogenes of Sinope.

questions of authorship and transmission. His conclusions were rather pessimistic: the apparent unity of voice in the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* was a mere illusion, Wolf thought, the product of editorial work undertaken by various individuals over a period of centuries. Excluding basic copyists' errors would not, alone, produce a 'good' edition of the poems – at best, careful attention to the principles of emendation held to in the Alexandrian age might offer some partial insight into the texts as the Alexandrians found them, but we could hope for little more. After all, the first written version of the epics likely was not composed before the reign of Peisistratos (561-527 BCE), which predated even the *founding* of Alexandria by some two hundred years, and if it made sense to speak of a 'Homer' at all, he would have composed them earlier still, before the Greeks had yet learned to write. Wolf's historicism, and his commitment to an unromantic and materialist methodology, are symptomatic of what would become the distinctively 19th century 'positivism'.¹³ The discipline he formalised, classical philology, was to be the young Nietzsche's chosen field of study, and 'Homer and Classical Philology', Nietzsche's first lecture, is best understood as a response to Wolf's formulation of the Homeric Question.

Originally to be titled 'On Homer's Personality', the lecture treats the Homeric Question as representative of the state of philology in general, and therefore as a means to access certain constitutional questions peculiar to that discipline.¹⁴ Nietzsche's approach to the Homeric Question is arguably no less historicist than Wolf's, but he cleaves to a certain *kind* of historicising (which would become, in his later works, the vaunted 'genealogical method') which privileges, as one commentator has put it, 'the logic of human belief'.¹⁵ For Nietzsche, the 'Homeric Question' as traditionally conceived is unanswerable – at least to this extent he shares Wolf's scepticism – but this is not especially important: Nietzsche regards Homer as a 'personified concept' (*personifizierter Begriff*), that is, as a fictional person who serves as a kind of vessel for an idea. By this, he means that what we understand to be denoted by 'Homer' has, since antiquity, been an *aesthetic* rather than a scientific judgement. He argues that the Greek conception of Homer changed over time: once understood as a material figure, the 'father of heroic epic' alongside Hesiod, he was transformed in parallel with the development of the Greek sense for beauty into the aesthetic concept of the 'father of poetry in general'. This transformation was contemporary with the elimination of cyclical epics from Homer's catalogue

¹³ Josefowicz, D.G., 'The Whig Interpretation of Homer: F.A. Wolf's *Prolegomena ad Homerum* in England' in eds. Blair, A., Goering A.S., *For the Sake of Learning* (Boston: Brill, 2016), p. 822.

¹⁴ While far from 'settled', the Homeric Question does not now command the degree of interest and controversy among classicists it once did. At the time of Nietzsche's elevation at Basel, however, the subject was still a locus of lively scholarly dispute.

¹⁵ Porter, J.I., 'Nietzsche, Homer, and the Classical Tradition' in ed. Bishop, P., *Nietzsche and Antiquity*, (Camden House, 2004), p. 19.

of attributed works – which was once very swollen indeed – itself an ‘aesthetic judgement’ predicated on preserving the perceived unity of the author’s personality. The process, at any given point in history, of identifying the ‘true Homer’ is always, for Nietzsche, an aesthetic exercise which reveals more about the culture receiving Homer than it does the poet himself. ‘Let us imagine ourselves living in the time of Peisistratos,’ he declares, ‘the word “Homer” then comprehended an abundance of dissimilarities’ – the very act of committing the epics to writing was itself an act of interpretation, in which Homer the personality was defined by the negation of that which he was *not*.

The same is true, Nietzsche tells us, of the recent history of Homer scholarship, in which Wolf’s mechanistic methodology of textual analysis predominated. Two general approaches emerged: the first sought to substitute the notion of Homer as a singular genius with the Greek people *in general*, at the height of their youthful energy and creative power, where ‘Homer’ was not an historical individual so much as a symbol of the ‘poetising soul of a people’. Adherents to this view would labour to identify discrepancies and inconsistencies within the texts, that is, to expose the epics as patchwork weavings of a long tradition of popular poetry. The other approach, by contrast, ‘sheltered themselves beneath the authority of Aristotle’, insisting upon the unity and grandeur of the Homeric epics as the fruits of one mind, but no less eagerly hunting for those weaker verses which might suggest otherwise, rationalised as vulgar retouchings and interpolations over the course of the poems’ transmission. Both traditions were engaged, Nietzsche thinks, in the same activity: the creation of their particular vision of Homer through selectiveness and textual interpretation which could not fail, in the end, to amount in subjective aesthetic judgements. He writes, ‘The sum total of aesthetic singularity which every individual scholar perceived with his own artistic gifts, he now called Homer.’

It is clear Nietzsche thought that one’s evaluation of Homer, what one was prepared to call ‘Homer’ in the first place, reflected one’s attitude towards Greek antiquity in general. For Nietzsche, that the name ‘Homer’ should ‘comprehend an abundance of dissimilarities’ is not cause for despair, but is instead archetypally Greek. He was preoccupied at all stages of his productive life with demonstrating not merely the antagonism between the classical world and the modernity which would claim it, but also the antagonism immanent to the Ancient Greek world *itself*. This idea is captured in an entry from the 1868/9 notebook, in which Nietzsche writes: ‘As one goes about solving the Homeric Question, the tendency is to reject the tradition because the tradition is contradictory. But this contradictoriness is itself a problem that needs to be solved. A history of the tradition explains these contradictions’ (*BAW* 5, 224). The

contradictoriness of ancient characterisations of Homer, when treated philologically, maps the cultural development of Greek civilisation.

II. Competition and the ‘Heroic Code’

‘. . . always be first and best and superior to the others.’

- Peleus’ command to his son, Achilles (*Iliad* XI.784).

In *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche compares Homer’s influence with that of the Bible.¹⁶ One does not have to look far in order to find evidence for the claim that Homer lay at the centre of classical Greek (and, to an extent, Roman)¹⁷ culture: Xenophanes has it that ‘all at first have learnt according to Homer’ (Xenoph. fr. 10) and Herodotus records how it was Homer and Hesiod who jointly shaped the development of the Greek religion – they ‘taught the Greeks the descent of the gods, and gave the gods their names, and determined their spheres and functions, and described their outward forms’ (Hdt. II.53.2). Alexander the Great quite self-consciously took Achilles as a model of emulation, for which he was mocked by the Athenian Demosthenes.¹⁸ According to Plutarch, Alexander slept with Aristotle’s recension of the *Iliad* under his pillow.¹⁹

The Socrates of *Republic* dubs Homer ‘the best of poets and the first of tragedians’, whom some admire as ‘the educator of Greece’ and upon whom some think the Greeks should ‘model [their] whole lives’. This opinion is not, of course, shared by Socrates himself, who considers it prudent that only hymns to the gods and paeans to good men should have a place in the ideal society, while ‘sweet lyric’ and ‘epic muse’ are better off banished from the state unless a defence for them ‘on rational principles’ can be furnished (Plat. *Rep.* 606e-607b). This apparent hostility towards poetry *for its own sake* underlies Nietzsche’s characterisation of Plato as an ‘enemy of art’ in *The Genealogy of Morals*, and is visible in the Socratic ‘myth of the theoretical man’ which Nietzsche positions as antithetical to tragedy in *The Birth Of Tragedy*. It is telling that Plato should

¹⁶ While perhaps an unfair comparison in the sense that the Bible is considered to constitute a divine revelation, Homer was certainly regarded in antiquity as having at least a partially divine nature. Cf. e.g., Democr. D13, Ar., *Poet.* 1459a.

¹⁷ One of Julian the Apostate’s more cunning attempts to curtail the influence of Christianity on the late Roman Empire was to institute a general prohibition against Christian tutors teaching Homer and the classics to their charges. The idea being that even in the 4th century CE, Homer was regarded as so critical to a proper aristocratic education that the empire’s nobility would have little choice but to prefer pagan teachers over their Christian counterparts. See Ammianus Marcellinus’ *Res gestae*, 22.10.7.

¹⁸ Plut., *Dem.* 23.2.

¹⁹ Plut., *Alex.* 9.2, 26.1.

so conspicuously position Homer as his implied antagonist here – he evidently understood that, in order to establish Socrates as the new ideal to which his countrymen ought to aspire, he had first to persuade them to reject²⁰ the model of the Homeric hero. It was with this in mind that Hegel aptly described Homeric epic as ‘the element in which the Greek world lives as man lives in the air’.²¹

It is necessary to consider in greater detail what the ‘Heroic Code’ of Homer actually consisted of. Homer did not compose ethical treatises, nor can the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* be regarded as explicit statements of a particular, well-defined set of values. Insofar as these poems contain a moral ‘code’, therefore (as Nietzsche and those Greeks who looked to Homer as an authority believed they did), this must be determined by way of inference from the implied values of the Homeric heroes. The society we glimpse through Homer’s verse is a strictly aristocratic one, with the only visible class distinction being between the *aristoi* (‘the best’) – a caste of hereditary nobility who alone possessed political power and who held the greater part of material wealth – and the rest.²² These nobles, who are synonymous with the heroes that comprise the great majority of the characters of the *Iliad*, enjoy their privileged position by virtue of their martial prowess, as Sarpedon explains to Glaucus:

“ . . . *we* are the ones to head our Lycian front,
brace and fling ourselves in the blaze of war,
so a comrade strapped in combat gear may say,
Not without fame, the men who rule in Lycia,
these kings of ours who eat fat cuts of lamb
and drink sweet wine, the finest stock we have.
But they owe it all to their own fighting strength—
our great men of war, they lead our way in battle!”

- *Iliad* XII.315-20

The wealth and prestige afforded to heroes is here presented as a consequence of their skill-at-arms and their willingness to lead their countrymen on the battlefield, even at great personal risk.²³ It is natural, if not quite accurate, to perceive a prototypical *noblesse oblige* in the hero’s function as warlord; his privilege is at once a consequence of his strength and the source of an

²⁰ Or, at least, reinterpret, as we shall briefly consider in a later footnote.

²¹ *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte*, ed. Lasson, G. (Leipzig, 1923), 529.

²² Finley, M.I., *The World of Odysseus*, (New York Review Books, 2002), p. 52.

²³ A few lines later, Sarpedon notes that ‘the fates of death await us’ and that he and Glaucus have no choice but to ‘Give our enemy glory or win it for ourselves!’, *Iliad* XII.325-8.

obligation to use it in service of his community.²⁴ Hector is similarly depicted as a guardian of his family and his city, drawn by his obligations to them into conflict with the invading Danaans. However, it is essential to note that in the final analysis, Hector's personal honour takes precedence over his responsibilities even to his family. He is desperately implored, first by his wife Andromache, holding their infant son at *Il.* VI.406-46 and later by his parents, Priam and Hecuba, at XXII.33-92, to withdraw from the fighting and fulfil his duty to protect them. Poignantly, Hector is immune to their entreaties on the grounds that he must 'win [Priam] great glory' – as well as glory for himself – by fighting 'in the front ranks of the Trojan soldiers'. Hector is perfectly aware that without him to protect them, the infant Astyanax as well as Hector's own parents will be brutally slain, and his wife enslaved to some foreign master, but even this is preferable to enduring the shame of cowardice in the eyes of 'the men of Troy and the Trojan women trailing their long robes' (VI.440). *Kleos* (glory), attained through feats of arms, is the ultimate aim of the Iliadic hero, socially objectified in the esteem of his peers and quantified in the spoils of war he loots from his defeated enemies.

The acquisition of *kleos* is therefore undertaken even at the expense of other obligations, and a hero's personal sense of honour is at all times his most important consideration. This is evident in the case of Achilles' withdrawal from the war effort: the absence of Achilles and his Myrmidons spells disaster for the Achaeans who are driven to desperate straits by their resurgent Trojan enemies. Whatever Achilles' evident obligation, as a member of the expedition, to protect his fellow Greeks from the catastrophe precipitated by his withdrawal, he nonetheless considers the affront to his honour perpetrated by Agamemnon to be the greater motive to action (or inaction, in this case). It is only when confronted with the possibility of an even more terrible dishonour – to leave the killing of his comrade Patroclus unavenged – that Achilles re-joins the struggle. The interests of the wider community to which Achilles belongs are of secondary importance to him; his honour – the public perception of his pre-eminence – comes first. It is important to emphasise that the *time* (usually translated as 'honour', but more literally 'that which a hero is owed'²⁵) of the Homeric hero is a very public affair. Where *kleos* is the fame and renown a hero attains through his feats, *time* is the recognition he is paid by others, most often taking the form of treasure. Courage and valour in battle is only worthwhile insofar as it is

²⁴ This comparison is limited by the highly individual nature of the Homeric warrior-culture: an individual hero's responsibility is principally to *himself*, to his own honour and glory, even if this comes at the expense of his duties as protector. See, for example, Hector's decision to leave his family behind (to an ultimately gruesome fate) in order to face the dread Achilles in battle, despite Andromache's desperate entreaties.

²⁵ Crisp, R., 'Homeric Ethics' in ed. Crisp, R., *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2013).

recognised by others, and that such recognition acquires material form in the shape of treasure should not mislead us: Achilles is not aggrieved when Agamemnon appropriates Briseis because he fears losing access to her, but rather because the transfer of a concubine from Achilles to the Mycenaean king symbolises a transfer of honour in this public sense; Agamemnon's prestige is augmented and Achilles' is diminished. Similarly, the tripods, cauldrons, stallions, beautiful women, gold, silver and other valuable things Agamemnon has his embassy offer to Achilles in Book IX do not, as it were, stand for themselves. Like the commodities of Marx's analysis in the first volume of *Capital*, the treasures of the Iliadic heroes function as physical depositories of social value²⁶ and quantitative differences in material wealth are the mere phenomenal form of corresponding differences in prestige.

Given the social and relational character of honour as represented in the *Iliad*, it is natural that the fame and glory sought by its heroes should constitute what are often called 'competitive goods'.²⁷ When Hector calls upon Zeus to ensure the future prosperity of his son (that he might be 'strong and brave like [Hector], and rule all Troy in power'), he asks ultimately that others might praise Astyanax 'when he comes home from battle bearing the bloody gear of the mortal enemy he has killed in war' (*Il.* VI.475-480). Hector here presents the esteem of others as the highest good and identifies its representation in the physical form of conquered spoils, with the grisly detail of their bloodiness emphasised to underline that glory is always won at the expense of another. This is reflected in the *agon*, the contest-idea of Greek society more generally. In order for there to be winners, there must also be losers. If one hero's victory does not correspond with another hero's defeat, it is surely worthless.

An important social form which the *agon* assumes in Homer, aside from armed combat, is the athletic contest – a custom which would be taken up with great verve by the later archaic and classical Greeks. Lavish detail is afforded in *Il.* XXIII to the funeral games Achilles organises in honour of his dead companion, Patroclus. The heroes compete for prizes in a series of familiar Greek competitions: the chariot race, foot race, boxing, wrestling, and weight-throwing. The seriousness with which the competitors regard their place in these contests is indicative of the essential continuity, from a cultural point of view, of competition between heroes on the battlefield, and competition between athletes at the games. When Achilles proposes after the

²⁶ In the case of commodities, this social value is the socially necessary labour time expended in their production; in the case of wealth in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the relative esteem in which the owner of this wealth is held by his counterparts.

²⁷ Kahn, C., 'Pre-Platonic Ethics' in ed. Everson, S., *Ethics* (Companions to Ancient Thought, pp. 27-48), (Cambridge: University Press, 1998), p. 30.

chariot race that Eumelus, whose yoke broke and who was therefore forced to complete the course on foot, be awarded the second prize in recognition of his bad luck, Antilochus (who came second) is enraged and immediately announces his refusal to surrender the prize – a mare – and moreover challenges to single combat any who would try to take it from him. No one does so, but the atmosphere is similarly pregnant with the possibility of violence when Menelaus accuses Antilochus of cheating and demands he submit to arbitration and the swearing of oaths. The situation is resolved when Antilochus apologises and offers the mare to Menelaus in recompense – who promptly accepts and then returns the prize to Antilochus: this rapid changing of hands of the trophy is a purely social function; Menelaus desires the mare only because it is representative of his superiority in the contest. Once that superiority is recognised, the mare may then be freely dispensed with, as a gift (*Il.* XXIII.570-615).

In Book XXIV of the *Odyssey*, Agamemnon relates to Achilles (both now in Hades) how magnificent the funeral games thrown in his honour were, and how exquisite the prizes competed for. The failure of Ajax the Greater to win the armour of Achilles in a contest after the events of the *Iliad* precipitates the former's descent into murderous rage and, eventually, suicide in Sophocles' *Ajax*. Odysseus' return as rightful king of Ithaca in *Od.* XXI is announced by his victory in an archery contest, followed by a general slaughter of the devious suitors who had spent years devouring the ample stores of Odysseus' *oikos*, and therefore eroding, in real terms, the material substance of his prestige.

In his valuable contribution to the study of pre-Platonic ethics, Kahn distinguishes between the ethic implied by the Homeric code and the one supplied by Hesiod: the former is characterised by the 'unlimited self-assertion' of heroes in perpetual pursuit of ever-greater glory and self-aggrandisement, the latter by a consciousness of the limits of mortality and a belief in the disastrous consequences of overweening hubris. He feels Hesiod's influence in the Delphic injunctions 'nothing too much' and 'know thyself', warnings which pertain directly to the fear of divine jealousy, and which serve as functional constraints on heroic ambition. As we shall see later, from Nietzsche's point of view these two putatively distinct ethical influences are intertwined: the *agon* which Nietzsche praises as the special ingredient of Greek genius depends on ceaseless competition – it is undone by the ultimate triumph of any one individual. That the Greeks should therefore have developed a sense that no mere mortal should find himself without earthly rivals, and thus a rival only to the gods, is unsurprising.

Kahn also notes, correctly in my opinion, that Homer is essentially devoid of *pessimism*.²⁸ Life and its bodily pleasures are highly valued and the violence of war – despite its necessity as a condition of the acquisition of *kleos* – is not presented in uncritical terms. Harrowing vignettes describing the fate of individual heroes, fallen on the battlefield, lend the *Iliad* a certain poignancy, and the dreadful pleading of Andromache, Priam, and Hecuba discussed above provides insight into the horrific consequences of such conflicts for non-combatants. Recall also Achilles' remark at *Od.* II.486-90: “And do not make light of death, illustrious Odysseus,” he replied. “I would rather work the soil as a serf on hire to some landless impoverished peasant than be king of all these lifeless dead.” It is a (perhaps obvious) point worth making that the kind of courage admired in a Homeric hero depends in the first place on the existence of some real fear or sense of loss – the magnificence of Achilles' choice of a glorious death over a long and comfortable life only makes sense on the understanding that a good life, lived for its own sake, is a wonderful thing, and not given up lightly.

This is suggestive of why Nietzsche rejects Plato's characterisation of Homer as a 'tragedian', let alone the best of them: Homer is incapable of the kind of genuine life-affirmation offered by the Attic tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles because his implicit assessment of life in the first instance is positive. The 'tragic world-view' adumbrated in *The Birth of Tragedy* consists in a recognition of the impossibility of an un-mediated affirmation of life, captured by the Wisdom of Silenus at *BT* 3: “The very best thing is utterly beyond your reach; not to have been born, not to be, to be *nothing*.”²⁹ Homer's presentation of a heroic world in which life is inherently valuable represents, as far as Nietzsche is concerned, a naïve falsification: ‘to arrange, beautify, simplify – that is the continual task from Homer to the Sophists of the third and fourth centuries of our era...’ (*HH* II.221). In more prosaic terms, the exclusively verbal form of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* denies them access to the Dionysiac component deployed by the Attic tragedians; without the musical dithyrambs of the chorus, poetry cannot produce the properly tragic effect. Homeric epic is therefore archetypally Apolline in both form and content, its author a ‘hoary dreamer lost in his own inner world’ (*BT* 5).³⁰

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ A passage from Aristotle's fragmentary dialogue *Eudemus*.

³⁰ For a fuller account of the position of Apolline art in Nietzsche's aesthetics, as well as a summary of the distinctive elements of Attic tragedy as Nietzsche understood them, see Chapter 3: ‘Socrates, Tragedy, and Decadence’.

III. The Two Goddesses

In 1872, Nietzsche presented Cosima Wagner with five ‘prefaces’ to books which would never be written – a somewhat unconventional Christmas gift. The Wagners, it seems, were not especially impressed: Cosima recorded in her diary that she found Nietzsche’s writing to be patchy.³¹ Among these offerings was the essay ‘Homer’s Contest’, in which Nietzsche gives an account of the exemplary quality of early Greek civilisation, whose triumphs he attributes – at least in part – to their reverence of *Eris*, dread goddess of strife.

Eris, twin sister of ‘murderous Ares’, was associated with discord and struggle and fulfils a pivotal role in the Judgement of Paris, the events of which have a strong bearing on the narrative of the *Iliad*, but nonetheless lie outside its scope. Eris, like her brother, is patron to no particular city or people, but revels in conflict and bloodshed for its own sake. Surprisingly, however, her position in myth is nonetheless ambiguous: Hesiod’s *Works and Days* describes not one Eris-goddess, but two, with differing spheres of influence. The first of these is the goddess of senseless destruction and discord, who incites fruitless and bloody conflicts and whom men revere only ‘perforce, through the will of the deathless gods’. The second, or ‘good’, Eris, inspires a certain kind of *productive conflict*, that is, competition, in those whom she touches. This kind of strife, born of jealousy and the desire to surpass one’s peers, Hesiod tells us, is ‘healthy for men’ as it ‘stirs up even the shiftless to toil’ (*WD* 1-26). The good Eris is revered, rather than reviled, for the gift of strife, because the competitive instinct was understood not as an unpleasant state of deficiency, but as a necessary spur to activity that ultimately aids mankind. As Nietzsche writes, ‘The Greek is envious and conceives of this quality not as a blemish, but as the effect of a beneficent deity. What a gulf of ethical judgement lies between us and him?’³²

Nietzsche is unabashed in expressing his admiration for this cultural trait, and indeed credits to it the flourishing of the Greek world after Homer. That which appears to our sensibilities barbaric, jealous, petty, and vindictive about the Greeks is, Nietzsche thinks, inseparable from what made them great. It is wrong to imagine, therefore, that the history of that culture (or indeed, as he says, ‘man’ in general) is characterised by two conflicting tendencies, on the one hand the humaneness which distinguishes humans from beasts and which characterises the Greeks at their most artistically and intellectually brilliant, and on the other those base instincts to cruelty and dominion. Rather, the two should be taken as complimentary and indivisible: ‘abilities generally

³¹ Wagner, C., *Die Tagebücher*, eds. Gregor-Dellin, M., Mack, D. (München: Piper, 1976) Vol. I, p. 623.

³² ‘Homer’s Contest’, p. 3-4.

considered dreadful and inhuman are perhaps indeed the fertile soil, out of which alone can grow humanity in emotions, actions, and works.³³

The antagonisms (mentioned above) immanent to our vision of classical Greece are what Nietzsche has in mind here. He claims that the classicism of (his) modernity is unable to make sense of the brutality of its subject: ‘Why did the entire Greek world exult in the battle-images of the *Iliad*?’ he asks.³⁴ Is it civilised to make something beautiful out of battlefield slaughter, or to render aesthetically pleasing Achilles’ pile of corpses, with which he dams the river Xanthus? Nietzsche makes much of the ‘tiger-like pleasure in destruction’ which forms an indispensable part of the ancient Greek character, magnified in the heroic figure of Achilles (and his historical emulator, Alexander³⁵). The many cases of shocking cruelty which recur in the body of classical literature betray some clue to the ‘abysses of hatred’ which seethe beneath the ‘Greek serenity’ of popular imagination: from the horrific domestic fury of the Corcyrean revolution, in which countless citizens were butchered by their countrymen, to the custom that the conqueror of a city had the right to execute all of its male citizens and sell the women and children into slavery. Nietzsche maintains that, in the partial sanctioning of such things, we see a culture which recognised the necessity of a discharge of brutal instinct, and a revelling in destruction: ‘the tiger bounded forth, a voluptuous cruelty shone out of his fearful eye.’³⁶ The bad Eris is here at work, and Nietzsche is keen to emphasise that both the violent excesses of the Greeks *and* their much-vaunted cultural accomplishments originate in the same impulse. We are only able to make sense of Nietzsche’s point if we interpret the ‘two Eris-goddesses’ as in fact representing dual aspects of the same drive for conflict – as two different ways in which that drive actualises itself.

In *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche distinguishes two ‘modes of action’ which this singular instinct can produce: either a move to ‘raise oneself up’ (*erheben*) by proving the superior of one’s adversaries in contest (*Wettkampf*), or a move simply to ‘push the other down’ (*herabdrücken*). That the structure of Greek society served to channel the Eris instinct into productive ends, to push individuals towards that mode of action defined by *Wettkampf*, explains its (from Nietzsche’s perspective) unusually rich cultural output (*HH* III.29).

³³ ‘Homer’s Contest’, p. 1.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Arrian tells us that Alexander had, from his boyhood, an ‘ambition to rival [Achilles]’ and cut off his hair in honour of the dead Hephaestion in self-conscious imitation of Achilles’ symbolic hair-cutting at the funeral of Patroclus (*Arr. An.* 7.14). Plutarch records that Lysimachus, tutor to the young Alexander, was held in the esteem of the family in part because ‘he called himself Phoenix, Alexander Achilles, and Philip Peleus’ (*Plut. Alex.* 5). Plutarch also claims that Alexander slept with Aristotle’s recension of the *Iliad* under his pillow while on campaign, regarding it as a ‘viaticum of the military art’ (*Plut. Alex.* 8).

³⁶ ‘Homer’s Contest’, p. 1.

The genius of the Greeks, for Nietzsche, was in their recognition of the power of Eris and the measures they took to harness its destructive potential for productive ends. The same impulse which drove Alexander to bore holes in the feet of Batis, one of the defenders of Gaza, and drag his body around by chariot (in grotesque caricature of Achilles' treatment of Hector) produced the unparalleled achievements of the classical age: it governed the hearts of Aeschylus and Sophocles as they vied against their respective rivals time and time again at the Dionysia, obtaining (for Nietzsche, at least) the dizzy heights of art yet imagined, for the sake of a mere prize. He writes at *HH* III.170, 'the Greek tragedians, for instance, composed in order to conquer; their whole art cannot be imagined without rivalry – the good Hesiodian Eris, Ambition, gave wings to their genius.' The influence of the good Eris, here identified with ambition, is credited with the singular achievements of tragedy. The contest-idea which Homer taught the Greeks was, as far as Nietzsche is concerned, a pre-condition of the greatness attained by Attic tragedy. Consider, as another example of Eris at work in the domain of art, that it was the vulgar pride in victory of the Messenians and Naupaktians after their recapture of Sphacteria from the Spartans which made possible the *Nike* of Paionios, a monument to both the singular artistic accomplishments of the Greeks, and to their incorrigible pettiness, enshrined at Olympia.³⁷

It is important that we do not take Nietzsche as endorsing a barbaric doctrine of unrestrained civil strife: Nietzsche is careful to insist that an untrammelled impulse to conflict, with destruction as its only object, is rightly to be reviled. The specialness of the Greeks is not in their savagery, which is at any rate pretty common in the course of human history in general, but in their unprecedented reconciliation with, and transformation of, that savagery. Insofar as he regards modern scholarship as having lost sight of the centrality of Eris, Nietzsche believes that we are unable to understand the Greeks 'in Greek fashion'.

He notes, moreover, that the strife of competition was not the preserve of mortals; consider the struggle of Thamyris and the Muses³⁸, the gruesome contest of Apollo and Marsyas³⁹, and the

³⁷ The sculpture depicts *Nike*, goddess of victory, swooping down from an elevated position. Originally, the monument was arranged such that Nike was descending in the direction of a golden aspis, which had been dedicated to the temple by the Spartans during the waxing of their power, after they triumphed against the Athenians at Tanagra in 457BC. This arrangement clearly underlined the decline of Spartan power at the time of the *Nike's* dedication.

³⁸ The Muses stole Thamyris' voice when he boasted that he could defeat them in a singing contest. See Pausanias 4.33.7.

³⁹ The satyr Marsyas boasted he could defeat Apollo in a musical contest—after the god bested him, Apollo flayed the impudent challenger alive. See Pausanias 10.30.9.

bitter fate of Niobe.⁴⁰⁴¹ The Greeks felt themselves to be under the envious eyes of the gods, who would enact fearsome punishment on those whose *hybris* brought them into open contest with their immortal betters. The strife between living persons could never be allowed to come to an end, no one individual could be elevated as uniquely excellent and without rivals, for they would soon find themselves new ones: the gods. This principle, iterated upon time and time again in the body of Greek myth, holds true of the flourishing of the state: if a final victor in contest were settled upon, the good Eris would cease in her work and would no longer inspire individuals to surpassing acts of courage, works of beauty, and so on. It is with this in mind, we must imagine, that Heraclitus remarked bitterly of the Ephesians' decision to ostracise Hermodorus that, 'Among us nobody shall be the best; if however someone is the best, let him be so elsewhere and among others' (B121). Nietzsche regarded the total victory of Macedon over the rest of Greece as constituting just such a catastrophic disruption of the agonistic order: the Hellenistic age emerged into the vacuum left by the death of the Hellenic, and its crown was Alexander, a caricatured Achilles.

For Nietzsche, competitiveness infused every aspect of Greek culture, from the individual, to the artistic, to the military and political, and, naturally, to the intellectual. Nietzsche suggests that we cannot make sense of the Colophonian Xenophanes' remarks on Homer, deriding his depiction of the gods as thieving, adulterous liars (fr. 11), except in these terms: 'We do not understand this attack . . . if we do not imagine, as later on also with Plato, the root of this attack to be the ardent desire to step into the place of the overthrown poet and to inherit his fame.'⁴² One can only come into the fulness of one's own powers, under this view, by setting oneself against whatever (or whoever) already predominates. A certain iconoclasm is therefore inextricable from the Greek genius, as it must continually reinvent itself through competition with *itself*—the new poet cannot be a mere student of the old, the new philosopher must make an enemy of his teacher, and so on.

For Nietzsche, Homer is the paradigm example of precisely such re-invention: in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, we can detect an inheritance of formulae and laws of composition which the author(s) turned to new purposes, defining a fresh set of conventions which would similarly be conquered and reinvented by succeeding generations. This process, by which the poet would

⁴⁰ Niobe bragged about her fertility, comparing herself favourably to Leto, Zeus' lover and mother to Apollo and Artemis. Consequently, Apollo and Artemis murdered all of Niobe's children before Zeus turned the poor woman into a marble statue. See Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 6.165ff and 6.305ff.

⁴¹ 'Homer's Contest', p.4.

master and then innovate upon the stylistic constraints established by his predecessors, Nietzsche refers to as ‘dancing in chains’, the willing self-imposition of artistic constraints with a view to eventually surpassing them (*HH* II.140). Nietzsche identifies Homer as the first ‘pan-Hellenic Greek’ because his influence was so total and, despite attempts to oust him, he remained the authoritative source of cultural knowledge in Greece for the whole span of what Nietzsche regards as its greatest age. The Hellenic, for Nietzsche, is inextricable from the name ‘Homer’ for precisely this reason, and it was not a poet that would supplant him in the end, but a philosopher: Nietzsche characterises what he perceives to be Plato’s antipathy towards Homer in much the same way as he does Xenophanes’, that is, as the enmity of a rival. The majesty of Plato’s achievements in *Symposium*, *Gorgias*, *Protagoras*, and other works is, Nietzsche thinks, the dethroning of Homer, at once a demonstration of Plato’s own superior talents⁴³ and the inauguration of a radically new phase in the history of Greek culture. Nietzsche claims that this opposition, between Plato (‘the greatest enemy of art which Europe has produced up to the present’) and Homer (‘life’s involuntary panegyrist’) is ‘the true, the complete antagonism’ (*GM* III.25).⁴⁴

⁴³ At least from Plato’s own perspective. Nietzsche takes the rather contrarian view that Plato’s work represents only a very limited artistic achievement: ‘I am a total sceptic when it comes to Plato and I have never been able to join in the conventional scholarly admiration of the *artist* Plato . . . It seems to me that Plato mixes up all the forms of style, which makes him a *first-rate* decadent of style . . . Plato is boring.’ (*TI*, ‘What I Owe the Ancients’ 2).

⁴⁴ Nietzsche’s characterisation of Plato as seeking to supplant Homer with a new ideal (i.e. Socrates) is not without basis, although he does not do us the favour of pointing to which specific elements of the frequent discussions of Homer in Plato’s dialogues informed it. We can find our own way, however: For example, at least one commentator has noted the strangeness of Socrates’ apparent misquotation of Homer at *Apology* 28d2 – Angela Hobbs has pointed out that Plato has Socrates render Achilles’ remark at *Il.* XVIII.114 as ‘May I die straightway, once I have inflicted punishment on the wrongdoer’, whereas in the Homeric original this line appears simply as Achilles’ statement of his intention to return to battle ‘. . . to overtake that killer of a dear life’. Hobbs claims that this is problematic in two senses: first, in that it is unclear that Achilles regards his act of vengeance against Hector as a dispensation of ‘justice’ (*dike*), and second, that for Socrates to present Achilles’ actions in this way would seem to be inconsistent with his teaching elsewhere, which unambiguously rejects the *lex talionis*. See Hobbs, A., *Plato and the Hero: Courage, Manliness and the Impersonal Good*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 183.

More generally, Socrates’ comparison of himself with Achilles seems puzzling in view of the distinction between their respective assessments of the value of life for its own sake: in his more Pythagorean aspect in the pre-middle dialogues, Socrates demonstrates an evident indifference towards the prospect of bodily death, cf. e.g. *Phaedo* 67e ‘the true philosophers practice dying, and death is less terrible to them than to any other men.’ Achilles, by contrast, and as we have noted above, regards bodily life as intrinsically valuable and his decision to give it up is therefore an immense sacrifice. It seems to me that these curious appropriations of Homer by Plato/Socrates represent evidence of a tendency observed by Nietzsche and considered elsewhere in this thesis – in Chapter 3 – namely, that Socrates was in the business of radically reinterpreting, and therefore making his own, the central institutions of Athenian culture. In order for us to make sense of Socrates’ invocation of Achilles, it is necessary for us to return to the *Iliad* and perceive in its central personality not a pre-philosophical barbarian, but instead an anticipation of Socrates himself! The retroactive projection of Socratic values onto the socially authoritative Homeric epics is, I think, an exercise in will to power of the kind described by Nehamas in ‘A Reason for Socrates’ Face: Nietzsche on “The Problem of Socrates”’ in Nehamas, A., *The Art of Living* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

We are able to perceive the Greece which existed before the *agon*, the pre-Homeric ‘womb of Hellenism’, only, as it were, through a glass, darkly. Homer is our bridge between the familiar and the alien, between the Hellenic and the age which preceded it: in his poetry we are presented with a vision of that age as it is filtered through the artistic gauze, ‘its colours appear lighter, milder, warmer . . . its people better and more likeable’. But if we try to imagine such a world as it was in itself, in terms of the material intercourse of real people, can we fail to envision anything but horror? Nietzsche invites us to wonder what form of life could have necessitated the dreadful theogonic myths, of incest and patricide, of mutilation and cannibalism, of ‘a life in which alone the children of *Night* rule.’ While the cults of Orpheus and Musaeus recognised the dominion of strife in human affairs, Nietzsche claims, they turned instead to a ‘disgust at existence’, according to which life is understood as punishment and atonement (‘Homer’s Contest’, p. 2). There is nothing distinctively Greek in these pessimistic observations, save that the Greeks eventually produced another answer to the problem life presents, one that was very different to that of the Orphics: a contest-idea by means of which a life defined by fighting could still be affirmed. This answer is exemplified in, and taught by, Homer.

In the next chapter, we shall see that one of Nietzsche’s favourite Greek philosophers took up the Homeric ethic of contest and (while vociferously rejecting Homer as an authority) elevated it to the status of a metaphysical principle. The image of Heraclitus, dark and brooding, looms large in the early Nietzsche’s imagination, as does his fiery ontology of a universe consumed in the relentless, but structured, conflict between opposing forces.

CHAPTER 2

HERACLITUS AND THE METAPHYSICS OF CONFLICT

‘Everything that happens, happens in accordance with strife, and it is just in this strife that eternal justice is revealed. It is a wonderful idea, welling up from the purest springs of Hellenism, the idea that strife embodies the everlasting sovereignty of strict justice, bound to everlasting laws. Only a Greek was capable of finding such an idea to be a fundament of a cosmology; it is Hesiod’s good Eris transformed into the cosmic principle; it is the contest-idea of the Greek state, taken from the gymnasium and the palaestra, from the artist’s agon, from the contest between political parties and between cities – all transformed into a universal application so that now the wheels of the cosmos turn on it.’

- *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, 5

The essence of Heraclitus’ metaphysics is conflict. To this extent, his philosophy represents for Nietzsche an extension of the ‘contest-idea’ (*der Wettkampfgedanke*) of the Greek state, following Homer, into the realm of cosmology. In this chapter, I will argue that Heraclitus’ paradoxical identification of justice (*dike*) and harmony (*harmonie*) with conflict (*eris*) cements his place in Nietzsche’s reception of ‘those exceptional Greeks who invented science’ (*HH II.215*). I will present the case for what I think is the most plausible reading of Nietzsche’s interpretation of Heraclitus, namely, one that sees Heraclitus committed to a so-called ‘Doctrine of Radical Flux’. In so doing, I will critically engage with a recent and influential survey by Jessica Berry as well as some mainstream ‘moderate’ interpretations of Heraclitean flux. Finally, I will show that Nietzsche regarded Heraclitus’ *personality* as a pure expression of the kind of self-directed intellectual agonism that characterises what he understood to be the unique genius of the Greeks.

I. Fire and Contest

In the bitter throes of grief over the death of his comrade Patroclus, Achilles broods on the unpleasant character of a life defined by conflict: ‘I wish’, he says to his mother, ‘that strife would vanish away from gods and mortals.’ (*Il.* XVIII.107). For Heraclitus ‘the Obscure’⁴⁵ of Ephesus, this is a foolhardy wish indeed – tantamount to willing the negation of the universe itself. As the Alexandrine Scholia A to this verse notes:

[Heraclitus, who believes that the nature of things was constructed according to conflict (*eris*), finds fault with Homer (for this verse), on the grounds that he is praying for the destruction of the cosmos.]⁴⁶

In characteristically iconoclastic style, Heraclitus therefore corrects the poet: ‘One must realise that war is shared and Conflict is Justice, and that all things come to pass in accordance with conflict’ (B80). On the face of it, this is a bizarre claim: it is natural to associate a harmonious order – of society, or perhaps even of the cosmos – with peace. On such a view, strife arises as the symptom of a *dysfunction*, that is, of elements that should be working in tandem instead finding themselves at odds.

Heraclitus, however, reverses this formula: he claims that war (*polemos*) is ‘shared’ or ‘common to all’ (*xynos*⁴⁷) not merely in the manner of Hector when he remarks to Polydamas that ‘Alike to all (*xynos*) is the god of war, and lo, he slayeth him that would slay’ (*Il.* XVIII.309), but in a much more general sense: war is the universal condition, for which the vicissitudinous fortunes of opposing armies on the battlefield represent a striking microcosm in human terms. Heraclitus does not stop at this observation, of course: not only does he consider war to be the universal condition, but he judges that it is a just condition – indeed, he judges that Conflict (*eris*) is Justice (*dike*). Kahn notes that this claim appears ‘at first sight utterly perverse’ and at complete odds with the tradition of Hesiod and Solon, for whom ‘notions of conflict and violence are systematically opposed to those of law and justice.’⁴⁸

The statement that ‘all things come to pass in accordance with conflict’ echoes the proem (‘all things come to pass in accordance with the *logos*’) and signals that Heraclitus elevates *dike* beyond

⁴⁵ In describing Heraclitus’ deliberate use of obscure language, Cicero quotes the following (possibly from Lucilius): ‘cognomento qui σκοτεινός perhibetur, quia de natura nimis obscure memoravit’ (‘The surname of the Obscure who bore, So dark his philosophic lore;’). See *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum*, II.15.

⁴⁶ Kahn, C., *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 204.

⁴⁷ ξυνός (Ionic), cf. κοινός (Attic).

⁴⁸ Kahn, C., *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus*, p. 206.

its familiar associations with just requital and identifies it with the cosmic ordering principle (*logos*). In this expanded sense of ‘justice’, we can see how – although he folds it into the notion of conflict – Heraclitus need not reject the conventional, narrow definition: understood at the level of human affairs, justice may still be regarded as the equitable balance of crime and punishment, but on a universal level Heraclitus perceives this balance as of a kind with all other cyclical exchanges, superintended by the *logos*.

For Nietzsche, Heraclitus’ identification of *dikeē* with *eris* (a correction and resolution to Anaximander’s ‘problem of becoming’, where the injustice of things coming into being is recompensed by their passing away again) is the precondition of his most astounding negation: the denial of being. Nietzsche writes, ‘He no longer distinguished a physical world from a metaphysical one, a realm of definite qualities from an undefinable “indefinite”’ (PTG, 5). Rather than conceiving of the emergence of things with definite qualities as some sort of defect which is balanced out by their eventual annihilation and return to unity, Nietzsche’s Heraclitus holds that this unity itself *just is* the process of coming into being and passing away. The picture of pre-Socratic philosophy which Nietzsche paints for us in *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks* is one of a series of variations and developments on the central insight that ‘all things are one’. He therefore understands Heraclitus’ innovation in declaring that ‘the cosmos, the same for all . . . [is] an ever-living fire, kindled in measures and in measures going out’ (B37) as not only refining (and refuting) Anaximander’s cosmology, but also inverting Thales’ claim – which Nietzsche thinks is the ‘embryonic form’ of the theory of metaphysical unity – that ‘all is water’.

The fiery universe of Heraclitus’ imagination is characterised by two opposed and cyclical processes: that of kindling and that of going out, or put differently, of coming into being and of passing away. By selecting fire as the primal element, Heraclitus repudiates the conventional identification of some ultimate substratum that belies the continual transformations experienced in the perceptible world. When faced with the inherited dichotomy between the world as it is perceived, characterised by flux and transformation, and the world as it is in itself, characterised by stasis, Nietzsche’s Heraclitus emphatically rejects the latter as illusory rather than the former:

‘I see nothing other than becoming. Be not deceived. It is the fault of your myopia, not of the nature of things, if you believe you see land somewhere in the ocean of coming-to-be and passing away.’ (PTG 5)

As far as Nietzsche is concerned, then, Heraclitus develops a metaphysics according to which the universe is not an object, but rather a process – inherently protean and characterised by transient phenomena. This process is itself oppositional, formed as it is by the continual struggle between

opposed forces and properties. Destruction is a close companion to both fire and war, and it is therefore no surprise that Nietzsche characterises the Heraclitean perspective in violent terms: the insight that all the world is nothing more than a process of coming into existence and dying away is ‘terrible’ and ‘paralysing’, and its impact on the one who learns of it is akin to that of an earthquake (*PTG* 5).

Fire is inherently ambiguous in evaluative terms, however, being at once a tool of destruction and the spark of civilisation: the conflagration which devours an entire city is of a kind with the gentle hearth-fire which warms a home, or the heat of the oven which bakes nourishing bread. Our assessment of the value of a fire will always depend on the ends towards which it is diverted and it is, in this sense, a very useful symbolic representation of conflict in general: violent, dangerous, transformative, given to limitless consumption, but with the potential to produce marvellous and desirable effects. The ‘two Eris-goddesses’ – the two aspects of strife – of Hesiod, discussed at length in Chapter 1, are at work here: just as the destructive principle of fire may be corralled into forms that are useful or even beautiful (as in glasswork or fired clay, for instance), so too can the inherently hostile and oppositional principle of human competitiveness be channelled away from unrestrained barbarism and into the remarkable cultural achievements of the Greek *polis*. In Heraclitus, the sameness of opposing properties is emphasised equally with their difference (‘It is wise, listening not to me but to the report (*logos*), to agree that all things are one’, B50). The universal picture found in the surviving fragments is not, therefore, a chaotic mess of antagonistic powers – rather, the complex of opposing properties, superintended by the regulating principle of the *logos*, actually constitutes a harmonious order.

As we shall see in Chapter 5, Nietzsche extends this same paradoxical vision of conflict-as-harmony to his account of the political constitution of the *polis*: I will argue that he regards the political community in the first instance not as a rejection of the essential hostility between individual interests, but in fact as its sublimation into a new and more potent form. Nietzsche reads this notion of conflict as a political ideal – the *agon*, or contest, as a model for the behaviour of individuals, parties, classes, and states – back into Heraclitus: for Nietzsche, Heraclitus’ account of the universe as an arena of powers whose endless contest is governed by the *logos* is a ‘wonderful idea, welling up from the purest springs of Hellenism’ in its transformation of the ‘contest-idea of the Greek individual and the Greek state’ into a cosmic principle (*PTG* 5).

The form that the coming-to-be of Heraclitus’ cosmology assumes is that of a ‘unity of opposites’:

‘Graspings: wholes and not wholes, convergent divergent, consonant dissonant, from all things one and from one thing all.’ (B10)

In Heraclitus, the very opposition between ‘sameness’ and ‘difference’ is itself reconciled into a unity: only through understanding the constant opposition between properties of the world can we come to understand their harmony. This notion, that the stability of things depends on a certain kind of instability, is exposed analogically in B125. Just as *kykeōn* (an ancient Greek drink made of a mixture of wine, barley, and cheese) must be stirred continually or else it separates, the opposition or ‘strife’ between different properties must be constant if the world is to continue to exist. Heraclitus, bemoaning the general ignorance of this principle, makes the same claim in different words in B51:

‘They do not comprehend how a thing agrees at variance with itself; it is an attunement turning back on itself, like that of the bow and the lyre.’

That opposing physical forces struggle against one another in the case of a drawn bowstring does not speak to some fault of the weapon; the tension between these opposites is what defines a bow in the first place. So too with the plucked string of a lyre, which can realise its purpose only through a similar traction. Heraclitus’ use of these two examples – both involving instruments conventionally associated with Apollo – is unlikely to have been accidental.⁴⁹ Apollo, whose sphere traditionally includes harmony and moderation (among many other things) is implicitly invoked, perhaps, in order to emphasise that these virtues depend on the interplay of oppositional forces. Indeed, Apollo is brother to the raucous Dionysus, whose revels often involve ritual madness, the violation of boundaries, and perhaps even cannibalism.⁵⁰ That the two deities should be so closely associated despite the stark contrast between their respective domains (Apollo a god of reason, moderation, and civilisation; Dionysus of transgression, madness, and excess) and that they should be given joint authority over music serves as an example of the oppositional unity which Heraclitus espouses as a universal law.

The brief profiles of the pre-Socratic philosophers presented in the unfinished *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks* are not intended to be comprehensive expositions of the doctrines of those philosophers but rather, as Nietzsche tells us in the preface, ‘slices of personality’. These ‘slices’ are important to Nietzsche not because he necessarily agrees with the philosophical points at stake, but rather because he wishes to create a sense of great individual personalities whose

⁴⁹ As Pearson notes in ‘Unity in Strife: Nietzsche, Heraclitus and Schopenhauer’ in eds. Siemens, H., Pearson, J., *Conflict and Contest in Nietzsche’s Philosophy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), p. 48.

⁵⁰ Luz, M., ‘Dionysus: Myth and Ritual in Sources from the Archaic Period’, University of Haifa, Museum Hecht, 1998.

work is always a window into their character. The object of the work, as Nietzsche clearly states from the off, is to ‘love and honour’ something that no refutation nor ‘subsequent enlightenment’ can diminish, namely: ‘great human beings’ (*PTG*, Preface). Heraclitus is therefore presented as a node in what Jessica Berry has called a ‘narrative arc, the aesthetic unity of which [Nietzsche] took to be the great achievement of Hellenic culture and which has as much to do with the characters of those [Greek philosophical] thinkers as with their doctrines.’⁵¹ Through an examination of a few of these ‘great human beings’, Nietzsche believed he could distil something of the essence of the ‘polyphony of Greek nature’, that elusive element that marks the Greeks out for his special admiration. In the case of Heraclitus, he is keen to emphasise the radical, melodramatic quality of the cosmological system the fragments imply – a function of the revolutionary vigour of their author.

II. Concerning Nietzsche’s Interpretation of Heraclitus

One major current in Nietzsche scholarship ascribes to him an ontological position inspired by Heraclitus that consists, stated succinctly, in a denial of ‘being’, that is, in the rejection of a concept of reality as the ‘thing-in-itself’ which underlies the manifold fields of our experience.⁵² According to the traditional view, Nietzsche rejects this conception of being, which he associates archetypally with Plato, in favour of a view of the universe as undergoing a ceaseless process of transformation and ‘becoming’, within which it is impossible to identify constancy or persistence.

In a recent essay on Nietzsche’s reception of Greek philosophy, Jessica Berry has challenged this interpretive trend for several different – but related – reasons. Berry claims that Nietzsche’s admiration for Heraclitus is to be explained in terms of his interest in ‘great human beings’, in philosophers whose personalities and approaches to the problems of philosophy provide rich insights into the culture from which they emerged. As far as Berry is concerned, the best inference that may be drawn from Nietzsche’s most extensive treatments of Heraclitus (she mentions *Philosophy in the Tragic Age* specifically) is an interpretation of the fragments which is much more moderate than Nietzsche’s bombast elsewhere might suggest: insofar as Nietzsche recognises a flux doctrine in Heraclitus, it is in the narrow sense that something like enduring

⁵¹ Berry, J. N., ‘Nietzsche and the Greeks’ in eds. Richardson, J. and Gemes, K., *The Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 93.

⁵² Consider, for example: Heidegger, M., *Nietzsche* trans. Krell, D.F. (New York: Harper and Row, 1979); Nehamas, A. *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2002); and Danto, A.C., *Nietzsche as Philosopher* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

Platonic Forms are impossible, and that the measure by which the transformation of things is regulated is itself the condition of an 'orderly cosmos'.⁵³ Moreover, Berry argues that the attribution of a radical flux doctrine to Heraclitus is itself controversial – dependent on scant textual support and inconsistent with his repeated emphasis on the *logos* as a universal principle.

Berry has hit upon an important characteristic of Nietzsche's interest in Heraclitus – one that I believe extends consistently to his interest in the other philosophers considered in this thesis – and defies the conventional reading advanced by some of Nietzsche's most celebrated interpreters. However, I also wish to defend the view that in some important respects the *content* of Heraclitus' philosophy was at least as important to Nietzsche as its form (and perhaps that these two are not easily disentangled). Berry's reading rather neglects this aspect of Nietzsche's reception of Heraclitus, in part – it seems to me – out of a spirit of interpretive charity (Berry does not wish to associate Nietzsche with a dubious and unfashionable metaphysical doctrine). To this end, I will endeavour to show both that there is good reason to suppose that Nietzsche read Heraclitus as committed to a 'radical flux doctrine' and that this reading is quite defensible on its own terms.

Heidegger writes that, for Nietzsche, 'All Being is a Becoming'.⁵⁴ The traditionally Heraclitean contours of this position are easily traced, and Nietzsche himself repeatedly connects the idea with Heraclitus. In *Twilight of the Idols*, in a section entitled "'Reason" in Philosophy', he writes:

'Heraclitus will remain eternally right with his assertion that being is an empty fiction. The "apparent" world is the only one: the "true" world is merely *added by a lie*.' (TI, "'Reason" in Philosophy' 2)

The later Nietzsche evidently regarded Heraclitus as a fellow traveller in the denial of a metaphysical 'true world' beyond apparent change and multiplicity. Whereas those pre-Socratics whom Nietzsche considered lesser thinkers had questioned the value of the senses because they seem to suggest the ephemeral character of the physical world, Heraclitus had done so for precisely the opposite reasons: they erroneously give the impression of persistence where there is none.

Nietzsche makes a critical extension of this observation which Nehamas takes up as the cornerstone of his 'aesthetic' reading, namely, that:

⁵³ Berry, 'Nietzsche and the Greeks', p. 98.

⁵⁴ Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, trans. Krell, D.F. (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), I.7, p. 234.

‘There is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming; ‘the doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed – the deed is everything.’ (GM I.13)

Nietzsche regarded individuals as merely the sum of their actions – the conventional identification of the human person with an immortal soul or essence is an error produced by post-Socratic mystification. On Nehamas’ reading, the reduction of individual egos to the sum total of their effects enables Nietzsche to approach the evaluation of human beings in a *literary* rather than a moral mode. If a person is not so much an agent, or a rational will capable of freely deciding this or that course of action, but rather a tableau of actions and words stretched across a span of time, then a non-moral assessment becomes possible: an artwork, lacking subjectivity, can be beautiful even when it depicts something morally repugnant. It is not unreasonable to suppose, therefore, that the dramatic claim in *The Birth of Tragedy* that ‘only as an aesthetic phenomenon can the world be eternally justified’ was possible only because of the conceptual materials Nietzsche had taken up from Heraclitus.

During Nietzsche’s Basel days, in the earliest stirrings of his passion for philosophy, the Heraclitean privileging of Becoming is everywhere perceptible. In *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, Heraclitus is celebrated for his recognition that ‘The whole nature of reality lies wholly in its *acts*’, whose objects are little more than ‘the flash and spark of drawn swords, the quick radiance of victory in the struggle of opposites.’ (PTG 5)

Berry cautions us against too literal a reading of these passages, which seem to suggest that Nietzsche interprets Heraclitus as committed to a radical ontological doctrine to which he also assents. In the case of *Philosophy in the Tragic Age*, she points out that the purpose of the text as stated by Nietzsche in the preface is to ‘emphasise only that point of each of their [the philosophers he treats] systems which constitutes a slice of *personality*’ (PTG ‘Preface’). We must therefore be careful, Berry continues, not to regard Nietzsche’s treatment of Heraclitus in the manuscript as a definitive statement of his interpretation. Its function is rather, she suggests, to ‘show [Heraclitus] as a predictable link in a chain of philosophical developments’ beside Thales, Anaximander, and the rest.⁵⁵

However, Berry’s reading cannot easily be sustained once Nietzsche’s 1870 Basel lectures on ‘The Pre-Platonic Philosophers’ are taken into consideration. In the lecture material which pertains to Heraclitus, Nietzsche engages in an extended discussion of the concept of flux which

⁵⁵ Berry, ‘Nietzsche and the Greeks’, p. 93.

takes as its starting point a thought experiment first devised by the natural scientist Karl Ernst von Baer in 1860.

Put briefly, von Baer suggests that the relative pulse-rate of different animal species corresponds both with a relative difference in lifespan and with a relative difference in sensory perceptions. Against the apparently common-sense claim that there *is* persistence in the universe, Nietzsche therefore asks us to suppose that our pulse-rate were accelerated dramatically, and our lifespan correspondingly reduced (to, for example, forty minutes). In such an instance, we would regard the ephemeral organic life of grass and flowers as unchanging and constant in much the same way we now think of the mountains.

Further, if we imagine that our pulse-rate were reduced by a factor of one thousand, and our lifespan correspondingly multiplied by one thousand (to, say, 80,000 years), Nietzsche suggests that our perception would again change: the difference between night and day would be imperceptible, the seasons would change within what would feel like hours, foliage would erupt and fall away incessantly like so many fountains, and ‘the solar ecliptic would appear as a luminous bow across the sky, as a glowing coal, when swung in a circle, appears to form a circle of fire’.⁵⁶

Nietzsche’s point here is that those things which may seem unchanging appear so only because of a limitation of perspective – if the conditions of our perceiving the world were to alter sufficiently, that is, if we were able to dramatically change our point of view – all constancy might evaporate in an instant. ‘Enough then!’ he exclaims, ‘Every shape appearing to us as persistent would vanish in the superhaste of events and would be devoured by the wild storm of Becoming.’⁵⁷ It is unclear, on the basis of this text alone, whether Nietzsche is simply reporting his interpretation of Heraclitean flux or if he is doing so with implicit agreement. In either case, Nietzsche is keen to emphasise just how radical the Heraclitean worldview is:

‘this is the intuitive perception of Heraclitus; there is nothing of which we may say, “it is.” He rejects Being. He knows only Becoming, the flowing. He considers belief in something persistent as error and foolishness.’⁵⁸

If we are to infer, as seems reasonable in light of the textual evidence in his later published work, that Heraclitus’ doctrine of flux influenced Nietzsche’s own thought, then it is plain how such an

⁵⁶ Nietzsche, F.W., ‘The Pre-Platonic Philosophers’, trans. Whitlock, G., (Champaign, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2006), p. 61.

⁵⁷ Ibid. p. 62.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

ontology might have underwritten the development of what has come to be called Nietzsche's 'perspectivism' – roughly, the thought that 'objectivity' conceived as independence from any particular perspective, or point of view, is a pernicious falsehood. Heraclitus teaches that the world as it appears to us, as a domain of static objects and properties, is at worst a falsehood and at best a function of our local and limited perspective. Many of his paradoxes contain contradictory judgements that can be made sensible only by qualifying them so as to locate their propositions within a particular point of view.

A clear example of one such contradictory judgement is B61:

'The sea is the purest and foulest water: for fish drinkable and life-sustaining; for humans undrinkable and deadly.'

Here the offending contradictory properties ('purest' and 'foulest') are qualified in such a way as to relate them to particular classes of critic ('fish' and 'humans') and thereby the contradiction seems to be dispelled. Heraclitus demonstrates one manner in which apparent opposites can be reconciled in the same entity, namely, according to different *perspectives*.

Relatedly, the same thing (when considered under different aspects) may be subject to opposite descriptions. This is the case when Heraclitus relates the plight of surgeons:

'Doctors who cut and burn and torture their patients in every way complain that they do not receive the reward they deserve.' (B58)

When considered under the aspect of medicine, cutting and burning (which in most circumstances would be heinous and unpleasant) may be regarded as good and worthy of reward. In this sense, cutting and burning are held to be simultaneously good and bad. B59 ('The path of the carding wheel is straight and crooked') may be interpreted in a similar vein: as it appears in itself, the line produced by the carding wheel is crooked but, when understood as *writing*, the line may be regarded as straight.

It is, of course, possible to interpret Heraclitus as using these examples to draw attention to the fact that certain apparent contradictions can be reconciled through qualification. Nietzsche's interpretation is much more challenging: Heraclitus has realised that 'forms exist only at certain levels of perception,⁵⁹ that is, that we may only speak of the world of persistent objects as existing from a *particular point of view*. It seems clear, with these considerations in mind, that

⁵⁹ Ibid.

Nietzsche was committed to a reading of Heraclitus that emphasised the deeply radical quality of his metaphysics.

III. Was Heraclitus really all that radical?

To prove that Nietzsche read Heraclitus as cleaving to a genuinely radical metaphysical doctrine of universal conflict, it is not strictly necessary to prove that this constitutes an *accurate* reading. However, I judge (in much the same way as Berry) that the plausibility of an interpretation of Nietzsche is diminished if it involves needlessly attributing to him a clearly false or outlandish position. An independent knowledge of Heraclitus therefore enriches our interpretation of Nietzsche. With that in mind, I will now make the case that Nietzsche's reading of Heraclitus as committed to a doctrine of radical flux is consistent with the surviving corpus and perfectly defensible on its own terms. This remains a live issue in current scholarship, however, and I shall offer only a compressed overview of the matter here.

Aristotle writes that 'it is impossible for anyone to suppose that the same thing is and is not, as some imagine Heraclitus says.' (*Met.* IV.9, 1005b). It is with this sense of schoolmasterly disapproval that Heraclitus is attacked in the *Metaphysics*. If we are to reject the claim that Heraclitus was simply talking nonsense, however, how are we to interpret the apparent assertion of contradictories that recurs throughout the surviving fragments? The answer lies in how we understand one of the central doctrines attributed to Heraclitus, identified variously as the principle of the 'Unity of Opposites'⁶⁰ or the 'Harmony of Opposites'.⁶¹

In many of the fragments, Heraclitus presents as identical some pair or set of properties which people habitually separate and regard as opposite to one another. For example:

'The way up is the way down.' (B60)

and the fragment we considered earlier:

'The path of the carding wheel is straight and crooked.' (B59)

In each of these examples, Heraclitus asserts that apparently contradictory properties obtain of the same object. There appears to be intuitive justification for describing the marks of a carding

⁶⁰ Kirk, G. S., Raven, J. E., and Schofield, M., *The Presocratic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) p. 188.

⁶¹ Guthrie, W.K.C. *A History of Greek Philosophy*, Vol. I: The Earlier Presocratics and the Pythagoreans (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), p. 435.

wheel as ‘crooked’, just as there is justification for describing these same marks as ‘straight’. We can immediately see Aristotle’s problem: in order for something to be straight, it cannot be crooked, and so in stating that the path of the carding wheel is both straight *and* crooked, Heraclitus is claiming that ‘the same thing is and is not’. This is true of the same way being both upwards and downwards. We may consider, as Geoffrey Kirk does, the possibility that Heraclitus is indicating some essential connection between things we typically regard as opposites, rather than stating contradictories *simpliciter*. To suppose that Heraclitus was clumsily violating the law of non-contradiction is to make the same mistake as Aristotle, ‘who applied his own tight logical standards anachronistically’.⁶²

Heraclitus is not merely pointing to some specific kinds of properties and their relations with one another, but to a highly general principle which we might understand as the universal condition of being. Support for this reading is not difficult to find in the fragments:

‘It is wise, listening not to me but to the report, to agree that all things are one.’ (B50)

Just as the contradictories Heraclitus asserts in his other sayings form a unity with one another, so do those units form a general unity in which ‘all things are one’. This cosmic unity is identified with the *logos* (translated above as ‘the report’), a term around which syntactical ambiguities abound. In B1 (what was surely the proem of his book)⁶³ Heraclitus tells us that the *logos* ‘holds forever’ and that ‘all things come to pass in accordance’ with it, but indicates that human beings always fail to recognise this. The *logos* is ‘shared’ (B2), which is to say, common to all people, but most of us ‘live as though [our] thinking were a private possession’. Emerging from these two fragments is a clear impression of what Guthrie calls ‘the governing principle of the Universe’,⁶⁴ some formulation according to which all things exist and relate to each other. Indeed, ‘principle’ and ‘measure’ are accurate English translations of ‘*logos*’.⁶⁵

It would be mistaken to imagine that the reconciliation of opposites into a unity renders their essential difference merely illusory, either of the *logos* or of Heraclitus’ paradoxes. The essential difference between opposites – their divergence – is emphasised at the same time as their unity. As Heraclitus remarks:

⁶² Kirk, Raven and Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, p. 186.

⁶³ As attested by both Aristotle (*Rhet.*, 1407b16) and Sextus Empiricus (*Against the Mathematicians*, VII.126-132).

⁶⁴ Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, Vol. I, p. 428.

⁶⁵ Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus*, p. 29.

‘Graspings: wholes and not wholes, convergent divergent, consonant dissonant, from all things one and from one thing all.’ (B10)

The precise character of this constant opposition is the subject of the dispute to which I earlier referred: the ‘traditional’ interpretation, advanced by doxographers since Plato, has Heraclitus committed to a doctrine of radical flux, the view that the entire world is – at every instant – engaged in a violent process of change. Under such an account, the famous ‘river fragments’ are to be regarded as analogies for the condition of the universe, which is to say, a condition of uninterrupted flux.

Kirk, Raven, and Schofield also reject the attribution of a radical flux theory to Heraclitus, as Berry does, and for two reasons: first, they claim that such an interpretation has no basis in the surviving fragments; and that second, radical flux constitutes a ‘gross departure’ from common sense, along with an implied post-Parmenidean scepticism about the senses that appears to be contradicted by Heraclitus’ writing elsewhere.⁶⁶ It seems apparent to our sensory faculties that some things are stable, at least for a given period of time. Heraclitus writes:

‘Whatever comes from sight, hearing, learning from experience: this I prefer.’ (B55)

This sentiment seems to support Kirk, Raven, and Schofield’s claim that Heraclitus is not interested in challenging the veracity of the senses, and that we should therefore be reluctant to attribute any doctrine to him which conflicts with their testimony. That the radical interpretation is attested by Plato and Aristotle is explained by a scepticism about their interest in providing an objective assessment of their predecessors, and by the suggestion that Plato was influenced more by the distortions of self-styled ‘Heracliteans’ such as Cratylus than by Heraclitus himself.⁶⁷

The more moderate interpretation these authors advance in the stead of radical flux is the claim that the world is ‘in perpetual strife’ in the sense that opposite properties, forming a harmonious unity, pull continually against one another such that change in one direction eventually necessitates change in the other. Heraclitus’ preferred metaphor for the volatile character of the universe is war; he writes that ‘Conflict is Justice’ (B80) and that ‘War is father of all and king of all’ (B53). The conflict between different sides in battle reflects the push-and-pull of opposites in the world: just as one side in battle may have the mastery at one moment, only to lose it the next, so does the world consist in the relentless exchange between opposite properties over time.

⁶⁶ Kirk, Raven and Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, p. 195.

⁶⁷ Aristotle, *Met.* A6, 987a32.

The *logos* translated as ‘proportion’ or ‘reckoning’ may thereby be understood as that measure against which the total balance of the universe is determined. For Kirk, Raven and Schofield, the *logos* consists in (and governs) the exchange between opposites, ensuring that the ongoing process of universal change is ‘proportional and balanced overall.’⁶⁸ Berry agrees, claiming that:

‘Heraclitus’ point is not simply that there is constancy in the cosmos because change is itself ever-present or permanent – which sounds sophistic at any rate. The idea is that natural change occurs in measured, regular cycles and that it is governed by an orderly principle, *logos*.’⁶⁹

Under this interpretation, the constant opposition which Heraclitus exemplifies in his paradoxes is the coming-to-be and passing away of all things at different times and in different places. It is not the case, then, that this desk before me is *right now* in a state of transformation or instability, but rather that it will *at some point* undergo destructive change and thereby balance the cosmic scale. This helps to explain why at least some of Heraclitus’ paradoxes (notably, B61) are qualified in such a way as to relieve the pressure of self-contradiction: the same thing is and is not, but not at the same time, in the same place, or from the same perspective. We are spared a departure from common sense by this view, for just as temporary stalemates obtain at different parts of the fighting line, so do certain properties temporarily preponderate over others.

According to the authors, the more moderate interpretation of flux does not abandon its crucial feature (the domination of conflict and struggle) but makes it possible for us to apply Heraclitus’ insight to ‘the world of our actual experience, in which all things must eventually change but some things are for the time being obviously stable.’⁷⁰

While this account of the nature of flux finds some support in the fragments, I do not believe that it can be sustained. First, because it fails to credit Plato as a sophisticated interpreter of Heraclitus, which there appears to be strong grounds for supposing he was; second, because the argument from common sense is unsound; and third, because it diminishes Heraclitus’ philosophical contribution to a mere variation upon his intellectual inheritance from Pythagoras.

That Plato chooses to satirise poor readings of Heraclitus as holding to a Pythagorean notion of harmony – as he does through the character of the pompous Eryximachus in *Symposium* (Plat. *Sym.* 187a-c) – should at least give us pause before dismissing him as an unreliable source of

⁶⁸ Kirk, Raven and Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, p. 191.

⁶⁹ Berry, ‘Nietzsche and the Greeks’, p. 97.

⁷⁰ Kirk, Raven and Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, p. 194.

information about Heraclitus' philosophy. Elsewhere, he displays a sophisticated grasp of Heraclitean thought that should fortify our confidence in his ability to provide a credible interpretation of flux: in *Sophist*, Plato has the Eleatic Stranger distinguish between two different versions of the notion that 'being is many and one, and is held together by enmity and friendship' as it is conceived by the 'Ionian Muses' (Heraclitus) and the 'Sicilian Muses' (Pythagoras and Empedocles), respectively. While the 'gentler Muses' of Sicily hold that the world continually alternates between mutually exclusive states of harmony and discord, the 'more strenuous Muses' of Ionia insist that it is 'always simultaneously coming together and separating', which is to say that harmony and discord are present *at once* (Plat. *Soph.* 242D). Here, Plato gives explicit evidence of his awareness of the more moderate interpretation of the unity of opposites and carefully distinguishes it from the view he represents Heraclitus as having held. Guthrie argues that Plato's appreciation of this important distinction 'is an excellent guarantee of his insight'.⁷¹

Moreover, the argument that because Heraclitus has an uncomplicated commitment to the reliability of the senses he cannot have sustained a radical flux doctrine is unpersuasive. This argument may be represented formally as follows:

- i) It is impossible both to have an un-sceptical view of the veracity of the senses and to hold that all things are in constant flux.
- ii) Heraclitus had an un-sceptical view of the veracity of the senses.

Therefore,

- C) Heraclitus did not hold that all things are in constant flux.

It is not immediately obvious that (i) is true; it does not seem to me to be a 'gross departure from common sense' to imagine that a bronze cauldron may be developing patina even as I look at it, or that a rock should in any given instant be undergoing imperceptible erosion or the despoiling taint of moss. In this sense, those objects which have the semblance of stability are nonetheless subject to continual transformation. To acknowledge that certain processes are not immediately available to our senses does not constitute serious scepticism about their veracity and is therefore perfectly consistent with a common-sense account. It is worth pointing out, moreover, that we cannot claim with much confidence that Heraclitus was philosophising *before* Parmenides.

⁷¹ Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, Vol. I, p. 437.

Diogenes Laërtius, for example, claims that both men ‘flourished in the 69th Olympiad’ (c.500-504 BCE, cf. D.L. ix.1.1 and D.L. ix.3.23).⁷²

We may complicate (ii) by referring to another extant fragment of Heraclitus, which says:

‘Eyes and ears are poor witnesses for men if their souls do not understand the language.’
(B107)

Guthrie interprets this fragment as expressing the sentiment that the senses are essentially unreliable; without an appreciation for the ‘language’ (a development of the continuity between *logos* as both spoken words and ‘a universal pattern of experience’ established in the proem)⁷³ the senses will not reveal the world to us as it really is. The world speaks to us in its own language, a language we must make an effort to learn if we wish to be able to interpret reality in the right way. Otherwise, as in B19, our ‘direct experience of the nature of things will be like the babbling of an unknown tongue for the soul who does not know how to listen’.⁷⁴ B55 need not be interpreted as a straightforward endorsement of the value of testimony derived from the senses, but may be seen as expressing a feeling found elsewhere in the fragments that self-sought wisdom is to be preferred over established and socially authoritative sources of knowledge such as Homer and Hesiod (the latter of whom Heraclitus mocks for distinguishing night from day as completely distinct divinities rather than opposite sides of the same unity, see B57).

It may be pointed out that B107 speaks not to the reliability of the senses as such, but to the reliability of inferences about the world made by individuals who have no comprehension of the *logos*. Although this must be conceded, it nonetheless leaves us with a version of Heraclitus’ view of the senses that provides equal support for the radical and moderate interpretations of his philosophy: lacking understanding of the *logos*, some people may erroneously infer from their experience of rocks and cauldrons that these things do not undergo constant change, but those of us who better understand the ‘world-language’ are able to avoid this mistake by developing more considered inferences about those same experiences.

The moderate interpretation of flux also deprives Heraclitus’ thought of its radical originality, requiring as it does that the harmony of opposites be conceived of as the alternation between states of stability and instability according to a universal measure of balance (*logos*). As pointed

⁷² Although Plato himself dates Parmenides slightly later. In the *Parmenides*, the eponymous philosopher, aged sixty-five, meets a young Socrates c.450 BCE (Plat. *Parm.* 127a-128b).

⁷³ Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus*, p. 107.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

out earlier, this view was well-established by the time of Heraclitus and recurred as a stock feature of cosmogonies from the Milesians onwards.⁷⁵ Indeed, it seems to commit us to lumping Heraclitus in with Pythagoras and Empedocles in precisely the manner Plato was careful to avoid. That this interpretation produces an account of Heraclitus' philosophy in which 'the sharp edge of his teaching has been taken off, and it has been blunted into the similitude of someone else's' should count against its credibility.⁷⁶

Further, it is unclear how we are to make sense of Heraclitus' use of paradox under the moderate interpretation: if Heraclitus is not saying that all things are in a constant state of contradiction, with opposites struggling against one another, why should he choose to express his thoughts in the form of apparent contradictions? In defending Heraclitus against an apparently implausible Platonic formulation, the ambiguity of his thought is dissolved into something that can be comfortably expressed in plain language. This reduces the deliberate obscurity of the fragments in their paradox form to the status of mere stylistic flourish. For these reasons, I suggest that Heraclitus' use of paradox is best understood as a reflection of his radical conception of a world at war with itself, a world which he must strain against the limits of language to properly describe. Heraclitus is best interpreted (as Nietzsche interpreted him) as advancing a revolutionary and iconoclastic philosophy of radical becoming, one that, for Nietzsche, speaks to the inimitable genius of his personality just as surely as a plant speaks to the nature of the soil from which it grows (*PTG*, Preface).

IV. Philosophy as Personality: Heraclitus and Hellenism

In the preface to *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, Nietzsche writes:

'...whoever rejoices in great human beings will also rejoice in philosophical systems, even if completely erroneous. They always have one wholly incontrovertible point: personal mood, colour. They may be used to reconstruct the philosophic image, just as one may guess at the nature of the soil in a given place by studying a plant that grows there.'

That manuscript, unfinished and intended ultimately to tell the story of Greek philosophy from Thales to Plato, is as mentioned above a study of the personality of the philosophers it treats as much as it is of the actual content of their doctrines.

⁷⁵ Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, Vol. I, p. 441.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 436.

What is it, then, that Nietzsche found remarkable about Heraclitus as a *personality*? In *The Birth of Tragedy*, he groups Heraclitus in with Pythagoras as representatives of the 6th century, of the ‘tragic Greece’ which preceded the Golden Age inaugurated by Socrates and celebrated in the New Attic Comedy. Quoting Goethe’s *Epigrammatic Epitaph*, Nietzsche dismisses the Greek world after Socrates as ‘frivolous and capricious in old age’,⁷⁷ a society too concerned with wit, appearance, and pleasure, one that has forgotten the tragic insight captured by the Wisdom of Silenus. For Nietzsche, the plays of Euripides symbolise a pernicious democratising tendency in Greek culture – in Euripides, the ordinary goings-on of day-to-day life are introduced to the stage for the first time. The spectator is at last made a character in the drama, the whole complex of his thoughts and feelings are made words in the mouths of heroes, and, putting it metaphorically, Odysseus is reduced to a Graeculus figure (BT 11). That Euripides should have chosen to insert ‘bourgeois mediocrity’ into the centre of an art form hitherto characterised by all the pomp and grandeur of the heroes of Aeschylus and Sophocles serves to demonstrate, Nietzsche thinks, that he did not understand his predecessors.

He therefore attacks the ‘Greek serenity’ of this period as

‘the cheerfulness of slaves who know no graver responsibility, no higher ambition, nothing in the past or future of higher value than the present.’ (BT 11)

What starker contrast to this ‘senile and slavish enjoyment of life’ (BT 11) could he hope for, then, than Heraclitus ‘the Riddler’ (D.L., IX.6), ‘the Obscure’ (Cicero, *De Finibus* II.15), ‘the Weeping Philosopher’?⁷⁸ Heraclitus was famed in antiquity for his misanthropy, his haughty pride, and his complete contempt for the common run of humanity. Born into one of the most renowned noble families of Ephesus, he could have claimed the archonship of the city had he not instead chosen voluntary exile in the Artemision after his fellow citizens banished Hermodorus, an aristocrat of some renown:

B121: ‘The adult citizens of Ephesus should hang themselves, every one, and leave the city to children, since they have banished Hermodorus, a man pre-eminent among them, saying, Among us nobody shall be the best; if however someone is the best, let him be so elsewhere and among others.’

The failure of the Ephesians to recognise the greatness of one individual, instead electing to persecute him apparently out of envy, evidently incensed Heraclitus to the extent that he called

⁷⁷ *Epigrammatic Epitaph*, line 7.

⁷⁸ Seneca, *Moral and Political Essays*, trans. Cooper, J., M.; Procopé, J., F., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 50 note 17.

for the deaths of all the city's adults. Nietzsche points to this episode as evidence of the total gulf Heraclitus felt between himself and all others – living their lives as if they were asleep, even when awake, they were incapable of understanding Heraclitus even when he sought to make himself understood (B1). It is for this reason, Nietzsche suggests, that Heraclitus seems to compare himself to the Pythia:

B93: 'The lord whose oracle is in Delphi neither says nor conceals, but gives a sign.'

To implicitly compare himself and his philosophy to the god Apollo is an outrageous display of hubris, the sort that in Greek myth is generally met with some gruesome punishment. Shaul Tor has noted that this fragment is perhaps more interesting than is generally supposed: traditional interpretations have made the obvious connection between the ambiguity of the Pythian oracle and the obscurity of Heraclitus' own pronouncements, but have not recognised, Tor claims, that Heraclitus' statement about Apollo is itself ambiguous. Apollo, through his oracle, *says* all manner of things – to state otherwise seems to be to claim something very implausible. Some translations of the fragment (such as Kahn's) anticipate this peculiar meaning and avoid it by translating λέγει as 'declare', 'assert', or 'reveal'. This allows for the possibility – and perhaps even implies – that the god says indirectly what he does not outright declare. Tor sees no reason to translate λέγει in this way, as opposed to simply as 'say', as is typical in Archaic Ionic prose, except to sidestep an apparent interpretive problem.⁷⁹ The upshot of Tor's analysis is that the Pythia does not, in fact, *say* what she prophesises, but rather provides a sign that requires interpretation, which 'gestures towards [an] answer, serving as an orienting but also difficult and ambiguous starting point...' which the mortal interpreter must negotiate successfully.⁸⁰ On this reading, Heraclitus captures the theological insight implicitly conveyed by the Delphic traditions without merely recapitulating something obvious. The god does not speak answers to the queries brought to him by his consultants, but issues in difficult signs, by the light of which they *might* find those answers.

When Heraclitus compares himself to Apollo, then, he is not merely suggesting that his pronouncements represent indirect ways of saying something he might otherwise simply declare, but rather that his philosophy can only serve as a point of orientation for the would-be disciple, the beginning of the riddle and not its answer. In this fashion, he explicitly directs his work

⁷⁹ In Herodotus 7.141, the Athenians take themselves to be addressing Apollo directly, and although it is the Pythia who gives answer, Apollo identifies himself as speaker 'I will speak to you again of strength adamantine.' Kahn himself identifies Herodotus's Ionic as the standard by which to judge the 'ordinary' usage of Heraclitus' language as it would have been understood by his original audience.

⁸⁰ Consider: Did Apollo *say* to Croesus that he would destroy his own kingdom should he make war on Persia? Did he *say* to Arcesilaus that he must not burn the Cyrenaeans who fled to Aglomachus' tower? (Hdt. 4.163-164).

towards an exclusive audience: a select few who are able to undertake the task of introspection which knowledge of the *logos* demands. The rest, we must imagine, can hang. What might strike us as conceitedness greeted Nietzsche as a mark of greatness:

‘...no one will be able to imagine such regal self-esteem, such boundless conviction that one is the sole fortunate wooer of truth. Men of this sort live within their own solar system, and that is where they must be sought . . . Such a being might seem more comprehensible in a remote shrine, among images of the gods and amidst cold, sublime architecture. As a man among men Heraclitus was incredible.’ (PTG 5)

In his lecture on the subject at Basel, Nietzsche spends a great deal of time establishing the social and political context during the acme of Heraclitus’ philosophical productiveness (which he supposes must be some time after the 69th Olympiad, perhaps contemporaneous with the Ionian Revolt), and emphasises Heraclitus’ utter hostility towards public life and popular wisdom. He goes on to quote an indicative anecdote from Diogenes Laërtius:

‘Heraclitus, after having retreated into the solitude of the sanctuary of the Temple of Artemis, played knuckle bones with children, and when the Ephesians stood around him in wonder, he called to them: “Why, you rascals, are you astonished? Is it not better to do this than to take part in your civil life?”’ (D.L. IX.3)

Nietzsche is very interested in Heraclitus as an intellectual elitist *par excellence* – all the rest of humanity is under the spell of misapprehension, and thus Heraclitus can make no bridge to them. He is entirely introspective, viciously criticising established wisdom, poetry, and religious customs. Participation in the civil life of the *polis* was contemptible for Heraclitus because its social fabric was woven with unqualified approval from conventionally authoritative sources of wisdom; that is, from Homer, Hesiod, and sacred tradition. Renouncing these, he instead chose to ‘consult himself’ (B101). It is clear that a condition for the ‘great human being’ is, for Nietzsche, a certain alienation from the culture in which one finds oneself. In an aphorism entitled ‘*The criminal and what is related to him*’, Nietzsche lays out his view that the ‘criminal’ (defined as the type of ‘strong human being’ who is at war with his culture’s dominant ideal and is consequently ostracised) is a prerequisite of greatness:

‘All innovators of the spirit bear for a time the pallid, fatalistic sign of the Chandala⁸¹ on their brow: *not* because they are felt to be so, but because they themselves feel the terrible

⁸¹ ‘Chandala’ refers to an individual belonging to a low-status ‘untouchable’ Hindu caste in the traditional Indian caste system. The implication here is that the ‘innovator of the spirit’ must choose, at least temporarily, a form of

chasm which divides them from all that is traditional and held in honour' (TI, 'Skirmishes' 45).

It is clear that these 'innovators of the spirit' do not suffer ostracism because of the hostility of mainstream opinion, nor because they are identified by their fellows as essentially 'other' to the cultural ideal that governs it, but because they recognise for themselves their unique social position. In order to fully realise their latent potential for the transformation of values, they must first set themselves against everything that came before and embark on what Marx famously called 'a ruthless criticism of all that exists'.⁸² In a fragment explaining his disdain for the masses and their reliance on received wisdom, Heraclitus paraphrases the jurist Bias of Priene, who is said to have declared that 'Most men are bad':

'For what thought or wisdom have they? They follow the poets and take the crowd as their teacher, knowing not that there are many bad and few good.' (B104)

Heraclitus attacks the uncritical transmission of wisdom from poets and social institutions on the grounds that most people are 'bad', and thus we cannot place our trust in the judgement of others if we seek to understand the world around us. I do not think it would be unreasonable to infer from this determination that Heraclitus implicitly connects knowledge and interest, that is, he supposes that most people believe, and teach, as they do for *interested* reasons. This pessimism concerning human nature grounds Heraclitus' suspicion of any purported knowledge arrived at through means other than introspection and forms the foundation of our conception of philosopher as cultural critic.

We arrive now, by means of this observation, at the paradox of Heraclitus as a personality in Nietzsche's philosophy: if Heraclitus is to be admired, principally, for his status as a pure expression of Greek culture – as a 6th century antidote to all the ills of Socratism and a vector for the so-called 'Tragic Age' that preceded it – then how are we to make sense of his emphatic rejection of that culture in almost all its facets? The answer is a pleasingly Heraclitean one: for Nietzsche, the 'great human beings' of Greek antiquity are precisely those who felt themselves to be in a certain sense *un-Greek*, who, recognising their own uniqueness, withdrew in disdain from the world as they found it and laboured in their thought to devise a *new* way of looking at things.

social ostracism in order to realise his potential. More specifically, the word 'Chandala' (चांडाल) denotes in Sanskrit a person who handles the disposal of corpses.

⁸² Letters from the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*, Kreuznach, September 1843.

Heraclitus' vehement rejection of the likes of Homer and Archilochus (who 'deserve to be chased out of the lists and beaten with rods', B42) comports with Nietzsche's characterisation of him as an individual set completely against the rest of the Greek world:

'he treats poets not as poets but as teachers of falsehood. His hatred always finds the sharpest word: he finds the religious sensitivities of the masses absolutely unapproachable; he curses their purifications, their honouring of the gods, their cult of the Mysteries.'⁸³

The engine of Greek cultural development during the period which interests Nietzsche the most was as we saw in the previous chapter a kind of self-directed intellectual agonism: the envious desire of each new generation to contend with and overthrow the dominant forms of the previous one was the 'good Eris' at work, infusing the Greeks with an impressive cultural dynamism.⁸⁴

For Nietzsche, Heraclitus – inhabiting '[his] own solar system' – manifested this ideal very directly. Disdaining popular mythology and religious ritual as well as the towering figures of Homer and Hesiod, Heraclitus strove to dethrone old ways of looking at the world in favour of a radically new (but still very distinctively Hellenic) ontology of strife: in being an exception to his own culture, he was at the same time its exemplar.

Nietzsche is quite selective in his willingness to praise this form of cultural iconoclasm, however: where Heraclitus is celebrated for his vituperative attacks on traditional sources of moral authority, Socrates is subjected to some of the most vicious criticism (and in many cases, petty name-calling) Nietzsche marshals anywhere in his writing. Like Heraclitus, Socrates rejected the values enshrined by the Greek culture in which he found himself and, perhaps to an even greater degree, cultivated original and radical values – values, indeed, that would exert a decisive influence on the development of European civilisation for thousands of years. As we shall see, Socrates, too, innovated upon the Greek cult of competition, fashioning from the elements presented to him by the Athenian traditions of rhetoric and pederasty a wholly new agon in which he was pre-eminent. How, then, are we to make sense of Nietzsche's apparent contempt for Socrates?

⁸³ *PPP*, p. 57.

⁸⁴ See *HH* II.140; and 'Homer's Contest', p. 4.

CHAPTER 3

SOCRATES, TRAGEDY, AND DÉCADENCE

'This is why the image of the dying Socrates, of a man liberated from fear of death by reasons and knowledge, is the heraldic shield over the portals of science, reminding everyone of its purpose, which is to make existence appear comprehensible and thus justified; and if reasons are insufficient to achieve that end, then it must ultimately be served by myth'

- *The Birth of Tragedy* 15

On first pass, it may seem that Nietzsche's assessment of Socrates is quite straightforward: few individuals in all of his published work earn as much scorn, derision, and mean-minded mockery. Socrates is attacked as 'rabble' (*Pöbel*), 'pseudo-Greek' (*pseudogriechisch*), a 'criminal' (*Verbrecher*), a 'symptom of decay' (*Verfalls-Symptom*), and a 'décadent'. The true picture is not quite so simple, however: commentators have noted the striking similarity between Nietzsche's self-conception and the figure of Socrates.⁸⁵ It is no accident that Nietzsche chooses to open the biographical *Ecce Homo* with a direct comparison between Socrates and himself, nor that he should have remarked in an unpublished essay that 'Simply to acknowledge the fact: *Socrates* is so close to me that I am almost continually fighting with him.'⁸⁶

In the following chapter I will explore Nietzsche's treatment of Socrates in both his early and later periods, examining how he perceived Socrates' relationship with the Apolline and Dionysiac forces at play in Attic tragedy and the nature of Socratic philosophy considered as a form of *décadence*.⁸⁷ I will argue that Nietzsche's rejection of Socratism should be understood as emanating from the Socratic dissolution of the competition of drives through the over-privileging of reason. The model of balanced contest between forces that Nietzsche admires in the ancient Greek city-state and in the tense interplay of Apolline and Dionysiac artistic impulses extends also, I will

⁸⁵ Consider, for example, Nehamas, A., *Life as Literature* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2002).

⁸⁶ Nietzsche, F.W., 'Wissenschaft und Weisheit im Kampfe' in *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the Early 1870s*, trans. Breazeale, D. (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1999), p. 127.

⁸⁷ It is not immediately obvious why Nietzsche often prefers the French word over its German equivalent. Andrew Huddleston has argued that Nietzsche uses 'décadence' to identify a 'specific psychological dynamic' characterised by the resort to futile extirpative extremes, Huddleston, A., *Nietzsche on the Decadence and Flourishing of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 77-87.

contend, into the human psyche: where Socrates advocates the pacification of the turmoil of competing drives through their universal subordination to reason, Nietzsche instead wills that the drives be maintained in a structured competition with each other. I argue, further, that Nietzsche's refusal to acknowledge the genius of Socrates despite their philosophical disagreements (as he seems able to do with other influences, notably Schopenhauer) is a function of the fact that he perceives Socrates as a rival with whom he must compete.

I. Socrates and Tragedy: 'a shadow growing ever longer in the evening sun'

The Birth of Tragedy is an unconventional work even by the (perhaps more tolerant and varied) academic standards of the 21st century, so it is difficult to understate how bizarre it must have appeared to the 19th century German philologist. Although hardly a career-ending scandal for the young Nietzsche (as is sometimes imagined), its publication certainly was not met with a warm reception. One especially vitriolic critic, Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, attacked Nietzsche for 'his ignorance and lack of love for the truth',⁸⁸ and modern readers might well sympathise with Wilamowitz as they attempt to navigate the interpretive maze the *BT* presents.

The *BT* was the first of Nietzsche's published works and also represents his first foray into academic philosophy. The book itself is a playful exercise in form, assuming the appearance of a standard academic monograph but flagrantly flouting the associated conventions: footnotes, citations, and references are few and far between, and the register of Nietzsche's writing on what Wilamowitz calls 'serious philological questions'⁸⁹ hovers somewhere between speculative-philosophical and mythical-literary. In the 1886 prefatory essay to its third edition, entitled 'An Attempt at Self-Criticism', Nietzsche describes the *BT*'s concerns as being 'located in the territory of *art* – for the problem of science cannot be recognised within the territory of science'.⁹⁰

The 'problem of science' to which he alludes is explained elsewhere in the preface as the apparently paradoxical character of philosophical/natural-scientific enquiry which, he suggests, masquerades as the disinterested pursuit of truth precisely as a 'cunning' or 'cowardly' means of

⁸⁸ Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, U.v., 'Future Philology! A reply to Friedrich Nietzsche's "Birth of Tragedy"', trans. Postl, G, Babich, B., Schmid, H. (New York: Fordham University, 2000), p. 4.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Nietzsche, F. W., *The Birth of Tragedy* trans. Speirs, R. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) p. 5.

avoiding the truth.⁹¹ The cipher who stands at the centre of this puzzle is none other than the ‘mysterious ironist’, Socrates. Nietzsche suggests, tantalisingly, that Socrates’ ‘secret’ was this problem of science, and that *The Birth of Tragedy* was his first, immature attempt at exposing it. The later Nietzsche (the preface was written three years before his infamous ‘Turin collapse’) therefore evidently regarded the central argument of the book as basically continuous with the more developed view of Socrates that he would give voice to in *Twilight of the Idols*, to be published three years later.

In Section Three of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche recounts the tale of the wise Silenus, companion and tutor to the god Dionysus. Hunted through the forest by King Midas and compelled to reveal ‘what is the best thing for all men’, Silenus replies: ‘The very best thing is utterly beyond your reach: not to have been born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*’. This claim, the ‘wisdom of Silenus’, forms the whole basis of the *BT*: how can human beings come to affirm life despite its objective meaninglessness and horror?

At the time he wrote the *BT* (during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71), Nietzsche was heavily influenced by the pessimistic philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer, who had developed a worldview from the Kantian transcendental aesthetic that interpreted life not merely as miserable and torturous, but metaphysically and *necessarily* so. It is under the sway of this dreary world-view that Nietzsche articulated his theory of tragedy, as a response to the horrific conclusion drawn by Schopenhauer,⁹² whom Nietzsche describes both as his ‘great teacher’ (*HH* II, ‘Preface’ 1), and his ‘antipode’ (*NCW* ‘We Antipodes’).

The book’s subject matter is a comparatively small collection of dramatic works composed in or around the city-state of Athens in the 5th century BCE: the so-called ‘Attic tragedy’, dominated by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides (whom Nietzsche reviles). Of the hundreds of tragedies composed during this period, only a few dozen remain to us basically intact. That Nietzsche should have chosen to confer a position of cosmic significance on an artistic movement so little-preserved and short-lived – not merely in human history, but even in the history of Greek culture – is interesting in itself, and demands explanation. Why did he regard Attic tragedy as being, in the words of Milton in the preface to *Samson Agonistes*, ‘unequall’d yet by any’?⁹³

The answer is that Nietzsche considered Attic tragedy to have achieved an unprecedentedly tense and successful balance between two competing, if interrelated, ‘artistic drives’, the Apolline and

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁹² The extent to which Nietzsche was still, at the time of writing, convinced of the metaphysical elements of Schopenhauer’s philosophy is debatable. I will discuss this briefly in Chapter 4.

⁹³ Steiner, G., *The Death of Tragedy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963) p. 31.

the Dionysiac. The distinction between these two elements of artistic expression is perhaps the most famous legacy of *BT*, and an interpretation of Nietzsche's account of them is indispensable to understanding the significance of tragedy in his philosophical works. The first section of the *BT* identifies its contribution as being to the 'science of aesthetics' and concerned with explicating the duality of two hitherto unrecognised artistic drives, which Nietzsche chooses to symbolically associate with two Greek art deities: Apollo, Olympian god of light, dreams, order, and prophecy; and Dionysus, ambiguous hero-god of intoxication, choral music, and ritual madness.

Nietzsche focuses on dreaming as Apollo's exemplary phenomenon, and specifically on the representational function of dreams, which is to say that there is a recognisable relationship between a dream of how things are, and how they might actually be. In Hellenic polytheism, dreams were taken to have prophetic and oracular significance for precisely this reason. Nietzsche considers Apollo to be 'the god of all image-making energies' (*BT* 1). Representations, by virtue of their being a *mimesis* of reality, have a certain plasticity and order. Indeed, representations are 'of' things; they require the delineation of their subject from that which lies outside of it. In this regard, dreams necessitate the capacity to discriminate or distinguish one thing from another. Importantly, a representation provides mediated access to its subject – an intervening illusion between observer and reality – that creates a sense of distance.

Nietzsche therefore identifies Apollo with Schopenhauer's *principium individuationis* (as the 'magnificent divine image [*Götterbild*]' of that principle, *BT* 1), both as the ultimate archetype of a distinct, self-sufficient person, and as a symbol for boundaries and the structure of experience more generally. Art-forms born of the Apolline instinct are sculpture, relief, architecture, painting, and other representational arts.

At the point at which this structure begins to break down and the Apolline skein loosens, we find Dionysus. Nietzsche states that the essence of the Dionysiac is best understood through the analogy of an ecstatic intoxication. Under the influence of narcotic drink, the Bacchic disciple is drawn beyond herself as an individual, into a greater communion both with her fellow human beings, and with nature. The impulse which Nietzsche associates with this god is, at its core, one of transgression; the need to overcome boundaries and violate distinctions, to seek a primordial unity, is characteristic of Dionysus. Under this spell,

'Now the slave is a freeman, now all the rigid, hostile barriers, which necessity, caprice, or "impudent fashion" have established between human beings, break asunder.' (*BT* 1)

Critically, the Dionysiac impulse transgresses the *illusion* of individuation, and presses the individual as closely as possible against the shape of Kant's ineffable thing-in-itself, the 'true world' in which no one object or person is distinguished from any other under the concepts of space and time. Nietzsche here gestures towards Schopenhauer's metaphysics and its close relationship with Vedic philosophy by describing how the 'veil of maya' is torn apart in the state of Dionysiac intoxication. In this instance, Nietzsche uses 'veil of maya' as a way of referring to Schopenhauer's 'World as Representation', construed as an obstacle that obscures the true world, which consists of primordial, unindividuated unity (*das Ur-Eine*). Nietzsche takes music to be the quintessentially Dionysiac art form, influenced by the Schopenhauerian view that music is purer by virtue of its being non-representational. Rather than constructing an intervening representation between observer and reality, music directly presents or instantiates its content without an interlocutor. The fourth movement of Beethoven's ninth symphony (which Nietzsche suggests might help us to better understand the Dionysiac) does not 'represent' joy, it *manifests* it in an ineffably direct way. The mediating, pacifying 'distance' of Apolline art is nowhere to be found.

As described in *The Birth of Tragedy*, the duality of Apolline and Dionysiac drives in the human person therefore consists in the incessant fluctuation between the impulse to order and individuality on the one hand, and the impulse to transgression and oneness on the other.

The Apolline elements of tragedy are clear. Theatre is representational by necessity: it involves deploying actors to represent persons and entities other than themselves. The content of the drama is structured by an intelligible, causal succession of narrative events that unfold through time. Language is used, in the form of dialogue and narration, to facilitate this succession. These representational features constitute the distinctly Apolline, individuating structure of the art form.

The Dionysiac elements operate at the levels both of content and of form. In *Oedipus the King*, the narrative requires that Oedipus is punished for his egregious actions (killing his father and marrying his mother) and accepts his fate, even though he was entirely ignorant of his crimes while perpetrating them, and thus we are inclined to say that they lie outside of the sphere of his moral responsibility. Oedipus, however, accepts the legitimacy of the charge, and his punishment. He is unable to make any moral sense of what is happening to him, but that renders it no less real nor damaging. The content of the plots of tragic drama revolve around the points at which reality outstrips the terms in which we make sense of it.

As Steiner notes, 'The Greek tragic poets assert that the forces which shape or destroy our lives lie outside the governance of reason or justice'.⁹⁴ Far from the downfall of the tragic hero being a consequence of some moral deficiency, it is shown to rest upon *sheer contingency*. While we might judge Oedipus for his impassioned slaying of the old man on the road to Thebes (whom he would later learn was his father), it would be a mistake to imagine that Oedipus' travails represent a kind of narrative justice being brought to bear: after all, he was fated for patricide and anguish even before his birth. The structures by which we make moral sense of the world are represented as ultimately inadequate; reality is shown to shatter them whenever it feels like it. The content of tragedy, therefore, consists in an exposition of the Wisdom of Silenus and a lesson in the futility and hostility of life.

On the level of form, the chorus (an absolutely integral component of classical tragedy) is supremely Dionysiac: in the chorus, no distinction is drawn between individual members and their collective identity, a sea of voices without personality beyond that of their united whole. The music, which accompanied all tragic performance, was supplied by the chorus. The structural role is crucial; they act as a liminal point between audience and character in the world of the play, blurring and softening this distinction. Operating inside the narrative, commenting and interacting with characters, the chorus is also turned out towards the stands, speaking *to* and *for* the audience in their observations. In this sense, the chorus is Janus-faced, both inside and outside the play at once, breaking down the structural boundaries that representational systems such as drama typically reinforce and depend upon.

The affirmatory power of tragedy is born of this interplay, at the level of both content and form, of naturally opposed Apolline and Dionysiac elements. The Dionysiac content of the play, namely, the essential cruelty and indifference of the world towards the individual, is discharged in the form of Apolline symbols: the tragic heroes, individual persons-writ-large, possessed of a mythical and rhetorical grandeur. The structural apparatus of the chorus permits the loosening and partial transgression of the distinction between audience and actor, and, to an extent, between one individual and another. In this manner, the choric dithyramb induces the audience to participate in the drama, joining the chorus themselves, and temporarily suspending their individuated identity. In this state, the audience is able to fully apprehend the destructive horror of reality (articulated chillingly in the closing words of *Oedipus the King* as 'Now as we keep our

⁹⁴ Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy*, p. 7.

watch and wait the final day, count no man happy till he dies, free of pain at last.⁹⁵) while being shielded from the full extent of its disintegrating force.

How does Socrates, whose secret is the subject of *The Birth of Tragedy*, relate to this divine interplay? Nietzsche marks Socrates as the starting point of ‘a profound *delusion*’, namely, the belief that one can come not merely to understand every aspect of existence, but even to ‘correct’ it. This delusion is characteristic of a particular ‘type’ of human being, of which Socrates is the originator and exemplar: the *theoretical man*.

The pre-tragic Greeks, Nietzsche claims, were inclined to use art as a tool to conceal or misrepresent reality, that is, not to use artistic representation as a means to make truth tolerable, but instead as a way to obscure it entirely.⁹⁶ He writes:

‘the splendid “naivete” of the earlier Greeks which, according to the characterisation given above, must be conceived . . . as the victory which the Hellenic will, through its mirroring of beauty, obtains over suffering and the wisdom of suffering...’ (*BT* 17)

This is to say, pre-tragic Greek cultures made life-affirmation possible by obscuring the world’s unpleasantness beneath a transfiguring gauze of artistic illusion. Myth, poetry, and sculpture create a ‘consummate immersion in the beauty of appearance’ that seduces and distracts the observer from a grim reality. What form does this obscuration take? It is not a matter of inducing false beliefs about the world: Reginster is right to encourage a careful interpretative distinction between the ‘appearance’ of Apolline illusion and mere ‘deception’; the seduction of appearance is something we choose to participate in while conscious that, on the most basic level, it is illusory. On the grounds of this distinction, Reginster calls Apolline illusions ‘resilient’, which is to say that the discovery of their illusoriness has no consequence for their efficacy as a means of life-affirmation. Indeed, many such illusions ‘come packaged with a *presumption of falsity*’⁹⁷: by ‘revealing’ to a child playing make-believe that she is not, in reality, an astronaut, one does nothing to deter her in pursuit of the illusion that she is. Apolline illusions do not even pretend to believability in the first place. The resilience of Apolline artworks, specifically,

⁹⁵ Sophocles, *Oedipus the King* trans. Fagles, R. in *The Three Theban Plays* (London: Penguin Classics, 1984) p. 251.

⁹⁶ There is an argument to be made, of course, that Homer was a tragedian (as the Socrates of *Republic* claims, ‘We must go on to examine the claims of the tragedians and their chief, Homer.’ X, 598d) but Nietzsche is clear that Homer is the exemplar of the distinctly Apolline epic poet, whose art form is structurally incapable of manifesting the balance of Apolline and Dionysiac elements necessary to achieve the tragic effect.

⁹⁷ Reginster, B. ‘Art and Affirmation’ in ed. Came, D., *Nietzsche on Art and Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 18.

depends upon ‘the rapturous vision, the pleasurable illusion’ (BT 4) they induce, a natural aesthetic pleasure that can be ‘denied’ no more than sensation itself.

However, this doctrine of ‘redemption through pure appearance’ is not ultimately tenable to Nietzsche. The affirmation provided by solely Apolline illusion consists in distraction from, and obstruction of, an intolerable reality. This approach cultivates a calculated ignorance concerning the true nature of things, which it guards against with a cocoon of pleasure and disinterested contemplation. Clearly, genuine affirmation is impossible when one does not have knowledge of the thing being affirmed. In seeking to detach us from the truth, from the Wisdom of Silenus, the purely Apolline approach denies us the opportunity to confront the world as it is, and thereby permanently precludes the possibility of our affirming it.

The ‘myth of the theoretical man’, by contrast, rests on the substitution of ‘metaphysical comfort for an earthly consonance’ (BT 17). The kind of affirmation offered by Socrates, Nietzsche thinks, is defined by an intellectual optimism, which understands the universe to operate according to causal principles which can be learned and manipulated in order not merely to understand everything about reality, but to *correct* its moral deficiencies (the proliferation and omnipresence of suffering). Such a view allows us to regard Schopenhauer’s challenge as answerable by conventional evaluative means: like Schopenhauer, I may weigh happiness against suffering in judgement of life, but unlike him, find that the former outweighs the latter, or rather, that *it can if I choose to make it so*. This myth institutes, as Nietzsche puts it in section 17:

‘a *deus ex machina* of its own, the god of machines and crucibles, that is, the powers of the spirits of nature recognised and employed in the service of a higher egoism; it believes that it can correct the world by knowledge, guide life by science, and actually confine the individual within a limited sphere of solvable problems, from which it can cheerfully say to life: “I desire you; you are worth knowing”.’ (BT 17)

In other words, suffering is construed as a contingent (rather than a necessary) feature of the world, and one that lies within our power to ameliorate. The theoretical man builds a world of which a positive moral evaluation can be made, but only through the application of reason. Reason itself is thereby privileged as chief in the pantheon of values and conflated with morality, while the theoretical life (that of the philosopher, given over to the fearless application of reason) is ennobled.

Nietzsche describes Socrates as one of the ‘murderers’ of tragedy (beside Euripides) because he considers the Socratic ‘greed for knowledge’ as pathologically opposed to art, and Dionysiac-

tragic art in particular, for which it is bound to engender ‘hostility’ and ‘disgust’ (BT 15). Socrates’ influence on Euripides is reflected in the latter’s experimentation with the structure of Aeschylean tragedy: for Nietzsche, the plays of Euripides symbolise a pernicious democratising tendency in Greek culture – in Euripides, the ordinary goings-on of day-to-day life are introduced to the stage for the first time. The spectator is at last made a character in the drama, the whole complex of his thoughts and feelings are made words in the mouths of heroes. The chorus, correspondingly, is de-emphasised, and narrative information is more often delivered via dramatic monologue, while the characters themselves suggest a more complex and naturalistic conception of the interior life of the drama’s human subjects. From Nietzsche’s point of view, this represents an attack on both the Apolline and Dionysiac components of tragedy: the chorus plays a critical role in softening the distinction between individual persons, and between the audience and the drama; while the pomposity and grandeur of the Apolline characters serves their function as symbolic exemplars of human beings *in general* – by presenting them naturalistically, Euripides radically diminishes their ability to function in this way. Nietzsche therefore characterises Euripides as Socrates’ cultural stooge, dismantling and reconstructing the art of tragedy to serve a new purpose.

In this respect, Nietzsche quite self-consciously echoes Aristophanes’ assessment of Euripides, made most explicitly and forcefully in *Frogs*: this play, first performed at the Lenaia in 406 B.C., within a year of the deaths of both Sophocles and Euripides, eulogises the ‘tragic art’ that died with them (those tragedians who remained were ‘mere vintage-leavings, jabberers, choirs of swallow-broods, degraders of their art...’ *Frogs*, 93-4). Like Nietzsche, Aristophanes brings both Aeschylus and Euripides (representatives of the Attic Tragedy and its New School, respectively) before the judgement of Dionysus – albeit in a much more literal sense – and has them defend their respective claims to the ‘tragic seat’, the immortal recognition in Hades of their unequalled dramatic achievement. In pleading his case, the Euripides of the *Frogs* claims as virtues the very innovations which Nietzsche decries as fatal to the art of tragedy:

That he diminished the grandeur and bombast of the language of tragedy, reducing it to something recognisable to the average citizen,

‘When I first took this art of plays from you,
crammed with bombast to the gills, fustian stuff,
at first I made it slim, reduced its weight,
with vesicles, and walks, and laxatives.

I gave a potion drawn from bookish chat'
(*Frogs*, 939-43)

that he gave voice to ordinary people,

'For me the woman spoke—so did the slave,
the master, maiden, the old woman, too.'
(*Frogs*, 949-50)

and, most heinously of all for Nietzsche, Euripides confesses to bringing the Socratic scourge to bear on poetry,

'I brought logic into art.'
(*Frogs*, 973)

After Aristophanes' Dionysus inevitably prefers the brooding Aeschylus over his rival in the contest, the chorus make the only direct reference to Socrates in the work, characterising him as given to idle chatter and 'frivolous word-scraping' (*Frogs*, 1491) and identifying his disregard for the Muses and the art of tragedy as part and parcel of the state's general decline. It is tempting, therefore, as Jacob Howland notes,⁹⁸ to regard *The Birth of Tragedy* as something of a companion piece to the *Frogs*: Nietzsche expounds and expands upon the critique of Euripides implicit in Aristophanes' work, namely, that through his art he embraced a new, radical, and distinctly Socratic worldview which undermined and eventually destroyed Attic tragedy.

Insofar as Nietzsche regards the Socratic worldview as false, he understands its champions as embracing another kind of illusion, a misrepresentation of reality which serves to make it more palatable. The 'problem of science' is here unmasked: Nietzsche does not think that the pursuit of truth can itself be rationalised – the only form of analysis to which it is amenable is in terms of animal or existential needs. The theoretical man *must* 'follow knowledge like a sinking star' because this pursuit itself assumes the grounds he needs in order to make his own life tolerable, that is, that the world can be perfectly rationalised. The crucial difference between the illusion propagated by Socrates and his followers and the distortions of Apolline art is that the former are *not* resilient. Paradoxically, if the theoretical man were ever to actually seize hold of the truth, it would refute the grounds of his seeking it. As Zarathustra proclaims, 'Ah, who hath not succumbed to his victory!' (Z LVI.30).

⁹⁸ Howland, J., 'Plato's Dionysiac Music? A Reading of the *Symposium*' in *Époché*, Volume 12, Issue 1 (Fall 2007), p. 18.

I suggest, therefore, that Nietzsche's objection to Socrates in *The Birth of Tragedy* is not so different from his appraisal of the 'ascetic priests' in *The Genealogy of Morals*: the problem with the ascetic ideal is not that it propagates a falsehood in service of life, but that, in the end, it serves life *disadvantageously*. Insofar as Socrates demands that we seek the truth unrelentingly, the Wisdom of Silenus looms ever on the horizon, and we are incapable of shielding ourselves against it. Like Oedipus, the theoretical man ruthlessly (even heroically) uncovers the truth, but its apprehension ultimately spells his ruin. The ascetic 'bargain' always has a sting in its tail, and the inevitable outcome is nihilism.

II. Socrates the Criminal: the influence of Aristophanes

Excepting a brief – and uneasy – détente during the so-called 'middle period', Nietzsche's view of Socrates does not fundamentally alter between the publication of *The Birth of Tragedy* and his later thoughts in *Twilight of the Idols*, even as it is refined by a new analysis in terms of 'décadence'. But his appraisal is not as unambiguous as it seems. If the important element of genius in a philosopher is not so much about the content of their doctrine but rather the way it is formulated (radically, originally, the fruit of an ambitious mind under the sway of the 'good Eris') then Socrates seems to stand out as a Zarathustra figure. He is original, inimitable, and brilliant – contesting and overtaking the dominant ideals of his culture and successfully replacing them with his own world-vision, whose power and influence has been so total in the development of western civilisation that its effects are felt no less intensely now than they were in antiquity. Is he not therefore engaged in just the sort of 're-valuation of values' which Nietzsche recommends to us?

To answer this question, we must look more carefully at the nature of Nietzsche's attacks on Socrates. What may occur to us at first glance as petty insults often reveal themselves as a sort of covert praise: that Socrates should be a 'criminal' (*Verbrecher*) is not in itself a bad thing – recall Nietzsche's comments on the self-ostracism of 'all true innovators of the spirit', whom he also calls 'criminals' (*TI*, 'Skirmishes' 45).

This 'criminal' state, defined by the impulse to revolt, transgress, and overcome the existing order of things, is one phase in the development of genius and invariably a characteristic of Nietzsche's favourite philosophers: the hermitic Heraclitus, the coarse Diogenes, the reclusive

Epicurus⁹⁹ and, undoubtedly, the wily Socrates. ‘Catiline,’ he writes, with some whimsy, ‘– the antecedent form of *every* Caesar.’¹⁰⁰ When the criminal prevails over the dominant ideal¹⁰¹ he achieves something close to the most sublime realisation of the will to power, that is, the elevation of his own values – themselves the expression of those conditions under which *he* can best affirm life – to the status of a dogma.¹⁰²

Socrates seized upon the forms and customs of 5th century Athens, most notably the strong competitive impulse and the institution of pederasty, and used these materials to fashion something radically new: a way of life made possible only through the exercise of dialectic, the unremitting pursuit of truth by argument. The Socratic elenchus is distinguished from the activity of the Sophists in the sense that the purpose of the former is to arrive at the truth, while the purpose of the latter is simply to win an argument or persuade an audience. Of course, in the process of arriving at the truth, Socrates tends *also* to win an argument and persuade his audience. The tendency of the Sophists to subordinate the wills of those who hear them is no less active in Socrates, indeed, in re-orientating rhetoric towards the pursuit of truth – and thereby inflating its social value – he only augmented this power. Socrates identified a form of *agon* in which he was peerless, and so reinterpreted this custom as the ultimate measure of value. As Nehamas notes, Socrates’ success in effecting a permanent shift in the locus of value among aristocratic Athenians is a model case of Nietzsche’s will to power as a mechanism of change in history:

‘Whatever exists, having somehow come into being, is again and again reinterpreted to new ends, taken over, transformed, and redirected by some power superior to it; all events in the organic world are a subduing, a *becoming master*, and all subduing and becoming master involves a fresh interpretation, an adaptation through which any previous “meaning” and “purpose” are necessarily obliterated.’ (GM II.12)

This transformation was only possible, however, because the old way of things was in a state of irreversible decline. Socrates found himself among ‘men of fatigued instincts, among the conservatives of ancient Athens [*unter konservativen Altathern*]’ who paid lip service to traditions and values that no longer held any real meaning for them (BGE 212).

⁹⁹ Epicurus was only reclusive vis-à-vis the public and political life of the *polis* – his Garden was reputedly very convivial.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ As Socrates surely did, if only posthumously.

¹⁰² Nietzsche consistently associates Socratism with dogmatism – *not* in the sense of an arbitrarily or irrationally-held belief *per se*, but as a consequence of the Socratic insistence on universality, that is: ‘What is good for me is good not only for me, but for all people, in all places, at all times.’

He acted as a reflection of the iniquity of his contemporaries in two ways: First, he was the most extreme case of what was generally understood to be a wider social malady. Nietzsche refers to a tale¹⁰³ in which a physiognomist, observing Socrates' astonishing ugliness, calls him a 'cave of bad appetites', a judgement which Socrates himself happily endorses. He is therefore taken to embody the moral degeneration – or sickness – of Athens: 'Everywhere the instincts were in anarchy; everywhere people were but five steps from excess' (*TI* 'Problem', 9). Second, he was simultaneously the cure for that malady, revealed in his ironic response to the physiognomist's insult: 'That is true, but I have become master of them all'. These two features of his character allowed Socrates to 'see behind' his contemporaries, to expose their hypocrisy and to lacerate them for it even as he lacerated himself, the 'old physician and plebeian who cut ruthlessly into his own flesh, as he did into the flesh and heart of the "noble"' (*BGE* 212).

As David McNeill argues, for Nietzsche, Socrates came to represent an inversion of the degenerating nobility of Athens, in which young and sybaritic libertines like Alcibiades saw 'the contradictions in [their] soul transformed into an ideal'.¹⁰⁴ In *Symposium*, Plato makes Alcibiades stagger into the party late, drunk, supported by an *aulos* girl and wreathed in ivy and violets – inhabiting, quite explicitly, the role of Dionysus – before offering an encomium to Socrates that begins, interestingly, as something like a rebuke: he compares Socrates to the Sirens and the satyr Marsyas, branding him *hubristês* (ὕβριστής). The use of this word in particular (meaning an 'insolent, licentious, wanton man', typically of such overweening arrogance that he sees fit to challenge the gods) is a calculated irony – who could better deserve such a characterisation than Alcibiades? However, it is precisely Socrates' ability to hold up a mirror to Alcibiades, to induce him for once to *shame*, to make him feel that his life is not worth living, that earns adulation.

Alcibiades' attack on Socrates is essentially Aristophanic in character, depending as it does on the picture of human desire which the comedian earlier sketched in his own encomium to *eros*, and it speaks to the text's general concern with the interrelation of Socratic philosophy, tragedy, and comedy. Aristophanes' speech characterises *eros* as a limiting force that acts upon, and constrains, our thumotic¹⁰⁵ longings: 'horizontal' desires for food, wine, and sex divert men from their 'upwards' desire to surpass and dominate others. This regulatory effect is indispensable to the health of the state, for when men are unconcerned with erotic desires, their energies are focused

¹⁰³ He seems to be referring to an episode apparently related in the lost Socratic dialogue *Zopyrus* by Phaedo of Elis.

¹⁰⁴ McNeill, D.N., 'On the Relationship of Alcibiades' Speech to Nietzsche's "Problem of Socrates"' in ed. Bishop, P., *Nietzsche and Antiquity* (New York: Camden House, 2004) p. 269.

¹⁰⁵ Pertaining to the *thumos* or *thumoeides*, that component of the *psyche* concerned with excellence and pre-eminence in Plato's tripartite division of the soul (Plat. *Rep.* IV.439e), where it sits as the intermediary between *nous* ('intellect') and *epithumia* ('appetite').

solely on political self-aggrandisement and the ruthless pursuit of (often tyrannical) power. Heterosexual *eros* is less threatening in this sense than homosexual *eros*: heterosexual men are more given to reproduction, diffusing their horizontal desires across a network of dependent relationships (wives, children, siblings, etc.). Homosexual men, on the other hand, marry and reproduce only according to the command of custom, and are more readily able to regard sex as a functional tool, allowing them to satisfy their erotic desires and then, in their sense of fulness, more vigorously pursue thumotic desire (Plat. *Sym.* 192b1-3). Erotic desires can serve this limiting function, however, only so long as they remain unfulfilled: one who is either satisfied (his erotic desires are slaked) or otherwise unmoved by desire at all (e.g. Socrates) is dangerous, because he is free to pursue his basic or essential ('original') thumotic desire.

The threat of such an unrestrained kind of person is conveyed in the myth of the circle-men: human beings, in our original state, were creatures of impressive power and determination and 'being terrific in strength and vigour' we 'got big ideas' and naturally elected to wage war on the Olympian gods (Plat. *Sym.* 190b5). When Zeus subsequently intervenes, separating the circle-men into two halves, their thumotic desire for supremacy is undiminished, but their psychophysical capacity to pursue that desire is radically enfeebled: sundered from themselves, the circle-men would spend all their time vainly attempting to re-join their missing halves (the advent of *eros* in the form of the *epithumia* to be with others), and thereby neglect their own subsistence, perishing of starvation. Being desirous of human worship, Zeus was dissatisfied with this outcome, and decided to rearrange the genitals of the circle-men: positioning these at the front of their bodies. Now that human beings were able to consummate their erotic desire in the form of sex, they could intermittently experience the sense of 'wholeness' that their separation otherwise denied them, and were then able to focus on providing for themselves, and worshipping the gods. Aristophanes *presents* his account of *eros* in terms of the human desire to feel a sense of wholeness through another, that is, to bind oneself to other people and thereby achieve a completeness of which we are otherwise constitutively incapable. Crucially, however, this is a merely instrumental effect of *eros*, whose real object, on Aristophanes' view, is to prevent people from becoming useless through the torment of complete denial, or dangerous through its complete satisfaction: through the fleeting satisfaction of erotic longing in the act of sex, Zeus made it possible for the newly separated humans to live and work apart from one another. Far from having the romantic tint sometimes supposed, then, Aristophanes' encomium to erotic love presents it as a tool of pragmatic value, one which safeguards the health of the state by keeping human beings in an intermediate condition between satisfaction and denial.

From Aristophanes' point of view, Socrates' self-control with respect to the pleasures of the body is what makes him so dangerous: he seems almost completely indifferent to the erotic pursuits that occupy other men and manifests no obvious longing to be with others. Socrates does not need, in principle, the company of anyone else in order to engage in philosophical activity. Just as he needs no other bodies, he is represented in the *Clouds* as remarkably independent from his own: he does not wear shoes, and is indifferent to the cold (103, 363, 416), he is so unconcerned with sleep that the bedbugs which infest his dwelling do not bother him (633-4, 699, 707-15), he is used to going without food and wine (175, 415-6), and he does not spend time washing himself (835-7). Socrates' speech envisions a loftier goal for *eros*, far from being a restraining force exercised on thumotic desire, it has an integral (if instrumental) role to play in an individual's progression to the 'birth of true virtue'. The *thumos* has a much more limited role, one that is subordinated to *eros*: he presents thumotic desire as principally the longing for honour, which itself is just a species of *eros*. In conceiving of desire as a basically unitary phenomenon, Socrates could not depart more completely from Aristophanes' account.

Returning then to the myth of the circle-men, we can say that Zeus' plan has failed in the case of Socrates: his gaze is not directed down towards his navel and genitals, or outwards towards other people, but fixed ever upward. In his apparent immunity to the regulating effect of *eros* conceived as separate from (and a restraint upon) the *thumos*, Socrates implicitly inhabits the same position as the vigorous and powerful human beings who preceded us: unrestrained, and inclined to *hubris*, an arrogance and ambition that is bound to culminate in hostility towards established religion and Athenian culture. In *Clouds*, Socrates is presented as manifesting just this tyrannical ambition and disregard for the gods: he first appears suspended on 'the machine', typically used to represent the gods 'standing above' the dramatic action. He denies the divinity of Zeus and refuses to acknowledge oaths sworn in the name of the Athenian gods (247-8, 267). Far from being indifferent to the pursuit of social pre-eminence, he is depicted as a tyrant to his students, who fear him and whose condition resembles that of ill-treated beasts (184-6, 195). When Nietzsche points to Socrates' apparent hypocrisy (his overtaking of established practices as a mechanism of his own will to power at work), he therefore echoes and restates the Aristophanic perspective, given voice by Alcibiades when he brands Socrates 'ὄβριστης'.

In *Frogs*, Dionysus instructs the two tragedians to give prayer to the Muses before their contest begins. Aeschylus does so immediately, but Euripides states flatly that 'My vows are paid to other gods than these' (889) and, when Dionysus asks if these gods are his own, newly coined, Euripides agrees (891). In *Clouds*, Aristophanes has Socrates demand that Strepsiades

acknowledge three gods only, Chaos, the Clouds, and the Tongue (423-424); compare this with the charge brought against Socrates by the Athenians that he ‘does injustice . . . by bringing in new and strange divinities’ (*kaina daimonia eispherôn or eisêgoumenos*)¹⁰⁶, and it seems reasonable to infer that Aristophanes believed both that Socrates was guilty of *hubris* and that he had transmitted this same arrogance to the tragic works of Euripides. As Nietzsche writes,

‘It did not escape their contemporaries in the ancient world that the tendencies of Socrates and Euripides were closely related. The most eloquent expression of their good nose for things was the legend circulating in Athens that Socrates was in the habit of helping Euripides compose his poetry.’¹⁰⁷ (BT 13)

It is safe to assume that Plato was fully aware of the continuity between the perspectives of Aristophanes and Alcibiades – the latter implicitly assumes the role of Dionysus in judgement, a clear mirroring of the *Frogs*. Aristophanes is just about to offer a rejoinder to Socrates’ speech before he is tellingly interrupted by the arrival of Alcibiades, perhaps a narrative indication that the latecomer is to make Aristophanes’ point for him (*Symposium* 212c5).

It is not uncommon in translations of this passage for *ὕβριστής* to be rendered in English as ‘criminal’ – especially given Alcibiades’ suggestion that he shall ‘gather witnesses’ should Socrates refute his accusation (215b) – opening a tantalising connection with Nietzsche’s characterisation of the criminal as revolutionary transgressor against the dominant ideal. While Nietzsche recapitulates the main points of Aristophanes’ critique of Socrates and Euripides, he does so with a slightly different valence: that Socrates should be hostile to established religion, trusting entirely in his own judgement over and against the determinations of the *nomos* – that is, that he should display a *revolutionary* antipathy towards the customary way of looking at the world, is surely something admirable, at least in a sense, as far as Nietzsche is concerned. In order for Socrates to become a genius, an exceptional and great individual, he must ‘for a time, bear the pallid and fatalistic mark of the Chandala’ and willingly open up a gulf between himself and the general run of humanity. Nietzsche’s ambivalence towards Socrates is here at its most intense: on the one hand, Socratism spelled the doom of Attic tragedy and the worldview it encapsulated, one which Nietzsche took to be of incalculable value, but on the other, this ‘ruthless criticism of all that exists’ is the burden and the responsibility of all great innovators of the spirit.

Importantly, however, Socrates’ single-minded pursuit of the truth, and his valorisation of reason at the expense of the bodily drives, represents a total rejection of the logic of competition which

¹⁰⁶ D.L. II.40.

¹⁰⁷ D.L. II.18.

governs the ‘contest-idea’ which Nietzsche lauds and which is manifested so impressively in the work of Aeschylus and Sophocles. Nietzsche observes in an 1881 notebook that the success of the ancient Greek states (in terms not only of their cultural output, but also their basic social cohesion) depended on how effectively their institutions could manage the balance between the competing psychological elements in their citizens, and thereby regulate the effects of thumotic desire. The principal means by which they achieved this, he thinks, is through the contest-idea in its specific manifestation as *agon*, state-sanctioned competition which redirects the potentially destructive jealous energies of citizens into competitive activity that actually promotes the flourishing of the city. He writes, ‘The Greek legislators promoted the *agon* in order to divert competition from the state and to gain political calm . . . – this had the secondary effect of making the citizens strong and beautiful.’¹⁰⁸ In the following section, I argue that Nietzsche saw the constitution of the human soul as analogous to that of the state: just as the competition between the ambitious citizens and their fiery thumotic desires must be redirected towards productive ends, so too, I will argue, did Nietzsche think that the competition between the opposing drives which comprise the psyche require regulation. As we shall see, Socrates’ repudiation of this principle represents, for Nietzsche, his most significant theoretical transgression (and the most compelling evidence of his own psychological pathology).

III. Socratic Moderation as *décadence*

The last words of Socrates, as recorded in the *Phaedo*, were ‘Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius; make this offering to him and do not forget’ (Plat. *Phaedo* 118a). Earlier in the same dialogue, as Socrates converses with his companions about his imminent death by poison, he intimates that the aim of philosophy is ‘to practise for dying and death’ (Plat. *Phaedo* 64a). Socrates further elicits from his partner in conversation, Simmias, that death is that process by which the soul is separated from the body and, since any true philosopher disdains ‘pleasures concerned with the service of the body’ as obstacles to the acquisition of knowledge, he has no cause to be perturbed by the prospect of his own death. The senses are incapable of grasping the immaterial forms of the Just, the Beautiful, and the Good, and worse still, have a powerfully deleterious effect on the ability of the ‘soul itself’ to grasp them. Only when the soul is emancipated from the body, therefore, can it attain ‘pure knowledge’ (Plat. *Phaedo* 65-67). The life of the body, with its ceaseless distractions and drives, presents itself to the Socrates of *Phaedo* as a kind of illness,

¹⁰⁸ eKGWB/NF-1881,11[186].

and so it is little wonder that he should regard his eventual death as a curative blessing bestowed by Asclepius, the god of medicine.

In ‘The Problem of Socrates’, Nietzsche argues that this negative assessment of life amounts to a form of ‘*décadence*’ no different, ultimately, to the licentiousness of Alcibiades. In keeping with the general orientation of his philosophy, defined by what one commentator has called a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’,¹⁰⁹ Nietzsche claims that assessments of the value of life can only ever be ‘symptomatic’. Because, he thinks, the value of life itself cannot be estimated by man – as he is ‘party to the dispute, indeed its object, and not the judge of it’ – Nietzsche claims that ‘value judgements concerning life . . . possess value only as symptoms’, symptoms which speak to the psychological health of their advocates and little else.¹¹⁰

In the same essay, Nietzsche presents a 5th century Athens characterised by ‘fatigued instincts’, teetering on the precipice of degeneration and cultural retrogression spurred by the slow death of old values. Two rival responses to this situation arise to confront each other: the unbridled hedonism of Alcibiades, whose manifold passions pull him in this or that direction, unmoderated by a sense of propriety or virtue, and the rationalism of Socrates, who would make his reason master of the passions and so tame them. Socrates perceived the conflictual nature of the human in the same way that Schopenhauer later would: the drives are the source of human suffering, and so to be ruled by one’s desires is not only to surrender the pursuit of truth – which is everywhere hampered by the bodily functions – but also to submit oneself to a miserable existence:

‘Only the body and its desires cause war, civil discord, and battles, for all wars are due to the desire to acquire wealth, and it is the body and the care of it, to which we are enslaved, that compel us to acquire wealth...’ (Plat. *Phaedo*, 66c-d)

Nietzsche shares Socrates’ judgement: the unrestrained debauchery of Alcibiades constitutes a surrender to the ‘anarchy of the instincts’, an admission that one is enslaved to the whims of passion, unable to balance or regulate the competing elements of one’s nature. Perhaps counterintuitively, then, this inability to moderate the influence of the drives is definitive of Nietzsche’s concept of *décadence* as applied to Socrates. To better understand this charge, we must briefly sketch Nietzsche’s philosophical psychology.

¹⁰⁹ Josselson, R., ‘The Hermeneutics of Faith and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion’, *Narrative Inquiry*, Volume 14, Issue 1, Jan 2004, p. 1.

¹¹⁰ ‘The Problem of Socrates’ in *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ* trans. Hollingdale, R.J., (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 40.

The central concept in Nietzsche's philosophical psychology is the 'drive' (*Trieb* or, sometimes, *Instinkt*): he defines the human will and its free exercise solely in terms of the interplay of drives (*BGE* 19) and identifies them as the source of our moral sentiments (*GS* 335). Nietzsche's use of the term is specialist, as evidenced by his tendency to ascribe agential and homuncular characteristics to the 'drives' at stake in his analysis: any given drive 'evaluates' objectives (*HH* I.32), 'represents itself', and 'philosophises' (*BGE* 6). It is unlikely, therefore, that Nietzsche intends by 'drive' merely some base appetite or physiological condition¹¹¹ – indeed, the human will, comprised of these drives, is a 'commonwealth of souls' in which the dominant drives function as a 'ruling class' (*BG* 19).

Nietzsche consistently characterises these basic units of human psychology as standing in essentially *oppositional* relations to one another: 'every drive is tyrannical' and exists in an 'order of rank' relative to every other (*BGE* 6). Each drive, for Nietzsche, represents a particular evaluation of the object towards which it is directed, and thus he tends to talk about the complex of drives which makes up the individual as though it were a host of tiny subjects, each with its own perspective and each pulling against all the others in an effort to obtain mastery. Each drive is a 'kobold' or 'spirit' which longs to present itself as the ultimate object of existence and thereby tyrannise over the rest.

This way of thinking about human psychology resembles an internalisation of Heraclitus' ontology of strife: for Nietzsche, the 'ever-living fire' of Heraclitus' cosmos penetrates even into our souls, as the violent interplay of forces in the form of drives mirrors the relentless flux and transformation of the natural world. This state of affairs, while protean, is also no more chaotic in principle than Heraclitus' universal picture: while the universe is regulated by the *logos*, so too is the mind of a healthy individual regulated by a balance between the drives. The *décadent*, however, is 'too weak-willed, too degenerate' to achieve such a balance, and so either surrenders to his desires, or makes war on them (*TI* 'Morality as Anti-Nature', 1).

Nietzsche claims that the will-to-truth which one generally finds 'in cases of really scientific men' is not, in fact, the 'father of philosophy', i.e. the drive that impels people to engage in philosophical enquiry. Rather, the drive to knowledge is a kind of instrument taken up and 'used' by another drive for its purposes (*BGE*, 1). In the case of Socrates, Nietzsche considers his elevation of the drive to knowledge to a superordinate position over the other desires to be a function of the 'fear of and flight from pessimism.'¹¹² With this in mind, let us turn to consider

¹¹² 'An Attempt at Self-Criticism' in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Speirs, R., trans. (Cambridge, 2004), p. 4.

the Socratic model of self-mastery which Nietzsche attacks so vituperatively in ‘The Problem of Socrates’.

Socrates’ prescription for this malady (the anarchy of the instincts) is as morbid as one might expect in view of his characterisation of philosophy as ‘practice for dying’:

‘While we live, we shall be closest to knowledge if we refrain as much as possible from association with the body...’ (Plat. *Phaedo*, 66e)

The Socrates of *Phaedo* therefore recommends that the pursuit of truth be undertaken at the expense of bodily pleasure, to the greatest extent possible short of suicide. Rather than submit our reason to the dictates of the drives, Socrates contends that the drives should be made answerable to our reason. This accounts for his reputed abstemiousness: in addition to the other ascetic habits depicted by Aristophanes, Diogenes Laërtius reports that Socrates was also peculiarly frugal with food (D.L. 2.27). This is not to say that Socrates did not feel the pull of the drives in the first place – his denial of them was a *struggle*: recall the tale of the physiognomist.

Against Alcibiades, the perfect inversion of Socratic asceticism, Socrates understood that the anarchy of instinct had to be overcome through a kind of self-interrogation and discipline. However, what makes Socrates a *décadent* as far as Nietzsche is concerned is that his prescription for self-mastery consists not in a harmonious reconciliation of the multiple drives, but in their complete subjugation by reason:

‘If one needs to make a tyrant of *reason*, as Socrates did, then there must exist no little danger of something else playing the tyrant.’

By insisting that all human activity be submitted first to dialectic (for Nietzsche: to the exercise of justifying oneself by giving *reasons*), Socrates elevated one particular drive above all the others: the will to truth. Nietzsche regards this drive as no less an instinct than any other, and for him the Socratic hypertrophy of the cognitive faculty, the identification of human selfhood with this lone impulse, represents an implied denigration of the rest: they become, as one commentator puts it, ‘lower, degenerate . . . features simply of the body or our fallen nature.’¹¹³ Just as Nietzsche judged that any permanent resolution to the endless competition which characterised the *poleis* would (and, indeed, did)¹¹⁴ result in cultural stagnation, so the permanent triumph of any one drive over the rest leads a person to nihilism and life-denial.

¹¹³ Nehamas, A., ‘A Reason for Socrates’ Face’ in *The Art of Living*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p. 139.

¹¹⁴ See Nietzsche’s analysis of the Peloponnesian War in ‘Homer’s Contest’.

In abstaining as much as possible from the indulgences of the flesh and thereby deliberately suppressing those desires that might otherwise cause suffering or diminish our capacity to reason, the Socratic approach seeks to attack *décadence* itself. For Nietzsche, however, this is folly: “To *have* to combat one’s instincts – that is the formula for *décadence*.”¹¹⁵ To posit a conflict between one’s passions and one’s self in this manner – to assume that such a distinction is even possible – is ‘to attack life at its roots’. Far from being a deliverance, this kind of discipline represents an acute form of degeneration, a resort to ‘castration’, to ‘extermination’, to the judgement that ‘one must kill the passions’ (*il faut tuer les passions*).¹¹⁶ Socrates’ cure, like Schopenhauer’s saintly-ascetic ideal, results in an abnegation of life; something which Nietzsche repudiates as a symptom of the very disease it purports to treat.

Nietzsche concludes ‘The Problem of Socrates’ with a speculation: could Socrates, in the end, have reached this realisation himself?

“Socrates *wanted* to die – it was not Athens, it was *he* who handed himself the poison cup, who compelled Athens to hand him the poison cup... “Socrates is no physician,” he said softly to himself: “death alone is a physician here... Socrates himself has merely been a long time sick...”¹¹⁷

IV. Socrates as Rival

So, Nietzsche’s antipathy towards Socrates can be explained in large part by the Socratic tendency to will the dissolution of the contest of the drives and their subordination to reason. It is in this sense – as an opponent of the contest-idea, ‘the noblest fundamental thought of the Hellenes’ – that Nietzsche derides Socrates as archetypally ‘anti-Greek’ [*antigriechisch*]. However, Nietzsche’s relationship with Socrates is more ambiguous still: he elsewhere seems more than able to praise philosophers whose doctrines he refutes. To take an obvious example, Nietzsche rejects almost totally the content of Schopenhauer’s philosophy – his convoluted metaphysics and his resort to an extreme saintly-ascetic model of moral virtue – but he nonetheless recognises Schopenhauer the man as his ‘great teacher’, and as, if nothing else, a worthy opponent against whom his ideas are ultimately to be measured. We might rightly wonder why Socrates, who appears to perform the same function, is denied a similar acknowledgement.

¹¹⁵ ‘The Problem of Socrates’, 11.

¹¹⁶ ‘Morality as Anti-Nature’, 1.

¹¹⁷ ‘The Problem of Socrates’, 12.

Indeed, Nietzsche describes *himself* as a decadent in the first part of *Ecce Homo* and draws explicit comparison with Socrates, concluding:

‘Need I say after all this that in questions of decadence I am *experienced?*’ (EH I.1)

Nietzsche, one might observe, seems to regard himself as emerging among ‘men of fatigued instincts’, in a culture hovering on the precipice of disaster as its moral centre begins to disintegrate. Is he not as much a carrion-bird (or a gadfly) as Socrates?

Nehamas argues that this is in fact the case, and that Nietzsche and Socrates stand very close to one another by Nietzsche’s own measurement. He explains the gruesome, decadent figure of Socrates whom Nietzsche fashions in the later period in terms of a kind of psychological defence mechanism: Nietzsche *must* distinguish himself from Socrates in order to exist as the character he presents as, and so constructs Socrates the Dogmatist as a complete antipode. If Nietzsche were ever to recognise Socrates’ influence on his own thought, he would be forced to confront their overwhelming similarity and thereby risk losing his sense of himself as occupying a unique position in the history of philosophy.¹¹⁸

That Nietzsche does not acknowledge Socrates as an educator can be explained in a different (and, I think, more satisfying) way, however: if Nietzsche really does view his task as effecting a complete transformation of the moral landscape, in the mode of Socrates, then he must necessarily take Socrates as his competitor. So total was Socrates’ triumph – the ‘vortex and turning-point of so-called world history’ (BT 15) – that the new table of values he created utterly displaced what had preceded them. The ‘dominant ideal’ *is* Socrates, and Nietzsche must therefore contest it if he is to accomplish his goal. Consider, as an analogy, the position of the Apolline in *The Birth of Tragedy*: despite according the Apolline drive an equally important station to its opposite, Nietzsche devotes scant time in the book to giving an exposition of it when compared to his extensive disquisition on the nature of the Dionysiac. This is because he observes the Apolline influence everywhere in contemporary culture, and in the history of Europe from Socrates onwards – it is Dionysus who stands as the neglected partner. Nietzsche would do little for the ‘science of aesthetics’ if he spent his time celebrating the beauty of geometric symmetry in plastic art; his contribution is precisely to drag the Dionysiac forces back into the limelight. The same is true of Socrates: so successful was the Socratic project of reorienting society towards the pursuit of truth and the pacification of the competition between drives in the individual that it forms the status quo against which Nietzsche much distinguish

¹¹⁸ Nehamas, *The Art of Living*, p. 154.

himself. Nietzsche regards Socrates, by the very fact of his genius and the corresponding enormity of his influence on European civilisation, as a competitor and rival to be overcome, just as Socrates himself saw Homer.

CHAPTER 4

THE SOUL-SOOTHER OF LATER ANTIQUITY: NIETZSCHE ON EPICURUS AND SCHOPENHAUER

I see his eyes gaze upon a wide, white sea, across rocks at the shore that are bathed in sunlight, while large and small animals are playing in this light, as secure and calm as the light and his eyes. Such happiness could be invented only by a man who was suffering continually. It is the happiness of eyes that have seen the sea of existence become calm, and now they can never weary of the surface and of the many hues of this tender, shuddering skin of the sea. Never before has voluptuousness been so modest.'

- *The Gay Science* I.45

There are few individuals about whom Nietzsche wrote so effusively as he did of Epicurus. Lauded as 'one of the greatest men' in *The Wanderer and His Shadow* (HH III.295), Nietzsche's admiration permeated even his private letters: in 1883, he confided in Heinrich Köselitz that the bust of Epicurus seems to emanate 'willpower and intellectuality' and expressed his envy for the tranquillity of the Garden.¹¹⁹ In this chapter, I will reconstruct Nietzsche's reception of Epicurus and attempt to answer one of the major interpretive questions it presents.

Epicurus receives more praise in Nietzsche's writing – both his published work and his private letters – than almost any other figure. This adulation is concentrated mainly in the period 1879 to 1883 (the so-called 'middle period', encompassing *Human, All Too Human*, *Daybreak*, and the first four books of *The Gay Science*). In this chapter, I will argue that Nietzsche's admiration for Epicurus is surprising (and therefore interesting) for the following reasons: Epicurus' elevation of the state of *ataraxia* – a sort of serenity unperturbed by desire – to the ideal condition at which life should direct itself bears more than a superficial resemblance to that brand of asceticism (associated principally with Schopenhauer) which Nietzsche consistently attacks as being in opposition to life. Relatedly, the harmonious seclusion of the Epicurean Garden, with its

¹¹⁹ *Digitale kritische Gesamtausgabe Werke und Briefwechsel*, 428. An Heinrich Köselitz in Venedig, 1. Juli 1883 and 457.: 26. August 1883.

commandment to ‘live unnoticed’, appears inconsistent with the explosive, adversarial, warlike agonism that Nietzsche elsewhere takes as the essential ingredient of Greek genius.

Taken together, these considerations make it difficult to see why Epicurus appears so frequently in Nietzsche’s middle period writings as a model of genius. In what follows, I aim to explain both why, at least for this substantial period, Nietzsche seems to have regarded Epicurus’ ethics as different enough from those of Schopenhauer (whose asceticism Nietzsche famously rejects) to warrant a positive assessment, and how his fondness for the serenity of the Garden is quite consistent with his reception of the Greeks more generally.

I will begin by outlining the interpretation of Epicurean hedonism which can most credibly be ascribed to Nietzsche: I will argue, against less radical readings, that Epicurus regarded the absence of pain and disturbance as *identical with pleasure*, and provide circumstantial evidence that Nietzsche was sympathetic to this interpretation. This being the case, the Epicurean picture begins to strongly resemble Schopenhauer’s pessimistic metaphysics in ‘Additional Remarks on the Doctrine of the Suffering of the World’ and Book II of *The World as Will and Representation*. This is an interpretive problem insofar as Nietzsche rejects Schopenhauer for his commitment to an axiological opposition to suffering which ultimately engenders nihilism: Schopenhauer’s remedy for the inexorable torment of the will is *décadent* in the manner of Socrates – a saintly-ascetic ideal according to which desire is denied to the greatest degree possible. The problem, then, is how Nietzsche can simultaneously approve of the Epicurean perspective while emphatically rejecting the Schopenhauerian one.

I will make the case that the relevant distinction between these points of view lies in the evaluative stance towards life and the bodily drives which they imply, and not in any substantial disagreement about the character of pleasure and pain. I will argue that the basic similarity between Epicurus and Schopenhauer is their mutual recognition of the problem presented by desire, namely, that the multiplication of desires is attended by the multiplication of suffering. As we shall see, the central difference from Nietzsche’s point of view is that Schopenhauer advocates for the resolute denial of desire itself, whereas Epicurus actually promotes the *cultivation* of certain desires. The pessimistic conclusion of Schopenhauer, according to which there is no way of living that could be preferable to nonexistence, is absent in Epicurus: where Schopenhauer abjures sensuality with a Socratic abstemiousness, Epicurus develops a taxonomy of desire which demands that reason distinguish between that which is necessary and that which is superfluous. Finally, I will argue that the Epicurean model of *ataraxia* represents a balancing and rank-ordering of the human drives which maps onto Nietzsche’s dictum in *The Gay Science* of

‘giving style to one’s character’ (GS 290) and constitutes a psychologised restatement of the *agon*, that ‘contest-idea of the Greek individual and the Greek state’ (PTG 5). I argue that, for a time at least, Epicurus represented for Nietzsche a compelling alternative to the Socratic model of self-mastery as tyranny, one predicated on maintaining (rather than dissolving) the oppositional contest of the drives.

I. The Storm of the Soul: Epicurus on Pleasure

In order to make clear the interpretive problem presented by Nietzsche’s positive assessment of Epicurus, it is necessary to explain, in brief, the conception of pleasure found in Epicurean ethics. The similarities between Epicurus and Schopenhauer become striking when their distinctively *negative* characterisations of pleasure are compared.

Epicurus is far from unique among Hellenistic philosophers in his conception of philosophy as the practice of living well. What *is* unique about the Epicurean ethical eudaimonism, and most interesting for our purposes here, is the nature of the good it advocates: pleasure ‘construed as quiet of mind (*ataraxia*) and the absence of bodily pain (*aponia*)¹²⁰ is Epicurus’ guiding principle. It appears that Epicurus himself did not feel he had to make a formal case for the status of pleasure as the *summum bonum* of human life. The truth of the proposition that pleasure is good and pain bad is taken to be immediately apparent to the senses, and moreover observable in human behaviour: everywhere we seek to promote our own pleasure while avoiding pain. Indeed, the Epicurean Torquatus of Cicero’s *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum* equates the basic hedonistic principle with factual statements such as ‘snow is white’, ‘fire is hot’, and so on (*Fin.* II.6-19). The claim that hedonism is self-evidently true, and therefore requires no proof by argument, may seem to us to be as controversial (if not flatly provocative), but no more controversial than the character of the hedonism being asserted: On what grounds, one might ask, does Epicurus seem to conflate pleasure with the mere absence of pain? Plato had maintained that these two conditions are discrete (*Rep.* 583c-584), and to the hedonistic Cyrenaics such a conflation was intolerable. Eusebius records that, for Aristippus of Cyrene, there are three basic states in which human beings can be:

‘one in which we are in pain, and which is like a storm at sea; a second in which we experience pleasure, and which is like a gentle swell . . . and the third, intermediate, in which

¹²⁰ Erler, M., Schofield, M., ‘Epicurean Ethics’ in eds. Algra, K., Barnes, J., Mansfeld, J., Schofield, M., *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 644.

we feel neither pain nor pleasure, and which is like a flat calm.’ (*Praeparatio Evangelica*, XIV.18.32)

This distinction and, in particular, the assessment that pleasure has a positive reality beyond the mere negation of suffering, has intuitive appeal. It seems plausible to suggest that certain kinds of gratification are independent of any pain or deficit they might relieve. This is a criticism pressed at length in the second book of *De Finibus*, along with the charge of self-contradiction, for Epicurus professes that he is able to conceive of the good only in terms of the sensory pleasures to which he apparently denies positive reality. Anticipating this putatively Epicurean assessment in Book IX of *Republic*, Plato has Socrates make the case that it is erroneous to judge pleasure as that state which follows from the relief of some pain or discomfort, pointing out that certain experiences may prompt spontaneous pleasure (smelling a pleasant odour, for example). Indeed, the scholarship of recent decades has largely denied that Epicurus ever held such an extreme position: Erler and Schofield, to take an influential example, assert that Epicurus would have ‘firmly rejected’ the claim that he regards pleasure as simply synonymous with the absence of pain.¹²¹

A thorough assessment of the competing interpretations of Epicurus on pleasure is, of course, beyond the scope of this chapter. However, it is worth noting that the more ‘radical’ interpretation of Epicurean pleasure – the one which I argue we should assume Nietzsche held – is defensible.¹²² Perhaps most revealingly, Epicurus himself seems to have stressed that his position was distinct from (and stronger than) that of the Cyrenaics on this point: the simile Eusebius attributes to Aristippus is the more fascinating because it is also found, in a paraphrased form, in Epicurus. In a concise statement of the negative pleasure of *aponia* and *ataraxia*, he writes:

‘When once we have this [the surcease of suffering] come about, all the storm of the soul abates, seeing that the living creature cannot then go as if in search of something it lacks, or of anything else by which the good of the soul and the body will be fulfilled. For it is then

¹²¹ Erler and Schofield, ‘Epicurean Ethics’, p. 653.

¹²² If we accept the argument that the Epicurean good is the delight *brought about* by the absence of suffering, rather than the absence of suffering itself, what we are left with is little more than a variation on the doctrine of Aristippus. The delight one takes in *ataraxia* and *aponia* would be, strictly speaking, a kind of ‘kinetic’ (as opposed to negative, or ‘kataktematic’) pleasure. In this case, the distinction between Epicurean and Cyrenaic hedonism must be considered very minor, if not negligible, and certainly much less than Epicurus makes out, for the Cyrenaics were happy to admit of mental pleasures alongside physical ones. The price one pays for denying the radical interpretation, therefore, is the originality and power of the Epicurean insight, reduced as it is to a modest refinement of Aristippus. Moreover, less radical readings (e.g. Erler and Schofield 1999, Gosling and Taylor 1982) require the attribution to Epicurus of the strange tendency to misrepresent himself by standardly presenting his view of the good in negative terms. We should not worry that we encumber Nietzsche with a patently incorrect view by presenting him as having held to a more radical reading of Epicurus on pleasure.

that we have need of pleasure, when we are in pain because of the absence of pleasure. When we are not in pain, we no longer have the need for pleasure.’ (*Ep. Men.* 128)

The denial of the middle condition, the gentle swell, and the implicit assignment of the designation ‘pleasure’ to the ‘flat calm’, signals that the Epicurean position is a significant departure from Aristippus. Epicurus deliberately characterises pleasure as the abatement of ‘the storm of the soul’, the absence of bodily pain and mental anguish. This is the interpretation taken up by Arthur Schopenhauer (who identifies Epicurean pleasure with the temporary suspension of the Will) and, I argue, by Nietzsche.

We know that the young Nietzsche read – and was much impressed by – Friedrich Albert Lange’s *The History of Materialism and Criticism of Its Present Importance*,¹²³ in which an account is given of major materialist philosophies from Democritus to Kant. According to Lange’s characterisation, ‘Peace of soul and freedom from pain are the only lasting pleasures, and these are therefore the true aims of existence.’ Lange sharply distinguishes the hedonism of Epicurus from that of Aristippus in the form of life that each promotes: the ‘quiet garden-life of Epicurus’ amounting to the *vita contemplativa* of the mature man, in stark contrast to the ‘tempestuous’ life of Aristippus, a symptom of ‘unquiet youth’. This comparison recalls the ‘storm-at-sea’ simile and locates the distinctiveness of the Epicurean doctrine precisely in its negative characterisation of pleasure.¹²⁴ As we shall see, this interpretation of Epicurus had earlier been adopted by Schopenhauer, who elected to cast his account of the psychology of aesthetic experience in terms of Epicurean enlightenment. We have reason to suspect, therefore, not merely that Nietzsche was aware of interpretations of Epicurean hedonism as basically *negative* in its conception of pleasure, but that he was well-disposed to such readings.

If, for the sake of argument, we adopt this reading (which is not without merit and which, more importantly, is likely to be the one which Nietzsche himself accepted) an illuminating parallel with Schopenhauer becomes available.

¹²³ See eKGWB/BVN-1866,517 – *Brief AN Carl von Gersdorf*. Ende August 1886 in which Nietzsche quotes Lange’s *The History of Materialism and Criticism of Its Present Importance* approvingly, describing the work as ‘excellent and very instructive’ (*vortrefflich und sehr belehrend*).

¹²⁴ Lange, F.A., *The History of Materialism and Criticism of Its Present Importance* Vol. I., trans. Thomas, E.C. (London: Trübner & Co, 1887), p. 103.

II. Schopenhauer and Epicurus on the Character of Suffering and the Purpose of Philosophy

In ‘Additional Remarks on the Doctrine of the Suffering of the World’, Schopenhauer endeavours to show that suffering is the defining characteristic of existence. Targeted for especially excoriating polemic is the philosophical trope that ‘evil’ is a negative quality, which is to say that it consists of the mere absence of good. Schopenhauer rejects this view, attributed to Leibniz, on the grounds that it is the good which is negative, consisting merely in the absence or relief of evil. Crucially, he claims that ‘all happiness and satisfaction, is negative, that is, the mere elimination of a desire and the ending of a pain.’¹²⁵¹²⁶ In support of this claim, Schopenhauer provides a useful and grounded example of the negative character of the good:

Just as we *do not feel* the health of our whole body, but only the small spot where the shoe pinches, so we do not think of all our affairs that are going on perfectly well, but only of some insignificant trifle that annoys us.¹²⁷

This view is given fuller and weightier exposition in the second book of *The World as Will and Representation* (*WWR*), in which happiness is reduced to the satisfaction of a given state of willing. For Schopenhauer, existence consists, ineradicably and incessantly, in the undulations of a blind and insatiable metaphysical ‘Will’. His characterisation of this ‘Will’ is as a complex ontological postulate intended to partially transgress the Kantian prohibition by explaining some aspect of the ‘thing-in-itself’ (*Ding an sich*), the world as it exists independently of its objectification in experience. Schopenhauer’s expression of this idea – which he calls his ‘single thought’ (*der einzige Gedanke*); the sum of his entire philosophical system – sprawls across the four volumes of *WWR* and we need not trouble ourselves with his argumentation here. It is worth outlining, however, the basic insight into the character of existence in which Schopenhauer’s metaphysics results, and how he understands the Will to operate at the level of organic life, and human psychology, respectively. The behaviour of all organisms, according to Schopenhauer, is directed towards some localised objective which serves the overarching *telos* of the sustenance and propagation of life. He characterises this innate disposition to self-maintenance and reproduction as the ‘will to life’ (*Wille zum Leben*), of which the lion’s predatory behaviour and the sunflower’s tendency to bend towards the light, for instance, are both manifestations. The natural condition of all living

¹²⁵ Schopenhauer, A., ‘Additional Remarks on the Doctrine of the Suffering of the World’ in *Parerga and Paralipomena* Vol. II, trans. Payne, E.F.J., (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 292.

¹²⁶ Note that this subtle elision from ‘good and evil’ to ‘happiness and pain’ is Schopenhauer’s, not mine, although it is just as well for our discussion of hedonism.

¹²⁷ *Parerga and Paralipomena*, p. 291.

things, therefore, is *want* or *lack*: for food, water, light, sex and so on. While the Will has an expressly psychological dimension with respect to human beings and some animals, we should not imagine that Schopenhauer intends what might be called ‘panpsychism’ in modern parlance: the Will defines all forms in the world of representation and does not necessarily imply consciousness; as Christopher Janaway notes, ‘Everything in the world – humans, animals, plants, water, and stones – manifests Will in Schopenhauer’s new sense: no individual thing remains perpetually in a state of self-sufficiency.’¹²⁸

Although one might suppose that human intelligence elevates us above other forms of life in this regard, Schopenhauer insists to the contrary that the more sophisticated the intellect of a being, the greater and more complex its desires and, thus, the more numerous and exquisite its sufferings. Rationality, in this sense, becomes a mere instrument in service of the Will, which takes precedence as the indifferent motivating impetus of life. Although certain desires may be slaked, this is only temporary, and their satisfaction is always followed by a storm of fresh wants, or else by the crushing and distinctly human affliction of boredom. From these observations, Schopenhauer draws the dreadful conclusion of Book II: to exist is to will, which is to say to tend towards something which one is – or has – not; to lack something. In living, we will; in willing, we suffer.

Unsurprisingly, Schopenhauer’s ethical recommendation is a ‘saintly-ascetic’ form of life in which the demands of desire are denied as resolutely as possible. The unparalleled importance he places on art follows from his view that it is only during aesthetic experience that the Will is temporarily suspended and contemplation of ideas beyond the mere economy of our desires becomes possible. Schopenhauer understood this fleeting release from the pressures of the Will to be the objective of Epicurean hedonism:

‘it is the painless state, prized by Epicurus, as the highest good and the state of the gods; for that moment we are delivered from the miserable pressure of the will. We celebrate the Sabbath of the penal servitude of willing; the wheel of Ixion stands still.’¹²⁹

Nietzsche himself quotes this passage (including the comparison to Epicurus) in the third essay of *The Genealogy of Morals* as he advances his critique of Schopenhauer’s aesthetics. Under this

¹²⁸ Janaway, C., ‘Introduction’ in ed. Janaway, C., *The Cambridge Companion to Schopenhauer*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 7.

¹²⁹ Schopenhauer, A., *The World as Will and Representation* Vol. I, Payne, E.F.J., trans. (Dover Publications Inc., 1969), p. 196.

bleak view, 'happiness' merely implies the temporary termination of some desire, and the ultimate good is taken to be the abnegation of desire *itself*.

The parallels with Epicurus are therefore clear: the calming of the tempestuous human soul is the shared objective of their ethics, to be achieved by the elimination of 'unnecessary' desires and the pursuit of mental and physical tranquillity. Epicurus endorses a taxonomy of desires, distinguishing the 'necessary' from the 'unnecessary', and identifies the power of philosophy in its capacity to emancipate us, through the careful application of reason, from the needless longings and superstitions which cause us pain. Epicurus therefore takes up, perhaps with greater seriousness, the analogy made by many of his predecessors between philosophy and medicine; Porphyry cites the Epicurean teaching, 'Empty is that philosopher's discourse which offers therapy for no human passion' (Porph. *Marv.* 31). This view of reason, too, is shared by Schopenhauer: the value of the truths unearthed by philosophy lies in their potential to disabuse us of the Will's illusions, by means of which we are seduced into the fruitless pursuit of irrational desires.

It would also seem that both Epicurus and Schopenhauer identified the human capacity to anticipate future pleasure and pain as, itself, a source of intense gratification and of intense suffering. The beneficial power of anticipation as regarded by Epicurus is found in an extract from *On the Goal* cited by Plutarch:

'The well-balanced state of the flesh and reliable expectation about it hold the greatest and most secure joy for those who are capable of an appraisal.' (Plu. *Non Posse* 1089d)

While his acknowledgement of its corresponding potential to generate new kinds of pain is recorded by Diogenes Laërtius:

'...the flesh endures the storms of the present alone, the mind those of past and future as well as the present.' (D.L. X.137)

Schopenhauer also declares that reflection, a unique faculty of human beings made possible by our recollection and foresight, acts as a 'condenser', multiplying joy and suffering beyond the immediate. He claims that the tragic consequence of this faculty, however, is that we actively seek to increase our pleasures in a fashion – Schopenhauer claims – unknown to the animal or 'brute'. Because pleasures are only possible through the fulfilment of needs, that is, through the alleviation of suffering, human beings are ever in pursuit of more and varied *kinds* of suffering. This explains our distinctive predilection for 'luxury, delicacies, tobacco, opium, alcoholic

liquors, pomp, display, and all that goes with this.¹³⁰ Epicurus' emphasis on the power of reason is here most salient: the sober judgement of philosophy, made possible by those very faculties that lead us to proliferate our needless desires, can exorcise unnecessary sources of pain. Indeed, far from the debauched revelry he is taken by a hostile tradition to recommend, Epicurus' hedonism is instead characterised by a kind of tranquil austerity. As Nietzsche observes, 'A little garden, figs, little cheeses and in addition three or four good friends – these were the sensual pleasures of Epicurus' (*HH* III.16).

But this very modesty in matters of bodily pleasure itself presents a problem: Nietzsche's excoriating treatment of the 'ascetic ideal' in his later works connects abstemiousness in pleasures of the body with a nihilistic life-denial and 'turning away' from the world of sensation. We might recall his assessment of the role of asceticism in Schopenhauer's aesthetics: "what does it mean if a philosopher pays homage to ascetic ideals?" we get our first hint: he wants *to free himself from torture*' (*GM* III.6). As we have seen, Epicurus' ethics is in several major respects identical to that of Schopenhauer. This is problematic for interpreters of Nietzsche insofar as Schopenhauer's ethics provides the main grounds for Nietzsche's emphatic rejection of him as a life-denying ascetic. In the following sections, I argue that the key distinction between Epicurus and Schopenhauer for Nietzsche (at least in his middle period) lies in their markedly different responses to a world defined by suffering: where Schopenhauer resorts to nihilism, Epicurus cultivates a 'heroic-idyllic' mode of life-affirmation.

III. Epicurus and Schopenhauer on the 'Wisdom of Silenus'

It appears there is much in Epicurus for Nietzsche to revile: perhaps most significantly, he seems to share Schopenhauer's axiological opposition to suffering, a principle which Nietzsche charges with engendering nihilism. Nietzsche conceives of nihilism as the repudiation of the actual world for its incapacity to realise one's values. The nihilistic moment occurs, not when one comes to understand that one's values have become devalued, but when the (imagined) world in which their realisation is possible is shown to be a mirage (*WP* 37, cf. *ibid.* 12). For Nietzsche, the existential threat which faces modernity is the expiration of the metaphysical world in which our morals are alone realised. The consequence of this is either a transvaluation of values, or else the denial of the actual world which has, as Reginster puts it, 'proven inhospitable to the realisation

¹³⁰ Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena*, p. 294.

of certain specific (hedonistic) values'.¹³¹ In such a state of despair, Nietzsche observes, 'The hedonism of the weary is . . . the supreme measure of value' (*WP* 155). By this I take him to refer to that state of mind in which one would prefer the absence of sensation altogether, and the rest this entails, over the continuation of suffering. The apparent similarities between this unfortunate state and the hedonism of Epicurus (with its specifically negative characterisation of pleasure) are clear. This makes obvious the strong resemblance between Epicureanism and Schopenhauer's nihilistic pessimism, with its emphasis on the abnegation of desire.

We now see the fullness of the problem Nietzsche's admiration for Epicurus presents: how could the middle Nietzsche embrace Epicurus while rejecting Schopenhauer?

To answer this question, we must first compare the position each of these men occupies in Nietzsche's philosophy more broadly. While Schopenhauer's influence on Nietzsche cannot be overstated, its form is the subject of some debate. It is not clear that any positive doctrine is transmitted from Schopenhauer's systematic philosophy to Nietzsche's own thoughts after *The Birth of Tragedy*. Ivan Soll points out, I think quite rightly, that serious disagreement itself can constitute a profound form of influence with the potential to 'determine the focus and direction of [one's] thinking'.¹³² The idea that contest and struggle with worthy opponents, or against fearsome obstacles, is essential to the development of one's powers is quite natural to Nietzsche's way of thinking across his entire career. In 'Homer's Contest', he identifies this principle with the *agōn* (ἀγών) of the Greek states of antiquity, an institution which he understands to substantially account for their as-yet unsurpassed excellence. As we shall see, Nietzsche's reception of both Epicurus and Schopenhauer is best understood in terms of the *agon*, although in very different ways. In the case of Schopenhauer, he is a respected adversary ('a man and a knight with a glance of iron', *GM* III.5) against whom Nietzsche must distinguish himself: Schopenhauer's pessimism is the obstacle that must somehow be overcome.

Schopenhauer himself summarises this pessimism in the judgement that,

'If suffering is not the first and immediate object of our life, then our existence is the most inexpedient and inappropriate thing in the world.'¹³³

This evaluation, reconfigured as 'The Wisdom of Silenus', forms the immediate background of Nietzsche's first work of philosophy: in Section Three of *The Birth of Tragedy*, at the beginning of

¹³¹ Reginster, B., *The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press 2008), p. 32.

¹³² Soll, I. 'Schopenhauer as Nietzsche's "Great Teacher" and "Antipode"', in eds. Gemes, K. and Richardson, J. *The Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 160

¹³³ *Parerga and Paralipomena*, p. 291.

Nietzsche's disquisition into art and the Greek spirit, he recounts the tale of Silenus, companion and tutor to the god Dionysus. Hunted through the forest by King Midas and compelled to reveal 'what is the best thing for all men', Silenus replies, 'The very best thing is utterly beyond your reach: not to have been born, not to be, to be nothing' (*BT* 3).

The Nietzsche of *The Birth of Tragedy* hopes to reject this conclusion by explaining one way – the only way – in which life may be vindicated as worthwhile, that is, through art. The account of aesthetic psychology he draws upon is essentially continuous with Schopenhauer's in Book III of *WWR*,¹³⁴ and so Schopenhauer may be said to supply both the basic problem of *The Birth of Tragedy* and the embryo of its solution. In pursuit of his 'justification of existence', as Janaway notes, Nietzsche accepts Schopenhauer's empirical judgement (that suffering defines existence) while rejecting his evaluative conclusion (that existence is therefore to be repudiated). Crucially, Nietzsche regards Schopenhauer as a philosopher in the most basic sense: a truth-seeker who was unafraid to 'philosophise with a hammer', shattering what he perceived to be the illusions and mystifications of Christian religion and the facile optimism of Hegel. Although he inherited wholesale the values of Christianity – which is to say that he was a moralist – he alone (Nietzsche thought) had the strength to confront the full force of their pessimistic implications. Thus, while the later Nietzsche was often keen to emphasise his absolute difference from Schopenhauer in his assessment of life,¹³⁵ Schopenhauer nonetheless remained his 'great teacher' (*HH* II, 'Preface' 1) and the most refined expression of that which he sought to overcome.

It is tempting, therefore, to imagine that Nietzsche's attitude towards Epicurus should be understood in the same terms. Schopenhauer's penetrating honesty is found also in Epicurus, who abjures religious convention and common opinion, even to the extent that he withdraws with his companions to the seclusion of a private garden, instructing one of his students to 'Hoist your sail and flee from every form of *paideia*' (D.L. X.5). Indeed, it may appear that a foretaste of Schopenhauer's pessimism can be found in Epicurus' articulation of the greatest happiness:

'The flesh cries out not to be hungry, not to be thirsty, not to be cold. If someone is in these states and expects to remain so, he would rival even Zeus in happiness.' (*Sent. Vat.* 33)

We might infer from observations of this kind that not merely is death nothing to fear, as Epicurean doctrine asserts, but it may even be ideal: there is surely no greater state of

¹³⁴ See Denham, A. E., 'Attuned, Transcendent, and Transfigured: Nietzsche's Appropriation of Schopenhauer's Aesthetic Psychology' in ed. Came, D., *Nietzsche on Art and Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹³⁵ Occasionally to the point of complete dismissal. See Soll, 'Schopenhauer as Nietzsche's "Great Teacher" and "Antipode"', p. 162.

undisturbed tranquillity than that of the grave. Can we explain Epicurus' appeal to Nietzsche, therefore, in the same way as Schopenhauer's? As a genius and *parrhesiast* of pessimism, willing to follow the negative conception of the good to its bitter end and affirm 'The Wisdom of Silenus'?

We cannot, for Epicurus rejects Silenus' sentiment in very explicit terms:

'Much worse is he who says that it were good not to be born, but when once one is born to pass with all speed through the gates of Hades. For if he truly believes this, why does he not depart from life? It were easy for him to do so, if once he were firmly convinced. If he speaks only in mockery, his words are foolishness, for those who hear believe him not.' (D.L. X.127)

The pessimistic conclusion of Schopenhauer, according to which there is no way of living that could be preferable to nonexistence, is absent in Epicurus. The dramatic difference in Nietzsche's assessments of Epicurus and Schopenhauer, respectively, rests on this point: where Schopenhauer turns away from the world in disgust, Epicurus is somehow able to have confidence in the potential of human beings to develop a form of life that is worthwhile.

Some recent scholarship has suggested that the middle Nietzsche was attracted to certain kinds of modest asceticism. Ansell-Pearson notes that by dispensing with such 'disabling phantasms' as the immortality of the soul and the desire to riddle out all the mysteries of existence, Epicurus is able to cultivate a conception of happiness which is grounded in the simplicity and limitations of life.¹³⁶ Unlike Schopenhauer's saintly-ascetic ideal, which consists in a withdrawal from and renunciation of the world, the withdrawal to the Epicurean garden involves 'a new attunement to nature as a source of pleasure, removing oneself from the false infinite'.¹³⁷ Only once we extract ourselves from the tumult of ordinary social life to a place of calm reflection, where – as Nietzsche writes – 'no noise of wagons or of shouters would penetrate' (GS 280), are we able to engage in the sort of philosophical reflection that makes us capable of Epicurus' modest happiness.

Epicureanism is inherently optimistic about the human capacity to reach this ideal (and godlike) state of reflective distance, as captured by Philodemus in his formulation of the second two propositions of the so-called *Tetrapharmakos*: 'it is easy to procure what is good; it is also easy to endure what is evil' (Phld. *Ad Cont.*, PHerc. 1005, col. 4.9-14). There are echoes here of the Cynic virtue of *autarkeia*, the self-sufficiency of one who is liberated from the false opinions, baseless fears, and unnecessary desires imposed on him by society. Epicurus seems to have

¹³⁶ Ansell-Pearson, K., 'On Nietzsche's Search for Happiness and Joy: Thinking with Epicurus' in *The Agonist*, Volume X, Issue II, Spring 2017.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.* p. 4.

thought he had succeeded in entering this state himself. In a letter to his mother, recorded in inscription by Diogenes of Oenoanda, he writes,

‘despite mortality, I do not take second place to that nature which is immortal and blessed. For whilst I am alive, I have pleasure to the same degree as the gods’ (Diog. Oen. Fr. 125).

Nietzsche is consistently vocal in his opposition to those who would ‘[make] war on passion itself’, that is, those who engage – like Schopenhauer – in a ‘radical hostility, mortal hostility towards sensuality’ (‘Morality as Anti-Nature’, 2). However, he is careful to distinguish this expedient from genuine asceticism, as the resort only of those who are too weak of will to impose moderation on themselves. Epicurus, by contrast, exemplifies the sort of careful reconciliation of the competing elements of one’s nature characterised by Nietzsche as the effort to ‘give style to one’s character’ (*GS* 290). As will become clear in the following section, it is this idea – that Epicurus was able to sustain and affirm the conflictual interplay of the drives – which explains his appeal to Nietzsche.

In order to uncover what characterises the Epicurean way of living, we must consider the relationship between *ataraxia* (freedom from mental anguish) and the institution of *agon* mentioned earlier. I will show that *ataraxia* in fact represents the psychological internalisation of the agonistic principle and that this goes some way to explaining Nietzsche’s positive assessment of Epicurus.

IV. Competitive Spirits: the *agon* of the soul

In the preceding chapters, we have seen that one of the defining aspects of the kind of competitiveness that Nietzsche admires in its various incarnations in Greek antiquity is the element of ‘balance’: the contest (of heroes, of states, of psychological drives) must be configured in such a way as to prevent any one contestant winning a total – which is to say *permanent* – victory over the others. This is obviously not to say that temporary or local victories are impossible, quite the opposite: in the case of athletic contest, to take a clear example, competitors could of course win victory in the games without threatening the institution itself. Recall Hippocleas, honoured by Pindar in the Tenth Pythian Ode: in the moment of his triumph the victorious athlete comes as close as possible to a surpassing, near-divine state, akin to the blessed Hyperboreans. Crucially, however, the athlete never actually crosses the barrier which separates the mortal from the divine, and the games continue unabated long after his death.

Sparta and Athens ‘gave up the contest’, Nietzsche tells us in ‘Homer’s Contest’, through their pursuit of absolute imperial power over the traditionally fiercely independent Greek cities (pp.7-8). In this, they ‘surrendered to Persia’ (presumably, to an oriental-style despotism inconsistent with the traditional political arrangements of Greece) in an historical movement that would culminate in Philip II of Macedon who concluded the subjugation of all Greece by a single power and Alexander the Great, that ‘roughened copy and abbreviation of Greek history’ who carved out a cosmopolitan empire in the east and embraced the trappings of Achaemenid royal power to the chagrin of his generals.¹³⁸

That the end of the competition heralds decline is, Nietzsche thinks, deeply ingrained in the Greek cultural imagination and reflected in its myths, which imply that a person who has no mortal competitors earns himself the enmity of the gods and thus, more often than not, an ignominious death. He takes the case of Miltiades as an instructive historical example of this phenomenon, according to which ‘the Greek was unable to bear fame without further struggle, and fortune at the end of the competition’: Miltiades, who won unprecedented honour for his role in the Greek victory at Marathon, found himself in a position of incomparable prestige. Here, at the pinnacle of success and without any rivals, a ‘low thirsting for revenge awakened’ within him and, for the sake of revenging himself on a citizen of Paros for some petty slight, began a series of events that ended with his own death in abject shame.¹³⁹ Miltiades, as a ‘man without rival, without opponent, on the solitary height of glory . . . has beside him only the gods – and he therefore has them against him. These however betray him into a deed of the Hybris, and under it he collapses.’

I have argued that Nietzsche’s critique of Socrates, and specifically his characterisation of Socrates as a *décadent*, proceeds from a similar concern with maintaining competitive balance, not between states or athletes at the games, but between the opposing drives which Nietzsche thinks

¹³⁸ Most offensively to the Macedonian sensibility, Alexander for a time adopted the Persian custom of demanding ‘proskynesis’ from his subjects, the act of prostrating oneself before, and kissing the limbs of, one’s lord. Arrian tells us that according to Callisthenes, Alexander’s court historian, it was inappropriate for Alexander to require his men to perform proskynesis before him insofar as this was an honour traditionally accorded to the gods alone, while Alexander himself was only a human being (Arr. *An.* XI).

¹³⁹ Miltiades was an Athenian aristocrat who served, for a time, as a vassal of the Persian king Darius I and as an officer in his army. Upon returning to Athens and being elected one of the ten *strategoí* (generals) for 490 BCE, Miltiades would use his experience fighting alongside the Persians to inform the successful Greek tactics at the Battle of Marathon, for which Herodotus credits him (Hdt. 6.109-11). This victory over a numerically superior invading Persian force substantially raised the esteem in which Athens, and Miltiades himself, were regarded by the Greek world, precipitating a period of Athenian ascendancy that would culminate in (and be ended by) the Peloponnesian Wars. Miltiades would soon use this newfound regard among the Athenians to requisition a fleet and army for the purposes of attacking the island of Paros in 489 BCE, ostensibly because the Parians had contributed a single trireme to Darius’ invading armada, but in fact because he wished to punish the Parian citizen Lysagoras, who had slandered him in the days when he was still a Persian subject (Hdt. 6.133).

constitute our psychology. The will to truth, considered as a drive not fundamentally distinct from the bodily drives, is not by itself to be repudiated: indeed, Nietzsche praises the vigour and freedom of mind offered by scepticism as opposed to faith ('A spirit who wills greatness and also wills the means to it is necessarily a sceptic', *A* 54) and his own project in *The Genealogy of Morals* can be understood as the effort to apply the truth-seeking impulse to itself. The 'Problem of Socrates', put succinctly, is that he denied that the will to truth is merely one drive among others, and instead made it a 'tyrant' over the rest. This hypertrophy of the cognitive faculty is pathological for Nietzsche in a similar way to Alcibiades' hedonism, its apparent inverse – to wit, as a symptom of the constitutive inability to manage or regulate competing desires: where Alcibiades lets his desires run rampant, Socrates subjugates them to his reason, crowning, as it were, a permanent victor in the contest.

This interpretation of Nietzsche's critique of Socrates implies that he thinks that an alternative (non '*décadent*') model of self-discipline in which the competition of drives *is* effectively regulated according to some sort of plan, after the fashion of the regulated contest of the Greek *agon*, is at least possible. Epicurus, as a representative of 'moderation' (*Maßen*) as opposed to Socratic 'tyranny' (*Tyrannie*), is an example of such an alternative.

As we have seen, Epicurus regards the will to truth as having an important role to play in a healthy human life (particularly in its capacity to disabuse us of harmful illusions or anxiety derived from pointless metaphysical speculation) but *not* a totalising one: the pursuit of truth should not be carried to such an extent that it has a deleterious effect on our capacity to enjoy life. In this way, Epicurus turns Socrates (and Plato) upside down: whereas Plato and his teacher have it that the body is the seat of those epithumetic impulses which lead us *away* from the true object of philosophy – and, indeed, of life – namely, truth, Epicurus identifies the body as both the beginning and the end of philosophy. Sense-experience, the liberation of the soul from disturbance (*ataraxia*) and the body from pain (*aponia*), are the basis of Epicurus' notion of the good. Far from elevating one passion above the rest and succumbing to the instinct for castration of the bodily sources of suffering, Epicurus recommends a deliberate cultivation of modest pleasures according to a 'plan', a taxonomy of necessary and unnecessary desires.

Epicurean hedonism has been popularly mischaracterised, even since antiquity, as recommending the unbridled pursuit of pleasure: 'The beginning and root of all good is the stomach's pleasure' (Athen. 546f), Epicurus teaches, and Horace describes himself as 'a true pig of Epicurus' herd'

(Hor. *Ep.* 1.4.16).¹⁴⁰ Cicero's critical assessment of the Epicurean school and the open hostility of the Church Fathers further consolidated Epicurus as one of the most maligned figures in the history of philosophy – De Witt describes the 'slanders and fallacies of a long and unfriendly tradition' in the reception of Epicureanism.¹⁴¹ Nietzsche was one of many 19th century commentators to note the injustice of this characterisation, and the Epicurus that appears in his works and letters is no sybarite, but rather the model of a species of gentle asceticism which emphasises the importance of self-knowledge and the therapeutic-emancipatory power of philosophical contemplation.

Note that the serenity of the Epicurean Garden, the idyll which Nietzsche surely imagines in the aphorism 'Et in Arcadia ego' (*HH* III.295), does not involve a dissolution of the tense opposition between drives: the purpose of the Epicurean philosophy is precisely to organise and regulate this still very live *agon* of the passions and perhaps to shape it into an aesthetically unified self. That Epicurean tranquillity does not involve the pacification of struggle, nor the elimination of resistance, seems to be the guiding idea in the concept of 'heroic-idyllic philosophising' to which Nietzsche alludes in this aphorism: he begins by establishing an idyllic pastoral scene of the kind one might find in Theocritus ('I looked down, over waves of hills, through fir-trees and spruce trees grave with age, towards a milky green lake . . . high above me, two gigantic ice-covered peaks floating in a veil of sunlit vapour') before imagining the introduction of 'Hellenic heroes . . . at one and the same time heroic and idyllic'.

It is reasonable to imagine that the term 'Hellenic heroes' denotes characters of the kind that populate Homer's epics. This is significant in that Homeric heroes are defined, above all else, by their relentless and energetic pursuit of conflict in the form of resistance: resistance against which they might prove their superiority over others, both their heroic peers and the common run of humanity (recall Peleus' instruction to Achilles: ' . . . always be first and best and superior to the others. *Il.* XI.784).

¹⁴⁰ Erler and Schofield have discussed a particularly striking example of this caricature in a fascinating item from the Boscoreale treasure: a 1st century BCE Roman silver goblet with repoussé decoration depicting a discussion between two skeletons, identified as Zeno the Stoic and Epicurus, of the question of whether pleasure is the *telos*, or ultimate goal, of all action. Zeno is shown adopting a tense pose as he evidently makes his argument to Epicurus, who assumes a more relaxed posture – much more interested in the cake sitting on the table between them than in what Zeno has to say. A piglet lies at Epicurus' feet, further emphasising the perception that his school of thought consisted of a rather dissolute fixation with gustatory pleasure. ('Epicurean Ethics' in eds. Algra, K., Barnes, J., Mansfeld, J., Schofield, M., *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999] – the goblet is item Bj 1924 of the Boscoreale treasure and may be viewed in the Greek, Etruscan, and Roman Antiquities collection at Musée du Louvre.)

¹⁴¹ De Witt, N.W., *Epicurus and His Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1954), 3.

That such a model of warlike heroism should find itself in the midst of a serene Arcadian idyll is on the face of it strange, and this is Nietzsche's point: Epicurus, in his mode as heroic-idyllic philosopher, achieved a form of bucolic tranquillity which did not depend on the pacification of the struggle between drives. The balanced and productive strife between drives is *sustained* rather than subjugated (as is the case with Socrates and Schopenhauer), and this is indicated by the presence of the battlesome 'Hellenic heroes' in the calm pastoral scene which Nietzsche describes. 'Et in Arcadia Ego' is the title of a painting by Poussin¹⁴² (to whom Nietzsche alludes in this section) which speaks to the presence of death even in the bliss of the Arcadian idyll. Poussin's work depicts a group of idealised shepherds in classical garb regarding a tomb, while a pallid woman looks on. It is significant there is no indication of the presence of death in Nietzsche's Arcadian scene, presumably because one of the achievements of Epicurean philosophy was the elimination of the irrational fear of death. Rather, I suggest that it is the presence of the Hellenic heroes in the scene which explains the aphorism's title – emblematic of the factuality of conflict-seeking human nature, preserved in the particular form of happiness that Epicurus was able to achieve.

Nietzsche could also be referring to the 'Hellenic heroes' of Attic tragedy, that art-form which he regarded as the apogee of Greek brilliance: a tragic hero's condition is defined by unremitting suffering and often (most especially in the case of Oedipus) a torturous awareness of some dreadful truth. Nietzsche might be suggesting, therefore, that Epicurus was capable of creating a form of happiness and calm that existed simultaneously with an acute awareness of suffering. Richard Bett interprets *GS* I.45 along these lines: Epicurus is able to take pleasure in the superficial calmness of the 'sea of existence' *only* because of his intimate familiarity with the turbulent currents of suffering that rage beneath its surface.¹⁴³

V. Epicurus as *décadent*: a late reappraisal?

There is reason to believe that Nietzsche's positive assessment of Epicurus did not last. Indeed, evidence from some of the later texts suggests that Nietzsche felt Epicurean ethics was the 'hedonism of the weary' *par excellence*: in an illustrative passage from *The Gay Science*, he characterises Epicurus as 'one who suffers most and is poorest in life' and therefore 'need[s]

¹⁴² An earlier treatment of the same theme was given by Guercino, depicting two Arcadian shepherds regarding a tomb upon which sits a human skull. Guercino also titled his work 'Et in Arcadia ego'.

¹⁴³ Bett, R., 'Nietzsche, the Greeks, and Happiness (with Special Reference to Aristotle and Epicurus)', in *Philosophical Topics*, vo.33, no.2, Fall 2005, p. 63.

mainly mildness, peacefulness, goodness in thought and in deed' and associates him with Christianity (*GS* 370). Nietzsche here presents the philosophy of Epicurus as emanating from a species of mental – and perhaps physiological – weakness: the tranquillity which Epicurus desires is a consolation for the existence of suffering and he is to this extent, the 'antithesis of a Dionysian pessimist', who desires change and becoming over stasis and being.

The distinction between those who privilege 'being' and those who privilege 'becoming' is a recurrent one in Nietzsche and is developed indirectly in the unpublished *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks* (although here it is not yet articulated in the mythic register of the Apolline-Dionysiac distinction): Nietzsche presents Anaximander as having held that the existence of individuated objects was, in a cosmic sense, a kind of injustice against the essential unity of all things, eventually 'punished' by the inevitable passing away of all that comes into being (*PTG* 4). Nietzsche thinks that Heraclitus, by contrast, saw the cosmos as inherently dynamic, defined by continual processes of destruction and renewal, superintended by the *logos* and without the need for any metaphysical substrate to ground it. The Heraclitean metaphysics was a transformation of 'the contest-idea of the Greek individual and the Greek state . . . into the most general principle, so that the machinery of the universe is regulated by it' (*PTG* 5). Where Anaximander sees the tumultuous world of experience as an injustice, as different than it *ought* to be, Heraclitus develops a cosmology that affirms the conflictual nature of the world for what it *is*, and does so in such a way as to reify the essentially agonistic spirit of Greek culture. That Nietzsche should position Epicurus on the Anaximandrian side of this division is therefore a substantial criticism: in privileging being over becoming, Epicurus joins Socrates and his followers in the Socratic tradition as symptoms of a decline in Greek philosophy, and of cultural decay more generally.

Comparisons between Nietzsche's assessment of Epicurus and his (fascinatingly inconsistent) view of Socrates become all the more necessary in view of a passage in *Beyond Good and Evil* where Epicurus is attacked for his 'mentality of pacification', defined by a conception of happiness as 'primarily rest, lack of disturbance, repletion, unity at last' (*BGE* 200). This 'mentality of pacification' consists in a person's desire to see an end to the strife between the drives which constitute his or her own person (in which 'conflicting . . . drives and value standards that fight with each other' are rife), or, in other words, to 'end the war that he is'. Such a view is symptomatic of a species of decadence that Nietzsche identifies in the first instance with Socrates: in 'The Problem of Socrates', Nietzsche claims that Socrates is a '*décadent*' insofar as he is incapable of reconciling the multiplicity of conflicting drives present in himself, instead advocating a hypertrophy of the cognitive faculty (and associated overvaluing of the will to truth) at the expense of bodily desire. Socrates wills the triumph of one drive over the rest (he wills

‘reason to act as tyrant’, *TI* ‘Problem’, 10) and therefore desires an end to internal conflict, a ‘pacification’ of his own soul.

In the passage from *Beyond Good and Evil* cited above, Nietzsche claims that Epicurean hedonism, defined by its notion of happiness as lack of disturbance, is guilty of the same decadent error, that is, Epicurus wills that the conflict within himself be brought to an end. In a related note from 1884, Nietzsche writes ‘And Epicurus: what did he enjoy but the cessation of pain? That is the happiness of a sufferer and a sick person’ (*eKGWB*, NF-1884,25[17]). Nietzsche is grappling here with the apparent kinship between Epicurean tranquillity and a certain saintly-ascetic abnegation of the bodily – associated typically with Socrates, Christianity, and Schopenhauer – which he takes to be pathologically conditioned. Indeed, the way Nietzsche formulates his criticism of Epicurus in this note anticipates the terms in which he will attack Schopenhauer (in some respects, quite unfairly) in the third essay of *The Genealogy of Morals*. In the relevant section, he claims that Schopenhauer’s aesthetics of disinterestedness is self-refuting insofar as it is motivated by ‘the strongest, most personal interest possible: that of the tortured person who frees himself from torture’ (*GM* III.4).

It is clear, therefore, that Nietzsche was aware of the significant ways in which Epicurean ethics resemble the ascetic ideal which he repudiates and that this grounds his critical association of Epicurus with Christianity. Bett has suggested that Nietzsche’s vacillating opinion of Epicurus is attributable to his characteristic slipperiness (‘That Nietzsche refuses to be pinned down to a single position is no news’),¹⁴⁴ but a simpler explanation is available: Some of Nietzsche’s most effusive remarks on Epicurus appear side-by-side with some of his most critical in the second edition of *The Gay Science*, with the latter (that is, his critical remarks) appearing *only* in the revised edition. This substantially expanded text includes a fifth book, in which we find the section above connecting Epicurus with the Christian tradition (and, most surprisingly, with Augustine). Nietzsche writes that it is in terms of ‘a certain warm, fear-repelling narrowness and confinement to optimistic horizons’ that he ‘gradually [came] to understand Epicurus’ (*GS* 370). This is something of a departure from the assessment of Epicurus found in an earlier section from the 1882 edition of the book, retained untouched in the 1888 edition and quoted in part at the beginning of this chapter, in which Nietzsche seems to write approvingly of the ‘happiness of the afternoon of antiquity’. It is even further from that section in *The Wanderer and His Shadow* (1880) where Nietzsche hails Epicurus as ‘one of the greatest men’ and ‘the inventor of the heroic-idyllic mode of philosophising’ (*HH* III.295).

¹⁴⁴ Bett, ‘Nietzsche, the Greeks, and Happiness (with Special Reference to Aristotle and Epicurus)’, p. 66.

We cannot be certain, of course, that Nietzsche underwent a change of heart on the question of Epicurean ethics during the middle of the decade, but it seems a reasonable possibility and is perhaps implied by Nietzsche's claim in *GS* 370 that his critical conclusions concerning Epicurus were arrived at only gradually. Nonetheless, at least for a substantial period of time (which encompasses some of his most important contributions), Nietzsche regarded Epicurus with reverence despite the apparent closeness of his ethic to the life-denying asceticism of Schopenhauer.

VI. Concluding Remarks

The consistently approving tone in which Nietzsche writes about Epicurus in the middle period presents an interpretive problem: what distinguishes Epicurean ethics from the Schopenhauerian pessimism that Nietzsche is so keen to reject? I have shown that there is much kinship between the Epicurean and Schopenhauerian characterisations of pleasure and between their instrumental accounts of the value of reason, while presenting a possible answer: the essential point of *difference* between the Schopenhauerian and Epicurean perspectives lies in their response to the problem of desire and suffering. Where Schopenhauer resorts to a resolute denial of the Will to the greatest possible degree, Epicurus insists on the human capacity to cultivate a form of life worth living. To this extent, the modest asceticism of Epicurus reflects a classical concern with the harmony of opposites and the balancing of one's drives into a natural equilibrium under which life may be affirmed. This equilibrium is underpinned by the notion of productive strife which Nietzsche associates with the *agon*, that 'contest-idea of the Greek individual and the Greek state' (*PTG* 5). The *agon* is therefore internalised by Epicurean ethics as the balance achieved between carefully moderated passions.

While Nietzsche's assessment of Epicurus may, I suggest, have changed by the mid-1880s, it is critical that we understand how he ever felt able to affirm him at all. For a time, Epicurus appeared to Nietzsche as a quintessentially *Greek* answer to the problem of suffering, whose very way of life embodied 'the noblest fundamental thought of the Hellenes'.

CHAPTER 5

COURAGE IN THE FACE OF REALITY:

NIETZSCHE ON THUCYDIDES AND JUSTICE

For ourselves, we shall not trouble you with specious pretences-either of how we have a right to our empire because we overthrew the Mede, or are now attacking you because of wrong that you have done us-and make a long speech which would not be believed . . . since you know as well as we do that right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.'

- *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 5.89

In the second section of 'What I Owe the Ancients', Nietzsche praises the Greek historian Thucydides as an antidote to the 'morality-and-ideal swindle of the Socratic schools'. Recent literature on Nietzsche and Thucydides has explained this characterisation in terms of their shared commitment to political realism, understood as a broad cynicism concerning human motivation and a pessimism about the extent to which moral considerations factor into political decision-making.¹⁴⁵ In this chapter, I argue that the thus-far neglected foundation of this political realism is Thucydides' subtle, pragmatic (as opposed to *moral*) account of justice. For Nietzsche and Thucydides both, I claim, justice arises exclusively out of conflict: it is the tense balance achieved between competing interests, under which rights are determined exclusively according to prudential calculations of advantage. I argue that this picture represents a refinement and synthesis of the *nomos-physis* debate which gripped the 5th century sophists and that this explains Nietzsche's otherwise curious description of Thucydides as 'the most perfect expression of sophist culture'.

Nietzsche's praise for Thucydides – his 'cure from all Platonism' – is well-acknowledged in the secondary literature. Many passages in which Nietzsche deals explicitly with questions in political philosophy make direct reference to Thucydides as having held essentially the same views as Nietzsche himself (e.g., *HH* I.92 and *HH* III.31). In this chapter, I endeavour to show that the

¹⁴⁵ See: Leiter, B., 'Intellectual History and Background' in *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Nietzsche on Morality* (London: Routledge, 2002) and Polansky, D., 'Nietzsche on Thucydidean Realism' in *The Review of Politics*, Vol.77, No. 3 (SUMMER 2015), pp. 425-448.

principal element of Thucydides' appeal as far as Nietzsche is concerned is his recognition that justice is only ever prudential and invariably the product of conflict. This prudential justice is not, as one might expect, merely that 'might makes right'. I argue instead that Nietzsche reads Thucydides as presenting a nuanced account of justice as a mechanism for the productive redirection of what he takes to be the natural instinct for competition.

In section I, I establish that 'justice' (*dike*) has several closely related meanings in *History of the Peloponnesian War*. I show that under Nietzsche's interpretation, Thucydides presents each of these senses of justice as essentially prudential, that is, deriving normative force to the extent that it serves the interests of the involved parties. This pragmatic justice emerges only under conditions of strife, where competing interests are forced to compromise with each other. In section II, I argue that Nietzsche's characterisation of Thucydides as 'the most perfect expression of sophist culture' ('What I Owe the Ancients', 2) must be understood in view of the sophist distinction between *nomos* (law) and *physis* (nature). I make the case that Nietzsche's Thucydides is a 'sophist' insofar as he refuses to retreat into Platonic idealism, instead steering a middle course between Callicles and Thrasymachus in implying that while *nomos* constrains our nature, it does so in such a way as to be congenial to our interests. In section III, I present Nietzsche's favourite (and most often referenced) episode in the *History*, the Corcyrean civil war (*stasis*), as evidence that the pragmatic conception of justice which Thucydides presents as obtaining *between* cities is also foundational to the political constitution of the individual city itself. For Nietzsche, the institutions of the *polis* served to redirect the competitive instincts of citizens into productive ends and when these institutions were disrupted, as in Corcyra, conflict-seeking impulses erupted in a conflagration of violence. In a short coda, I consider whether Nietzsche's reading of the *History* is credible in view of modern interpretations of Thucydides as a moral realist.

I. Thucydides on Justice

Justice (*dike*) is represented by various speakers in the *History of the Peloponnesian War* under four general forms: first, justice as the accommodations arrived at through negotiation between parties of equal power for fear that neither has the strength to prevail over the other by force without terrible cost. Second, justice as the balance that obtains between imperial city and tributary city, where the master exercises moderation in its treatment of the tributary, and the tributary in turn shows all proper obeisance, sparing the one a wasteful expenditure of resources and the other its destruction. Third, justice as the moral arguments deployed by the strong in order to rhetorically disguise naked acts of aggression. Fourth, justice as the moral arguments made cynically by the weak, who would pursue their aims with naked aggression if only they had the power to do so.

For an example of the first, consider the infamous remark of the Athenian delegation to Melos, which Nietzsche refers to as the ‘dreadful colloquy between the Athenian and Melian ambassadors’ (*HH* I.92), that justice ‘is only in question between equals in power’. The Melian dialogue is an exchange between the Athenians on the one hand, who have come under arms to demand the submission of the Spartan colony of Melos, and the Melians on the other. Conducted to address the city’s elite in private, rather than the people at large, the Athenians swiftly dispense with any pretence that they come to present a moral case for surrender: the Athenians are strong, and the Melians far overmatched. Their choice is simply between submission, sparing Athens the loss of revenue from the destruction of a potential tributary ally, or complete annihilation. In this case, the Athenians are presented as regarding ‘justice’ as a politically irrelevant category in negotiations between unequal parties.

Nietzsche takes up this position explicitly in *Human, All Too Human* where he writes that ‘Justice (fairness) originates between parties of approximately *equal power*, as Thucydides correctly understood’ (*HH* I.92). In the same aphorism, he identifies justice as a kind of exchange arising from expediency in which each side (providing they are coequal) negotiates claims. Similar discussion between unequal parties would, presumably, be impossible, for the stronger need not qualify his demands with promise of requital. Thucydides (on Nietzsche’s reading) regards justice under this aspect as a resort of equals, established through negotiation.

The association of ‘justice’ with a balanced or measured transaction between powers echoes Nietzsche’s appraisal of Heraclitus, which we considered in Chapter 2, for whom the endless back-and-forth struggle of the *agon* is elevated to the governing principle of the cosmos:

‘...it is Hesiod’s good *Eris* transformed into the cosmic principle; it is the contest-idea of the Greek individual and the Greek state, taken from the gymnasium and the palaestra, from the artist’s *agon*, from the contest between political parties and between cities – all transformed into universal application so that now the wheels of the cosmos turn on it.’ (PTG 5)

This agonistic principle, which Nietzsche formulates in ‘Homer’s Contest’ as the dictum ‘every talent must express itself in fighting’ (p.5), can plausibly be read into the structure of the *History* itself: arranged as it is in a series of dyadic contests, with each speaker doing his best to prevail either over his discursive partner or their audience. Like Heraclitus, Thucydides also displays a natural competitiveness with those historical authorities who preceded him, aiming to displace Homer and Herodotus with his own novel historiography. Thucydides’ effort to distance himself from his socially authoritative predecessors is especially evident in the so-called ‘Archaeology’: in his speculative analysis of the Trojan War, Thucydides argues that the conflict was significantly smaller than is claimed by Homer, whose figures he dismisses as unreliable insofar as they fell from the mouth of a poet – a profession prone to exaggeration (Thuc. 1.10.1). It also seems likely that the stark difference of content and tone between this argumentative introduction (*logos*) and the main body of the apparently neutral historical account (*ergon*) is an indication of Thucydides’ intention to depart from the rhetorically charged historical tradition in which he found himself (namely, of the ‘prose chroniclers, who are less interested in telling the truth than in catching the attention of their public’ [Thuc. 2.21.1]).¹⁴⁶

Thucydides does allow for something like his expedient concept of justice to emerge between unequal parties, however, as in the case of Diodotus’ contribution to the Mytilenean debate. Here, we find an example of the second form of justice implied by Thucydides. Mytilene was a city-state on the island of Lesbos and a non-tributary ally of Athens, being a member of the Delian League. In 428-27 BCE, the Mytileneans conspired to revolt against Athens and instead join with Sparta. Once the revolt was crushed and the Mytileneans forced to submit to an unconditional surrender, the Athenian assembly determined that all the city’s men should be put to the sword and its women and children enslaved. However, a second debate took place the following day, as a result of which the Athenians changed their minds and Mytilene was spared. The assembly were persuaded by the arguments of Diodotus, who makes a pragmatic case for why it is in Athens’ best interest that the city survive:

¹⁴⁶ The disparity of style between the Archaeology and what follows it may therefore be considered consciously anti-programmatic.

‘At present, if a city that has already revolted perceive that it cannot succeed, it will come to terms while it is still able to refund expenses, and pay tribute afterwards. In the other case, what city do you think would not prepare better than is now done, and hold out to the last against its besiegers, if it is all the same whether it surrender late or soon? And how can it be otherwise than hurtful to us . . . to receive a ruined city from which we can no longer draw the revenue which forms our real strength against the enemy [Sparta]?’ (Thuc. 3.46.2-3)

It is important to note, of course, that Thucydides presents the Athenian change of policy as resulting not from the realisation that to destroy Mytilene would be barbarous, but rather from an unsentimental and pragmatic reappraisal of what outcome is in the Athenians’ own best interests.¹⁴⁷ In the case of the Mytilenean debate, therefore, we are confronted with a startling example of ‘Thucydides’ political realism: moral considerations are shown to have no bearing on decision-making and statecraft, where either destructive anger (like that which gripped the Athenians in the first place, at the goading of Cleon) or self-interested calculation (as in Diodotus’ winning argument) alone hold sway. As Diodotus himself points out, ‘we are not in a court of justice, but in a political assembly; and the question is not justice, but how to make the Mytileneans useful to Athens’ (Thuc. 3.44.4).

The debate furnishes us with an example of the second form under which justice appears in the *History*: as proportional transaction between unequal parties. While the Mytileneans are helpless to resist the Athenians any further, their annihilation would, on balance, be deleterious to the Athenian cause both through the example it might set for future enemies considering surrender and through the loss of potential tribute. The overwhelming Athenian superiority in force is therefore tempered by the advantage gained by restraint. This, Nietzsche recognises as ‘the rights of the weaker’, which arise from a balance between the interests of the stronger and weaker parties, as in the case of Mytilene, and grant the weaker some limited rights proportional to their perceived usefulness (*HH* I.93).

The third form of justice implied by Thucydides is most conspicuous in the case of the Spartan justification for initiating the war with Athens. From the beginning of his *History*, Thucydides is quite candid about how little stock he places in the moral explanations his subjects provide for

¹⁴⁷ This is not to say that Diodotus (or Thucydides) did not think that it would be morally wrong to destroy Mytilene. It is possible to interpret Diodotus’ decision to make pragmatic arguments (Mytilene should be preserved because it is in our economic and diplomatic interests) rather than moral arguments (Mytilene should be preserved because destroying it would be *wrong*) to the Assembly as strategic: perhaps he thought that arguments which emphasised the advantages to be gained by sparing the city would simply be more convincing to his audience. However, this actually reinforces interpretations such as Nietzsche’s, which take Thucydides as essentially sceptical about the role morality plays in political decision-making – the only considerations which Thucydides presents as having weight in the context of diplomacy and empire are practical and self-interested.

their participation in the war. The Spartans insist that their reason for declaring war is the injustices to which their allies have been subjected by the Athenians – the ephor Sthenelaidas protests that the Lacedaemonians should not ‘deliberate under injustice’ (Thuc. 1.86.4). Thucydides, however, states that in his view the ‘real cause’ of the war, ‘formally most kept out of sight’, was simply ‘The growth in power of Athens, and the alarm this inspired in Lacedaemon’ (Thuc. 1.23.6). Thucydides therefore seems to position the Spartan justification for war as a sort of veneer which serves to conceal their *real* motive (which is wholly power-political), a motive that we are told they wished to keep out of sight. Here, a moral judgement (that the Athenians are guilty of injustice), is shown to be deployed by an aggressive actor in order to disguise its aggression.

The final aspect under which justice is presented in *History of the Peloponnesian War* is as the cynical resort of those who cannot attain their ends by force. The Athenian envoys who address the Spartans and Corinthians before the war has begun declare with characteristic candour:

‘And it was not we who set the example, for it has always been the law¹⁴⁸ that the weaker should submit to the stronger. Besides, we believed ourselves to be worthy of our position, and so you thought us till now, when calculations of interest have made you take up the cry of justice – a consideration which no one ever yet brought forward to hinder his ambition when he had a chance of gaining anything by might.’ (Thuc. 1.76.2)

The Athenians take for granted that their audience understand that justice as such involves the subordination of the weak by the strong, but go further in suggesting that the determining factor in whether or not they are judged worthy of their position by the Spartans is a calculation of partisan interest. The envoys reduce moral judgement to a question of power: it is naturally ‘right’ that the Athenians should seek to dominate lesser cities insofar as they are the stronger, and the protestations of injustice brought forward by the Spartans are to be understood as the embittered complaints of the losing party. When a city is getting its own way, questions of ‘justice’ in this moral sense simply do not arise.

The ‘law’ to which the Athenian envoys appeal requires some contextualisation. We learn from Plato that one of the most important philosophical debates in the Greece of the 5th and 4th

¹⁴⁸ The ‘law’ the Athenian envoys refer to (rather confusingly) is not written law or customary morality, consisting instead – as they clarify earlier in the same speech – in the facts of ‘the human character’ (*ho anthrōpeios tropos*). Their point is precisely that Athens acted in accordance with human nature (characterised by its three strongest motivators: honour, fear, and interest [*timēs kai deous kai ōphelias*]). The Spartan objections to Athenian hegemony only masquerade as moral arguments, the envoys claim, and are in fact *also* motivated by ‘the human character’: the Spartans oppose Athenian dominance because of ‘calculations of interest’.

centuries BCE concerned the *nomos-physis* distinction. Many of Socrates' 'sophist' interlocutors in the dialogues take a strong position on the relationship between *nomos* (the man-made law of custom¹⁴⁹) and *physis* (nature)¹⁵⁰: consider the Callicles of *Gorgias*, who regards *physis* as a more appropriate standard for right action than *nomos* which constrains it (*Gorg.* 483b-c); or the Thrasymachus of *Republic* I, who claims that justice is nothing other than following the law (*Rep.* I.338c). Thucydides was evidently aware of these two broad ways of conceiving of justice (namely, as concerning 'laws of nature' or 'man-made laws of custom') for the argument he puts into the mouths of the Athenian envoys is intelligible only in these terms: by nature (*physis*), the Athenians say, it is just that 'the weaker should submit to the stronger', and yet the Spartans and Corinthians protest this by appeal to some other standard of justice. When the Athenians claim that the 'cry of justice' is only ever taken up cynically, they therefore refer to moral complaints that are not grounded in nature. From the Athenian perspective, their actions are in accordance with the law of nature (*physis*), and this is the only *relevant* kind of justice. The reason Nietzsche gives for his approval of Thucydides is precisely that he expresses, in some relevant way, 'sophist culture' – I will argue that this is because Thucydides observes the hard-headed sophist distinction between *nomos* and *physis*.

II. Thucydides the Sophist?

The sophist dispute over the relationship between nature and custom not only forms the necessary background to an accurate reading of Thucydides, but appears to be central to Nietzsche's positive appraisal of him. In 'What I Owe the Ancients', his most extensive discussion of the subject, Nietzsche claims to hold Thucydides in high regard because:

'*Sophist culture*, by which I mean *realist culture*, attains in him its perfect expression – this invaluable movement in the midst of the morality-and-ideal swindle of the Socratic schools which was then breaking out everywhere.' ('What I Owe the Ancients', 2)

He counts Thucydides among the sophists – indeed as the greatest among them – and characterises their shared realism as a kind of antidote to Socratism. Any reconstruction of Nietzsche's interpretation of Thucydides must therefore explain what Thucydides' relationship with 'sophist culture' consists of (and, indeed, what Nietzsche understood this culture to be). One of the most influential anglophone interpreters of Nietzsche in recent years, Brian Leiter, has attempted to grapple with Nietzsche's (on the face of it) puzzling characterisation of

¹⁴⁹ Literally *man*-made in the Greek case, in that women were uniformly excluded from political office.

¹⁵⁰

Thucydides as a sophist.¹⁵¹ As we shall see, Leiter's approach contains much that is valuable for our purpose but is far from the complete picture.

Leiter argues that Nietzsche admires the pre-Socratics, principally, for their methodological naturalism and realism. In the case of philosophers such as Heraclitus, Leiter claims that their unsceptical trust in the evidence of the senses and corresponding thoroughgoing empiricism sets them apart from the idealist Platonists who followed them and whom Nietzsche vituperatively critiques. Leiter argues that the sophists, with whom Nietzsche identifies Thucydides (an identification Leiter takes up), are 'realists' in a quite different sense: they are committed, not to a metaphysical doctrine, but to a view of human motivation approaching what might nowadays be called *Realpolitik*. This refers to a hard-headed pragmatism in the judgement of human action, according to which the self-interested pursuit of wealth, glory, and dominion is understood to be its principal engine. Nietzsche regards Thucydides as 'the last manifestation' of this 'strong, severe, harsh objectivity instinctive to the older Hellenes' ('What I Owe the Ancients', 2). Morality for these 'Classical Realists' (as Leiter dubs them) is little more than whatever suits their purposes at a given point in time. As the Athenian envoy notes of the Lacedaemonians in the Melian dialogue, 'they are most conspicuous in considering what is agreeable honourable, and what is expedient just' (Thuc. 5.105.4).

According to Leiter, Classical Realists (by no means a designation he reserves for ancient philosophers alone – his net captures, notably, Machiavelli and some currents in modern American jurisprudence) may be identified by their commitment to three positions: Naturalism, Pragmatism, and Quietism.

Classical Realists are naturalists insofar as they believe that there are 'certain (largely) incorrigible and generally unattractive facts about human beings and human nature'. They are pragmatists in that they regard the effects or consequences in practical terms as the only relevant subject of evaluation in theoretical matters. Finally, they are quietists to the extent that they consider normative theorising, beyond the limits imposed by the facts of human nature (that is, *moral theorising*), to be idle. It is better, classical realists judge, to remain quiet on moral questions given that they exercise no real causal efficacy in the unfolding of events.¹⁵²

¹⁵¹ It is puzzling that Nietzsche characterises Thucydides as a sophist for an obvious reason: in the context of 5th century Greece, 'sophists' were itinerant intellectuals who taught young men rhetoric and its allied arts in order to prepare them for careers in public life, usually for a fee. These self-professed 'wise men' (*sophoi*) often take up the role of antagonists in Plato's dialogues, typically being tamed by Socrates' superior arguments. Thucydides clearly was not a sophist in this sense.

¹⁵² Leiter, B., 'Classical Realism' in *Philosophical Issues*, Vol. 11, Social, Political, and Legal Philosophy (2001).

Leiter thinks that Callicles serves as a good mouthpiece for this worldview – he dispenses with ‘the fiction that would deny that *strength, power, and selfishness* are the driving forces in human affairs’.¹⁵³ E.R. Dodds, too, ventures that Nietzsche regarded Callicles as an exemplar of that ‘sophistic culture’ which he admired in Thucydides, that is, he may have shared Socrates’ praise for Callicles as one who is frank in ‘saying plainly what others think but do not care to say’ (*Gorg.* 492d).¹⁵⁴ Leiter suggests that what might be called Nietzsche’s ‘fatalism’ (the insight that, as he writes in *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks* 7, ‘Man is necessity down to his last fibre and totally “unfree”, that is if one means by freedom the foolish demand to be able to change one’s *essentia* arbitrarily’) may be found reflected in the sophist exaltation of human nature as the ultimate grounds of justice. Human behaviour, as far as the Classical Realists are concerned, is virtually uniform and predictable save for the intervention of forcible restraint. Glaucon gives voice to this idea in Book Two of *Republic*:

‘We shall catch the just man red-handed in exactly the same pursuits as the unjust, led on by self-interest, the motive which all men naturally follow if they are not forcibly restrained by the law and made to respect each other’s claims.’ (*Rep.* II.359c)

The self-serving nature of human beings is restrained only, Glaucon claims in his mode as devil’s advocate, by the law; left in perfect freedom, all people alike will ruthlessly pursue their own desires at the expense of others. Callicles even goes so far as to suggest that customary morality, enshrined in the *nomos*, is little more than a fiction concocted by the weak in order to diminish and restrain the strong:

‘It is for themselves and their own advantage that they make their laws and distribute their praises and their censures. It is to frighten men stronger than they and able to enforce superiority that they keep declaring, to prevent aggrandisement, that this is ugly and unjust, that injustice consists in seeking to get the better of one’s neighbour.’ (*Gorg.* 483b-c)

One cannot fail to detect in Plato’s Callicles a prototypic form of the account of morality that Nietzsche lays out in the first essay of *The Genealogy of Morals*, according to which a quasi-mythical ‘slave-revolt in morals’ succeeded in inverting the dominant aristocratic ideal, re-casting what had hitherto been good as ‘evil’. Callicles and Nietzsche both identify morals as emerging from particular social arrangements as an ideal expression of the interests of particular classes of

¹⁵³ Leiter, B., ‘Intellectual History and Background’ in *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Nietzsche on Morality* (London: Routledge, 2002) p. 50.

¹⁵⁴ Dodds, E.R., ‘Socrates, Callicles, and Nietzsche’, appendix to his revised text of Plato’s *Gorgias*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 389.

people and as entailing, at least to some extent, an irresolvable conflict between law (*nomos*) and nature (*physis*).

It seems clear, however, that Callicles at least is rather more than a quietist on moral questions. While offering a pragmatic appraisal of customary morality in terms of the power-interests of the weak and the many, Callicles is also insistent that ‘wantonness, lack of discipline, and freedom . . . are excellence and happiness’, and readily concedes to Socrates that he believes one should not restrain one’s appetites but allow them to become as large as possible (*Gorg.* 492c-e). Leiter maintains that Classical Realism is characterised by a quietism on moral matters and that the purpose of Classical Realist theory-construction is to better understand human action by adopting an unsentimental view of human nature. Crucially, the Classical Realist critique of moral theorising does not depend on an alternative moral theory, but merely on the observation that such theories are incapable of exercising meaningful influence over human action. Leiter provides the position of U.S. jurist Richard Posner as an example of precisely this kind of scepticism, who writes:

[academic moralism] has no prospect of improving human behavior. Knowing the moral thing to do furnishes no motive, and creates no motivation. Motive and motivation have to come from outside morality . . . As a result of its analytical, rhetorical, and factual deficiencies, academic moralism is helpless when intuitions clash or self-interest opposes, and otiose when they line up.¹⁵⁵

Posner is very clear that his view does not entail, nor even imply, a scepticism about morality as such, rather a scepticism about the role moral judgements play in human motivation. But insofar as Callicles argues that lack of restraint of the passions is, in fact, virtue (*arete*), then his pragmatic critique of the customary morality must be understood as instrumental, that is, as being in service to his own distinctive moral theory. It is one thing to observe that people act selfishly in the pursuit of their own desires, and quite another to claim that doing so is the essence of virtue.

The case of Thrasymachus, on the face of it, provides better support for Leiter’s interpretation: unlike Callicles, who cleaves to a normative conception of human nature which violates Classical Realism’s quietism condition, Thrasymachus maintains only that ‘the just is nothing else than the advantage of the stronger’ (*Rep.* I.338c). From Thrasymachus’ point of view, the state depends neither practically nor theoretically on an independent principle of justice – the ruling class formulates laws for the sake of its own advantage and the realisation of this advantage in the

¹⁵⁵ Posner, R.A., ‘The Problematics of Moral and Legal Theory’ in *The Harvard Law Review* Volume 111, May 1998, Number 7.

shape of civil obedience is all there is to 'justice'. Thrasymachus asserts that justice is not a function of human nature but of political and personal contingency and that it disadvantages those who are not rulers. He claims that the individual profits better from 'unjust' conduct (that is to say, the pursuit of one's own advantage without respect for the law) but it is not clear that he makes of it a moral principle in the manner of Callicles.

In *Republic*, Plato has Thrasymachus enter the debate between Socrates and Polemarchus in a fit of rage, apparently frustrated by the dialogue he has been observing. Thrasymachus accuses Socrates of trickery and his disciples of truckling meekly before his specious arguments (*Rep.* I.336d, I.341b): in attempting to formulate a conception of justice which is abstracted away from the real conditions of power, Socrates and his disciples obscure the essentially amoral source of political authority and the law. For Thrasymachus, justice is not an independent standard with which the law ideally intersects, it is in fact for all practical purposes identical with the law. As we shall see, Nietzsche himself characterises the state and its laws as the realisation of the interests of a ruling class, albeit in perhaps a subtler sense than Thrasymachus allows. Although he does not identify Thrasymachus by name, I think there is good reason to suppose that Nietzsche had him in mind when praising the 'strong, severe, harsh objectivity' of sophist realism (of which Thucydides was the 'great summation', 'What I Owe the Ancients', 2). Thrasymachus did not merely disagree with Socrates on the matter of justice, but held Socratic philosophy as such *in contempt* as a form of trickery and misdirection, the 'morality-and-ideal swindle' to which Nietzsche alludes.

While applicable to Thrasymachus, that Classical Realism cannot account for those sophists, like Callicles, who argue in favour of the normative primacy of human nature against conventional morality speaks against its usefulness as a heuristic for understanding Nietzsche's characterisation of Thucydides as representing a 'sophist culture'. Leiter is nonetheless right to draw attention to the *nomos-physis* distinction as the context in which to understand Nietzsche's positive remarks about the sophists, and while his 'Classical Realism' is not the complete picture, it serves as a good starting point for an analysis of Nietzsche's characterisation of Thucydides as representing '*sophist culture*, by which I mean *realist culture*'.

What is missed by Leiter's analysis, I suggest, is that Nietzsche takes Thucydides as steering something of a middle course between Callicles and Thrasymachus on the role of *nomos* and its relationship with power: insofar as customary justice is shown in the *History* to consist of a sort of compromise between opposing parties, Thucydides *does* seem to think that Callicles is right that it is a restraint placed upon the powerful. A city cannot simply do what it wishes at all times,

both because it would find itself in destructive wars with an equal power or powers (as indeed was the case with imperial Athens) and because it would itself *profit less* from those it conquers. This latter consideration, that unrestrained self-interested action against weaker parties is imprudent, is the ‘Law of the Weaker’ which Nietzsche thought Thucydides had recognised: it is in the interests of a strong city to afford a weaker one limited rights and autonomy – a ruined community can provide no tribute in wealth and ships. In this sense, *true* self-interest is served by restraint. Thrasymachus is therefore right that custom is determined by the strong to their own advantage, because the constraints imposed by conventional justice on the conduct of cities are prudential and congenial to their own interests.

The advent of the *nomos-physis* debate represented, historically speaking, a threat to tradition: the likes of Callicles and Thrasymachus called into question the validity of the traditional standards of conduct from the point of view of human nature. If the law is basically contingent, and moreover disadvantageous to those who follow it and are called just, we might be left wondering what its value is. Old forms of thought were now forced to defend themselves in the arena of dialectic and, if found wanting, might be cast aside. It may seem curious, therefore, that Nietzsche should characterise the sophists as defending an older spirit of Hellenism against the depredations of Platonic idealism – if anything, Plato adopts a conservative strategy, attempting to provide an independent justification for legitimate rule that can weather the sceptical arguments of Callicles et al.

Thucydides, I claim, represents Nietzsche’s answer to this problem: Thucydides seems to have agreed with the sophists that human nature is distinct from *nomos* and does not necessarily overlap with it. This is evident in his analysis of the *stasis* at Corcyra¹⁵⁶, which he represents as an occasion of the ‘nature of mankind’ (*physis anthropon*) breaking through a dissolving civil order (Thuc. 3.82). Like Callicles, Thucydides sees *nomos* as having functioned to constrain the self-interested excesses of citizens. This rather pessimistic view is of course redolent of Hobbes¹⁵⁷ (Thucydides has it that ‘human nature’ [*anthroponeia physis*] is ‘always rebelling against the law’ [*nomos*] at Thuc. 3.84.2) and indeed Nietzsche, who describes the *stasis* at Corcyra as a case of the ‘state of nature’ (*der Naturzustand*) breaking through in a disintegrating community (*HH III.31*). Unlike Callicles, however, Thucydides evidently regards these constraints as being prudential from the point of view of even those parties that seem to get the better of the violence: he consistently presents the events at Corcyra – and the further civil strife that would convulse the

¹⁵⁶ A particularly bloody civil war (*stasis*) gripped the city-state of Corcyra in 427 BCE. Thucydides describes the grisly episode in some detail (Thuc. 3.82-84).

¹⁵⁷ See e.g. Hobbes, T., *Leviathan*, ed. Gaskin, J.C.A. (Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 1996), pp. 82-84.

Greek world in the years to follow – as tragic and wrongheaded. The rule of law, involving the recognition of the rights of weaker parties to be spared destruction or excessive interference, is simply more profitable from the perspective of the strong. The harmonious functioning of the political community is required if the interests of its ruling class are to be best-served, chiefly (as we shall see in the next section) because it insulates them from the constant threat of cycles of usurpation such as were common during the Peloponnesian War. The insight of Thrasymachus, that *nomos* is determined by the advantage of the strong, is therefore correct as far as Thucydides is concerned. Where Thrasymachus goes wrong is in claiming that the advantage of the individual (be that an individual person or, we can imagine, an individual city) is best achieved by ignoring the law when and where one can get away with it. When *nomos* is observed, human nature is effectively corralled into productive and profitable ends; when it is flouted completely, anarchy and carnage are sure to follow.

The distinction Nietzsche draws between productive and destructive strife (the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Eris, respectively), which we analysed in Chapter 1, therefore structures his interpretation of Thucydides: the Greek world flourished when a tense balance between opposing politics and individuals could be maintained and when the domineering, competitive instincts of human nature could be transformed, through the institutions enshrined in *nomos*, into marvellous cultural achievements. The ‘good Eris’ is distilled in the *agon*, the ‘contest-idea of the Greek individual and the Greek state’ (PTG 3), an accommodation between nature on the one hand (with its potentially destructive hunger for conflict and self-assertion) and the restraining impositions of custom and law on the other. The lack of regard for this balance of opposing forces shown by the Athenians in their empire-building project, and later by the Spartans after their victory over Athens, precipitated the decline of Greek civilisation as Nietzsche sees it. This imprudent pursuit of absolute power at the expense of sustained competition constituted, as we saw in the previous chapter, the ‘surrender to Persia’ of which Nietzsche accuses Athens and Sparta (‘Homer’s Contest’, p.8). Nietzsche took Thucydides to have recognised that *nomos* was inherently unstable, liable to collapse into a maelstrom of war and civil disorder, and that it served not to *suppress* our nature, as Callicles thought, but to divert it into useful ends. In the following section, I will argue that, for Nietzsche, the insight that justice in the form of *nomos* is born of a prudential accommodation between competing powers is true not merely of the relations between *poleis*, but indeed of the constitution of the *polis* itself.

III. Justice within the State: the Corcyrean *stasis* and the ineluctable strife of the *polis*

In *Friedrich Nietzsche on the Philosophy of Right and the State*, Kazantzakis makes the interesting claim that, for Nietzsche, ‘the state’s genesis amounts to a most extreme realisation of human immorality’.¹⁵⁸ His explanation is two-fold: first, Nietzsche’s account of the origins of the state presents it as the process by which the domination of a particular social group acquires sanctification in the form of institutions. State power is, in the first instance, a stark expression and legitimation of the physical superiority of one class over and against another. To this extent, the state is immune to moral entreaty and the exercise of its power is conditioned only by prudential calculations of interest – it is merely the externalisation of the will to dominate, and thus both its origin and function are strictly ‘immoral’ in Nietzsche’s sense. Second, even during periods where moral modes of valuation prevail (as in modern Europe) the very structure of the state is such that it remains constitutively impervious to moral considerations. Because state power is, by its nature, depersonalised, moral responsibility for the conduct of states is dispersed so widely among so large a body of individuals that it simply ‘vanishes’.¹⁵⁹

One can immediately recognise what one commentator has called the ‘Thucydides of Henry Kissinger’¹⁶⁰ in this unsavoury picture of the origins and nature of state power: in their conduct towards allies and enemies alike, the *poleis* of the *History* seem to be guided by interest alone. Thucydides presents the Athenian position at Melos (which was brutally destroyed) and Mytilene (which was eventually spared) as motivated exclusively by prudential considerations (that ‘if we do not molest them, [our tributary allies will think] it is because we are afraid’ [Thuc. 5.97] and ‘how to make the Mytilenians useful to Athens’ [Thuc. 3.44.4], respectively), and he is no more generous to the Lacedaemonians: as we have seen, he dismisses the explanations offered by the Spartans for their involvement in the war – it was not any purported violation by the Athenians of the Thirty Years’ Peace which provoked Sparta to go to war, but rather their fear of the growing imperial power of Athens (Thuc. 1.23). Consider also the Spartan commander Brasidas, praised by Thucydides as ‘just and moderate’ (*dikaion kai metrion*) and possessing ‘virtue’ (*arete*), but who is nonetheless shown to bring cities over to the Peloponnesian cause *with the intention* of later betraying them to the Athenians in negotiation (Thuc. 4.81.2). The irony that ‘so good a man at all points’ (Thuc. 4.81.3) should cynically and deliberately exploit the esteem in which he

¹⁵⁸ Kazantzakis, N., *Friedrich Nietzsche on the Philosophy of Right and the State*, trans. Makridis, O., (New York: State University of New York Press, 2006), p. 36.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹⁶⁰ Connor, W. R., ‘A Post-Modernist Thucydides?’, in *The Classical Journal*, Vol.72, No.4 (Apr.-May, 1977) p. 31.

was held by the Chalcidians in order to strengthen Sparta's negotiating position passes without any comment from Thucydides. It is tempting to interpret this omission as implying that, for Thucydides, Brasidas' ruthless conduct in service of his city was in no way inconsistent with his being a man of upstanding character.

Insofar as Nietzsche takes Thucydides to have concerned himself with 'human nature', it follows that his rather pessimistic estimation of our capacity for justice as anything other than an uneasy and practical compromise extends not merely to cities but also to individuals. It may be objected, however, that Thucydides' *History* is a history of states and their relations with one another, and it is therefore not immediately clear that the conclusions we have so far reached concerning Nietzsche's interpretation of Thucydides on justice *between* cities apply also to justice *within* an individual city. Ste. Croix has argued that Thucydides observes a distinction between the 'canons of interpretation and judgement' appropriate to an analysis of the behaviour of states, and those appropriate to the behaviour of individuals.¹⁶¹ This distinction, so the argument goes, is felt even in the most distressing episodes of the *History*: during the Mytilenean Debate, Thucydides has Diodotus establish that the Athenians, gathered in assembly, 'are not litigating in a court among ourselves, in a case where justice is appropriate', but rather debating 'how to make the Mytilenians useful to Athens' (Thuc. 3.44.4). The rhetorical significance of this statement seems to require that there is a fundamental difference in the mode of decision-making appropriate to court deliberations (which involve the judgement of individuals) and political deliberations concerning the fate of foreign cities. Similarly, when the Melians attempt to convince the Athenian envoys that Sparta will send forces to relieve their beleaguered city, the Athenians claim that the Spartans are 'the worthiest men alive' in matters of justice concerning themselves, but are governed by expediency alone in their treatment of other peoples (Thuc. 5.105.4).

There is reason to think that this distinction was commonly drawn. Demosthenes argues that 'Of private rights within a state, the laws of that state grant an equal and impartial share to all, weak and strong alike; but the international rights of Greek states are defined by the strong for the weak.' (Dem. XV.29).¹⁶² Isocrates claims that when they had attained their empire, the Athenians judged that it is 'just for the stronger to rule over the weaker' in the intercourse between the Greek cities, only to adopt precisely the reverse position after their defeat and during the Spartan hegemony that followed – now taking the view that as the rule of the stronger is unjust as far as

¹⁶¹ See Ste. Croix, G.E.M., *Origins of the Peloponnesian War* (London: Duckworth, 1972) 7, and also *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), Liv: 'Marx and Thucydides'.

¹⁶² Demosthenes is supposed to have studied the work of Thucydides, as Nietzsche was aware: eKGWB/NF-1878,30[10] — *Nachgelassene Fragmente Sommer 1878*.

the government of their city is concerned, so too is it unjust with respect to the government of all Greece (Isoc. VIII.67-69). Aristotle also reports this view, albeit critically, as the hypocrisy of those who ‘in their own internal affairs demand just government, yet in their relations with other peoples pay no respect to justice’ (*Pol.* VII.1324b).

It may be, then, that Thucydides observes a distinction between justice *within* the city, and justice *between* cities. Even if this is true, however, one can still argue that he presents moral considerations as irrelevant in both cases: only the laws of state, predicated, we can assume, on threats of violence or (in Athens) ostracism, furnish weaker citizens with a recourse against their stronger adversaries. When competition between rival factions spins out of control, as in the case of the *stasis* in Corcyra (in which Nietzsche takes a particular interest, treating it both in ‘The Greek State’ and in ‘The Wanderer and His Shadow’ 31), the regulating authority of the state is weakened (or destroyed altogether) and bloody cycles of political violence follow. After the departure of the Peloponnesian fleet, Thucydides describes the terror that gripped the city, under which ‘Death raged . . . in every shape’ (Thuc. 3.81.5). For Nietzsche, the pessimistic, pragmatic conception of justice which Thucydides identifies in the intercourse between *poleis* is also found as the constitutive principle of social organisation *within* the *polis*. When an accommodation cannot be reached between powerful *poleis* (as in the case of Athens and Sparta) or between the powerful and the weak (as in the case of Athens and Melos), the outcome is destructive savagery. Similarly, when the inherent tension between factions and individuals within the *polis* ruptures those institutions (like the *agon*) which channel it towards productive ends, violent chaos ensues.¹⁶³

Nietzsche takes it that political communities are generally founded out of concern for mutual security. He regards the principles of equality and reciprocity – which form the basis of citizenship – as an artificial (and purely *de facto*) means of assuring that the bestial instincts of different individuals, which naturally stand opposed to one another, are regulated within the bounds of the law.¹⁶⁴ The sheer contingency and volatility of this tentative truce between competing individuals is demonstrated, he thinks, when one examines those cases where ‘communality collapses completely’, as in Corcyra: ‘everything dissolves into anarchy, then there at once breaks through the condition of the unreflecting, ruthless inequality that constitutes the state of nature’ (*HH* III.31). The immediate cause of the upheaval in Corcyra was a dispute between the oligarchic and democratic factions, but Thucydides tells us that in the ensuing chaos

¹⁶³ See *Nachgelassene Fragmente Frühjahr–Herbst 1881* for an explicit statement of this idea.

¹⁶⁴ The *isonomia* of Cleisthenic Athens is a useful case in point.

‘some were slain also for private hatred, others by their debtors because of the moneys owed to them’ (Thuc. 3.81.4). The loosening of the skein of state authority engendered by the oligarchic coup and the expectation by each party of the support of their respective patron hegemons (the democrats looked to Athens, their ally in the Epidamnian affair, while the oligarchs naturally turned to Sparta for aid) prompted a wholesale slaughter, with some participants seizing upon the opportunity for personal gain or petty revenge. Thucydides, on Nietzsche’s reading, presents an unflinching look at the temporary and vulnerable character of justice – ever under pressure from the ‘state of nature’, which is characterised by ‘ruthless inequality’ and the Hobbesian *bellum omnium contra omnes*. It seems clear, then, that Nietzsche would reject the spirit of Ste. Croix’s reading: while he thinks there is a difference between justice in and justice between cities for Thucydides, this difference is basically superficial: when just accord is reached between polities, it is overdetermined by prudential considerations (as in the ‘Thirty Years’ Peace) and moral considerations are otiose. The intra-political justice which enables weaker citizens to appeal against their superiors similarly obtains only under certain pragmatic conditions – recall Nietzsche’s remarks on the ‘rights of the weaker’ in *HH* I.93. The *polis* is *always already* in strife – a tense balance of essentially opposed social forces, indeed this is its basic condition, and thus the isonomic rights which emanate from it are no more substantial (that is to say moral – more than merely pragmatic) than the settlements between *poleis*.

Recent scholarship on the civic character of the classical and Hellenistic *poleis* provides support to Nietzsche’s claim that such states consisted in the tense convergence of otherwise conflicting interests, reconciled (at least temporarily) only as a consequence of calculations of mutual security.¹⁶⁵ Benjamin Gray has identified one particular ‘mode’ of Greek civic politics in the 4th century, which he calls ‘Dikaiopolitan’ after the city of Dikaia in Chalkidike, that suggests the primacy of a prudential conception of justice with respect to the internal disputes of the *polis*. The city of Dikaia, an Eretrian colony (founded, perhaps, by exiled Medisers)¹⁶⁶ in western Chalkidike, underwent what seems to have been an especially severe *stasis* in 365-359 BCE. The subsequent reconciliation between the disputant factions took the form of an oath – which would determine the shape of the new peace which was to follow the end of civil turmoil – to be sworn by all Dikaiopolitans on pain of exile or death. The precise wording of this oath survives, preserved in an inscription and, as Gray writes, ‘Its main features are punctilious respect for procedures and studied obeisance to the demands of a particularly uncompromising and

¹⁶⁵ See Ma, J., *Polis: the Greek City-State 800 BC-AD 600*, 2011; Gray, B., *Stasis and Stability: Exile, the Polis, and Political Thought*, c.404 BC-146 BC (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) and ‘Justice or Harmony? Reconciliation after *stasis* at Dikaia and the fourth-century BC *polis*.’ in *Revue des Études Anciennes* 115 (2), pp. 369-401.

¹⁶⁶ See Knoepfler, D., *Bulletin épigraphique* 263 in *Revue des Études Grecques* (2008), pp. 651-653.

precisely calibrated form of . . . tit-for-tat reciprocity¹⁶⁷: participants in the reconciliation would swear ‘not to bear grudges towards anyone in word or deed’, ‘not [to] put anyone to death or punish anyone with exile or confiscate anyone’s property for the sake of what is in the past’. Gray points out that the oath is worded in such a way as to place rhetorical emphasis on the reciprocity of a good or bad turn, for example when the participant swears,

‘I will take down (others) from the altars and be taken down myself.¹⁶⁸ I will give and receive the same good faith. I will give and receive purification as the commonwealth orders. If I bound anyone by a pledge, or gave a pledge myself, I will give and receive as I exacted or gave a pledge.’

The grammar of these promises accentuates the isonomic and contractual character of the settlement (to ‘take down . . . and be taken down’ and to ‘give and receive as I exacted or gave’). No provision is made for just or unjust action except in terms of this reciprocity – the inscription places no moral judgement whatever on the events of the *stasis*, nor does it invoke *Homonoia* (goddess of concord). It is clear that the settlement deemed most appropriate by the Dikaiopolitans and their arbitrators consisted in an unsentimental compact of mutual security designed to guard against future unrest.

Considered under its Dikaiopolitan aspect, the form of justice according to which the internal affairs of the *polis* were conducted begins to appear very much like the hard-headed ‘realist’ conception which Nietzsche perceives in Thucydides’ assessment of the conduct of states. For Nietzsche, justice between states ‘originates between parties of approximately *equal power*’ (HH I.92) and also with respect to those cases where the destruction of a weaker enemy would be less advantageous than its preservation (HH I.93), but these types are equally applicable to persons: the need for mutual security produces a corresponding need for artificial equality between individuals, an equality which provides the basis for a political community (HH III.31), that is, ‘Justice is thus requital and exchange’ (HH I.92). This equality need not assume a democratic form, of course – just as the besieged city is in a position to negotiate with the greater force that invests it on the basis that the city’s destruction would be mutually disadvantageous, so too can slaves enjoy ‘rights’ to the extent that they are useful to their master:

‘Rights originally extend *just as far* as one *appears* valuable, essential, unloseable, unconquerable and the like, to the other. In this respect the weaker too possesses rights, but more limited

¹⁶⁷ Gray, B., *Stasis and Stability*, p. 47.

¹⁶⁸ In all likelihood this constitutes a promise not to exploit the sanctuary of temples in order to escape punishment for violation of the settlement.

ones. Thence the celebrated *unusquisque tantum juris habet, quantum potentia valet* (or more exactly: *quantum potentia valere creditur*).¹⁶⁹ (HH I.93)

The expedient justice which obtains between *poleis*, under a form appropriate to the relative degree of power between disputants, is therefore mirrored at the level of civic intercourse between individuals: namely, tense compromise between classes, as between the nobility and ordinary citizens in the Athens of Pericles or the institutionalised subjection of the interests of one class according to the interests of another (as in the case of citizens and their slaves). More often, both forms of justice are consubstantial: Kazantzakis rightly observes that the Athenian democracy is more properly considered an aristocracy in which ‘a few thousand citizens were rulers over three hundred thousand metics [foreign residents without formal rights] and slaves.’¹⁷⁰ Athens was a slave society and, after the fashion of much of the ancient world, one that explicitly excluded women from participation in government.¹⁷¹ Of the caste even eligible to participate in assembly at the *prytch*,¹⁷² perhaps the most one could typically expect to do so was five to six thousand.¹⁷³ We should not allow ourselves to be distracted by the fact that the more extreme case of the unproductive Spartiate, sustained only by the labour of his Helot slaves, represents an especially acute example of a phenomenon that obtained of *poleis* generally. The much-vaunted enthusiasm for participation in a full civic life which one can perceive in the Athens of the 5th century was surely only possible to the extent that the economic and domestic labour undertaken by those explicitly excluded from the political process *made* it possible. It is probably with this in mind that Nietzsche describes the Greek *polis* as paradigmatically ‘aristocratic’ (BG 262).

That Thucydides is prepared to present unvarnished the ruthless (and often atrocious) conduct of a city like Athens, to show that this great *polis*, like the rest, was defined by the violent interplay of jealous competition within and without, is surely why Nietzsche recommends him as an antidote for the ubiquitous naivete of 19th century philhellenism:

‘Thucydides is the best cure for the “classically educated” young man who has carried away a horrible, whitewashed image of the “ideal” Greeks as the reward for his secondary-school training.’ (‘What I Owe the Ancients’ 2)

¹⁶⁹ *unusquisque . . . valet*: each man has as much right as he has power; *quantum . . . creditur*: as he is believed to have power. Spinoza, *Tractatus Politicus*, II.8.

¹⁷⁰ Kazantzakis, *Friedrich Nietzsche on the Philosophy of Right and the State*, p. 38; Morris, I., ‘The growth of Greek cities in the first millennium BC’, (Stanford, 2005), p. 15.

¹⁷¹ Rhodes, P. J., ‘The Athenian Revolution’, in *The Cambridge Ancient History* Volume V: the Fifth Century, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 95.

¹⁷² The hill where Athenians would hold their democratic assemblies.

¹⁷³ Sinclair, R. K., *Democracy and Participation in Athens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 25.

Moreover, Thucydides' decision to interpret the dreadful events he relates as having emanated not from historical contingency, but indeed from 'the nature of mankind', constitutes the *Tatsachen-Sinn* (sense for the facts) for which Nietzsche praises him. Nietzsche tells us that while Plato 'escapes into the ideal' when confronted with reality, Thucydides demonstrates an 'unconditional will not to be fooled' (not to hide, we can assume, behind idealist abstraction). It is this Thucydides who embodies an indefatigable 'courage in the face of reality' ('What I Owe the Ancients', 2).

One commentator has taken this further in identifying Thucydides' capacity to represent multiple opposing perspectives as equally well-justified as potentially exerting an influence on the development of Nietzsche's so-called 'perspectivism'. David Polansky argues that the critique of morality upon which the Sophists 'verge', according to Nietzsche, is not the explicit devaluing of common virtues, but instead their capacity to shift seamlessly between multiple inconsistent perspectives, recognising that each may (with the right speaker) be imbued with the ring of truth.¹⁷⁴ Thucydides is in this sense quite different from Plato, whom Nietzsche seems to regard as often (but not always, see, for instance, his early assessment of *Symposium*) unfair in his presentation of Socrates' interlocutors, using them as patsies to inevitably be confuted by Socrates when Plato chooses to reveal his own position. Thucydides is able to inhabit the perspectives of his subjects in such a way as to present their arguments with superb rigour, doing so without preference to the individual and, crucially, without in the end offering a moral judgement. Through this achievement, the ability to 'juxtapose the multiplicity (the geographical relativity) of the moral value judgements', the Sophists were able to 'let it be known that every morality can be dialectically justified' (*WP* 233).

Similarly, in *Shame and Necessity*, Bernard Williams suggests that Thucydides' realism was constituted by a very broad account of human motivation which left him at liberty to present his subjects as exhibiting great intelligence, clarity, and surety of purpose in pursuit of their ends, irrespective of the extent to which they conformed to conventional morality. This is one respect in which, from Nietzsche's point of view, Thucydides stands out as Plato's superior: Plato, one might imagine, could not have written a Melian dialogue. Not through any failing of philosophical genius, nor literary skill, but because his (already-moralised) account of human psychology placed limits on the kinds of explanation of human motivation he was capable of developing. As Williams notes, 'Thucydides' conception of an intelligible and typically human motivation is broader and less committed to a distinctive ethical outlook than Plato's; or rather –

¹⁷⁴ Polansky, D., 'Nietzsche on Thucydidean Realism' in *The Review of Politics*, Vol.77, No. 3 (SUMMER 2015), p. 436.

the distinction is important – it is broader than the conception acknowledged in Plato’s psychological theories.¹⁷⁵

In a fragment from the *Nachlass*, Nietzsche writes, “Thucydides is the type closest to me: he enjoys types, finds that every type has a certain amount of good reason, and tries to reveal it: that is his practical justice.”¹⁷⁶ We might recall Nietzsche’s middle-period interest in the balancing of the competing drives at work in the soul of an individual person:

‘One thing is needful – to ‘give style’ to one’s character – a great and rare art! It is practised by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses that their nature has to offer and then fit them into an artistic plan until each appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye.’ (GS 290)

The reconciliation between the competing elements of one’s nature does not consist in the identification of a super-ordinate drive to which the rest are subordinated (as in the case of Socrates, ‘The Problem of Socrates’ 10), but rather in the structured competition of the drives according to particular aesthetic *types*. ‘Types’ (*Typen*) of individual, in Nietzsche’s sense, are defined by the kind of rank-ordering of drives manifest in their actions. To this extent, Nietzsche’s psychology appears to have been substantially influenced by the tripartite theory of the soul found in Plato, who, in the mouth of Socrates in *Rep.* IX, associates the *logistikon* (the rational part of the soul), *thumoeides* (the ‘spirited’ part), and *epithumetikon* (the appetitive part) with three different *types* of human being, according to which faculty predominates.¹⁷⁷ That Thucydides is willing, in a way that Plato simply is not, to detect in each type ‘a certain amount of good reason’, speaks to Polansky’s reading of a nascent perspectivism in the multivocality of the *History*.

Polansky argues that the ‘realism’ of Thucydides, as far as Nietzsche is concerned, is in this respect remote from the sense of the word familiar to modern political theory: Nietzsche does not understand Thucydides as demonstrating the illusoriness of moral judgements by revealing their inefficacy at the level of politics and history, but as undermining the moral ‘world-view’ by simultaneously expressing a range of mutually inconsistent interpretations of the same events.

¹⁷⁵ Williams, B., *Shame and Necessity*, (Berkeley; London: University of California Press, 1993), p. 161.

¹⁷⁶ eKGWB/NF-1880,6[383] — *Nachgelassene Fragmente Herbst 1880*.

¹⁷⁷ “‘Is it not also true,’ [Socrates] said, “that the ruling principle of men’s souls is in some cases this faculty [the *logistikon*] and in others one of the other two [the *epithumetikon* and the *thumoeides*], as it may happen?” “That is so.” [Glaucon] said, “And that is why we say that the three primary classes of men also are three, the philosopher or lover of wisdom, the lover of victory, and the lover of gain.” (Rep. IX.581b-c). The similarity between this account in Plato and Nietzsche’s claim that persons can be distinguished according to ‘types’ (defined according to which drive predominates) has not escaped the notice of commentators. See, for example, Janaway, C., ‘Nietzsche’s Psychology as a Refinement of Plato’s’ in *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 1, (Spring 2014).

This is to say that, for Nietzsche, the enterprise of critiquing morality is not a question of distinguishing between a reality in which moral principles do not obtain and the human perception that they do, but of recognising that such a distinction is not even possible. The ‘realism’ which he reads into Thucydides and the Sophists is an apprehension of the intractable plurality of interpretations of the world, of which no overriding moral judgement is ultimately possible.

Hermocrates’ speech serves as an invaluable microcosm of the way in which this plurality is represented in the course of *History of the Peloponnesian War*. During his address to the Sicilian congress at Gela, the Syracusan Hermocrates gives his assessment of the Athenian imperial project:

‘That the Athenians should cherish this ambition and practice this policy is very excusable; and I do not blame those who wish to rule, but those who are too ready to serve. It is just as much in men’s nature to rule those who submit to them, as it is to resist those who molest them’ (Thuc. 4.61.5).

Even as Hermocrates makes the case to the assembled delegates that the Sicilian polities must unite against the interference of an alien power, he nonetheless presents the struggle between the Athenians and those whom they wish to conquer as akin to a contest: it does not make sense to speak of the Athenians being unjust in their pursuit of imperial ambition, any more than it does to censure their enemies for resisting them. The claims of each side are thus presented as equally legitimate even as they are completely irreconcilable.

It is the sophistic capacity to argue equally effectively from incompatible perspectives, and corresponding recognition of the impossibility of the ‘disinterested objectivity’ requisite for the kind of morality which Nietzsche criticises, that constitutes the ‘realism’ they share with Thucydides. Thus, the realism for which Nietzsche praises Thucydides in ‘What I Owe the Ancients’ is precisely his lack of objectivity in this degenerate sense – the ‘real’ of Thucydides is the rejection of any detached, super-ordinate point of view beyond the manifold interests, affects, and perspectives of the actors involved. The *décadence* of the Greek instinct’ which Nietzsche bemoans is a retreat into the ideal, the elevation of an imagined absolute perspective above all competitors, the ‘morality-and-ideal swindle’ of Socratism, from which Thucydides is his only respite.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁸ We might fairly suppose that Thucydides’ total philological independence from the Platonic corpus, which cannot be claimed of the other Sophists, played a role in his appeal to Nietzsche.

IV. Concluding Remarks

Nietzsche's interpretation of Thucydides emphasises the cold practicality of the conception of justice that emerges from the *History*. What might be called Nietzsche's political philosophy is characterised by a cynicism about the nature of state power and he identifies this same 'political realism', which he associates with the sophists, in Thucydides' scientific treatment of the Peloponnesian War. Moreover, Thucydides recognises in his description of the revolution in Corcyra and the subsequent civil strife that shook the Greek world that, as Nietzsche puts it in a middle-period fragment, 'Meanness arises first *in the community*. Thucydides: φθονερόν [Phthoneron]¹⁷⁹ against the superficially radiant'.¹⁸⁰

In this chapter, I have argued that Nietzsche admires Thucydides for his candour in presenting a vision of politics as defined, in a fundamental sense, by conflict. A refutation, for Nietzsche, of the bloodless naivety of Winckelmann's classicism with its 'noble simplicity and quiet grandeur',¹⁸¹ Thucydides sees a Greek world convulsed by strife, soaked in the blood and sweat of ceaseless competition – a complex nexus of fiercely opposed individuals and interests, pushing and pulling against each other in their relentless pursuit of advantage. However, like Heraclitus before him, Thucydides found a certain kind of harmony in this maelstrom: just as the institutions of the Greek state arose as a means of redirecting the potentially destructive agonal energies of its citizens into useful ends, so did principles of 'justice' emerge to regulate the competition between states, governed, ultimately, by a concern for the balance of power. When these regulating institutions are ruptured within the *polis*, as at Corcyra, or between *poleis*, as in the whole history of Greece after the Persian Wars,¹⁸² carnage and eventual stagnation ensue.

V. Coda: is Nietzsche's interpretation credible?

I have claimed that Nietzsche's Thucydides presents a vision of political history as defined by strife and expediency, in which moral considerations are effectively irrelevant. I argue that Thucydides is an expression of 'sophist culture' for Nietzsche insofar as he synthesises important

¹⁷⁹ 'The envious': *Phthonos* was the personification of jealousy and envy.

¹⁸⁰ eKGWB/NF-1879,41[43].

¹⁸¹ 'Winckelmann's and Goethe's Greeks, Victor Hugo's orientals, Wagner's Edda characters, Walter Scott's Englishmen of the thirteenth century – someday the whole comedy will be exposed! It was all historically false beyond measure, but – modern.' (WP 830 Nov. 1887-March 1888).

¹⁸² He regards the Greek victory over the Persians as, perhaps paradoxically, precipitating the decline of their civilisation: 'Then came the *downfall* through the *Persian Wars*. The danger was too great and the victory too extraordinary.' (eKGWB/NF-1875,6[13]).

developments in the sophist debate concerning *nomos-physis* into a pragmatic, conservative, and non-idealist concept of justice. However, some commentators have suggested that by peeling away the ideological distortion and pretention to justice affected by the Athenians and others, Thucydides actually provides a moralising critique of a debased political class.¹⁸³ Under this interpretation, Thucydides is in fact something of a closet moralist, and the candour with which he presents the cynicism of his subjects is intended to act as an object lesson in how *not* to behave. It is therefore worthwhile to briefly consider whether Nietzsche's reading of the *History* is useful (or even defensible) for the modern interpreter of Thucydides.

Raymond Geuss has made the case that Nietzsche is wrong to position Thucydides as a representative of 'sophist culture', holding instead that he subscribes to a form of moral realism which is not inconsistent with the *Tatsachen-Sinn* which Nietzsche praises as characteristic of his political realism. Nietzsche's presentation of Thucydides as a Sophist is moreover problematic, Geuss argues, because it implies that he can be placed on the side of rhetoric in the great struggle between rhetoric and dialectic which Plato so often takes as the subject of his dialogues.¹⁸⁴ The sophists' art of using skilful wordplay to make any given interpretation as persuasive as any other is subjected to Socrates' withering scrutiny in *Gorgias*, but Thucydides also expresses an implicit disdain for rhetoric:

'What used to be described as a thoughtless act of aggression was now regarded as the courage one would expect to find in a party member; to think of the future and wait was merely another way of saying one was a coward; any idea of moderation was just an attempt to disguise one's unmanly character; ability to understand a question from all sides meant that one was totally unfitted for action.' (Thuc. 3.82.4)

Thucydides here documents how the ruthless pursuit of political goals engendered a radical denaturing of moral concepts and a corresponding distortion of language. He highlights the use of rhetoric to present a distorted but expedient picture of a given situation, repackaging savagery as 'manly character' and 'intelligence'. 'To fit in with the change of events', he writes, 'words, too, had to change their usual meanings' (Thuc. 3.82.3).

Thucydidean realism, as both Geuss and Leiter would agree, does not entail a commitment to value-free, disinterested enquiry, and it is therefore unsurprising to find that Thucydides makes

¹⁸³ See, for example, Foster, E., *Thucydides, Pericles, and Periclean Imperialism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

¹⁸⁴ Geuss, R., 'Thucydides, Nietzsche, and Williams' in ed. Dries, M., *Nietzsche on Time and History* (de Gruyter, 2008), p. 43.

some more explicit value judgements in the course of his *History*. In his description and subsequent analysis of the *stasis* at Corcyra, Thucydides mourns the ‘general deterioration of character throughout the Greek world’ and ‘the savage and pitiless actions into which men were carried . . . because they were swept away into an internecine struggle by their ungovernable passions’ (Thuc. 3.84.1-2). On first blush, this looks very much like a moral judgement of the failure of the Corcyreans and, later, the rest of the Greeks, to control their passions and thereby avoid catastrophe. It is not merely the case that the phraseology of these passages is moral in character – moral subjects are the focus of analysis. Further, Irene Hau contends that Thucydides’ ‘moral didacticism’ is often characterised by frequent ironic juxtaposition that implies moral judgement without declaring it outright. For instance, in recounting the destruction of Plataea at the hands of the Spartans, he writes:

‘And so Plataea perished in this way in the ninety-third year after she became the ally of Athens.’ (Thuc. 3.68.5)

Thucydides does not recount the length of the Athenian-Plataean alliance for chronographic reasons, Hau suggests, because his system for keeping track of time throughout the history is predicated on counting the number of years since the start of the war. Rather, she argues, Thucydides chooses to emphasise the length of the alliance in order to accentuate the enormity of the Athenians’ failure to protect their friends.¹⁸⁵

However, while it is clear that Thucydides offers a number of evaluative judgements in the course of his *History*, these judgements are better understood as expressions of the hard-headed pragmatism typical of political realists of many different stripes: Thucydides gives an evaluation of the revolutions which convulsed Greece after Corcyra (namely, that they were very bad), but this evaluation is articulated in terms of the practical effects of revolutionary violence as weighed against the interests of those instigating it. The depravity of the revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries is presented as simply a function of the circumstances in which they found themselves: ‘[war] brings most people’s minds down to the level of their actual circumstances’ (Thuc. 3.82.2). The disruption of peace resulted in calamities because of the inherent savagery of human nature, and this ‘happens and always will happen’ while that nature is unchanged. Civilisation and the provision of plenty elevate human beings to a higher (but nonetheless savage) state, but the restraint imposed by social mores is vulnerable to the vicissitudes of chance and fate and is always pressured by the combustive nexus of competing interests that constitute

¹⁸⁵ Hau, I., *Moral History From Herodotus to Diodorus Siculus* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016) pp. 199-200.

the *polis*. Thucydides judges civil violence and its corresponding effect on the public use of language as bad because they ultimately lead to carnage and are therefore self-defeating: people *think* they are acting in the interests of their own security by eliminating political opponents, but they in fact simply generate cycles of violence that permanently endanger them. The ‘general laws of humanity’, which require fairness in the treatment of one’s enemies, are to be respected by the victors in internecine struggle only because ‘there may come a time when they, too, will be in danger and will need their protection’ (Thuc. 3.84.3). It would be wrong, therefore, to imagine that Thucydides was a ‘moral realist’ in any sense recognisable to current scholarship: he does not judge the violent parties in Corcyra and elsewhere because they act brutally for the sake of expediency; he judges them because their brutality is, in the end, inexpedient.

CONCLUSION

'Carcasse, tu trembles?

Tu tremblerais bien davantage, si tu savais

*où je te mène.*¹⁸⁶

- Turenne

The Greeks were an object of fascination for Nietzsche throughout his life, from the first stirrings of philosophical genius in his juvenile explorations of the Platonic corpus to the explosive closing sentiment of his final book: 'Have I been understood? *Dionysos* versus *the Crucified*.' (EH 'Why I am a Destiny', 9). In the course of this thesis, I have shown that the 'contest-idea of the Greek individual and the Greek state' (*der Wettkampfgedanke des einzelnen Griechen und des griechischen Staates*) is the persistent feature distinctively characteristic of Greek antiquity as Nietzsche saw it, unifying a range of personalities with widely diverging interests and perspectives. My secondary objective, concomitant with this, has been to provide evidence of the enduring influence of the Greeks on Nietzsche's philosophy well beyond his explicit treatments of tragedy and pre-Socratic philosophy during the Basel period. The extent of this influence is such that major themes in Nietzsche's thought cannot be fully understood without an attendant understanding of his appraisal of those figures considered in the preceding chapters.

¹⁸⁶ 'Carcass, you tremble? You'd tremble even more if you knew where I'm taking you.', Henri de Latour d'Auvergne, Vicomte de Turenne, quoted by Nietzsche at the beginning of Book Five of *The Gay Science*.

Nietzsche's Homer is a mysterious and liminal figure both conceptually and chronologically, a cipher suspended between two worlds: at his back, the tumultuous dark age that supplies the subject of the Homeric corpus; before him, the age of Hellenism which that corpus would substantially shape. I chose to begin my study of Nietzsche's reception of the Greeks with Homer for just this reason, that he represents the 'actual factuality of Greek cultivation' (*HH* I.262) in terms of which the Hellenic world (and, for Nietzsche, the discipline of philology itself) must be understood. Nietzsche compares the extent of his influence on subsequent cultural developments in the Greek world to that of the Bible on Christian Europe (*HH* I.262). It thus speaks to the centrality of the *agon* – that Hellenic national pedagogy according to which 'every talent must express itself in fighting'¹⁸⁷ – to Nietzsche's conception of Greek antiquity, that he identifies it in the first instance with Homer.

I have argued that the ethic implied by Homer's poetry – the 'heroic code' – is defined by the pursuit of competitive goods in the form of *kleos* (glory) and *time* (honour). Whether in martial, athletic, or rhetorical contest, the Homeric heroes distinguish themselves at the expense of their adversaries. This evaluative mode, in which one must forever strive to 'be first and best and superior to the others' (*Il.* XI.784), applies even to the concourse of Olympian gods, locked as they are in a divine struggle which parallels, affects, and is affected by the conflict between individual heroes and between the Achaeans and the Trojans. In Chapter 1, I showed that Nietzsche regards this contest-idea as the bedrock of Hellenism, not to be superseded until the advent of Socrates (and even then, not fully), and the engine of the uniquely impressive cultural output of Greece. Nietzsche evidently thought that this was a scandalising observation for his philhellenic contemporaries: that the instinct for conflict with others functioned in the Greek case as the source of that grand cultural inheritance much lauded by European moderns despite their delicate Christian sensibilities. 'The Greek is envious and conceives of this quality not as a blemish, but as the effect of a beneficent deity', he writes, 'What a gulf of ethical judgement lies between us and him?'¹⁸⁸

In the course of my discussion of 'Homer's Contest' and related texts, I argued that Nietzsche's approval of the competitive instinct is far from uncomplicated or blanket, however: he underlines the significance of the Hesiodic distinction between the 'good' and 'bad' Eris, goddess of strife, according to which the (what he evidently takes to be *natural*) human inclination to enter into conflict with others can manifest either as baneful destructiveness or as productive

¹⁸⁷ 'Homer's Contest', p. 8.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

competitiveness. The same force, strife, is at work in the ‘tiger-like pleasure in destruction’¹⁸⁹ evident in the massacres and mutilations perpetrated by Achilles on Hector and the Trojans, *and* in the contest of the Dionysia, which produced the highest form of art yet attained, Attic tragedy. I claimed that Greek civilisation and Greek barbarism flow, for Nietzsche, from the very same source, and that the fact that modern philology¹⁹⁰ should have lost sight of this notion constitutes one of his most important criticisms of contemporary perspectives on the Greeks. Although he seems to relish the provocative implications of this point of view (that ‘abilities generally considered dreadful and inhuman are perhaps indeed the fertile soil, out of which alone can grow humanity in emotions, actions, and works’),¹⁹¹ Nietzsche is nonetheless clear that the excellence of the Greeks was not in their instinct for savagery, but rather the manner in which that instinct was channelled into productive ends by intervening institutions: socially-sanctioned contest between individuals was promoted by Greek legislators in order to divert the potentially destructive antagonistic energy of citizens away from the political sphere. Out of this expedient ferment grew the *agon*, that species of competition which promoted rather than damaged the health of the polity, in which citizens could win acclaim at the expense of their rivals. The Greek celebration of strife, originated by Homer, is laudable to Nietzsche only to the extent that it was moderated by laws and norms that rendered it capable of producing desirable effects and ‘stronger, more beautiful’ human beings.¹⁹²

In Chapter 2 I argued that this conception of the *agon* – as the regulated chaos of incompatible and competing interests set against one another in service to productive ends – extends also to Nietzsche’s reading of Heraclitus’ metaphysics. I claim, against some recent scholarship, that Nietzsche understood Heraclitus as holding to a so-called ‘doctrine of radical flux’ according to which the basic condition of the universe is ceaseless change and transformation. Nietzsche interpreted Heraclitean flux as the *agon* of the *polis* appearing under a new guise, magnified into a cosmic principle: the universe is – at every instant – engaged in a violent process of change consisting of the fluctuation and exchange between opposing forces and properties. I argue that, according to Nietzsche’s reading of Heraclitus, the apparent permanence of objects in the world speaks only to the limitedness of the human perspective, being in truth simply ‘the flash and spark of drawn swords, the quick radiance of victory in the struggle of opposites’ (*PTG* 5). As in the case of the *agon*, however, the cosmos of Heraclitus is superintended by a regulating principle: the *logos*. The moderated exchange of forces produces its own queer kind of stability as

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ ‘Modern’ in the sense of ‘contemporary with Nietzsche’.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² NF-1881,11[186].

certain properties predominate over their opposites at one time, and vice versa at another. The harmony of this world-system consists, paradoxically, in the fact that it is constantly at odds with itself. I contended that this principle is mirrored in Heraclitus' personality – as a perfectly self-conscious outsider and critic of socially authoritative sources of knowledge such as Homer and Hesiod. For Nietzsche, he is to this extent an archetypally 'Hellenic' individual, engaged in a competition across centuries with his influential predecessors: Heraclitus, who inhabited '[his] own solar system' (*PTG* 8) was an exception to his own culture and at the same time its exemplar.

Chapter 3 was devoted to an examination of Nietzsche's relationship with Socrates, who plays a pivotal role in the world-historical narrative that Nietzsche advances in various ways across the body of his published work (he is 'the vortex and turning-point of so-called world history' [*BT* 15]). I argued that Nietzsche's appraisal of Socrates is more complex than it first appears and is best understood in terms of the agonistic principle that he takes to be distinctively characteristic of the Greeks. Far from playing the simple role of foil to the older Hellenism that Nietzsche admires, I made the case that, in many respects, Socrates represents for Nietzsche an outstanding model of genius. Following Nehamas, I claimed that Nietzsche regards Socrates as a kind of outsider and 'criminal' who transgressed against the dominant ideal of his age and sought to self-legislate a new set of values. This process consisted of the formulation of 'a new kind of *agon*' in the dialectic, which Nietzsche credits Socrates with having discovered. The form of public contest was overtaken by Socrates for his own purposes, namely, the promulgation of a new system of values predicated on an unconditional commitment to the value of truth and an emphatic rejection of the appetitive desires. In this manner, Socrates 'fascinated by appealing to the agonistic drive of the Greeks – he introduced a variation into the wrestling matches between young men' (*TI* 'Problem', 8). Like Heraclitus, Nietzsche's Socrates is a ruthless critic of everything that exists, always seeking an enemy to confront and overcome on favourable ground, that is, in the arena of dialectic where Socrates' natural talents made him pre-eminent. I argued that Nietzsche regards Socrates and Plato as in competition not merely with their contemporaries, but also (like Heraclitus) with the authoritative form of valuation taught by Homer, that 'element in which the Greek world lives as man lives in the air'.¹⁹³ Nietzsche's assessment of Plato's hostility towards Homer is that it consists in the enmity of a rival – that the literary achievements of the Platonic dialogues speak to a desire to excel Homer not merely in approximation of the truth, but also in style, form, and artistic quality. Indeed, I provided

¹⁹³ *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte*, ed. Lasson, G. (Leipzig, 1923), 529.

support for Nietzsche's view that Socrates sought to assume control of dominant cultural forms (in order to radically reinterpret them) by discussing an illustrative passage in *Apology*. Socrates apparently misquotes Achilles at *Il. XVIII.114* in order to present his quest for vengeance against Hector as the pursuit of justice.

I made the case that Socrates' hostility (as Nietzsche sees it) to tragedy in the Aeschylean and Sophoclean style was a function of his unwillingness to sustain the tense balance of conflicting drives: in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche gives an interpretation of Attic tragedy according to which it is the dynamic exchange between the Apolline and the Dionysiac – essentially opposed 'artistic drives' (*Kunsttriebe*) – both at the level of content and form that produces the tragic effect. He echoes and reinforces the charge of Aristophanes: that Euripides – a mere stooge or valet of Socratism – disrupted this balance by de-emphasising the chorus (the integral Dionysiac element) in favour of dramatic monologue while presenting characters with more complex interior lives, better approximating the thoughts and preoccupations of ordinary people and hence, the spectator. Like Aristophanes, Nietzsche thinks that in this, Euripides was Socrates' pupil: he tells us that the Socratic 'greed for knowledge' is pathologically opposed to art, and Dionysiac-tragic art in particular, for which it is bound to engender 'hostility' and 'disgust' (*BT 15*).

I claimed that Nietzsche's critique of Socrates is grounded in his philosophical psychology, which I argued is characterised by an '*agon* of the soul' according to which the multifarious drives are understood to exist in continual competition with one another. As in the case of the competition of the *agon*, in which victors are always temporary and thus the contest never-ending, for Nietzsche the struggle between competing drives cannot be allowed to resolve itself permanently. The competitiveness that spurred the Greeks to produce marvellous works of art, literature, and philosophy could not survive the end of the competition itself in the form of a single, pre-eminent competitor – hence the dreadful theogonic myths that describe the grim fates visited upon those who, upon becoming peerless among mortals, found themselves in competition with the gods. I suggested that Nietzsche conceives of the complex of drives that constitutes the human person in much the same way: a healthy individual moderates the oppositional interplay of his desires and therefore does not permit any one drive to predominate over the rest. The ascetic who vigorously denies the appetitive drives is, for Nietzsche, just one side of the *décadent* coin whose obverse is hedonistic abandon. Nietzsche's attack in 'The Problem of Socrates' is to claim that Socrates fails in just this manner, namely, by 'making a tyrant of reason' ('Problem', 7) at the expense of the bodily.

If Nietzsche's chief criticism of Socrates is that he was a *décadent*, that he permitted one drive to prevail permanently in the contest of the soul, then Epicurus may represent an instructive example of an individual who successfully resisted this temptation. In Chapter 4, I outlined what I take to be the interpretive problem presented by Nietzsche's effusive praise for Epicurus in the middle period: as a system of ethics – and a mode of valuation – Epicureanism privileges negative states of being in the form of *aponia* (the absence of bodily pain) and *ataraxia* (the absence of mental disturbance). I argued, against less radical readings, that Epicurus regarded the absence of pain and disturbance as not merely the precondition of negative (or *katastematic*) pleasure, but as *identical with it*, and provided evidence that this interpretation was dominant in scholarship contemporary with Nietzsche. This being the case, the Epicurean picture begins to strongly resemble Schopenhauer's pessimistic metaphysics in 'Additional Remarks on the Doctrine of the Suffering of the World' and Book II of *The World as Will and Representation*. I claimed that this is an interpretive problem insofar as Nietzsche rejects Schopenhauer for his commitment to an axiological opposition to suffering which ultimately engenders nihilism: Schopenhauer's remedy for the inexorable torment of the will is *décadent* in the manner of Socrates – a saintly-ascetic ideal according to which desire is denied to the greatest degree possible. The problem, then, is how Nietzsche can simultaneously approve of the Epicurean perspective while emphatically rejecting the Schopenhauerian one.

I argued that the basic similarity between Epicurus and Schopenhauer is their mutual recognition of the problem presented by desire, namely, that the multiplication of desires is attended by the multiplication of suffering. I claimed that the central departure from Nietzsche's point of view, however, is that Schopenhauer advocates for the resolute denial of desire itself, whereas Epicurus actually promotes the *cultivation* of certain desires. The pessimistic conclusion of Schopenhauer, according to which there is no way of living that could be preferable to nonexistence, is absent in Epicurus. The point of difference between them lies not in an essential disagreement over what is valuable (that is, their shared conception of pleasure) but rather Epicurus's confidence in the potential of human beings to develop a form of life that is worthwhile. Where Schopenhauer insists on the abnegation of desire, succumbing like Socrates to the temptation to denigrate the bodily drives in favour of a castrative asceticism, Epicurus prescribes the *cultivation* of modest pleasures according to a plan. I have argued that this represents, for Nietzsche, an exercise in 'giving style to one's character', the regulation of the drives according to an individual schema, producing a self-chosen form of life which one is able to affirm.

I have shown that the contest-idea of the Greek state – the tense balance between opposing forces which underpins the ‘polyphony of Greek nature’ that Nietzsche lauds – is internalised in Epicurean ethics as the balance achieved between carefully moderated passions. While this interpretation is well-supported by textual evidence from Nietzsche’s middle period, it is possible that the modest asceticism of Epicurus is incompatible with the more bombastic demands of value-creation for which Nietzsche advocates in the later period. Indeed, I considered whether we should regard his later critical remarks concerning Epicurus as constituting a complete reappraisal of the desirability of the Epicurean ethic, standing as it does so close to everything that Nietzsche wishes to repudiate in Schopenhauer and Christianity.

If Heraclitean ontology and Epicurean ethics represent the transformation of the agonistic spirit of the palaestra into a cosmic principle and the basis of human happiness respectively, then Thucydides – Nietzsche’s ‘cure from all Platonism’ – is its sublimation into an unsentimental politics. In Chapter 5, I argued that Nietzsche’s philosophy of law and the state is heavily influenced by his reading of Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War*. I made the case that Nietzsche’s Thucydides is not so much a critic of morality as a pragmatist who regards moral considerations as exercising no causal efficacy over the course of events in history. I considered the interpretation, advanced by Ste. Croix, that Thucydides regards moral judgements appropriate (and, indeed, makes them himself) in the case of individual citizens and their conduct, as it were, *inside* the political community – he simply believes that such judgements lose their relevance when applied to the intercourse *between* communities. I argued that, as far as Nietzsche is concerned, Thucydides implies that the constitution of those political communities themselves is predicated not on high-minded moralism, but on a strictly prudential calculation of mutual interest. This makes possible the tense truce that obtains between the multiple competing interests of which the *polis* consists. Considered under this ‘Dikaiopolitan’ aspect, Nietzsche understands the *poleis* of Thucydides’ *History* as existing in the first place as a highly volatile compromise between hostile individuals and classes (which can explode, as in Corcyra, into cycles of horrific violence) in precisely the same manner that the ‘justice’ which obtains *between* cities is merely the balance of opposed powers.

Nietzsche’s interpretation of Thucydides emphasises the cold practicality of the conception of justice implied by the *History* and his unique capacity to even-handedly present a range of conflicting perspectives on the same events. The contest between the *poleis* in war is thus only one level on which the phenomenon of the ‘good Eris’ obtains: for Nietzsche, the tension between conflicting interests is the original and sustaining condition of the political community,

a tension which – as we saw in preceding chapters – if properly maintained, is capable of producing the most marvellous cultural effects.

The genius of the Greeks as Nietzsche saw them lay in their conception of contest in its many forms as the bedrock of the state, of the arts, of the pursuit of human happiness and excellence, and even of the universe itself. From an unlikely source – the petty envy and jealousy of rivals – spring the most remarkable achievements in philosophy, literature, and statecraft. Nietzsche's vision of Hellenism is defined by dynamic processes of self-overcoming as the *agon* expands to dominate both the public and private spheres, extending even across generations as old forms are destroyed or overtaken by new perspectives. Those 'sublime' Greek individuals whom Nietzsche distinguishes from the rest are not unified by a common philosophy, being frequently and vehemently at odds with one another, but rather as special exemplars of this contest-idea – often outside and against Greekness as they found it, feeling a gulf between themselves and everything traditional and in need of reinvention. These individuals, residing like Nietzsche himself in frigid Hyperborean climes at once within and beyond the Greek imagination, *vying* with the Greek imagination, should be celebrated as its greatest legacy: 'Whoever tells of them, tells the most heroic story of the human mind!' (*HH* II.221).

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