

Nietzsche's
Aesthetic Solution

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A Brief Introduction to the Genius of Nietzsche

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NIETZSCHE'S AESTHETIC SOLUTION

SCENE 1: NIETZSCHE AND WAGNER

Nietzsche played the piano and all his life (until insanity) he improvised on it for hours; he wanted to be a composer and he composed. There is a huge book of his compositions available in university libraries, but nothing commercially available has been recorded. He also sang and composed songs. Probably his best known musical work is the *Manfred Meditation*. Nietzsche thought very highly of himself as a musician but he wrote music just like his prose; in other words he defied every rule of composition and tonal connection, he made many mistakes in harmonics, and so forth, and he never developed a consistent theme throughout his pieces; everything is variations and changes. In his music he reaches for *Rausch*, an untranslatable word, which means a kind of frenzy, an ecstasy, an intoxication. It is interesting that Nietzsche's father was also a musician and composed; both father and son would improvise for hours together on the piano.

Wagner, like Nietzsche's father, was 31 years older than Nietzsche. Wagner's mistress Cosima was a morally warped person wrapped in mystery. She was the wife of the famous conductor Von Bülow, but she lived with Wagner; eventually she actually was divorced by Von Bülow. She lived about 50 years after Wagner died.

Cosima was the daughter of Liszt, the famous composer and pianist, and she was 7 years older than Nietzsche. There was a curious relationship in the Wagner household. Nietzsche idolized Wagner, even though he himself was already recognized as a genius and was a full professor at a famous university. He behaved more like he was in the presence of a divine with Wagner. At the same time, Cosima played the role of trying to draw Nietzsche into German nationalism and antisemitism. She was a virulent anti-Semite and her slogan was, "burn Jews."

The first conflict between Nietzsche and Wagner took place on the subject of war; Wagner was for it and Nietzsche was against it. Wagner was very pro-German, very nationalistic, and—like Hegel—found Prussia to be the ideal state. Nietzsche said Prussia was "obnoxious and uncivilized." Nietzsche never shared Wagner's German emotionalism and German nationalistic ideas.

The appearance of *The Birth of Tragedy* in 1872 during this decade of his second phase (1869-1879) caused Nietzsche considerable ostracism; it was actually first understood mainly by musicians. *The Birth of Tragedy* stresses "the overpowering man of affect" (Fischer-Dieskau 1976) , and in it Nietzsche forecast the polyphony of Mahler and Schönberg which came later. He emphasized ecstasy and visionary exultation in music. He saw music as having as its purpose to bring forth spiritual excitement and processes that can be depicted only by music; Nietzsche was absolutely wild about Wagner's "*Ring*" operas (Chessick 1983) and Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*.

Some readers were spellbound by *The Birth of Tragedy* but most of them ignored it and—worst insult of all—students refused to register for Nietzsche's classes. It was a great blow to him, but this great and arrogant work—in which he clearly depicts himself as the superior successor to Socrates—was published when Nietzsche was only 28. In the same year, 1872, Wagner established his own festival at Bayreuth; matters shifted between Nietzsche and Wagner from that time on. There was great public success for Wagner— he had his own place, his own festival, his own hall built to his own specification, and great honor—but Wagner demanded slavish obedience and adoration from all people around him and he did not like independent thought. He essentially tried to use Nietzsche as a propagandist for Wagner. The sections in *The Birth of Tragedy* from the sixteenth to the end—probably the worst thing Nietzsche ever wrote—are all Wagner propaganda added by Nietzsche after he produced the first 15 sections of *The Birth of Tragedy*; a kind of an afterthought to make Wagner feel pleased.

Nietzsche became increasingly ambivalent about Wagner. He began to develop all kinds of new and worse psychosomatic ailments, and began giving excuses to stay away from Wagner's home. He wrote a paper called "Richard Wagner in Bayreuth" in 1876; in this paper his first misgivings about Wagner appear. He visited Bayreuth and was very much disappointed. In his mind the composer of such exalted and magnificent music should attract a spiritual and cultural elite (remember he was still in the phase of veneration, with faith in culture and genius). When he came to the opera house in Bayreuth he saw the traditional bourgeois middle aged matrons with their diamonds and fur coats—relatively well-to-people. He saw middle class Christians, not the Greek heroes he was hoping to see at Bayreuth, and it became clear to him that Wagner was interested in making money and was quite happy to open the place to such a public, because this was the public that could afford the prices! Nietzsche called these people "the fat matrons from Marianbad."

Nietzsche also became increasingly shocked by Wagner's antisemitism, which was much amplified in Bayreuth, becoming a kind of admission ticket to the "inner crowd." The last straw, however, was not antisemitism but Wagner's *Parsifal*. It is a Christian opera and goes back to Christian themes—yet Wagner was an avowed atheist. Nietzsche felt this was hypocritical and a "sell-out" because it was obviously written to attract the kind of audience that was attending the Bayreuth festival. He seemed unable to recognize that it is also a musical masterpiece of the very highest order.

SCENE 2: NIETZSCHE AND SOCRATES

The two themes of Nietzsche and Wagner, and Nietzsche and Socrates, run throughout all of Nietzsche's writings from beginning to end. In *The Birth of Tragedy* Socrates appears as almost a demigod, the father of logic and the exterminator of the Greek music drama, who took on two Greek gods and won. *The Birth of Tragedy* was written to overturn all the nineteenth century beliefs about Greek culture. Nietzsche blamed Socrates and his cool rationalism for throwing an uncomprehending wet blanket over the Dionysiac tragedies of the Greeks. He also praised Socrates because he felt that Socrates' passion for knowledge prevented complete race suicide of the Greeks, a theme that comes up over and over again. Socrates' scientific optimism was a holding action against the degeneration of Greek culture, and for this Nietzsche praised him.

Nietzsche admired many so-called great men, for example, Jesus, Schopenhauer, Wagner, and Socrates. He admired Jesus, he respectfully criticized Christianity in the German Protestant tradition, and he hated what he called decadence in Christ's followers—in this case organized Christianity. He admired Schopenhauer, he respectfully criticized Schopenhauer's philosophy, and he hated the decadence in those who claimed to be following Schopenhauer by putting on a false asceticism. He admired Wagner, he respectfully criticized Wagner's music, and he hated German nationalism and German antisemitism. Finally, he admired Socrates, he respectfully criticized his rationality, and he hated Platonists and the later Greeks. He sometimes refers to the Platonists and the later Greeks using the term "Alexandrianism," an obvious reference to Alexander the Great, who represented the final flare-up of Greek dominance.

One of the most important, if not the most important, opposition in all Nietzsche's writing is

between Christ and Socrates. For Nietzsche, Christ represents the next world, whereas Socrates represents man saving himself, the doctrine that man's salvation is himself. Christ represents the crucified; Socrates and Goethe represent joyful affirmation of this life. Thus Christ represents giving up on this life; Socrates and Goethe represent joyfully reaffirming this life through sublimated passion. Remember it was Nietzsche (not Freud) who invented the concept of sublimation—he sometimes called it "spiritualization."

Christ represents giving in to suffering, whereas Nietzsche saw Socrates as representing the overcoming of suffering in this world. Christ says the next world is what is important. Christ and Schopenhauer say life is intolerably evil and full of suffering, therefore concern yourself with the spiritual. In Schopenhauer's case the spiritual represented what Schopenhauer called Will, a wholly metaphysical concept.

Socrates in a sense was what Nietzsche unsuccessfully tried to be personally like, although he arrogantly thought of himself as superior to Socrates. Nietzsche wanted to be wild and drunken but under control. In the *Symposium* of Plato, all drink and all talk, but Socrates drinks them all under the table. He has the most control of all, whereas at the same time he is not an ascetic—he drinks along with them.

Nietzsche said, "Let's concern ourselves with this world." He scorned what he defined as "God," namely, other worlds, ultimate realities, Kant's things-in-themselves, Schopenhauer's Will. These were all dead, according to Nietzsche. When he wrote, "God is dead," what he meant was that we cannot know anything about the spiritual world, about the world behind the world of appearances. We can never get in touch with metaphysical reality according to Nietzsche, so all that is intelligible must be found within the world of appearances. These themes lead ultimately and paradoxically to Nietzsche's own metaphysical position.

In order to understand Nietzsche one must be aware of his changing views of Socrates. In his second phase, as stated, he was unhappy with Socrates as a "wet blanket" rationalist but he praised him for preserving Greek culture. He exalted Socrates during his positivistic period (what I have called the first part of his third phase), when Nietzsche preferred science to poetry. Finally, in the rest of the third

phase he broke with Socrates and presented his own views, but he was *always* arguing with Socrates.

SCENE 3: NIETZSCHE AND SCHOPENHAUER

There are 4 "books" which make up Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations* (sometimes translated the *Untimely Reflections*). The first of these, published in is called *Thoughts out of Season*; it abandons German patriotism and it objects to Bayreuth.

The second of these is on history, published in *Of the Use and Disadvantage of History for Life*. This second "book" already shows how Nietzsche approached history as he will approach philosophy. He distinguished three types of history (see Nietzsche 1957): 1) antiquarian history, which is practiced in universities where the scholars reverently consolidate their knowledge of the past, study the ancient scripts and so forth, 2) critical histories, which attempt to pass sentence on the past, and 3) monumentalistic history, which concentrates on past heroes in order to confront us with contemporary mediocrity and the possibility of greatness. Here is the main point: the person that Nietzsche was really talking about in this whole "untimely meditation" was Darwin. Nietzsche disagreed that the goals of humanity can be reached by some kind of evolution of the species. He argued—and this (after Pindar) is his first individual original point—that *the goal of humanity is the production of its highest specimens*.

The third of his "meditations" was called *Schopenhauer as Educator*, a beautiful little "book." In 1874 Nietzsche here first pronounced the theme "become yourself," also taken from Pindar. Actually it is an autobiography of Nietzsche and not about Schopenhauer at all, although it claims to be. It presents a highly idealized description of Schopenhauer (see Nietzsche 1965).

Richard Wagner in Bayreuth is the fourth "untimely meditation," written in 1876, detesting Wagner's nationalism and antisemitism. Wagner was anti-French, whereas Nietzsche was very pro-Voltaire, especially after he visited Bayreuth. Nietzsche then moved to a French aphoristic style of writing; thus he even moved away from German prose for a while. Around 1878 he became extremely sick with psychosomatic ailments, probably because of the break with Wagner, and in 1879 he resigned his university position; it is this resignation from his university position that marks the end of his second phase. From that point he became a homeless wanderer for 10 years until he broke down, going from

cheap unheated flats to cheap unheated flats, from one Italian or Swiss city to the other.

Nietzsche's entire early philosophy can be found in *The Birth of Tragedy* and *Untimely Meditations*. He distinguished in his early philosophy between man's true nature and man's animal nature. The representatives of man's highest or true nature, according to Nietzsche, are the artist, the saint, and the philosopher. Here Nietzsche followed Hegel. Man's animal nature is represented by the masses—the so-called ordinary or herd man. Nietzsche had nothing but scorn for the ordinary man, he called him lazy and filled with fear of social retaliation.

Hegel thought that the state was the highest culmination of social man, whereas Nietzsche thought the state was an enemy of man because it forced conformity and prevented man from reaching his true nature. Nietzsche also claimed that the Church was an "Antichrist"; by this he meant the organized church had "sold out" Christ and joined the state in compelling conformity.

How does one find his true self? Nietzsche (1965) addressed this question in *Schopenhauer as Educator*. He said, ask what you really loved until now and what are the traits you must admire in your chosen educators. He attempted to illustrate this by describing what he represents as the traits of his chosen educator, Schopenhauer. Clearly he had the example of Socrates in mind (as described in Act I, Scene 3, above).

He addressed himself to the issue of man's dignity, which he felt the Bible gave us and Darwin took away. He said we must remake our own nature, each man (women are ignored) single and alone, for himself. Notice that this Socratic point of view cuts across *all* racial, ethnic, and nationalistic boundaries! *All* values for Nietzsche derive from the individual; Nietzsche was not interested in any color or creed or ethnic group at all. He did have in mind an aristocracy however, but it is not the traditional kind of aristocracy, it is the aristocracy of the man who has overcome himself, found himself, and become what he is. He believed that all men, regardless of color, race, and creed have the potential to be truly human. We must in our own lives do the same thing that Apollo does for Dionysus in *The Birth of Tragedy* (see below); we must give order to our passions to achieve and overcome these drives.

Nietzsche is commonly misunderstood in his unfortunate language exhorting to war, extolling the "blond beast,"¹ and so on. These political metaphors try to encourage us to make war on what is in

ourselves, overcome what is in ourselves, and become what he thought of as aristocrats. He did not like the masses; he despised them because he felt that they have not made such an effort.

There are some interesting thoughts about an educator in *Schopenhauer as Educator*. He felt that an educator should help the student discover the fundamental laws of his own character. He believed like Socrates that an educator should help you to unchain something in yourself, enabling you to climb higher toward your true being.

He distinguished three kinds of men: a) the Rousseauian man who longs for something beyond himself, and reaches out to holy nature, b) the Goethian man who is contemplative, scientific, and neutral, and c) Nietzsche's hero, the Schopenhauerian man who faces truth squarely, accepts the pain of it, and who examines the consequence of the denial of all cherished beliefs. Such a man despises all thoughts of comfort or discomfort, and he lives an isolated heroic life. In fact, he has remarkable resemblance to professor Nietzsche, and of course, Nietzsche has been criticized for making his philosophical hero the model of himself.

Schopenhauer as Educator is a preliminary work which offers a picture of life as a whole and something you can live by. He stressed the uniqueness of each individual and argued that culture has to further the production of the Schopenhauerian man—artists, philosophers, and saints. In it he attacked the usual aims of education, which Nietzsche said are to help people make money, make good citizens of the state, and make them scholars, and he attacked the scholarly teaching of philosophy with its cramming for examinations. He insisted that the key test of a philosophy is whether one can live by it.

By the time he wrote *Ecce Homo* in 1888, he said Schopenhauer has "the peculiar bitter odor of corpses about him." That is quite a way from the former idealization! The somber picture of life that Schopenhauer gives first attracted Nietzsche, but Nietzsche is too joyful a person; he is too life-affirming to accept Schopenhauer's pessimism.

There were certain tremendous attractions Schopenhauer held for Nietzsche; in fact one could say that his basic philosophy comes from or rests on Schopenhauer. First of all there is the denial of the supernatural and the transcendental. Then there is Schopenhauer's stress on the irrational character of the universe. The greatest clash between Schopenhauer and Hegel was that Hegel insisted the universe

was developing in an orderly fashion, while Schopenhauer declared it to be utterly irrational.

Also crucial was Schopenhauer's subordination of intellect to Will. Schopenhauer was the first philosopher who minimized the power of reason and saw it as a slave of something else. "Will" for Schopenhauer is a mysterious metaphysical driving force, deep in the psyche, never defined. The fundamental pessimism of Schopenhauer first attracted Nietzsche—the meaninglessness of it all, which is very strongly emphasized by Schopenhauer.

There are vital differences however, between Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. One of the most important is over the notion of Will. Schopenhauer's philosophy rests on a metaphysical concept called Will, a transcendental force which unites everything. It is the driving force of the universe. Nietzsche said this is nonsense, for there is no metaphysical reality beyond what we know. On the other hand, he said that individuals are "will points," individual unique centers of a driving for power. Nietzsche did not believe there is some transcendental reality that holds the world together. He did not think that any such force could ever be found. He also objected to Schopenhauer's proposed solution to withdraw from life, listen to music, and become an ascetic. Schopenhauer himself never followed this, and in fact lived just the other way, thus failing Nietzsche's true test of any philosophy.

He disagreed with Schopenhauer about pity. Schopenhauer had pity for everybody, whereas Nietzsche renounced pity in this sense, as we shall discuss later. Wagner was deliberately trying to express in his music the philosophy of Schopenhauer; just as Dante expressed in his poetry the metaphysics of Aquinas, Wagner especially in *Tristan and Isolde* attempts to express the metaphysics of Schopenhauer. Nietzsche broke finally with all of this, forming his truly original ideas in his last few sane years.

SCENE 4: THE BIRTH OF TRAGEDY

The Birth of Tragedy is a remarkable book; it has no footnotes and no quotations. It was his first book, it was sensational and scandalous, and it ruined him. His reputation as a scholar and philologist after that was tainted. Most people did not understand what the book was about. Only Wagnerians liked it. The academics called it sheer propaganda.

The two major concepts in the book are represented by the gods Apollo and Dionysus. Watch for these in the writings of Nietzsche because their meanings change as he goes on. In *The Birth of Tragedy* "Apollonian" stands for restraint, harmony, and measure, and "Dionysian" stands for drunken frenzy. At the end of his intellectual career (around 1888) Nietzsche no longer opposed the Apollonian and the Dionysian; he synthesized the Dionysian and Apollonian under Dionysus, and he contrasted Dionysus with the crucified Christ.

The Birth of Tragedy tried to reintroduce the spirit of Dionysus into dry, sterile, academic philosophy also, and he forecasted that if we continue to repress the Dionysian the twentieth century will see a terrible explosion. This was his important objection to the hypocritical Christian ethics of the Victorian era. Copleston (1965) explains,

This means that the nineteenth century culture characterized by the domination of knowledge and science is exposed to the revenge, as it were of the vital forces, the explosion of which will produce a new barbarism. Beneath the surface of modern life Nietzsche sees vital forces which are wild, primitive, and completely merciless. One looks at them with a fearful expectancy as though at the cauldron in the witch's kitchen . . . for a century we have been ready for world-shaking convulsions (p. 173).

Nietzsche's work revolutionized the prevalent conception of the spirit of Greece. At the time of Nietzsche the Greeks were thought of as a kind of super-rational beings with computer-like minds. He argued for the first time that we cannot really appreciate the Greek Apollonian achievement—their balanced and disciplined achievements—unless we realize the kinds of power they had to harness in order to make these achievements possible. Nietzsche argued that it was the fusion of the Apollonian and the Dionysian that made the Greek achievements in tragedy supreme.

For Nietzsche as for modern psychotherapists, mental health is not something like the lack of an infection. Health is the ability to overcome disease—to overcome the forces of destruction or forces of disintegration, what psychotherapists call "ego-strength."

He raised the question: how might we justify life if God is dead? The issue "God is dead" does not really come up until later in full force in Nietzsche, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. His first answer to this problem in *The Birth of Tragedy* was to justify man as an aesthetic phenomenon, as something magnificent, the product of culture. Yet in spite of his anti-metaphysical stance, Nietzsche seemed unaware that "Apollo" and "Dionysus" are certainly metaphysical concepts. They are *disembodied*

principles. Behind Nietzsche's anti-metaphysics there is at the very beginning in his first original work a metaphysics.

The Birth of Tragedy raised Nietzsche's key questions and problems: 1) What is the relationship between science, art, and life? 2) Can there be aesthetic as against moral meanings for existence? 3) What is the difference between strong pessimism and romantic pessimism? 4) How can we achieve the reevaluation of values? and 5) How to launch an attack on the foolish scientific optimism of his time. In this book the phrase "Socratism" is ambivalently equated with rationalism, scientism, and scientific optimism.

In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche argued that neither science nor art can reach the truth; all are illusions. The illusions of science—which are based on language—make life possible, and the illusions of art make it bearable. This latter idea he borrowed from Schopenhauer. Quite unlike Kant, who believed that there were certain conceptual schemes built in to the human mind, Nietzsche argued that conceptual schemes *vary* from society to society. He conceived of himself as an outsider who is looking at the conceptual scheme of his society and examining possible other ones. This is an extremely dangerous thing to do, but it is the task of the true philosopher, who must question, revalue values, and create new ones. A society is shored up in its self-esteem by its conceptual scheme, so someone who challenges the whole underpinnings of it must end up isolated and an outsider. Thus, Nietzsche later said of himself "I am dynamite," echoing a phrase used to describe him by his first serious and appreciative critic, Brandes.

He viewed artistic intuition as the basic exploratory activity of man. Art for Nietzsche is a metaphysical activity and is the highest human task. Only later on do artistic conceptions become systematized, conceptualized, and made into science. He equated art and fantasy and dreaming as ways we make life bearable. He considered dreaming to be interpreting life through images.

There is a confusion running through his distinction between Apollonian art and Dionysian art. Apollonian art is supposed to be individuating; examples of this are sculpture and painting and dreaming. Dionysian art is supposed to be disintegrating or dis-individuating by drunkenness—*Rausch*—ecstasy, transport, not literal alcoholic drunkenness. Examples of Dionysian art are lyric poetry, music, and religious ecstasy, but there are forms of painting which can be Dionysian and there are forms of

music and poetry which are Apollonian . It is a vague metaphorical distinction and his critics even today attack this distinction because it is so vague. He saw first Homeric art and then later on the full-blown Apollonian art of the magnificent Greek statues as *transforming* the raw barbaric cruelty and destructiveness of the stone age—the barbaric Dionysian world—transforming it in order to make life possible and bearable, to counteract the pessimism and the nasty brutal shortness of barbaric life. At the same time, this barbarism in 1872 was seen by Nietzsche as always ready to explode from under the thin veil of the Apollonian rationalism.

Freud in *Civilization and Its Discontents* saw the unhappiness and the suffering of civilization as a necessity, because what Nietzsche would call the Dionysian elements have to be constantly transformed, kept under some kind of repression, and turned on ourselves—making it impossible to achieve the happiness of their full discharge and imbuing us with a sense of guilt (Chessick 1980).

The key thesis of *The Birth of Tragedy* was that the best Greek tragedy was a fusion, a finely tuned balance of these two forms of art, the Apollonian and Dionysian; an amalgam. The chorus in the Greek tragedy is a sublimation of the ancient Dionysian ecstatic rites, in which humans who represented Dionysius were literally torn to pieces.

Unfortunately, according to Nietzsche, along came Euripides and Socrates, who substituted explanation and discussion and dialectic for the chanting of lyric poetry and the chorus. This, according to Nietzsche, was an artistic catastrophe, "the death of tragedy through the spirit of reason." At the same time, he much admired the achievements of reason and science of Socrates, which gave hope to the declining Greek civilization.

Notes

¹ By this frequently quoted term he meant not "Aryan" or Nazi, but simply a lion (see Act IV, Scene 1, of the present book).