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## Nietzsche And The Religion Of The Future

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*The waters of religion are ebbing away and  
leaving behind swamps or stagnant pools.<sup>1</sup>*

This article examines the place of religion in Nietzsche's writings and how it fits with the task of a "new philosopher." Although Nietzsche opposes all otherworldly, monotheistic religions, it is incorrect to say that Nietzsche proposes atheism as a solution. Religion, he contends, is an essential part of any healthy culture. Nietzsche's new philosophy would fashion gods consistent with the natural order of rank and the highest aims of man.

Nietzsche conceives of modernity not as progress but an unhealthy and dangerous break with tradition that he seeks to set right. Consequently, he turns to the greatness of antiquity. Nietzsche, for example, follows the ancients in affirming the superiority of philosophy to politics. Nietzsche's new philosophy is characterized by its ability to use—and indeed govern—religion, science, and politics for the sake of high culture. The death of god is a terrible event, but it makes possible the discovery of the will as a fact of nature and the creation of new gods. Rather than merely opposing modernity or appealing to antiquity, Nietzsche looks past modernity to create something new and greater.

### I. Religion And Culture

Seeing Nietzsche as anything other than anti-religious is quite a feat. Statements in favor of religion are usually overshadowed by statements to the contrary, so it is all too easy to emphasize his anti-religious bent. His claim that "there are no moral phenomena

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "Schopenhauer as Educator," *Untimely Meditations*, R. J. Hollingdale trans. (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1997), §4.

at all, but only a moral interpretation of phenomena” implies an absolute freedom for moral interpretation.<sup>2</sup> And earlier in that work, Nietzsche refutes both god and the devil.<sup>3</sup>

Although he is regarded as an atheist who revels in the death of god, nowhere does Nietzsche advocate an exclusively atheist agenda. For instance, he does not herald atheism as the antidote for the ascetic. As John Andrew Bernstein contends, “Nietzsche never attempted a logical refutation of the possibility of God’s existence.”<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Nietzsche is only reluctantly celebratory in proclaiming the death of god: he calls it “the great spectacle in a hundred acts reserved for the next two centuries in Europe—the most terrible, most questionable, and perhaps also the most hopeful of all spectacles.”<sup>5</sup> His Zarathustra, we should recall, was so bothered by the death of god that he retreated to the mountaintop where he remained in solitude for ten years.<sup>6</sup> For all of his disdain for Christianity, the opposite is true of his stance on religion: Nietzsche wants a new faith as much as he wants a new philosophy, a view that is only now being taken seriously.<sup>7</sup>

These two views of Nietzsche are reconciled by examining, for lack of a better term, level of analysis. Nietzsche applies the doctrine of the will to power to individuals; a people, however, needs a faith. “A people that still believes in itself retains its own god,” he writes. “In him it reveres the conditions which let it prevail, its virtues: it projects its pleasure in itself, its feeling of power, into a being to whom one may offer thanks....Under such conditions, religion is a form of thankfulness.”<sup>8</sup> The health and growth of a people is tied to its beliefs: the strong have faith; the weak have nothing.

Of course Nietzsche is not an advocate for all religions. Certain ones, Christianity for example, remain undesirable. “Formerly [god] represented a people, the strength of a people, everything aggressive and power-thirsty in the soul of a people,” he writes. “Now he is merely the good god.”<sup>9</sup> In a sense, Nietzsche’s attack on Christianity is made in the name of god and religion. Christianity is not only at odds with nature, but also with the very concept of what a religion should be. Good religions and just gods are

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<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Walter Kaufmann, trans. (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1966), §108.

<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche, *Good and Evil*, §37.

<sup>4</sup> Bernstein continues: “Nietzsche never attempted a logical refutation of the possibility of God’s existence. He does not appear to have thought it attainable. What he substituted was a genetic reduction of faith, which was clearly intended to have the effect of a refutation by suspicion....Nietzsche’s implication is that the belief in God is traceable to human needs.” John Andrew Bernstein, *Nietzsche’s Moral Philosophy* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1987), 165-66.

<sup>5</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, trans. (New York, NY: Vintage, 1989), §3.27.

<sup>6</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, “Thus Spoke Zarathustra,” *The Portable Nietzsche*, Walter Kaufmann, trans. (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1982), Afterworldly.

<sup>7</sup> See Tyler T. Roberts, *Contesting Spirit: Nietzsche, Affirmation, Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998); and Weaver Santaniello, *Nietzsche and the Gods* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, “The Antichrist,” *Portable Nietzsche*, §16.

<sup>9</sup> Nietzsche, “The Antichrist,” §16.

those that reflect the needs of a people. Nietzsche refers to a desirable ruler-type as a “Roman Caesar with Christ’s soul.”<sup>10</sup>

The problems with Christianity become more evident when it is compared to Islam. “Islam is a thousand times right in despising Christianity,” Nietzsche claims. “Islam presupposes *men*.”<sup>11</sup> Christianity, by contrast:

has cheated us out of the harvest of ancient culture; later it cheated us again, out of the harvest of the culture of *Islam*. The wonderful world of the Moorish culture of Spain, really more closely related to *us*, more congenial to our senses and tastes than Rome and Greece, was *trampled down*....Because it owed its origin to noble, to *male* instincts, because it said Yes to life even with rare and refined luxuries of Moorish life.<sup>12</sup>

Nietzsche blames Christianity for the inability of Islam to find a wider audience. Nevertheless, Islam, like Christianity, is an otherworldly-monotheism, the very sort of religion that his new religion points away from.

It is through Nietzsche’s examination of religion that he is able to assess the vitality of a people. “The difference among men becomes manifest not only in the difference between their tablets of goods,” he writes. “It becomes manifest even more in what they take for really *having* and *possessing* something good.”<sup>13</sup> His estimation of a people is connected directly to its estimation of itself. Strong cultures relish their strengths, while weak cultures ignore even their most debilitating weaknesses, to the point of pitying criminals<sup>14</sup> and using the sick as doctors.<sup>15</sup> Nietzsche understands the importance of religion enough to judge among them.

Nietzsche’s view of religion is very much tied to an emphasis on tradition as the basis for culture. It is worth quoting at length.

Morality is nothing other (therefore *no more!*) than obedience to customs, of whatever kind they may be; customs, however, are the *traditional* way of behaving and evaluating. In things in which no tradition commands there is no morality; and the less life is determined by tradition, the smaller the circle of morality. The free human being is immoral because in all things he is *determined* to depend upon himself and not upon a tradition....What is tradition? A higher authority which one obeys, not

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<sup>10</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, Walter Kaufmann, trans. (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1967), §983. For Walter Kaufmann, this phrase is “the very heart of Nietzsche’s vision of the overman. Being capable of both sympathy and hardness, of loving and ruling, not using claws though having them.” *From Shakespeare to Existentialism* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1960), 300.

<sup>11</sup> Nietzsche, “The Antichrist,” §A 59.

<sup>12</sup> Nietzsche, “The Antichrist,” §60.

<sup>13</sup> Nietzsche, *Good and Evil*, §194.

<sup>14</sup> Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, §2.10.

<sup>15</sup> Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, §3.15.

because it commands what is *useful* to us, but because it *commands*... Originally all education and care of health, marriage, cure of sickness, agriculture, war, speech and silence, traffic with one another and with the gods belonged within the domain of morality: they demanded one observe prescriptions *without thinking of oneself* as an individual. Originally, therefore, everything was custom, and whoever wanted to elevate himself above it had to become lawgiver and medicine man and a kind of demi-god: that is to say, he had to *make customs*—a dreadful, mortally dangerous thing! Who is the most moral man? *First*, he who obeys the law most frequently.... *Then*, he who obeys it even in the most difficult cases. The most moral man is he who *sacrifices* the most to custom... the individual is to sacrifice himself—that is the commandment of morality of custom.<sup>16</sup>

Nietzsche sees the needs of culture to be served by tradition and custom: this is the role for morality. Modern man seeks other justification for his morality. Nietzsche writes:

Those moralists, on the other hand, who, following in the footsteps of Socrates, offer the individual a morality of self-control and temperance as a means to his own advantage, as his personal key to happiness, are the exceptions—and if it seems otherwise to us that is because we have been brought up in their after-effect: they all take a new path under the highest disapprobation of all advocates of morality of custom—they cut themselves off from the community, as immoral men, and are in the profoundest sense evil.<sup>17</sup>

From Socrates onward, morality becomes a means to self-control and personal fulfillment. Modern morality serves only the individual—and not very well.

Contrary to what most interpreters would have us believe, Nietzsche does not open up the moral world to any and all interpretations; Nietzsche even warns us against doing so. What he wishes to stress is the role of philosophy in interpreting morality. Philosophers do not have the right to interpret morality as a personal preference; rather, they are bound to do so within the confines of nature and the health of a people. Hence Nietzsche calls for a radical reevaluation of the nature and purpose of morality. “High spirituality itself exists only as the ultimate product of moral qualities,” he posits. “It is a synthesis of all those states which are attributed to ‘merely moral’ men, after they have been acquired singly through long discipline and exercise, perhaps through whole chains of generations... high spirituality is the spiritualization of justice and of that gracious severity which knows that it is its mission to maintain the *order of rank* in the world, among things themselves—and not only among men.”<sup>18</sup> The order of rank informs

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<sup>16</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, R. J. Hollingdale, trans. (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1997), §9.

<sup>17</sup> Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, §9.

<sup>18</sup> Nietzsche, *Good and Evil*, §219.

religion, just as it informs the will. Nietzsche's morality is a sort of "high spirituality" accessible only to those capable of knowing the standard for equality and justice as it is found "not only among men," but primarily as it exists in nature.

Nietzsche questions all morality in light of this consideration: "Moralities must be forced to bow first of all before the *order of rank*; their presumption must be brought home to their conscience—until they finally reach agreement it is *immoral* to say: 'what is right for one is fair for the other.'"<sup>19</sup> Later he notes, "there is an order of rank between man and man, hence also between morality and morality."<sup>20</sup> Although Nietzsche depicts the victory of "good and evil" over "good and bad," the battle has not everywhere been decided: "One might even say that it has risen ever higher and thus become more and more profound and spiritual: so that today there is perhaps no more decisive mark of a '*higher nature*,' a more spiritual nature, than that of being divided in this sense and a genuine battleground of these opposed values."<sup>21</sup>

Previous moral philosophers, however, have done nothing to prevent freedom for moral interpretation. "That philosophers' invention...the invention of 'free will,' of the absolute spontaneity of man in good and in evil, was devised above all to furnish a right to the idea that the interest of the gods in man, in human virtue, *could never be exhausted*."<sup>22</sup> Morality has been interpreted to advance what is low (and formerly bad) in man as good, possible, and, worst of all, necessary.

Nietzsche's protests of other "interpretations" of morality now become clearer. He equates the Romans with strength and nobility and the Jews with its opposite, "*ressentiment par excellence*."<sup>23</sup> Nietzsche holds a high, or perhaps even higher, regard for the morality of the Greeks and the "abundance of gratitude that it exudes."<sup>24</sup> Continuing, he notes: "it is a very noble type of man that confronts nature and life in *this* way. Later, when the rabble gained the upper hand in Greece, *fear* became rampant in religion, too—and the ground was prepared for Christianity."<sup>25</sup> Morality, Nietzsche contends, should be gauged according to how it affects the strength of a people.<sup>26</sup> He seeks to construct or recognize a religion consistent with nature and the needs of a great people. Christian morality will be replaced by a life-affirming morality of rank, far superior with regard to nature and its service to culture.

The difference is illustrated in Nietzsche's comparison of the New Testament with the Old. While he goes to great lengths to oppose Christianity, Nietzsche speaks with reverence regarding the Old Testament:

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<sup>19</sup> Nietzsche, *Good and Evil*, §221.

<sup>20</sup> Nietzsche, *Good and Evil*, §228.

<sup>21</sup> Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, §1.16.

<sup>22</sup> Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, §2.7.

<sup>23</sup> Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, §1.16.

<sup>24</sup> Nietzsche, *Good and Evil*, §49.

<sup>25</sup> Nietzsche, *Good and Evil*, §49.

<sup>26</sup> Nietzsche, *Good and Evil*, §188; *Will to Power*, §151.

In the Jewish ‘Old Testament,’ the book of divine justice, there are human beings, things, and speeches in so grand a style that Greek and Indian literature have nothing to compare with it. With terror and reverence one stands before these tremendous remnants of what man once was... whoever is himself merely a meager, tame domestic animal and knows only the needs of domestic animals... has not cause for amazement or sorrow among these ruins—the taste for the Old Testament is a touchstone for ‘great’ and ‘small’.... To have glued this New Testament... to the Old Testament to make *one* book, as the ‘Bible,’ as ‘the book par excellence’—that is perhaps the greatest audacity and ‘sin against the spirit’ that literary Europe has on its conscience.<sup>27</sup>

The difference between the two, Nietzsche argues, is that in the Old Testament he finds “great human beings, a heroic landscape, and something of the very rarest quality in the world, the incomparable naïveté of the *strong* heart; what is more, I find a people.”<sup>28</sup> The New Testament did a great disservice to the great tradition of religion and faith that preceded it.

Some religions can also be used for educative purposes, including preparation for leadership. It is possible, Nietzsche notes, for some, “those ascending classes,” to “walk the paths to higher spirituality.”<sup>29</sup> Here asceticism and Puritanism are useful. Asceticism is useful for philosophers but not for philosophizing. When applied to some, and not all, their existence becomes, not only tolerable, but “indispensable” to the advance of a people. For those incapable of rule—that is the “vast majority” of “ordinary human beings”—

religion gives an inestimable contentment with their situation and type, manifold peace of the heart, an ennobling of obedience, one further happiness and sorrow with their peers and something transfiguring and beautifying, something of a justification for the whole everyday character, the whole lowliness, the whole half-brutish poverty of their souls... it is refreshing, refining, makes, as it were, the most of suffering, and in the end even sanctifies and justifies.<sup>30</sup>

Nietzsche replaces the tyranny of modern morality with a three-fold typology. Religion can be: an instrument of rule, a means of instructing the “ascending classes” for future rule, or a means of distracting or placating those who are stationary and unfit for rule. This last quality is perhaps the only benefit of either Christianity or Buddhism, the

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<sup>27</sup> Nietzsche, *Good and Evil*, §52.

<sup>28</sup> Nietzsche, *Good and Evil*, §3.23.

<sup>29</sup> Nietzsche, *Good and Evil*, §61.

<sup>30</sup> Nietzsche, *Good and Evil*, §61.

latter of which excels at it. As he contends: “Philosophy is not suited for the masses. What they need is holiness.”<sup>31</sup>

This is the reason Nietzsche does not wish completely to rid philosophy of the soul. It is not necessary, he claims, “to renounce one of the most ancient and venerable hypotheses... But the way is open for new versions and refinements of the soul-hypothesis; and such conceptions as ‘moral soul,’ and ‘soul as subjective multiplicity,’ and ‘soul as social structure of the drives and affects,’ want henceforth to have citizens’ rights in science.”<sup>32</sup> It is modern philosophy and science that is truly anti-Christian and anti-soul.<sup>33</sup> Nietzsche wishes not to abjure the concept of the soul, but to challenge it with other claims, or to amend it with a concern for the will to power and the order of rank. It is not possible for a rigid concept of the soul to serve knowledge. Instead, Nietzsche opens up the way for a series of alternative and competing views of the soul, each radically different from the Christian vision of it.

By interpreting morality in light of nature and the strength of a people, philosophers become legislators, or creators of value. “The philosopher as *we* understand him, we free spirits—as the man of the most comprehensive responsibility who has the conscience for the over-all development of man—this philosopher will make use of religions for his project of cultivation and education, just as he will make use of whatever political and economic states are at hand.”<sup>34</sup> Religion, Nietzsche notes, is an indispensable tool for “the art of governance,” whether this means direct rule and obedience or the use of surrogates, as in the case of the Brahmins.<sup>35</sup> In the latter instance, the philosophers then left themselves leisure for study and contemplation, free of the demands of the political sphere. Hence the new philosophers can be philosophers *and* kings. This view of morality and the gods means that, while god is dead, other gods are very much waiting in the wings. “And how many new gods are still possible!” Nietzsche exclaims. “As for myself, in whom the religious, that is to say god-forming, instinct occasionally becomes active at impossible times—how differently, how variously the divine has revealed itself to me each time!”<sup>36</sup>

Nietzsche believes that perspectivism will renew our sense of the divine. “At times we find certain solutions of problems that inspire strong faith in *us*; some call them henceforth *their* ‘convictions,’” he writes. “Later—we see them only as steps to self-knowledge, sign-posts to the problem we *are*—rather, to the great stupidity we are, to our spiritual *fatum*, to what is *unteachable* very deep down.”<sup>37</sup> Human nature too easily views success as a result of the will. The misunderstanding of the will to power too often

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<sup>31</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner*, Walter Kaufmann, trans. (New York, NY: Random House, 1967), §3; Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All too Human*, R. J. Hollingdale, trans. (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1996), §115.

<sup>32</sup> Nietzsche, *Good and Evil*, §12.

<sup>33</sup> Nietzsche, *Good and Evil*, §54.

<sup>34</sup> Nietzsche, *Good and Evil*, §61.

<sup>35</sup> Nietzsche, *Good and Evil*, §61.

<sup>36</sup> Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, §1038; Cf. §1039.

<sup>37</sup> Nietzsche, *Good and Evil*, §231.



becomes spiritual in nature—an arbitrary morality. If morality is an error, the only remedy is a philosophy open to other perspectives, including the creation of new gods.

Nietzsche warns, however, that the “other side” of religion is its “uncanny dangerousness.” Philosophers must be wary “when religions do *not* want to be a means of education and cultivation in the philosopher’s hand but insist on having their own *sovereign* way, when they themselves want to be ultimate ends and not means among other means.”<sup>38</sup> Christianity and Buddhism fail in this regard as they “seek to preserve,” and in the process they have become “religions for sufferers.”<sup>39</sup> It is for this reason that Nietzsche places religion—and with it politics—so delicately in the hands of his new philosophers.

Religion, it seems, is necessary for any healthy and thriving political community. Nietzsche is adamant, however, that religion be of a particular sort and, most importantly, that it be placed under the control of those most capable of understanding its proper usage.

## II. The Greek Genius

Just as Nietzsche sought to rewrite, or at least to amend, the story of modernity, he also wished to revisit antiquity to assess the reality, and the totality, of Greek culture. For Nietzsche, Socrates and Plato were neither the whole nor the best of what the Greeks have to offer about life and philosophy. “I recognized Socrates and Plato to be symptoms of degeneration,” Nietzsche writes, “tools of the Greek dissolution, pseudo-Greek, anti-Greek.”<sup>40</sup> More specifically, Nietzsche argues against the “Socratic equation of reason, virtue, and happiness: that most bizarre of all equations, which, moreover, is opposed to all the instincts of the earlier Greeks.”<sup>41</sup> In other words, Socrates and Plato were hardly representative of the true Hellenic genius.

Socrates’ break with the Greeks is most evident in his preferred method. “With Socrates,” Nietzsche writes, “Greek taste changes in favor of dialectics. . . . Above all, a noble taste is thus vanquished; with dialectics the plebs come to the top. Before Socrates dialectic manners were repudiated in good society.”<sup>42</sup> For Nietzsche, dialectics is a barren form of No-saying.<sup>43</sup> “One chooses dialectics only when one has no other means,” he writes. “It can only be *self-defense* for those who no longer have other weapons.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Nietzsche, *Good and Evil*, §62.

<sup>39</sup> Nietzsche, *Good and Evil*, §62.

<sup>40</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, “Twilight of the Idols,” *Portable Nietzsche*, Socrates §2.

<sup>41</sup> Nietzsche, “Twilight,” Socrates §4.

<sup>42</sup> Nietzsche, “Twilight,” Socrates §5.

<sup>43</sup> Nietzsche’s repeated arguments against dialectics have not stopped some from including him among its practitioners. “We take the position that his [Nietzsche’s] method is, in fact, very close to that of Marx. . . . Nietzsche employs the technique of dialectical critiques of values and institutions and, by retracing out their history through genealogy, shows the original purpose and function for which these values were established and how, over time, they are decomposed, destroyed and fragmented.” Georg Stauth and Bryan S.

Nietzsche is not hostile to all the ancients, however; he is an admirer of Thucydides, among others.<sup>45</sup> Thucydides, Nietzsche writes:

takes the most comprehensive and impartial delight in all that is typical in men and events and believes that to each type there pertains a quantum of *good sense*: *this* he seeks to discover. He displays greater practical justice than Plato; he does not revile or belittle those he does not like or who have harmed him in life... Thus in him, the portrayer of man, that *culture of the most impartial knowledge of the world* finds its last glorious flower.<sup>46</sup>

Thucydides presents his history of man for the sake of man. In Thucydides, the natural beauty of man is a gift to posterity.

Nietzsche places other Greeks alongside Thucydides. Greece “had in Sophocles its poet, in Pericles its statesman, in Hippocrates its physician, in Democritus its natural philosopher,” he notes.<sup>47</sup> Not surprisingly, Nietzsche sides with the Sophists against Socrates and Plato. “The Sophists are no more than realists,” he contends. “They formulate the values and practices common to everyone on the level of values—they possess the courage of all strong spirits to know their own immorality.”<sup>48</sup> The Sophists were the real Greeks, and the real Greek teachers; it was Socrates and Plato that broke with the tradition of their people.<sup>49</sup>

Nietzsche separates Thucydides and the other Greeks from Socrates and Plato based on their choice of life over wisdom. This is not to say that the Greeks did not value knowledge, however, for “the Greeks themselves, [were] possessed of an inherently insatiable thirst for knowledge”; but they “controlled it by their ideal need for and

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Turner, *Nietzsche's Dance: Resentment, Reciprocity and Resistance in Social Life*, New York, NY: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 22.

<sup>44</sup> Nietzsche, “Twilight,” Socrates §6; Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, Marianne Cowan, trans. (Washington, D.C.: Regenery Publishing, Inc., 1998), §3.

<sup>45</sup> Robert Eden traces Nietzsche's teaching on justice (and the eternal return) to Thucydides' Melian dialogue. *Political Leadership and Nihilism: A Study of Weber and Nietzsche* (Tampa, FL: University of South Florida Press, 1983), 126.

<sup>46</sup> Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, §168; Cf. “Twilight,” Ancients §2.

<sup>47</sup> Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, §168.

<sup>48</sup> Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, §429.

<sup>49</sup> In one of his earliest works, Nietzsche includes Socrates among the “Greek masters”: “All other cultures are put to shame by the marvelously idealized philosophical company represented by the ancient Greek masters Thales, Anaximander, Heraclitus, Parmenides, Anaxagoras, Empedocles, Democritus and Socrates. These men are monolithic. Their thinking and their character stand in a relationship characterized by strictest necessity. They are devoid of conventionality, for in their day there was not philosophic or academic professionalism. All of them, in magnificent solitude, were the only ones in their time whose lives were devoted to insight alone. They all possessed that virtuous energy of the ancients, herein excelling all men since, which led them to find their own individual form and to develop it through all its metamorphoses to its subtlest and greatest possibilities. For there was no convention to meet them half-way. Thus all of them together form what Schopenhauer in contrast to the republic of scholars has called the republic of creative minds: each giant calling to his brother through the desolate intervals of time. And undisturbed by the wanton noises of the dwarfs that creep past beneath them, their high spirit-converse continues.” *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, §1.

consideration of all the values of life. Whatever they learned, they wanted to live through, immediately.”<sup>50</sup> The Greeks, before Socrates at least, valued knowledge insofar as it served life. For the Greeks, life was an open question: it was not possible, they thought, to know for certain the value of life. Conversely, Socrates sought to answer once and for all that very question. As Nietzsche explains it: “judgments, judgments of value, concerning life, for it or against it, can, in the end, never be true: they have value only as symptoms; in themselves such judgments are stupidities...*the value of life cannot be estimated*...For a philosopher to see a problem in the value of life is thus an objection to him, a question mark concerning his wisdom, an un-wisdom.”<sup>51</sup> The question of life is to remain unanswered; any solution may provide some guidance, but it may come at the expense of other, potentially superior, perspectives.

There are countless other admirable qualities in the Greeks. The Greeks were, for example, non-egalitarian in nature. “Other peoples have saints; the Greeks have sages,” Nietzsche writes.<sup>52</sup> The Greeks knew how to honor great men, and especially great thinkers: “It has been rightly said that a people is characterized not as much by its great men as by the way in which it recognizes and honors its great men. In other times and places, the philosopher is a chance wanderer, lonely in a totally hostile environment which he either creeps past or attacks with clenched fist. Among the Greeks alone, he is not an accident.”<sup>53</sup> Nietzsche’s fear is not that men like Pericles will not be honored; Nietzsche fears that they will no longer exist. For Nietzsche, Pericles was “the mightiest and worthiest...man on earth...[He] represented the visible human realization of the constructive, moving, distinguishing, ordering, reviewing, planning, artistically creative, self-determining power of the spirit.”<sup>54</sup> The Greeks had a strong culture because they had strong and worthy individuals carrying it on their shoulders.

The Greeks also had a different view of man and his relationship with nature. In an unpublished aphorism, Nietzsche writes:

When one speaks of *humanity*, the idea is fundamental that this is something which separates and distinguishes man from nature. In reality, however, there is no such separation: ‘natural’ qualities and those called truly ‘human’ are inseparably grown together. Man, in his highest and noblest capacities, is wholly nature and embodies its uncanny dual character. Those of his abilities which are terrifying and considered

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<sup>50</sup> Nietzsche, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, §1.

Elsewhere, Nietzsche writes, “The idyllic shepherd of modern man is merely a counterfeit of the sum of cultural illusions that are allegedly nature; the Dionysian Greek wants truth and nature in their most forceful form—and sees himself changed, as by magic, into a satyr.” *The Birth of Tragedy*, Walter Kaufmann, trans. (New York, NY: Random House, 1967), §8.

<sup>51</sup> Nietzsche, “Twilight,” Socrates §2.

<sup>52</sup> Nietzsche, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, §1.

<sup>53</sup> Nietzsche, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, §1.

<sup>54</sup> Nietzsche, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, §19.

inhuman may even be the fertile soil out of which alone all humanity can grow in impulse, deed, and work.<sup>55</sup>

Nietzsche goes on to mention how the Greeks represented this view.<sup>56</sup> For him, the Greek view of nature is the standard by which modern culture ought to be judged.

Nor did the Greeks despise the body in the manner of modern morality. “The Greeks remain the first cultural event in history,” Nietzsche writes. “They knew, they *did*, what was needed; and Christianity, which despised the body, has been the greatest misfortune of humanity so far.”<sup>57</sup> Far from despising the body, the Greeks pronounced even the most painful and routine elements of the body as holy, and revered it as such. The body was the source of creation; and through it “there may be the eternal joy of creating, that the will to life may eternally affirm itself.”<sup>58</sup> The Greeks saw beauty in the thing most hated by Christianity: human nature. In the Greek, the body takes its rightful place among the things most revered.

### III. Gods Who Philosophize

The Greeks also had a different view of the role of religion. “The Greeks,” Nietzsche argues, “did not see the Homeric gods as set above them as masters, or themselves set beneath the gods as servants, as the Jews did. They saw as it were only the reflection of the most successful exemplars of their own caste, that is to say an ideal, not an antithesis of their own nature.”<sup>59</sup>

Nietzsche also finds elements of his positive teaching in the Greeks, including the will to power: “For it is only in the Dionysian mysteries, in the psychology of the Dionysian state, that the *basic fact* of the Hellenic instinct finds its expression—its ‘will to life.’”<sup>60</sup> The will to power has its origin in Greek culture, where he claims they too valued life over truth.

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<sup>55</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, “Homer’s Contest,” *Portable Nietzsche*, 32-39. Cf. *The Gay Science*, Walter Kaufmann, trans. (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1974), §155.

<sup>56</sup> “In earlier times...the conviction that mankind was the goal of nature was so strong that it was assumed without question that nothing could be disclosed by knowledge that was not salutary and useful to man, indeed that things other than this *could* not, *ought* not to exist.—Perhaps all this leads to the proposition that truth, *as a whole* and interconnectedly, exists only for souls which are at once powerful and harmless, and full of joyfulness and peace (as was the soul of Aristotle), just as it will no doubt be only such souls as these that will be capable of *seeking it*: for, no matter how proud they may be of their intellect and its freedom, the others are seeking *cures* for themselves—they are *not* seeking truth. This is why these others take so little real pleasure in science, and make of the coldness, dryness and inhumanity of science a reproach to it: it is the sick passing judgment on the games of the healthy.—The Greek gods, too, were unable to offer consolation; when Greek mankind at last one and all grew sick, this was a reason for the abolition of such gods.” Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, §424.

<sup>57</sup> Nietzsche, “Twilight,” *Skirmishes* §48.

<sup>58</sup> Nietzsche, “Twilight,” *Ancients* §4.

<sup>59</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All too Human*, §114.

<sup>60</sup> Nietzsche, “Twilight,” *Ancients* §4.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche contrasts the Dionysian will to power with the influence of the sun god, Apollo.<sup>61</sup> Bernd Magnus and Kathleen M. Higgins describe the Apollinian as “the principle of order, static beauty, and clear boundaries. The Dionysian principle, in contrast, is the principle of frenzy, excess, and the collapse of boundaries.”<sup>62</sup> These “art impulses of nature” are responsible for the greatness of Greek culture.<sup>63</sup> The relationship is best explained not as a tension, but as a harmony. Nietzsche writes: “These two art drives must unfold their powers in a strict proportion, according to the law of eternal justice. Where the Dionysian powers rise up as impetuously as we experience them now, Apollo, too, must already have descended among us, wrapped in a cloud; and the next generation will probably behold his most ample beautiful effects.”<sup>64</sup> The result is that “the Dionysian and the Apollinian, in new births ever following and mutually augmenting one another, controlled the Hellenic genius.”<sup>65</sup> Nietzsche argues that “naïve” art, such as that of Homer, is the product of the Apollinian impulse; but of course “Apollo could not live without Dionysus!”<sup>66</sup> Nietzsche rejects such monotheism, or “Christian monoton-theism,”<sup>67</sup> in favor of the never-ending tension between his twin gods.<sup>68</sup> At

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<sup>61</sup> On nature in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Werner Dannhauser writes: “Depending on the context, ‘nature’ in *The Birth of Tragedy* can refer either to the empirical world of appearances, or to the primordial reality which is their ground. If one thinks of nature in the former sense, then the highest art, tragedy, certainly goes beyond an imitation of it.” “Nevertheless,” he concludes later in the work, “a world view does emerge from the book. The world is a chaos and not a cosmos. A primordial disorder underlies all appearance of order. The fundamental Dionysian reality is a system of discordant energy. Man is confronted by a chaotic world; moreover, he partakes of the chaos, being a dissonance created by dissonance. The abyss surrounds him and is within him. Man’s fundamental experience is that of suffering; to live means to suffer. Life is a process of creation and destruction, a meaningless game in which man may imagine himself a player but in which he is a pawn. Life has no purpose of goal beyond itself; it is a ‘dark, driving, insatiably self-desiring power.’ The life force in man is extinct.” *Nietzsche’s View of Socrates* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974), 117 and 119.

<sup>62</sup> Bernd Magnus and Kathleen M. Higgins, “Nietzsche’s works and their themes,” *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche*, Bernd Magnus and Kathleen M. Higgins, eds. (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 22.

Nietzsche writes: “the word ‘*Dionysian*’ means: an urge to unity, a teaching out beyond personality, the everyday, society, reality, across the abyss of transitoriness: a passionate-painful overflowing into the darker, fuller, more floating states; an ecstatic affirmation of the total character of life as that which remains the same, just as powerful, just as blissful, through all change; the great pantheistic sharing of joy and sorrow that sanctifies and calls good even the most terrible and questionable qualities of life; the eternal will to procreation, to fruitfulness, to recurrence; the feeling of the necessary unity of creation and destruction.” In the same section, he writes: “the word ‘*Apollinian*’ means: the urge to perfect self-sufficiency, to the typical ‘individual,’ to all that simplifies, distinguishes, makes strong, clear, unambiguous, typical: freedom under the law.” Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, §1050.

<sup>63</sup> Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, §2.

<sup>64</sup> Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, §25.

<sup>65</sup> Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, §4; Cf. *Will to Power*, §1050, 1052.

<sup>66</sup> Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, §3.

<sup>67</sup> Nietzsche, “The Antichrist,” §19.

<sup>68</sup> Michael Allen Gillespie contends that Nietzsche’s “notion of the Dionysian is derived from the notion of the Christian God in ways Nietzsche does not altogether understand, in large part because he does not recognize his conceptual debt to the earlier Romantic idea of the Dionysian and the idealist conceptions of the will. The Dionysian will to power is thus in fact a further development of the idea of the absolute will that first appeared in the nominalist notion of God and became a world-historical force with Fichte’s notion of the absolute I. This means that God is not as dead for Nietzsche as he believes; only the rational element in God is dead, the element that was grafted onto the Christian God to temper his omnipotence. Nietzsche’s Dionysus, to speak

the end of *Beyond Good and Evil*, he alludes to Dionysus and his beloved Ariadne as the gods of the religion of the future.<sup>69</sup>

The problem of modernity can be defined in terms of the victory of the Apollinian, in the form of Platonic metaphysics, over the Dionysian. “This is the new opposition,” Nietzsche writes: “the Dionysian and the Socratic—and the art of Greek tragedy was wrecked on this.”<sup>70</sup> Nietzsche places Socrates at odds with the spirit of the Greek culture, represented, in his view, by the healthy struggle between Dionysus and Apollo. “Consider the consequences of the Socratic maxims: ‘Virtue is knowledge; man sins only from ignorance; he who is virtuous is happy.’ In these three basic forms of optimism lies the death of tragedy.”<sup>71</sup> Socrates killed “the infinity of art” and with it the infinity of Greek culture.<sup>72</sup> If modernity is Apollinian, we cannot live without Dionysus, the role Nietzsche seeks to play.

It must be noted that the tension between Dionysus and Apollo is less pronounced in Nietzsche’s later writings. Some have noted that the later Dionysus possesses the power for creation and destruction.<sup>73</sup> This change, however, is easily accounted for without altering the basic nature of the dyad. The victory of the Apollinian in Socrates meant for Nietzsche that he had to supply the Dionysian countermeasure in the extreme. In one of the most important parts of *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche refers to Dionysus as “that great ambiguous one and tempter god,” the god who was offered Nietzsche’s first book as a sacrifice.<sup>74</sup> Nietzsche remarks that he has learned much since then, and refers to himself as “the last disciple and initiate of the god Dionysus,” someone who “might begin at long last to offer you, my friends, a few tastes of this philosophy, insofar as this is permitted to me.”<sup>75</sup> This explains why Apollo becomes secondary in his later writings: he came to understand more clearly that culture could only be set right through a tragic philosophy and a Dionysian philosopher.<sup>76</sup> Music in

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in Nietzsche’s own metaphorical language, is thus not an alternative to the Christian God but only his final and in a sense greatest modern mask.” *Nihilism Before Nietzsche* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995), xxi.

<sup>69</sup> For the best summary of Nietzsche on Dionysus and Ariadne, see Laurence Lampert, *Nietzsche’s Task: an Interpretation of Beyond Good and Evil* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), especially 262-294.

<sup>70</sup> Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, §12.

<sup>71</sup> Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, §14.

<sup>72</sup> Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, §15.

<sup>73</sup> See Kaufmann (Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil*, n295) on the difference between the early Dionysus and the later one.

It may also be that Nietzsche became more pessimistic in the realization of a Dionysian spirit. As Kaufmann notes elsewhere, “it is one of Nietzsche’s central points in [*The Birth of Tragedy*] that we cannot do justice to the achievement of the Greeks and the triumph of the power of restraint that he calls Apollinian unless we first behold the unrestrained Dionysian energies that the Greeks managed to harness.” Walter Kaufmann, “Translator’s Introduction,” *The Birth of Tragedy*, 4.

Nietzsche’s emphasis on the Dionysian nature of his project may have more to do with the chronology of his works or a greater pessimism than a change in his understanding or presentation of Dionysus.

<sup>74</sup> Nietzsche, *Good and Evil*, §295.

<sup>75</sup> Nietzsche, *Good and Evil*, §295.

<sup>76</sup> This is one instance of the development of Nietzsche’s philosophy. In an early work, he writes: “if philosophy ever manifested itself as helpful, redeeming, or prophylactic, it was in a healthy culture. The sick, it

general, and Wagner in particular, was no longer the answer. In Dionysian times, we might find Nietzsche as the herald of the Apollinian. In his formulation, Nietzsche is not so much a tempter-philosopher as he is our savior.<sup>77</sup>

In speaking of Dionysus as a philosopher, Nietzsche notes, “certainly the god in question went further, very much further...and was always many steps ahead of me.”<sup>78</sup> Dionysus understood, long before Nietzsche, that philosophy demands action. Dionysus was more capable of destruction and thus more capable of creation. Hence *The Birth of Tragedy*, a book calling others to action, was itself insufficient. His philosophy eventually became more political as he sought out controversies of his age.<sup>79</sup> Nietzsche the author became Nietzsche the destroyer.

That Dionysus is related to destruction does not diminish his virtue. “The desire for destruction, change, becoming, *can* be the expression of an overfull power pregnant with the future...but it can also be the hatred of the ill-constituted, disinherited, underprivileged, which destroys, *has* to destroy, because what exists, indeed existence itself, all being itself, enrages and provokes it.”<sup>80</sup> Just as creation is not always good, destruction is not always bad. The difference lies in the goals. Destruction can be for the sake of strength and becoming, an “expression of overflowing energy,” as much as it can be the result of a hatred of life and growth. The Greek culture rested on a balance between Dionysus and Apollo that resulted in creation and destruction of the right things (truth) and for the right reason (life).

Nietzsche finds evidence to support his views elsewhere, most notably in Rome. In many respects, Nietzsche argues, the Romans are better teachers in that they stand

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made ever sicker. Wherever a culture was disintegrating, wherever the tension between it and its individual components was slack, philosophy could never re-integrate the individuals back into the group....Philosophy is dangerous wherever it does not exist in its fullest right, and it is only the health of a culture—and not every culture at that—which accords it such fullest right.” *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, §1.

<sup>77</sup> Rosen suggests that Nietzsche may have associated himself with Dionysus ironically, “as a concealed disciple of Apollo, the pagan god of lucidity.” *Ancients*, 190.

<sup>78</sup> Nietzsche, *Good and Evil*, §295.

<sup>79</sup> The thing most changed about Nietzsche was the tactics he used, or saw as necessary, to realize his goal; his philosophy did not change all that much, certainly not as much as is commonly held. Porter, for example, writes, “Nietzsche’s writing and thinking are stranger, and more consistent, than they have been credited with being in the past.” Porter later concludes, “the most basic ingredients of [Nietzsche’s] thinking are all in place well before *The Birth of Tragedy*.” James I. Porter, *Nietzsche and Philology of the Future* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 2 and 21.

Cf. Ruth Abbey, who claims that Nietzsche’s “middle period”—from *Human, All too Human* (1878) to first four books of *The Gay Science* (1882)—is distinctive. *Nietzsche’s Middle Period* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000).

I agree with Abbey that these middle works are ignored, and I have done my part to rectify this oversight in the literature. I have followed Porter and Kaufmann, however, in seeing a general continuity between the different phases of Nietzsche’s corpus. Furthermore, given Nietzsche’s emphasis on the value of perspective, it would be difficult to disregard completely any of his writings, published or otherwise. Walter Kaufman, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1968), 342-43.

<sup>80</sup> Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, §846; Cf. *The Gay Science*, §370.

closer to us than do the Greeks.<sup>81</sup> The Romans, for example, are a good example of a culture that can thrive without philosophy, or at least without an extreme version of it. “The Romans during their best period lived without philosophy”; conversely, the Greeks were ruined by theirs.<sup>82</sup> In pointing to the Romans as better teachers, Nietzsche suggests that the thing most needed in modernity is an example of a strong culture where philosophy in the platonic sense is not needed.

Nietzsche spent a lot of time looking to the past, but he does not mean to return there. To conservatives, he writes: “one *must* go forward—step by step further into decadence (that is *my* definition of modern ‘progress’). One can *check* this development and thus dam up degeneration, gather it and make it more vehement and *sudden*: one can do no more.”<sup>83</sup> On those who simply turn their backs on the whole of modernity, he writes: “The main thing about them is *not* that they wish to go ‘back,’ but that they wish to get—*away*. A little *more* strength, flight, courage, and artistic power, and they would want to *rise*—not return!”<sup>84</sup> It is not possible, nor is it desirable, to return to antiquity. Nietzsche’s intent is not to resurrect the ancients, but to surpass all that has come heretofore. If it is not possible to return, then we must rise.

Modernity, then, is not so much a development of the Greek as a move away from it.<sup>85</sup> We are right in looking to the Greeks for guidance, but we looked to the wrong Greeks, and now we pale in comparison. It is no wonder that the Greek influence is often looked upon with such great disdain:

nearly every age and stage of culture has at some time or other sought with profound irritation to free itself from the Greeks, because in their presence everything one has achieved oneself, though apparently quite original and sincerely admired, suddenly seemed to lose life and color and shriveled into a poor copy, even a caricature....Unfortunately, one was not lucky enough to find the cup of hemlock with which one could simply dispose of such a character.<sup>86</sup>

The first remedy for our shame is the acceptance of it.

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<sup>81</sup> Nietzsche, “Twilight,” Ancients §2.

<sup>82</sup> Nietzsche writes: “The Greeks, with their truly healthy culture, have once and for all *justified* philosophy simply by having engaged in it, and engaged in it more fully than other people. They could not even stop engaging in philosophy at the proper time; even in their skinny old age they retained the hectic postures of ancient suitors....By the fact that they were unable to stop in time, they considerably diminished their merit for barbaric posterity, because this posterity, in the ignorance and unrestraint of its youth, was bound to get caught in those too artfully woven nets and ropes.” Nietzsche, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, §1.

<sup>83</sup> Nietzsche, “Twilight,” Skirmishes §43.

<sup>84</sup> Nietzsche, *Good and Evil*, §10.

<sup>85</sup> “For Nietzsche modernity represents a decisive moment in the history of western culture, when its values are revealed to be hollow illusions and thereby lose all legitimacy. The consequent crisis is constantly threatened with a lapse into a decadent nihilism, a state of absolute passive unbelief, in which no values are legitimate, least of all those of the discredited western tradition.” Matthew Rampley, *Nietzsche, Aesthetics and Modernity* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 2.

<sup>86</sup> Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, §15.



However much Nietzsche revered the Greeks, he too was overly modern in his thinking at times. “I *spoiled* the grandiose *Greek problem*, as it had arisen before my eyes, by introducing the most modern problems!” he writes. “I began to rave about ‘the German spirit’ as if that were in the process even then of discovering and finding itself again.”<sup>87</sup> The Greek problem was the problem of nature, the problem of life, one that can never, and indeed should never, be solved.

But that does not mean that Nietzsche spoiled the Greeks forever; they still exist to be appreciated anew. As he cheers: “Greeks! Romans! The nobility of instinct, the taste, the methodological research, the genius of organization and administration, the faith in, the *will* to, man’s future, the great Yes to all things, become visible in the *imperium Romanum*, visible for all the senses, the grand style no longer mere art but become reality, truth, *life*.”<sup>88</sup>

At the end of *Twilight of the Idols*, one of his final works, Nietzsche answers the question posed by the title “What I Owe to the Ancients.” The answer, he reveals, is *everything*. The ancient culture is the only culture that does not possess the seeds of its own overcoming; it is “still rich and even overflowing” enough to serve as the foundation for a people.<sup>89</sup> It can do so because it is based on a certain understanding of nature and rank; it is based on a teaching of the will and a respect for life as the standard by which it judges itself. In the Hellenic, Nietzsche finds not only a culture with a respect for will and nature, but a model for philosophy and religion.<sup>90</sup> He closes this work by going further than he does in his other works: “Herewith I stand on the soil of which my intention, my *ability* grows—I, the last disciple of the philosopher Dionysus—I, the teacher of the eternal recurrence.”<sup>91</sup> With this statement he places himself on the same level as his Zarathustra.<sup>92</sup>

#### IV. The Return To Nature

Perhaps the most important element that Nietzsche drew from Greek culture was the notion of the eternal. He considered this essential in understanding the Greeks. “What was it that the Hellene guaranteed himself by means of these mysteries?”

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<sup>87</sup> Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, “Self-Criticism” §6.

<sup>88</sup> Nietzsche, “The Antichrist,” §59.

<sup>89</sup> Nietzsche, “Twilight,” Ancients §4.

<sup>90</sup> Robert John Ackermann writes: “Nietzsche believed that the European culture involving the standard valuation of the Greeks, a European culture that had once been powerful and progressive, had played itself out in his time, and that continued adherence to the values embedded in European history was now reactive and even deadly. New values and a new culture were necessary, and Nietzsche tried to locate such values in a philosophical reworking of his vision of early Greece.” *Nietzsche: A Frenzied Look* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990), 4-5.

<sup>91</sup> Nietzsche, “Twilight,” Ancients §5.

<sup>92</sup> “Zarathustra once defines, quite strictly, his task—it is mine, too—and there is no mistaking its meaning: he says Yes to the point of justifying, of redeeming all of the past.” Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, Walter Kaufmann, trans. (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1979), Zarathustra §8.

Nietzsche asks. “*Eternal* life, the eternal return of life; the future promised and hallowed in the past; the triumphant Yes to life beyond all death and change; *true* life as the overall continuation of life through procreation, through the mysteries of sexuality.”<sup>93</sup> The Greeks loved life to its fullest, longing for the eternal, even if life remained the same.<sup>94</sup>

Of Dionysus and Apollo, it is Dionysus who more accurately represents the eternal. “Dionysian art, too, wishes to convince us of the eternal joy of existence: only we are to seek this joy not in phenomena, but behind them,” Nietzsche professes. “We are to recognize that all that comes into being must be ready for a sorrowful end; we are forced to look into the terrors of the individual existence—yet we are not to become rigid with fear: a metaphysical comfort tears us momentarily from the bustle of the changing features.”<sup>95</sup> Dionysus is the god of becoming, and those who follow him are able to find joy in the passing that accompanies it. Nietzschean art, of which Nietzsche’s philosophy is a part, is Dionysian art. It celebrates eternal becoming.

The notion of the eternal has lost its place in modern philosophy, however, and being has come to replace becoming. “You ask me which of the philosophers’ traits are really idiosyncrasies?” Nietzsche asks.

For example, their lack of historical sense, their hatred of the very idea of becoming.... They think that they show their respect for a subject when they de-historicize it.... Death, change, old age, as well as procreation and growth, are to their minds objections—even refutations. Whatever has being does not become; whatever becomes does not have being. Now they all believe, desperately even, in what has being. But since they never grasp it, they seek for reasons why it is kept from them.<sup>96</sup>

Philosophy since Plato lacks this Dionysian element. Philosophers are concerned only with questions of being, without examining life and truth in their strongest, most perfect forms.

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<sup>93</sup> Nietzsche, “Twilight,” Ancients §4.

The first hint at the eternal return occurs in *The Birth of Tragedy*, §16. Dionysian wisdom and art are both based on an appreciation for the eternal: “The metaphysical joy in the tragic is a translation of the instinctive unconscious Dionysian wisdom into the language of images: the hero, the highest manifestation of the will, is negated for our pleasure, because he is only phenomenon, and because the eternal life of the will is not affected by his annihilation. ‘We believe in eternal life,’ exclaims tragedy; while music is the immediate idea of this life. Plastic art has an altogether different aim: here Apollo overcomes the suffering of the individual by the radiant glorification of the *eternity of the phenomenon*: here beauty triumphs over the suffering inherent in life; pain is obliterated by lies from the features of nature. In Dionysian art and its tragic symbolism the same nature cries to us with its true, undissembled voice: ‘Be as I am! Amid the ceaseless flux of phenomenon I am the eternally creating primordial mother, eternally impelling to existence, eternally finding satisfaction in this change of phenomenon!’”

<sup>94</sup> “What is amazing about the religiosity of the ancient Greeks is the enormous abundance of gratitude it exudes: it is a very noble type of man that confronts nature and life in *this* way.” Nietzsche, *Good and Evil*, §49.

<sup>95</sup> Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, §17.

<sup>96</sup> Nietzsche, “Twilight,” Reason §1.

While the turn from becoming to being was done for the sake of wisdom, the result has been the opposite: nothing has been gained in terms of insight, yet much has been lost in the process. In *Human, All too Human*, Nietzsche writes:

an essential disadvantage which the cessation of the metaphysical outlook brings with it lies in the fact that the attention of the individual is too firmly fixed on his own brief span of life and receives no stronger impulse to work at the construction of enduring institutions intended to last for centuries....For the metaphysical outlook bestows the belief that it offers the last, ultimate foundation upon which the whole future of mankind is then invited to establish and construct itself.<sup>97</sup>

Attending to matters of being, in practice, only concerns matters of *our* being, for we can never know the whole of being. The better strategy involves turning our attention to the eternal, for only there can we hope to glimpse being in its purest form. As Nietzsche explains, “that *everything recurs* is the closest *approximation of a world of becoming to a world of being*.”<sup>98</sup>

Contemplating being has had dire consequences for man, not only in terms of wisdom but also of perspective and will. Nietzsche writes: “as soon as we imagine someone who is responsible for our being thus and thus, etc. (God, nature), and therefore attribute to him the intention that we should exist and be happy or wretched, we corrupt ourselves the *innocence of becoming*. We then have someone who wants to achieve something through us and with us.”<sup>99</sup> Concentrating on matters of being compromises the will to power. If God, Nature, or the Forms are responsible for the order of the universe and man is subservient to it, then nothing is left for the will. Being imprisons the will; becoming frees it. The will to power itself is the doctrine of becoming. It is far better that we should recognize that “all events, all motion, all becoming, as a determination of degrees and relations of force, as a *struggle*,”<sup>100</sup> for only then can we realize the power and the primacy of the will and the true value of life.

This is not to say that the eternal can easily be endured. Consider what Nietzsche says of the eternal return: “If this thought gained possession of you, it would change you as you are or perhaps crush you.”<sup>101</sup> That the eternal return requires great strength is evident in its originator, Heraclitus. “The everlasting and exclusive coming-to-be, the impermanence of everything actual, which constantly acts and comes-to-be but never is, as Heraclitus teaches it, is a terrible, paralyzing thought,” he writes.<sup>102</sup> If modernity is the story of man made weak, Nietzsche’s philosophy is a call to rank, for strength in all its

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<sup>97</sup> Nietzsche, *Human, All too Human*, §22.

<sup>98</sup> Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, §567.

<sup>99</sup> Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, §552.

<sup>100</sup> Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, §522.

<sup>101</sup> Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, §340; Cf. Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, §462.

<sup>102</sup> Nietzsche, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, §5.

guises. However much the eternal return is “the greatest weight,”<sup>103</sup> Nietzsche agrees with Heraclitus on the “innocence of becoming.” Heraclitus “discovered what wonderful order, regularity and certainty manifested themselves in all coming-to-be; from this he concluded that coming-to-be could not be anything evil or unjust.”<sup>104</sup>

The amount of strength required for the eternal return means that some individuals, Nietzsche included, will view it as a release of the will; others, no doubt, will be overwhelmed.<sup>105</sup> The result is that time itself is experienced in different ways by individuals according to their respective strength. “Some beings,” he writes, “might be able to experience time backward, or alternately forward and backward (which would involve another direction of life and another concept of cause and effect). . . . Rather the world has become ‘infinite’ for us all over again, inasmuch as we cannot reject the possibility that *it may include infinite interpretations*.”<sup>106</sup> The notion of the eternal, and with it the doctrine of the eternal return, is the logical consequence of the will to power, Nietzsche’s perspectivism, and the order of rank. It is the height of his teaching, and the principle to which the others point.

It is only through the eternal that the will can reach its peak. No longer is it subject to *ressentiment* for the past, a bad conscience in the present, or an impotence for the future: “‘*The world is perfect*’—thus says the instinct of the most spiritual, the Yes-saying instinct.”<sup>107</sup> Elsewhere, Nietzsche writes, “The highest state a philosopher can attain [is to] to stand in a Dionysian relationship to existence—my formula for that is *amor fati*.”<sup>108</sup> His new philosophy loves life; it is full of gratitude and joy. Releasing the will through a love of the eternal means more than a supreme affirmation of the self; it is an affirmation of human nature in its imperfect splendor.

Although Nietzsche castigates Christianity and other moralities, in the end, his eternal return is a morality of sorts, one not inconsistent with what he says of moralities.<sup>109</sup> He is not amoral or immoral; it is a certain type of morality that he rejects. He writes:

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<sup>103</sup> Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, §340.

<sup>104</sup> Nietzsche, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, §9.

<sup>105</sup> The eternal return is a “daunting thought experiment and a healing epiphany.” Frederick Appel, *Nietzsche contra Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 14.

<sup>106</sup> Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, §374.

<sup>107</sup> Nietzsche, “The Antichrist,” §57.

<sup>108</sup> Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, §1041. Also see *Ecce Homo*, “Clever,” §10; *Gay Science*, §276; Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner*, §4; *Nietzsche Contra Wagner*, “Epilogue.”

<sup>109</sup> “The distinctive invention of the founders of religion is, first: to posit a particular kind of life and everyday customs that have the effect of a [discipline of the will] and at the same time abolish boredom—and then: to bestow on this life style an interpretation that makes it appear to be illuminated by the highest value so that this life style becomes something for which one fights and under certain circumstances sacrifices one’s life. Actually, the second of these is more essential. The first, the way of life, was usually there before, but alongside the other ways of life and without any sense of its special value. The significance and originality of the founder of a religion usually consists of his seeing it, selecting it, and guessing for the first time to what use it can be put, how it can be interpreted.” Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, §353.

at bottom I abhor all those moralities which say: ‘Do not do this! Renounce! Overcome yourself!’ But I am well disposed toward those moralities which goad me to do something and do it again, from morning till evening, and then to dream of it at night, and to think of nothing except doing this *well*, as well as *I* alone can do it. When one lives like that, one thing after another that simply does not belong to such a life drops off....But I do not like negative virtues—virtues whose very essence it is to negate and deny oneself something.<sup>110</sup>

As a morality, the eternal return includes an order of rank; it is anything but egalitarian in nature. Not only does it not negate, but also it is a profound affirmation of the self and of life. It is a religion without a church, without an afterlife (indeed, with no other life), and without a need for the divine.<sup>111</sup> Nietzsche’s is a religion that loves gods for man’s sake.<sup>112</sup>

## V. Conclusion

Absent from the discussion thus far has been the extent to which it is possible to combine philosophy, politics, and religion in the manner Nietzsche describes. How likely is it that philosophers of the future will fashion new gods and become legislators and creators of values? Nietzsche himself is ambivalent on the issue. Although he

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<sup>110</sup> Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, §304. This is what Nietzsche means when he writes, “the law of the conservation of energy demands *eternal recurrence*.” *Will to Power*, §1063.

On this point, White writes: “The doctrine of eternal return is neither bad physics nor bad metaphysics, but rather, it seems to me, accurate anthropology: it illuminates the nature of human existence. This doctrine is anthropological, but it is not moral; it tells me now I must exist, but not how I should exist....This indicates that if I accept Nietzsche’s gift, I must go beyond Nietzsche....It is perfectly fitting that Nietzsche’s gift should be not so much an answer as a challenge. The challenge to me is to create—not *ex nihilo*—, and not once and for all, but rather on the basis of what it already is, and as it continues to develop—a soul I will be proud of creating, a soul whose existence I can affirm. Nietzsche’s gift teaches me that I am creating my soul in any case, whether I know it or not; but it does not teach me, nor does it want to teach me, what kind of soul to create.” Alan White, *Within Nietzsche’s Labyrinth* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1990), 104.

<sup>111</sup> This is not to say that there will be no gods. The most thoughtful statement on the nature of Nietzsche’s new religion comes from Laurence Lampert. He writes: “the intelligible character of the whole shows itself to our best penetration as a process of relentless, surging energy in which every power draws its ultimate consequences at every moment—blind, meaningless, wasteful abundance that consumes whatever it generates and is lovable as it is; the highest ideal is a post-Platonic, post-modern loyalty to the earth that can learn how to assign limits to the human conquest of nature and human nature out of love of the natural order of which we are dependent parts; the only possible world-affirming divinities are pre-biblical and post-biblical, earthly gods who are male and female and are neither otherworldly nor moral but who philosophize and are well disposed towards humanity; both the gains of knowledge and the tenets of belief must submit to the test of an intellectual conscience [imbued] with a distaste for pious fraud and a gratitude for the possibility of science; the always partial knowledge of our natural history made possible by the subtle historical sense can assign the future a past of struggle for enlightenment and renaissance without clutching to any particular element of the past as if it were timeless; a proper physio-psychology can become aware of the unity of our species amid the whole array of species, and aware that all species share the common fate on our planet of appearing, flourishing, and falling extinct.” *Leo Strauss and Nietzsche* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 180.

<sup>112</sup> Cf. Nietzsche, *Good and Evil*, §60.

sincerely hopes it will come to pass, he is fully aware that his teaching might bear no fruit. That is why he writes with such urgency and why his later philosophy is more radical.

More thoughtful observers will question whether the combination is even desirable. Tocqueville, we should recall, warned that religion is too important—and politics too easily corrupted—to warrant the dependence of one on the other. That Nietzsche does not (or cannot) describe the particulars of a religion of the future is anything but reassuring, and can only fan the flames of those who draw lines from him to fascism and the Nazis.

In any event, Nietzsche wants us to follow him in thinking that his program is possible and necessary and the only means to redirect the course of an increasingly decadent West.

Nietzsche has much to add to the discussion of religion and politics, if only because he challenges our liberal sensibilities on the need to separate church and state.