

Nietzsche's Attitude Towards Greek Thought

Ahmed Rezzoug
Doctorant
Université d'Alger 2

تاريخ القبول: 2018-05-01

تاريخ الإرسال: 2018-03-17

تاريخ النشر: 2018-12-02

ملخص:

لعب الفكر اليوناني دورًا بارزًا في فلسفة فريدريش نيتشه. لدرجة أنه كرس أول كتاب له بعنوان "مولد التراجيديا"، إلى تحليل التاريخ اليوناني. فما يعجبه في اليونانيين القدماء أمر أساسي في فهم ما يكرهه في المجتمع "الحديث". اهتمام نيتشه باليونانيون القدماء قاده إلى وصفهم، في مناسبات لا نهاية لها بأنهم "جميلون". في هذا السياق، تسعى هذه المقالة إلى فهم آراء نيتشه حول الفكر اليوناني القديم - ما يجعله بالغ الأهمية. سيركز هذا المقال بشكل كبير على "مولد التراجيديا"، لأنه يكون محور تفكيره في مسائل الإغريق.

Abstract:

Greek thought plays a salient role in Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy. So much so that he devoted his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, to a new analytic reconception of Greek history. There is a sense that in understanding what he likes about the Ancient Greeks is essential in understanding what he disliked and despised about 'modern' society. Nietzsche's 'obsession' towards the Greeks led him to call them, on endless occasions, "beautiful." In it is in this light that this article seeks to understand Nietzsche's views on Ancient Greek thought—what makes it so important, and what led him to call them so "beautiful." Likewise, this article will by and large focus on Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, for it is there that the crux of his thinking on Greek matters lies.

Friedrich Nietzsche was obsessed with the Greeks. He discovered them as a schoolboy, and they stayed with him throughout his life. In fact, his very last note, well in his period of insanity, was signed 'Dionysus.' There is a contrast that goes throughout his philosophy between the Ancient Greeks and 'modern' bourgeois Christianity. There

is a sense that in understanding what he likes about the Greeks is essential in understanding what he disliked and despised about his 'modern' society. He was, of course, a philologist. He knew his ancient texts very well. The Greece that he really admired, however, was not the Greece, as a philosopher, you would have expected him to have loved. He thought that the Greece of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle was already, in some sense, decadent. The Greece that Nietzsche praised and admired was Homer's—that of tragedy. His first book *'The Birth of Tragedy'* (1872) talks at great length about the ways in which tragedy became possible for the Greece, and the ways it has become unthinkable for modern culture. The obsession with the Ancients was not his alone. Germany, in general, was taken by the Greeks. There was a great awareness that Germany was a backward country when compared to France and England, and consequently was very defensive. If one traces the history of the nineteenth-century Germany, what one traces is a coming to awareness of German culture. Tracing it would spell out a certain defensiveness that claims German culture deserves the same place in the sun as, say, French culture or English philosophy. By the time we get to Nietzsche, of course, we have a unified Germany under Bismarck, but nevertheless, there is still a profound defensiveness about it—one which Nietzsche is keenly aware of.

The Influence of the Greeks was so profound on German cultural elite in general that E.M. Butler, in 1935, published a book called the *'Tyranny of Greece over Germany.'* In it, Butler illustrates the significant hold of Greek thought on Germany's. Indeed, there is a sense that since the 18th century, the Germans had looked to Ancient Greece as a kind of golden age—the time when human life was, if not perfect, as good as it could get. Hence, modern period, by contrast, becomes inferior. Nietzsche, however, thinks that it is very important not to dismiss modernity. In an early essay, *Fate and History*, he makes the point that simply getting lost in history and bemoaning the fact, as some of his predecessors had done, that Greece was so wonderful and contemporary life was so impoverished, leads to a really belated life. He despised his fellow scholars, whom he labelled as "scholarly oxen," (qtd in. Solomon and Higgins 19). because of their focus on Greek grammar and philology. Moreover, he accuses them of "having noticed only the bright spots and not the darkness that gave them meaning. Their superficial conception of Greek cheerfulness is a result of this profound halving of the Greek legacy." (Ackermann 18). These so-called scholars, he thought, were merely worried about when such and such were performed, but did not spend a minute wondering what it would be like living as a Greek; and in particular, what it would be like to live as a Greek today. "From the beginning, in talking about Greece, Nietzsche was also talking about the present." (Ackermann 13). The Greece Nietzsche admires is very much that of Homer's. More accurately, what the great poet wrote about other events. This would in time give rise to one of those rumors that Nietzsche likes barbarians. After all, it is hard not to think about Achilles and Agamemnon without

thinking about their barbarity. Nevertheless, there is a sense in which the virtue and attitude they displayed towards life was enviable and an approach that was clearly missing in the ‘modern’ world. If one thinks about the tragedies of the great Greek playwrights—this is all before Socrates—and plays like *Oedipus*, *Antigone*, *Prometheus* and the plays about the Trojan women, what one comes to realize is that model of life is one we have trouble understanding, for it seems so cruel and so stark. After all, the idea of a fate driving Oedipus to do all sorts of awful things—murdering one’s father, marrying one’s mother and, in consequence, putting one’s eyes out—seems woeful to most of us. It is in this light that one of the themes in *The Birth of Tragedy* is how different it was for the Greeks, and how they saw these tragedies performed.

In fact, the theme of *Birth of Tragedy*, at its very core, is that tragedy is a real, honest recognition of what life is all about. To be sure, Oedipus and Antigone are people that faced dilemmas, situations that none of us would really like to face, but the truth is, all of us are going to face our own dilemmas. We all have to face up to death and the bad things in life, and the question is: how do we do that? Do we accept it as the way things are or do we rationalize it away? The idea in *Birth of Tragedy* is that the Greek view of tragedy was possible because two different strands of thought and feeling came together in a remarkable way. On the one hand, the Apollonian—the rationalistic—saw tragedy as something that happens to the individual. It is, in other words, a real personal loss. On the other hand, and what I would like to emphasize here, is the Dionysian, connected with what one might call the ‘superpersonal.’ It is the idea of ourselves as part of the flow of life. If one thinks about orgiastic rituals or what Hegel calls “Bacchanalian Revels,” (qtd in. Solomon and Higgins 19), one will come to realize that one of the things that is most pronounced about it is the loss of the sense of self. One feels, in other words, that we go with the flow and that one is part of life, and what happens to one as an individual is of no great importance. It is, I would suggest, a sort of rational individualism that Nietzsche thinks allowed the Greeks to come up with this notion; that on one hand, something awful is happening to the individual, but at the same time understanding this as something beautiful. In other words, individuality “must be paid for by suffering,” for “suffering is not a bad thing; it is what confers dignity on human beings.” (Ackermann 18).

The Birth of Tragedy makes a distinction, however, between two different sets of Greek authors. Nietzsche sees the early great tragedians, namely, Sophocles and Aeschylus, as very much in tune with this merging of the Dionysian and Apollonian instinct—getting the two imbalanced. Whereas the third of the great three Ancient Greek playwrights, Euripides, Nietzsche condemns. “Euripides, too, was . . . a mask only: the deity who spoke out of him was not Dionysus, nor Apollo, but . . . Socrates.” (qtd in Kaufmann 393). A condemnation that occurs because of Euripides’s linkage, which is

debatable in classical circles, with Socrates. In fact, Nietzsche sometimes goes further in his vehemence against Socrates. "In origin, Socrates belonged to the lowest class: Socrates was plebs. We know, we can still see for ourselves, how ugly he was." (Nehamas 71). With these two, according to Nietzsche, Greek culture drowned into decline. As John Ackermann puts it:

Nietzsche sees Euripides and Socrates as destroying a superior Greek culture and as opening the era of the human. From Nietzsche's point of view, Euripides and Socrates were not Hellenic figures. If tragedy somehow arises from an opposition between Apollonian and Dionysian elements in Greek artistic life, it degenerates when this opposition is papered over by monological Socratic and Euripidean rational explanations of human action. (Ackermann 14).

The difference was that Sophocles and Aeschylus saw tragedy as something inexplicable and unrationalizable. For instance, one watches *Oedipus* and *Antigone*, and the overwhelming sense that one comes with is that life is a mystery with no lucid explanation. With Euripides, however; Nietzsche says, rationalization enters the picture. Euripidean tragedy, for Nietzsche, is a "deflection toward nihilism and as a loss of awareness of Dionysian foundations." (Ackermann 18). And of course, whether or not the link with Socrates can be sustained, the fact remains that both tried to explain tragedy in such a way that human beings could ultimately think they way through it, and that is precisely what Nietzsche says one could not do.

Dionysian process is replaced by a superficial optimism. Actors on the stage now represent ordinary people and their actions, not dream images. This allows the audience to recognize itself in the characters on the stage, and changes profoundly the relationship between the audience and the events on stage. Drama now assumes a human form. Euripides presents a drama of the common person, recognizably human, who feels cheerful and comprehending in the face of an unexpected and calculable future. (Ackermann 18).

Nietzsche also thinks that one of the Greeks' primary virtues was their agonistic tendency. Theirs was a life itself is a struggle. Their tragedies make this very clear. Homer's two great works '*The Iliad*' and '*The Odyssey*' make it amply clear to what

extent life is always a struggle of one sort or another. The more peaceful side of this struggle, the Olympics, which come from Ancient Greece, is an illustration of a sense in which there is a ferocious competition rather than a genteel one. It was, in other words, something larger than sport; it was life. This sense of 'agon' is, Nietzsche thinks, what makes the Greeks so "beautiful"—that they saw life in terms of a struggle and the struggle itself shifted into an artistic form. (qtd in. Solomon and Higgins 22).

Nietzsche felt the normal views of foundational individuality expressed by philosophers were illusory and was intrigued by the Dionysian as a means of indicating why these views might be false and superficial. Individuality is a construct doomed to eventual return to world process, a return that could be anticipated in losing oneself in a Dionysian performance. (Ackermann 15).

The idea of looking at life as a struggle even extends to such supposedly genteel professions as philosophy. One often talks about Socrates in terms of his love of the truth and pursuit of wisdom, but one does not have to read much of Plato to see a further side in Socrates. What he loves as well is a good and fierce argument in the streets and display his cleverness and depth of knowledge. He was as "competitive a philosopher as one had ever been, and one might argue Socrates set the model for what philosophers think of themselves today." (qtd in. Solomon and Higgins 23). In other words, the important thing is winning arguments and carry the day triumphantly.

That agonistic sense of life as tension extended even to philosophy. This idea also explains in Nietzsche's terms why Greece declined. In the early days of Greece, when there were constant wars between the city states, invasion from the Persians and so on, struggle was constant, Nietzsche thinks. This, I believe, is one of the places where he stretches history. Nietzsche tells us that as long as the Greeks had a struggle going on, they knew what life was about and they were great. As soon as they found themselves in a period of relative peace, what happened was that kind of inner instinct turned against themselves and that is when they started to decay. The idea of Greek Tragedy as two vital forces, henceforth, gets resolved, or shall we say, destroyed. How? By an overemphasis from Euripides's part and mainly Socrates's, on the rationalistic and Apollonian. In fact, one of the aspects of Socrates's philosophy, which often gets commented on, but perhaps not in the properly critical way, is in some sense a denial of tragedy. He says, for example, "give your first and greatest care to the improvement of your souls, and not till you have done that to think of your bodies or your wealth."¹ In other words, the only thing that a good man has to worry about is the status of his own

¹<https://www.roangelo.net/logwitt/logwit86.html>

soul, and if he is properly attentive to the health of his soul, nothing else can harm him. Let us ponder over Oedipus; was not a good man? In fact, he did everything that was expected from him within the context of the culture, and he also did everything Socrates would say he ought to do, even, much to his detriment, a self-examination of the very profound sort. But did Oedipus's efforts inoculate him from his own misfortunes? Quite the contrary. In fact, regrettable things happen to honest and mundane people, but Socrates's philosophy says ultimately that there is such a thing as an "eternal soul," which outlives the body, and in fact, lives forever. (qtd in. Solomon and Higgins 23). Socrates had a fantasy of a more perfect world in which a pure soul could think pure ideas without bodily temptations, instincts and sufferings. As said earlier, it may be the opposite.

Only by instinct': with this phrase we touch upon the heart and core of the Socratic tendency. With it Socratism condemns existing art as well as existing ethics. Wherever Socratism turns its searching eyes it sees lack of insight and the power of illusion; and from this lack it infers the essential perversity and reprehensibility of what exists. (qtd in. Nehamas 73).

For Nietzsche is right, what makes Socrates tick is human encounter, engagement and a kind of competitive struggle. What gives way when one abandons the Dionysian—a sort reckless abandonment—in favor of the purely rationalistic Apollonian spirit, is that we stop thinking in terms of life, because life is, at least partially, Dionysian. When one starts identifying with Socrates, that life is pure rationality, and thinking beyond tragedy is possible, then there is a sense in which one denies life itself. Nietzsche's argument goes even further than this. He implies, for example, that to understand Socrates's philosophy is to understand that Socrates hated life.

I admire the courage and wisdom of Socrates in everything he did, said—and did not say. This mocking and enamored monster and piper of Athens, who made the most overweening youths tremble and sob, was not only the wisest chatterer of all time: he was equally great in silence. I wish he had remained taciturn also at the last moment of his life; in that case he might belong to a still higher order of spirits. Whether it was death or the poison or piety or malice—something loosened his tongue at that moment and he said: "Oh Crito, I owe Asclepius a

rooster." This ridiculous and terrible "last word" means for those who have ears: "Oh Crito, life is a disease." Is it possible that a man like him, who had lived cheerfully and like a soldier in the sight of everyone, should have been a pessimist? He had merely kept a cheerful mien while concealing all his life long his ultimate judgment, his inmost feeling. Socrates, Socrates suffered life! And then he still revenged himself—with this veiled, gruesome, pious, and blasphemous saying! Did a Socrates need such revenge? Did his overrich virtue lack an ounce of magnanimity? —Alas, my friends, we must overcome even the Greeks! (qtd in. Solomon and Higgins 23).

The picture is very clear. Despite all appearances, Socrates did not like life. He saw life as something to be overcome. There is a fantasy expressed by Socrates in which he assumes that his soul might live on, a belief he regards as a kind of liberation; and Nietzsche wants to say it is exactly the wrong picture to convey. The right one is accepting life for exactly what it is.

In his later work, Nietzsche brings up a great myth, which one could find in both Indian and Persian thought; the myth of 'eternal recurrence.' Behind it is the idea of life circling around and coming back again. The importance of that myth for Nietzsche is that life must be emphasized for the sake of its essence, not for the sake of an eternal existence, or as in the Christian tradition, of a future heaven. Instead, the weight of each moment is such that one should appreciate life and all its moments for their own sake. In terms of philosophy, what Nietzsche does is to look behind Socrates. If one looks before Socrates came to the scene, one would find a great series of Greek philosophers, and we would do them a disservice by simply referring to them as the 'pre-Socratics.' For instance, the philosopher which, in many ways, models Nietzsche's philosophy and own picture of the universe is Heraclitus. He who said that all is "flux." In other words, everything changes. Heraclitus, as John Ackermann puts it, is a "a philosopher with a deep intuition for the flux and a philosopher who didn't separate intuition and cognition so as to fall into the inanities of a purely rational discourse." (Ackermann 21). He is also a philosopher who took fire as his element the primary substance of the universe where others said it was water or air and earth. What is most important about fire is that it is always changing. If one looks at a flame it never is the same shape twice. For him, struggle, conflict and war were the essence of all things. People were based on a nature which itself was in constant contradiction and change. In other words, one cannot step in the same river twice. The idea being that life is not something static or eternal, but

something that it is always changing, and understanding that, is the real wisdom. Put in Nietzsche's words, "life is at the bottom of things, despite all the changes of appearances, indestructibly powerful and pleasurable." (qtd in. Nehamas 73). Moreover, as Ackermann points out, "For the pre-Socratics, to know the good was also to know suffering, and they simply observed a Dionysian world without attempting to impose a rational order on it." (Ackermann 21). Indeed, the "early Greeks accepted both the world and life as they found them and celebrated even their most horrible aspects." (Nehamas 73).

Heraclitus's contemporary, Parmenides, who in many ways anticipates much of Plato, thought that reality is and must be, of necessity, eternal, enduring and unchanging. The notion of change is simply an illusion. What we perceive as reality is not that at all. It is and must be a mystery for us. Movement is an illusion that it is impossible. What follows is that reality must be something else than what we perceive. It is the same philosophy picked up later on by Socrates, and then, by Plato. Is constructed over an emphasis on the eternal, the otherworldly and what Plato called a "world of being." (qtd in. Solomon and Higgins 85.) A world in which there is no change. A world in which *this* world is only a shadow. One of his most famous images is the myth of the cave. We have a story about a bunch of prisoners chained to a cave, and all that they ever see are the shadows on the wall. Suppose, however, that one of them turns around, breaks free and actually sees the world itself. It would be so dazzling that one would probably be blinded and if one comes back and tells his fellow prisoners what he had seen they would be so outraged that they would kill him. What it would also depict, and what Nietzsche is picking on, is the idea that this world of our experience—that there is another one, which is very different. Although Plato did not say that this world is unreal, he did imply, with clarity, that the world we are living in is, in some important, sense less real and less important than the world of 'being.' This, for Nietzsche, is a kind of escapism; the ultimate refuge of rationality. Hence, it is the reason why he thinks Socrates made reason into a tyrant. As Alexander Nehamas puts it, "Socrates denied the importance of instinct and stressed instead the value of reason and dialectic, which he considered as the most central human activity." (Nehamas 72).

This is something to explain in a number of ways. Part of it, of course, might be put in straightforward philosophical terms. In light of the general trend of early Greek thought, one way of describing it is the sophistication of development of reason. There is, however, another way of describing—Nietzsche's. Namely, it is the decline and neglect of the Dionysian instinct. His main point is to say what we find in Socrates is a need to escape; an unwillingness to accept life for what it is. With Socrates, the emphasis on reason is not just as a human faculty and ability to think, but reason can do something else—what Parmenides thought it couldn't do. More precisely, to see through the 'world of being.' A world as it really is and that vision, if not blinding, is so striking

that once one sees it one will fall in love and never come back into the cave of ordinary experience. Another danger, one that Nietzsche focuses on, is that what one is falling in love with also has to be reflected with what one is falling out of love with. When you fall in love with reason and the otherworldly, what you do is fall out of love with *this* world and out of life, and that is what went wrong with Greece, Nietzsche tells us.

Nietzsche accomplishes quite a lot in his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*. In a way, he lays out an agenda that is going to continue with him throughout his philosophical production. And the fundamental question he asks really is what was Greek tragedy all about? He ponders over the fact that the Greeks seemed so obsessed with the kinds of stories and tragedies pointed out earlier. He ends up answering the question by pointing out that the Greeks were not only attempting a type of artistic reconciliation of opposites, but actually, a kind of solution to the problem of evil. What he thinks they achieved is to provide an answer that made sense to them. If one thinks of Schopenhauer's conviction that one should lose the 'will' to live, then this is what Nietzsche thinks the Greeks were grappling with too. They, too, recognized that much about life—on the surface—is rather unacceptable. The Greeks, however, rather than concluding we ought to withdraw from life, showed a way of celebrating life despite the fact that suffering was an essential fact of it. The Apollonian and Dionysian instincts discussed earlier turn out to be artistic principles. So when the Greeks merged the two, as Nietzsche claims they did in tragedy, there is a sense of merging two different ways of looking at the external world. On the one hand, the Apollonian way, of seeing beauty and idealizing what one sees. On the other, the more musical side of things, the Dionysian, which urges to respond in as lively a way as possible. And this is, for Nietzsche, what makes them so succinct and "beautiful."

References

- Ackermann, R. J. (1993). *Nietzsche: A Frenzied Look*. Massachusetts : University of Massachusetts Press.
- Angelo, R. W. (2018, January). *Socrates - Care of the Soul*. Retrieved from Wittgenstein's Logic of Language: Robert Wesley Angelo
- HOLLINGDALE, R. (1997). *A Nietzsche Reader*. London: Penguin Books.
- Kaufmann, W. (1974). *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Kaufmann, W. (1988). *The Portable Nietzsche*. Haimondswort: Penguin Group.
- Magnus, B., & Higgins, K. (1996). *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Nehamas, A. (1998). *Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault*. Berkley: University of California Press.

- Nietzsche, F. (1994). *The Birth of Tragedy: Out of the Spirit of Music*. London: Penguin Group.
- Solomon, R. C. (2003). *Living With Nietzsche*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Solomon, R. C., & Higgins, K. (199). *The Will to Power: The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche*. Virginia: TTC.
- Solomon, R. C., & Higgins, K. (2000). *What Nietzsche Really Said*. New York: Random House, Inc.
- Wilkerson, D. (2006). *Nietzsche and the Greeks*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group.