

Into The Void: Nietzsche's Confrontation With Cosmic Nihilism

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Abstract

This paper looks at authoritarianism as an expression of nihilism. In spite of his rigorous critique of Platonism, I suggest that Nietzsche shares with Plato an authoritarian vision that is rooted in the cyclical experience of time. The temporality of the eternal return unveils a vista of cosmic nihilism that cannot possibly be endured. In the absence of metaphysical foundations, the vital will to power is assigned an impossible task – to create meaning from nothing. I suggest that when confronted with the horror of the ungrounded void, the self-overcoming of nihilism reverts to self-annihilation. The declaration that God is dead becomes the belief that death is God. I trace Nietzsche's cosmic nihilism back to Plato's myths and the poetic vision of Sophocles and Aeschylus. I argue that Nietzsche's overcoming of nihilism is itself nihilistic. However, this does not mean that Nietzsche's project is as a complete failure. On the contrary, I suggest that Nietzsche's deepest insight is that the good life does not consist of the pursuit of truth, but the alleviation of suffering.

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The Genealogical Method

This paper looks at Nietzsche's confrontation with the innate nihilism of Western metaphysics. I suggest that nihilism is not just an existential issue, but deeply political as well. It is typically assumed that authoritarianism is an expression of foundationalism. Conversely, democracy is taken to be an outgrowth of the dissolution of metaphysical foundations. Against this standard assumption, I argue that authoritarianism is in fact symptomatic of nihilism. David Ohana makes a similar argument in his book *The Dawn Of Political Nihilism*. Ohana suggests that nihilism and authoritarianism are not two opposed world-views, but rather two sides of the same coin. Ohana: "Until now, nihilism and totalitarianism were considered opposites: one an orderless state of affairs, the other a strict regimented order. On closer scrutiny, however, a surprising affinity can be found between these two concepts."¹⁵² Totalitarianism is not contrary to, but rather an expression of nihilism – the will to establish Order in the midst of Chaos. In what follows, I attempt to expand on Ohana's insight by looking at nihilism as a development of ancient Greek metaphysics – from Plato's myth of the cave to the Promethean destiny of eternal return.

Nietzsche's genealogical method refutes the divine origin of authority, tradition, and law. The problem, however, is that value loses its affective force once morality is perceived to be nothing more than a historical construct. In the absence of divine origins, morality amounts to nothing more than subjective preference resulting from the radical de-centering of meaning, value, and truth. In response to the dissolution of metaphysical foundations, the only perceived refuge becomes either the passive nihilism of radical pessimism or the active nihilism of religious fundamentalism. The dissolution of foundationalism provokes a metaphysical need for

¹⁵² David Ohana, *The Dawn Of Political Nihilism*, (Brighton, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 2012), 1

moral absolutes. The challenge, therefore, is to face the ungrounded void without succumbing to nostalgia for the Absolute.

The death of God is the discovery that Truth lacks any metaphysical grounding in the Absolute. I take issue with postmodern thinkers who view Nietzsche's declaration that "God is dead" as an emancipatory event.¹⁵³ For instance, Jacques Derrida associates nihilism with democratic pluralism and authoritarianism with foundationalism. For Derrida, the deconstruction of a transcendental signifier opens up a plurality of diverse interpretations in place of a fixed origin. For this reason, nihilism is akin to liberation – *freedom from* moral absolutes and *freedom to* decide for oneself what is meaningful. According to this logic, postmodernism gives rise to the democratic self-legislation of value. But what *is* meaningful? Indeed, what is good? More often, the discovery that our highest values are ontologically ungrounded provokes a sense of *angst*, anxiety, or horror before the abyss. Postmodernism in naïve to the extent that the very real danger of nihilism stemming from the radical contingency of value, meaning, and truth is evaded, suppressed, and concealed. We ignore the metaphysical need at our own peril. To paraphrase Nietzsche, it is necessary to know why we exist.

According to Martin Heidegger's influential interpretation, Nietzsche's will to power occupies the threshold between the culmination of nihilism and its supersession towards a genuine affirmation of life. In my view, Nietzsche ultimately fails to overcome the tragic destiny of the West. Contrary to his original intent, Nietzsche's attempt to overcome nihilism is itself nihilistic. Heidegger: "Thought in terms of the essence of nihilism, Nietzsche's

¹⁵³ See Gianni Vattimo, *Nihilism And Emancipation*, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2004)

overcoming is merely the fulfillment of nihilism.”¹⁵⁴ Nietzsche’s declaration that God is dead means that in the late-modern age, our highest values devalue themselves. For this reason, the death of God requires that thinking occur without recourse to metaphysical foundations. I argue that Nietzsche’s aesthetic response to the horror of ontological groundlessness proves insufficient. In response to the radical contingency of value, meaning, and truth, Nietzsche attempts to legislate a new table of values beyond good and evil. I will nevertheless argue that the revaluation of value does not signify the overcoming of nihilism, but rather its full expression. The vital will to power is assigned an impossible task – to create meaning *ex nihilo*. When confronted with the cosmic nihilism of the eternal return, the self-overcoming of nihilism reverts to self-annihilation.

I tend to interpret Nietzsche’s legacy in light of Heidegger’s appropriation of the crisis of nihilism. For Heidegger and Nietzsche both, European history is nihilistic to the extent that it is characterized by the innate violence of Platonic metaphysics. Heidegger: “European history reveals its fundamental feature as nihilism.”¹⁵⁵ Platonic metaphysics is characterized by the unconditional grounding of meaning, value, and truth in a fixed origin, foundation, or cause. Heidegger: “Metaphysics is an inquiry beyond or over beings, which aims to recover them as such and as a whole for our grasp.”¹⁵⁶ In other words, metaphysics seeks to comprehend the ground of being in order to grasp the totality of being. Metaphysics is an expression of nihilism for the following reason: The ill-fated attempt to grasp the ultimate foundation, origin, or ground of being leads to the startling discovery that being is in fact ungrounded. This discovery can be unsettling to say the least. In Heidegger’s words, “an attempt to delimit beings in what

¹⁵⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche vs. III-IV*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York, NY: Harper One, 1987), 219

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, 188

¹⁵⁶ Martin Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?* trans. Glenn Gray (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 2004), 106

they are, in their Being, leads us to the brink of nothingness, and to the abyss.”¹⁵⁷ Heidegger: “We must not shrink back here and must rather consider this: If we want to grasp beings (the Greeks say delimit, place within limits), then we must, indeed necessarily, proceed to the limit of beings, and that is nothingness.”¹⁵⁸ Thinking is the endurance of this abyss, chasm, or void at the heart of existence. It would seem that for Heidegger, thinking is a dangerous exercise.

The philosophy of Immanuel Kant exemplifies the kind of metaphysical grounding of morality that Nietzsche’s genealogy renders untenable. Unlike Nietzsche, Kant evades the nihilistic implications of attempting to ground morality upon mere reason. According to Nietzsche’s analysis, Kant “wanted to supply a *rational foundation* for morality . . . morality itself, however, was accepted as given.”¹⁵⁹ In attempting to establish a metaphysical foundation of morality, Kant simply takes it for granted that such an exercise is both possible and desirable. Nietzsche exposes the insufficiencies of Kant’s philosophy by posing a radically different kind of question, one that is genealogical rather than metaphysical. While Kant poses “the question of where our good and evil really originated”, and therefore seeks a metaphysical grounding of morality in the transcendental categories of subjective reason, Nietzsche instead asks: “Under what conditions did man make these value judgments good and evil?”¹⁶⁰ More simply, while Kant passes moral judgment upon existence, Nietzsche inverts this relationship, judging morality from the perspective of life itself. Nietzsche’s genealogy of morality therefore indicates a radical inversion of Platonic orthodoxy.

¹⁵⁷ Martin Heidegger, *The Beginning Of Western Philosophy: Interpretation of Anaximander & Parmenides*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz, (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 2015), 13

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 7

¹⁵⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good And Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, (New York, NY: Vintage, 1966), 97

¹⁶⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy Of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, (New York, NY: Vintage, 1967), 16

Nietzsche: “What, seen in the perspective of *life*, is the significance of morality?”¹⁶¹ Oblivious to this line of questioning, Kant’s transcendental idealism attempts to ground universal moral law upon the *a priori* categories of practical reason.

For Kant, the moral law is characterized by its universality. Moreover, the unconditional moral law can be distinguished with certainty from the relativity of social maxims, customs, and norms on the basis of practical reason. Nevertheless, the attempt to metaphysically ground morality in the sovereignty of reason is both unfounded and untenable. While Kant suggests that practical reason is the ultimate foundation of moral law, Nietzsche argues that reason is not at all transcendental. Instead, reason remains historically mediated by the same social conditions from which it claims independence. Consequently, there is no rational basis by which to distinguish between the absolute moral law and the relativity of value. Additionally, Kant’s universal moral law bears within itself a self-contradiction. On the one hand, ‘the moral law within’ is unconditional, absolute, and therefore every bit as objective as the laws of physics governing the movement of ‘the starry skies above’. On the other hand, the moral law is not so much discovered as it is legislated by the autonomous will. Only one of these claims can be true. Either the law is absolute and determines the will, or the will is primary and constitutes the law. In my opinion, the notion of the autonomous will marks the true originality of Kant’s thinking. For Kant, the autonomous will only submits to law that it has legislated. The Kantian legacy of secular modernity is that all value is perceived as historically contingent. Put simply, there is no moral law at work in the cosmos apart from the law that is willed into existence *ex nihilo*, out of nothingness.

¹⁶¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth Of Tragedy*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, (New York, NY: Vintage, 1967), 22

The Kantian legacy of secular modernity becomes readily apparent in light of John Stuart Mill's appropriation and development of Kant's thought. Mill's notion of individual freedom is widely considered to be the foundation of political liberalism, a tradition to which Nietzsche is vehemently opposed. In my view, Kant's notion of moral autonomy is the basis of Mill's idea of political freedom. Like Kant's notion of moral autonomy, Mill's idea of political freedom is both formal and abstract. The problem is that liberal freedom does not provide a compelling vision of 'the good life'. Mill argues that we are free to determine the good in our own way, so long as our own freedom does not inhibit the freedom of others. Nevertheless, Mill fails to pose the fundamental question, mainly – What is the good life? The implication of the liberal notion of freedom developed by Kant and Mill is that 'X' is not willed because it is good. Instead, 'X' is good because it is willed. The relativity of value resulting from moral self-legislation eradicates any notion of intrinsic meaning in the world. The will is completely ungrounded. Or, to phrase the matter differently, the will is grounded in nothing other than the will itself – the will to will. This leads to a significant problem: that while everything is permitted, nothing is compelling. Nietzsche: "One would rather will nothing than not will."¹⁶² In the words of the poet Yeats: "The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity."¹⁶³ In this sense, nihilism is not opposed to, but rather symptomatic of political liberalism.

Nietzsche's most provocative claim is that the highest values of the modern age originate from a slave revolt in morality. Nietzsche distinguishes between two different kinds of morality: 1) noble, or master morality, and 2) slave morality. According to Nietzsche, the virtues of the ancient Greeks exemplify noble morality, while the values of the ancient Hebrews is akin to a slave revolt in morality. While noble morality affirms the ancient virtues of courage, strength,

¹⁶² Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy Of Morals*, 16

¹⁶³ Yeats <<https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/second-coming>> 2017

and honour, the slave revolt inverts this table of values. With the slave revolt, the ancient virtues of strength, courage, and honour are replaced with the Christian values of humility, love, and compassion. Nietzsche's evaluation of these two different kinds of morality is extremely nuanced. On the one hand, Nietzsche respects the vitality of noble morality. But on the other hand, Nietzsche admires the strength of will required to undermine and supplant these noble values. In fact, the slave revolt in morality accomplishes that which Nietzsche himself initiates but never accomplishes – a revaluation of value.

Nevertheless, Nietzsche's tentative admiration for this slave revolt is tempered by his dislike of the spirit of resentment from which it originates. Nietzsche claims that the slave revolt in morality originates from a seething sense of psychological resentment towards the ruling nobility. The revaluation of value is not motivated by a desire for justice. Instead, the slave revolt is rooted in a twisted and cruel desire for vengeance and retribution. In this sense, the intention of the slave revolt is not the abolition of hierarchical structures of power, but instead, to seize power for oneself, and to rule as one was once ruled. For this reason, Nietzsche judges slave morality to be reactionary rather than life affirming and genuinely creative. The slave revolt is nothing more than a reactionary rejection of the noble sense of what is good. According to Nietzsche, the slave first conceives of "the evil enemy and the Evil One, and this in fact is his basic concept, from which he then evolves, as an afterthought, a good one – himself."¹⁶⁴ In this sense, "slave morality . . . is fundamentally reaction."¹⁶⁵ All that noble morality calls good slave morality calls bad. While noble morality is a spontaneous affirmation of the good, "the slave revolt in morality begins when resentment itself becomes creative and gives birth to values."¹⁶⁶ Slave morality is

¹⁶⁴ Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy Of Morals*, 41

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 37

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 36

driven by a hatred of evil, which the slave identifies as everything the noble considers good. If slave morality is founded upon hatred and resentment, noble morality is inspired by love of the good. Nietzsche argues that the noble “conceives the basic concept ‘good’ in advance and spontaneously out of himself and only then creates for himself an idea of ‘bad’! This ‘bad’ of noble origin and that ‘evil’ out of the cauldron of unsatisfied hatred.”¹⁶⁷ In other words, while slave morality distinguishes between good and evil, noble morality distinguishes between good and bad. Nietzsche admires the slave revolt in morality for accomplishing a revaluation of value. Nevertheless, Nietzsche ultimately remains faithful to the spontaneity and vitality of noble morality.

For Nietzsche, slave morality violates the laws of nature itself; it violates the basic law that the strong should devour the weak. Nietzsche expresses this controversial argument by means of analogy. The struggle between master and slave is equivalent to the relationship between the bird of prey and the lamb. The bird of prey hunts the lamb because it is strong, just as the lamb is prey to the bird because it is weak. While noble morality celebrates this strength, slave morality condemns it. Instead, slave morality makes a virtue of weakness and a sin of strength. In this sense, slave morality is amounts to a mutilation of the will; the will is repressed and turned against itself through the psychological internalization of conscience and guilt perpetuated by organized religion. Nietzsche levels some of his sharpest criticism at the moral indoctrination of ascetic priests. The ascetic priests are evocative of the Catholic clergy as well as the Hindu Brahmin caste. Nietzsche: “The ascetic priest alters the direction of resentment. By instilling such notions as sin and guilt, the will is folded back upon itself for the purpose of self-discipline and self-overcoming.”¹⁶⁸ In other words, religious asceticism trains the will to repress the affirmative life-instincts for the sake of

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 41

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, 41

disciplinary self-mastery. Such discipline of the will is presumably achieved through the religious practice of poverty, humility, and chastity as well as spiritual training in fasting, yoga, and meditation. According to Nietzsche, ascetic priests exemplify the bitter resentment of slave morality. Nietzsche: "Here rules a resentment without equal, that of an insatiable instinct and power-will that wants to become master not over something in life but over life itself . . ." ¹⁶⁹ Mastery over life is characterized by belief in the ascetic ideal. The ascetic ideal is the ancient metaphysical faith in the goodness of truth; "the faith in a metaphysical value, the absolute value of truth . . ." ¹⁷⁰ Nietzsche: "It is the profound, suspicious fear of an incurable pessimism that forces whole millennia to cling to a religious interpretation of existence . . . Piety, the 'life in God', seen in this way, would appear as fear of truth." ¹⁷¹ It is interesting that in spite of his criticism of the ascetic ideal, Nietzsche readily admits that he too relies upon faith in the value of truth.

It is perhaps unexpected that Nietzsche himself confesses a metaphysical need for the ascetic belief in the absolute value of truth. Nietzsche's own revaluation of value can only be undertaken on the basis of an unconditional belief in the ascetic ideal. This is unfortunate, seeing as the revaluation of value disenchant the very faith upon which it depends. The will to truth deconstructs its own foundation – the ascetic faith that "god is truth, that truth is divine." ¹⁷² Consequently, Nietzsche's genealogy of morality is caught in a performative contradiction. On the one hand, the revaluation of value presupposes an absolute value of truth beyond any revaluation and upon which the task of revaluation is nevertheless grounded. But on the other hand, the revaluation of value is precisely the deconstruction of all such absolutes. The task

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, 117

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 151

¹⁷¹ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good And Evil*, 71

¹⁷² Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy Of Morals*. 152

of revaluation therefore undermines and destroys its own conditions of existence. Nietzsche: “*That the ascetic ideal has meant so many things to man, however, is an expression of the basic fact of the human will, its horror of a vacuum: it needs a goal – and it would rather will nothingness than not will.*”¹⁷³ In other words, faith in the ‘ascetic ideal’ is symptomatic of the basic fact that “man has to believe, to know, from time to time why he exists.”¹⁷⁴ Nietzsche: “Apart from the ascetic ideal, man, the human animal, has no meaning . . .”¹⁷⁵

In Nietzsche’s final analysis, “this ascetic priest, this apparent enemy of life, this denier – precisely he is amongst the greatest conserving and greatest yes-creating forces of life.”¹⁷⁶ Nietzsche explains that “from the moment faith in the god of the ascetic ideal is denied, a new problem arises – that of the value of truth . . . The value of truth must for once be experimentally called into question.”¹⁷⁷ Nietzsche therefore poses a deeply unsettling question: “What if this belief is becoming more and more unbelievable, if nothing turns out to be divine any longer unless it be an error, blindness, lies – if god himself turns out to be our longest lie?”¹⁷⁸ It would seem as if “some ancient and profound trust has been turned into doubt . . . and how much must collapse now that this faith has been undermined . . .”¹⁷⁹ Nietzsche recoils but does not retreat from the horror of such a collapse. Indeed, the will to truth “forbids itself the lie involved in the faith in god.”¹⁸⁰ Not only does Nietzsche’s genealogy of morality expose the groundlessness of our highest values, but in an even more

¹⁷³ Ibid, 97

¹⁷⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, (New York, NY: Vintage, 1974), 75

¹⁷⁵ Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy Of Morals*, 162

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, 121

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, 153

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, 152

¹⁷⁹ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 279

¹⁸⁰ Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy Of Morals*, 160

radical gesture, questions the value of truth as such! Nietzsche therefore poses a remarkably new kind of question: “Might not morality be a will to negate life, a secret instinct of annihilation?”¹⁸¹ What is the value of value? What is the value of morality for life? Does morality benefit or inhibit the flourishing of life? Prior to Nietzsche’s provocation, Western philosophy was established upon Socrates’ assurance that the virtuous life is the happy life. However, Nietzsche suggests that the benefit of morality to life has heretofore been merely presumed as fact. The social utility of morality has never been subjected to serious doubt, which is precisely Nietzsche’s intent.

The Death Of God

The prophetic declaration that God is dead does not necessarily announce the emancipation from religious dogma, as Nietzsche’s post-modern enthusiasts presume. Nor does it announce a catastrophic loss of faith, as is the interpretation of Nietzsche’s neo-reactionary readers. The matter at hand is neither simple nor clear. The meaning of the death of God has yet to be decided for the reason that we are still living out the implications of what it means to exist in a godless age. Nietzsche’s famous declaration that God is dead is uttered in aphoristic form in the parable of the madman. As Eugene Thacker indicates in *12 Fragments On Nihilism*, “we do him a disservice if we credit Nietzsche for the death of God. He just happened to be at the scene of the crime.”¹⁸² That a madman should witness this event is appropriate, given that insight into the ungrounded horror of being is akin to a madness that can scarcely be endured. Upon stumbling upon this dangerous discovery, the madman descends from the monastic solitude of the mountain into

¹⁸¹ Nietzsche, *The Birth Of Tragedy*, 23

¹⁸² Eugene Thacker <<http://www.fourbythreemagazine.com/issue/nihilism/12-fragments-on-nihilism>> 2017

the bustle of the market. Predictably, the public does not readily receive the madman's message. Ironically, it is the madman, bearing the message of God's absence, who is the authentic seeker of God. It is the unbelieving villagers, weak of faith, who ultimately reject the death of Go. Moreover, the madman not only discovers that God is dead, but that we have killed him: "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him".¹⁸³ At first, it seems that "there has never been a greater deed"; that humanity has reached spiritual maturity and is no longer in need of such dogmatic certainties as belief in God.¹⁸⁴ It turns out that this initial estimation is far too optimistic. The madman ultimately concludes that he has arrived too early; that "this tremendous event is still on its way."¹⁸⁵ Although God is dead, this truth remains too horrific to bear. The madman says that "*We have killed him* – you and I".¹⁸⁶ What does it mean to bear responsibly for the death of God? Both the solitary individual and the unreflective herd share responsibility for this crime. It is clear that the herd bears responsibility for unreflectively receiving established dogma as truth. But in what sense is the madman responsible for the death of God? The only crime of the madman is to seek truth unconditionally, no matter how unsettling that truth may be. For Nietzsche, it is precisely such fidelity to truth that kills God, so to speak. The will to truth disenchants the necessary fiction that God is truth and truth is divine. Put simply, truth, for Nietzsche, is akin to madness. For this reason, truth is the greatest danger. As such, truth ought to remain hidden, a privilege of the noble few.

Nietzsche's announcement that God is dead is an allegory for at least three related phenomena: 1) the discovery that the divine realm of ideas is a myth, 2) the ensuing disenchantment of the temporal world of appearance, and 3) the culmination of metaphysics in the nihilistic

¹⁸³ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 181

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 181

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 182

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 181

destiny of the West. According to Heidegger's interpretation, Nietzsche's use of the term God refers to super-sensory realm of ideas. Since Plato, Western metaphysics has been characterized by the position that the ideal realm of forms is "the true and genuinely real world".¹⁸⁷ The ascetic ideal is not limited to religion; it is prevalent in philosophy as well. For Nietzsche, the beginning of Western metaphysics in ancient Greece is the origin of asceticism. For this reason, Nietzsche suggests that Plato is the first ascetic priest. Nietzsche: "The idea at issue here is the valuation the ascetic priest places on our life: he juxtaposes it [becoming] with a quite different mode of existence [being] . . ." ¹⁸⁸ The problem with Plato's metaphysical dualism between being and becoming is that this world is viewed as illusory and empty of true substance. The phenomenal world of becoming is devalued by the metaphysical valuation of an ideal world of true being. In contrast to the true super-sensory world, the phenomenal world of appearance is false. Nietzsche: "Philosophical men have a presentiment that the world in which we live and have our being is mere appearance, and that another, quite different reality lies beneath it."¹⁸⁹ In light of this metaphysical dualism, the imperative of reason amounts to "the annihilation of the veil of *maya* . . ." ¹⁹⁰ In this sense, Platonic metaphysics devalues life as mere appearance, illusion, or *maya*. The aim of philosophical reason is to 'annihilate' this false world of appearance in order to intuit the divine world of forms.

The divided line between the sensible and super-sensible realms is symbolized by Plato's famous allegory of the cave in *The Republic*. In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates invites his interlocutors to imagine the human condition as one of bondage in an underground cave-like dwelling. Upon the walls of this underground dwelling are images of

¹⁸⁷ Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology & Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt, (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 1977), 61

¹⁸⁸ Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy Of Morals*, 117

¹⁸⁹ Nietzsche, *The Birth Of Tragedy*, 34

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 40

shadows cast by fire. Since the prisoners lack any knowledge of existence outside of the cave, the shadows of artificial things are mistaken for the things themselves. There is nevertheless a world beyond the bondage of the cave – a world of radiant sunlight in which the things themselves shine forth. The Sun represents the form of the Good, the source of true knowledge, of which the perception of shadows is a mere semblance. Socrates then asks us to imagine that the prisoner was compelled to emerge from this false world of darkness. For Plato, the world of shadows cast by fire represents the illusory world of appearance, while the world of overwhelming beauty represents the true realm of forms. The prisoners' forced ascent from the cave would amount to the destruction of the illusions to which one clings as certain and true. One would be compelled towards the unknown. Upon emerging from the underground prison, one is compelled by some unknown force to turn and gaze upon the Sun itself. The Sun represents the Supreme Source, the form of the Good that moves all without itself being moved. Upon first perceiving the radiant illumination of the Sun, one would be blinded, and therefore subjected to a state of ignorance even more extensive than one's condition of bondage in the cave. However, once one's eyes adapt to the sunlight, one would perceive a world of overwhelming beauty in which the forms are intuited as they truly are. For Socrates, such true vision amounts to wisdom. Socrates then asks us to imagine that following his ascent into the radiance of being, the prisoner was compelled to descend into the darkness of the cave once more. While the prisoner was once bound in a state of ignorance, now the prisoner is bound in a state of knowledge. Plato's allegory indicates that knowledge does not bring freedom. The prisoner remains bound in spite of the wisdom gained. Nevertheless, inspired by such visions of overwhelming beauty, the prisoner feels compelled to bear witness to the truth for the benefit of others. The prisoner therefore attempts to teach what he has learned: that we are ignorant of our own bondage. This world is a mere semblance of truth. Furthermore, there is another world beyond our own, a world of overwhelming beauty and truth. Tragically, the prisoner is not

believed. Moreover, he is hated and despised by those he wishes to teach. Lacking knowledge of the Good, those bound within the depths of the cave prefer ignorance to truth. Such is the human condition according to the Platonic legacy of Western metaphysics.

In my opinion, the meaning of Plato's allegory is identical to that of Nietzsche's allegory of the madman. For Plato, this illusory world of appearance is symbolized by a world of shadows cast by fire, while the true world of the forms is represented by a world of 'overwhelming beauty' illuminated by the Sun. In light of Plato's allegory, the death of God therefore indicates that "the suprasensory world is without effective power."¹⁹¹ Heidegger: "That the highest values hitherto are devalued means that these ideals lose their capacity to shape history."¹⁹² In other words, the implication of what Nietzsche calls the death of God, or what Heidegger names the end of metaphysics, is that the unconditional grounding of reality has itself become unreal. However, the discovery that the real world of forms is a myth does not simply render the false world of appearance true. Heidegger: "If God, as the suprasensory ground and goal of all reality is dead, if the suprasensory world of the Ideas has suffered the loss of its obligatory and above all its vitalizing and upbuilding power, then nothing more remains to which man can cling and by which he can orient himself."¹⁹³ The death of God provokes a condition of existential disorientation in light of the radical contingency of all meaning, value, and truth. In Nietzsche's words, the death of God is akin to "plunging continually . . . through an infinite nothing."¹⁹⁴ The temptation, in light of this state of existential groundlessness and psychological disorientation, is to attempt to reorient oneself by clinging to the illusion of a transcendent power. Heidegger: "The cause of nihilism is morality,

¹⁹¹ Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, 99

¹⁹² Heidegger, *Nietzsche vl. III-IV*, 203

¹⁹³ Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, 61

¹⁹⁴ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 181

in the sense of positing the supernatural ideals of truth, goodness, and beauty that are valid in themselves.”¹⁹⁵ The nihilist believes: 1) that this world, the world that is, should not be, and 2) that the other world, the world that should be, is not.¹⁹⁶ This is precisely the meaning of Plato’s allegory of the cave, in which illusion is preferred to truth.

The belief of the nihilist is identical to that of the metaphysician. For instance, Plato argues that this world only retains value in light of a true world beyond our own. The divine world of forms grounds the material world of appearance in true being. Consequently, “whatever has value in our world now does not have value in itself.”¹⁹⁷ In order to affirm value, meaning and truth in this world, one “must affirm another world than the world of life, nature, and history.”¹⁹⁸ Nevertheless, Nietzsche asks: “Insofar as they affirm this ‘other world’ . . . must they not by the same token negate its counterpart, this world, our world?”¹⁹⁹ Heidegger cites Socrates, who perceives “the world down here as a veil of tears in contrast to the mountain of everlasting bliss in the beyond.”²⁰⁰ The truth of this world is a mere reflection of a higher world. But the existence of another world would at the same time negate the intrinsic value of this world. Consequently, while metaphysics is already inherently nihilistic, so too is the destruction of metaphysics via the revaluation of value. Again, although metaphysical dualism is thoroughly nihilistic, the collapse of metaphysical dualism risks bringing nihilism to its full expression. While formerly this world lacked meaning in itself, now the world lacks any meaning whatsoever; nature has become

¹⁹⁵ Heidegger, *Nietzsche vl. III-IV*, 206

¹⁹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will To Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, (New York, NY: Vintage, 1967), 318

¹⁹⁷ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 242

¹⁹⁸ Ibid, 282

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, 282

²⁰⁰ Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, 61

“indifferent beyond measure.”²⁰¹ As a result of the disenchantment of the supersensory realm, our own “de-deified world has become stupid, blind, mad, and questionable.”²⁰² Just as the true world has become a myth, the apparent world too has become ungrounded. In Nietzsche’s words, an “ancient and profound trust has been turned into doubt . . . and how much must now collapse, now that this faith has been undermined.”²⁰³ It would seem that both the traditional faith in unconditional value and the modern critical revaluation of value inevitably leads to nihilism. Platonic metaphysics is nihilistic because meaning lies beyond the world. The end of metaphysics is nihilistic because there is no longer a beyond, and therefore no meaning either.

Nihilism is “the radical repudiation of value, meaning, and desirability.”²⁰⁴ As the metaphysical grounding of value is subjected to revaluation, “the highest values devalue themselves. The aim is lacking; ‘why?’ finds no answer.”²⁰⁵ In this sense, the revaluation of value leads directly and unavoidably to a devaluation of value. However, it is Nietzsche’s hope that the devaluation of value is only a transitional stage in the history of the West. The transition from passive nihilism to active nihilism would signify a new epoch of world-history. In the fragmentary *Will To Power*, Nietzsche distinguishes between 1) the catastrophe of passive nihilism on the one hand, and 2) the possible redemption of active nihilism on the other. For Nietzsche, it remains to be decided whether the death of Go signifies catastrophe or redemption. The implication of passive nihilism is that “every kind of dogmatism that is left standing dispirited and discouraged.”²⁰⁶ Active nihilism, however, is “a violent

²⁰¹ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good And Evil*, 15

²⁰² Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 309

²⁰³ *Ibid*, 279

²⁰⁴ Nietzsche, *The Will To Power*, 7

²⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 9

²⁰⁶ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good And Evil*, 1

force of destruction.”²⁰⁷ Active nihilism is the conviction that “what is falling, we should still push”²⁰⁸ in order that “the weights of all things can be determined anew.”²⁰⁹ In this sense, active nihilism is “not only the belief that everything deserves to perish; but one actually puts one’s shoulder to the plough; one destroys.”²¹⁰ Nevertheless, it seems that redemption can neither be achieved through the old faith in the ascetic ideal, nor through the new principle of valuation – the will to power. For Heidegger and Nietzsche both, “nihilism does not strive for mere nullity. Its proper essence lies in the affirmative nature of a liberation.”²¹¹ Heidegger: “Nihilism then proclaims the following: *Nothing* of the prior valuations shall have validity any longer; all beings must be differently posited as a whole . . .”²¹² Consequently, “the will to power becomes the principle of a new valuation . . .”²¹³ Contrary to Kant’s moral law, “the will is now pure self-legislation of itself; a command to achieve its essence, which is commanding as such, the pure powering of power.”²¹⁴ The ungrounded will to power has no purpose apart from the preservation and enhancement of power; it is the will to nothing.

It is at this point that the thinking of Heidegger and Nietzsche diverge. Heidegger suggests that Nietzsche’s error is to presume that “the basic characteristic of beings is will to power, and all interpretations of the world, to the extent that they are kinds of valuations, derive from the will to power.”²¹⁵ In my view, Nietzsche’s will to power more closely resembles the vitalism of

²⁰⁷ Nietzsche, *The Will To Power*, 18

²⁰⁸ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 219

²⁰⁹ *Ibid*, 219

²¹⁰ Nietzsche, *The Will To Power*, 18

²¹¹ Heidegger, *Nietzsche vl. III-IV*, 204

²¹² *Ibid*, 205

²¹³ *Ibid*, 202

²¹⁴ *Ibid*, 224

²¹⁵ *Ibid*, 188

Spinoza's *Conatus* than the individualism of Descartes' *Cogito*. For Nietzsche, the will to power operates unconsciously at the instinctual level; it is a transpersonal force that runs deeper than the individual ego. For Heidegger, the will to power does not indicate the overcoming of nihilism, but rather its logical extension. While Nietzsche distinguishes between passive and active forms of nihilism, Heidegger makes a similar distinction between incomplete and complete nihilism. While Nietzsche's thinking exemplifies incomplete nihilism, Heidegger's thinking presumably characterizes complete nihilism. Heidegger suggests that "incomplete nihilism does indeed replace the former values with others, but it still posits the latter always in the old position of authority that is gratuitously maintained as the ideal realm of the suprasensory."²¹⁶ While God has disappeared from his "authoritative position in the suprasensory world, his authoritative place is still always preserved . . . as that which has become empty."²¹⁷ Heidegger suggests that "the empty place demands to be occupied anew and to have the God now vanished from it replaced by something else."²¹⁸ According to this demand, new ideals are set up as highest values in the realm formerly occupied by being itself. As a result, being is transformed into value, and, as such, into an arbitrary determination of the ungrounded will.

The transformation of being into value effectively devalues being into a product of the will. To the extent that being is "accorded worth as a value, it is already degraded to a condition posited by the will to power itself."²¹⁹ For Nietzsche, value has no metaphysical grounding apart from the ungrounded will to power; the world is will to power and nothing else.²²⁰ For this reason, Heidegger judges Nietzsche's genealogy of morality to be nihilistic. Heidegger: "Nietzsche's metaphysics is nihilistic insofar as it is value thinking,

²¹⁶ Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, 69

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 69

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 69

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 103

²²⁰ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good And Evil*, 48

and insofar as the latter is grounded in will to power as the principle of all valuation. Nietzsche's metaphysics consequently becomes the fulfillment of nihilism proper, because it is the metaphysics of the will to power."²²¹ The implication is that there is nothing of value apart from that which is attributed value by the generative will. Contrary to Nietzsche's incomplete nihilism, Heidegger suggests that "completed nihilism must, in addition, do away with even the place of value itself, with the suprasensory as a realm, and accordingly must posit and revalue values differently."²²² The challenge of completed nihilism is to leave the open place formerly occupied by God empty, open, and unoccupied by any transcendental signifier. Heidegger suggests that "instead of [the place of God], another [place] can loom on the horizon – a place that is identical neither with the essential realm belonging to god nor with that of man, but with which man comes once more into a distinctive relationship [with being]."²²³

For Nietzsche, humanity in its present form is not up to the task of assuming self-mastery and dominion over the Earth. A new type of man must therefore be created – the Overman.²²⁴ The strength of will required for undertaking a reevaluation of value is rare, as is anything noble. Nietzsche: "Independence is for the very few, it is a privilege of the strong."²²⁵ Contrary to Heidegger, Nietzsche's insight into the groundlessness of being does not inspire awe and wonder, but horror in the face of the abyss. Nietzsche warns that the vast majority of people lack the courage to exercise the generative will to power in the face of a meaningless and indifferent universe. Only an elite aristocratic caste has the courage to face the groundlessness of being and summon the strength of will necessary to create

²²¹ Heidegger, *Nietzsche vl. III-IV*, 204

²²² Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, 69

²²³ *Ibid*, 100

²²⁴ See Stanley Rosen, *The Mask Of Enlightenment*, (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 2004)

²²⁵ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good And Evil*, 41

meaning from *nothingness*, from nothing prior to the will itself. Nietzsche advocates for the creation of “a new aristocracy, based on the severest self-legislation.”²²⁶ Only the caste of the ‘overman’ is capable of becoming who they are: “self-legislators, self-creators, creators of new values and tables of what is good.”²²⁷ Put simply, the highest need is “to teach man the future of man as his *will* . . .”²²⁸ Such strength of will is fashioned through a strict adherence to ascetic regimes of self-discipline “with the intention of training a ruling caste – the future maters of the Earth.”²²⁹ Heidegger: “Justice looks beyond to that sort of mankind which is to be forged and bred into a type, a type that possesses essential aptitude for establishing absolute dominion over the Earth.”²³⁰ It would be a mistake to interpret the Overman as equivalent to the modern Enlightenment project of moral self-legislation, whereby each is subject only to the law that they themselves will. On the contrary, the highest man is “he who determines values and directs the will of millennia by giving directions to the highest natures.”²³¹ It is therefore no less true for Nietzsche than for Aristotle that “the wise man must not be ordered but must order, and he must not obey another, but the less wise must obey him.”²³²

Nietzsche distinguishes between the ruling caste of the Overman from under-caste of the last man. The last man lacks sufficient courage to endure the spiritual transfiguration undergone by the Overman. Instead, the last man succumbs to the need for a metaphysical grounding of truth. The metaphysical need refers to the psychological inability to cope with the radical contingency of

²²⁶ Nietzsche, *The Will To Power*, 504

²²⁷ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 266

²²⁸ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good And Evil*, 117

²²⁹ Nietzsche, *The Will To Power*, 502

²³⁰ Heidegger, *Nietzsche vl. III-IV*, 245

²³¹ Nietzsche, *The Will To Power*, 519

²³² Aristotle, *The Basic Works Of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York, NY: Random House Inc, 1941), 691

truth. In response to the anxiety, uncertainty, and disorientation of metaphysical groundlessness, the last man clings to the myth of divine origins. Just as the allegory of the cave teaches that there is an ideal realm that grounds this world, the myth of the metals teaches of the divine origins of justice. According to Nietzsche, the purpose of Plato's myth is to instill the false belief "that the order of castes, the highest, the dominating law, is merely the ratification of the order of nature, of a natural law of the first rank."²³³ The teaching of the myth of the metals is that the ruling philosopher-kings belong to a superior caste, just as the lower castes are inherently inferior. It therefore follows that the last man is incapable of self-mastery and so must be ruled by the Overman. The function of the noble lie is to maintain order by justifying hierarchical social relations as an expression of the great chain of being. This hierarchy is justified by the belief that the social order is a reflection of the natural order, and that the rule of the few is at the same time the rule of the best.

We have seen that Nietzsche is opposed to the perceived dualism and foundationalism of Platonic metaphysics. However, Nietzsche shares with Plato an authoritarian political vision that is rooted in the cyclical experience of time. For Nietzsche and Plato both, the temporality of the eternal return unveils a vista of cosmic nihilism that cannot possibly be endured. Ohana states the problem well: "Man created an illusion of wholeness, order, and unity in order to organize the chaos by giving it a meaningful structure, but the reflective consciousness exposes the illusion."²³⁴ Man cannot bear to be the origin of his own meaning. The insight into the Promethean destiny of cyclical time reverts to a psychological need for political order grounded in foundational myth (the myth of foundations). By outlining the nihilistic destiny of Western metaphysics, Nietzsche brings us face-to-face with the disenchantment of all value, meaning,

²³³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, trans. H.L. Mencken (Tuscan, AZ: See Sharp Press, 1999), 82

²³⁴ Ohana, *The Dawn Of Political Nihilism*, 42

and truth. Tragically, Nietzsche brings us to the precipice of the abyss, while nevertheless failing to accomplish a leap beyond.

The Promethean Destiny Of The West

Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* poses the following question: "What is the significance of the *tragic* myth amongst the Greeks?"²³⁵ For Nietzsche, tragic myth offers a glimpse into the nihilistic fate of the West. Nietzsche's visionary insight is that attic tragedy is an aesthetic response to the horror of confronting the ungrounded emptiness of being. The innate nihilism of Western metaphysics is evident in the startling conclusion of Plato's *Republic*, the myth of Er. The myth of Er offers a shocking vision of cosmic nihilism. The myth tells of the warrior Er, who upon dying in battle, returns to life bearing an unsettling account of the afterlife. Er describes the transmigration of his soul through divine realms. Upon departing from his body at the moment of death, Er's soul first arrives at a landscape of heavenly and demonic realms. At this boundary between worlds, the soul encounters a judge who measures out punishment and reward. The judge directs the soul towards higher or lower realms based upon the goodness of one's life. The wicked are imprisoned in the depths of Tartarus, each sin punished ten times over, while the virtuous ascend to heavenly realms of bliss. After receiving their just measure, all souls, wicked and virtuous alike, journey towards a panoramic vista. Upon entrance into this visionary realm, the soul glimpses the horrific Spindle of Necessity, a cosmic vortex turned by the arbitrary decree of the hideous Moirai (Fates), daughters of Ananke (Necessity). At this point of the journey, the soul must decide on its next reincarnation based upon the lessons learned from previous lives. The soul's decision as to what constitutes a good life will determine the fate of its reincarnation. If the soul decides wisely, it

²³⁵ Nietzsche, *The Birth Of Tragedy*, 18

will ascend to a higher form of life. It is for this reason that philosophical wisdom is of cosmic significance for Socrates.

It is nevertheless strange that the myth of Er ultimately undermines Socrates' assurance that the good life is also the happy life. Instead, the myth indicates that ultimately, wisdom is futile. Life is blind suffering, regardless of virtue or vice. The nullity of wisdom becomes increasingly evident in light of the startling culmination of the soul's transmigration. After deciding on the form of its next life, the soul must journey to Lethe, the river of forgetfulness. Upon reaching the banks of Lethe, the soul is compelled to drink from the river, and subsequently forgets its previous incarnations along with the lessons learned. The soul is then carried away by the solar winds of a cosmic storm, randomly descending as a shooting star into its next incarnation. Plato's cosmological vision is horrifically bleak. In the end, the soul's reincarnation is not determined by just measure, but instead by blind Fate. If I may draw from Hindu cosmology, the "wheel of samsara" is not turned by Justice. There is no karma in Plato's horrific vision, only arbitrary Fate. The myth of Er contradicts Socrates' fundamental teachings that "virtue is knowledge; man sins only from ignorance; he who is virtuous is happy."²³⁶ In order to establish that the good life is in fact the best form of life, Socrates must presuppose a cosmological notion of justice operative within the universe. However, the arbitrary turning of the Spindle of Necessity indicates that there is in fact no such measure. Instead, "all that exists is just and unjust and equally justified in both."²³⁷ Plato refutes the optimism of the Hindu sages; reincarnation is not governed by karma. Instead the transmigration of the soul is determined by the turning of blind Fate.

The nihilistic destiny of Western metaphysics is readily apparent in Sophocles' *Theban Trilogy*, especially *Oedipus The King*. Sophocles

²³⁶ Ibid, 91

²³⁷ Ibid, 72

tragic drama presents striking answers to Nietzsche's question of whether or not truth is beneficial to life. The answer is a resounding no! On the contrary, Sophocles' attic tragedy offers a shockingly bleak vision of the world in which the search for truth is fated to culminate in utter devastation. Even Oedipus, the heroic king of Thebes, lacks the strength to endure the truth of cosmic nihilism. For Oedipus, truth is ultimately a revelation of horror. According to a prophecy of the Delphic oracle, Oedipus is destined to kill his father and sleep with his mother. Horrified by the oracle's prophecy, Oedipus exiles himself in a desperate attempt to avoid his fated ruin. But Oedipus's determination to evade his future only hastens the prophecy to fruition. Oedipus is ignorant of the fact that the King and Queen of Corinth, who raised Oedipus, and whom Oedipus takes to be his biological parents, are in reality Oedipus' adopted parents. It is because of this ignorance that in self-imposed exile from Corinth, Oedipus fails to recognize his true father when they meet in a chance encounter upon the road. Ignorant of his true identity, Oedipus engages in a heated dispute with the elderly stranger. In a state of rage, Oedipus unintentionally kills the stranger, Oedipus' true father, Laius, King of Thebes.

Upon reaching the city of Thebes, Oedipus discovers its citizens at the mercy of the monstrous Sphinx. The only hope for salvation is to solve the riddle of the Sphinx. The Sphinx's riddle represents the secrets of nature of which only Oedipus is wise enough to perceive. Oedipus heroically solves the riddle and defeats the Sphinx. In a demonstration of gratitude, the Thebans crown Oedipus their king. As a result, Oedipus unknowingly marries his own mother Jocasta, the Queen of Thebes. To all appearance, Oedipus rules over a period of prosperity. However, the truth is that Oedipus' heinous crimes are festering deep within the body-politic. The gods strike Thebes with a horrible plague as punishment for the unspeakable crimes of their king. Oedipus, desperate to relieve the suffering of his people, pleads to "learn what act or covenant of mine could still redeem the

state?”²³⁸ At that moment, Creon, brother of Jocasta, returns from the oracle bearing news that “our wounds will issue into blessings.”²³⁹ The gods bring reassurance, promising that “seek and you shall find. Only that escapes which never was pursued.”²⁴⁰ Encouraged by the oracle’s prophecy, Oedipus is determined to discover the identity of Laius’ killer, and thereby “drag that shadowed past to light.”²⁴¹ Nevertheless, Oedipus’ resolve to discover the truth at any cost leads to the devastating recognition of the ungrounded emptiness of being.

According to Aristotle’s authoritative interpretation of the play, Oedipus’ torment at the hands of gods is just. This is because Oedipus is afflicted with that which Aristotle calls the tragic flaw of pride. According to Nietzsche, however, Sophocles’ play bears witness to far darker truth – that ignorance is preferable to knowledge. Nietzsche: “Sophocles understood the most sorrowful figure of the Greek stage, the unfortunate Oedipus, as the noble human being who, in spite of his wisdom, is destined to error and misery . . .”²⁴² Far from displaying a tragic flaw, Oedipus’ only crime is his devotion to truth. In the pursuit of truth, Oedipus summons the prophet Tiresias, who warns Oedipus that truth is too difficult for the soul to bear. Oedipus nevertheless persists, and Tiresias declares that “the murderer of the man whose murder you pursue is you . . . I say that you and your dearly beloved are wrapped together in hideous sin, blind to the horror of it.”²⁴³ Oedipus is reduced to a state of shock and despair. Desperate to avoid such a horrific prophecy, Jocasta offers false comfort, dismissing the command of the Delphic oracle to “know thyself.” Jocasta: “There is no art of prophecy known to man . . . If the god insists of tracking down the

²³⁸ Sophocles, *The Oedipus Plays Of Sophocles*, trans. Paul Roche, (New York, NY: Meridian, 1966), 7

²³⁹ Sophocles, *The Oedipus Plays*, 8

²⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 9

²⁴¹ *Ibid*, 11

²⁴² Nietzsche, *The Birth Of Tragedy*, 67

²⁴³ Sophocles, *The Oedipus Plays*, 21

truth, why then, let the god himself get on track.”²⁴⁴ Ever faithful to the gods, Oedipus is beyond such false consolation and resolves to face the truth at any cost. Jocasta nevertheless continues to plead with Oedipus to “forget it all. It’s not worth knowing . . . God help you, Oedipus! Hide it from you who you are.”²⁴⁵ Oedipus is nevertheless compelled to continue seeking the truth until the mystery is revealed: “Forget it all? I can’t stop now.”²⁴⁶ According to Nietzsche, Oedipus should have followed the council of Tiresias and Jocasta; the truth is indeed too painful to endure. Upon discovery of the truth, Oedipus cries out: “Lost! Ah lost! At last it’s blazing clear. Light of my days, go dark. I want to gaze no more.”²⁴⁷ According to the chorus, Oedipus’ fate reveals “man’s pattern of unblestness.”²⁴⁸ What, then, is the truth of Oedipus’ fate? What discovery could be so horrific that Oedipus is compelled to gauge out his own eyes in the shock of recognition?

The horrific truth of Sophocles’ attic drama is as follows: “The edge of wisdom turns against the wise: wisdom is a crime against nature.”²⁴⁹ For Sophocles, we are abandoned by the gods, destined to suffer a world of pain, whose only respite is death. Nietzsche suggests that, “conscious of the truth he has once seen, man now sees everywhere only the horror or absurdity of existence . . .”²⁵⁰ In recognition of his fate, Oedipus’ act of self-blinding suggests that it is better to live a life condemned to eternal darkness than to glimpse the horror of being. According to Nietzsche’s interpretation, “it was to be able to live that the Greeks had to create these gods from a most profound need.”²⁵¹ Nietzsche: “The Greek knew and felt the terrors

²⁴⁴ Ibid, 40

²⁴⁵ Ibid, 58

²⁴⁶ Ibid, 60

²⁴⁷ Ibid, 67

²⁴⁸ Ibid, 68

²⁴⁹ Nietzsche, *The Birth Of Tragedy*, 69

²⁵⁰ Ibid, 60

²⁵¹ Ibid, 42

and horrors of existence. That he might endure this terror at all, he had to interpose between himself and life the radiant dream-birth of the Olympians.”²⁵² The veil was torn for Oedipus, thereby revealing a glimpse of the horror. In spite of his nobility, strength, and courage, Oedipus’ fate is too terrible to bear. Creon nevertheless attributes blame to Oedipus, advising him to “stop this striving to be master of all. The mastery you had in life has been your fall.”²⁵³ Nevertheless, it is not pride, but rather devotion to truth that drives Oedipus. The teaching of the play is completely nihilistic, and can be summarized as follows: “So being mortal, look on that last day and count no man blessed in this life until he’s crossed life’s bounds unstuck by ruin.”²⁵⁴ Oedipus’ tragic fate indicates that it is better *not to be* than *to be*. Oedipus: “Oh wretched, ephemeral race, children of chance and misery, why do you compel me to tell you what it would be most expedient for you not to hear? What is best of all is utterly beyond your reach: not to be born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*. But the second best for you is – to die soon.”²⁵⁵

The tragic world-view of *Oedipus King* is reinforced in an important passage of Plato’s *Apology*. At the moment of his death, Socrates says that he owes Asclepius a rooster. Asclepius is the god of healing, to whom Socrates owes a sacrifice. Presumably this debt is owed because Socrates thinks that death heals the wound of life. For Socrates, life is a disease whose only cure is death. Like Oedipus, Socrates “suffers life like a sickness,” and only death can heal the illness of living.²⁵⁶ It is therefore better to not have been. Ultimately, both Socrates and Oedipus attain peace by resolutely enduring the cruelty of their fate. For this reason, Oedipus is considered a hero within the ancient Greek world. According to the conventions of attic tragedy, a hero is characterized by the quest for truth, such as

²⁵² Ibid, 42

²⁵³ Sophocles, *The Oedipus Plays*, 80

²⁵⁴ Ibid, 81

²⁵⁵ Nietzsche, *The Birth Of Tragedy*, 42

²⁵⁶ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good And Evil*, 74

Odysseus' epic journey in Homer's *Odyssey*. For the ancient Greeks, the quest for truth inevitably involves the transgression social norms, roles, and customs. Since the social order is divinely sanctioned, the transgression of social norms therefore invites divine retribution. For the ancient Greeks, a hero clears a new way of being beyond established forms of life. The search for truth therefore requires great courage. By committing incest and patricide, Oedipus transgresses the sacred cultural taboos of Thebes. These taboos repress the instincts in the name of preserving the established social order. The will of the hero is liberated from any such restrictions. Nietzsche calls the Greek hero a "free spirit." For Nietzsche, the will is free to the extent that "the spirit would take leave of all faith and every wish for certainty . . ." ²⁵⁷ However, even the 'free spirit' must submit to the 'tyrannical' rule of the gods.

Take, for instance, Aeschylus' remarkable *Prometheus Bound*, in which the gods themselves are cast as tyrants. In the only surviving fragment of the Prometheus trilogy, the primordial Titanic gods are at war with the new Olympic gods. The ancient Titans are defeated and imprisoned within the abysmal depths of Tartarus. Only Prometheus, who sides with the new gods, against his own kind, is spared punishment. Upon observing the wretched state of humanity, Prometheus raises mankind above bare animal life by bestowing the transformative gift of fire. In so doing, Prometheus transgresses the divine command of Zeus. The tyrant Zeus is enraged by Prometheus' compassion for humanity, imprisoning the Titan for all of eternity upon a mountainside of untrodden desolation in a savage act of divine retribution. As if that were not punishment enough, Prometheus must endure the consumption of his liver by a bird of prey, only to have it continually regenerate in order to be consumed again and again until the end of time. As Prometheus bears the gift of foresight, the question arises as to why the Titan could not foresee his own tragic fate? It is a cruel trick of Fate that Prometheus is gifted

²⁵⁷ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 290

with foresight but not with the gift of remembrance. Though gifted with foresight, Prometheus is nevertheless destined to forget. As a result, Prometheus must suffer the eternal return of the infinite cycles of time. Time is an infinite circle; everything that will happen has already happened. Conversely, everything that has happened will happen again and again. Even the ancient Titanic gods must submit to the arbitrary law of the “grey-grim” Fates. To the extent that we moderns look to the future while forgetting our past, Prometheus’s Fate is also our own.

Aeschylus’ bleak cosmic vision can be discerned in Prometheus’ final lamentation: “So must I bear, as lightly as I can, the destiny that fate has given me; for I know well against necessity, against its strength, no one can fight and win.”²⁵⁸ Perhaps, like Oedipus, Prometheus would have gouged out his own eyes upon learning of his tragic fate, were his arms not already bound by indestructible adamantine chain. The remarkably nihilistic vision of Aeschylus’ attic tragedy is “that it is better to die than suffer torment.”²⁵⁹ The contention that non-being is preferable to being can readily be discerned when Prometheus reveals the nature of his gift to humanity. Prometheus: “I stopped mortals from foreseeing doom . . . I sowed in them blind hopes.”²⁶⁰ The response of the chorus to this revelation is not sorrow, but approval; “That was a great help that you gave to men.”²⁶¹ It would seem that knowledge does not bring freedom, but rather visions of catastrophic ruin and utter despair. With knowledge, one can only lament “the dreamlike feebleness by which the race of man is held in bondage, a blind prisoner.”²⁶² For Prometheus, ignorance of our condition is preferable to knowledge. “It is better not to know” that mortals as well as the immortal Gods and Titans are

²⁵⁸ *Greek Tragedies vl I*, ed. David Grene & Richmond Lattimore, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 69

²⁵⁹ *Greek Tragedies*, 93

²⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 74

²⁶¹ *Ibid*, 74

²⁶² *Ibid*, 85

bound by the blind rule of Fate. In spite of Prometheus' bitter lamentations, Hermes dares to accuse him of pride: "Bring your proud heart to know a true discretion – oh foolish spirit – in the face of ruin."²⁶³ Hermes: "When you are trapped by ruin don't blame fortune."²⁶⁴ But Prometheus remains steadfast, resolutely bearing the injustice of the gods, conceding no wrongdoing. Prometheus: "Oh Holy mother, oh Sky that circling brings light to all, you see me, how I suffer, how unjustly."²⁶⁵ Prometheus must resolutely endure his fate, bearing witness to the nihilistic horror of being until the end of time.

For Nietzsche, Prometheus' fate is also that of the West. Like Prometheus, we are destined to endure the eternal return of time that destroys and renews all that we take to be eternal and true. Nietzsche's shocking discovery is that "something might be true while being harmful and dangerous in the highest degree."²⁶⁶ Truth is not beneficial but harmful to life. For Nietzsche, the challenge is therefore "to recognize untruth as a condition of life . . ."²⁶⁷ It would seem that self-consciousness is an aberration that ought to be annihilated. The challenge, in light of Aeschylus' tragic vision of cosmic nihilism, is to ascend to a higher perspective from which the horror of blind Fate appears sublime. From the vistas of such heights, "all things, whether good or evil, are deified."²⁶⁸ For Nietzsche, affirming the beauty of suffering is all that can be hoped for: "for it is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence is eternally justified."²⁶⁹ For Nietzsche, only the aesthetic re-enchantment of experience provides relief from this primal death wish. The only consolation is to learn to see beauty in necessity.

²⁶³ Ibid, 102

²⁶⁴ Ibid, 105

²⁶⁵ Ibid, 106

²⁶⁶ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good And Evil*, 49

²⁶⁷ Ibid, 12

²⁶⁸ Nietzsche, *The Birth Of Tragedy*, 41

²⁶⁹ Ibid, 52

Nietzsche's genealogical project remains unfinished, cut short by the tragic onset of madness. We are left with an *aporia* – an unsurpassable limit that must nevertheless be surpassed. It would seem that the search for truth dissolves its own conditions of existence: the ascetic belief that truth is divine and that knowledge is akin to blessedness. We cannot simply evade Nietzsche's shocking discovery that it is not truth, but fiction that proves beneficial to life. Although I have argued that Nietzsche's attempt to replace ethics with aesthetics is ultimately inadequate, Nietzsche's confrontation with cosmic nihilism should not be judged to be a complete failure. In my view, Nietzsche's deepest insight is that the good life is not the pursuit of truth, but the alleviation of suffering.

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