

section 8 of *The Birth of Tragedy*, he develops a specific account of how the framing/reframing of the tragic theater works in order to produce a double vision, one that is intrinsically perspectival and so avoids the monocular illusions of the imaginary all-seeing eye. The spectators can look down at the scene, the tragic vision, from their place in the *theatron*, identifying with Bacchantes on a mountainside, while, insofar as they identify with the theatrical chorus, they can be virtually looking up, from *orchestra* to *skene*. In tragedy, the frame is transfiguring; setting off the actors in their costumes and masks from the surrounding space, it makes the "eye insensitive and blind to the impression of 'reality'" (ibid.).

In thinking of the framing effect of tragedy and the work of the poet, one must understand the audience or spectators as also being constituted by the frame. What is transfigured is the viewing subject (*Zuschauer*), as well as the visions that are presented. Nietzsche speaks of the spectators as enabled to see beyond (*übersehen*) the world of culture around them, imagining themselves as chorists. *Übersehen* is a complex verb, which can mean "to overlook," in the sense either of scanning and surveying, or of neglecting, failing to see, and forgetting. Given Nietzsche's penchant for emphasizing the active and transformative sense given by *über-* in words such as *überwinden* and *Übermensch*, his *übersehen* may actually combine several of these meanings. The spectators, in their specially arranged and framed space, look beyond the ordinary world of their culture to imagine themselves one with the chorus, whose spectacle they see, and to have the visions had by the chorus as if they were their own. This would not be a mere neglect or failure to see the surroundings; it would rather be akin to the "active forgetfulness" that Nietzsche celebrates in *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Seeing beyond may entail not only having a vision, but also being able to behold a vision within a vision; and this, one might say, is to see abysses. In the tragic theater, on Nietzsche's analysis, vision is not overwhelmed by music but has its own complex structure or framing/reframing that enables a seeing beyond; the birth of tragedy is the condition of a continual rebirth of the visionary.

It is significant, in *The Birth of a Tragedy*, that Nietzsche contrasts the visual sensibility of tragedy with the "one great Cyclops eye of Socrates" that "was denied the pleasure of gazing into the Dionysian abysses." The Cyclops eye of Socrates is not capable of the complex vision required by the tragic frame, a vision that involves *übersehen* and that identifies with the chorus so as to behold its visions through them. Just as he cannot gaze into the abyss, so he cannot dwell with the shining figures that are projected out of it. He is blind to everything but the tragic plot, which he finds confused. Socrates' maxims—that virtue is knowledge, that no one does wrong knowingly, that the virtuous man is the happy man—all establish the frame of a new setup, which could be called the theater of dialectic and virtue. This is

precisely what Socrates plays out in his own life, turning himself into a theatrical figure in the Athenian agora; he constitutes a "new Socratic-optimistic stage world." The aesthetic consequence of Socratism, as Nietzsche sees it, is an intolerance of ambiguity, hidden depths, and complexity; it is the aesthetics of presence.

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Nietzsche on Art and Politics

As a modern philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche stands out for his espousal of an aesthetic interpretation of existence. For many commentators, the elevation of art to be found in his work is coupled with a corresponding denigration of politics, although for others, Nietzsche's political thought has become the object of serious attention. This "return" to a "political" Nietzsche has challenged the portrait of him as a purely existentialist or aestheticist philosopher that prevailed in the decades after World War II. In his autobiography, *Ecce Homo* (1888), Nietzsche described himself as a disciple of Dionysus and famously as the "last antipolitical German." Such a statement gives clear expression to Nietzsche's distaste for the national statism and militarism that characterized the aspirations of Germany under Otto von Bismarck, but it also conceals the fact that a notion of politics does inform Nietzsche's mature thinking on the need for social change and historical transformation in order to bring about a new culture and the production of new types of human being.

Nietzsche's early writings, it is true, contain a dismissive attitude toward politics. In his first published work, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), he criticizes attempts to locate a political meaning to Greek tragedy, insisting that its origins are solely religious. In his *Untimely Meditations* (1873–1876), he speaks of those who naively think that the ills of existence can be met with a political solution. It is only as an "aesthetic phenomenon" for the early Nietzsche that life can find any justification and ultimate meaning and significance. As Martin Heidegger noted, the position that Nietzsche embraces in his mature period (1883–1888), in which

art is celebrated as the proper task of life, as its true metaphysical activity (*The Will to Power*, 853), represents a return to the position of *The Birth of Tragedy*. The writings of the mature period, however, are also characterized by a distinctive political philosophy in which Nietzsche extends his aesthetic appreciation of life to questions of human evolution in the sociohistorical domain.

In its broadest and most creative sense, the artistic impulse characterizes the "activity" of life, where life is conceived as "will to power" (*Wille zur Macht*). In this compound formulation, the "will" is not to be understood as denoting a simple desire "for" power, in which the will strives to possess what it lacks, because "power" denotes not an object separate from, and independent of, a subject (such as the "will"), but simply the essence of the activity of willing, which is always an overpowering, an expansive becoming and an aggressive growing that are endogenously generated. In part, Nietzsche's formulation of life as will to power is presented as a rival to Darwinian conceptions in which the emphasis is placed on the adaptation of forms of life to external circumstances. Nietzsche argues that this is to neglect the priority of the spontaneous and expansive "form-shaping forces" that work from within and that provide life with new directions and interpretations (*On the Genealogy of Morals*, II, 12).

This emphasis on life as composed of internally generated "form-shaping forces" is crucial to grasping Nietzsche's articulation of an "artist's metaphysics." For example, the will to truth, which he believes has guided metaphysics since Plato onward, a will that expresses a desire for a "true" world not subject to semblance, illusion, or error, but consisting of a world of pure and immutable forms, has in turn to be understood as the expression of a deeper will to power. Through forms of knowledge, humankind has arrived not at "truth" but at a world it can master and control by imposing on it categories of reason and logic that make it appear as something calculable, uniform, and regular. This will to truth, however, suffers from an anthropic illusion, namely, that in the construction of a transcendent reality it is possible to discover "truth" and so attain the standpoint of eternity. Nietzsche's point is that the desire for a changeless world and for eternal truths is little more than the expression of a human—all too human—phobia of death, destruction, and decay. "Truths," for Nietzsche, are not discovered but created and made, and are an expression of the activity of the will to power.

The elevation of art in Nietzsche stems in large part from his reception of Immanuel Kant and his critique of metaphysics. Nietzsche believed that Kant's Copernican revolution had shown metaphysics to be impossible and, in the process, had opened the door to relativism and nihilism (*Philosophy and Truth*, 1979 pp. 11–12). This new modern philosophy, which showed the impossibility of transcending our limited anthropocentric standpoint, would lead to a cul-

ture of self-resignation and nihilistic despair. It is in this context of cultural decay and fragmentation that Nietzsche assigns to art the function of a cultural redeemer. He appeals to philosophers of "tragic knowledge" who will master the uncontrolled drive for knowledge, but not by means of any new metaphysics. These new philosophers consider it "tragic" that the ground of metaphysics has been withdrawn and will not rest content with the motley whirling game of the natural sciences. Instead, they "return to art its rights." Knowledge is now to be placed in the service of the "best life," and what makes this knowledge tragic is recognition that even illusion must be willed. For the tragic philosopher, therefore, the recognition of metaphysical activity as merely anthropomorphic simply "completes the picture of existence." He does not become a skeptic as a result and nihilism exists only as an experience to be overcome. A tragic culture is one that does not seek to flee the world of becoming, of change, of decay, and so on, but, through the primacy accorded to art, entices human beings to transcend a narrow egoism, to leave behind the *principium individuationis*, and to participate through tragic awareness in the eternally creative and eternally destructive forces of life, and to do so without being overcome by despair or resignation. Art enjoys the "good will to appearance"; it penetrates the abyss and looks into it, but also contains powers of form capable of producing a sense of play and enjoyment in the elusive mysteries of life (*The Gay Science*, 107). Art is thus more valuable than "truth" (the truth of Platonic-Christian metaphysics) and it is cultivated in order so that we may not perish of the "truth" (the truth of an "artist's metaphysics").

A sustained notion of politics appears late in the unfolding of Nietzsche's thinking. The conception he advances of a "great politics" refers to the artistic task he believes now faces those philosophical legislators who, in an age of nihilism, an age in which the will to truth has culminated in a paralyzing will to nothingness, must come up with new visions and riddles of what the human being is and of what may still become of it. They are to do this through new practices of discipline and new experiments in breeding (*Beyond Good and Evil*, 208). These are the philosophers of the future, the "artist-tyrants" who will impose on man the discipline of great suffering, which is the discipline, Nietzsche contends, that has created all enhancements of man so far (*ibid.*, 225). Here art and artifice are conjoined so that willing and thinking the future become a matter of artistry and cultivation and in which politics comes to be based on methods of artificial selection. This, for example, is how Nietzsche designed his thought experiment of the eternal return of the same, writing of it as the "great cultivating thought" that will serve to enhance the strength of the strong and to enervate further the powers of the world-weary and the impotent (*The Will to Power*, 1053 and 1058).

Nietzsche appeals to artists "of" the future, but the "of" spoken about has a double meaning because it refers to

artist-philosophers who belong to the future (whose time is not yet), but also to those artist-philosophers who are responsible for its invention as a measure of their gravity. The invention of the future is to be a matter for architects, designers, experimenters, and innovators, who will all teach man that the future is now dependent on his will and his will alone. In this way, an end will be put, Nietzsche holds, to the gruesome accident and nonsense that so far have been called "history" (*Beyond Good and Evil*, 203). Nietzsche has a particular conception of the future that is now to be created and willed into existence. The philosopher-legislators, who practice a craft that is an amalgamation of philosophical laboring, natural science, and artistic creativity, are to construct a vision of the human being that will show that its possibilities for advancement have yet to be exhausted. In this way, their constructions will combat the modern political tendency that favors a degeneration and diminution of the human being into a "perfect herd animal," or what Nietzsche calls the "animalization of man into the dwarf animal of equal rights and claims" (*ibid.*).

It should be noted that Nietzsche's vision of the future of evolution is not at all racist. The breed of new philosophers that he sees as appearing on the horizon are depicted by him as modern human beings without a home who are too manifold and racially mixed in their descent to be tempted to participate in the "mendacious racial self-admiration and racial indecency that parades in Germany today" (*The Gay Science*, 377). Moreover, he argues that, beneath the rise of European democracy, an equally important "physiological" process is taking place in which the Europeans are evolving more and more similar to one another as they become "more and more detached from the conditions under which races originate" (*ibid.*). As a result, the future will be characterized, Nietzsche believes and hopes, by a "supra-national and nomadic type of man" who shall possess a "maximum of the art and power of adaptation as its typical distinction" (*Beyond Good and Evil*, 242). He also holds that the modern movement of democratization will produce at the same an involuntary arrangement for the cultivation of "tyrants." He adds that this word is to be heard in its most "spiritual" sense (*ibid.*).

Significant problems attach themselves to Nietzsche's thinking on art and politics, rendering his philosophical project incoherent and showing it to be entirely caught up in the antinomies and aporias of modern European thought. For example, it is not at all clear that with the central notion of his artistic understanding of life and reality—the will to power understood as a creative, form-building, inner force—Nietzsche has not fallen back on the kind of aesthetic anthropomorphism of existence that at one point in his writing he incisively shows to be illegitimate (*The Gay Science*, 109). If it is the case that to posit "self-preservation" as the cardinal drive of life is to impose an aesthetic and moral judgment on it, as Nietzsche argues, in what respects

does the theory of will to power, which holds that life displays a desire for perpetual self-overcoming, differ in this regard? The determination of life as will to power has a pernicious influence on Nietzsche's political thinking. The basic problem is that it ontologizes the historical reality of enslavement and violence, pronouncing exploitation to be the essence of what lives as a "basic organic function" and as the "primordial fact of all history" (*Beyond Good and Evil*, 259). It is this biologically informed ontology that Nietzsche dubiously deploys to legitimize his prejudices in favor of an aristocratic society rigidly constructed along hierarchical lines (*ibid.*, 257). Nietzsche's philosophy of the future also shares in the dangerous myth peculiar to modernity of achieving emancipation or advancement through controlling the forces of history and evolution. This desire for control proved disastrous in the first half of the twentieth century, and unfortunately, humanity still shows no signs of shaking off its hubris and letting go of its anthropocentric conceits as it approaches the twenty-first century.

Perhaps the most disconcerting criticism to be made of Nietzsche's philosophy, however, is that its celebrated Dionysian affirmation of reality—that all is war and becoming, that the highest affirmation of life is attained once we are able to say yes to reality as it is without subtraction, addition, or selection—rests, ironically, on a static conception of historical evolution that is simply unable to allow for genuine becoming or progress. Nietzsche's positing of Dionysian truths is absolutist and a prioristic, and seems out of sync with the emphasis on perspectives and experimental conceptions of reality that characterizes other aspects of his philosophy. His Dionysian conception of reality is undialectically posited and susceptible to Marxist criticisms that would accuse it of reifying particular aspects of modern existence and offering false promises of happiness in its championing of an aesthetic solution in the form of a philosophy of life based on a tragic pessimism and a regressive cult of Dionysus. Thus, although it is possible to divorce Nietzsche's aesthetics of life from its fateful association with the racist ideology of National Socialism, it is by no means clear that one can redeem it from a series of contradictions, problems, and weaknesses, which seriously impair one's reception of it.

[See also Politics and Aesthetics.]

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