

Article

Nietzsche's "Love" for Socrates

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Abstract: In this essay I contest the prevailing view that Nietzsche almost exclusively criticizes Socrates, by a careful consideration of his encounter with Socrates in the *Birth of Tragedy* and *Twilight of the Idols*. By showing that in Nietzsche's own sense he "loved" Socrates, I am able to raise a number of important issues for further consideration.

Keywords: nietzsche; socrates; dionysian; apollinian tragedy

In one of his latest works, *Ecce Homo*, in a section entitled "Why I Write Such Good Books", Nietzsche writes, "Has my definition of love been heard? It is the only one worthy of a philosopher. Love—in its means, war." [1]. This striking characterization is commensurate with his account in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and elsewhere of friendship, where he insists that friendship should be a struggle, that in one's friend one should find "one's best enemy" ([2], p. 168), that the friend should be "a hard nut, on which one could break a tooth" ([2], p. 169). In short, that friendship should be in every sense a "demand" relationship. If this is true of friendship, it is hardly surprising that it should be no less true for love. It is in this precise sense that Nietzsche "loved" Socrates throughout his writing career, from his earliest work, *The Birth of Tragedy*, to one of his latest, written in the last months of his sane life, *Twilight of the Idols*, one entire section of which is entitled "The Problem of Socrates". Throughout his life, Socrates was just that for Nietzsche: a *problem*. He was a problem because, on the one hand, Nietzsche saw Socrates as "the one turning point and vortex of so-called world history" ([3], p. 96) without which the world might have degenerated into a "gruesome ethic of genocide, motivated by pity" ([3], p. 169) yet on the other hand, Socrates was the proximate cause of the "death of tragedy" in Ancient Greece and the real beginning of what Nietzsche saw as the "decline" of Western culture, for which Nietzsche could not forgive him. In short, Nietzsche was both enormously attracted to, yet repulsed by, Socrates. Socrates was, in one of Nietzsche's favorite phrases, "a great question mark" for

all of culture and certainly for Nietzsche himself. In this paper I would like to challenge two commonly held views regarding Nietzsche's attitude toward Socrates: the first, that Nietzsche was almost exclusively critical of Socrates, sometimes harshly and unfairly so, the second that acknowledges Nietzsche's at least occasional ambivalence toward Socrates, but nevertheless still strongly emphasizes the more negative attitude.¹ Even the latter views, in my judgment, too often pass quickly over the positive remarks while emphasizing the negative. I want to show that Nietzsche's attitude was much more fully and literally ambivalent than that, that Nietzsche really was torn in his attitude toward Socrates, and to show just why Socrates held such a complicated mixture of attraction and repulsion for Nietzsche, why it would be fair to say that in his own sense, he "loved" Socrates.

We should begin with Nietzsche's first published work, *The Birth of Tragedy*, where his complicated attitude toward Socrates is already in full view, even if the more positive side of his attitude is too often missed or understated by commentators. To do so, however, we must place his evaluation of Socrates in its context, the development of Nietzsche's account of the greatness—and then the decline and even the death—of Greek tragedy, for it is in this context that the question of Socrates first arises for Nietzsche. That account has been controversial on several grounds. Its larger context in *The Birth of Tragedy* as a whole is to set up in the last third of the book the possibility of a *rebirth* of tragedy out of the spirit of *German* music and in particular out of the operas of Richard Wagner, who at that time in his career Nietzsche respected to the point of veneration. Later of course, Nietzsche retracted that enthusiastic endorsement, though even in his later works highly critical of Wagner, *The Case of Wagner* and *Nietzsche Contre Wagner*, I would argue that his attitude becomes almost as complicated regarding Wagner as it is regarding Socrates. Second, it is held by many, including perhaps most famously Walter Kaufmann, the translator of so many of Nietzsche's works, that Nietzsche later largely abandoned the account of tragedy in *The Birth of Tragedy*, for the most part leaving behind the Apollinian element so important in this first account in favor of an almost exclusive emphasis on the Dionysian as the crucial element of tragedy and indeed of human life itself.² By my reading, that account mistakes the absence of constant literal reference to the Apollinian in the later works for the absence of the very idea, which, I would argue, in certain ways, never goes away.³ Third and finally, there is the controversy surrounding the account of tragedy in terms of the Apollinian/Dionysian opposition itself—whether it is an accurate account of the two Greek gods, and

¹ A few of many examples: [4–9]. For a good example of the recognition of Nietzsche's ambivalence, but a clear emphasis on the negative see ([9], p. 26): "While Nietzsche was of two minds concerning Socrates—in many respects he admired Socrates immensely and often chose Socrates as a model of personal integrity—he nonetheless saw the distinctive features of cultural decadence forcefully at work in him: the extremist individual, the fanatical moralist, the fanatical rationalist, the calumniator of art, the apolitical corruptor of Athenian culture (and of its youth)." See also ([9], pp. 59, 60, 63).

² See for example his introduction to his translation of the ([10], p. 9), and his introduction to his translation of ([11], pp. 202, 203, 209). Kaufmann is one of those who fully recognizes the admiration Nietzsche held for Socrates, despite the harsh criticism. Another important exception is [12], e.g., p. 235. But cf. p. 237.

³ Perhaps the best example of this is Zarathustra, who is very much taken up with "Apollinian" individuality, even though he never mentions that god (he's a Persian—why would he?). His teaching early in the book of the "overman" could be construed as a kind of hyper-Apollinian figure. But as Part III indicates, Zarathustra also undergoes the Dionysian terror/joy experience, and thus is a "tragic" figure.

whether it in any case adequately accounts for the greatness of Greek tragedy. It is this third issue on which we need to dwell if we want to appreciate the significance of Nietzsche's introduction of Socrates into the discussion.

Regarding the issue of the historical accuracy of Nietzsche's account of the two gods, Apollo and Dionysus, I would want to make the following initial observation: Nietzsche's primary goal is not scholarly accuracy. If his account of the two gods differs in certain ways from the actual Greek understanding, as indeed proves to be the case, this rather raises certain questions: Does Nietzsche perhaps have a *more adequate* understanding of the forces that were personified in these two gods than the Greeks themselves? Does he see something about these forces that the Greeks experienced but perhaps did not adequately comprehend? Are the differences indications of unconscious forces in play with the two gods? In short, the fact that Nietzsche's account may not exactly accord historically with the ancient Greek view does not by itself constitute a *criticism* of Nietzsche's account. With that in mind, let us turn to his account, in which we can observe certain differences from the historical understanding of the Greeks and what those differences portend.

Nietzsche's actual account of Greek tragedy in terms of the opposition between the two god-forces, Apollo and Dionysus, is controversial also in part because once he introduces the two gods, there appear to be two different accounts of the nature of Greek tragedy that seem, at least at first, to be in tension if not contradiction with each other. However, I think that the very tension between them is precisely the character of tragedy as Nietzsche understands it. Let me then briefly develop the two strands, beginning with Nietzsche's initial account.

Nietzsche introduces his most basic account in the very first section of the book. Apollo and Dionysus, he says, represent two forces that were for the Greeks a "tremendous opposition", "for the most part openly at variance", until, he continues, "by a metaphysical miracle of the Greek 'will'," they are somehow united in "an equally Dionysian and Apollinian form of art—Attic tragedy" ([3], p. 33). Tragedy, then, is this precarious union of the Dionysian and Apollinian forces, forces that, Nietzsche emphasizes, are not just personifications of *human* characteristics but "artistic energies which burst forth from nature herself". ([3], p. 38). Let us consider briefly Nietzsche's characterization of each of them, beginning as he does with the Apollinian.

The first characteristic of the Apollinian is that this god represents what Nietzsche calls, borrowing from Schopenhauer, the "principium individuationis", the "principle of individuation" that gives each of us our sense of a certain unity, integrity and identifiable coherence. ([3], pp. 35–36) Following from this, the Apollinian represents the emphasis on self-knowledge, on the delimitation of boundaries, the clarity that is associated with this god of light. Its law, says Nietzsche, is "the individual, *i.e.*, the delimiting of the boundaries of the individual, *measure* in the Hellenic sense. Apollo, as ethical deity, exacts measure of his disciples, and to be able to maintain it, he requires self-knowledge".⁴ So far, Nietzsche's account of what Apollo stands for seems a reasonably accurate account of the Greek understanding. However, now, Nietzsche adds, and emphasizes, a characteristic that is decisive for his understanding of tragedy, but which, I would argue, is an overemphasis of a trait that for the Greeks themselves was a minor, almost subliminal aspect of the god. I refer to his emphasis on the association of Apollo with dreams, veils, and illusions. The god, he says, represents "the beautiful illusion of the

⁴ Recall the first of the Delphic inscriptions: "Know thyself" ([3], p. 46).

dream worlds,” in which, even at its most intense, we recognize that it is “mere appearance” ([3], p. 34). He summarizes this characteristic as follows:

“This joyous necessity of the dream experience has been embodied by the Greeks in their Apollo: Apollo, the god of all plastic energies, is at the same time the soothsaying god. He who (as the etymology of the name indicates) is ‘the shining one’, the deity of light, is also ruler over the beautiful illusion of the inner world of fantasy” ([3], p. 35).

As we shall see, this strong emphasis on the illusory character of the Apollinian will play a decisive role in Nietzsche’s account of tragedy, even if it is an overemphasis on this element in the Greek understanding.

Next, Nietzsche turns to his account of Dionysus. Dionysus is, to be sure, the god of wine and intoxication, but it is what the experience of intoxication represents that is important to Nietzsche and to the Greeks, namely, the breakdown of individual inhibitions, the experience of oneness with the whole, of unity with others and the world. In the intoxicated Dionysian experience, he says, “Now, with the gospel of universal harmony, each one feels himself not only united, reconciled, and fused with his neighbor, but as one with him, as if the veil of Maya had been torn aside and were now merely fluttering in tatters before the mysterious primordial unity” ([3], p. 37). Nor is it simply with our fellow humans that the Dionysian experience unites us. We become one with the whole of nature. “Under the charm of the Dionysian, not only is the union between man and man reaffirmed, but nature which has become alienated, hostile, or subjugated, celebrates once more her reconciliation with her lost son, man” ([3], p. 37).

Importantly, however, this experience of unity and immersion in the whole, which by itself might be considered desirable and even idyllic, involved, for Nietzsche, a certain self-oblivion, the oblivion, that is, precisely of the Apollinian state of individuation. Nietzsche puts it this way: “The wisdom of Silenus (a follower of Dionysus) cried ‘Woe! Woe!’ to the serene Olympians. The individual, with all his restraint and proportion, succumbed to the self-oblivion of the Dionysian states, forgetting the precepts of Apollo. *Excess* revealed itself as truth. Contradiction, the bliss born of pain, spoke out from the very heart of nature. And so, wherever the Dionysian prevailed, the Apollinian was checked and destroyed” ([3], pp. 46–47).

Already in this passage we can hear the intonations of a third, decisive consequence for Nietzsche of the self-oblivion of the Dionysian state, one that Nietzsche perhaps emphasizes more than did the Greeks themselves, namely, that the Dionysian experience, at least from the standpoint of the individual whose very individuality is destroyed, is terrible, indeed inarticulable and intolerable by itself. Nietzsche emphasizes this intolerability again and again. He insists that, “The Greek knew the terror and horror 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.” ([3], p. 42). So terrifying, in fact, is the Dionysian experience that it cannot be articulated in language (which is, by its capacity for precision and relative clarity, itself Apollinian), but is available to us only in music. “Language can never adequately render the cosmic symbolism of music, because music stands in symbolic relation to the primordial contradiction and primordial pain in the heart of the primal unity, and therefore symbolizes a sphere which is beyond and prior to all phenomena” ([3], p. 55). Nietzsche summarizes this experience of the Dionysian and intimates its connection to the Dionysian element in tragedy with his remarkable one-paragraph interpretation of Hamlet as a tragic hero. It is worth quoting at length:

“In this sense, the Dionysian man resembles Hamlet: both have once looked truly into the essence of things, they have *gained knowledge*, and nausea inhibits action; for their action could not change anything in the eternal nature of things; they feel that it is ridiculous or humiliating that they should be asked to set right a world that is out of joint. Knowledge inhibits action; action requires the veils of illusion; that is the doctrine of Hamlet, not that cheap wisdom of Jack the Dreamer who reflects too much and, as it were, from an excess of possibilities does not get around to action. Not reflection, no—true knowledge, an insight into the horrible truth, outweighs any motive for action, both in Hamlet and in the Dionysian man” ([3], p. 60).

Implicit in this account of Hamlet is the core of Nietzsche’s first account of tragedy. Life is at once tragic and “only justifiable as an aesthetic phenomenon” ([3], p. 22), because at its core, life is *Dionysian*, and that means horrible, inarticulable, intolerable. This horrible Dionysian truth only becomes *tolerable* by imposing on it an Apollinian veil or illusion, that veil of *individual things that are beautiful*, which finds its highest vehicle in tragic art. As Nietzsche puts it, “It was in order to be able to live that the Greeks had to create these gods (the Olympians) from a most profound need. Out of the original titanic divine order of terror, the Olympic divine order of joy gradually evolved through the Apollinian impulse toward beauty, just as roses burst from thorny bushes. How else could this people, so sensitive, so vehement in its desires, so singularly capable of *suffering*, have endured existence, if it had not been revealed to them in their gods, surrounded with a higher glory?” ([3], pp. 42–43). Life is only justifiable aesthetically, then, because life at its fundament, *unveiled* by the Apollinian illusion of beautiful individuality, is horrible and intolerable.

We can now see the importance of Nietzsche’s emphasis on Apollinian individuality as illusory for his understanding of tragedy. The truth is the self-less oneness of all things, symbolized by Dionysus. The experience of individuality *veils* this, gives us a feeling of self-hood, uniqueness, self-importance, all of which is *illusory*, but *necessary* to make life tolerable. Tragedy accomplishes this by joining together the recognition of the Dionysian truth with the Apollinian veils of individuality that make it tolerable.

This Apollinian *affirmation* of illusion is noteworthy and will be important for our understanding of Nietzsche’s complicated attitude toward Socrates. The Socratic, and later, the “Enlightenment” attitude toward our recognition of something as an illusion would be very different; if we as products of the “Enlightenment” discover that something, some belief, some experience, is illusory, we believe that we should *reject the illusion*, even if and when it requires courage to do so. Nietzsche’s view is more complicated and subtle. Yes, we should recognize Apollinian individuality, including decisively the integrity of ourselves as individuals, as illusory, but nevertheless recognize *also* the necessity of *affirming* that illusion as the only way to tolerate the horror of Dionysian truth.

However, now, Nietzsche turns to develop a second understanding of the relation of the Apollinian to the Dionysian in tragedy that complicates things still more, since the second version seems at least initially to be in tension if not contradiction with the first. The first, to summarize, affirms the illusion of Apollinian individuality as the only way to tolerate the horror of Dionysian self-oblivion. The Apollinian veil of illusion, notwithstanding its illusory character, at once saves us from the horror of Dionysian self-annihilation while nevertheless allowing us to glimpse it in a veiled, and so, tolerable manner. We thus can become aware, even if through a glass darkly, of the tragic character of human existence.

Nietzsche's second version seems very different. Beginning in Section 10, with his remarkable characterization of the heroes of Greek tragedies—Oedipus, Antigone, *etc.*—as *masks*, *Apollinian veils*, for the true hero of every Greek tragedy, Dionysus himself, Nietzsche develops this remarkable view, which I quote at some length.

“In truth, however, the hero is the suffering Dionysus of the Mysteries, the god experiencing in himself the agonies of individuation, of whom wonderful myths tell that as a boy he was torn to pieces by the Titans and is now worshipped in this state as Zagreus. Thus it is intimated that this dismemberment, the properly Dionysian *suffering*, is like a transformation into air, water, earth, and fire, that we are therefore to regard the state of individuation as the origin and primal cause of all suffering, as something objectionable in itself. But the hope of the epopts looked toward a rebirth of Dionysus, which we must now dimly conceive as the end of individuation...This view of things already provides us with all the elements of a profound and pessimistic view of the world, together with the *mystery doctrine of tragedy*, the fundamental knowledge of the oneness of everything existent, the conception of individuation as the primal cause of evil, and of art as the joyous hope that the spell of individuation may be broken in augury of a restored oneness” ([3], pp. 73–74).

It is now *Apollinian individuation* that is the source of suffering and evil, not the Dionysian primal unity. Illusory individuality is now the cause of suffering, and the true affirmation is the Dionysian one of ridding ourselves of this evil illusion in the *joy* of Dionysian immersion. Life is now justifiable as an aesthetic phenomenon not because Apollinian veils can allow us to tolerate the horrible Dionysian truth but because it is the *Dionysian artist* who can *strip away* the illusory veils of individuality and allow us to experience the unmitigated and joyful Dionysian truth.

How are we to make sense of this tension and even apparent contradiction? One way would be to appeal to Nietzsche's later doctrine of “perspectivism.” *From the Apollinian perspective*, Dionysian self-obliteration will be experienced as horrible and intolerable. *From the Dionysian perspective*, Apollinian individuation is an illusory source of suffering and evil, which must be overcome to experience the joy of Dionysian unity of all things.

However, I think that resorting to such perspectivism would not do full justice to the power of Nietzsche's account of tragic experience, although it is surely part of the story. I think instead that Nietzsche *wants* the contradiction, because tragedy and tragic insight are precisely the experience of the contradiction. Yes, Apollinian individuality, even as we know it to be illusory, *does* give us a sense of meaning, integrity, uniqueness, and yes, Dionysian self-obliteration *can* be experienced as horrible and even intolerable (those of my generation used to call this “a bad trip”). On the other hand, the experience of Dionysian unity with all things, of overcoming our individual inhibitions and personal “hang ups” in a feeling of oneness with a whole, *can* be experienced as liberating and joyful, and the burdens and responsibilities of individuality *can* be experienced as the source of suffering and evil. However contradictory, *both* are true, both, together, as one. This, for Nietzsche, I think, is the power of tragic experience and tragic insight.

This is what, for all his greatness, Socrates destroyed and for many centuries made impossible, at least in Nietzsche's view. How? Nietzsche prepares us for his introduction of Socrates and what he stood for by a critical evaluation of Euripides that many regard as unjust to the poet. Euripides, in Nietzsche's view, was the *proximate* cause of the death of tragedy. As he understood it, Euripides found fault with old tragedy (focally Aeschylus and Sophocles) primarily because in it there always

remained an element of mystery, of profound though inarticulable depth that could not be fathomed (obviously, from Nietzsche's standpoint, this is the presence of Dionysian mystery). But Euripides did not like or want this mystery! He wanted clarity, intelligibility, and so began the practice in his plays of beginning them by bringing before the audience a voice that would *explain* to them in advance what the tragedy was about. Euripides thus ruined tragedy by "bringing the spectator onto the stage", that is, by jettisoning the predominance of Dionysian mystery in favor of a kind of hyper-Apollinian clarity and understanding ([3], pp. 79–82).

However, this demand for clarity and intelligibility, the ruination of genuine tragedy, was not really Apollinian. Rather, as Nietzsche understands it, it is the result of the profound influence on Euripides of "that other spectator, who did not comprehend tragedy and therefore did not esteem it", Socrates. ([3], p. 81). It is important to appreciate the astonishing power that Nietzsche attributes to Socrates as he introduces him. He says that through Euripides' plays "Dionysus had already been scared from the tragic stage by a daimonic power speaking through Euripides. Even Euripides was, in a sense, only a mask: the deity that spoke through him was neither Dionysus nor Apollo, but an altogether newborn daimon, called Socrates. This is the new opposition: the Dionysian and the Socratic—and the art of Greek tragedy was wrecked on this."⁵

Before we turn in detail to the character of the Socratic tendency that ruined tragedy, it is important to appreciate how powerful a force Nietzsche regards it as embodying. Socrates is a *deity*! He represents a *daimonic power*, the *equal* of Dionysus and Apollo. We are obviously not talking here simply about the historical man, Socrates, or even about the Socrates of the Platonic dialogues, but about the *daimonic force* that he instantiates, a force that Nietzsche will now regularly refer to as "the Socratic tendency" and as "Socratism". The Greek "daimon", more than the German "Dämon" or the English "demon", already contains within it some of the very ambivalence Nietzsche himself will attribute to Socrates: a half-divine, half-mortal "spirit" that can work for good or evil.⁶ Nevertheless, by the strength of this introduction alone, I think it would be fair to say that virtually no one in the history of philosophy has been more *appreciative* of the power of the Socratic than Nietzsche.

However, what are the characteristics of the Socratic that could have brought about the death of tragedy, that made Socrates the enemy of Dionysus? We get our first clue when Nietzsche, still focusing on Euripides' antipathy to Dionysian wisdom, characterizes that poet's work as "aesthetic Socratism": "Now we should be able to come closer to the character of *aesthetic Socratism*, whose supreme law reads roughly as follows: 'To be beautiful everything must be intelligible', as the counterpart to the Socratic dictum, 'Knowledge is virtue'. With this canon in his hands, Euripides measured all the separate elements of the drama—language, characters, dramatic structure and choric music—and corrected them according to this principle." ([3], pp. 83–84). That is, what dismayed Euripides about the work of his predecessors in tragedy was precisely the Dionysian element of mystery, that is, of incomprehensibility, inarticulability. That dissatisfaction, according to Nietzsche, is

⁵ I have altered the Kaufmann's translation slightly, substituting "daimonic" and "daimon" for his "demonic" and "demon." The German words "Dämon" and "dämonische" typically would be translated "demon" and "demonic" as in Kaufmann, but Nietzsche's classical training as well as the obvious etymologies of the German words clearly suggest the differently inflected Greek meanings of the words are in play here ([3], p. 82).

⁶ I wish to thank the anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to emphasize this point.

Socratic through and through. There are actually two important elements present in this first formulation: first, the emphasis on, or perhaps better, the demand for, the *intelligibility* of all things. In Nietzsche's view, Socrates is a proto-Hegelian: "the world is through and through rational". Second, when Socrates, or his "tendency" comes across something—such as Dionysian mystery—that appears *not* to be intelligible, the proper response is to *correct it*. The mechanism of this correction of the world is *knowledge*.

This leads to a characteristic of Socrates, again at least in Nietzsche's view, that is decisive for his criticism of that Greek as the "murderous principle" of tragedy and as the "opponent of Dionysus" ([3], p. 86): Socratic *optimism*. For *if* the world is in principle through and through intelligible, even rational, and if indeed what begins as unintelligible can be *made* intelligible through knowledge, then what will remain of that "pessimism of strength" that was the Dionysian element in Greek tragedy? It will be gone. Nietzsche develops this reading of Socrates in three brief passages that I shall quote and comment upon. In the first, Nietzsche characterizes this supposed intention of Socrates to correct existence with a complicated mixture of awe and dismay.

"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. Basing himself on this point, Socrates conceives it to be his duty to correct existence: all alone, with an expression of irreverence and superiority, as the precursor of an altogether different culture, art, and morality, he enters a world, to touch whose very hem would give us the greatest happiness." ([3], p. 87).

Although Nietzsche will soon turn his critical guns on this Socratic optimism about the correctibility of existence, it should be noted that in this first statement it is tinged with appreciation and even awe. However, Nietzsche's primary point is to criticize such hubris, for in it lies the death of tragedy.

"Consider the consequences of the Socratic maxims: 'Virtue is knowledge; man sins only from ignorance; he who is virtuous is happy'. In these three forms of optimism lies the death of tragedy. For now the virtuous hero must be a dialectician; now there must be a necessary, visible connection between virtue and knowledge, faith and morality: now the transcendental justice of Aeschylus is degraded to the superficial and insolent principle of 'poetic justice' with its customary *deus ex machina*" ([3], p. 91).

The optimism inherent for Nietzsche in the Socratic dialectical pursuit of knowledge is the real source of the death of tragedy, and for this Nietzsche obviously has it out for Socrates. However, almost always, again to emphasize the complexity of his view, his criticism is tinged with appreciation and admiration. The third and summary passage reads as follows:

"Socrates is the prototype of the theoretical optimist who, with his faith that the nature of things can be fathomed, ascribes to knowledge and insight the power of a panacea, while understanding error as the evil *par excellence*. To fathom the depths and to separate true knowledge from appearance and error seemed to Socratic man the noblest, even the only truly human vocation. Since Socrates, this mechanism of concepts, judgments, and inferences, has been esteemed as the highest occupation and the most admirable gift of nature, above all other capacities" ([3], p. 97).

Nietzsche's diagnosis of just why Socrates is so optimistic about knowledge, why he is so optimistic about the power of dialectic and logic to "correct existence", is centrally tied to Socrates' repudiation of what for Nietzsche is the very characteristic that was at the basis of the greatness of the

earlier Greek tragic view of life: instinct. Appealing to the Platonic Socrates' account in the *Apology* of Socrates' peregrinations through Athens, questioning the statesman, orators, poets and artists and discovering again and again that they were ignorant of what they were doing, that they "thought they knew what they did not know", Nietzsche concentrates on Socrates' conclusion regarding at least the poets and artists, that they did not know the source of their creative power but that it was "only by instinct" that they created what they did. Nietzsche comments, "'Only by instinct' with this phrase we touch upon the heart and core of the Socratic tendency" ([3], p. 87). For it was precisely instinctual knowledge that made Dionysian wisdom possible. Socrates, as Nietzsche understands him, wants to repudiate "instinct" in favor of articulated knowledge, but that repudiation, once again, amounts to the death of tragedy.

Yet, as always, the situation with Socrates for Nietzsche is more complicated. It is not simply that Socrates *rejects* instinct and instinctual wisdom. Rather, he *perverts* it. Nietzsche interprets Socrates' famous *daimonion*, his "voice" which never speaks positively to Socrates but always and only dissuades him from doing something that he should not, as just such a perversion. Here is Nietzsche's judgment on the real significance of Socrates' *daimonion*:

"While in all productive men it is instinct that is the creative-affirmative force, and consciousness acts critically and dissuasively, in Socrates it is instinct that becomes the critic, and consciousness that becomes the creator—truly a monstrosity *per defectum*! Specifically, we observe here a monstrous *defectus* of any mystical disposition, so Socrates might be called the typical *non-mystic*, in whom, through a hypertrophy, the logical nature is developed as excessively as instinctive wisdom is in the mystic" ([3], p. 88).

Whereas, even in Socrates' own view, creative people create by a kind of *instinctual* wisdom for which there is always something mystical and inarticulable, and their critical faculty is a function of their *conscious* thought, Socrates, at least in Nietzsche's view, is the perverse converse: his critical insight—his *daimonion*—is instinctual, whereas his "creative" activity, such as it is, namely, his dialectical elenchus, is a function of his conscious thought. This makes him, from the standpoint of the Greek experience that gave them the Dionysian tragic insight, a monster, a monster, once again, whose very monstrosity was the death of tragedy. However, it should also be noted that Nietzsche's very choice of the term "monster" in the above quotation yet again contains an ambiguity that Nietzsche attributes to Socrates. For on the one hand, a "monster" is, after all, a product of *nature*, something that Nietzsche would presumably want to affirm. Yet on the other hand, and perhaps predominantly, we typically regard a "monster" as something *negative*. And so it is with Socrates, at least in Nietzsche's judgment.⁷

Yet, perhaps no more striking example of Nietzsche's ambivalence toward Socrates is presented in the next few pages, for after this harsh criticism of Socrates, after criticizing him for being the "murderous principle" of Greek tragedy, he turns to an evaluation of the historical principles that Socrates embodies, and decides that "Socratism" has been nothing less than the savior of Western culture. For Socrates' demand for knowledge, his dissatisfaction with anything less than dialectically certified knowledge, his optimism that this knowledge could not only fathom the universe but correct its defects, turned historically into *science*, and turned the best minds of every generation toward the

⁷ Again, thanks to the anonymous reviewer who encouraged me to take note of this.

pursuit of knowledge as the highest goal of the best humans. Here, then, is Nietzsche's remarkable summary of Socrates' historical affect, a summary whose estimate of Socrates' importance could hardly be matched by any other philosopher before or since.

"Once we see clearly how after Socrates, the mystagogue of science, one philosophical school succeeds another, wave upon wave; how the hunger for knowledge reached a never-suspected universality in the widest domain of the educated world, became the real task for every person of higher gifts, and led science onto the high seas from which it has never again been driven altogether; how this universality first spread a common net of thought over the whole globe, actually holding out the prospect of the lawfulness of an entire solar system; once we see all this clearly, along with the amazingly high pyramid of knowledge in our time—we cannot fail to see in Socrates the one turning-point and vortex of so-called world history. For if we imagine that the whole incalculable sum of energy used up for this world tendency had been used *not* in the service of knowledge but for the practical, *i.e.*, egoistic aims of individuals and peoples, then we realize that in that case universal wars of annihilation and continual migrations of peoples would probably have weakened the instinctive lust for life to such an extent that suicide would have become a general custom and individuals might have experienced the final remnant of a sense of duty when, like the inhabitants of the Fiji Islands, they had strangled their parents and friends—a practical pessimism that might have generated a gruesome ethic of genocide motivated by pity..." ([3], p. 96).

Socrates, or better, the Socratic tendency, now understood as the incessant and optimistic drive for knowledge at any price, the insistence that anything that is to count as knowledge must be able to withstand dialectical elenchus and be certified as demonstrable, has been the savior of civilization. This is hardly faint praise, even as we acknowledge that Nietzsche himself will have deep qualms about the modern culture that Socrates made possible.

So far, in this, Nietzsche's first book, I have tried to show that Nietzsche's attitude toward Socrates is not the predominantly negative view that many have attributed to him; rather, it is what *we* would call profoundly ambivalent—but what Nietzsche himself would call, by his own account in *Ecce Homo*, love. Many, perhaps led by Kaufmann, have argued that much of what Nietzsche says in *The Birth of Tragedy* gets left behind as Nietzsche's thought "matures", including this evaluation of Socrates. I would contest this generalization on most points. Here I shall only concentrate on his evaluation of Socrates, and suggest, by a much briefer look at one of his very last works, *Twilight of the Idols*, that Nietzsche's attitude toward Socrates remains essentially the same, that, in the strikingly accurate title of the section of this late book where Nietzsche focally addresses Socrates, Socrates remains *a problem*. For Nietzsche names this section "The Problem of Socrates".

The Birth of Tragedy, Nietzsche's first book, was published in 1872. *Twilight of the Idols* was written in the fall of 1888, surely the most productive year of Nietzsche's life, when he wrote five books in this the last year of his sanity, before he collapsed into madness in January of 1889. It should be obvious that in a thinker as active and creative as Nietzsche, his attitude toward Socrates—or toward anything else for that matter—would not remain *identical*, and I have no intention of making such a claim that surely would amount to a harsh criticism of Nietzsche or any other thinker. What I do want to argue, however, is that Nietzsche's attitude toward Socrates remains *consistent* throughout his productive life. Of course, as we shall see in a moment, he emphasizes some different issues both by way of praise and criticism. However, I want to argue, these differences are never contradictory, many

of them in fact are clear developments out of the earlier evaluation, and on the larger issue of Nietzsche's recognition that there is much to both praise and criticize about Socrates—we might say much to love and hate, whereas Nietzsche would simply say much to “love”—Nietzsche remains as convinced as ever. Let me indicate some of the evidence of this.

We shall turn first, as Nietzsche himself does, to his critical remarks in *Twilight* concerning Socrates. He begins with the very same sort of criticism with which he began in *The Birth of Tragedy*, that Socrates inaugurates a great *decline* in Greek culture since he was the “murderous principle” of Greek tragedy. Except that by now, still convinced that Socrates represents a decline, Nietzsche broadens the issue considerably. He begins with the affirmation—really a reaffirmation of an oft-repeated claim—that most of the supposedly great sages of history have made a similar judgment on life, “*that it is no good*” ([10], p. 473), and that moreover, such a judgment on the part of them all is really an indication of decadence. He includes Socrates among these decadents, based initially on what can only be called a curious reading of Socrates' last words on his deathbed in Plato's *Phaedo*, which Nietzsche mistranslates as “I owe Asclepius the Savior a rooster”⁸ ([10], p. 473), and which he interprets as Socrates saying that his life is a sickness. In any case, about Socrates he adds, “The irreverent thought that the great sages are *types of decline* first occurred to me precisely in a case where it is most strongly opposed by both scholarly and unscholarly prejudice: I recognized Socrates and Plato to be symptoms of degeneration, tools of the Greek dissolution, pseudo-Greek, anti-Greek” ([10], pp. 473–74), and he even cites parenthetically *The Birth of Tragedy* in support of this. So, Socrates is still paradigmatically a symptom of decline, although now, it is less specifically as the murderer of tragedy and more generally as one of those so-called sages who *evaluates life badly*, or rather, as Nietzsche insists, that they think that life can be evaluated at all ([10], p. 474).

To support this, it is on Socrates' supposed decadence that Nietzsche first concentrates. He cites, as evidence of this, Socrates' notorious ugliness (“Ugliness, in itself an objection, is among the Greeks almost a refutation” ([10], p. 474)), his plebian background, but most importantly and consistent with his evaluation in *The Birth of Tragedy*, the “hypertrophy of the logical faculty” and “that Socratic equation of reason, virtue, and happiness: that most bizarre of all equations, which, moreover, is opposed to all the instincts of the earlier Greeks” ([10], p. 475). We have seen these themes in the earlier text. Here, Nietzsche concentrates his attention on the so-called Socratic optimism about reason and “dialectic”, by which Nietzsche seems to mean what is often called the “Socratic method” of questioning established views to see if they can withstand Socrates' elenchus. Such demand for reasons and dialectical proof Nietzsche now interprets as a form of “bad manners”, dishonesty, and in any case not relevant to genuine insight. “What must first be proved is worth little” ([10], p. 476), he says famously. But by now Nietzsche, steeped in his commitment to what he calls his “geneology”, is most interested in the *psychology* of such an insistence on reason giving, on what experience of life gives rise to such a commitment. And he decides that it is an instance of *the spirit of revenge*.

“As a dialectician, one holds a merciless tool in one's hand; one can become a tyrant by means of it; one compromises those one conquers. The dialectician leaves it to his opponent to prove that he is no

⁸ The sentence actually says, “Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius.” The “we” indicates a *shared* debt, and would seem more obviously to refer to the overcoming of the “sickness” of *misology*, which threatened them all throughout the *Phaedo*.

idiot: he makes one furious and helpless at the same time. The dialectician renders the intellect of his opponent powerless. Indeed, is dialectic only a form of *revenge* in Socrates?" ([10], p. 476).

Anyone familiar with Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* knows that the "spirit of revenge" is a quality that Nietzsche sees as one of the worst characteristics of modern culture and as something that must be overcome. He has his Zarathustra say at one point, "For *that humanity be delivered from revenge*, that for me is the bridge to the highest hope, and a rainbow after long storms" ([2], p. 211. Translation modified). To accuse Socrates of being motivated by the spirit of revenge is for Nietzsche strong criticism indeed.

Yet, paralleling his shift in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche immediately after this strong criticism turns to praise of Socrates. "I have given to understand how Socrates could repel: it is therefore all the more necessary to explain his fascination." ([10], p. 477). He goes on to praise Socrates for three important features. First, he says, Socrates "discovered a new kind of *agon*" ([10], p. 477). This is the "flip-side", as it were, of Nietzsche's fierce criticism of Socratic dialectic. Socrates' mode of questioning, his famous elenchus, was actually a continuation, Nietzsche now says, of the Greek love of the contest. Socrates, steeped in this very Greek love of competition, gave to the Greeks a new kind of *agon* that they—especially the youth—loved greatly. In this sense at least, Socrates was hardly "un-Greek"! He appealed with his agonistic questioning to a core Greek characteristic. And yet the now familiar ambiguity remains. Was this "new *agon* that Socrates created a *development*, a *continuation* of the traditional Greek *agon*, or was it a *perversion* thereof? Or, as is more probable with Nietzsche, *both*?

Nietzsche's second praise of Socrates is intriguing because of its abruptly cryptic character. It is a single sentence: "Socrates was also a great *erotic*" ([10], p. 477), he says. What could he mean by this? That Socrates *was* a great erotic is hardly disputed, even by Socrates himself, who in the *Symposium* claims to be an expert on eros and *only* on eros. [11]. However, in what sense does Nietzsche intend this attribution? If we stay with Nietzsche's characterization of love in *Ecce Homo* (written within a month of *Twilight of the Idols*), that love has everything to do with contest, challenge, even war, then it is appropriate that this one sentence characterization of Socrates be included in the same paragraph as the description of his agonistic character. For this agonistic striving, on Nietzsche's view—and, in a complicated way, I think on Plato's—*would be* the evidence for his erotic character.

Third, and on this Nietzsche spends the most time, Socrates recognized that his own situation as Nietzsche characterizes it, that he was a "cave of bad appetites" that he succeeded in controlling through his extraordinary *sophrosyne*, was in fact symptomatic of all of Greek culture, that "everywhere the instincts were in anarchy; everywhere one was within five paces of excess" ([10], p. 477), and that only a "tyrannical" commitment to *reason* would save not only Socrates but Greek culture. As Nietzsche puts it, "When one finds it necessary to turn *reason* into a tyrant, as Socrates did, the danger cannot be slight that something else will play the tyrant" ([10], p. 478). Socrates, that is, *correctly diagnoses* a dangerous situation for all Greek culture, and his affirmation of "reason" is his proposed cure. "The fanaticism with which all Greek reflection throws itself upon rationality betrays a desperate situation; there was danger, there was but one choice: either to perish or—to be *absurdly rational*" ([10], p. 478).

However, alas, as Nietzsche understands it, even this correct diagnosis by Socrates together with his response of hyper-rationality did not work, indeed, was *itself* an indication of decline. Nietzsche thus concludes regarding the Socratic standpoint,

“Socrates was a misunderstanding; The most blinding daylight; rationality at any price; life, bright, cold, cautious, conscious, without instinct, in opposition to the instincts—all this was a mere disease, another disease, and by no means a return to ‘virtue’, to ‘health’, to happiness. To *have* to fight the instincts—that is the formula of decadence: as long as life is *ascending*, happiness equals instinct” ([10], pp. 478–79).

To the very end, then, Nietzsche’s evaluation of Socrates remains consistent. Socrates was great, indeed, as Hegel put it, “world-historical”, but at the same time, a disaster for the great culture that was Greece, and an enormously mixed blessing for the culture that is ours.

What, then, can be taken from this, other than my scholarly effort to show that Nietzsche’s attitude toward Socrates might better be called “love” in his sense than straightforward rejection or even hatred? The spirit that Nietzsche calls “the Socratic tendency”, the drive for knowledge, together with the optimism that such knowledge will at least make things better for us if not indeed “perfect” us, is in large measure still *our* spirit. His complicated evaluation of Socrates is therefore of a piece with his complicated evaluation of modernity, of us. In the face of the strong optimism about the progressive development of the human spirit bequeathed to us by Hegel and Marx, in the face of the conviction that the course of history is essentially a course of *progress*, a conviction that most of us today still have a tendency to hold on to, Nietzsche was one of the first to challenge us with a very different evaluation of the course of history—that at least in many ways though not without qualification, it is a history of decline. He also warns us that such optimism about progress could easily turn us not into the liberated creators of the Hegelian and especially Marxian vision, but into what Nietzsche calls “last men”, self-satisfied, no longer striving, thoughtless, who say, “we have discovered happiness—and they blink” ([2], p. 130). Given the events of our epoch in the world, I think Nietzsche’s reservations about Socrates—and therefore about us—are worth taking very, very seriously.

One final point: I have tried in this paper to elicit in some detail Nietzsche’s at once complicated, ambivalent, but nevertheless challenging interpretation of Socrates and “Socratism”. If I have been successful, this raises a number of questions, perhaps the first of which is, to what extent is Nietzsche’s understanding of Socrates and the Socratic tendency fair, even correct? That is obviously a large question, the subject of another paper that needs to be written. Here, I would just say this in closing: Socrates’ *aporia*, his recognition of the incompleteness of his knowledge, of the inevitable finitude of *all* knowledge claims, and so his philosophic stance not of the *assertion* of this or that doctrine but of *questioning*, that *aporia* radically destabilizes any claim such as Nietzsche’s that Socrates was an “optimist”, whether about knowledge, wisdom, or correcting existence. Indeed, it destabilizes the very possibility of comfortably placing Socrates anywhere on the binary of optimism and pessimism. But to the extent that Nietzsche’s understanding of Socrates and Socratism hinges on the affirmation of Socrates’ optimism, will that also not destabilize his evaluation of Socrates more generally? Would it not at very least force us to distinguish between Socrates and the historical fact of “Socratism”? Questions abound!

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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