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The Role of Laughter in the Thought of Friedrich Nietzsche

Paul D. Gerdes
Old Dominion University

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THE ROLE OF LAUGHTER IN THE THOUGHT OF

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

By

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B.A. August 1977, College of William and Mary In Virginia

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Old Dominion University in Partial Fulfillment of the
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MASTER OF ARTS

HUMANITIES

OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY
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Approved by:

____________________
Lawrence J. Hatab (Director)
ABSTRACT

THE ROLE OF LAUGHTER IN THE THOUGHT OF FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

Paul D. Gerdes
Old Dominion University, 1994
Director: Lawrence J. Hatab

The objective of this thesis is an analysis of the role of laughter in the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), by which I mean both its influence on his intellectual development, and the incorporation of it in his philosophy. Such an undertaking is important because, while it might seem somewhat odd for a philosopher, and particularly a German philosopher, to consider laughter fundamental to his thought, laughter does play an essential role in all of Nietzsche's writing.

For the purposes of this thesis, I will investigate three separate but interrelated aspects of Nietzsche's thought: the influence of the Dionysian tragic-comic experience of the ancient Greeks in Athens during the Golden Age (5th century BC), best exemplified by the relationship of the historical figures of Aristophanes and Socrates; the psychology of laughter, and the role it plays in psychotherapy, with an eye to what light modern psychology can shed on Nietzsche's laughter in toto; and Nietzsche writings themselves, in an attempt to understand why he emphasizes laughter the way he does.
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I am very appreciative of the help of Dr. Robin Lewis. She has been a great help in understanding the psychological aspects of laughter. Dr. Lewis is a very capable individual and someone for whom I have the utmost respect.

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To:
M.J.G and V.L.S
&
Artemis
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This crown of laughter, the rose-wreath crown: to you, my brothers,
I throw this crown.

--Nietzsche

Attempt at a Self-Criticism
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The objective of this thesis is an analysis of the role of laughter in the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche, by which I mean both its influence on his intellectual development, and the incorporation of it in his philosophy. Such an undertaking is important because, while it might seem somewhat odd for a philosopher, and particularly a German philosopher, to consider laughter fundamental to his thought, laughter does play an essential role in all of Nietzsche's writing.

For the purposes of this thesis, I will investigate three separate but interrelated aspects of Nietzsche's thought: the influence of the Dionysian tragic-comic experience of the ancient Greeks in Athens during the Golden Age (5th century BC), best exemplified by the relationship of the historical figures of Aristophanes and Socrates; the psychology of laughter, and the role it plays in psychotherapy, with an eye to what light modern psychology can shed on Nietzsche's laughter in toto; and Nietzsche's writings themselves, in an attempt to understand why he emphasizes laughter the way he does.

During his brief career as a professor, Nietzsche taught classes in Latin grammar, pre-Socratic philosophy, Greek lyric poets, Aeschylus' Choephoroi, Sophocles' Oedipus Rex, Hesiod's Erga and Works and Days, Plato's Apology, and the
introduction to Plato's *Dialogues*. More importantly, however, Nietzsche was as much a student as a teacher of the ancients, and it shows in his writings.

Whether it be his understanding of the ancient Greek religion of Dionysus, or his audacious writings concerning the philosophers of tomorrow he calls the 'Attempters', laughter plays a constant and central role. In fact, Nietzsche holds laughter to be one of the most important tactics strong, healthy people can use to relate to their own existence.

Not only is Nietzsche interested in the way contemporary man interacts with his world, but also the way his daring and resourceful philosophers of tomorrow will engage existence. For Nietzsche, man is a condition that must be transcended, because man is but a resting point on the way from beast to something greater than man; overman. In that transition, laughter is a sign, as well as a method, of overcoming.

Nietzsche goes so far as to,

... actually risk an order of rank among philosophers depending on the rank of their laughter all he way up to those capable of *golden* laughter. And supposing that gods, too philosophize, which has been suggested to me by many an inference—I should not doubt that they also know how to laugh the while in a superhuman and new way and at the expense of all serious things. Gods enjoy mockery: it seems they cannot suppress laughter even during holy rites.\(^1\)

Significant, too, is the way the old gods died, according to Nietzsche:

For the old gods, after all, things came to an end long ago; and verily, they had a good gay godlike end. They did not end in a "twilight," though this lie is told. Instead: one day they *laughed* themselves to death. That happened when the most godless word issued from one of the gods themselves—the word: "There is one god. Thou shalt have no other god before me!" An old grim-beard of a god, a

To some it might seem odd to rate philosophers on their ability to laugh, but for Nietzsche, laughter is a reflection of the physical and mental health of the individual. In his words, "Those who climb over the highest mountains laugheth at all tragic plays and tragic seriousness." As Aristotle suggests, tragedy is the fall of kings and Gods not the downfall of ordinary people. This demonstrates that 'golden laughter' comes at the price of great suffering. To Nietzsche, to exist in the most aware state means to suffer. Thus, understanding the cancer wards, prisons, insane asylums, and the victims of drought and famine is to know the whole truth of existence. The ability to laugh in response to existence, the need to laugh, even after knowing existence in its entirety, is the true legacy of the ancients.

Nietzsche, I believe, thought that the two-sided Dionysian experience (comedy and tragedy) was absolutely necessary for the achievements of the ancient Greeks, serving as the prototype for modern psychotherapy. The ancient Greeks worshipped both Apollo and Dionysus, and it is worship of these two gods that Nietzsche refers to as the Tragic experience. The tragic experience is the way Nietzsche proposes to link Apollo and Dionysus. Apollo's power of light and structure is used to reveal the

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3Ibid., 153.

4Psychotherapy is defined by *Webster's II New Riverside University Dictionary* (Boston: Riverside Publishing, 1988), as: "psychological treatment of mental, emotional, and nervous disorders."
terrible Dionysian truths about life. The Tragic experience resulting from this union allowed the Athenians to be the most vital civilization ever to have existed.

They were no brute savages, mindlessly and insensitively propelled through life by blind instinctive urges; rather, they were highly intelligent, sensitive, and cognizant of the ways of the world. And what is more, they were sustained neither by any thing like a Judeo-Christian religious belief nor by any myth of historical progress and human perfectibility. Yet they did not succumb to any Schopenhauerian pessimism; on the contrary, they were perhaps the most vigorous, creative life-affirming people the world has known.  

To begin this investigation, I will examine what I believe to be Nietzsche's greatest accomplishment, the one central discovery which underlies all of his achievements. That one novel innovation is his unique insight into this phenomenon among the ancient Greeks. Nietzsche meticulously illustrates this in his first and greatest book, *The Birth of Tragedy*. I call it his greatest book because it contains the seeds of all his later thoughts, and is the key to understanding his philosophy.

The two decisive innovations of the book are, first, its understanding of the Dionysian phenomena among the Greeks: for the first time, a psychological analysis of this phenomena is offered, and it is considered as one root of the whole of Greek art. Secondly, there is the understanding of Socratism: Socrates is recognized for the first time as an instrument of Greek disintegration, as a typical decadent. "Rationality" *against* instinct. "Rationality" at any price as a dangerous force that undermines life.

The elegant, yet delicate mental balance he uncovered in ancient Athens (before the appearance of Socrates) led to his perceptive insights and virulent critiques of

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6 Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*. The first edition was published in 1872 as *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music* and the second appeared in 1874 as *The Birth of Tragedy Or: Hellenism And Pessimism*.

7 Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 727.
Western Civilization. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche tried to build a "bridge to the psychology of the Dionysian poets." He used the book to try and understand the thought of these ancient Greeks, with the hope of rekindling the fires of the Dionysian experience in contemporary man.

What I feel is a starting point for this investigation is the fact that, while Nietzsche placed a great deal of emphasis on the Dionysian phenomenon among the Greeks, he failed to expound fully on half of it. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche explains the virtues of the Dionysian art of tragedy, yet fails to clarify his ideas on tragedy's counterpart, namely comedy. Both tragedy and comedy in ancient Greece were thought of as different ways of presenting the Dionysian experience. Yet Nietzsche, with his emphasis on the value of 'golden laughter', concentrates almost exclusively on tragedy. I would like to investigate the role laughter plays in Nietzsche's thought by investigating the role comedy played in Athens, to see what, if any, impact that role might play on Nietzsche's thought for the future.

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8 Ibid., 729.
CHAPTER II

NIETZSCHE AS PHILOSOPHER

Will Durant once called Nietzsche "the child of Darwin and the brother of Bismarck."¹ In my opinion, Nietzsche (Fig. 1) is undoubtedly one of the most important and influential philosophers of the modern, or for that matter, post-modern age. As a thinker, he is in a league with only Socrates, Plato and Heraclitus of Ephesus, making him the most influential thinker since the fall of ancient Athens. His ideas have been the rallying cry for fascists, communists, socialists, feminists, anarchists, zionists, futurists, aristocrats, pacifists and many more groups that find some aspects of his writings to be to their liking.

Nietzsche's ideas were already becoming well disseminated across Europe at the beginning of the First World War. In fact, the assassin of Archduke Ferdinand was fond of quoting a poem of Nietzsche from Ecce Homo.² Shortly after the war started, a London bookseller dubbed the war the "Euro-Nietzschean War."³ The Germans only enhanced this impression by distributing 150,000 copies of an extremely durable Thus Spake Zarathustra to the troops at the front.

²Ibid., 135-136.
Figure 1. Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844-1900); in Walter Kaufmann Nietzsche Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist, 4th. ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), cover.
In the Second World War, the Nazis, failing to find any contemporary writers to support the fascist state, drafted Nietzsche into their cause. The Nazis were fond of Nietzsche's ideas, and enlisted him as an important intellectual and spiritual leader. "It is not too much to say that but for Nietzsche the SS—Hitler's shock troops and the core of the whole movement—would have lacked the inspiration which enabled them to carry out their programme of mass murder in Eastern Europe." Once again, copies of Nietzsche's works were sent to the troops at the front, and a museum was created at the home of his sister to further his ideas for the Third Reich. Together with Hitler's Mein Kampf and Rosenberg's Myth of the Twentieth Century, Thus Spake Zarathustra was ceremoniously placed in the Tannenberg Memorial.

The potential to misunderstand Nietzsche is latent in his writings. While it is questionable to saddle Marx with the responsibility for the Gulag Archipelago, or blame Nietzsche for Auschwitz, it is nonetheless true that their writings could be misread as justifications in a way that, for example, those of Alexis de Toqueville and John Stuart Mill could not. However, any definitive reading of Nietzsche's writings shows he loathed the groups that were the predecessors of the Nazis, and felt that the Reich was the end of German thinking as such. Nietzsche also often wrote against the anti-Semitic feeling sweeping Germany during his time. Nietzsche knew his writings

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4Ibid., 329.

5Ibid., 238. The Tannenberg Memorial was built to commemorate Germany's victory over Russia in the Great War.

6Ibid., 316.
were 'dynamite' but perhaps these words were prophetic:

Carcasse, tu trembles?
Tu tremblerais bien davantage, si
tu savais, où je te mène.  

Even today, at least one major book, *The Closing of the American Mind*, asserts that Nietzsche's thought has had a great impact on current American thinking. The author, Allan Bloom, argues somewhat convincingly that Nietzsche's idea that after the death of god there is no real truth, only different perspectives, has slowly arrived in the American psyche, without all the subtler aspects of Nietzsche's thought, in such a way as to convince people that there is no right and wrong. Bloom says, accurately or not, that older, stronger Americans were certain there was a right and wrong (their particular way just happened to be the right one). He even goes so far as to argue that Americans now have closed minds, because they refuse to even consider the idea that there might be a right and wrong. Nietzsche's ideas are far from being cold and sterile almost a hundred years after his death. On the contrary, interest in Nietzsche is growing dramatically.

Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche was born in 1844 to a Protestant pastor, from a long line of pastors and deeply religious thinkers. He was born on the birthday of the Kaiser Friedrich Wilhelm IV, hence the name. Though his family was not rich, he

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attended mainly private schools, until achieving a free place (at the age of fourteen) at the renowned boarding school of Schulporta in 1858. While there, he mastered the subjects that would be very important to all his later work, ancient Greek language and history. After enrolling in Leipzig University as a theology student, however, he realized during his first year that he did not believe in God.\(^9\) Within ten years, he was awarded a full professorship in classical philology, at the University of Basel in Switzerland, despite the fact that he had no degree, had taken no examinations, and had not written a thesis. The University of Leipzig finally conferred the necessary degree.

Nietzsche's short but rewarding career as a college professor appears to have been marked by good relations with students, and rocky ones with the University. "I make even buffoons behave themselves. During the seven years I taught Greek in the senior class in the Padagogium in Basel, I never had occasion to punish anyone; the laziest boys worked hard."\(^{10}\) Shortly after arriving at the University, in his first major address, he pointed out that the study of ancient languages should best be understood as a tool of philosophers trying to understand antiquity. His first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, was published in a manner that was quite appropriate for Nietzsche, having no Greek quotations, footnotes or bibliography. Of this work, a classicist still renowned for his translations of Plato's dialogues said ". . . a work of profound


\(^{10}\)Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 683.
imaginative insight, which left the scholarship of a generation toiling in the rear."¹¹ "Scholarship, art and Philosophy are growing together so much in me that one day in all probability I shall give birth to centaurs."¹²

Nietzsche's intellectual and philosophical world changed forever, when in 1865, while rummaging through a second hand bookstore in Leipzig, he happened on The World as Will and Representation¹³ by Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860). "It seemed as if Schopenhauer was addressing me personally. I felt his enthusiasm and seemed to see him before me. Every line called out for renunciation, denial, resignation!"¹⁴ Schopenhauer, too, was a student of the ancient world, but one whose extremely pessimistic views Nietzsche would spend a lifetime trying to answer.

Schopenhauer felt the world was a place of terrible suffering. The world as we know it depends on the constitution of the mind and is, therefore, an expression of man's own will. As such, man himself, as well as his world, is included in the phenomena, and is objectified will as well. Schopenhauer promoted a type of determinism that led to his pessimistic outlook. He believed that the only way to deal with this terrible world of suffering and evil (that man helps to create for himself) is to

¹¹Walter Kaufmann, "Translator's Introduction," in Basic Writings of Nietzsche, 8.


stop willing, to stop desiring, to will nothing itself, resignation even of the will to live.

While Nietzsche agreed with Schopenhauer's analysis of the world as fundamentally suffering, he sought to affirm it anyway. For Nietzsche's efforts to affirm the world, despite its change and negativity, Schopenhauer "never wearied of hurling in advance his most irate curses and thunderbolts."\(^{15}\)

At this point, all the major factors in Nietzsche's intellectual career are present: first, his all-pervasive belief that 'god is dead', and all the meaning that comes with it; second, his consummate mastery of ancient texts and languages; third, an almost superhuman challenge from Shopenhauer, that even though the world is the idea one wills it to be, no one ever fulfills their desires, and hence the world is always desperation and disappointment. Life is even more horrible than Hobbes' notion in *Leviathan*\(^{16}\) of 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short' would have it. Schopenhauer felt one should give up, and stop desiring, or willing, because life is at bottom completely deficient. The best hope is not to be born at all, the second best is to die early.

These three ideas form the basis for Nietzsche's intellectual origin. The first chronologically, and perhaps most importantly, was his instruction in Greek and Latin. This capability allowed him to comprehend the ancient texts themselves, and not rely on possibly prejudiced translators with axes to grind. "It was his [Nietzsche's] view that classical studies were marred by non-Greek assumptions which fostered a picture of..."

\(^{15}\)Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 22.

of Greek culture more in line with our own ideas than anything else."\textsuperscript{17} Nietzsche's mastery of ancient Greek religion, history, and philosophy established his philosophical career.\textsuperscript{18}

The second momentous aspect of his early philosophical development was the notion that 'god is dead'. God could not die unless he once was alive. How did this myth die out. The way god died was the dogmatic adherence to truth among the Christians. Nietzsche proposes Christianity finally "\textit{patere legem, quam ipse tulisti.}"\textsuperscript{19}

It became unbelievable to believe in the myth of Christianity. This truth testing the myth of christianity led to its downfall. God is a myth and not a fact. However, the 'death of god' is now a reality for man to live with.

\textit{"The Madman"—Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly: "I seek God! I seek God!"—As many of those who did not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter. Has he got lost? asked one. Did he lose his way like a child? asked another Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? Emigrated?—Thus they yelled and laughed.

The madman jumped in to their midst and pierced them with his eyes. "Whither is god?" he cried; "I will tell you. We have killed him—you and I. All of us are murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained the earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither

\textsuperscript{17}Lawrence Hatab, \textit{Myth and Philosophy} (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1990), 113.

\textsuperscript{18}I found the turning-point in the modern understanding of early Greek thought to be the publication just a hundred years ago of Nietzsche's \textit{The Birth of Tragedy.}" Hugh Lloyd-Jones, "Nietzsche and the Study of the Ancient World" in \textit{Studies in Nietzsche and the Classical Tradition} ed. James C. O'Flaherty, Timothy F. Sellner and Robert M. Helm (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1976), 1.

\textsuperscript{19}"Submit to the law you yourself proposed," Nietzsche, \textit{Genealogy of Morals}, in \textit{Basic Writings of Nietzsche}, 597.
are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? Do we not need to light lanterns in the morning? Do we hear nothing as yet of the noise of grave diggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods too decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.

How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: Who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it? There has never been a greater deed; and whoever is born after us—for the sake of this deed he will belong to a higher history hitherto.

Here the madman fell silent and looked again at his listeners; and they, too, were silent and stared at him in astonishment. At last he threw his lantern on the ground, and it broke into pieces and went out. "I have come too early," he said to them; "my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men. Lightning and thunder require time; deeds; though done, still require time to be seen and heard. This deed is still more distant from them than the most distant stars—and yet they have done it themselves."

It has been related further that on the same day the madman forced his way into several churches and there struck up his requiem aeternam deo. Led out and called to account, he is said always to have replied nothing but: "What after all are these churches now if they are not the tombs and sepulchers of God?" 20

Nietzsche knew that god was the bedrock of the value system. Without god to anchor right and wrong, society would devolve to relativism and nihilism. No longer would truth be an issue that is black and white, but shades of grey. God offered the unchanging ground necessary on which to base truth.

Philosophy, for Nietzsche, was not about truth, but about living without truth. The problem of life becomes how to avoid the meaninglessness that is a legacy of the

death of God. Nietzsche guessed that the greatest danger confronting modern man would be nihilism. For those strong enough to embrace the fact that 'god is dead', perspectivism pertaining to right and wrong is the rule of the day. "Simply put, truth is a pious law adopted by those too weak to celebrate the Saturnalia of illusion."21 This is not to say that there is no better or worse; after the death of god, there is no good or evil, only better or worse.

The monumental implications of the death of god were not lost on Nietzsche. He felt that man would struggle with this for centuries, to overcome the meaninglessness that would come from the death of god. The death of god was pregnant, from its very inception, with both destruction and hopefulness; a new creation, a new myth. He knew it would entail either an end in nihilism, or else require a whole new set of values, a 'revaluation of all values', based, Nietzsche hoped, on life enhancing values. "I beseech you, my brothers, remain faithful to the earth, and do not believe those who speak to you of otherworldly hopes."22 Perhaps "man will rise even higher as soon as he ceases to flow out into god."23 For Nietzsche, the cardinal aspect of life was not self-preservation, but a need to overcome obstacles to demonstrate strength. "Man is by no means the crown of creation: every living being


22 Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, in The Portable Nietzsche, 125.

stands beside him on the same level of perfection.”

“A living thing seeks above all to discharge its strength—life itself is a will to power; self-preservation is only one of the indirect and most frequent results.”

The third cornerstone of Nietzsche's intellectual undertaking came by way of the philosopher Schopenhauer. Nietzsche did not fundamentally disagree with his assessment of life with all its despair. The truth is ugly.

Indeed it might be a basic characteristic of existence that those who know it completely would perish, in which case the strength of a spirit should be measured according to how much of the "truth" one could still barely endure—or to put it more clearly, to what degree one would require it to be thinned down, shrouded sweetened, blunted, falsified.

The world is construed by suffering, and for Nietzsche, the more you know suffering, the more you know existence. For the famous Greek tragedian Aeschylus, wisdom only came through suffering. The difference between Nietzsche's view of existence and Schopenhauer's is that, for Nietzsche, existence is "holy enough to justify even a monstrous amount of suffering.”

Nietzsche rejected Schopenhauer's pessimistic estimation concerning a world of appearance and becoming, beginning with the refutation of Schopenhauer's analysis of Greek tragedy. Schopenhauer thought tragedy proved the Greek's resignation to a...


25 Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 211.

26 Ibid., 239.

world of meaninglessness and anguish, that the Greeks embraced the meaninglessness, and resigned themselves to cursing their lot, and resolutely ceasing to will.

Thus in tragedy the terrible side of life is presented to us, the wailing and lamentation of mankind, the domination of chance and error, the fall of the righteous, the triumph of the wicked; and so that aspect of the world is brought before our eyes which directly opposes our will. At this sight we feel ourselves urged to turn our will away from life, to give up willing and loving life. 28

For Nietzsche, Greek tragedy proved just the opposite, that even with Schopenhauer's essentially accurate assessment of existence, the ancient Greeks celebrated life. To Nietzsche, there is no pessimistic art. The great beauty and creations of the Greeks cannot be explained in any other way than as a celebration of life, a resolute need to live, to create, no matter what the cost. Even though it contains great suffering, life is preferable to death. In many ways, the ancient Greeks were in a position much like modern man after the death of god, after the 'drain plug' of meaning had been pulled. The resolute individual is to be the hero of an atheistic and morally destitute existence; he presents the contradiction of the pursuit of exceptional living, when no transcendental principles exist. He must represent his own vindication.

These three elements formed the intellectual core of Nietzsche's thought. For Nietzsche, the rejection of nihilism would be a superhuman task, even a heroic one. He characterized his own enterprise as requiring a "heroic way of thinking," 29 and planned a heroic quest to find the answers to the value of life itself. His questions

28Schopenhauer, 433.

included: How can life acquire the highest relevance, its deepest significance? How can it be least be wasted? In a world where there are only perspectives and no real truth, where everyone finds their own individual truth, the same is true for philosophers:

The task of painting the picture of life, however philosophers may pose it, is nonetheless senseless: even under the hands of the greatest of painter-thinkers all that has ever eventuated is pictures and miniatures out of one life, namely their own—and nothing else is even possible.31

"The product of a philosopher is his life (first of all, before his works). That is his work of art."32 For Nietzsche, meaning, like life, is essentially individualistic, not one truth but 'my truths'.

Nietzsche's hope was to "instill a passion for greatness in a world without gods."33 This is a heroic undertaking, not well suited for the weak. "Independence is for the very few; it is a privilege of the strong."34 "Are you one of those who had the right to escape from a yoke? There are some who threw away their last value when they threw away their servitude."35 As Nietzsche reminds us, cows belong behind fences. Cows should not be allowed to travel when and where they please; it is not in

30Thiele, 14.


33Thiele, 11.

34Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, in Basic Writings of Nietzsche, 231.

35Nietzsche, Thus Spake Zarathustra, in The Portable Nietzsche, 175.
their own best interests to be free. For the weak, or herd animals, as Nietzsche would call them, it is far better not to realize that the underpinnings of society, culture and truth are gone. This is because they cannot bear to be free. "And he who is not a bird should not build his nest over abysses." The values of the herd should rule in the herd, the values of the creator should be his own values.

Hatred of mediocrity is unworthy of a philosopher: it is almost a question mark against his "right to philosophy." Just because he is the exception, he must protect the rule, and he must encourage self-confidence in all mediocre.

The heroic individual lives in the same world as his decadent counterpart, but unlike the decadent individual, is strong enough to transform the meaninglessness of life into an occasion for celebration. He is "prompted by well-being, by overflowing health, by the fullness of existence?" He knows the risks to individuality are timidity and laziness. "I will remain my own!" or as Pindar said "become who you are." Only a few are capable of such resolve. The majority remain cheerful in their pretense, fulfilling their social roles, and playing the role assigned to them in the theater of politics. Many would seek to live life in the woods like shy deer:

What they would like to strive for with all their powers is the universal green-pasture happiness of the herd, with security, lack of danger, comfort, and an easier

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36 Ibid., 217.
38 Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy, in Basic Writings of Nietzsche, 17.
40 Pindar, Second Pythian Ode, 72, quoted in Hatab, Myth and Philosophy, 109.
life for everyone; the two songs and doctrines which they repeat most often are "equality of rights" and "sympathy for all that suffers"—and suffering itself they take for something that must be abolished.\textsuperscript{41}

Nietzsche proposes the opposite for those who can live resolutely.

. . . carry heroism into the search for knowledge . . . For believe me: the secret for harvesting from existence the greatest fruitfulness and the greatest enjoyment is—to live dangerously! Build your cities beside Vesuvius! Send your ships into uncharted seas! Live at war\textsuperscript{42} with your peers and yourselves!\textsuperscript{43}

This joy of life that belongs to those who live dangerously,\textsuperscript{44} brings us to one of the fundamental tenets of an 'attempter': The idea that "the certain prospect of death could sweeten every life with a precious and fragrant drop of levity"\textsuperscript{45} "The thousand mysteries around us would only interest us, not torture us, if we were healthy enough in our hearts"\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{41}Nietzsche, \textit{Beyond Good and Evil}, in \textit{Basic Writings of Nietzsche}, 244.

\textsuperscript{42}It is pointed out by Alexander Nehames, \textit{Nietzsche: Life as Literature}, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 114., that Nietzsche does not mean armed military struggle.

\textsuperscript{43}Nietzsche, \textit{The Gay Science}, 228.

\textsuperscript{44}This willingness to engage in risk-taking activity is essential for healthy, sane individuals. Fritz Perls, in his book \textit{Gestalt Therapy Verbatim} (Lafayette, California: Real People Press, 1969), 46.suggests risk taking is part of growth and essential to life.

\textsuperscript{45}Nietzsche. \textit{The Wanderer and his Shadow}, in \textit{Basic Writings of Nietzsche}, 322.

\textsuperscript{46}Nietzsche, \textit{Gesammelte Werke}, 16:55.
CHAPTER III

NIETZSCHE AND THE ANCIENT GREEKS

In his early days as a student of ancient Greece, Nietzsche set out to hypothesize about tragedy among the Greeks. The basic question that Nietzsche set out to answer was: Why did a society, whose creations are still the marvel for the world to behold a millennia later, consider their greatest creation to be tragic theater? "The best turned out, most beautiful, most envied type of humanity to date, those most apt to seduce us to life, the Greeks—how now? They of all people should have needed tragedy?" 1

Nietzsche set out to answer this question by exploring Greek modes of thought, in particular tragedy, ". . . and thus became the first to comprehend the phenomenon of the Dionysian." 2 He came to see the Greek miracle in terms of a tension between appearance and reality, with appearance represented in the form of the Greek god Apollo (an Olympian god of sky, light, poetry, prophesy, beauty, and order), and reality represented by the god Dionysus (a chthonic god of earth, wine, music, dance, and revelry; gift giver and destroyer). 3 Apollo and Dionysus (best represented by

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1Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy, in Basic Writings of Nietzsche, 17.

2Nietzsche, Ecce Homo, in Basic Writings of Nietzsche, 728.

dream and intoxication)⁴ represented the tension that made the Greeks what they were.

To further the analogy, he singled out two art forms as prototypes of each; "the
Apollinian art of sculpture, and the non-imagistic Dionysian art of music."⁵

The Apollinian frenzy excites the eye above all, so that it gains the power of
vision. The painter, the sculptor, the epic poets are visionaries par excellence.
The Dionysian state, on the other hand, the whole affective system is excited and
enhanced: so that it discharges all its means of expression at once and drives forth
simultaneously the power of representation, imitation, transfiguration,
transformation, and every kind of mimicking and acting⁶

Nietzsche viewed the application of Dionysian wisdom to his world, and the
world of the future, as indispensable. He bemoaned the fact that, although the
problems facing man's existence are basically unchanged since ancient times, modern
man has learned almost nothing from the past. Although the following quotation is
from Nietzsche himself writing about Schopenhauer and the ancients, it is even more
accurate for Nietzsche: "Thus . . . together they form a Republic of Geniuses; one
giant calls to another across the arid intervals of ages, and, undisturbed by a wanton
noisy race of dwarfs, creeping about beneath them, the sublime intercourse of spirits
continues."⁷ Man has forgotten the 'legacy of the ancients' and it was all 'in vain'.
"The whole labor of the ancient world in vain: I have no word to express my feelings

⁴Ibid., 7.

⁵Nietzsche, Birth of Tragedy, in Basic Writings of Nietzsche, 33.

⁶Nietzsche, Twilight of the Idols: Or How to Philosophize with a Hammer, in The Portable Nietzsche, 519.

about something so tremendous. "  

Nietzsche would like us moderns to entertain the Dionysian mental outlook, to " . . . hold fast to our luminescent guides the Greeks."  

Evidently the ancient Greeks suspected the future would look back admiringly at them. As Pericles\textsuperscript{10} was supposed to have said at the funeral oration for the Greeks fallen at Marathon, " . . . We are the school of Helles . . . the future will wonder at us as does the present." \textsuperscript{11} Greeks like Sappho, Solon, Homer, Euclid, Archiloachus, Pindar, Hippocrates, Pericles, Pythagoras, Thucydides, and Thespis are still household names two thousand years later.

Every nation is put to shame if one points out such a wonderfully idealized company of Philosophers as that of the early Greek masters, Thales, Anaximander, Heraclitus, Parmenides, Anaxagoras, Empedocles, Democritus and Socrates. All those men are integral, entire and self-contained, [Napoleon's word about Goethe] and hewn out of one stone. \textsuperscript{12}

Greek innovations were by no means solely cerebral. The Greeks were remarkably well rounded physically as well. If the love affair with the well-formed human body did not begin with the ancient Greeks, it was certainly brought to its zenith

\begin{footnotes}
\item[9] Nietzsche, \textit{The Birth of Tragedy}, in \textit{Basic Writings of Nietzsche}, 137.
\item[10] Pericles (500-429 B.C.), the great Athenian Strategus and orator. So great a leader was he that the historian Thucydides stated that Athens was indeed ruled by the first Citizen. His period became known as the Age of Pericles.
\item[12] Nietzsche, \textit{Early Greek Philosophy \& Other Essays}, 79.
\end{footnotes}
by them. The realistic nude statue was an ancient Greek invention, comprising the unparalleled combination of a perfectly formed male body, with a well-educated and accomplished intellect. The idea of a champion athlete and accomplished scholar began in ancient Athens, and frankly died there as well, Nietzsche noted. This incredible constellation of proper human relationships to the world has only been known in ancient Greece. When we speak of 'Greek gods' we generally refer to extremely well-built humans. Even today, understanding the Greek relationship with physical and mental health eludes us. An example of this mindset is that, in order to attend the Olympic games everyone had to be naked, spectators and competitors alike. 13 The Greek need to create and maintain beauty is demonstrated in the design of their buildings (the Acropolis), institutions (democracy), and arts (philosophy, medicine). Lysippus, a comic poet contemporary of Aristophanes, writes about Athens:

If you have not seen Athens you are a blockhead;  
If you have seen her and not been captivated, you are a donkey;  
If you have felt her charm and scamper off you are a pack-ass. 14

To Nietzsche, this enormous ability to create came to the ancient Greeks as a need, from having seen the world in all its gruesomeness and suffering, and knowing existence too well. They needed the 'veil of art' to protect them from the truth of


14Gilbert Norwood, Greek Comedy (Boston: John W. Luce, 1932), 37.
existence. Knowledge and nausea kill action; action requires the veil of illusion.\textsuperscript{15} Art has the ability to transform us, to save us from pessimism. They had to create, to laugh in the face of this terrible truth about existence. "Here where the danger to [the] will is greatest, art approaches as a saving sorceress, expert at healing. She alone knows how to turn these nauseous thoughts about the horror or absurdity of existence into notions with which one can live."\textsuperscript{16}

As proof of how sensitive the Greeks were to suffering, they completely forbade the depiction of violence on the stage. All violence went on off-stage, and was later reported, usually by messenger. They didn't need to see violence; they knew that aspect of existence all too well. Suffering was their life. This unique awareness of the futility of existence led to "an intellectual predilection for the hard, gruesome, evil, problematic aspect of existence, prompted by well being, by overflowing health, by the fullness of existence."\textsuperscript{17} To Nietzsche, nothing of value could ever be created in comfort. "The discipline of suffering, of great suffering—do you not know that this discipline has created all the enhancements of man so far."\textsuperscript{18}

Nietzsche points out that only humans laugh and weep. "Perhaps I know best why man is the only animal that laughs: he alone suffers so excruciatingly that he was

\textsuperscript{15}Nietzsche, \textit{The Birth of Tragedy}, in \textit{Basic Writings of Nietzsche}, 60.

\textsuperscript{16}Ibid., 7.

\textsuperscript{17}Ibid., 17.

\textsuperscript{18}Nietzsche, \textit{Beyond Good and Evil}, in \textit{Basic Writings of Nietzsche}, 344.
compelled to invent laughter."¹⁹ The reason humans need to laugh is that, faced with the world construed of suffering as it is, they must. Nietzsche felt that as humans evolved self-awareness, and understood the world for what it was, they cried. After the humans learned to cry, over time, as the humans became stronger, they came to understand that to live is to suffer. "First principal: one must need to be strong—otherwise one will never become strong."²⁰ Only because man is strong can he turn sorrow into laughter.

According to Nietzsche the more you know suffering, the more you know life. Suffering is at the heart of all creativity. There are no great creations without suffering. There is no way around this terrible fact. The Greeks did not try to protect themselves from pain and suffering, or learn to resist it. On the contrary, if you learn to accept pain, you will not suffer as much from it.²¹ The Greeks didn't try to transcend negativity, they embraced it. Nietzsche agreed that one must know the terrible to truly understand the beautiful. Those who know the dark the best appreciate the light the most.

Saying Yes to life even in its strangest and hardest problems; the will to life rejoicing over its own inexhaustibility even in the sacrifice of its highest types—that is what I called the Dionysian, that is what I understood as the bridge to the

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¹⁹Durant, 414.


²¹In the ancient world life was more difficult than our own. It was a world of famine, war, brutality, plague, and death even from the slightest infected injury. This atmosphere of short lives and imminent death helps to explain why the ancients enjoyed watching torture.
psychology of the tragic poet.\textsuperscript{22}

From this psychology of suffering evolved the 'Black Art' of tragedy, described by Nietzsche as, "... an artistic taming of the horrible."\textsuperscript{23} "Here where the danger to [the] will is greatest, art approaches as a saving sorceress, expert at healing. She alone knows how to turn these nauseous thoughts about the horror or absurdity of existence into notions with which one can live."\textsuperscript{24}

The heroes in the older Greek tragedies were presented in such a way that, no matter how bad things got, no matter how much they suffered, they bore their fate nobly. Certainly, there was some lamenting and decrying their fate by tragic heroes. Whether it be Sophocles' depiction of Oedipus putting out his eyes in \textit{Oedipus Rex}, or Aeschylus' Prometheus deathless, chained to a rock and doomed to have his liver eaten every day and regenerated every night in \textit{Prometheus Bound}, they are presented as knowing at heart that, no matter how bad things got, life was, at its very core, always worth living.\textsuperscript{25} For Nietzsche "... every true tragedy leaves us—that life is at the bottom of things, despite all the changes of appearances, indestructibly powerful and pleasurable."\textsuperscript{26} Nietzsche felt in tragedy the Greek instinct for beautifying the terrible

\textsuperscript{22}Nietzsche, \textit{Ecce Homo}, in Basic Writings of Nietzsche, 729.

\textsuperscript{23}Nietzsche, \textit{The Birth of Tragedy}, in Basic Writings of Nietzsche, 60.

\textsuperscript{24}Ibid., 7.

\textsuperscript{25}"Until Euripides, Dionysus never ceased to be the tragic hero; that all the celebrated figures of the Greek stage—Prometheus, Oedipus, etc.—are mere masks of the original hero, Dionysus." Ibid., 73.

\textsuperscript{26}Nietzsche, \textit{The Birth of Tragedy}, in Basic Writings of Nietzsche, 59.
was best expressed. The way the Greek culture chose to beautify the dark side of existence, through art, is for Nietzsche proof of their affirmation of life.

In fact, Aeschylus said that wisdom 'only' comes by way of suffering. As proof of the value of life, the Greek gods, including Zeus himself, came down to earth (as a bull or a swan) because human life was worth living, even to a god. On the wall around the Acropolis in Athens, there is a relief depicting Nike removing a stone from her sandal. A stone cannot possibly be an inconvenience to a goddess, unless she is part mortal. (Fig. 2.) Achilles would rather live life, even if it were as a day laborer, than rule in the underworld, according to Homer.

"Blessed people of Hellas! How great must Dionysus be among you if the god of Delos considers such magic necessary to heal your dithyrambic madness!"

To a man in such a mood, however, and old Athenian, looking up at him with the sublime eyes of Aeschylus, might reply: "But say this, too, curious stranger: how much did this people have to suffer to be able to become so beautiful!"27

27Ibid., 144.
Figure 2. Nike (Athena) Fastening her Sandal; parapet of the Temple of Athena Nike, Acropolis, Athens, circa 410 B.C. in Helen Gardner, Art Through the Ages (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1970), 151.
CHAPTER IV

SOCRATES, EURIPIDES AND TRAGEDY

The impact of Socrates (496-399 B.C.), the great Athenian orator and sophist, on antiquity was so great that Nietzsche called him "the one turning point and vortex of so-called world history." Nietzsche even goes so far as to divide civilization into eras before and after Socrates. This is because Socrates (Fig. 3), and his mouthpiece Euripides, represent the antithesis of the tragic Apollinian-Dionysian synthesis, and are historically responsible for destroying it. Nietzsche believed the ancient sources that claimed Socrates and Euripides were in collusion. Socrates objected to tragedy and only attended new plays of Euripides. "His [Socrates] contempt for tragedy is of such magnitude that Plato felt compelled to burn his tragedies in order to become a disciple of Socrates." Plato also argues against the value of laughter (comedy) for the Guardians in the Republic saying, "... if anyone represents men of worth as

1Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy, in Basic Writings of Nietzsche, 36.

2Euripides (480-406 B.C.), the third of the celebrated Attic tragedians. It was said in ancient times that he was a prolific writer of plays and wrote at least eighty. Euripides composed plays in which ordinary people were portrayed in highly emotional settings. He often depicted female characters, such as he did in Trojan Women and Medea. Euripides was known in ancient times as a religious and ethical revolutionary.

overpowered by laughter we must not accept it, much less if gods."⁴

There were widespread tales that Socrates helped Euripides write his plays, and both were "mentioned in the same breath as corrupting influences."⁵ They are also connected in intellectual prowess, by the Delphic oracle. This most sacred of oracles ranked Socrates the wisest of all men, and Euripides second wisest. Euripides and Socrates were historical and intellectual allies. In the theater, Euripides poetically advanced the dialectical thinking of Socrates. Euripides sang the song of Socrates, he was the aesthetic poet of Socrates. "Because of this, Euripides' project can be understood as an attempt to eliminate the Dionysian element from Tragedy."⁶ But for Nietzsche, "the irony of it all is that Euripides repudiated his project after that project had already succeeded."⁷ Euripides, like Socrates, never realized how great the Greek culture was that allowed Socrates' new type of thinking to evolve.

As evidence of how important Nietzsche thought Socrates was to Greek tragic culture, in 1871 he published what was later to become *The Birth of Tragedy as Socrates and Greek Tragedy.*⁸ For Nietzsche, Socrates, the ugly unartistic cripple, did not represent the Greeks at all. In fact, he embodied everything the Greeks stood

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⁵Dannhauser, 61.

⁶Ibid., 57.

⁷Ibid., 57.

against. "Nietzsche calls Socrates a monstrosity, he dwells on Socrates' physical ugliness, plebeian origin, and instinctual decadence."\textsuperscript{9} Socrates, with his single-minded perspective that everything must be ultimately rational and reasonable, flew in the face of the old Greek ideas.

To Nietzsche, this dogmatic drive for absolute, unconditional rationality—the Socratic dictum of the unexamined life being not worth living—was the unmistakable sign of degeneration ("everything unconditional belongs in pathology")\textsuperscript{10} and was not representative of mainstream Greek thought at all. "The Socratic principal that virtue is knowledge, that one only sins out of ignorance, and that the virtuous man is the happy-man these are the basic forms of an optimism spelling the death of tragedy."\textsuperscript{11}

This optimistic idea of Socrates, that thinking can reach the deepest core in being, is not found in earlier Greeks, such as Aeschylus. The Stalwarts of Marathon with their singular capacity for suffering, knew just the opposite, that "life is suffering, that existence is fundamentally terrible."\textsuperscript{12} The life-long teachings of Socrates that we know of through Plato, suggest he believed in the optimistic power of man to understand the world, that existence was rational and good. In fact, man himself does wrong only out of ignorance. Socrates judges existence to be good; it only appears to be negative at times. Therefore, appearance is what is bad, not existence. Plato's cave

\textsuperscript{9} Dannhauser, 22.

\textsuperscript{10} Nietzsche, \textit{Beyond Good and Evil}, in \textit{Basic Writings of Nietzsche}, 280.

\textsuperscript{11} Dannhauser, 64.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 50.
image demonstrates this idea, and reduces our perceived world to mere illusion.

Socrates is distinguished from earlier, stronger Greeks by the fact he that judged existence, while they took the "world as it is, without subtraction, exception, or selection." Even the darkest emotions envy, jealousy, and hatred can enhance to life. Nietzsche points out both Greek and Trojan were noble to Homer.

Socrates was tried for his revolutionary ideas; namely, corrupting the youth, and failing to believe in the gods. Plato's Dialogue, the Apology, recounts Socrates' defense. "Some ancient writings one reads in order to understand antiquity; others, however, are such that one studies antiquity in order to be able to read them. To these belong the Apology." As Plato writes, it was Aristophanes who began the indictment of Socrates:

Very well what did my critics say in attacking my character? I must read out their affidavit, so to speak as though they were my legal accusers: Socrates is guilty of criminal meddling, in that he inquires into things below the earth and in the sky, and makes the weaker argument defeat the stronger, teaches others to follow his example. It runs something like that. You have seen it yourself in the play by Aristophanes, where Socrates goes whirling around, proclaiming that he is walking on air, and uttering a great deal of other nonsense about things of which I know nothing.

Both of these charges boil down to the same thing, contributing to the destruction of the unique mental and physical balance the Greek religion maintained in Athens.

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13 Nietzsche, The Will to Power, 536.


Socrates himself, to be sure, with the taste of his talent—that of a superior dialectician—had initially sided with reason; and in fact, what he did do his life long but laugh at the awkward incapacity of noble Athenians who, like all noble men, were men of instinct and never could give sufficient information about the reasons for their actions? 16

To Nietzsche "what must first be proved is worth little." 17 Socrates was against books because if you needed a book to remember something you never really knew it. A jury of five hundred of his Athenian peers found him guilty on all counts (not a very close vote), and sentenced him to death. By no means was this a case of mistaken identity, as almost all the jurors undoubtedly were very familiar with Socrates, and many were life-long friends. All of the principal historical sources (Aristophanes, Plato, and Xenophon 18) about Socrates agree that his religious ideas were ardently revolutionary. 19 It is also clear, in Xenophon's Dinner Party, that Socrates was known to be the man depicted in Aristophanes' Clouds. 20

Perhaps Socrates and Euripides had second thoughts about what they did, because in prison Socrates began to have dreams that told him to practice art, and he supposedly did so; while Euripides' last play, the Bacche, centered on the destruction of:

16 Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, in Basic Writings of Nietzsche, 294.

17 Nietzsche, Twilight of the Idols, in The Portable Nietzsche, 476.

18 Xenophon (430-355 B. C.), a contemporary and friend of Socrates who wrote three texts about Socrates; Apology, Symposium, and Memorabilia.


of those who didn't adhere to the teachings of Dionysus. This is the only play we have by Euripides in which Dionysus the god appears. Ancient sources also suggest that Euripides committed suicide. Perhaps Euripides realized what he and Socrates had undone. Socrates last words were "Crito, we ought to offer a cock to Asclepius. See to it, and don't forget."\(^{21}\) It was a Greek custom to give a cock to Asclepius (the god of medicine) after getting well. What Socrates was saying, was that he had been sick for a long time.

This leads Nietzsche to speak of "the problem of Socrates."\(^{22}\) It should not surprise anyone "that in Aristophanes [plays] Socrates should appear as the first and supreme Sophist, as the mirror and epitome of all sophistical tendencies."\(^{23}\) At Socrates' trial, when asked about his accusers, Socrates said "... it is impossible for me to know and tell you their names, unless one of them happens to be a playwright [Aristophanes]."\(^{24}\)

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\(^{22}\)This is the title to the second chapter of Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols*.

\(^{23}\)Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 87.

CHAPTER V

ARISTOPHANES AND OLD COMEDY

Aristophanes (445-380 B.C.) was born the son of Philippus, tribe Pandionis, deme Cydatheneons. He wrote his first play at the age of eighteen, and produced several plays under the assumed names Callistratus and Philonides. Aristophanes was one of the three greats of Old Comedy, but by no means the most famous or successful. Unfortunately, only the plays of Aristophanes have survived the millennia and exist today. Some say that when the tyrant of Syracuse asked Plato to describe the constitution of Athens, the philosopher sent him the works of Aristophanes.  

Aristophanes wrote at least twenty-five comedies, of which eleven are extant. There were other great writers of comedy. Cratinus (490-420 B.C.) son of Callimedes, Athenian tribe Enis, was the second of the three greats of Old Comedy. The third, Eupolis (born 429 B.C.), son of Sosipolis, won seven victories while writing only fourteen plays.

Less renowned writers of Old Comedy were Crates and Ameipsias. Crates "... was the first man in Athens to relinquish the lampoon form and compose stories and plots for general application."  

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victories at the Athenian competitions to his credit. Ameipsias (circa 500 B.C.-430 B.C.) twice defeated Aristophanes at the City Dionysia. It is possible that Socrates was a member of the Chorus in Ameipsias' play Chorus (about a famous musician said to have taught Socrates). In any event, he took part in the play. One line from the play survives: "Socrates, among the few the best, among the many the most stupid, hast thou also come to us? This is true fortitude!"

Besides the plays of Aristophanes, "vase paintings (Fig. 4, 5) have been fruitfully studied, but our main source [of information about old comedy] is still the reports of ancient scholars." "True comedy," said Voltaire "is the speaking picture of the follies of a Nation" "Comedy is that type of drama which employs action tolerably close to real life and an expression light, charming often laughable." Comedy literally means 'song of revelry'.

The beginnings of comedy are uncertain, and even Aristotle says he knows nothing of the earliest phases, but he does believe comedy "originated with those who led the phallic songs." However, some aspects can be surmised:

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3Norwood, 24.  
Ibid., 24.  
5Ibid., 2.  
7Norwood, 1.  
8Aristotle, Poetic 1440 b., quoted in Norwood, 5.  
9Ibid., 1449 b., quoted in Norwood, 8.
Figure 4. Revelers; amphora circa 510-500 B.C., in Art Through the Ages, 118.

Figure 5. Brygos Painter Revelers; circa 490 B.C., in Art Through the Ages, 118.
Comedy began in Attica when a group of people disguised themselves as animals performing mimes attached to the comos (reveling rout of Dionysian worshipers). Their phallic procession sang lampoons (a short abusive scurrilous address) against chance bystanders, and sometimes more elaborately against public characters. At first their performance, or at any rate their remarks were impromptu; later a poet wrote lines for them. When the poet's work attained some elaboration, he wrote an address for the chorus to sing before they withdrew. Next an actor was introduced . . . At first mere clowning with the chorus after the parabasis. Later the actor invaded the earlier part of the performance and was later provided with a colleague, so that genuine dramatic action was possible . . . Later the Lyrics increased in beauty and elaboration, plot was developed; topics of deep political and social interest were handled. Prologues . . . came into being . . . the Comos came back into its own, rounding the play with a final triumphant riotousness. 

Old Comedy, from its very inception, always displayed candid indecency, particularly about sex.

These plays were presented as true religious offerings, and as such Aristophanes was a disciple of Dionysus. He admits this quite plainly when he says:

Dear spectators, freely shall I speak to you, yes and truly,  
So help me Dionysus whose ward I am. 

Aristophanes whose whole life is devoted to Dionysus . . .  

Compare Aristophanes' statements with Nietzsche's statements two thousand years later: "I the last disciple of the philosopher Dionysus." (Fig. 6). "Indeed, what is Dionysian? . . . one 'who knows' is talking, the initiate and disciple of his god."  

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10Norwood, 13.  
13Nietzsche, Twilight of the Idols, in Basic Writings of Nietzsche, 110.  
14Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy, in Basic Writings of Nietzsche, 20.
Figure 6. *Dionysus*; Attic red-figured pointed amphora by the Kleophrades Painter, circa 500 B.C., in C.M. Bowra *Classical Greece* (New York: Time, 1965), 146.
Greek actors wore comic masks and padded costumes, with a large conspicuous phallus attached to all the male characters. The structure of Old Comedy was as follows: A Prologue, where the leading character engages with the audience and suggests the "happy idea" or merrythought, followed by the Parodos, the entry of the chorus; the Agon, where the happy idea battles with the opposition; the Parabasis, where the poet himself airs his personal ideas; the Episodes, where the happy idea is applied; and the finale of feasting and copulation known as the Gammos.

It should not be forgotten that these Dionysian religious rites were accompanied by Dionysian music and dance and were presented in competition with other plays. At the end of the festival, the winner of the competition, as judged by a jury of citizens, received a wreath of ivy (the same prize as awarded in tragedy). (Fig. 7.) Whenever and however it began, Old Comedy ended with the fall of Athens at the close of the Peloponnesian war in 404 B.C.

Old Comedy was somewhat like modern television shows, such as Laugh In, and Saturday Night Live. These shows were so popular that their satire, political freedom, and biting social criticism have become a part of the national mentality.

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15"The spectators of the audience are explicitly made into a subject in one place—the Parabasis. The poets relationship to the audience is a subject of every parabasis in which the coryphaeus speaks on behalf of the poet. The audience is berated for its inconsistency, for its lack of loyalty and sophistication, or for its failure to give the poet his due; the audience may also be criticized for its political failures in the . . . parabasis. In the act of transforming the audience into a comic spectacle, however, the poet reveals himself as a spectator of society and his audience as well as a spectacle whose personal hopes, ambitions, feelings and disappointments are witnessed and laughed at by the audience." Thomas K. Hubbard, The Mask of Comedy (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 14.
Figure 7. Theater at Epidaurus, circa 350 B.C. in *Art Through the Ages* 4th ed. 168.
However, in ancient Athens, the individuals to be lampooned sat in the front row with the high priest of Dionysus, to whom the plays were being offered in competition as a prayer, and even the god Dionysus was ridiculed. It is this religious dimension that separates the Greeks drama from subsequent dramatic forms that might seem similar such as the comedies and tragedies of Shakespeare.

Greek comedies featured loose plots, broad farce, puns, buffoonery, coarse indecency, and a great deal of obscenity. Very often, the comedies involved satire of important Athenians, or social, political or moral issues. Aristophanes' freedom of expression has given rise to an adjective in the English language; 'Aristophanic', meaning roughly crude, vulgar (no doubt because of the sexual innuendos and jokes regarding bodily functions), and fantastic plots presented in a uproariously absurd, yet lighthearted manner—a satyr\textsuperscript{16} poking fun at serious notions. As Athens was a relatively small town, many plays alluded to individuals (most of whom were probably in the theater) the audience would know. During a performance of Aristophanes' play, Clouds, Socrates is said to have stood up, so the crowd could compare his face to the mask the actor playing him was wearing. The political freedom enjoyed by the comic poets in Ancient Greece is truly unimaginable by modern day standards.

Tragedy and comedy, although apparently different, are in fact two sides of the same coin. "Both the tragic and the comic involve negation, and the peculiarly human phenomena of crying and laughing both arise from human awareness of negation and

\textsuperscript{16}\textit{Mythological beings often represented as half man, with the legs and lower torso of a goat. Satyrs were renowned for their lustfulness, and love of revelry.}
limits. Both old comedy and tragedy strictly adhered to a rigid form. There is a curious connection between the sublime and the ridiculous. Both forms use the Apollinian beauty and light, through lyric poetry, to show the Dionysian dark side (fatality in the case of tragedy, and the destruction of cultural pretensions in the case of comedy). To show this affinity, there was a form of drama known as tragicomedy, which integrated the two. Unfortunately, only one example of this survives, Euripides' Alcestis. In this play, what starts out as a tragedy ends as a comedy, and makes it seem like a genuinely natural progression. Both tragedy and comedy were presented concurrently at festivals, as religious offerings or prayers in honor of the god Dionysus, and were sometimes accompanied by a tragicomedy.

In Plato's dialogue featuring Socrates and Aristophanes, the Symposium, the speeches center on the meaning of love. "The moral of Aristophanes' tale is that love is 'the desire for wholeness'." "Aristophanes emphasizes that this search for wholeness must be in the context of proper respect for the gods, whose ability to affect human lives in dramatic ways has been shown in his myth." After a long night drinking in Plato's Symposium, the topic being considered in the morning light is the relationship between comedy and tragedy:

Aristodemus says he doesn't remember other parts of the argument, since he had missed the beginning and was also sleepy, but he said that the chief point Socrates was forcing them [Aristophanes a comic poet, Agathon a tragic poet] to accept was that the same man could know how to compose both comedy and tragedy and that


18 Plato, The Symposium and the Phaedrus Plato's Erotic Dialogues, 68.
a skillful tragedian could create comedies. They were being forced to go along, although they were getting drowsy and hardly following it. Aristophanes fell asleep first, and by the time morning came Agathon had also.19

This marvelous 'human-world' relationship was maintained by the state. Tragedies and comedies were the most prevalent means for teaching Dionysian wisdom that we are aware of, but others probably existed. The Polis, or city state, felt the Dionysian experience to be so vital, that it paid virtually all the expenses of the theatrical productions. Attending the Dionysian dramas was deemed so important that even those without money were not denied access. Theater goers could even ask to be reimbursed for a lost days wages. "In Athens during all drama festivals all business was suspended, the law courts were closed and prisoners were released from jail. Even women, barred from most social events, were welcomed at the theater"20 As we see in Aristophanes' play The Thesmophoriazusae,21 there is every reason to believe that the bulk of the Athenian population knew most of the major tragedies, if not also the comedies, line by line. The play continually refers to scenes and lines from numerous tragedies, and could not possibly have made sense to the audience, much less have been funny, had they not known them by heart.

Aristophanes was a capable playwright but he was also a social critic. His first

19Ibid., 59.

20C. M. Bowra, Classical Greece (New York: Time, 1965), 149.

21In Women Celebrating the Thesmophoria (festival of Demeter) the women are trying Euripides for revealing negative truths about their sex. They capture Euripides' kinsman and Euripides, in "disguise tries to save him by brilliant parodies of rescue scenes from his own Telephus, Palamedes, Helen, and Andromeda." Aristophanes, in The Complete Plays of Aristophanes, 329.
comedy, *Daitaleis*, now lost, was a biting satire on the product of city education, as compared with that of the old-fashioned country training that displayed his conservative leanings. Aristophanes' political satire was directed against what he saw as social and political decisions that were undermining Athens.

Aristophanes was a contemporary of Socrates, the famous Athenian philosopher, and Euripides, the famous tragedian. Aristophanes felt he was witnessing the breakup of the Greek mind, and at the time candidly blamed Socrates and Euripides. Even Plato recognized this degeneration, and his fundamental purpose became, "how to rescue, or improve upon, the organization of the city-state that was becoming dysfunctional before his very eyes." Aristophanes used comedy as a weapon to try and stop the destruction of the delicate mental condition wrought by Socrates and Euripides. In several of his plays, Aristophanes attacked what he saw as blasphemy of Dionysus; leading the list of blasphemers were Euripides and Socrates. The major plays in which he deals with these social problems are *Clouds*, *Frogs*, and *Thesmophoriazusae*.

Aeschylus. Of what ills is Euripides not the cause?
Pimps he brings on in defiance of the laws,
A woman in a temple becoming a mother,
A woman lying with her own brother,
*No-life equals life* asserting,

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22 Meaning roughly, people of an imaginary deme or bough of Athens, who call themselves the 'Banqueteers'.

Our whole city thus subverting,$^24$

When Dionysus judges the poet by the weight of verse in the *Frogs*, Aristophanes has Aeschylus tell Euripides:

> Let him get into the scale, 
With his children, his wife Cephisophon, and himself, 
Holding all his books: I need but two of my lines,$^25$

Plato's *Symposium*, set some seven years after Aristophanes' *Clouds*, shows Socrates and Aristophanes quite friendly and engaged in intellectual discussion, Aristophanes is even agreeing with Socrates. Some authors argue that they were not antagonists. "Far from being an enemy of Socrates, Aristophanes was his friend, but somewhat envious of his wisdom—even of the wisdom of the young Socrates."$^26$

However, I do not think the evidence supports this view. "Aristophanes is never discussed or quoted in the dialogues, though he is mentioned in the *Apology* and is one of the speakers in the *Symposium*."$^27$

The *Clouds* was first presented in 423 B.C., at the Great Dionysia, losing to the *Wine-Flask* of Cratinus, and the *Chorus* of Ameipsias. Aristophanes felt so strongly about the *Clouds* that it was again presented in 422 B.C., with several changes. Perhaps Aristophanes lost the competition because he was too easy on Socrates. There


$^25$Ibid., 412.


is evidence that the play we have today may have been rewritten to be far more unsympathetic to Socrates. "In contradiction to the other comedies, the *Clouds* does not end in gaiety."²⁸ It is not only a comedy, but possesses many of the qualities of a political pamphlet.

Right Logic. Some day Athens will realize what lessons you are giving to her fools.²⁹
Socrates. What gods? With us, gods are not legal tender³⁰
Strepsiades. Alas for my delusion! Mad indeed was I, when for Socrates sake, I cast out the gods.³¹

Beneath the surface of laughable or utter nonsense can be plainly felt a strong opinion, and a passionate appeal, such as his appeal to the audience in the parabasis of the

*Acharians*:

Bear me no grudge, Spectators, if, a beggar,
I dare to speak before the Athenian people
About a city in a comic play.
For what is true even a comedy can tell.
And I shall utter startling things but true.³²

Socrates was lampooned and ridiculed in at least three other major plays, once each by Cratinus, Eupolis and Ameipsias.³³

Aristophanes was apparently brought to trial in Athens twice for treason,

²⁸Strauss, 12.
³⁰Ibid., 108.
³¹Ibid., 141.
³³Norwood, 217.
because of what he presented in his plays concerning Athenian government policies.

His Athenian citizenship and patriotism were questioned. I mention this for the reason that Aristophanes' views must have reflected the views of his many fellow Athenians, otherwise his plays, as political and topical as they were, would not have been popular.

As Sigmund Freud said, "jokes that have a purpose run the risk of meeting people who do not want to listen to them."  

Perhaps Plato saw the error of his ways, as Nietzsche suggests:

Aristophanes—that transfiguring, complementary spirit for whose sake one forgives everything Hellenic for having existed, provided one has understood in it's full profundity all that needs to be forgiven and transfigured here—there is nothing that has caused me to meditate more on Plato's secrecy and sphinx nature than the happily preserved petit fait that under the pillow of his deathbed there was found no "Bible," nor anything Egyptian, Pythagorean, or Platonic—but a volume of Aristophanes. How could even Plato have endured life—a Greek life he repudiated—without an Aristophanes?  


35 Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, in Basic Writings of Nietzsche, 231.
CHAPTER VI

RECAPITULATION

Thus far, I have reviewed what Nietzsche and Aristophanes thought befell the unique and fragile Dionysian-Apollinian mental constellation. The Dionysian was born out of strength, and the integration of Apollo, showing the wisdom of Dionysus. This constellation of being was destroyed by a weakling’s doctrine of optimism, foisted on the Greeks by Socrates, and his mouthpiece Euripides.

The mental and physical constellation of being that made the ancient Greeks what they were was a type of psychotherapy, not psychotherapy as we know it today, but psychotherapy just the same; in fact, perhaps the most widespread and successful form of psychotherapy ever imagined; a psychotherapy for an entire civilization.

Athens was a small city, and its citizens much like a close knit group, with many common values. They had shared norms, and were a cohesive monoculture. Outsiders and non-Greeks were viewed as barbarians. During the Dionysian drama, almost all citizens attended as a group, and learned these lessons by heart.¹ We know that, for comedies, seating was arranged by what part of the city, or Deme, one lived in. If one can call this education on emotions, meaning and the value of life a form of

¹Many comedies and tragedies for which we have text, turn on the fact that the listener has memorized lines from other plays. This is certainly true of Aristophanes play, The Frogs.
group therapy for those who suffer, then I think it is fair to call it a form of psychotherapy.

A great many psychopathological problems are biological or hereditary in nature. By this I mean that the individual's actions or thoughts are not the cause of his or her afflictions. However, this is not the case in all mental disorders. Strangely enough, it could be said that some people incorrectly think, feel, or perceive themselves into insanity. In some models of psychopathology (from Psycho the Greek word for mind, and Pathos the Greek word for suffering), mental processes (particularly the cognitive model), such as knowing, believing, and recalling are primary in creating a world of meaning. By this I mean that the way individuals see their relationship to the external world, and others, is the basis for their own world view. Just as there can be no personal language, there cannot be a completely personal world either. The world is not basically sterile and meaningless, but a shared world pregnant with possibilities.

One of the major aspects of modern life is that suffering and pain hurt far more than they did in the past, because everyone expects and believes that there should be no suffering. People believe that everyone lives a life of fulfillment and pleasure, except themselves, and this often leads to completely unrealistic expectations about the world and distorts their sanity. Incorrect and life-denying thoughts influence how people feel, and how they view the world. The cognitive psychotherapy model is based on the idea that past and present abnormal cognitions have caused many of the problems encountered in the present. Since impaired, or biased pathological cognitions caused
the problems, correct thinking\(^2\) might be able to restore sanity.\(^3\) To Nietzsche, the same might very well be true for civilizations. The ancients knew how to laugh and not take themselves seriously, in a way we are unable to. The ancients were able to put themselves in context.

To the Greeks, "tragedy and comedy expressed a two-sided affirmative response to negation, limits and finitude."\(^4\) On the one hand, you find Attic Tragedy beautifying the real truth of existence, that it is short-lived, and filled with suffering. On the other hand, you have Old Comedy, the "most positive form of tragic affirmation, an affirmative appropriation of the negative limits of being."\(^5\) Comedy can "turn these nauseous thoughts . . . into notions with which one can live: These are the sublime as the artistic taming of the horrible, and the comic as the artistic discharge of absurdity."\(^6\) Old Comedy, with its farce, satire, and buffoonery, was a way for the Greeks to laugh at themselves; a psychotherapy for those most afflicted; a way to not take themselves or their institutions seriously; a way to look into the positive aspects of life and make fun of them. Comedy affirmed the truly important aspects of living, and made fun of the

\(^2\)It is interesting to note that the Socratic method has been used to try and reason people back to sanity. Tullio Maranhao, *Therapeutic Discourse and Socratic Dialogue* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986).

\(^3\)Today, this is done with the help of many types of psychopharmacology. However, this has not always been the case in the recent past.


\(^5\)Ibid., 72.

\(^6\)Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 60.
pretentiousness of man in society. The motto on the oracle at Delphi was 'Nothing in
Excess,' a much needed reminder to a civilization that always took things to excess.

If we look closely at what psychology thinks laughter entails, perhaps we can
begin to understand why Nietzsche finds it so valuable to the philosophers of the
future. If we can understand what laughter does, if we can grasp how comedy works
to the good of a healthy mental outlook, perhaps we can understand how laughter
helped the Athenians achieve what they did, and use that knowledge to try and
understand why Nietzsche thinks laughter is so important.

The ability to laugh at oneself shows a freedom from fixation and affirms a
willingness to sacrifice form—ality; it overcomes what Nietzsche called the spirit of
gravity and is able to enjoy a surrender of structure; it acknowledges a kind of
uncertainty about oneself and one's beliefs in a special way. 7

As anyone who is familiar with counseling and psychotherapy will attest, these
two life affirming values represented in Dionysian drama are characteristics of a
healthy psyche. In the Greek civilization, these Dionysian truths were presented often
enough, and with such force and beauty, that these dramas served as psychotherapy for
a society. This might seem odd, but the idea that one should not object to the 'slings
and arrows of outrageous fortune'—because, even though the world is fundamentally
suffering, life is worth living no matter how much suffering one is presented with—is
something any good psychotherapist would like to be able to transfer to a patient. The
ability not to take oneself, friends, society, and problems too seriously, is another value
any good psychotherapist would like to instill. Sometimes, long hours of counseling

are undertaken to try and alleviate problems that occur when patients believe they are the only ones who suffer, and are fixated on problems and institutions that are taken too seriously. If a society, any society, made the values presented in Greek tragedy and comedy their most sacred values, they too might attain a mental balance that would allow them to achieve in the multitude of ways the Greeks did.

What I have tried to show thus far is that Nietzsche turned to the ancient Greeks for values for the philosophers of tomorrow, because he saw his age as very much like the time of the ancient Athenians. God is dead, and we must create new values to avoid the empty meaninglessness that will transpire now that the "drain plug" of existence has been pulled.

Nietzsche takes God's death to be a historical and cultural fact and is therefore forced to confront the problem of nihilism: To escape nihilism—which seems involved in both asserting the existence of God and thus robbing the world of ultimate significance, and also in denying God and thus robbing everything of meaning and value—that is Nietzsche's greatest and most persistent problem.

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8 Defined by Dagobert D. Runes, *Dictionary of Philosophy* (New Jersey: Littlefield Adams, 1972), 210, as "the doctrine that nothing, or nothing of a specified and very general class, exists, or is knowable, or is valuable."

CHAPTER VII

PSYCHOLOGY OF LAUGHTER

Humor has been studied by "philosophers, literary critics, literary biographers and historians, sociologists, folklorists, psychologists, physicians and scholars from various other disciplines." Even Plato wrote on laughter, in the *Philebus*:

Socrates: And do you realize that when we see a comedy, here again the soul experiences a mixture of pain and pleasure.

Protarchus: I don't understand you.

The argument runs on and ends with Socrates.

Socrates: Then our argument shows that when we laugh at what is ridiculous in our friends, our pleasure, in mixing with malice is a pain, for we have agreed that malice is a pain of the soul, and that laughter is pleasant, and on those occasions we feel malice and laugh.

Plato's comments certainly explain Aristophanes' view of comedy and humor very well. Charles Darwin explored laughter, and noted that laughter appears to be a universally observed behavior in humans. It is not at all clear why such unamusing objects as body parts, or concepts as matrimonial infidelity, sexual incompetence,


perversion, are among the funniest subjects. Quite often just the unexpected appearance of an obscene word at the most inappropriate time elicits humor.  

Unfortunately, only a few studies have been done on the physiology and psychology of laughter, and most of these concern pathological laughter.

Laughter is observed in children around the fourth month of life. There are apparently many types of laughter; the hushed laughter of lovers, the setting-on laughter of a group making fun of the individual with the lowest social level; the nervous laughter of someone expecting the worst; laughter in the face of great personal danger; the black humor of veterans of terrible wars, or nurses from hospitals specializing in the worst cases, self-deprecating laughter, even satirical laughter. Most laughter stems from sorrow in some way, and all types of laughter can be elevated an enhanced into 'golden laughter'.

Laughter is studied by psychologists because laughter is only relatively controllable, and therefore provides a good opportunity to study behavior under conflict, and even pathological behavior. Laughter is instinctual, spontaneous, and communicative. Laughter, then, bears on psychoanalysis, ethology, cognitive and

4V. I. Zelvys, "Obscene Humor: What the Hell?," *Humor* 3, no. 3 (1990), 332.


social psychology, and neurophysiology.⁷

"Many theories have been put forward in explanation of why we laugh. Not even one, however, has proved to be thoroughly convincing or wholly adequate."⁸ Many writers have explored laughter and comedy, such as Cicero, Quintellian, Moliere, Dryden, Shadwell, Fielding, Voltaire, Coleridge, Stendhal, and Carlyle. Many philosophers, as well, have investigated laughter, including Plato, Aristotle (who wrote a lost book on comedy), Hobbes, Descartes, Rousseau, Locke, Kant, Schopenhauer, Santayana, Freud, Bergson, and Dewey.

There seem to be four basic types of humor theories. Perhaps the oldest focuses on power, aggression, and superiority, and is closely associated with the ancient philosophers Plato and Aristotle, and the more modern Thomas Hobbes. In this view, humans are in a constant struggle with each other for power. To Hobbes, laughter is a 'sudden glory' of realizing superiority in some way. The second leading theory is concerned with morals, and is usually represented by Sigmund Freud.⁹ Freud's view is based on the 'hydraulic' theory of human psychic energy. To Freud, laughter comes from psychic energy summoned, but not used. This energy is discharged in the physical laughter itself. We prepare ourselves for some emotion, and then realize that


we need not be concerned, and the energy is discharged in laughter. The third theory is probably associated with Kant and Schopenhauer as much as contemporary cognitive psychology theory, and is called the incongruence theory. Kant located humor in the evaporation of expectation; Schopenhauer saw it as a mismatch between concept and perception. The last major theory of humor derives from the work of Henri Bergson. Bergson felt that every human had a non-materialistic vital force, an 'elan vital': Laughter is a result of our vital force reacting to the rigid constraints of modern society. It is a reaction to rigid, unreal social constructs, and shows our inanimate nature.

The purpose here is not to look at all kinds of laughter, but to try to understand what Nietzsche had in mind when he wrote about laughter. The great comic actor, Charlie Chaplin, once said, "[a] paradoxical thing is that in making comedy, the tragic is precisely what arouses the funny . . . We have to laugh in order not to go crazy."
What Chaplin was getting at, is the idea that laughter serves a purpose. Freud said that humor often copes with matters which are in themselves, unpleasant, sorrowful, or anxiety producing. In some modern hospitals, a room is often set aside for use as the 'humor room'. This room is dedicated to facilitating laughter; to helping people deal with stress, mental pain, and loss.

Humor is so rich, that dealing with pain does not even scratch the surface in explaining the many ways laughter works. Humor has been shown to reduce stress, pain, stress-related hormones, and the sedimentation rate.

Laughter increases breathing activity and oxygen exchange; increases muscular activity and heart rate; and stimulates the cardiovascular system, the sympathetic nervous system, and the production of catecholamines like epinephrine—all of which in turn stimulates the production in the brain of endorphins, the body's natural pain-reducing enzymes.

If Nietzsche is correct, in that laughter is a correct way for people to deal with stress and suffering, then a look at laughter in the therapeutic setting is in order. In a recent study, laughter was associated with the therapeutic process: First, laughter can be seen as an index of change and reflects heightened feelings; second, laughter can indicate a shift in self-concept; third, laughter can be indicative of an open, or aware,

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state; lastly, laughter can be seen as an expression of warmth, and intimacy with the
counselor. 18

Compare psychotherapists the findings with Aristophanes' and Nietzsche's
views concerning the onset of laughter: "Humorous outlook on life, a spontaneous
playfulness, an appreciation of the ridiculous and the tragic-comic, an ability to stand
off and see oneself as silly and foolish, a recognition of the absurd, a welcoming of the
burlesqued and the caricatured." 19 Another study attempted to use laughter to help
patients in psychotherapy engage in risky interpersonal behavior. 20 The study did not
reinforce the hypothesis; increases in laughter were associated with risk-taking, but so
were decreases in laughter. Perhaps changes in the level and strength of laughter can
signal a willingness to attempt risky interpersonal behavior. 21

Several new approaches to using laughter in psychotherapy have been
developed. The first is Provocative Therapy, 22 developed by Farelly and Mathews. As
described, the therapist tries to be provocative and self-disclosing. Humor is used to
help patients express their worst thoughts; and exaggeration, mimicry, ridicule,

18 R. A. Mahre and P. A. Gervaize, "An Integrative Review of Strong Laughter

19 Ibid., 512.

20 Dana R. Falk and Clara E. Hill, "Counselor Interventions Preceding Client

21 Ibid., 39.

22 F. Farelly and S. Matthews, "Provocative Therapy," in Innovative
sarcasm, irony, and jokes are utilized. Another psychotherapeutic approach is O'Connell's Natural High Therapy. 23 O'Connell has developed a therapeutic technique, called the humordrama. 24 The founder of Rational-Emotive Therapy uses laughter as a way to challenge a client's irrational and false system of beliefs. 25 Perhaps the therapist to employ humor the most is Mindess. 26 "He has employed apt jokes, situationally generated wit, teasing, and kidding—naturally introduced. He believes that the therapist—if a basically funny person, prone to wit, flippancy, and clowning—can serve as a model." 27 Behavior therapists also have reported success in using laughter in therapy. 28

Finally, the Adlerian therapist Corey often uses laughter in his counseling.


28 W. L. Ventis, "Humor in Behavior Therapy," in The Study of Humor, ed. H. Mindess and J. Turek (Los Angeles: Antioch University, 1980), 16-23. In a personal communication (April 6, 1994) with the author, Dr. Ventis (Professor, College of William and Mary) stated he encouraged laughter in the therapeutic setting, but did not fabricate it. He also related research that showed laughter to be one of the few positive defense mechanisms. In addition he recounted success he had in using humor in systematic desensitization of students especially for the fear of humiliation. Dr. Ventis also recounted a quote by Mark Twain that "sorrow not joy, is the secret well of laughter."
sessions, "I have found that humor and tragedy are closely linked and that, after allowing ourselves to feel some experiences that are painfully tragic, we can also genuinely laugh at how seriously we have taken our situation." ²⁹

"Angels can fly because they take themselves lightly". If psychiatrists can use humor to get their patients to lighten up, take themselves less seriously, and laugh at their concerns, then they would have doubtless taken a large and significant step toward helping and healing them.³⁰

According to Freud, humor can disinhibit people, and facilitate expression of conflicting themes.³¹ Humor is a way to express ideas that cannot be expressed in a society. Probably the best example of this in antiquity was the court jester. The jester was expected to say even the most 'forbidden' of things to the king. Indeed, a study showed 48% of the jokes told in a social setting to be sexual, and 34% to express derision.³² Even in derision, people must have values in common, or the joke will not be funny. Also, the joke is a vehicle for saying things one might be uncomfortable saying in any other way.

Laughter serves all these functions and more. However, the meaning and function of the laughter that Nietzsche had in mind, I believe, are best put by George Orwell: "Every Joke is a tiny revolution, humor and irony arise from the clash


between incongruent perspectives and their definitions of a situation; it may involve a turnover of the perspective, a shift of the way of seeing things, which robs the taken-for-granted reality of its dignity and seriousness. 33

If we continue with the above sequence, it appears that it reflects an increasing degree of cognitive development: the ability to process contradictory messages and tolerate ambiguities. In other words, humor requires not only those mental facilities characteristic of the infant and the lunatic but also the maturity of creative people, such as the artist and scientist. 34

For Nietzsche and the ancient Greeks, laughter is a way of dealing with chaos, 35 and chaos is, for Nietzsche, not only acceptable, but a fundamental aspect of reality.

Now that God is gone, and the 'drain plug' of reality is pulled, there are no reference points for truth. The consequences are either no meaning in life, nihilism, or perhaps new meaning created by man the esteemer. The natural order is nothing but inequalities and chaos. The bold new philosophers of tomorrow must learn to enjoy chaos, and as such, culture must be created anew. All values must be reevaluated with an eye to enhancing life. For this purpose, the courageous and daring bridge-builder philosophers capable of even 'golden laughter' are called for.


35 The results of his forty year study (supported by Harvard University) into human coping strategies, showed humor to be one of the five interpersonal and intrapersonal mechanisms used by mature individuals throughout the world. George Vaillant, Adaptation to Life (Boston: Little Brown, 1977).
In a recent development the noted psychologist Fry argues that laughter is a man made psychic 'chaos'. In the very same sense 'Chaos Theory' in science explains unpredictable phenomena in the physical world, laughter behaves in much the same way in the psychic world.

Scrutinizing Nietzsche's insights into human psychology might seem a waste of time to some individuals, because Nietzsche himself ended up in a mental institution.  


38 However, Freud's assessment of Nietzsche is that, "he had a more penetrating knowledge of himself than any other man who ever lived or is likely to live." Ernest Jones, *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud*, vol. II., (New York: Basic Books, 1955), 344, quoted in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 7.
CHAPTER VIII

NIETZSCHE AND LAUGHTER

Many of Nietzsche's notions stem from his perceptive psychological intuitions, and nowhere is this truer than in his understanding of laughter. As Nietzsche says, he was the first to be both a philosopher and a psychologist: "... in all psychologically decisive places I alone am discussed."¹ He considered himself a discerning judge of the human psyche; "the innermost parts, the 'entrails' of every soul are physiologically perceived by me—smelled."² "I was the first to discover the truth by being the first to experience lies—smelling them out.—My genius is in my nostrils."³

This sensitivity furnishes me with psychological antenna with which I feel and get a hold of every secret: the abundant hidden dirt at the bottom of many a character—perhaps the result of bad blood, but glossed over by education—enters my consciousness almost at first contact.⁴

Perhaps Nietzsche's deep psychological understanding of modern man, coupled with his perceptive insights into the ancient world, led to his extremely unusual world view. Basically, Nietzsche translated and transported the legacy of the ancients into his


²Ibid., 233.

³Ibid., 326.

⁴Nietzsche, Ecce Homo in Basic Writings of Nietzsche, 689.
writings, and in doing so, he saw the great value of laughter and comedy.

What made the Dionysian experience so important to Nietzsche was the psychological understanding that went along with it: "Dionysian affirmation of the world as it is, without subtraction, exception, or selection."\(^5\) "We do not easily negate, we make it a point of honor to be affirmers."\(^6\) The Greeks enjoyed all aspects of existence, the beautiful as well as the horrible. They, and they alone, were able to transform the horrible aspects of existence. "Into all abysses I still carry the blessings of my saying Yes—But this is the concept of Dionysus once again."\(^7\)

The incredible strength health and sanity that existed in ancient Greece may have been due, in some way, to naivete, as the Greeks were the first to truly come into their own in terms of a civilization and culture for all its citizens. The Greeks were certainly not alone, as there were other highly advanced civilizations; but in a very real sense, they were the first pioneers in a cultural experiment.

This crown of the laughter, the rose-wreath crown: I crown myself with this crown; I myself pronounced holy my laughter. I did not find anyone else strong enough for that. This crown of the laughter, the rose-wreath crown to you, my brothers, I throw this crown. Laughter I have pronounced holy: you higher men, learn—to laugh!\(^8\)

We must discover the hero no less than the fool in our passion for knowledge; we must occasionally find our pleasure in our folly, or we can not continue to find pleasure in our wisdom. Precisely because we are not at bottom grave and serious

\(^5\)Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 536.

\(^6\)Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, in *Basic Writing of Nietzsche*, 491.

\(^7\)Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 762.

\(^8\)Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 27.
human beings—really, more weights than human beings—nothing does us as much good as a fool's cap; we need it in relation to ourselves—we need all exuberant, floating, dancing, mocking, childish, and blissful art lest we lose the freedom above things that our ideal demands of us. It would mean a relapse for us, with our irritable honesty, to get involved entirely in morality and, for the sake of the over-severe demands that we make on ourselves in these matters, to become virtuous monsters and scarecrows. We should be able also to stand above morality—and not only to stand with the anxious stiffness of a man who is afraid of slipping and falling any moment, but also float above it and play. 9

And let that day be lost to us on which we did not dance once! And let that wisdom be false to us that brought no laughter with it. 10

For Nietzsche, this kind of psychotherapy for civilization already existed in Ancient Athens. This psychotherapy was known as the Apollinian-Dionysian experience. It was made up of a two-sided group therapy that included both tragedy and comedy. As Horace Walpole pointed out, the world is a comedy to those who think, but a tragedy to those who feel. This therapy was just such a potion for those who think, and feel, the most deeply. For those who think the most penetratingly into existence, true healthy instinctive laughter must be near, at all times.

The brave, strong, healthy, new exploratory mind-set found in the ancient Greeks appealed to Nietzsche, because the trails his new philosophers will be blazing are unmarked and unknown. These 'bridge-builders' will work among the destroyed temples and columns of Christian truths as if they are excavating some great archaeological site.

Unfortunately, Nietzsche knew all too well that modern man is sorely lacking a

9Nietzsche, The Gay Science, 164.

10Nietzsche, Thus Spake Zarathustra, in The Portable Nietzsche, 228.
whole type of human being, such as the stalwarts of Marathon (an Aeschylus). Modern man, with his "alienation, over-education, over-conceptualization, museum culture, denial of the body, destruction of real communities and substitution of 'lonely crowds' resentment, and in general a decline of what is excellent toward its least common denominator"\textsuperscript{11} is degenerating, aping its ideal.

Basically, all forms of laughter can be broken down into two distinct groups; laughing at, and laughing with. The Athenians laughed \textit{with} Aristophanes and \textit{at} Socrates. When one laughs \textit{with}, one has some cognitive or social values, in common. One has these values in common, even if one does not recognize them. When one laughs \textit{at}, one still has something in common with the society per se. This is because Freud thought every joke involved at least three people; a speaker, a listener and a third person representing a culture of shared values. That is why what really is funny is not what is said, but what is not said; what is unsaid, what is left out. If one has to explain a joke, it isn't funny. Perhaps both of these nonverbal forms of communication regarding existence have elements in common.

A shared suffering need not be explained in words. I shall repeat a hundred times; we really ought to free ourselves from the seduction of words!\textsuperscript{12} For Nietzsche laughter conveys meaning. The laughter of the philosophers of tomorrow will be distinguished by its spontaneity, depth, breadth and appropriateness. The philosophers


\textsuperscript{12}Nietzsche, \textit{Beyond Good and Evil}, in \textit{Basic Writings of Nietzsche}, 213.
of tomorrow will have no third person to make their jokes and laughter work because there are no transcendental values to have in common. The 'golden laughter' of the philosophers of tomorrow will serve as a nonverbal means of communicating their creative understanding of life.

The real antagonist of affirming life is a negative disposition. One needs lightness to overcome the inertia of the spirit of gravity. "Light feet are the first attribute of divinity."13 The spirit of gravity was represented in the past by Socrates and the ascetic ideal. " . . . the ascetic ideal has at present only one kind of real enemy capable of harming it: the comedians of this ideal—for they arouse mistrust in it."14 The ascetics denied life, they sucked the very blood out of life. "Greeks, Romans . . . not buried overnight by a natural catastrophe, not trampled down by Teutons and other buffaloes, but ruined by cunning, stealthy, invisible, anemic vampires. Not vanquished—merely drained."15 "Not by wrath does one kill but by laughter. Come, let us kill the spirit of gravity!"16 Seriousness, "is the most unmistakable sign of a labored metabolism, of struggling, laborious life."17 We should try not to take our problems seriously. . . . the short tragedy always gave way again and returned into the eternal comedy of existence: and "the waves of uncountable laughter"—to cite

13Nietzsche, Twilight of the Idols, 48.

14Nietzsche, Genealogy of Morals, in Basic Writings of Nietzsche, 596.


16Nietzsche, Thus Spake Zarathustra, in The Portable Nietzsche, 153.

17Nietzsche, Genealogy of Morals, in Basic Writings of Nietzsche, 590.
Aeschylus -must in the end overwhelm even the greatest of these tragedians.\textsuperscript{18} Get out of this mood of weighty and profound seriousness, perhaps with an Aristophanes leading the way.

Let us imagine a coming generation with such intrepidity of vision, with such a heroic penchant for the tremendous; let us imagine the bold stride of these dragon-slayers, the proud audacity with which they turn their back on all the weakling's doctrines of optimism in order to "live resolutely" in wholeness and fullness; would it not be necessary for the tragic man of such a culture, in view of his self education for seriousness and terror, to desire a new art, the art of metaphysical comfort, to desire tragedy as his own . . .\textsuperscript{19}

One of the most interesting places Nietzsche talks about laughter is Of the Vision and the Riddle,

> Among the wild cliffs I stood alone, Bleak, in the Bleakest Moonlight. \textit{But there lay a man.} And there—the dog, jumping, bristling whining—now he saw me coming; then he howled again, he \textit{cried}. Had I ever heard a dog cry like this for help? and verily, what I saw—I had never seen the like. A young shepherd I saw writhing, gagging, in spasms, his face distorted, and a heavy black snake hung out of his mouth. Had I ever seen so much nausea and pale dread on one face? He seemed to have been asleep when the snake crawled in his throat, and there bit itself fast. My hand tore at the snake and tore in vain, it did not tear the snake out of his throat. Then it cried out of me: "Bite! Bite its head off! Bite!" Thus it cried out of me—my dread, my hatred my nausea, my pity, all that is good and wicked in me cried out of me with a single cry.

> You bold ones who surround me! You searchers, researchers, and whoever among you has embarked with cunning sails on unexplored seas. You who are glad of riddles! Guess me this riddle that I saw then, interpret me the vision of the loneliest. For it was a vision and a foreseeing. \textit{What did I see then in a parable?} And who is it who must yet come one day? \textit{Who} is the Shepherd into whose throat the snake crawled thus? Who is the man into whose throat all that is heaviest and blackest will crawl thus?

> The Shepherd, however, bit as my cry counseled him; he bit with a good bite. Far away he spewed the head of the snake—and jumped up. No longer Shepherd, no longer human—one changed, radiant, \textit{laughing}! Never yet on earth

\textsuperscript{18}Nietzsche, \textit{The Gay Science}, 75.

\textsuperscript{19}Nietzsche, \textit{The Birth of Tragedy}, in \textit{Basic Writings of Nietzsche}, 26.
has a human being laughed as he laughed! Oh my brothers, I heard a laughter that was no human laughter; and now a thirst gnaws at me, a longing that never grows still. My longing for this laughter gnaws at me; oh, how do I bear going on living! And how could I bear to die now!

Thus spake Zarathustra.²⁰

where Nietzsche examines laughter and how it relates to nausea. The shepherd discharges "my hatred, my nausea, my pity all that is good and wicked . . . are all discharged, ridendo dicere severum."²¹ All the absurdity of existence is absolved with laughter. Not just any laughter; a superhuman laughter. A laughter so great that it inspires the shepherd. What now of the future of laughter? What place does laughter have at the table of the overman? "Zarathustra claims to have canonized laughter."²²

As Nietzsche put it "Laughter I have pronounced holy."

'Golden laughter', as distinguished from all other forms of laughter, is the emblem of the overman. For Nietzsche, laughter of this kind means one truly understands ones place in the world as the value creator, the esteemer. Nietzsche's overman knows he must constantly create meaning and value. As there are no transcendental values, all new values are to be created with an eye to the values of life. A light foot and "gay kind of seriousness and that wisdom full of pranks that constitutes the best state of the soul of man."²³ "A man's maturity—consists in having found again

²⁰Nietzsche, Thus Spake Zarathustra, in Basic Writings of Nietzsche, 271-272.

²¹"Through what is laughable say what is somber." This is the subtitle of The Case of Wagner, in Basic Writings of Nietzsche, 603.

²²Thiele, 188.

the seriousness one had as a child, at play." 24

A philosopher who can laugh at all destruction and creation is an individual who can deal with the chaos of existence. He is someone who can laugh at one's own idea of self importance and claims of suffering. He is one of those great individuals who can "... live dangerously! Build your cities beside Vesuvius! Send your ships into uncharted seas! Live at war with your peers and yourselves! Be robbers and conquerors as long as you cannot be rulers and possessors, you seekers of Knowledge!" 25 For these creative individuals, laughter is the weapon of choice. "To be incapable of taking one's enemies, one's accidents, even one's misdeeds seriously for very long—that is the sign of strong, full natures in whom there is an excess of the power to form, to mold to recuperate and to forget." 26 The laughing warrior is the image Nietzsche would have us visualize of the 'attempters' of tomorrow. Nothing is so sacred, just as it was in the times of Athens, that the philosopher cannot laugh at it. Every artist (and philosopher) "arrives at the ultimate pinnacle of greatness only when he comes to see himself and his art beneath him—when he knows how to laugh at himself." 27

In summation, I feel that laughter, in particular 'golden laughter', plays a great many roles for Nietzsche. The thinker and philosopher of tomorrow must know death.  

24 Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 273.


26 Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 475.

27 Ibid., 475.
"Look there! Look closely! This is your life, this is the hand on the clock of your existence.""28 "Death—the certain prospect of death could sweeten every life with a precious and fragrant drop of levity."29 This intimate knowledge of death will bring forth a desire for levity and laughter, a need not to take things seriously; not to take himself, his art, or even his culture overly seriously. Laughter is a potent weapon in the hands of the courageous philosopher of tomorrow to affirm existence, no matter how horrible it appears. Laughter is perhaps the only method these bold attempters may have to deal with the chaos and inauthenticity of a world devoid of transcendental meaning and value. As only humans cry, so too, only humans laugh. They laugh as a natural, instinctual, spontaneous way of dealing with stress. Laughter is contagious. For Nietzsche, this contagiousness of laughter is a way ordinary people receive nonverbal meaning and understanding from creators. Laughter, then, is a way for those who look deepest into the abyss of existence to absolve themselves from the nausea and absurdity. After all Zarathustra's greatest danger is nausea. Holy laughter is the correct way to affirm life. This 'golden laughter' is the sword of the courageous warrior fighting wars for ideas, and the greatest reward existence offers in a world with no transcendental values.

Nietzsche's relative neglect of Attic Comedy, compared to his concentration on Attic tragedy, whatever his motive, almost begs for a Birth of Comedy. It is possible that Nietzsche left out this analysis until after the implications of the Birth of Tragedy

28Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy, in Basic Writings of Nietzsche, 140.

29Nietzsche, The Wanderer and his Shadow, in Basic Writings of Nietzsche, 165.
were worked out at length. Perhaps Nietzsche felt laughter it would be worked out by philosophers of the future, "learn how to laugh, you higher men."\(^{30}\)

\(^{30}\)Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 27.
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