

Nietzsche's Dionysian Pessimism

JOSHUA FOA DIENSTAG *University of Virginia*

As a system of thought, pessimism is often assumed to be too deterministic or self-contradictory to withstand serious scrutiny. I examine Nietzsche's use of the term "Dionysian pessimism" to describe his own philosophy in order to challenge these presumptions. Nietzsche was quite critical of the pessimistic philosophers popular in his day, but he nonetheless considered his own work to be a kind of pessimism, which he meant not as a psychological characterization but as a philosophical one. Nietzsche's Dionysian pessimism is a perspective on life that can draw sustenance, rather than recoil, from the disordered, disenchanting world left to us after the demise of metaphysics. Whereas Schopenhauer advocated resignation, Nietzsche maintained that a new ground for activity could be found apart from the narratives of reason and progress. Dionysian pessimism is an answer to those who characterize Nietzsche's philosophy, and pessimism more generally, as passive or suicidal modes of thought.

That there still *could* be an altogether different kind of pessimism, . . . this premonition and vision belongs to me as inseparable from me, as my *proprium* and *ipsissimum*. . . I call this pessimism of the future—for it comes! I see it coming!—*Dionysian pessimism*.

—*The Gay Science*

Is it possible to draw a positive conclusion from pessimism, or is such an attitude simply a confusion or a contradiction in terms? It is often maintained that pessimism cannot be taken seriously as a philosophy because it leads nowhere, that is, it leads to hopelessness or resignation.¹ One could reply that the consequences of a philosophy cannot affect its truth or falsehood. We cannot reject pessimism because we do not like where it takes us. On the contrary, we should be on guard against any tendency to suppress a line of thought because its conclusion repels us. Yet, the eminently logical quality of this reply may deflect our attention from another and more satisfying sort of response, one that defends pessimism in particular as opposed to disagreeable thoughts generally. We must not simply grant that pessimism leads to a posture of resignation. The epigraph from Nietzsche suggests that another result from pessimism is possible or, indeed, that there is another sort of pessimism altogether, the conclusions of which do not lead inevitably to despair.

Like the idea of progress and the various philosophies to which it gave rise, pessimism is a modern phenomenon. As many historians have noted, the linear sense of historical time that emerged in the early-modern period made entirely new sorts of polit-

ical thought possible (Koselleck 1985; Pocock 1975). Although this new sense of time did not, of course, produce a philosophy by itself, it did provide an underlying intellectual structure that allowed new ideas to be built atop it, and it made those ideas feel more plausible when once proposed. It has been said many times that the idea of progress is something modern. One could offer many qualifications to this platitude,² but I will accept its general validity and simply point out that the change in European time-consciousness did not authorize only the idea of progress. Pessimism, too, is one of its progeny, the hidden twin of progress in modern political thought.

What is surprising in standard intellectual histories is how rapidly the idea of linearity is assimilated to the idea of progress, as if progress and stasis are the only two choices available to political philosophy. The word *pessimism* came into widespread use only in the nineteenth century, but it clearly names a persistent thought or set of thoughts that has recurred often in social and political theory since the Enlightenment in tandem with its opposite. Both terms appear only after the thoughts they reflect are already in play. Leibniz first used "optimum" as a correlate to "maximum" and "minimum" in his *Théodicée* of 1710 (1985). French writers then began to refer to his doctrine as one of *optimisme*. The term apparently crosses into English with the popularity of Voltaire's *Candide ou l'Optimisme* of 1759 (1992).

The first known printed appearance of "pessimism" in English followed a few decades later, although the context seems to indicate that the term was already in use.³ Philosophically, however, the emergence of pessimism may be dated to 1750 (1964) and the appearance of Rousseau's *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, with its characterization of modern man as a moral degenerate. Rousseau's ideas were seconded, in the early nineteenth century, in such works as Leopardi's

Joshua Foa Dienstag is Associate Professor and Associate Chair, Department of Government and Foreign Affairs, P.O. Box 400787, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA, 22904-4787 (jfdienstag@virginia.edu).

Earlier versions were presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association and the Princeton Political Philosophy Colloquium. I thank all the respondents and participants at those occasions for their helpful comments. Thanks are also due to Matthew Goldfeder, Amy Gutmann, George Kateb, Jennifer Mnookin, Alexander Nehamas, Bernard Reginster, and the referees and editor of this journal for their responses to various drafts. I also thank the University of Virginia and Northwestern University for research support that made the writing possible.

¹ See, for example, Bertrand Russell's (1945, 753–9) brief dismissal of Schopenhauer.

² The most common qualification is the claim that modern theories of progress are merely a secularized version of earlier Christian theologies of hope. The classic text is Löwith 1949. This argument has met with strong criticisms from, among others, Blumenberg (1983) and Pocock (1975). Although I cannot address this debate in detail, I should note that I find these criticisms largely persuasive.

³ See *pessimism* in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

Moral Essays ([1827] 1983), but pessimism achieved its brief period of genuine popularity through the work of Schopenhauer, whose *Parerga and Paralipomena* went through many editions after its initial publication in 1851 (1942). Thereafter, although never a dominant school in political theory, pessimism was a well-recognized position for at least several generations.⁴

What should be clear, even from this brief history, is that pessimism was originally viewed as a theory rather than (as we often think of it today) a psychological disposition. Rousseau's complicated story of material development coinciding with ethical devolution, for example, contained a great deal of human psychology but neither implied nor was meant to engender a depressive outlook. With Schopenhauer, the story is more complicated. As the author of such lines as "If the immediate and direct purpose of our life is not suffering then our existence is the most ill-adapted to its purpose in the world" (Schopenhauer 1970, 41), he indeed recommended withdrawal from material pursuits. But his reasons for doing so were largely metaphysical, and he expected that such a withdrawal would sharply limit human unhappiness. In any case, it is our very modern tendency to project a philosophical position onto people who are simply depressed that leads us to confuse philosophical with psychological pessimism. The question of the implications of pessimism cannot be settled by studying the effects of unhappiness; they need to be addressed at the theoretical level at which they arose.⁵ Happiness and unhappiness are universal phenomena, whereas pessimism, like the theories of progress to which it is opposed, is a modern idea.

Nietzsche's relationship to the pessimists who preceded him was hardly one of uniform celebration. He called Rousseau a "moral tarantula," and although initially inspired by Schopenhauer's philosophy, he eventually dissociated himself from its systematic conclusions (but retained a respect for its critical spirit). Nietzsche was also unkind toward the pessimists popular in the Germany of his day, especially Eduard von Hartmann, who held the chair of philosophy in Berlin; Nietzsche called him "completely abysmal" (BGE 204).⁶ As discussed below, Nietzsche believed that the

pessimism of both Hartmann and Schopenhauer led directly to nihilism. Indeed, the very popularity of this form of pessimism in the late nineteenth century was one reason Nietzsche believed nihilism would soon enjoy a temporary dominance of European society.

Intermixed with his critique, however, is an account of another kind of pessimism. Nietzsche viewed it as distinct from the popular one and called it "that courageous pessimism that is . . . the way to 'myself,' to my task" (AOM, Preface, 4). This alternative grew both from the "pessimism" of the pre-Socratic Greeks (as he called it in *The Birth of Tragedy*) and from Schopenhauer's philosophy, but Nietzsche distinguished sharply between what he frequently called "my pessimism" and those that preceded it. Ultimately, he gave his alternative the name "Dionysian pessimism" (GS 370).⁷ What exactly Nietzsche meant by this term and what appeal it may still have is the aim of this essay to discover. In part, this is a project of disentanglement, since Nietzsche made many references to "pessimism" without always indicating which variety he was talking about. When these references are viewed as a whole, however, clear patterns begin to emerge. Indeed, Nietzsche speaks of many types of pessimism, "the unclear word," only one of which he can embrace (KGW 8.1.129; see WP 38).

"Pessimism," by itself, is not a very specific term to Nietzsche, and this is not surprising. The late nineteenth century was the one period in which pessimism enjoyed wide respectability, if not allegiance, in popular and intellectual discussions.⁸ The term was used by and applied to a wide spectrum of authors in an indiscriminate way. Nietzsche's notes in the 1880s contain several lists of the various types of pessimism. Whether he composed these lists simply to distinguish among the possible varieties or because he planned to write about them in sequence is unclear. One list reads, in part: "Russian pessimism. Tolstoi, Dostoevsky / aesthetic pessimism l'art pour l'art 'description' / romantic and antiromantic pessimism / epistemological pessimism. / Schopenhauer. "Phenomenalism." / anarchistic pessimism," and so on, down to an entry for "moralistic pessimism," which Nietzsche identifies with himself (KGW 8.2.73-4).⁹

Nietzsche did not address all these varieties of

⁴ In the nineteenth century, examples are Eduard von Hartmann and then Hyppolite Taine; in the twentieth, Weber, Adorno, Camus, Cioran, and so on. Relaxing one's definitions a bit permits a much longer list (including such figures as Freud, Heidegger, Unamuno, and Sartre) to be generated. I cannot take up here the question of the proper boundaries of pessimistic thinking. A simple definition might be: those who accept modern notions of temporality but who reject the idea of progress. See the "Greek Pessimism" section below.

⁵ This has not stopped interpreters from attributing Schopenhauer's pessimism, for example, to an unhappy childhood. See the introduction by Hollingdale to Schopenhauer 1970.

⁶ Nietzsche references will use the following system: AC = *The Anti-Christ* (1968); AOM = *Assorted Opinions and Maxims* (1986); BGE = *Beyond Good and Evil* (1966a); BT = *The Birth of Tragedy* (1967b); D = *Daybreak* (1982); EH = *Ecce Homo* (1967a); HH = *Human, All-too-Human* (1986); GS = *The Gay Science* (1974); GM = *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1967a); PTG = *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of Greeks* (1962); Z = *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1966b); TI = *Twilight of the Idols* (1967a); UM = *Untimely Mediations* (1984); and WP = *The Will to Power* (1967c). Numbers refer to

Nietzsche's numbered sections or, if there are none, to page numbers in the editions listed in the references. For KGW = *Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (1967d), numbers refer to volume, book, and page. All translations from this last are my own responsibility, although I often draw on those in WP and other published versions when these exist. All emphases are original unless otherwise noted.

⁷ Nietzsche also occasionally spoke of "the pessimism of strength" (KGW 8.2.133), which, as we shall see, has a parallel but not quite identical meaning.

⁸ One interesting account of this, with many useful citations to the contemporary literature, appears in Dale 1989, chaps. 9–10.

⁹ A version of this jotting appears in *The Will to Power* as "aphorism" 82. The editors inserted a variety of punctuation marks in order to clarify and associate various lines with one another; all this punctuation is suppositional, and some of it appears mistaken (apart from the obvious awkwardness involved in pretending that a list is an aphorism). In Nietzsche's notebook, but not in WP, the note goes on to list other topics that apparently are to be considered related, such as "nationalism / industrial competition / science." To the best of my

pessimism in depth, but when he did consider them, he was usually careful to distinguish them from their relatives. From his perspective, what they had in common was their practice of rejection and denigration or, in his vocabulary, “no-saying.” But the object and means of no-saying were far more important to Nietzsche than the negativity itself. After another such list of pessimisms (“of sensibility, . . . of ‘unfree will’, . . . of doubt”), he sets out a clarification: “What must not be confused with all this: pleasure in saying No and doing No out of a tremendous strength and tension derived from saying Yes . . . the *Dionysian* in will, spirit, taste” (WP 1020). Dionysian pessimism, then, although it too is a no-saying and related to the others, is explicitly set off from them. For Nietzsche it is a philosophy of personal conduct, a suggestion of how to manage the human condition and cope with the basic problems of existence. Far from being a psychological disposition, it is a set of practices intended to guide an individual through the chaotic and disenchanting world in which we find ourselves.

A great deal has been written on the “art of living” that Nietzsche prescribes as a kind of substitute for ethics.¹⁰ This literature points us in the right direction but misses something crucial by ignoring Nietzsche’s self-characterization as a kind of pessimist. The implications of that label will be explored below, but they can be prefaced as follows: Pessimism has a particular understanding of the burdens of the human condition that these interpreters have not fully acknowledged. For Nietzsche, the time-bound character of our existence forms the basic problematic (and sets limits to the possibilities) of any life-practice that he can recommend.

Nietzsche’s Dionysian pessimism is a crystallization of ideas that takes place relatively late in his philosophical growth, but the term had many precursors in his earlier periods. It is best understood by tracing the development of Nietzsche’s thoughts on pessimism and, relatedly, the process by which he disentangled his own thinking from that of Schopenhauer.¹¹ Nietzsche began by quoting Schopenhauer uncritically, but he ended by proclaiming his views to be the opposite of

knowledge, Nietzsche does not refer to his own pessimism as “moralistic” elsewhere.

¹⁰ The phrase “art of living” is from Hadot (1995, 272), who used it as a description of the intended goal of ancient philosophy, “an exercise practiced at each instant.” See also Nehamas (1985, 1998), who applies the phrase to Nietzsche, as well as Thiele 1992, Strong 1988, Rorty 1989, Orlie 1997, and Connolly 1991. Foucault (1986) credits Hadot for inspiring his Nietzschean search for “techniques of the self” in ancient texts, but Hadot (1995, 206–13) politely declines to equate his interpretation with that of Foucault. This whole strand of interpretation is strongly criticized by those who believe Nietzsche meant to offer philosophical truths (although very novel ones) in the traditional meaning of that term. See, e.g., Appel 1999, Berkowitz, Clark 1990, and Leiter 1994. I cannot address this controversy in any detail, but my interpretation demonstrates an affinity with (and perhaps presents further evidence for) the view of the first group.

¹¹ I cannot accept the view that Nietzsche’s writings, from first to last, are all of a piece. In exploring the early writings, I attempt to identify themes that, although they have rivals at the time, later become dominant. I accept, in broad outline at least, the division of Nietzsche’s work into an early, middle, and late period as proposed by Warren 1988.

Schopenhauer’s, although he still called Dionysian pessimism his “quintessence.” While Nietzsche is more often labeled a nihilist than a pessimist, the crime of inciting resignation or apathy is one he is often charged with along with such acknowledged pessimists as Schopenhauer. If this charge turns out to be false, then it must change our opinion of both Nietzsche’s political theory and pessimism more generally.

Properly understood, pessimism is not simply an important element of Nietzsche’s philosophy but a tradition whose strength and relevance has been overlooked. In the right hands, pessimism can be—and has been—an energizing and even a liberating philosophy. It does indeed ask us to limit and eliminate some of our hopes and expectations, but it can also provide the means to navigate the bounded universe it describes. An entire literature, both scholarly and popular, is devoted to blaming pessimism for whatever spiritual crisis is thought to occupy us at the moment.¹² Indeed, it is such a flexible term of abuse that it has readily been applied to almost every critical social theory of the twentieth century. Existentialism, critical theory, and postmodernism are regularly labeled pessimistic, as if doing so were enough to discredit them. The term is more appropriate in some of these cases than others, but some thought should be given to why the label functions so well as a gesture of dismissal.

Critics often mistake a depiction of the world for a choice about our future, as if philosophers rejoice at the decline or decay they describe. This is akin to deriding scientists who warn of global warming because their models give apocalyptic predictions. Is it sensible to assume that the scientists want their predictions to come true? If the pessimists are right, it is the world that threatens us, not the writers who describe it. Yet, rather than address the threats to happiness that the world daily provides, critics of pessimism focus instead on the bearers of ill tidings and hope that, in dismissing them, they will eliminate the message as well. Yet, despite the instant unpopularity they accrue, pessimists keep appearing—I suspect because the world keeps delivering the bad news. Rather than blame pessimism, perhaps we should study it. Rather than hide from the ugliness of the world, perhaps we should learn to withstand it. Nietzsche took it as his task to find a way to live with the conclusions at which he had arrived, and to live well, sometimes even joyfully. One can debate the degree to which he succeeded, but understanding his pessimism must reorient our approach to all those pessimisms that followed in his wake.

GREEK PESSIMISM

Nietzsche first wrote of pessimism and its connection to the Dionysian in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Although it was certainly anachronistic to apply the term to the ancient Greeks (the word did not exist before the early nineteenth century), his use of it here explains a great deal

¹² Some recent representative titles are *Enemies of Hope: A Critique of Contemporary Pessimism* (Tallis 1999) and *The Future and Its Enemies* (Postrel 1998).

about its meaning in his later work. Its appearance in this early work may be thought to be due principally to the influence of Schopenhauer, but the Greek version Nietzsche claims to identify is in many ways distinct from Schopenhauer's.¹³ In retrospect, Nietzsche recognized this. In the "Attempt at a Self-Criticism," which he added to the book upon its republication, he lamented that he had "observed and spoiled Dionysian premonitions with Schopenhauerian formulations" (BT, "ASC," 6).¹⁴ But this retrospective judgment did not, as might be expected, lead him to alter the characterization of the pre-Socratic Greeks as pessimists. That was not the "Schopenhauerian formulation" he had in mind. Indeed, in the 1886 edition he added the subtitle "Hellenism and Pessimism" to the work and emphasized in his new introduction that what he still approved of in the book was its examination of "the good, severe will of the older Greeks to pessimism" and its contrast with the "optimism" initiated around the time of Socrates (BT, "ASC," 4).

The mistake that the new introduction identifies is the *confusion* of Greek pessimism with the Schopenhauerian variety. The Dionysian pessimism of which Nietzsche had a premonition through his exploration of the Greeks was obscured at first by his equation of it with Schopenhauer's philosophy. Later, the ancient Greeks were still viewed as pessimists but were simply another kind, as was Nietzsche himself. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, in fact, we have an early version of Nietzsche's own pessimism. Greek pessimism is not the same as that of Schopenhauer or Nietzsche, but it is an instructive model, both to Nietzsche, who called it "the only parable and parallel in history for my own innermost experience" (EH, "BT," 2), and to us in our attempt to understand his later attachment to this term.

The task that *The Birth of Tragedy* set itself was to explain not only the appearance of Greek tragedy but also its disappearance, at least in its traditional form, after Euripides. As is well known, Nietzsche hypothesizes that Socrates' introduction (and Plato's furtherance) of a rationalistic philosophy destroyed the pre-existing cultural grounds for Greek tragedy (BT 12–5). What did Socrates destroy, and how was this possible? Why, in any case, should a philosopher have the power to affect the theater? The answer lies in the pessimism that Nietzsche associates with the pre-Socratic philosophers and his belief that their ideas reflected the original character of early Greek culture. "Tragedy is the outlet of mystic-pessimistic knowledge" (KGW 3.3.73). Pessimism was the philosophical basis for the plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles. This was the wisdom

that the pre-Socratics possessed and that later generations first denied, then forgot. Socrates is the agent of this change because his philosophy is essentially *optimistic* (BT 14).¹⁵

In the period in which he wrote *The Birth*, Nietzsche did not think of optimism and pessimism as two equal, if opposite, ways of looking at the world, as we might today; rather "pessimism . . . is older and more original than optimism" (KGW 4.1.208). Pessimism is the domain of the Ionian philosophers who preceded Socrates and whose teachings we possess only in fragments. Instead of trying to construct a systematic, ordering philosophy, as Socrates and Plato were to do, the pre-Socratics grasped the chaotic and disordered nature of the world and only attempted to cope with it insofar as that was possible: "Pessimism is the consequence of knowledge of the absolute illogic of the world-order" (KGW 3.3.74).

In some notes from this period, Nietzsche first attributes to Democritus the doctrine that "the world [is] without moral and aesthetic meaning" and calls this idea "the pessimism of accidents" (KGW 3.4.151). In *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, a posthumously published essay written at about the same time as *The Birth*, he likens Anaximander to Schopenhauer and calls him "the first philosophical author of the ancients." He goes on to describe Anaximander as a "true pessimist" and quotes his only extant fragment to justify the label: "Where the source of things is, to that place they must also pass away, according to necessity, for they must pay penance and be judged for their injustices, in accordance with the ordinance of Time" (PTG 4; see KGW 3.2.312).¹⁶ The comparison with Schopenhauer follows directly in Nietzsche's text and emphasizes the moral quality in both of their philosophies; both view "all coming-to-be as though it were an illegitimate emancipation from eternal being, a wrong for which destruction is the only penance" (PTG 4; see Cartwright 1998, 122). As discussed below, Nietzsche later distinguished between Schopenhauer's moralizing pessimism and that of the Greeks.

In other words, the pre-Socratics, as Nietzsche interpreted them, grasped the animating principle of pessimism as I have described it elsewhere (Dienstag 1999, 85–6): Time is an unshakable burden for human beings because it leads to the ultimate destruction of all things—and this fate belies any principle of order that may, on the surface, appear to guide the course of events.¹⁷ Of course, whether any of the pre-Socratics would have put things this way is debatable (although Heraclitus, in particular, is certainly often understood

¹³ That Schopenhauer strongly influenced Nietzsche is generally uncontested by scholars, but the degree and timing of that influence are matters of considerable debate. For example, Kaufmann (in Nietzsche 1967b, 60n.) believes Nietzsche had already "broken loose from Schopenhauer" in *The Birth of Tragedy*, whereas Nehamas (1985, 42) believes it is precisely on the issue of tragedy that "the influence of Schopenhauer became dominant." Janaway (1998, 22), in a judicious formulation, maintains that "the Schopenhauerian system hovers eerily in the background, unasserted but indispensable." My article cannot settle this debate but may make a useful contribution to it.

¹⁴ *The Birth of Tragedy* was published in 1872 and reissued in 1886.

¹⁵ A parallel analysis, but without the emphasis on pessimism, is offered in Strong 1988, 152ff.

¹⁶ This is a translation of Nietzsche's German translation of the Greek original, which he slightly adapted to suit his own understanding. A standard English translation of the pre-Socratics renders Anaximander's fragment thus: "And the source of coming-to-be for existing things is that into which destruction, too, happens 'according to necessity; for they pay penalty and retribution to each other for their injustice according to the assessment of Time'" (Kirk, Raven, and Schofield 1983, 118).

¹⁷ For an alternate account of pessimism see Pauen 1997. For some conceptual analysis, see Bailey 1988.

in this fashion). What is important is that Nietzsche understood them to be doing so, that he understood the root of pessimism to be, as he later wrote, “time-sickness [*Zeit-Krankheit*]” (KGW 7.2.51).

Nietzsche considered tragedy to be the outgrowth of this view of the world as something constantly in flux, constantly in the process of becoming and, thus, constantly in the process of destroying. The ravages of time could not be cured or compensated through tragedy, only understood: “Tragedy . . . is in its essence pessimistic. Existence is in itself something very terrible, man something very foolish” (KGW 3.2.38). Nietzsche resists the conclusion, popular since Aristotle, that tragedy offers some kind of purification of the emotions generated by the terrible truths of the human condition (TI, “What I Owe,” 5; WP 851). He also rejects the idea that tragedies contain some sort of moral lesson meant to instruct us in ethical behavior. Instead, he argues, tragedy simply serves to lay bare for us the horrible situation of human existence that the pre-Socratic philosophers describe, a situation from which our minds would otherwise flee:

The hero of tragedy does not prove himself . . . in a struggle against fate, just as little does he suffer what he deserves. Rather, blind and with covered head, he falls to his ruin: and his desolate but noble burden with which he remains standing in the presence of this well-known world of terrors presses itself like a thorn in our soul (KGW 3.2.38).

The tragic outlook is thus generated from a base of pessimistic knowledge. It recommends no cure for the pains of existence, only a public recognition of their depth and power.

From the beginning, too, this view is associated with the Dionysian, “the mother of the mysteries, tragedy, pessimism” (KGW 3.3.309). The Athenian public theatrical festivals were known as the Dionysia, and Nietzsche goes so far as to claim the existence of a tradition “that Greek tragedy in its earliest form had for its sole theme the sufferings of Dionysus” (BT 10).¹⁸ Dionysus, in Nietzsche’s account (which here certainly parallels Schopenhauer’s account of the human condition), suffers the prototypical agonies of existence inflicted by time. He is severed from the eternal flux and individuated, then torn to pieces and reunited with the whole:

This view of things already provides us with all the elements of a profound and pessimistic view of the world, together with the *mystery doctrine of tragedy*: the fundamental knowledge of the oneness of everything existent, the conception of individuation as the primal cause of evil, and of art as the joyous hope that the spell of individuation may be broken in augury of a restored oneness (BT 10).

Dionysian suffering is essentially human suffering. In tragedy, this is indicated by a connection between the various elements involved in the public performance of the drama. The tragic hero simply personifies the

“Dionysian state” of the chorus as a whole (BT 10). The chorus is “the mirror-image in which the Dionysian man contemplates himself” and also “a vision of the Dionysian mass of spectators” (BT 8). Actor, chorus, and public are all connected in tragedy through their Dionysian character (see Strong 1988, 165). Each is a fragment torn from the whole. Nietzsche is here critiquing but also reconstituting the traditional philological stance that the chorus represents the Greek public. Although he sharply attacks the original proponents of this view, he in fact proposes not to reject it but to modify it. What he truly dislikes about the association in its original form is the implication that the connection between Athenian performers and spectators is somehow reflected in contemporary (i.e., nineteenth-century) relationships between artists and their public. He will only accept the connection of citizens and chorus on the condition that the Greek public is understood as a unique phenomenon, a “Dionysian throng,” that is, as a public already infected with the pessimistic wisdom of the pre-Socratics.¹⁹ Because modern audiences no longer share this outlook, comparisons of the moderns to the Greeks are, to Nietzsche, specious.

Against this account of pessimism and tragedy as a kind of Dionysian wisdom, Nietzsche counterposes Socratic philosophy, whose characteristic feature now appears to be its optimism.²⁰ Even while proclaiming its ignorance, Socratic inquiry rejects the pessimistic idea that inquiry, like every human activity, is ultimately doomed: “For who could mistake the *optimistic* element in the nature of dialectic, which celebrates a triumph with every conclusion . . . the optimistic element which, having once penetrated tragedy must gradually overgrow its Dionysian regions and impel it necessarily to self-destruction” (BT 14). Socrates does not promise eternal happiness, but he does affirm both that virtue results in happiness and that virtue can be taught; happiness is theoretically within the grasp of all (BT 15).²¹ He denies that there is anything ultimately mysterious about life or inevitable about suffering: “By contrast with this practical pessimism, Socrates is the prototype of the theoretical optimist who, with his faith that the nature of things can be fathomed, ascribes to

¹⁹ Nietzsche identifies A.W. Schlegel as the originator of the other view; although he proclaims that he gives Schlegel’s formulation “a deeper sense,” he certainly also exaggerates his own distance from contemporary German thought about the Greeks.

²⁰ My brief account of tragedy obviously underplays the role of the Apollonian as a contrast to the Dionysian. I do not suggest that the Apollonian is unimportant in *The Birth*. In the context of this discussion, however, it is less salient, since it is the Dionysian element of tragedy that is particularly linked to pessimism, and that is the element to which Socrates is particularly supposed to object: “This is the new opposition: the Dionysian and the Socratic” (BT 12).

²¹ Throughout *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche’s characterizations of Socrates are given without reference to their source; here it seems clear that he has in mind the conclusions of Socrates in Plato’s *Gorgias*, *Protagoras*, and *Republic* that true happiness can only come from virtue and that virtue is equivalent to knowledge. This picture is common enough, but it is far from the only one possible; an opposite view could perhaps be constructed from the Socrates of the *Meno*, who concludes that virtue *cannot* be taught.

¹⁸ Nietzsche calls this tradition “undisputed,” which seems doubtful. Again, however, the accuracy of his construal of the philological literature and traditions is less important than how these were related to his own views.

knowledge and insight the power of a panacea" (BT 15).

Notwithstanding Socrates' fate at the hands of his fellow citizens, Nietzsche has no doubt that this approach, developed by Plato, was ultimately victorious in its struggle with tragedy: "Optimistic dialectic drives *music* out of tragedy with the scourge of its syllogisms" (BT 14). Just as the pessimism of an older generation of Greeks explains the origin of tragedy, so the Socratic turn in Greek philosophy explains its demise. When the population adopted the optimistic perspective, the cultural context for tragedy evaporated (see Strong 1988, 161). From Nietzsche's perspective, this was anything but a theoretical advance. Greek pessimism may have been somewhat soporific in its consequences (see below), but it had a fundamental honesty that Socratic-Platonic philosophy lacks. This point, in particular, is reemphasized in the later introduction to *The Birth*. Pessimism is today, as in Nietzsche's time, commonly associated with ideas of cultural decay, but he takes the Greek experience to indicate precisely the opposite:

Is pessimism *necessarily* a sign of decline . . . as it once was in India and now is, to all appearances, among us, "modern" men and Europeans? Is there a pessimism of *strength*? . . . And again: that of which tragedy died, the Socratism of morality, the dialectics, frugality, and cheerfulness of the theoretical man—how now? might not this very Socratism be a sign of decline. . . . Is the resolve to be so scientific about everything perhaps a kind of fear of, an escape from, pessimism? A subtle last resort against—*truth* (BT, "ASC," 1)?

The Greeks of Socrates' generation could no longer *bear* to live with the brutal truths of the human condition and sought refuge in an optimistic philosophy. To Nietzsche this was "morally speaking, a sort of cowardice . . . amorally speaking, a ruse" (BT, "ASC," 1). Either way, it was an active self-deception that made life more tolerable but less genuine. It was a retreat from a real look at the abyss to a pleasing fantasy of progress and happiness. Thus, Nietzsche concludes, the optimists are the true harbingers of cultural decline. What else can we call their weakening of resolve in comparison with the stance of the earlier Greeks? Nietzsche's attack on Socrates and Plato is often taken to be a defense of irrationalism, but from his perspective it is they who retreat from an honest assessment of the world. The pessimistic vision of the world as fundamentally disordered, untamable, unfair, and destructive is the "truth" against which they close their eyes and retreat to a cave.

If this was Greek pessimism, and if it was in some sense Dionysian, then what separates it from Nietzsche's own later pessimism? We are dealing here only with matters of degree, but the differences are real enough (a fuller answer will be given below). Ultimately, the "Dionysian man" of *The Birth* is likened by Nietzsche to Hamlet—both are paralyzed by the knowledge of "the eternal nature of things." Both, that is, have gained an understanding of the primordial chaos of the world, next to which their own efforts will

always amount to nothing. Both, therefore, draw the conclusion that acting is pointless:

The Dionysian man resembles Hamlet: both once looked truly into the essence of things, they have *gained knowledge*, and nausea inhibits action; for their action could not change anything in the eternal nature of things; they feel it to be ridiculous or humiliating that they should be asked to set right a world that is out of joint. Knowledge kills action; . . . true knowledge, an insight into the horrible truth, outweighs any motive for action, both in Hamlet and in the Dionysian man (BT 7).

The pessimism of the Greeks resulted in a quiescence that tragedy, rather than purging, encouraged and strengthened.²² This Schopenhauerian conclusion that pessimism must issue in resignation is reversed in Nietzsche's later thought. Ultimately, for Nietzsche, the combination of the Dionysian and the pessimistic served to stimulate activity rather than passivity. In some notes for *Ecce Homo*, he wrote of *The Birth* that it contained, in embryonic form, "the conception of pessimism, a pessimism of strength, a classical pessimism . . . The antithesis of classical pessimism is romantic pessimism . . . e.g., the pessimism of Schopenhauer" (KGW 8.3.21). Although it is true that *The Birth* held many of the elements of Nietzsche's later account of pessimism, this statement probably exaggerates its distance from Schopenhauer (see Janaway 1998, 24). After all, in the first edition Nietzsche maintains that the Greeks derived some sort of "metaphysical comfort" from tragedy; later, in rejecting that conclusion, he suggests "you ought to learn the art of *this-worldly* comfort first; you ought to learn to laugh, my young friends, if you are hell-bent on remaining pessimists" (BT, "ASC," 7).²³ Ultimately, then, Nietzsche's Dionysian pessimism stimulates action. But how can the elements of Greek pessimism be recombined to draw the conclusion directly opposite that of *The Birth*?

PESSIMISM AND NIHILISM

It will be helpful at this point to locate Nietzsche's objections to the pessimism of his day, especially that of Schopenhauer and Hartmann. Although Nietzsche considered the latter to be a comically simplistic version of the former, his mockery of it is instructive, for it reveals a great deal about what he takes popular German pessimism to be.

Nietzsche judged Hartmann's pessimism to be a kind of reverse utilitarianism. That is, Hartmann posed the question of life as if it were a simple cost-benefit analysis: "Whether it be hedonism or pessimism or utilitarianism or eudaemonism: all these modes of

²² Again it can be objected that this account ignores the Apollonian element of tragedy, which allowed the Greeks to put a mask of "cheerfulness" over these conclusions (BT 8). But this point should not be overstated. The Apollonian elements do not, in Nietzsche's account, cause the Greeks to forget Dionysian insights; they are simply a means for avoiding suicide. They do not fundamentally alter the posture of resignation but, rather, redirect its effects.

²³ Maudemarie Clark (1998, 45) characterizes *The Birth* as "an attempt to save Schopenhauer's metaphysics by showing how to avoid Schopenhauer's own inconsistency."

thought which assess the value of things according to *pleasure and pain* . . . [are] naïveties" (BGE 225). They are naïve because they take reports of pleasure and pain at face value and because they never imagine that something other than simple pleasures could be a justification of life. Finding the pains of life to outweigh the pleasures, Hartmann draws the "logical" conclusion that life itself is best rejected. To Nietzsche, this entire way of thinking is absurd and hardly merits the title of "philosophy"; Hartmann's pessimism is really no more than a mathematical summation of peoples' feelings.

"The sum of displeasure outweighs the sum of pleasure; consequently it would be better if the world did not exist"—"The world is something that rationally should not exist because it causes the feeling subject more displeasure than pleasure"—chatter of this sort calls itself pessimism today! . . . I despise this *pessimism of sensibility*: it is itself a sign of deeply impoverished life. I shall never permit such a meager [one] as Hartmann to speak of his "philosophical pessimism" (WP 701; see WP 789).

Nietzsche's objection was not that Hartmann performed his calculation incorrectly. Nietzsche certainly did not maintain that life was or would be justified when pleasures outweighed pains (see KGW 4.2.414). Aside from its sheer simplemindedness, what condemns this approach is the impossibility of making such a calculation. We lack the necessary measuring-stick. Hartmann assumes that it is possible to stand outside life as a whole and, as it were, tote up its pluses and minuses. This is inconceivable, in Nietzsche's view: There is no perspective *sub specie aeternitatis* from which to make such an assessment, and the world itself, as the pre-Socratics recognized, is in a constant state of transformation, or becoming, which renders any such calculations transient and useless.

Becoming is of equivalent value every moment; the sum of its values always remains the same; in other words, it has no value at all, for anything against which to measure it, and in relation to which the word "value" would have meaning, is lacking. *The total value of the world cannot be evaluated*; consequently philosophical pessimism belongs among comical things (WP 708).

The world as a whole cannot be said to have any particular value, and it cannot be said to have a higher (or lower) value at one time rather than at another. We can never say that things are getting better or worse overall, or that the world as a whole is of high or low value. At best, we might say that, taken as a whole, things get neither better nor worse, since whatever exists is always in a process of transformation.

Nietzsche found Hartmann's pessimism comical—rather like an infant who rejects the world the moment its milk goes missing—and did not worry that many would be convinced by it. Or, if they came to espouse such a view, it would not be because the arguments were persuasive but because, as decadents, they were already inclined to this position—like the later Greeks (see TI, "Problem of Socrates," 2). Nietzsche's reaction to Schopenhauer was quite different. Although Schopenhauer had made the famous analogy between life and a business whose receipts did not match its

expenses, this was only one element of his argument and, to Nietzsche, a minor one, even if it was emphasized by successors such as Hartmann.²⁴

Schopenhauer had, in Nietzsche's view, made a *moral* judgment against life and not merely an economic calculation in its disfavor. Schopenhauer, unlike Hartmann, recognized the fundamental disorder of the world first identified, in a different way, by the Greeks. This, to Nietzsche, was Schopenhauer's great advance on all philosophy since Plato. It should have led him back to something like the tragic view of the pre-Socratics, but instead he drew a judgment *against* such a world, based on a moral standard.²⁵ That is, he attempted to account such a chaos generically "evil," but could only do so based on an imagined "good" stability, a timeless world of Being, against which our transient, everyday world could be measured.

Given these two insights, that becoming has no goal and that underneath all becoming there is no grand unity in which the individual could immerse himself completely as in an element of supreme value, an escape remains: to pass sentence on this whole world of becoming as a deception and to invent a world beyond it, a *true* world (WP 12; see WP 6, 9, 11).

This is the pessimism that leads to nihilism. It is pessimistic in the sense that it rejects the optimism inherent in the idea of an ordered universe. On this point, Schopenhauer remains, to Nietzsche, a great critic of the nineteenth-century social philosophies of progress, whether of the liberal-English or Hegelian-German varieties—and certainly is a stimulant to Nietzsche's own *rapprochement* to the pre-Socratics. But rather than embrace the natural chaos, as Greek tragedy did, Schopenhauer devised one final strategy to keep it at bay, namely, to sit in judgment and deem it bad. This, to Nietzsche, is something worthy of being called nihilism, and it is much more serious than Hartmann's calculation that for most individuals their quanta of pain exceeds their quanta of pleasure. It is instead a judgment against the world *as a whole*, a wish that it would not exist. Schopenhauer's pessimism is more severe because it cannot be cured, even in theory, by increasing the amount of pleasure in the world. Instead, life in its very nature is something worthy of rejection. Schopenhauer's pessimism endorses the wisdom of Silenus: "Not to be born is best," and for man "the next best thing by far is to go back / back where he came from, quickly as he can."²⁶

Ultimately, this strategy can be met with the objection Nietzsche raises to Hartmann: No observation

²⁴ This point has been overlooked by several commentators on the relationship between Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Soll (1988, 113; 1998, 83ff.), for instance, seems to assume that it is the surplus-of-pain argument that defines Schopenhauer and links him to Nietzsche. Cartwright (1998, 136) calls Schopenhauer a "quasi-hedonist" but admits that Nietzsche is not.

²⁵ There is strong evidence for this interpretation. For example, Schopenhauer (1970, 49) wrote: "Nothing is more certain than that, generally speaking, it is the grievous *sin of the world* which gives rise to the manifold and great *suffering of the world*; whereby is meant not any physical-empirical connexion but a metaphysical one."

²⁶ Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*, lines 1388–91 (1982, 358). Nietzsche discusses "the terrible wisdom of Silenus" in BT 3 and 4.

point exists from which to make such a judgment. Furthermore, there is no evidence for such a "true" world, only our "psychological need" for it to exist. Nietzsche makes these objections but then goes farther: Schopenhauer did not, in the end, have the courage of his own convictions: "a pessimist, a world-denier and God-denier, who *comes to a halt* before morality—who affirms morality and plays the flute [a pastime of Schopenhauer's], affirms *laede neminem* [harm no one] morality: what? is that actually—a pessimist" (BGE 186)? In other words, Schopenhauer betrayed the logical outcome of his own pessimism at the last possible moment by rejecting the implications of his ontology solely on a moral basis, and an unverifiable moral basis at that (see Higgins 1998, 167ff.).

At least for Socrates, optimism was based on the idea that the world had an order; when this idea was abandoned, the Socratic morality should have disappeared as well. But Schopenhauer denied the results of his own ontology. That he sought to preserve morality with a transcendental projection was transparently a failure of nerve—and one with severe consequences. When morality no longer claims to have a basis of any kind in the real world of events, it is free to condemn that world *in toto*, to develop into genuine philosophical suicidalism. Although Nietzsche saw the roots of this sort of thinking stretching back to Socrates' final request that his debt to Asclepius be paid, it was not until Schopenhauer completely uncoupled morality from ontology that this tendency could fully develop (TI, "The Problem of Socrates"). Nihilism, at least of this variety, is pessimism mixed with morality in a kind of devil's cocktail.²⁷

This is the basis for Nietzsche's repeated claim that, rather than rejecting Schopenhauer's pessimism, he "deepened" it and "first really experienced it" (WP 463). Whereas Schopenhauer mixed up and adulterated his pessimism with morality, Nietzsche takes himself to be purifying pessimism of the imperfections that Schopenhauer, its modern inventor, introduced to it (see BGE 56). In the introduction to the second volume of *Human, All-too-Human*, written in 1886, Nietzsche looks back on his *Schopenhauer as Educator* and explicitly traces this development: "I then went on to give expression to my reverence for my first and only educator, the great Arthur Schopenhauer . . . I was . . . already deep in the midst of moral skepticism and destructive analysis, *that is to say in the critique and likewise the intensifying of pessimism as understood hitherto*" (AOM, Preface, 1; see also WP 463). That critique is rooted in a moral skepticism: Schopenhauer relies on moral categories in passing a final judgment on the world, and Nietzsche rejects these categories. But the critique is likewise an intensification because it liberates Schopenhauer's pessimism (which is, after all, his original contribution) from the commonplace mo-

rality within which it has been encased.²⁸ The attack on Schopenhauer is thus, in spirit, an act of loyalty. And it leaves Nietzsche free to "experience" pessimism in a way unavailable to Schopenhauer—unavailable in fact to any philosopher in the West ever since Socrates poisoned Greek pessimism by his introduction of optimistic morality.

If this means confronting the terror that Schopenhauer, and the pre-Socratic Greeks, found in the prospect of a world of flux and becoming, Nietzsche's perspective at least offers the advantage of not succumbing to a nihilism that rejects life as a whole (see Soll 1998, 101ff.). Pessimism recognizes that "becoming aims at *nothing* and achieves *nothing*," and pessimism *does not sit in judgment of this condition* (WP 12). What is the result? "The *innocence* of becoming restored" (TI, "Four Great Errors," 8).²⁹ This idea Nietzsche considers "a tremendous restorative" (WP 765) just because we are released from the burden that morality imposes on us. Morality causes us to judge the world as a whole (an impossibility) and to judge it negatively (a mistake predicated on an impossibility): "Insofar as we believe in morality we pass sentence on existence" (WP 6), we "find existence a misfortune" (KGW 7.1.192). Along with the terror, there is also "a great liberation" involved in pessimism (TI, "FGE," 8). We no longer give credence to the world-hatred and self-hatred bound up with morality. The burden of its judgment is removed.

But are we not then returned to the Hamlet-like impotence of the pre-Socratics? Perhaps not. To the innocence of becoming, Nietzsche now believes there will be two broad categories of response, which he characterizes as arising out of "strength" and "weakness"; these indicate a capacity (or lack of capacity) to tolerate the meaningless of life. Those who cannot bear this sort of existence, who require an ultimate meaning to life, end up once again as nihilists, although in a psychological rather than a moralistic sense: "One grants the reality of becoming as the *only* reality, forbids oneself every kind of clandestine access to afterworlds and false divinities—but *cannot endure this world although one does not want to deny it*" (WP 12). This sort of pessimism *does* result in despair and resignation, and "the weak perish of it" (WP 37). This is what Schopenhauer's position, stripped of its illusions of a thing-in-itself, would amount to.

Yet, it is a mistake to believe that human beings need such premanufactured meanings, for there is a pessimism of strength as well. "It is a measure of the degree of strength of will to what extent one can do

²⁸ On Schopenhauer's self-consciously unoriginal morality, see BGE 186.

²⁹ This translation makes it appear as if Nietzsche is replacing one moral judgment about the world (i.e., that it is "guilty") with another (that it is "innocent"). But the word Nietzsche uses is "*unschuld*," the opposite in everyday speech of "*schuld*" or "guilty." *Unschuld* can be felicitously translated as "innocent," but the more literal translation is "not guilty" or "lacking guilt." Nietzsche's use of it here does not reverse the moral judgment but, insofar as possible, removes it entirely. To say that Becoming is *unschuld* is to adopt an agnostic position as to its moral worth and, moreover, to suggest that such a valuation is, in itself, inappropriate.

²⁷ Perhaps this is one example Nietzsche had in mind when he wrote of "the hidden history of philosophy, the psychology of its great names," that "Error is *cowardice*—every achievement of knowledge is a consequence of courage, of severity toward oneself" (WP 1041). See also WP 382.

without meaning in things, to what extent one can endure to live in a meaningless world *because one organizes a small portion of it oneself*" (WP 585). It is one thing to know that there is no natural or God-given meaning to the world as a whole or to life as a whole. But, from that point, to make "the inference that there is no meaning at all" is a "tremendous generalization," one that Nietzsche considers "pathological" (WP 13). Such a generalization represents an absolute disfaith in humanity, a presumption that humans can create no meaning other than that which they are given, which in itself is as without foundation as the earlier belief in a natural moral order to the world.³⁰ The alternative to this is based on the human capacity to create meanings of a temporary nature in our own corner of the cosmos. The lack of an overall natural meaning in the universe is no argument that adequate meaning cannot be generated by individuals. Nietzsche may have made this faulty generalization at the time he wrote *The Birth of Tragedy*, but he abandons it in his later work.

Aphorism 370 of *The Gay Science* encapsulates this transformation. Nietzsche describes his initial attraction to "philosophical pessimism" (Schopenhauer) and "German music" (Wagner) as based on a misunderstanding. What appeared to him at first as a cultural "earthquake" emerging from a Dionysian "over-fullness of life" was in fact the product of "the impoverishment of life," which Nietzsche now labels "romanticism." Romanticism only simulates something revolutionary; its radicalism is feigned. It seeks "above all mildness, peacefulness, and goodness in thought and deed . . . also logic, the conceptual understandability of existence . . . in short, a certain warm narrowness that keeps away fear and encloses one in optimistic horizons." Just as Wagner began his career as a partisan of the 1848 revolutions but ended as a unctuous courtier to German princes, so Schopenhauer began with a seeming rejection of Socratic optimism but, in the final analysis, retreated to it. This "romantic pessimism" is thus "an altogether different kind" from Nietzsche's own, which he names here for the first time as "Dionysian pessimism."

That there still *could* be an altogether different kind of pessimism, . . . this premonition and vision belongs to me as inseparable from me, as my *proprium* and *ipsissimum* . . . I call this pessimism of the future—for it comes! I see it coming!—*Dionysian pessimism*.

Romanticism, although it was Nietzsche's own starting point, turns out to be a kind of sham pessimism, and Nietzsche here declares his independence from it. Unadulterated pessimism is only now coming into existence; only when it does can we fully appreciate its promise and dangers. Nietzsche rejects Schopenhauer (although grateful for the education he provided), not

because the latter is too pessimistic, but because he is not pessimistic enough.

THE PESSIMISM OF STRENGTH

By a process of elimination, we have come some distance closer to understanding the pessimism of which Nietzsche could approve, but it remains to give a more detailed account of it. Certainly, his pessimism is a kind of no-saying, a rejection of traditional morality. But he emphasizes the *activity* involved in such a no-saying and considers it, by itself, to be something valuable. The alternative title Nietzsche gave one of his final books is perhaps a good starting point. *How to Philosophize with a Hammer* is the second name given to *Twilight of the Idols*. Throughout the book, however, there is little reference to this "hammer," and readers are often left wondering just what it is.³¹ In his notes Nietzsche repeatedly refers to pessimism as a kind of "hammer," one used to break down and break apart traditional ways of thinking (e.g., WP 132, 1055). This destruction is healthy and recuperative on its own, even apart from some rebuilding that may come: "The hammer: a teaching which through setting loose the death-seeking pessimism brings about an extraction of the most vital" (KGW 8.1.108).

What does it mean to wield the pessimism of strength as a tool? In the first place, of course, it means to attack existing moralities, "to teach destructive ways of thinking" (KGW 7.3.210). In this task, pessimism is an all-purpose instrument because it attacks the basis of all moralities, not just some of them. By denying the existence of any natural order to the universe and emphasizing the continuous flow of becoming and time, pessimism is as critical of utilitarian morality as it is of the Christian or Kantian variety. But its effect is not simply a critical one. Even if destruction is a necessary prelude, that is not the end in itself. A hammer also can be used to put something together—indeed, it is one of the few tools to possess this dual property. Likewise, pessimism "in the hand of the strongest becomes simply a hammer and instrument with which one can make oneself a new pair of wings" (KGW 8.1.109).

Wings of what sort? Here lies the difference between Nietzsche's pessimism and previous ones. Even the past pessimisms Nietzsche admired, such as that of the Greeks, came to an end with the destruction of illusions. In his account, the pre-Socratics evoked an ethos of virtual paralysis. As does Buddhism, they taught one to be at peace with the world's chaos but not to seek to alter it. In a long note entitled "Critique of previous pessimism," Nietzsche outlines his alternative:

³⁰ Soll (1988, 116) and Higgins (1998, 174), among many others, tend to view the difference between the two alternatives as a matter of temperament, so that the choice for strength or weakness is either something inborn and unalterable or a radical choice with no philosophical basis. I think the passages quoted above make clear that this is not the case. Every philosophical choice, for Nietzsche, is in some respect a matter of character, but it is clear that these two positions are separated by ideas, not just moods.

³¹ In the foreword, Nietzsche likens the hammer to "a tuning-fork" with which he sounds out the hollowness of idols. But this does not square well with his characterization of the work as "a declaration of war" and does not, in any case, help us understand the nature of the hammer. The final section is entitled "The Hammer Speaks" but is simply a short quotation from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Perhaps the hammer is Zarathustra himself? But this only further begs the question.

Our pessimism: the world does not have the value we thought it had. . . . Initial result: it seems worth less [sic]; . . . simply in this sense are we pessimists; namely, with the will to admit this revaluation to ourselves unreservedly and not to tell ourselves the same old story, not to lie to ourselves.

That is precisely how we find the pathos that impels us to seek *new values*. In sum: the world might be far more valuable than we used to believe; . . . while we thought we accorded it the highest interpretation, we may not even have given our human existence a moderately fair value (KGW 8.1.248).

Nietzsche is treading a delicate line, since, as we have seen, he also says it is a mistake to impute to the world any overarching value. But this does not mean we should cease to value anything at all. Schopenhauer's philosophy tends toward that nihilistic conclusion, which Nietzsche wants to resist. Pessimism as such need not lead there. Rather, the withdrawal of an overarching account of the world's value impels one to seek "new values" (note the plural). No single one of these can replace the old value system, but separately they may give us more reasons to continue living than can any overarching Meaning of Life. Christian morality and its offshoots seek to overcome thoughts of suicide with one ultimate duty, or ultimate happiness. Nietzsche's pessimism advises each of us individually to cobble together a meaning for life out of lesser goals with the ultimate result that, when these are gathered together, "the world might be far more valuable than we used to believe."

Nietzsche's inspiration here, as in so many other matters, is the example of a certain kind of art. His praise of art is not the romantic idea that it puts us in touch with great truths.³² Rather, art represents the organization of a small portion of an otherwise meaningless world that gives purpose to an individual existence (WP 585). It is the attempt to impose a temporary form on the inevitable transformation of the world; since the world must acquire some sort of particular form in its metamorphoses, art is "repeating in miniature, as it were, the tendency of the whole" (WP 617)—but by an effort of will. Art is not an attempt to fight the pattern of existence but an effort to shape that pattern into something recognizable, "to realize in oneself the eternal joy of becoming—that joy which also encompasses joy in destruction" (TI, "What I Owe," 5). The creativity of artists is, in essence, "gratitude for their existence" (WP 852).

When art assumes this shape, it becomes "the great seduction to life, the great stimulant to life" (WP 853). This is not to say, however, that such art must be "uplifting" in the conventional sense. Since joy in destruction may be a stimulant to life, even depictions of the most miserable things may be included: "The

³² His praise of art is not indiscriminate. He goes to great lengths to distinguish the sort of art he has in mind from that produced by the "artists of decadence" and "romanticism in art" (Wagner is always his chief example), which proceeds from "an impoverishment of life" and ends in "hatred of the ill-constituted, disinherited, and underprivileged . . . one who, as it were, revenges himself on all things by forcing his own image, the image of his torture, on them, branding them with it" (WP 852, GS 370).

things they display are ugly: but *that* they display them comes from their *pleasure in the ugly* How liberating is Dostoevsky" (WP 821)! Nietzsche does not mean, of course, that we should all be artists, but we should approach our lives as artists do their work. If we can understand *why* an artist who knows that art is devoid of metaphysical value still wants to paint pictures, then we can understand why Nietzsche thinks pessimism can result in a creative pathos. A better example might be the situation of an architect: Any sane architect must know that no building lasts forever. Built in opposition to nature (as to some extent every human structure must be), it will be attacked by nature (by wind, water, and so on) the moment it is completed. Whatever the purpose for which the structure is designed, that purpose will someday be superceded. However beautiful it may seem when erected, it will someday, to another set of eyes, appear ugly. Yet, knowing all this, architects pursue their craft. Knowing that the universe will ultimately not tolerate their work, they continue to organize a small portion of that same universe for local purposes.

The lack of order in the universe can also fuel nihilism, as Nietzsche is well aware. Unlike the nihilist, the pessimist does not just reveal the tragic character of existence but achieves a degree of equanimity about it. This aspect of pessimism often comes across as indifference to the suffering of others. Indeed, at times Nietzsche verges on expressing such indifference, but in the end he does something rather different. He advises, instead, that we not look to nature or God to express a horror of suffering on our behalf and that we not imagine that such suffering is any less "natural" than happiness:

The benefit consists in the contemplation of nature's magnificent *indifference* to good and evil. No justice in history, no goodness in nature: that is why the pessimist, if he is an artist, goes *in historicis* to those places where the absence of justice is revealed with splendid naiveté . . . and also in nature, to those places where her evil and indifferent character is not disguised (WP 850).

The view that pessimism leads to resignation usually includes the notion that it promotes a disinterest in the workings of the world. Nietzsche suggests just the opposite. Pessimism is an invitation to a new critical investigation of nature and history, even those elements of life that we consider ugly and evil.

One effect of this situation is that when we look at the world once again—without the grey-colored glasses of morality—we may see things differently. We may now find ourselves curious about that which, for millennia, we were taught to shun. Indeed, Nietzsche sees curiosity about what has been considered evil to be one of pessimism's greatest benefits. This does not mean we will simply celebrate what we once abhorred. Rather, we will seek it out on its own terms and come to our own fresh evaluation of it, and this goes for what was once called "good" as well:

Let us dwell a moment on this symptom of highest culture—I call it the pessimism of strength. Man no longer needs a "justification of ills"; "justification" is precisely

what he abhors: he enjoys ills *pur, cru*; he finds senseless ills the most interesting. If he formerly had need of a god, he now takes delight in a world disorder without God, a world of chance, to whose essence belong the terrible, the ambiguous, the seductive. In such a state it is precisely the *good* that needs “justifying” (WP 1019).

Nietzsche is quite clear that what we previously called good may well find a justification, but not “justification” in its previous sense: “If he *in praxi* advocates preservation of virtue, he does it for reasons that recognize in virtue a subtlety, a cunning, a form of lust for gain and power” (ibid.).

The pessimism of strength involves the use of pessimism as a hammer—as a philosophical technology—to destroy and to build. Pessimism is both a critique of existing moralities and an instrument in the construction of an alternative apart from morality. Far from ending in despair and resignation, Nietzsche considers the moment when “my type of pessimism” appears, “the *great noon*, . . . [the] great point of departure” (WP 134). Pessimism may not be the end of the journey, but all roads to the future lead through it, and it may be necessary to remain pessimistic for “a few millennia” (KGW 7.3.210). Can we say more about this alternative? In particular, what is *Dionysian* pessimism?

DIONYSIAN PESSIMISM

It is probably true that Nietzsche was less interested in assigning content to these hypothetical new values than in demonstrating that they should exist. One note on “the pessimism of the energetic” emphasizes that “the ‘to what end?’ after a terrible struggle [is] . . . itself a victory” (KGW 8.2.62). The simple desire to formulate new goals after overcoming earlier moralities is something to be celebrated. Although Nietzsche speaks often of a reevaluation of values, he never provides a new set to replace the old. Indeed, given his well-known sentiment that “a will to a system is a lack of integrity” (TI, “Maxims,” 26) and his radically individualistic belief that the formulation of new values is something each of us should undertake on our own (Z 1:22), it would be unfair to expect this from him. Still, we are not left simply with the imperiously vague injunction to “create new values.” Dionysian pessimism is not itself a value system, but it is an ethos that sheds some light on what it might be like to live a good life in the era following the death of God. This pessimism is a sort of art of living. It is a life-practice that Nietzsche recommends, although not for everyone.

Some sense of what Nietzsche meant by Dionysian is given in *The Birth of Tragedy*, but the use of this word continued to evolve (although he often wrote as if all the later meanings were implicit in the earlier ones). If Dionysian pessimism is the one “no” that evolves out of “yes,” then it is important to know what one is approving with a Dionysian “yes.” From the various texts and notes that bear on this question, the answer seems to be something on the order of “life as a whole” or “the world as it is and will always be.” But, as Nietzsche was fond of pointing out with regard to Hartmann, there is

really no perspective from which to view life as a whole (whether to deny or affirm it), so such an assent can only be a kind of gamble or risk-taking. It is an affirmation in the dark, an approval given in ignorance. Above all, it is a decision to welcome the unknown future and accept the unseen past rather than cling to a familiar present (Z 2:20). All pessimisms conclude that the universe has no order and human history no progress; the Dionysian variety is the only one that can find something to like about this situation:

My new way to “yes.” My new version of pessimism as a voluntary quest for fearful and questionable aspects of beings . . . A pessimist such as that could in that way lead to a Dionysian yes-saying to the world as it is: as a wish for its absolute return and eternity: with which a new ideal of philosophy and sensibility would be given (KGW 8.2.121).

The phrase “fearful and questionable,” which recurs frequently in Nietzsche’s texts, is carefully chosen to indicate what is at issue.³³ The aspects of existence that we have the greatest difficulty grasping and affirming are not the cruel and disgusting; they are those whose existence is so threatening to our sense of order that we have heretofore denied their very being, so that initially we find them “questionable” or “dubious.” Which are these? In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche ridicules “the almost laughable poverty of instinct displayed by German philologists whenever they approach the Dionysian.” Why laughable? Because these philologists cannot recognize what is, so to speak, right under their noses. The “Dionysian mysteries” are simply “the mysteries of sexuality . . . the *sexual* symbol was to the Greeks the symbol venerable as such, the intrinsic profound meaning of all antique piety” (TI, “What I Owe,” 4; see Higgins 1998, 170ff.). The absurdity of post-Socratic philosophy is ultimately demonstrated in its attitudes toward sex and the body. What ought to be the most obvious and immediate source of knowledge and pleasure is not merely obscured but almost entirely obliterated. Cruelty may be condemned by morality, but at least it is acknowledged; sexuality is eliminated from view through a process of “moral castrationism” (WP 204, 383).

Sexuality, not cruelty, represents that part of life with which it is most difficult to come to terms. It is the most difficult not because it is inherently shameful (“It was only Christianity . . . which made of sexuality something impure”: TI, “What I Owe,” 4). The difficulty lies in affirming the necessity for pain and suffering that accompanies any growth. That is, it involves admitting that we ourselves (and not just the world) are essentially flux and change. With its constant dissolution of boundaries, sexuality is more threatening to the optimist than is the human tendency to cruelty. This violation of self—simultaneously painful and pleasurable—is the simplest and best evidence that our own nature is as unstable and tumultuous as that of the rest of the universe and, therefore, that no calculation of

³³ *Furchtbaren und fragwürdigen* also can be translated as “terrible and doubtful.” For other uses of this term, see, for example, WP 852, GS 370. The phrase always refers to those things which the pessimist can bear the sight of but others cannot.

our best interest can ever be permanent. The Dionysian is "the triumphant Yes to life beyond death and change; true life as collective continuation of life through procreation" (ibid.). But this can only come at the cost of suffering, as the price to be paid for continuous rebirth: "In the teaching of the mysteries, pain is sanctified: the 'pains of childbirth' sanctify pain in general—all becoming and growing, all that guarantees the future, *postulates* pain . . . All this is contained in the word Dionysus" (ibid.). In Christian morality, the pains of childbirth are the Curse of Eve, and sexuality the sin which enables and stands for sin in general; it is this symbolism (and this generalization) which Nietzsche urges us to reverse. The Dionysian is not simply sexuality (Nietzsche is not Freud); rather, the repression of sexuality represents the repression of the "fearful and questionable" as such. Accepting the necessity of these things, *setting aside the goal of happiness as the ultimate aim of a human life*, is what the Dionysian "yes" requires.

This does not mean that happiness must disappear from human life. Setting it aside as the final goal does not mean banishing it altogether. But if happiness is to be found, it can only be on these new terms. We can only take our pleasures in an acceptance of this chaotic and, we now know, painful condition. Pleasure and pain cannot be separated, as the utilitarian or simplistic pessimists contend with their efforts simply to seek one and avoid the other. Destruction must be known and acknowledged as part of anything creative or good. The true embrace of becoming at the expense of being means *to take pleasure in the suffering that accompanies the demise of whatever is*.

The joy of Being is only possible as the joy of appearance[.] The joy of becoming is only possible in the destruction of the actuality of "Beings," the beautiful visions, in the pessimistic annihilation of illusions. In the destruction also of beautiful illusions, Dionysian joy appears as its climax (KGW 8.1.114; see also EH, "Destiny," 4).

This is something we have great difficulty doing. Nietzsche knew such an idea would sound dreadful to most. It is not enough to withdraw our condemnation of suffering. It is not enough to retreat to an agnostic shrug and agree to coexist with "necessary" suffering. That would equate to being agnostic about life itself. Instead, we must approve it. That is why Nietzsche depicts the idea of eternal recurrence as something proposed by a "demon" and the "greatest weight" upon one's conscience (GS 341). To will the eternal recurrence is to will endless suffering. Why should we sanction suffering, even our own, much less that of others?

If Nietzsche's reply is simply "because it is an unalterable part of life," then we are tempted to return to the position of Schopenhauer. Indeed, perhaps we now can see the attractions of that position most clearly. Why not reject this life we are offered, as Schopenhauer suggests, if to endorse it means to endorse endless and unalterable suffering? Nothing requires us to participate in the suffering of others. Our every moral instinct rebels at the thought. If we are

truly powerless against suffering, as Schopenhauer suggests, why not just withdraw? To this question, Nietzsche cannot give the sort of answer that provides any comfort. He cannot offer any unrebuttable reason for preferring affirmation over denial. In a world of flux, no such "reason" can permanently exist. This is why Nietzsche refers to strength—not because the strong survive and the weak die, but because those who affirm have the strength to control their disgust long enough to give themselves a local reason to live.

The Dionysian "yes" is not a matter of taking a sadistic pleasure in the suffering of others. It is a decision to value the future over the present. To be glad that the world is one of becoming rather than being means to be glad that things are always changing, that the future is always coming, and the present is always passing away. It means detachment from whatever exists at present, which inevitably appears as callousness toward others: "*Dionysian wisdom*. Joy in the destruction of the most noble and at the sight of its progressive ruin: *in reality joy in what is coming and lies in the future, which triumphs over existing things, however good*" (WP 417, second emphasis added). This is what Nietzsche had in mind by such phrases as "*amor fati*" or eternal recurrence. He is not saying that we must relive the past again and again; rather, this pattern of destruction and creation is unalterable and must be borne (WP 1041). And it cannot be withstood through faith in progress. We must learn to hope in the absence of an expectation of progress. If this sounds almost nonsensical to the modern ear, perhaps it is because we have been told for so long that progress is the rational thing to hope for.

The difference between the false pessimism of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche's version is explicitly outlined in *Zarathustra* as a difference in their respective attitudes toward our fate of temporality. In the twentieth section of the second book, titled "On Redemption," Nietzsche traces two approaches to our time-bound condition. First, he describes the preaching of "madness." But madness speaks as Nietzsche once did himself, by citing the aphorism of Anaximander—in a slightly altered form to bring out what Nietzsche now considers its vengefulness: "Everything passes away; therefore everything deserves to pass away. And this, too, is justice, this law of time that it must devour its children.' Thus preached madness" (Z 2:20). Madness continues to speak more directly in the voice of Schopenhauer, whose solution to the problem of time is to withdraw from the life of the will insofar as is humanly possible. "Can there be redemption if there is eternal justice? Alas, the stone *It was* cannot be moved: all punishments must be eternal, too. . . . No deed can be annihilated: . . . This, this is what is eternal in the punishment called existence, that existence must eternally become deed and guilt again. Unless the will should at last redeem itself, and willing should become not willing." To Nietzsche, this attitude of resignation toward our place in time can only be called madness, the product of "the spirit of revenge" or "the will's ill will against time." It moves too quickly from the inescapability of time to the idea that it enslaves us.

Second, Nietzsche contrasts this false redemption with a better one: Our temporality conditions us but does not imprison us: “I led you away from all these fables when I taught you, ‘The will is a creator.’ All ‘it was’ is a fragment, a riddle, a dreadful accident—until the creative will says to it, ‘But thus I willed it.’” Rather than hate backward, as it were, Nietzsche suggests that we look forward. If the present is the result of an unalterable past, it is also the source of a very alterable future: “I walk among men as among the fragments of the future—that future which I envisage.” Instead of a false redemption that is essentially an abandonment of society, the true pessimist (pessimistic still because he accepts our time-bound condition and all it entails) sees an opportunity, whereas the false sees only a conclusion: “To redeem those who lived in the past and to re-create all ‘it was’ into a ‘thus I willed it’—that alone should I call redemption.” Schopenhauer’s romantic pessimism acknowledges the power of the past but not the open horizon of the future. It is madness because it seems to be based on a hostility to existence that Nietzsche ultimately finds inexplicable except as self-hatred. Temporality is not just a limitation but a source of potential. The redemption of the past to which Nietzsche looks forward may be unlikely, but at least it is not an impossibility. His pessimism allows for possibilities.

Dionysian pessimism may be “fearful and questionable,” but the alternative is worse. In a famous note Nietzsche embodies the two choices as “Dionysus and the Crucified”: “It is *not* a difference in regard to their martyrdom,” that is, in whether the two personifications of different life-practices suffer and die, “it is a difference in the meaning of it” (WP 1052). In other words, it is not a question of how death and suffering can be minimized; in a pessimistic view, the greater portion cannot be avoided. “The problem is that of the meaning of suffering: whether a Christian meaning or a tragic meaning.” We are only given the choice of accepting this life as a whole or rejecting it as a whole.³⁴ There are more than two possible meanings for suffering, and we can surely struggle to alter those elements of life within our purview, but we will still be faced with the larger question when we cannot pick and choose. One alternative is to reject life as a whole: “The god on the cross is a curse on life, a signpost to seek redemption from life.” The other is to embrace life, with all the suffering entailed, both for ourselves and for others: “Dionysus cut to pieces is a *promise* of life: it will be eternally reborn and return again from destruction” (ibid.). If one accepts the pessimistic assessment of the world as a place of chaos and dissonance, one faces the choice of retreating from it or embracing it and trying to “let a harmony sound forth from every conflict” (WP 852).

³⁴ This is perhaps what Camus ([1955] 1983, 3) had in mind when he wrote: “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide.” See Cartwright 1998, 149.

THE FUTURE OF DIONYSIAN PESSIMISM

The commonplace understanding that pessimism must lead to hopelessness and resignation is unjustified.³⁵ In Dionysian pessimism, Nietzsche creates an alternative that is as ruthlessly skeptical toward all ideas of progress as is Schopenhauer’s pessimism but does not issue in despair (see Janaway 1998, 25). It looks toward the future, not with the expectation that better things are foreordained, but with a hope founded only on taking joy in the constant processes of transformation and destruction that mark out the human condition.

The belief that pessimism must lead to resignation makes one of two errors: Either it mistakes Schopenhauer’s variant (or Wagner’s or Buddha’s) for the whole of pessimism, or it sees no other possible response to the realization that we live in a tragic, disordered, immoral world. Why is it commonly thought that human beings must be disappointed at the prospect of a world in constant flux and chaos, where no moral order can be sustained? The answer is the assumption that human beings are creatures of order, that we are discomposed by chaos. To Nietzsche, we are no different from the world to which we are condemned; we are not islands of being in a sea of becoming but are constantly transforming and developing. He envisions a “*Dionysian* world of the eternally self-creating, the eternally self-destroying . . . without goal . . . Do you want a *name* for this world? . . . *This world is the will to power—and nothing besides!* And you yourselves are also this will to power—and nothing besides!” (WP 1067).³⁶ To restore “the innocence of becoming” to the world means likewise to restore it to ourselves and to face this chaotic world not as a creature alien to it or fallen from it but as part of that which we find most threatening. Those who believe pessimism leads to resignation see humans as “weak” creatures who must have transcendental meanings in order to survive. But pessimists need not believe that the demise of traditional beliefs must lead to aimlessness and suicide. It is rather those who fear pessimism, or fear the repeal of traditional moralities, that maintain this.

What does it mean to go through life with no expectations or, more precisely, with an expectation of

³⁵ The concept of resignation has recently been elaborated by Dumm (1998), who finds affirmative possibilities that deserve consideration. But I use the term in the widely accepted sense of despair or purposeful withdrawal from activity.

³⁶ To be sure, there is something paradoxical about this formulation. To imagine ourselves as will normally would imply our will has some object. Yet, if there are no permanent objects, only an eternal flux, including ourselves, then how is this possible? The paradox is not eliminated but mitigated in light of Nietzsche’s critique of our subject-object grammar and his related critique of our ideas of causality. In GS 370, Nietzsche explicitly links these to the emergence of Dionysian pessimism. The seeming strangeness of what he proposes emerges as much from our ordinary grammar of “will” as it does from the propositions themselves. In this passage it seems clear that Nietzsche gives us an inaccurate shorthand “name” for what he describes only because we, his readers, demand it. Nietzsche’s critique of causality is especially vivid in his discussion of dreams (see GS 22, 112; TI, “Four Great Errors,” 4; WP 479; and Dienstag 1997, 96–100).

nothing? To be sure, one is deflected from a certain kind of global ambition. The desire wholly to remake the world in one's image, in whatever manner, must be set aside once it is realized that the world will hold no image at all for very long.³⁷ Yet, Nietzsche says nothing that would deter one from seeking to organize "a small portion of it oneself" (WP 585), which does not mean cultivating one's own garden so much as knowing the limits to one's actions, however ambitious. Furthermore, there is a kind of freedom to be gained when one's existence is detached from the narrative of progress: freedom from the past. If human history is a narrative of progress, then one's fate is already scripted, in a sense, by what has come before; one is nothing more than "an angry spectator of all that is past" (Z 2:20). Pessimism, by freeing us from this script, simultaneously frees us from enslavement to the past.

The destruction of all things by time is not a judgment of their worth, as Anaximander maintained, but simply a condition of life and an opportunity to chart a personal course free of "the stone *It was*." Nietzsche concludes, as a kind of modern version of Greek "cheerfulness," that "the belief in time is good for one's health (pessimists after all)" (KGW 7.1.390). The constant transformation reminds us that our fate is not set. We have at least a role in determining it. The burden of the past is thus lessened, and the prospect of the future brightens. "The trust in life is gone: life itself has become a *problem*. Yet one should not jump to the conclusion that this necessarily makes one gloomy. Even love of life is still possible, only one loves differently" (GS, "Preface," 3). Instead of being a creature of the past, one can be "a bridge to the future" (Z 2:20). Instead of valuing oneself for being part of a long chain of progress, one can value the fresh start that one makes of oneself. Instead of searching for transcendental meanings, one can "give the earth a meaning, a human meaning" (Z 1:22.2).

Such a technique will not be to everyone's taste nor within the ability of all. It is best suited to those Nietzsche calls "the most moderate": "those who do not require any extreme articles of faith; those who not only concede but love a fair amount of accidents and nonsense; those who can think of man with a considerable reduction of his value without becoming small and weak on that account" (WP 55). These are the humans he considers "the strongest"—not those who can destroy the most, but those who can withstand the most destruction without giving way to pity and resignation.

CONCLUSION

A curious fact about Nietzsche's writings on pessimism emerges from the quotations in the preceding sections. Nietzsche wrote on the topic throughout his career, but there is a remarkable concentration on the topic in the

³⁷ Such a desire is permitted so long as one does not regret the fleeting character of the remaking (which obviously would alter the nature of the project).

series of introductions prepared in 1886 for all his pre-*Zarathustra* writings, which were then in the process of being republished. It is almost as if, looking back over the development of his thought, he identifies a guiding principle unseen hitherto in its entirety, even by himself, and desires to reemphasize it. He draws together his various poses into a unified attitude. Read together, these introductions (to *The Birth of Tragedy*, *Untimely Meditations*, *Human, All-too-Human*, *Assorted Opinions and Maxims*, and *Daybreak*) describe a pessimism that "has no fear of the fearful and questionable that characterizes all existence":

This has been *my* pessimistic perspective from the beginning—a novel perspective, is it not? a perspective that even today is still novel and strange? To this very moment I continue to adhere to it and, if you will believe me, just as much *for* myself as, occasionally at least, *against* myself . . . Do you want me to prove this to you? But what else does this long preface—prove (AOM, "Preface," 7)?³⁸

It would be a mistake to try to understand Dionysian pessimism by setting it against, say, utilitarianism or Kantian ethics and viewing it as a moral theory that prescribes a certain ideal set of behaviors and attempts to justify them to an audience of rational disputants. It is instead both a description of the irrational world in which we find ourselves and a prescription for coping with that situation. Nietzsche neither appeals to nor promises rationality and happiness in his attempts to defend his stance. It is better to consider Dionysian pessimism as an attitude and a practice that can guide us through the world, "a remedy and an aid in the service of growing and struggling life" (GS 370). This does not mean that the self is the sole object of philosophy or action, but it underscores the idea that we must recognize those limits of the human condition that optimists have been loath to acknowledge. Rather than suggest resignation, this pessimism encourages us to act while seeking to avoid the hubris so common to more systemic philosophies.

³⁸ Nietzsche is playing on the meaning of *beweisen* (prove). The root *weisen* means "show," so that *beweisen* can mean "show" in an intransitive sense, that is, to "show oneself."

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