

Nietzsche's *Down-goings*: Abysmal Thought, Aristocracy, and Care

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Abstract:

In the work *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* Nietzsche often mentions the term *down-going*, a concept perhaps fairly understood by some readers but not often explored by Nietzsche commentators. This concept seems to hold an important place not only in the work cited above but also in Nietzsche's project of the transvaluation of values. It would be of great interest and importance to readers of the said work to come up with interpretations that would aid in the understanding of such a difficult text. The style, the language, and metaphors used present a challenge to readers unfamiliar with the terrain and historical events, institutions, traditions, personalities and philosophies that Nietzsche was up against.

This paper is an attempt to grapple with the meaning of *down-going* and to understand the reasons for Nietzsche's passionate engagement, writing, and diagnosis of society and humanity despite his long and periodic episodes of sickness. That Nietzsche continued to challenge himself despite his bouts with sickness would seem to be incomprehensible to some. But a close look at his overall philosophical project, its intricate connection with his personal life, the personalities that he was with, and the self-formation that he underwent which was corollary to his philosophical engagement perhaps would reveal a certain comprehensibility.

Key words: Friedrich Nietzsche, down-going, self-formation, philosophy of life, ethics of care

Introduction

In the work *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche often mentions the term *down-going*, a concept perhaps fairly understood by some readers but not often explored by Nietzsche commentators. This concept seems to hold an important place not only in the work cited above but also in Nietzsche's project of the transvaluation of values. It would be of great interest and importance to readers of the said work to come up with interpretations that would aid in the understanding of such a difficult text. The style, the language, and metaphors used present a challenge to readers unfamiliar with the terrain and historical events, institutions, traditions, personalities and philosophies that Nietzsche was up against. It is this writer's attempt to grapple with the meaning of such notion and hopefully understand the reasons for Nietzsche's passionate engagement, writing, and diagnosis of society and humanity despite long and periodic episodes of sickness. That Nietzsche continued to challenge himself despite his bouts with sickness would seem to be incomprehensible to some. But a close look at his overall philosophical project, its intricate connection with his personal life, the personalities that he was with, and the self-formation that he underwent which was corollary to his philosophical engagement perhaps would reveal a certain comprehensibility about his enigmatic writings.

What does the notion of down-going mean in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*? What is the role of the movement of down-going in Nietzsche's overall project of transvaluation of values? How did Nietzsche characterize Judeo-Christian faith, Morality, Reason, Science, Scholarship? The present paper seeks to briefly answer the above questions to aid in the understanding of "down-going" within the context of Nietzsche's overall project. However, the writer believes that this present task is at best a modest undertaking to understand this philosopher, so often quoted but most of the times misunderstood. And in the light of Nietzsche's pronouncements about morality, science, reason, the human being, and life, what significance can we find in these explorations, as it were?

R.J. Hollingdale, one of the many reliable translators of Nietzsche's works into English, in an endnote in his translation of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* provides us with very important nuances contained in the German word *Untergehen*, translated as *down-going* in English. He says that "*Untergehen* has three meanings: to descend or to go down; to set (as the sun); and to be

destroyed or go under. There is much play upon this triple meaning throughout the book.¹ *Down-going*, then, means several things; to plunge, to take a dive, to go under, and to bear what is brought forth in the going under, to descend and be open as to what strikes one upon the descent and impress it upon oneself, taking heed of it as one gropes his way through this descent; to set, to be temporarily out of sight or range of another's sensorial vision, knowing that this momentary "disappearance" is short lived, that to go unseen from one's vantage point does not necessarily mean that something has ceased to be, rather, despite this short lived "hiddenness" one continues to be in action, working, as it were, and that this transient condition leads to another ascent; to be destroyed, to affirm the inevitability of annihilation and to impress upon oneself that destruction is the precondition of renewal, that it is also an announcement of rebirth.

The play cited by Hollingdale will be explored in the first section of the paper, explicating the three meanings of down-going, namely, to descend or go down, to set (just the sun), and to be destroyed or go under, as it is articulated in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. The following sections would then present that this notion of down-going provides a heuristic tool to understand Nietzsche's overall philosophical project, as reflected in both his life and work. Three important phases or highlights of Nietzsche's philosophical explorations will be discussed here. First, Nietzsche's investigations of the ancient Greeks with an emphasis on his discussion of tragedy and the period which he coins as the "tragic age" that serves as a counter strike against the onslaught of reason, science, Christianity, and an incipient nationalism. The confrontation of the Greeks with the abyss, with nothingness, with the transitoriness of existence, via Tragedy was an experience that enabled the Greeks to bear and overcome life's contradictions and unpredictability. This investigation of tragedy and the "tragic age" explicit in tragedy and thoughtfully implicit in the life and works of the pre-Platonic philosophers provided him with an insight that later will preoccupy some of his writings. Second, this discovery of tragedy, an inevitable predicament that have confronted the ancient Greeks, according to Nietzsche, may provide possible avenues to counter the phenomenon identified by Nietzsche as Nihilism. Nihilism as described by Nietzsche exists in manifold forms but comes to pass unnoticed to modern

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, translated by R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 1969), 339.



human beings. This led him to rethink the inheritance of modernity and “enlightenment.” Nietzsche’s diagnosis of nihilism and modernity have led him to retrieve “lost” aristocratic virtues and shape new ones as ways of bearing and overcoming old values. Third, Nietzsche’s quest for aristocracy and aristocratic ideals, in its very exhortation and evocation, which some interpret as the root of fascist or tyrannical reign, can be interpreted as a manifestation of a concern for others, a caring ethos or an ethics of care, if you will. The ethics of care may be seen as stemming from his understanding of the self as a body-self, the role of instinct and will in the human beings creative capacities, and the service of art, philosophy and music in the enhancement of life. This care, which reveals a strong form of the affirmation of life, is one that extends to others in the sense that the *agon*² clearly manifest in his texts is an invitation towards this way of living and seeing life and the world.

Down-going in Thus Spoke Zarathustra

There are several instances that Zarathustra, the main “character” of that work, went on a down-going. In the opening section of the Prologue we are informed that there arose in Zarathustra a profound need to go out of his dwelling, the cave, and go down the mountain towards the people who lived in the valley. Being up there for so long he has become so weary of his wisdom that he needs to give it away. Addressing the sun, he says:

Behold! I am weary of my wisdom, like a bee that has gathered too much honey; I need hands outstretch to take it. . . . I should like to give it away and distribute it, until the wise among men have again become happy in their folly and the poor happy in their wealth. . . . To that end, I

² By *agon* we mean here an elicitation to impugn old habits and assumptions and evoke a different way of thinking, feeling and acting against these old habits. For Nietzsche, *agon* is both a trait and a context for competition and contest. Nietzsche saw the *agon* as an important element in the development of Hellenic culture and civilization. See “Homer’s Contest” in *Preface to Unwritten Works* translated by M.W. Grenke (South Bend: St. Augustine Press, 2005) and *The Nietzsche Reader*, edited by Keith Ansell Pearson and Duncan Large (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006). For an interesting discussion on the *agon* and democracy see Lawrence J. Hatab’s “Prospects for a Democratic Agon: Why We Can Still Be Nietzscheans” in *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, Issue 24, Fall 2002, 132-147.



must descend into the depths: as you do at evening when you go behind the sea and bring to light the underworld too, superabundant star. . . . Like you, I must go down – as men, to whom I want to descend, call it. . . . Bless the cup that wants to overflow, that the waters may flow golden from him and bear the reflection of your joy over all the world! . . . Behold! This cup wants to be empty again, and Zarathustra wants to be man again. . . . Thus began Zarathustra's down-going.³

The down-going described in this passage connotes two important points. First, Zarathustra, coming from a condition of solitude, decides to be with others to share to them what he has found from his long years of contemplation. It gave him a feeling so overwhelming that it cannot be kept for himself. He must reach out and make it known to his fellow human beings, to the many. He has become like a brimming cup that “wants to be empty again” and in whose golden water he will bring joy to humanity. There is an urge in Zarathustra, an overwhelming urge to give out, to preach something. Second, Zarathustra tells us that he “must descend into the depths” like the sun to “bring light to the underworld.” Though unseen, the sun in its descent, in its period of setting never actually ends in giving light, it is still there beyond or under the horizon. Its “disappearance,” its setting, its down-going is an occasion for the coming renewal, and upon such renewal it is never the same sun, never the same rays reaching those to whom it shines. It is not therefore a “being” in a strict sense, a static entity devoid of movement, life or activity, but rather a *becoming*, continuously changing, giving, destroying, creating, recreating. “Into the depths” must Zarathustra go to bring about the good news. But to go into the depths one must also face the dangers that lie along the descent. One must be ready for the deluge and for that there arise the need to possess qualities to arm oneself against the perils that lies ahead.

In the section *Of the Three Metamorphoses*, Nietzsche discusses three imperative transformations of the spirit. These transformations can be transfigured as virtues that the creator of values should possess as he begins his confrontation with the old values and create new ones. The first phase of this metamorphoses involves the transformation of the spirit into a camel, the “weight-bearing spirit in which dwell respect and awe” and

³ Ibid., 39



whose “strength longs for the heavy.”⁴ This he must become to endure the weight, the burden, of finding himself alone in such an endeavor.

But bearing the burden is not enough. The beast of burden, the animal of strength and endurance, must become a beast of power and ferocity so as to create freedom, and “seize the right to new values.”⁵ Thus comes the second transformation, the camel must transform into a lion. The lion as the fiercest animal is needed to dispose of the dragon “Thou shalt,” the dragon of traditions, doctrines and values that have persisted in history. The lion is needed to create new values.

Amidst the ruins of what has been destroyed, amidst the devastation comes the chance to rebuild, to start anew. Thus, the metamorphoses of the beast of prey into a child which represents innocence and beginning. Only as a child can the spirit affirm life and existence despite the devastation and despite the inevitable, “[A] sacred Yes is needed . . . for the sport of creation: the spirit now wills *its own* will, the spirit sundered from the world now wins *its own* world.”⁶ The child wills its own and does not despair from the erased traditions, the certainties, the idols that the lion have destroyed. Rather, the child cavorts his way and affirms with gayness the abyss, the nothingness that confronts him. If the creator of values is to accomplish such an enormous task he or she should acquire such dispositions.

Upon arriving at the market of the town where the people have gathered to see the tightrope walker Zarathustra brings about his “gift.” He announces to the people the Superman:

I teach you the Superman. Man is something that must be overcome. . . . The Superman is the meaning of the earth. . . . I entreat you my brothers, remain true to the earth, and do not believe those who speak to you superterrestrial hopes. . . . They are despisers of life, atrophying and self-poisoned men, of whom the earth is weary. . . . Once blasphemy against God was the greatest blasphemy, but God died, thereupon the blasphemers died too. To blaspheme the earth is now the most dreadful offence. . . .

⁴ Ibid., 54

⁵ Ibid., 55

⁶ Ibid.

Once the soul looked contemptuously upon the body: and then this contempt was the supreme good—the soul wanted the body lean, monstrous, famished. So the soul thought to escape from the body and from the earth. . . . But tell me, my brothers: What does your body tell you about your soul? Is your soul not poverty and dirt and a miserable ease? In truth man is a polluted river. One must be a sea, to receive a polluted river and not be defiled. Behold, I teach you the Superman: he is this sea, in him your great contempt can go under.⁷

This very terse passage, in its very fullness, invites us to examine it fully. One can discern that the Superman is one who loves the earth. The earth as the very ground, the very foundation in which the Superman finds himself is the very world in which we live. But this very world in which we dwell is relegated, according to Nietzsche, by the afterworldsmen who have put forth the idea that this world is not the real world but is merely an illusion.⁸

The afterworldsmen are those whom Zarathustra calls the blasphemers of the earth, the very men who have privileged an other world, who preaches that there is a more real and true world where there is eternal bliss and freedom from suffering. They are blasphemers of the earth “[in] so far as . . . [they] actively cultivate hatred of all things earthly—for body, sexuality, and art, the senses, instinct and desire.”⁹ The blasphemers of the earth have also become blasphemers of the body. Privileging the soul, they have relegated the body. They are preachers of death who says that “[l]ife is only suffering . . . so see to it that you cease to live! So see to it that the life which is only suffering ceases!”¹⁰ Through ascetic practices the blasphemers of the earth “wanted the body lean, monstrous and famished.” Nietzsche here emphatically critiques the view that conceives the soul as superior to the body, a tradition that have persisted in modern philosophy whose inception can be traced in NeoPlatonism and its appropriation by the early

⁷ Ibid., 41-42.

⁸ Ibid., 58-61.

⁹ Kimerer Lamothe, *Nietzsche's Dancers* (New York : Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 61.

¹⁰ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 72.



Christian philosophers. Though they assign an other world more worthy to be aspired and longed for, this, according to Nietzsche, is a manifestation of the human beings creative will, a self whose creative and phantasmagoric vision have turned away and left behind the love for the earth and have forgotten that it is a self that is not severed from the body, a being as a body, a body-self. According to Zarathustra, the despisers of the body have created ideals of something that is 'beyond,' and that the pursuit of these ideals entails the self is not conceived as body-self, who "wants to die and turn away from life."¹¹ The pursuit something beyond which consequently turns away from life is, according to Nietzsche, is a sign of weakness, of ill health: "[i]t was the sick and dying who despised the body and the earth and invented things of heaven and the redeeming drops of blood: but even these sweet and dismal poisons they took from the body and from the earth."¹²

The will to escape this world, this will to create, is a manifestation of the will to power, "an impulse towards a goal, towards the higher, more distant, more manifold"¹³ which is grounded on the very contingencies of the body, the body-self, contingencies that are forgotten in the process of creation of otherworldly ideals.

For Nietzsche, there is no "I" separated from the body, it is rather one and the same in whose very embodiedness, physical activities and physiological processes come intelligence, emotions and creativity. The body-self, as the self and body at the same time, is the master and commander of one's thoughts and feelings.

What the sense feels, what the spirit perceives, is never an end in itself. But sense and spirit would like to persuade you that they are the end of all things: they are as vain as that . . . Sense and spirit are instruments and toys: behind them still lies the Self. The Self seeks with eyes of the sense, it listens too with the ears of the spirit . . . The Self is always listening and seeking: it compares, subdues, conquers, destroys. It rule and is also the Ego's ruler . . . Behind your thoughts and feelings my brother

¹¹ Ibid., 63.

¹² Ibid., 60.

¹³ Ibid., 138.

stands the mighty commander, an unknown sage—he is called Self. He lives in your body. He is your body. . . . There is more reason in your body than your best wisdom.¹⁴

Nietzsche militates against the view that posits the dichotomy of the mind and body, that the mind is separated from and privileged over the body and that reason has primacy and rulership over the senses, passions, instinct and desire. He wants us know our selves,¹⁵ to relearn to live our lives in such a way that we recognize ourselves as bodies, to pay attention to it, to treat it not just an object separated from the self, not to consider it as a prison house of the soul and reason, but to pay heed to the elemental contingency of ourselves to it, to recognize ourselves as one with it, for to know and experience ourselves as bodily beings in the process of becoming is essential not only in the understanding of ourselves and our lives but more importantly to transvaluate values that weaken our instincts, and suppress our desires and passions. As we experience it, we are beings who are bodies, who create and experience bodily becoming. Like Zarathustra we must “lead . . . the flown away virtue back to the earth . . . back to the body and life: that it may give the earth its meaning, a human meaning.”¹⁶ The human being as body-self is always in a process of becoming. He stands in the middle of the bridge, as it were, to bestow meaning. He stands alone in this crossing, without the idols that he relied upon for so long. It is the hour of the great noontide:

The man of knowledge must be able not only to love his enemies but also hate his friends. . . . One repays the teacher badly if one remains only a pupil. . . . You are my believers: but what importance are all believers? You have had not yet sought yourselves. . . . Now I bid you to loose me and find yourselves. . . . this is the great noontide: when man stands at the middle of his course between animal and Superman and celebrates his journey to the evening as his highest hope: for it is the journey to the new morning. . . . Then man, going under, will bless

¹⁴ Ibid., 62.

¹⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Basic Writings of Friedrich Nietzsche*, translated and edited by W. Kaufmann (New York: The Modern Library, 1968), 439.

¹⁶ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 102.



himself; for it is the journey to the new morning. . . . Then man, going under, will bless himself; for he will be going to the Superman; and the sun of his knowledge will stand in at noontide. . . . 'All the gods are dead now: now we want the Superman to love'—let this be our last will one day at the great noontide!¹⁷

It is in this expanse that he decides either to revert back to resignation or to overcome himself, to cross the bridge and to hurl himself, acknowledging the danger that comes along, towards the Superman.

To be destroyed, the third meaning of down-going, also enables us to better understand what the meaning of man and the transvaluation of values. The *love speech*¹⁸ of Zarathustra offers us what down-going as destruction means. Zarathustra says that he loves those who sacrifice themselves to the earth, those who work and build the house of the Superman, those who perform more than they promised, those "whose soul is deep even in its ability to be wounded,"¹⁹ all of them will their downfall, their destruction. But the annihilation mentioned here, is intimately entwined with the idea of rebirth, of resurrection. The annihilation of the old brings with it birth of the new, the revitalized, vibrant, stronger, healthier, the springing forth of new life. The destruction mentioned here is not physical destruction, that is, it is not physical death or annihilation. Rather it is a "conscious elimination or eradication of contaminated values."²⁰ Values that both on the personal and the social levels disable us, weaken us, and diffuse our creative impulses. Values that do not point and drive society to goals that it is supposed to endeavour, values that teach us not to learn new things, not to create new things, values that promote self-denial, otherworldliness, the refusal to embrace transitoriness and pain. The eradication of these values would pave the way to a new conception of life and of the world which affirms change, bear and overcome pain, and find beauty even in the most dreadful, loneliest and pernicious aspect of existence. With these enormous burdens not everyone is fit to carry. Those

¹⁷ Ibid., 103-04.

¹⁸ Ibid., 44-45.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Adrian Del Caro, *Dionysian Aesthetics: The Role of Destruction in Creation as Reflected in the Life and Works of Friedrich Nietzsche* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1981), 57.



who are strong, those who are healthy, those who possess the wit, intelligence, and creativity, those who possess the drive for excellence, those who are the best, should take on leading role.

***Down-going* in Tragedy**

What did Nietzsche see in the ancient Greeks and in the pre-Platonic philosophers? What is in Tragedy that Nietzsche conceived as significant for our time? What were the phenomena existent in his time which enabled him to come to the conclusion that there was something in the ancient Greeks that we can appropriate to address our current demise? What is the significance of art and of tragedy to life? And what particular event in ancient Greece took place whose consequences continue to reverberate in our time?

At the outset of *The Birth of Tragedy*, in his foreword to Richard Wagner, Nietzsche informs us of his main contention (this would later take an important place in his writings and self-formation). Nietzsche's conviction is "that art is the highest task and the proper metaphysical activity of this life."²¹ This conviction not only prepares one as to what *The Birth of Tragedy* seeks to accomplish. The statement made by Nietzsche in the Foreword also marks a *down-going*. As readers of the text, we find ourselves as witnesses to Nietzsche's encounter with the abysmal, the nothingness, the transitoriness of existence, as it is deeply ingrained in the culture, existentially and artistically experienced by the Greeks in his examination of Tragedy. But why tragedy? What is it in tragedy that makes it the appropriate form of art that bares significance to life? And with another text written in his early years as philologist he praises the pre-Platonic philosophers, those prominent men of the period which Nietzsche coins as the *Tragic Age of the Greeks*.²²

The Birth of Tragedy, as a text written for the purpose of addressing "the German problem," also informs us of his idea of art and its place in life. For Nietzsche, art is not a mere artifact, a mere thing to be admired and looked at in glass cases or frames consigned to museums or galleries, either

²¹ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. C. Fadiman (New York: Dover Publications, 1995), 4.

²² See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks* (trans. M. Cowan [Washington: Regnery Publishing, Inc.], 1994).



to be sold or displayed. Art for Nietzsche, in a broad sense, is an activity, a process of creation, and that the experience and meaningfulness of this creation, both to the artist, as the progenitor of the art, and those who behold and experience its 'beauty,' finds significance as it props in its full bloom when it is gauged in the enhancement of life.

Among the ancient Greeks Nietzsche found two artistic impulses: the Dionysian and the Apollonian. These art impulses may be represented by means of their manifestations or art products, the non-plastic and plastic arts. These two art impulses "continually incite each other to new and more powerful births."²³ For Nietzsche the mutual augmentation of these art impulses paved the way in developing Greek art²⁴ until finally "this coupling eventually generate the art-product, equally Dionysian and Apollonian, of Attic tragedy."²⁵

As an impulse, the Dionysian is the source and force of primal creativity. It is a force or impulse that "strives for the obliteration of reality on the level of mere appearance in an effort to join the underlying primal unity that is the ground of all existence."²⁶ Because of this power, "unalloyed Dionysian appears as a primarily destructive force bent on annihilating the whole world of human artifice;"²⁷ thus, it poses danger not only to the existence of human beings but to all life as well. The Dionysian, as states of "drunkenness" or "intoxication," can manifest in many forms, one of which is music. Music, as a non-plastic art is "the imageless manifestation of the Dionysian abyss, of the abysmal figure of ecstasy."²⁸

The Apollonian, on the other hand, as it is personified by the god Apollo, "the god of all plastic energies . . . the soothsaying god,"²⁹ is the state whereby there is a condition of a "measured restraint, that freedom from

²³ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 1.

²⁴ Ibid. 12-13.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Bruce Detwiler, *Nietzsche and Politics of Aristocratic Radicalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 147.

²⁷ Ibid., 148.

²⁸ John Sallis, *Crossings: Nietzsche and the Space of Tragedy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 84.

²⁹ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 2-3.



wilder emotions, that philosophical calm of the sculptor god.”³⁰ The Apollonian is the one that measures our actions. It is the impulse that allows us to construct images, create concepts or ideas. It allows us to fashion appearances and lets it come into being.

The performance of tragedy as an art form revealed to the Greeks the significance of the feeling of joy after the pain, of hope beyond the feeling of despair. Thus, in this ancient performative art there is an inextricable link between pain and joy, of suffering and the overcoming of suffering. The feeling of despair, felt and realized in tragedy, is transfigured into a higher level that provided the Greeks with the feeling of unity man with other men in the sense that are ‘of the same lot.’ It strikes upon him a feeling of a primordial union with nature in a way that is deeply felt as ‘coming to be and passing away.’ And, perhaps more importantly, it revealed and impressed upon him the *sublime*.

The Greek man of culture felt himself neutralized in the presence of the satiric chorus: and this is the most immediate effect of the Dionysian tragedy, that the state and society, and, in general the gulfs between man and man give way to an overwhelming feeling of unity leading back to the very heart of nature. The metaphysical comfort . . . that in spite of the flux of phenomena, life at bottom is indestructibly powerful and pleasurable.³¹

To behold the tragic, to experience the transitoriness and uncertainty of existence brings upon us pathos, for “such everlasting and exclusive becoming, such injection of indetermination into the very core of things, is ‘a fearful and paralyzing thought,’ virtually a return to the terrible wisdom of Silenus. The greatest power is required to transform this thought again—as tragedy thus—‘into the opposite, into the sublime and into blessed astonishment’.”³² But tragedy does not merely provide us with the feeling of pain and suffering. The pathos may lead to despair and resignation, to turn away from this life and affirm another realm worthy to be yearned and longed for. Or, it may become a catalyst within, a pervasive force which existentially ignites us, to look at life in a different way,

³⁰ Ibid., 3.

³¹ Ibid., 22.

³² Sallis, *Crossings*, 106.



perhaps to mitigate and judiciously think the way we do things to ourselves and to others. It provides us a means and a starting point for overcoming the feeling of despair and thus affirming it as part of existence. “[F]or Nietzsche one does not, in the face of tragedy, become disinterested, pure will-less subject, but rather one is shaken, made to tremble at the edge of the abyss. Thus, in contrast to Schopenhauer, tragedy is for Nietzsche no escape from willing and from the suffering implicated therein; is no mere, temporary masking of the source of human misery but a disclosure capable of leading one back from pessimism to affirmation.”³³

Although one may argue that tragedy is separate and has nothing at all to do with the day to day affairs of the Greeks, the opposite is the case. The hiatus between ordinary everyday life and that of the experience of ecstasy upon the viewing of tragedy lends a curative effect upon those who behold this abyss via tragedy, a saving grace of art comes in to redeem man from this state of anxiety. This curative role of art is not a mere anesthesia which numbs the core of our existence when we behold the tragic, rather “*art* approaches, as a redeeming and healing enchantress; she alone may transform these horrible reflections on the terror and absurdity of existence into representations with which man may live. These are the representation of the *sublime* as the artistic conquest of the awful, and the *comic* as the artistic release from the nausea of the absurd.”³⁴ The experience of pain and joy as it is revealed in tragedy brings upon oneself a different seeing, a different viewing of the world. The world becomes different in the sense that one is reminded of the fragility of our existence. This reminder and realization as it is deeply inscribed within those who behold the tragic is then transported to ordinary life as one turns again to one’s everyday affairs. In fact, life, after beholding the tragic and experiencing the sublime, is no longer ordinary. One becomes more cautious regarding things and thinks through situations and affairs more judiciously.

The tragic as the sublime was, according to Nietzsche, the secret ingredient of the Greeks for having a healthy life and culture. This reverberated in all their institutions, and thereby creating an atmosphere fertile for philosophy and philosophical engagement, he writes:

³³ Ibid., 99-100.

³⁴ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 23.



Philosophy is dangerous wherever it does not exist in its fullest right, and it is only the health of a culture—not every culture at that—which accords such fullest right. . . . And now let us look around for the highest authority for what we may term cultural health. The Greeks, with their truly healthy culture, have once and for all *justified* philosophy simply by having engaged it, and engaged in it more fully than any other people. They could not even stop engaging in philosophy at the proper time; even in their skinny old age they retained the hectic postures of ancient suitors, even when all they meant by philosophy was but the pious sophistries and the sacrosanct hair-splittings of Christian dogmatics . . . the Greeks knew precisely how to begin at the proper time, and the lesson of how one must start out in philosophy they demonstrate more plainly than any other people. Not to wait until a period of affliction. . . . but to begin in the midst of good fortune, at the peak of mature manhood, as the pursuit springing from the ardent joyousness of courageous and victorious maturity.³⁵

Having a healthy culture entails that society attains mountain peaks in areas of knowledge, art, and philosophy, flourishing in all areas of life and culture enriching those individuals within the society in which this thriving flows, as fertile soil for a condition of well being, of *eudaimonia*, of being *eudaimon* and of having *eudaimon*.³⁶ This, for Nietzsche, was paradigm by which present culture can, not imitate, but learn and work on.

***Down-going* in “History” (The Genealogy of Morals)**

It may be recalled that down-going means to plunge, to take a dive, to go under, and to bear what is brought forth in the going under, to descend and be open as to what strikes one upon the descent and impress it upon oneself and taking heed of it as one gropes his way through this descent. It also means to set, to be temporarily out of sight or range of one's sensorial vision, knowing that this momentary “disappearance” is short

³⁵ Nietzsche, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, 28-29.

³⁶ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 193.



lived, that to go unseen from one's vantage point does not necessarily mean that something has ceased to be, rather, despite this short lived "hiddenness" one continues to be in action, working, as it were, and that this transient condition leads to another ascent.

Genealogy, then, can be considered as a down-going. But genealogy, as a mode of investigation, is not mere delving into history of values, of morality, of concepts. Rather, it is a

critique of moral values, the value of these values themselves must be called into question—and for that there is needed a knowledge of conditions and circumstances in which they grew, under which they evolved and changed (morality as a consequence, as symptom, as mask, as tartufferie, as illness, as misunderstanding; but also morality as cause, as remedy, as stimulant, as restraint, as poison) a knowledge of a kind that has never existed or even been desired.³⁷

As a critique, genealogy looks at morality not in terms of essences, as pure or pristine, untouched by the will of people, of politics or of culture. Rather, it tries to look at these connections and contingencies. It questions the very conditions of possibility of existence of things, of values, of behavior of people. As a mode of questioning or critique, genealogy opens up, loosens what is hardened in history or tradition and allows it again to come to life or to surface. It is an investigation of origin, not to discover its hidden meaning, nor to establish that there is an underlying scheme of things, rather, as Foucault would comment, "The search for descent is not the erecting of foundations: on the contrary, it disturbs what was previously considered immobile; it fragments what was taught unified; it shows heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with it self."³⁸ Genealogy, as mode of investigation of origins, considers the acts of people, their positions in society, their interests and their wills as connected with the production and proliferation of certain notions in society, such as morality, or the concept of good and evil.

³⁷ Nietzsche, *Basic Writings*, 456.

³⁸ Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" in *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 82.



The Genealogy of Morals comprises three essays, each of which contains discussions summed up in each of the essays titles: “‘Good’ and ‘Evil,’ ‘Good’ and ‘Bad’”; “‘Guilt,’ ‘Bad Conscience’ and the Like”; and “What is the Meaning of Ascetic Ideals.” The first essay discusses the origin of ‘good’ and evil, ‘good and ‘bad.’ According to Nietzsche “the judgment ‘good’ did *not* originate with those to whom ‘goodness’ was shown! Rather, it was ‘the good’ themselves, that is to say, the noble, powerful, high-stationed and high-minded, who felt and established themselves and their actions as good, that is of the first rank, in contradistinction to all the low, low-minded, common and plebian.”³⁹ Hence, it was the powerful who designated what the ‘good’ was. And it was also them who wore such qualities. Originally the term good, according to Nietzsche means the noble, those who possess “a soul of high order,” those are “with a privileged soul.” In congruence with the development of such concept was the development of the concept ‘bad’ which connotes “common,” “plebian,” “low.”⁴⁰ These two concepts later would evolve into very different connotations which have carried along with them different moral and political shadings far different from their original meanings. These political and moral nuances, present in the values and institutions of today, are signs, according to Nietzsche, of humanity’s decline.⁴¹

This decline that Nietzsche speaks of is manifest in morality, culture, democracy, those very values and institutions inherited from Judeo-Christian religion and the thoughts or philosophies which sprung in the era of modernity and Enlightenment which promote resignation, the severance of the mind from the body, which profess the equality of man and takes the public as privileged over the individual, and which denigrates the instinct as part of man’s animality. The notion of ‘good’ originally meaning ‘the noble’ or those who belonged to a higher order was transformed into the ‘the evil ones’. On the other hand, ‘the common’, ‘the low’ or ‘plebian’ now becomes ‘the good,’ “he who is good who does not outrage, who harms nobody, who does not attack, who does not requite, who leaves revenge to

³⁹ Nietzsche, *Basic Writings*, 461-62.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 464.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 589-90, 595, 597.



God, who keeps himself hidden . . . who avoids evil and desires little from life."⁴²

The origin of such decline Nietzsche traces in the branching off and circumvention of aristocratic ideals by the priestly aristocracy into a sort of creative will (e.g., the anti-sensualist metaphysics⁴³). Such creative will stems from an inner regression of the priestly aristocracy's hatred and desire for vengeance to the nobility who were physically powerful, who possessed warrior traits, who emotionally could overcome fear and find outward expressions of their desire and power in the form of battles, hunts, or punishments without incurring any sense of guilt (for guilt to these class of men are a sign of weakness), which all the more are expression of their deeds of greatness and conquest.

The decay and loss of aristocratic values have also brought forth the rise of nihilism, incipient in the rise of science and reason (as pointed out in *The Birth of Tragedy*),⁴⁴ ethnicisms and nationalisms,⁴⁵ and the proliferation of the blind and unscrupulous use of egalitarian views or principles within societies.

We can no longer conceal from ourselves *what* is expressed by all that willing which has taken its direction from the ascetic ideal: this hatred of the human, and even more of the animal, and more still of the material, this horror of the senses, of reason itself, this fear of happiness and beauty, this longing to get away from all appearance, change, becoming, death, wishing, from the longing

⁴² Ibid., 482.

⁴³ Nietzsche writes: "the desire for *unio mystica* with God is the desire of the Buddhist for nothingness, Nirvana – and no more!" (Nietzsche, *Basic Writings*, 468.)

⁴⁴ "Well, to be sure, beside this detached perception there stands, with an air of great frankness, if not presumption, a profound *illusion* which first came to birth in Socrates. This illusion consists in the imperturbable belief that, with the clue of logic, thinking can reach the nethermost depths of being, and that thinking can not only perceive being but even modify it. This sublime metaphysical illusion is added an instinct to science and again and again leads the latter to its limits. . . ." (Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 53).

⁴⁵ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 221.



itself—all this means let us dare grasp it—a will to nothingness, an aversion to life, a rebellion against the most fundamental presupposition of life; but it remains a will! . . . man would rather will *nothingness* than *not* will.”⁴⁶

The petrification seen by Nietzsche as symptoms of decline have become so virulent during the writing of *The Genealogy of Morals* that it had crept in the life of every European to the extent that he declares: “[w]e can see nothing today that wants to grow greater, we suspect that things will continue to go down, down, to become thinner, more good natured, more prudent, more comfortable, more mediocre, more indifferent.”⁴⁷ Goals no longer matter, one wills nothing and therefore attains nothing, one even wills the nothing.

On the other hand, the view that science has attained its highest peak represented by “the last man” is also a manifestation of this will to nothingness. It is a symptom of denigrating other aspects of life such as culture, philosophy and art. On a general level, the thirst for knowledge of unbridled science, its march towards ever new forms of knowledge brandishing reason as its vanguard without perceiving its limitation is also a march to nothingness, leading, as it were, to catastrophic consequences.

The Quest for Aristocracy/In Search for Kindred Spirits

In an early essay written in the 1870s Nietzsche already saw signs of this decline, a problem which he saw threatens society, culture and individuals:

Those three constitutional dangers that threatened Schopenhauer threaten us all. Each of us bears a productive uniqueness within him as the core of his being; and when he becomes aware of it, there appears around him a strange penumbra which is the mark of his singularity. Most find this something unendurable, because they are, as aforesaid, lazy, and because a chain of toil and burden is suspended from this uniqueness. . . . Let him see to it that he does not become subjugated, that he does not become depressed and melancholic. . . . But the

⁴⁶ Nietzsche, *Basic Writings*, 598-99.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 480.



second danger which threatened Schopenhauer is not altogether rare, either. Here and there a man is equipped by nature with mental acuteness, his thoughts like to do the dialectical double-step; how easy it is, if he carelessly lets go the reins of his talent, for him to perish as a human being and lead a ghostly life in almost nothing but 'pure knowledge; or, grown accustomed to seeking the for and against in all things, for him to lose sight of truth altogether and then to be obliged to live without courage or trust, in denial and doubt, agitated and discontented, half hopeful, expecting to be disappointed. . . . The third danger is that of petrification, in the moral or intellectual sphere; a man severs the bonds that tied him to his ideal, he ceases to be fruitful, to propagate himself, in this or that domain, in a cultural sense he becomes feeble or useless. The uniqueness of his being has become an indivisible, uncommunicating atom, an icy rock. And thus one can be reduced to ruin by this uniqueness just as well as by the fear of it, by oneself as well as by surrender of oneself, by longing as well as by petrification: and to live at all means to live in danger.⁴⁸

The degeneration of the human being's capacity to create and overcome himself brought forth by society is also the source of his or her transcendence. On one level, individuals in their uniqueness, have the potential to free himself from the dictates manifested in society in many forms (e.g. media, bourgeois culture, etc.). On another level, the individual can choose to remain subjugated by these limitations set upon himself by choosing not to act on them, preferring to be content with one's own talent and capacities and blindly absorbing the dictates, the onslaught, of tailored culture, habitual morality, conventional values and traditional politics. This way of acting and reacting to life and history was far different from the life of a healthy culture exemplified by the Greeks.

For Nietzsche, what was clearly present culturally, morally, and (perhaps we can extend) religiously among the Greeks was contest, battle,

⁴⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, "Schopenhauer as Educator" in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 143-44.



and discord which are rooted in 'strife,' personified in the divinity Eris,⁴⁹ and envy. Because the Greeks knew the uncertainties and transitoriness of life, it made them more cautious with regard to how to proceed and live one's life. The rootedness of this *agon*, of strife and of envy to every Greek finds its expression in his very way of life and how he looks at the world. "Because he is envious, he also feels of every excess of honor, brilliance and fortune [*Gluck*] the envious eye of a god rest upon him and he fears this envy; in this case it warns him of the transitoriness of every human lot, he dreads his fortune and offering the best therefrom he humbles himself before the divine envy."⁵⁰

Within this degenerate culture, where everything is being fabricated in mass scale and in such a uniform way (including art), where morality has not yet freed itself from the tradition inherited from Judeo-Christian faith, and that the practice of politics and resistance have congealed into a tartufferie, it would seem that the pathological condition that Nietzsche experienced during his time is still present today. There is absence of *contest* in the Greek sense. Such absence could then be an occasion to retrieve a loss way of seeing humanity, life and the world, and carefully lay the conditions of possibility in the realm of theory and practice,⁵¹ of a new kind of art in ethics, politics and philosophy. This however, cannot be done in isolation, detached from the world or the realm of the social, or even, to a certain extent, without regard for institutions and their functions.

One thing above all is certain: these new duties are not the duties of a solitary; on the contrary, they set one in the

⁴⁹ "[T]he collected Greek antiquity thinks otherwise about resentment and envy than we do and judges like Hesiod, who at one time designates one Eris as evil, namely that one which leads human beings to hostile wars of annihilation against one another, and then prizes another Eris as good, who as jealousy, resentment, envy entices human beings to action, but not to the action of a war of annihilation, rather to the action of contest." Friedrich Nietzsche, *Prefaces to Unwritten Works*, trans. M.W. Grenke (South Bend: St. Augustine Press, 2005), 85-86.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁵¹ "Therefore, O my brothers, is a *new nobility* needed: to oppose all mob-rule and all despotism and to write anew upon new law-table the word: 'Noble' . . . For many noblemen are needed, and noblemen of many kinds, *for nobility to exist!*" (Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 220).



midst of a mighty community held together, not by external forms and regulations, but by a fundamental idea. It is the fundamental idea of culture, insofar as it sets for each one of us but one task: to promote the philosopher, the artist, and the saint within us and without us and thereby to work at the perfecting of nature.⁵²

The Possibility of an Ethics of Care

We have seen how Nietzsche's exhortation for a different regime, of a different way of looking and doing art, history, culture, ethics and politics centers upon the enhancement of life. Each aspect pointed out above touch upon one another, as a weave of cloth whose threads are bound together and whose purpose is to warm people in cold. The perception of tragic existence, the search for a genius and an active aristocracy and the delineation of aristocratic values, the plunging into history and the critique of scholarship and historiography, the genealogical enterprise and the discovery of life-denying values, are efforts to bring about a way of life in which human beings can thrive and flourish, whose capacities for creative endeavors are not stifled by institutions, morality, religion, culture, work and politics. Bearing such enormous task, Nietzsche never forgot his concern for himself. In the course of his effort to establish such a regime, he also displayed ways of overcoming, not only his illness, but also the dictates of society and culture within which he was part. Together with his philosophical writings, a self-formation, a way of "becoming who one is," was also the project of Nietzsche. No doubt these are manifestations of Nietzsche's concern, his care for life.

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⁵² Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, 160.



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