

# Chapter Two

## The worship of wildlife

Nietzsche's university studies in classical philology were so impressive that he was awarded a doctoral degree without being obliged to submit a formal dissertation. He was then – in an extraordinary achievement for a twenty-four-year-old – immediately appointed to a professorial position in Switzerland at the University of Basel. Nietzsche's brilliance was evident, and as his colleagues eagerly awaited the publication of his first extended academic study, his own aspirations motivated him to write a book intended to be of long-lasting interest.

Many years later, Nietzsche observed about himself that some people are born posthumously, and this is what happened with his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). It is read today as an inspired account of early Greek tragedy, but it did not enjoy success during Nietzsche's lifetime. The book was warmly received with supportive enthusiasm by Richard Wagner and his limited circle, but as a work which aimed to establish Nietzsche's solid reputation within the international field of academic philology, it was a professional disappointment: the short volume was too speculative, too filled with diverse themes, and too visionary for the times. It initially drew scathing criticism from some members of his profession, and was thereafter left alone quietly in relative neglect.<sup>20</sup>

Although *The Birth of Tragedy* is manifestly concerned with the origins of Greek tragedy, Nietzsche approached his subject synoptically.<sup>21</sup> Thinking in very broad terms, he first considered the general characteristics of Greek culture at the time of tragedy's emergence as an art form. Then, looking back into the history of the Greeks to those peoples who were their predecessors, he developed general hypotheses about the Greeks's overall psychology and metaphysical perceptions, using all of this to ground speculative projections about where we, as members of modern civilization, stand in relationship to the classical Greek culture and the experience of Greek tragedy. The subject matter of Nietzsche's first book extended far beyond the details of Greek tragedy, for it provided a general understanding of the ancient Greeks as they reflect upon modern society. He sought nothing less than to make his studies practically and culturally relevant to everyone in his contemporary European civilization.

Why, though, would someone who aspired to write a culturally influential book focus upon the esoteric topic of ancient Greek tragedy? Given Nietzsche's historical situation and interests, Greek tragedy was less esoteric than it now appears, and was far more attractive than one might suspect. First of all, although comedy appears in many cultures, the tragic art form appears to have been a uniquely Greek phenomenon, so given its stature within cultural history in general, it is a reasonable place for a person who studied classical Greek culture, as Nietzsche did, to devote his or her energies.

Second, during Nietzsche's time, there had been a revival of interest in Greek culture among those who discerned in the Greeks an extraordinarily healthy quality that might therapeutically be transplanted into a contemporary European culture in spiritual crisis. The prevailing opinion, at least among many intellectuals, was that the contemporary culture was sick and weak, and that it needed a rejuvenating shot in the arm. Organized Christianity was becoming less and less inspiring, and the increasing mechanization and dehumanization of the working population in the ever-growing world of factories and mass-production facilities was slowly turning people into mere appendages of money-making machines. Nietzsche himself never tired of condemning the business-and-bureaucracy-related values of the "market place," and

with it, the capitalist values that reinforced the beliefs – even in the sphere of morality – that people should always "be paid" for their deeds, and that God is a kind of supreme paymaster.<sup>22</sup>

Third, the particular influence of Schopenhauer's avant-garde outlook on Nietzsche had implanted the idea that life can be perceived as fundamentally tragic. So Nietzsche realized that an investigation of the Greek experience of tragedy-as-art could illuminate the nature of life, in a way that harmonized with a philosophy that, as we can now see in retrospect, was at the cutting edge.

Fourth, since the performance of Greek tragedy took place during the springtime and in connection with life-celebrating festivals in honor of the god Dionysus, there is a close relationship between the "birth of tragedy" and the affirmation of life and health – themes that Nietzsche wished to advocate in reaction to, and as a more hopeful advance upon, Schopenhauer's opposing tendency towards life negation, or "denial of the will."

### **The feral Dionysus and the beautiful Apollo**

Nietzsche constructed *The Birth of Tragedy* around two complementary and creative energies, whose interaction he believed was crucial to the emergence of Greek tragedy and the best of Greek culture in general. These can be described as "wildlife" (or "feral" or "animal") energies on the one hand, and "idealizing" (or "intellectualizing" or "perfecting") energies on the other. Nietzsche referred to the feral energies as "Dionysian," and to the idealizing energies as "Apollonian," associating them, respectively, with the states of frenzied intoxication and angelic dreaming. This distinction was partly inspired by Schopenhauer's theory of art, where the arts divide into the more willful art of music, which Schopenhauer maintained was a direct copy of reality itself, and the more contemplative plastic/verbal arts, which Schopenhauer maintained led to a tranquil awareness of timeless ideas, understood as the underlying ideal patterns of the daily world.

With the main art forms of classical Greece in mind, Nietzsche coordinated the Apollonian energies with the art of sculpture and the Dionysian energies with the art of music. At a more philosophical

level, these Apollonian and Dionysian creative energies paralleled Schopenhauer's distinction between the world's experiential surface, which appears to us as a set of individual things distributed throughout space and time, as opposed to the world's innermost heart, as it is in its spaceless and timeless self. Apollo represented the composed, ordered, controlled, safe, sanitized, perfected, and beautiful world of illusion, and Dionysus represented the wild, disordered, unmanageable, essentially horrific world of raw, chance-driven, accidental, brutal reality itself. Nietzsche summarized the relationships between these ideas and Schopenhauer's theory of art in the following:

In contrast to all who are keen to derive the arts from a single principle, as the necessary inspiring-force to every work of art, I would like to hold in view each of the two artistic divinities of the Greeks, Apollo and Dionysus, and recognize in their living and perceptual representations, two artworlds that differ from each other in their deepest essence and highest goals. Apollo stands before me as the transfiguring genius of the *principii individuationis* [principle of individuation], through which alone, redemptive release by means of illusion is to be achieved; whereas through Dionysus's mystical cry of jubilation, the spell of individuation is broken, and the way to the mothers of being, to the innermost kernel of things, is laid open. This awesome tension, which opens gapingly between the plastic arts, as Apollonian, and music, as the Dionysian art, has been revealed to only one of the great thinkers, to the extent that he, without the guidance of the Hellenic divinities' symbolization, bestowed upon music a different character and a different source than all the other arts, because it is not, like the others, a reflection of appearances, but an immediate reflection of the Will itself, and therefore represents what is metaphysical with respect to everything physical in the world, and represents the thing in itself, with respect to appearances. (Schopenhauer, *Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, I, p. 310.) [the reference here to Schopenhauer is Nietzsche's own]<sup>23</sup>

Nietzsche bestows much credit upon Schopenhauer in this excerpt, but we should note that since the end of the 1700s in Germany, there had already been a prevailing "Apollonian" conception of Greek culture – one that had been initiated by the ground-breaking

art historian, Johann Winckelmann (1717–68). Both Nietzsche and Schopenhauer inherited Winckelmann's conception of the Greeks as expressive of a "noble simplicity and tranquil grandeur" and Nietzsche complemented the prevalent peaceful, calm, reason-abiding conception with an emphasis on the more unruly, life-centered, non-rational, and instinctual Dionysian energies. For Nietzsche, the classical Greeks were not only a beautiful people; they were a fundamentally instinct-driven people, and he believed that their naturalness and intensely free expression of emotion was largely responsible for their supreme psychological health.<sup>24</sup>

Nietzsche thus coordinated the Schopenhauerian "appearance vs. reality" distinction with his own "Apollonian vs. Dionysian" distinction. And since Schopenhauer claimed that the world is "will," and that this will is, most importantly, the "will-to-live," Nietzsche regarded the Dionysian energies as fundamentally life energies, and moreover, as energies associated with a hard-to-bear truth about life: injury, conflict, appropriation, exploitation, and pain are unavoidable.<sup>25</sup> To be born into this world is, among many other things, to be exposed to pain. With such a theory in hand, Nietzsche associated the idea of "life" with the ideas of reality, existence, and truth. To experience the truth – which, for him, was harsh, dangerous, sexual, and animalistic – is to experience the Dionysian, feral quality of experience.

As an indication of what these Dionysian energies are like, without tempering or control by the rationalizing and idealizing Apollonian energies, we can consider the following excerpt:

From all corners of the ancient world from Rome to Babylon – leaving aside here the modern world – we can certify the existence of festivals, whose type is related to that of the Greeks, in the best case, as the bearded satyr, to which the goat lent its name and attributes, is related to Dionysus himself. In almost every case, the center of the festivals resided in an overflowing sexual unrestraint, whose waves washed away all social integrity and its venerable constitution; the wildest beastlike urges of nature were here unleashed to the point of that horrible mixture of voluptuousness and cruelty, which always seemed to me to be the real "witches'-brew." Against these feverish stirrings of these festivals, whose knowledge pressed upon the Greeks

from all land and sea routes, it appears that for a time they were completely secured and protected through the proud figure of Apollo, who held up the Medusa's head to this power that was as dangerous as could be, to this grotesque, barbaric, Dionysian force. It is in Doric art, that the majestic and repelling figure of Apollo is eternalized.<sup>26</sup>

In their free and unleashed form, the Dionysian energies are dangerous, grotesque, cruel, sexual, instinctual, and savage. They are the hardcore energies of life and of the jungle, and for Nietzsche, at this time at least, a world ruled exclusively by such energies – upon reflection – is difficult to welcome and embrace. Under the turbulent domination of such a Medusa, existence itself seems to be alien and meaningless, because one is born only to eat and be eaten, either violently by beings like oneself, or slowly by the erosion of time's mere passing.

What we have before us in Nietzsche's untempered, Dionysian vision of the world is what Fichte and Schopenhauer described as the endless conflictual, day-to-day world, where the will constantly “feasts upon itself,” and where animals and people fight each other in their ultimately futile efforts towards self-preservation. And yet, unlike Schopenhauer and many thinkers of his time, Nietzsche was not thoroughly intimidated and disheartened by this vision to the point of disgust, embittered cynicism, and retreat. He regarded it as horrific, but he fought to interpret life in a way that would allow him to revel in it nonetheless, as someone who could dwell in the energetic and oceanic thrill of “life itself,” despite its frightfully intimidating aspects.

### European culture in decline

Consonant with most European thinkers during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Nietzsche adored classical Greek culture as an example of exceptional human health, and he sang among the chorus of those who longed for a resurrection of the Greek spirit. He estimated the quality of his own time accordingly, upholding the Greek ideal as a measuring stick. Using the distinction between “Dionysian” and “Apollonian” energies as his instrument, he

claimed that in pre-Greek times, the feral Dionysian energies overshadowed the more composed Apollonian energies, and that cultural groups remained relatively animalistic and unrefined. In classical Greek times, the Dionysian and Apollonian energies became, as he saw it, optimally balanced, so as to allow the Greeks to develop their instinctual energies in a natural and creative manner, without being completely and crudely ruled by them. In post-Greek times, Dionysian energies supposedly became submerged, repressed, and unhealthily overshadowed by rationalistic, idealizing, Apollonian energies.<sup>27</sup> Rationality, Nietzsche believed, became a force of spiritual suppression, almost to the point of smothering human vitality. Contrary to traditional thinking in the West, Nietzsche denied that human nature is to be equated with rational nature, and he was convinced that the classical definition of the human being as a “rational animal” overly affirmed rationality as the supposedly “best” part of the human being. He saw this classical definition as downplaying the power of instinct, and hence as subordinating to rationality, the driving power of life itself.

According to Nietzsche, the consequence has been that ever since the times of the later classical Greeks, Western civilization has grown increasingly weak due to its over-reliance on rationalistic thinking – a mode of thinking that Nietzsche traced back to the influence of Socrates (c. 470–399 BC), and what some historians mark, with quite a different evaluation, as the eminent beginnings of Western philosophical culture. Socrates has long been regarded as the patron saint of Western philosophy, but for Nietzsche the classical philologist, Socrates remained an ambivalent figurehead. He could see how Socratic super-rationality could be toxic when taken in large doses, and how it could also be addictive. Concerning the present-day situation, he said:

Our entire modern world... recognizes the theory-driven person – of whom Socrates is the archetype and forefather – as the ideal, as someone who is armed with the highest powers of knowledge, and who works in the service of science. All of our educational strategies have essentially this ideal in view; every other type of existence has to drag itself up from the sidelines, as a merely permitted, and not really desired, type.<sup>28</sup>

Resonating within this century-old observation is an attitude still encountered in some quarters – one which, ironically, is hardly Socratic. It is often expressed as the prescription to make one's professional vocation "financially profitable," "practical," and something one can "do" to gain observably material rewards. In this light, it is easier to appreciate some of Nietzsche's uneasiness with exclusively pragmatic and business-oriented mentalities, especially in their more unrefined versions.

Nietzsche's understanding of his present-day situation, his continual attacks on Christianity, his questioning of "truth," his challenge to traditional forms of morality, his caustic criticisms of the majority of his contemporaries, his feeling of having been born out of step with the times in which he lived, his sense of needing to offer some kind of therapy to the people of his time – all of this – can be understood in light of his conception of the decline of Greek culture, and the later emergence and subsequent domination of narrowly technological and utility-oriented styles of thinking. Nietzsche is less critical of Socrates himself than he is of the rationalistic tradition which Socrates helped to precipitate. Stated more affirmatively, "many themes within Nietzsche's outlook can be grasped in light of his understanding of the healthy quality of classical Greek culture, and in particular, in reference to Greek tragedy, which was grounded less in abstract reasoning and far more on the direct experience of instinctual energies.

### Greek tragedy as a transcendence-festival

What did Nietzsche find valuable in the tragic art of the Greeks? For him, Greek tragedy afforded an awareness of life that acknowledged the suffering he perceived daily life to embody, while at the same time, it offered some protection from this vision – a protection that allowed one to perceive the truth about life without falling into a condition of hopelessness and despair. Nietzsche maintained that the experience of tragedy provided a healthy balance: by incorporating an Apollonian temperament into the scene, it softly polished the Dionysian passions, desires, and devouring appetites with a sense of perfection, such that the Dionysian life-energies neither ran

rampant in a devastating, cannibalistic frenzy, nor were unhealthily repressed, as supposedly happened in later years and subsequent cultures. The experience of Greek tragedy was akin to beholding the Medusa's face not directly, but in the reflection of Perseus's shield of wisdom.

Nietzsche maintained that the experience of Greek tragedy offered a "metaphysical consolation": it conveyed the idea that although we, as individuals, struggle and suffer in life and eventually die, from a more magnificent perspective we are part of "life itself" and our participation in that life is our true, joyous, thrilling, and eternal being. As some Christians find solace in the prospect of participation in an otherworldly kingdom of God after their bodies die, Nietzsche found solace in the possibility of participating in the universal life forces that permeate the here-and-now, earthly world of the living. Nietzsche exalted life in its concrete, down-to-earth manifestations. He regarded the metaphysical comfort associated with the oceanic blending of oneself into life itself as arising not so much from the idea that suffering is eliminated (although this accounted for part of the comfort), but from the perception of ourselves as participants in a powerful universal energy, as being part of the epic-scale dance of life, and hence, from the perception of ourselves as everlasting beings. One of the comforts of this experience is the feeling that we have transcended our finitude and death as individuals, because at this level of universal awareness we become "primordial being itself" during our earthly lives:

Also, Dionysian art wants to convince us of the eternal thrill [*der ewigen Lust*?] of existence: we ought to seek out this thrill, not in the appearances, but behind them. We should recognize how everything that arises, has to be prepared for a painful descent, as it looks into the horror of individual existence – while also not allowing itself to be turned into stone: a metaphysical consolation momentarily tears us away from the movements of the changing configurations. We are really for a brief moment the primordial being itself and experience its unbridled craving and thrill for existence; the struggle, the anguish, the annihilation of appearances, strikes us now as a necessity, in view of the overflow of uncountable forms of existence that are pressing and pushing themselves into life, in view of the

excessively fertile productivity of the world-will. At the same time, we are pierced by the fierce thorns of this anguish, where we simultaneously become unified with the unrelenting, primordial thrill of existence, and where we, in Dionysian rapture, have an inkling of the indestructibility and eternity of this thrill.<sup>30</sup>

In the same way, I believe, the Greek person of culture felt himself self-dissolvingly uplifted in view of the chorus of satyrs: and this is the most immediate effect of Dionysian tragedy, that the state and society, and above all, the distances between each and every person, dissolve into a powerful feeling of oneness, leading right to the heart of nature. The metaphysical consolation – with which, as I have already here pointed out – is that life is at the ground of things, and that despite all changes of appearances, it is invincibly powerful and filled with gusto. This consolation appears in bodily clarity as the chorus of satyrs, which is a chorus of natural beings, living on behind all civilization, indivisibly, and despite all changes of generation and histories of peoples, remaining eternally the same.

With this chorus the profound and sensitive Greeks – people who were capable of the deepest suffering – consoled themselves, as they gazed dashing into the horribly destructive tendency of so-called world-history, and into the gruesome cruelty of nature; in danger of yearning for a Buddhistic negation of the will, art saves them, and through art, life saves them.<sup>31</sup>

In truth, though, that hero is the suffering Dionysus of the Mysteries, the god who experiences in himself the sufferings of individuation – the god of whom wonderful myths tell how, as a lad, he was ripped to shreds by the Titans, and how he was worshipped in this condition as Zagreus.... In these observations we have already the elements of a profound and pessimistic world-outlook, together at the same time with the *mystery-teachings of tragedy*: the foundational knowledge of the oneness of all which exists, the recognition of individuation as the ultimate source of distress,<sup>32</sup> and art as the joyful hope, that the spell of individuation can be broken, as the divination of a reinstated oneness.<sup>33</sup>

In these crucial excerpts, Nietzsche associates the god Dionysus with life in general and with the individual manifestations of life in their mutual struggles against one another. He also refers to the individuation, or fragmentation, of life energies as “the primal cause of evil,”

and, in related excerpts, as “the origin and primal cause of all suffering” and as “something objectionable in itself.” In Schopenhauerian terms, Nietzsche’s *Dionysus-as-a-whole* represents the Schopenhauerian “will-to-live” in general, and Nietzsche’s *Dionysus-as-dismembered* represents the struggling and fighting individuals who, as manifestations of life itself, each suffer and die. The entire cosmos is personified as the being of Dionysus, in one or the other of his aspects. Dionysus is the Nietzschean Leviathan.

The “metaphysical comfort” provided by the experience of Greek tragic art is the experience of world-transcendence: it involves a transition in consciousness from the narrow standpoint of the struggling and self-defensive individual, to the expanded standpoint of the universal life energies, which Nietzsche maintains are eternally joyous, exuberantly fertile, ecstatic, creative, powerful, and pleasurable. Nietzsche believes, in effect, that the art of Greek tragedy displays for us on the theatrical stage a vision of the world whose articulated, individualized, fragmented, and ever-changing surface is terrible, and whose unified, universal, and eternal depth is thrillingly joyous. It is a vision wherein the individuals in the former realm can transform their perspective from a more individualistic to a more universal outlook, and thereby achieve a measure of metaphysical satisfaction and release from suffering.<sup>34</sup>

The extent to which Schopenhauer’s philosophy influenced Nietzsche has remained a matter of debate among scholars, with some claiming that Nietzsche never fully broke away from Schopenhauer, others claiming that Nietzsche arrived at his own characteristic views midway through his career, at about the time of his book, *Daybreak* (1880), and still others claiming that Schopenhauer’s views took only a brief, youthful hold on Nietzsche, only to appear insignificantly in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). Such diversity of opinion notwithstanding, it is clear that at the outset of his career, Nietzsche departed from the spirit of Schopenhauer’s philosophy insofar as he tried to affirm life, rather than to negate it, even though he retained much of the conceptual framework of Schopenhauer’s vision.

It is generally accepted that, in contrast to Schopenhauer, Nietzsche offered a more “life-affirming” view in *The Birth of*

*Tragedy*. This is true, however, in only a restricted sense: if we attend closely to the conception of life that Nietzsche affirmed, we see that he did not affirm life in its ordinary, day-to-day condition – a condition where life is articulated into a set of individuals that stand in essential disharmony and conflict. Nietzsche, like Schopenhauer and Fichte, regarded the unpolished vision of life as an almost unbearable jungle-scene, and at this intermediate stage in his intellectual development, he appears to have veiled this unnerving spectacle in order to make it more psychologically manageable. He did not fully affirm ordinary life in its horrific determinacy; rather, he immersed himself in the more abstracted, generalized idea of “life in general,” defined in a way that kept it relatively remote from the particular sufferings of daily life.

Nietzsche admitted that suffering is necessary as an expression of life, but his metaphysical ecstasy issued only when he transcended the individual standpoint and assumed the perspective of “the one living being, with whose creative joy [one is] united.” He followed Schopenhauer closely, insofar as he maintained that all suffering arises due to the principle of individuation, which is to say that Nietzsche’s solution to the problem of evil matched Schopenhauer’s: in our ordinary state of mind, we individuate things, and our suffering arises within this condition of humanity and our individuating-mentality, then evil dissolves, and shows itself to be an illusion. The difference between the two is that Schopenhauer identified a state of non-individuation located metaphysically beyond the world altogether, whereas Nietzsche characterized a state of non-individuation that is more earth-centered, and that is accessible as the awareness of universal “life itself” in Dionysic ecstasy.

The “affirmation of life” via tragic art in Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* was directly inspired by Schopenhauer’s account of aesthetic experience, since this experience is said to lift us out of the suffering-infused world of space and time. This is easily understandable, since the experience of tragic art is, on the face of things, an aesthetic experience. What is peculiar about Nietzsche’s account is that in the experience of tragic art, our awareness is not

transported to a realm of timeless Ideas, but to a realm more closely aligned with what Schopenhauer described in his account of moral awareness: for Nietzsche, tragic art transports us into the heart of life, where we become one with all living beings. Nietzsche regarded this condition as joyously thrilling, because awareness is expanded beyond its ordinary boundaries, and because all suffering supposedly arises from the principle of individuation which, at this level of universal awareness, is a principle left behind. Schopenhauer believed that the level of universal awareness wherein one identifies with “life in general” (that is, moral awareness) involves the dawning awareness of all suffering, since one thus identifies with every suffering being simultaneously. Each philosopher experienced the heart of life very differently, with Nietzsche experiencing a greater thrill, and with Schopenhauer experiencing a greater torture.

Since the states of mind described here are extraordinary, it is difficult to determine whose experience (if either) of the “heart of life,” Nietzsche’s or Schopenhauer’s, is closer to the actual truth. It remains that Nietzsche’s conception of the state of mind arising when one identifies with “life in general,” unlike Schopenhauer’s conception of moral awareness, involves a reduction of suffering, since he maintained that suffering itself arises as a result of the principle of individuation. It appears, then, that in his account of the aesthetic experience of tragedy Nietzsche removes the pain from what Schopenhauer described as “moral awareness,” since he claimed that what we are aware of in the experience of tragedy is the will-to-life itself – the very content that Schopenhauer associates with the object of moral awareness. Although Nietzsche intended to develop a life-affirming view in *The Birth of Tragedy*, his conception of life-affirmation bears close affinities to the more escapist aesthetic and ascetic modes of consciousness that Schopenhauer described as transcending, rather than directly facing, the world of daily life.<sup>35</sup>

### The rebirth of tragedy in Nietzsche’s Germany

Classical Greek tragedy, according to Nietzsche, presents a balanced vision of our world: we apprehend the suffering of finite individuals, while we are comforted in becoming aware of the underlying,

eternal delight inherent in life itself. As noted, he also believed that from the time of Socrates until his own century, this healthy vision had been disturbed, and that an over-rationalized, life-repressing attitude – an attitude that he referred to peculiarly as “optimism” – had taken over.<sup>36</sup> Living in the midst of what he considered to be an “optimistic” culture whose life forces had been devitalized by an overdose of logical and scientific thinking, Nietzsche looked hopefully for indications that the Greek spirit could be resurrected, and he found them in the German philosophy which had personally inspired him, namely, that of Kant and Schopenhauer. He also found these indications in the German music of his good friend and father-figure, Richard Wagner among others. Witness the nationalistic tone of the following excerpts. It is a young, twenty-eight-year-old Nietzsche speaking, at a time long before he would decide that the Germans are “too full of beer” to be located at the leading edge of European culture.

Out of the Dionysian foundation of the German spirit a power has risen up, which, having nothing in common with the original conditions of the Socratic culture, and from the standpoint of that culture is unable to be further explained or excused, and moreover, is in the eyes of that culture something horrible and incomprehensible, as well as overpowering and hostile: *German music*, in the way we should understand it, namely, in its powerful sunlike procession from Bach to Beethoven, and from Beethoven to Wagner.<sup>37</sup>

Through the colossal bravery and wisdom of Kant and Schopenhauer, the most difficult victory has been won – the victory over the optimism that lies hidden in the essence of logic, and in turn, at the foundation of our culture. Although this optimism was believed to have discerned and penetrated all of the universe’s riddles, as it was supported by completely unobjectionable eternal verities – ones where space, time and causality were regarded as fully unconditional, universally valid laws – Kant revealed how these, in fact, apply only to mere appearances, the work of *maya*. This optimism raises appearances to the level of the single and true reality, locating them at the innermost and true core of things, thus rendering impossible the real knowledge of this reality; i.e., as in the words of Schopenhauer, allowing the dreamer sleep even more soundly.

This knowledge initiates a culture which I dare to call a tragic one, whose most important feature is that wisdom replaces science as the highest goal. This wisdom, unmoved by the seductive distractions of the sciences, turns with a steadfast eye towards the total world picture, and tries to grasp, with sympathetic feelings of love, the eternal suffering as its own suffering.<sup>38</sup>

Where does the mystery of this unity between German music and German philosophy point, if not towards a new form of existence, whose content we are able to discern for ourselves only from the Hellenic analogies? ... the feeling lives in us that the birth of a tragic age for the German spirit is only a return of that spirit to itself – a glorious self-rediscovery – after having been forced to live for so long in servitude, in a helpless barbarism, under the forms of enormous outside powers. Now, finally, with its own homecoming, it can dare to walk along before all other peoples, boldly and freely, without the apron-strings of a Romanesque civilization: if only it can constantly learn from a single people, from whom to learn anything, is a high honor and a distinct rarity.<sup>39</sup>

The musical greatness of Bach, Beethoven, and Wagner remains unquestionable to this day, and Kant’s philosophy momentarily redirected the history of Western philosophy. To “make room for faith,” Kant narrowed the scope of provable knowledge, and indirectly stimulated in later thinkers alternative, provocative, and philosophically innovative efforts to attain knowledge of “absolute truth”. In the philosophers who criticized Kant, but who also inevitably followed in his footsteps, these efforts relied not on the reasoning powers Kant had so effectively defined and circumscribed, but on analysis-resistant intuition and direct insight. In Nietzsche’s estimation, Kant and Schopenhauer were among the first philosophers in the modern age who placed clear limits on the views of the Enlightenment, or “Age of Reason,” in general and on the scientific enterprise in particular – an enterprise that stemmed from the optimism of the 1600s and 1700s, grounded on the belief that reason alone could resolve the riddles of the universe and secure a harmonious society on earth.

What is less solidly supported in *The Birth of Tragedy* is Nietzsche’s unqualified belief that the spirit of Western culture

would be resurrected through the German spirit, chiefly through the multi-media musical festivals of Richard Wagner. Both of these objects of Nietzsche's early admiration – Germany and Wagner – diminished in importance as his career progressed, but one idea from his early reflections on tragedy continued to extend throughout his writings. This is Nietzsche's antagonism to excessive and exclusively rationalistic thinking; to any science devoid of art, to any purely literalistic, non-literary, non-poetic approach to understanding the world, and to any conception of knowledge that neglects the importance of wisdom. Nietzsche associated the world of Greek tragedy with the world of myth, and he claimed that in order to grasp the full truth of things, one needs to think imaginatively, in mythic terms:

He who recalls the immediate consequences of this restlessly progressing spirit of science will realize at once that *myth* was annihilated by it, and that, because of this annihilation, poetry was driven like a homeless being from her natural ideal soil. If we have been right in assigning to music the power of again giving birth to myth, we may similarly expect to find the spirit of science on the path where it inimically opposes this mythopoetic power of music.<sup>40</sup>

The myth wants to be experienced vividly as a unique example of a universality and truth that gaze into the infinite.<sup>41</sup>

The question of whether or not Nietzsche fundamentally rejected the concept of “truth” is marked by extended controversy. A straightforward and elementary philosophical difficulty resides in rejecting the idea of truth altogether, for if one asserts without qualification that “there is no truth,” then one has asserted a truth and has thereby accepted the idea of truth.<sup>42</sup> Nietzsche sometimes tripped and fell into this logical indelicacy. At other times, he was careful to reject only specific ways to approach the truth, often including among these the purely literal-minded, direct, and logical ways. Nietzsche had his own scientific and literalistic moments, but he tended to regard the “neutrally observe and carefully measure” method of inquiry as too unrefined and insensitive to the many nuances of experience, and as being especially blind to the “behind-the-scenes” (e.g., the unconscious) reasons for why we assert, or

believe, what we do. For Nietzsche, being too fiercely logical is a recipe for intellectual self-deadening and self-imposed ignorance. When searching for the most profound and far-reaching truths, he usually chose poetry before mathematics, and practical wisdom before mere book knowledge.

In the majority of his writings, Nietzsche held that the exclusively literalistic approach towards truth harbors an illusion because, by and large, he believed the truth cannot be reached in “a direct manner.”<sup>43</sup> In one of his most famous prefaces, written fourteen years after *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche gave voice to this idea, using the same images he employed in his first book. Specifically, he said once more in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) that if one is interested in truth, then one's approach must be subtle and indirect. One way to achieve this end is to be metaphorically-minded; another way (as Nietzsche later conceived of himself) is to be a “physiologist” or “psychologist” who considers the unconscious reasons why people say what they do. It is here, in the less-manifest desires that remain mostly hidden to us, where Nietzsche believed we will often unfold the truth. To express this idea, he wrote the following in his preface to *Beyond Good and Evil*:

Let us presuppose that the truth ... is a woman. Then what? Are there not grounds to suspect that all philosophers, insofar as they were dogmatists, understood women rather badly? That the awful seriousness, the awkward intrusiveness, with which they have hitherto approached truth, using such crude and rude methods, will really work to capture a woman? What is certain is that she has let no one capture her – and every type of dogmatism today stands there distressed and disheartened, assuming it is still standing at all! For there are those mockers who maintain that it has indeed fallen, that all dogmatism is on the ground, and more, that all dogmatism is taking its last breaths.

Seriously speaking, though, there are good reasons to believe, that all philosophic dogmatism, so solemn, so ultimately valid it has made itself out to be, may have nonetheless been only a noble child's-play and the gropings of a beginner.<sup>44</sup>

Nietzsche refers above to philosophical “dogmatists” – those who develop elaborate systems of thought and assert that the absolute

truth is captured by their conceptual system of interpretation. With a challenging eye, he critically evaluated such attempts at traditional philosophizing by examining them through his own special lens, namely, “through the perspective of life.” He considered them in reference to the kind of physiology the philosopher happens to have, the kind of psychological desires that the person has hidden, the kind of environment in which the person lives, and what benefits the person obtains by accepting such a belief system.

This life-grounded style of evaluation is one way to approach the truth “indirectly,” insofar as it stands opposed to what is manifestly said, and to the extent that it considers the underlying motivations for the assertions themselves. Such is the tone of a good deal of Nietzsche’s later style of analysis, which we find embodied in his notion of “genealogy.”<sup>45</sup> In *The Birth of Tragedy*, there are the seeds of this “indirect” approach to truth, to the extent that Nietzsche contested the Socratic, rationalistic approach to the world, and the assumption that the truth is to be found in the straightforward, direct, literal, face value of an expression (i.e., as would be presented in scientific formulas). By advocating this indirect, poetic approach to truth, Nietzsche fashioned himself as suitable to be knowledge’s true lover, and as a genuine philosopher in the literal sense of the word.

### Truth, from the perspective of life

One year after the publication of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche composed an essay entitled “On Truth and Lie in a Morally-Disengaged Sense” which, although it remained unpublished, is an instructive exemplar of Nietzsche’s style of thought. In his first book, Nietzsche examined Greek culture through “the perspective of life,” and this general idea of examining a subject matter, not from an absolute, “God’s-eye” standpoint, but from some set of limited, realistic, finite, and human standpoints, he later developed as his doctrine of “perspectivism.” This perspectivistic style of thought is one of Nietzsche’s well-known trademarks. He held that we have no choice but to consider things in terms of some background perspective within which we are, in effect, always already

immersed, regardless of whether this perspective is that of the human being, of one’s time period, of one’s culture, of oneself as an individual, or the more grand perspective of life itself, within which we participate as breathing, down-to-earth, and perishable beings. A “perspectiveless perspective” or a view “from nowhere in particular and from everywhere at once,” Nietzsche regarded as practically impossible and as thoroughly unrealistic.

The historical inspiration for Nietzsche’s perspectivism is Immanuel Kant, whose philosophy was dedicated to articulating one very characteristic, finite perspective, namely, the human perspective. Kant claimed, almost as a matter of obvious definition, that human beings can know things only within the framework of the human perspective, and that outside the manageable and managing constraints of this human perspective, we can prove nothing at all. The saving grace of Kant’s view, as far as Kant himself believed, is that because we are all human beings, we must all interpret things in exactly the same human way. Our limited human standpoint remains a shared one – one which coordinates our individual interpretations with each other from the very start. Human nature might stand in the way of ultimate knowledge, but it keeps our community intact and in interpretive harmony. For Kant, we may be barred forever from entering the garden of absolute knowledge, but we can rest with the philosophical certainty that we think in concert.

Kant spoke rigidly about the structure of the human perspective, having defined it in an abstracted way independently of individual differences, and indeed, independently of all the changing historical details of human experience. He conceived of “human nature” as a timeless abstraction, whose nature can be discerned by means of purely reflective thought. Having set historical differences aside, he identified and specified a single perspective that all humans allegedly share, going so far as to say that space and time, geometry and mathematics, were themselves constituents of this human perspective, and that if there were no humans, then space, time, and the laws of nature could very well amount to nothing at all.

Much of Nietzsche’s thought is Schopenhauerian, and since Schopenhauer himself was a Kantian, we find markedly Kantian dimensions within Nietzsche’s perspective. But just as

Schopenhauer modified some of Kant's insights, Nietzsche developed Kant's views in his own unique way. Temperamentally, Nietzsche was less speculative, more pragmatic, and in a broad sense, more scientific, and he interpreted the foundation of the human condition, not in reference to a single perspective understood in terms of pure thought-categories, as did Kant, but in reference to more experience-centered categories, such as "life," "physiology," "biology," "environment," "climate," "strength," and "diet," to name a few. Among these, the concept of "life" was central from the start. One could almost say that Nietzsche's philosophy expresses the perspective of life – one which, although it stands as only one among many theoretical possibilities, remains a practically unavoidable perspective for anyone alive. It follows, by definition, that a living being must adopt the perspective of life if it intends to live very long.

In "On Truth and Lie in a Morally-Disengaged Sense," Nietzsche thought seriously about how concepts such as "truth" and "falsity" appear through the "perspective of life." Ordinarily, and notably from a moral perspective, lies are typically regarded as negatively valued and truths are typically regarded as positively valued. From the perspective of life, things look different, and the valuations change: Nietzsche observed that weaker and less robust people often preserve themselves, or maintain their life, by lying, cheating, flattering, deceiving, camouflaging, and by other such means of deception. For the purposes of survival, maintaining false appearances can be extremely useful, which is to say that from the perspective of life, lying and cheating are not entirely objectionable and inappropriate, if one happens to be a weaker type. If one were extremely weak and desperate, it might even be that one could lose one's life or one's livelihood, if one did not constantly lie and cheat. The perspective of life is not a fundamentally moral perspective. When it comes to basic survival, morality loses its relevance when an individual's sheer will-to-live raises its self-preserving head. For Nietzsche, this is a fact of life.

When interpreting matters from the perspective of life, it is necessary to consider not only matters of survival, reproduction, health, and overall quality of life – all of which Nietzsche discusses

at one point or another – but the ways in which survival health, etc., are maintained by individuals of various kinds. Since people, and life forms in general, differ in their respective strengths and capacities, different strategies for living distinguish themselves. It is this more discriminating attitude that separates Nietzsche from Kant. Whereas Kant rested content to articulate a single, universalized, human perspective, Nietzsche looked carefully at the specifics that govern people's perspectives; case by case, group by group, and among these he considered differences in physiology, environmental conditions, and temperamental conditions, and he developed typologies of the stronger and weaker types, utilizing these discriminations to analyze all sorts of cultural phenomena. For this reason, there is much talk about different religious, ethnic, and national groups scattered throughout Nietzsche's writings, where he compares and contrasts these groups in reference to their various survival styles. In this vein, and much later in his career, Nietzsche expressed the need to consider as well all moral imperatives as the linguistic embodiments of varying physiological conditions – conditions which he considered to be more basic than conscious states of mind:<sup>45</sup>

In fact all tables of values – all "you ought to's" – which we know from history or ethnological research, in any case, first require a *physiological* examination and interpretive explication, before even a psychological one; similarly, all of them stand in need of a critique from the side of medical science.<sup>46</sup>

In his early essay on truth and lies, we find Nietzsche at the outset of his project of understanding the world through the perspective of life. His view at this point is that what is commonly accepted as "the truth" is mostly a construction, mostly something artificial and fictional, that has nonetheless become stabilized in people's minds for the purposes of community survival. Commonly accepted "truths" amount to sets of social constructions that have become solidified in the language we use, and which appear to the population at large as being natural and true, precisely to the degree that they remain stable and unquestionably accepted.

From the days of the ancient Greeks, if not earlier, what is "true" has been considered to be what is stable, unchanging, and reliable,

and Nietzsche appears to have accepted this view through most of his career. What he observed under the influence of Kant and Schopenhauer, though, is that there are two levels of stability – the level of the genuine truth, which might remain largely unknowable, and the level of the constructed “truths” which people arrange for themselves as the stabilities or law-like structures by which they agree to live. Strictly speaking, these latter truths are not necessarily truths at all, but are mostly illusions which people use to live effectively. This is one of the key thoughts in this relatively early essay, and what remains ambivalent is Nietzsche’s attitude towards such illusions, or fictions: sometimes he diminished their importance because they do not significantly represent the truth of things as they are in themselves; sometimes he elevated their importance because he was frequently far more interested in health and life than in truth, and in these contexts, he clearly preferred enlivening falsehoods to crushing truths.

Despite his interest in the perspective of life, and the requirements of healthy living, Nietzsche often expressed a strong desire to discern the genuine (rather than the artificial, perspective-of-life generated) truth, as unbearable as it might be, and he tended to deprecate the liars and self-deceivers of the world as weaklings, calling for all of us to “be honest with ourselves” in the face of the illusions we inherit. At one point, he called for the dissolution of *all* anthropomorphic projections, believing that these obscure the genuine truth, which he was convinced has nothing at all to do with human interests and human qualities. In light of this, we can read the following remark as expressing the idea that what is commonly called “truth” really amounts to myth or illusion – an illusion created by the poetic mind in the quest for life:

What, then, is truth? A maneuverable army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms – in short, a summation of human relationships which have been poetically and rhetorically heightened, transposed, and embellished, and which, after long use by a people, are considered to be solid, canonical, and binding: truths are illusions whose true nature has been forgotten.<sup>47</sup>

Nietzsche asserts here as true the proposition that “truths” are mostly illusions, and he operates philosophically with a distinction

between the “genuine truth,” as opposed to what is usually taken to be the truth, most of which he considered to be fiction.<sup>48</sup> This is to say that in Nietzsche’s eyes, almost everyone lives in a waking dream; almost everyone lives with a strong dimension of the Apollonian, as opposed to the Dionysian, aspect of existence, where Apollonian beauty and sanity – in the sense of “sanitized” – rule throughout the day. To see the world in terms of the Dionysian aspect, the life aspect, the feral aspect is to apprehend that we live mostly in illusion, in a condition of being captivated by a mostly fantastic world a good portion of the time, where the tendency is to rest content with merely comforting shadows as if they were realities, and where reality is perceived as clothed, rather than as naked. To see the world in terms of the Dionysian aspect is also, by implication, to align oneself with the fountain of life-energies from which such poetic dress-ups and cover-ups emerge.

Nietzsche fundamentally agreed with Kant’s pivotal statement that “the things which we intuit are not in themselves what we intuit them as being.”<sup>49</sup> Whether there are things in themselves that can be known, or whether there are indeed any “things” at all at the level of reality as it is in itself are yet further questions. At this point in his career – and this would be a view that would stay with Nietzsche at least up until 1886 – he recognized that there is an “illusion” or “appearance,” which implies that there is an underlying “reality” to which one implicitly refers. In his final two years, as we shall see in Chapter Five, Nietzsche aimed to dissolve this distinction between “appearance” and “reality” altogether, leaving us to speak only of the single world of experience and existence.