
SOCRATES AS A PROBLEM FOR NIETZSCHE

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There is a tragic element in the respective fates of these two men of genius, Socrates (446-399BC) and Nietzsche (1844-1900), that connects them and keeps them in the memories of sympathetic students of philosophy, in spite of the distance of time separating their earthly existence, their major temperamental differences, their distinct methods of expression as teachers and thinkers, and the many bad things the one has written about the other. For they were misunderstood and mistreated by their contemporaries, while they were alive; and only after their tragic deaths were they recognized and honoured as significant turning points in the history of European thought and culture. They are perceived now as heroes and martyrs of the spirit, the human spirit in its titanic and repeated attempts to liberate itself from the fetters of common customs and stupidity in order to live in accordance with the demands of human dignity understood differently by each, but felt deeply in their sensitive souls, and expressed exceptionally in their self-fashioned lives.

Specifically, Socrates was destined to become a symbol of human wisdom and of philosophical thinking at its best. For serious students of philosophy, his name has become a synonym of philosophy itself, a fortunate incarnation of Hellenic *logos* (reason), Hellenic *arete* (excellence), and Hellenic *eros* (love), the insatiable human love of wisdom regarding the nature of things and the soul of man. But Nietzsche, who was formally a student of theology and philology, and was not impressed with Socratic dialectic compared with Homeric epic and Aeschylean tragic poetry, saw in Socrates and his influence on Plato and other Socratic philosophers a serious problem demanding a radical solution, as we will see.

In terms of educational and cultural background, temperament and life experiences, the two men stood at the antipodes of the European spiritual world. Unlike Socrates who wrote no books to house his ideas, believing that no knowledge and human wisdom is of much worth, and left no manuscripts, Nietzsche was a prolific writer who produced and published a dozen books in less than twenty years of active life, and left many notes and manuscripts

unpublished, because of his mental collapse at the age of 45. He seriously believed that he had written masterpieces in the best German prose for men of taste, but his compatriots felt otherwise and his published works were met mostly with a cold silence that must have caused great suffering to his exceptionally sensitive soul and proud spirit. It was only after his death that he was recognized as a powerful writer, an insightful psychologist, a superb literary critic, a radical religious polemicist, and a profound thinker. He was destined, therefore, to become a recognisable icon, a symbol, and a sign of his transitional time, as well as a herald of the coming post-modern nihilism and decadence.

Now, a hundred years after his death, Nietzsche has become one of the most influential thinkers of our time by having contributed to the shaping of the tragic character and the horrific culture of the twentieth century in the most determinative way. Nietzsche's way of thinking, his radical ideas, and his aphoristic and fragmented style have easily led themselves to various interpretations and have been put to different uses and abuses by the political Right before and the political Left after World War II. He would have disapproved of both. His multiple metamorphoses in less than two decades during his active and productive life as a thinker and writer allowed Nietzsche to wear and change several masks. He left behind the initial role of classical philologist in order to assume the role of psychologist and anatomist of the human psyche. Subsequently, he played the role of the pragmatic positivist, the aphoristic and provocative essayist, the inspired romantic poet, the polemical critic of Christianity and Christian morality, the radical iconoclast of old idols, the prophet of the death of God, and the herald of the coming of the Superman.

Most seriously, though, he seems to have taken a role as the cultural physician and diagnostician of the German and European decadence of his time. He believed that there was a need for a radical reevaluation of all values for the preparation of the sick and timid human animal to adjust to the new scientific cosmogony as envisioned by his mytho-poetic and insightful psychology. Since he boldly touched upon many diverse and forbidden topics, especially regarding Christianity and morality; and since he expressed his provocative views in books, written in a style that is personal, laconic, aphoristic, fragmented, biting, caustic, satiric and sarcastic, Nietzsche was destined to catch the attention of thinking readers sooner or later, even if his writings had not been caught in the turmoil of the deadly political strife of the twentieth century, between the revolutionary Left and the reactionary Right.

It is understandable, then, that there are scholars who see in Nietzsche not the philosopher but the poet and cultural diagnostician, or even a comic jester and a "buffoon who was taken seriously" only after his death. As a philosopher, apart from existentialism, Nietzsche has not been taken seriously, especially by those who have a fixed conception of philosophy as the analytical discipline of the logic of scientific inquiry. Nietzsche, however, in his works from the earliest to the latest, published during his life and posthumously, speaks of "a new type" of philosophy. He dreamed that the philosophers of the future will live for the quest not of scientific "truth" and Socratic serenity, but of what Nietzsche calls poetically "tragic wisdom" and Dionysiac ecstasy. He appears, therefore, to demand to be taken seriously not only because of his honesty and sincerity, but also because of his claim that he has something new and important to say about the destiny of man and the possibility of higher culture in the new and tough world, the scientifically and technologically constructed cosmos of the present and the future. Besides, in all his writings from beginning to end, he made what he considered as old-fashioned philosophy, as represented by Socrates and Plato in particular, a target of his merciless critique. His scorn and ridicule of Socratic rationalism and Platonic idealism is equal to that he has used on Christianity which, in his estimate, is merely a vulgarised Platonism for the masses, the Chandala. Given his influence, he must be taken seriously.

Yet, among serious Nietzschean scholars there are those who, like Walter Kaufmann, want to make Nietzsche "an admirer of Socrates," and those who, like Alexander Nehamas, see him as holding an "ambiguous" and complex attitude towards the enigmatic Athenian philosopher. I believe that Nietzsche's opposition to Socrates and Plato, and what he took them to represent, should be considered more carefully, if we want to understand correctly his call for the revaluation of values and his appeal to poetic wisdom. In this paper, therefore, I will attempt to argue and provide support for the following points of my thesis:

First, that Nietzsche is quite serious about Socrates, the Socratic dialectic and the Platonic idealist philosophy that grew out of it. For he regrets that "Socratism" historically displaced the pre-Platonic philosophies, especially those of Heraclitus and Democritus, which Nietzsche favoured above all other Hellenic philosophies as having anticipated modern scientific discoveries, as well as his central metaphysical doctrine of "the eternal return."

Second, that there is no complexity or ambiguity in Nietzsche's stand against Socrates, because he clearly sees in the Socratic philosophy the antithesis of the most authentically Hellenic and aesthetically beautiful creations of the Classical Greek genius: Greek Tragedy and Attic Rhetoric. He believed that these too had fallen victims to Socratic rationality and decadent morality. He passionately desired to work tirelessly to revive both of them for the enrichment of German and European culture. He may have failed to do so, but he certainly succeeded in producing readable books filled with beautiful metaphors, pensive aphorisms, biting sarcasm, and witty sophistry.

Third, that, in Nietzsche's eyes, Socrates was also responsible for two of the most anti-Hellenic, monstrous, and harmful to life creations on earth: an absolute reality of pure Platonic Being, as opposed to the world of Becoming which, for Nietzsche, is "the only real world;" and a universalistic and slavish Christian morality of "beautiful souls" and phoney promises of "an after life" in "another world," both of which, he thought, are related to Socratic and Platonic rationalistic, moralistic, and idealistic philosophies.

Forth, that the Nietzschean plan and struggle for the radical reevaluation of contemporary European values had two distinct aspects: in the first place, the decadent values of the ascetic Christian ideal, as embedded in modern democratic institutions and culture, had to be replaced by the healthy aristocratic values of pre-Christian Classical antiquity; and secondly, the "Egyptian smelling" Platonic philosophy and "Jewish smelling" Socratic dialectic must give way to the wisdom of tragedy and the beauty of rhetoric; their respective spirit of heroic action and agonistic politics, that had given meaning and higher values to the peoples of Greece and Rome were to be revived so that their aristocratic politics may be reborn in contemporary Europe, preferably in Germany, with Wagner and Nietzsche as protagonists in the respective roles of the Artist and the "new type" of Philosopher, whose ideal is not Socrates, but Protagoras!

Fifth, that Nietzsche's sort and tragic life as a polemical writer, prophetic poet, rhetorical essayist, and uncompromising anti-Christian and anti-Socratic thinker, was sustained and empowered by this utopian but psychologically powerful dream. It seems to me that he spent his physical and spiritual energy to breath life into his noble vision, to give it a shape, a warm body, to see it moving into activist politics with the power of transforming the European decadent culture and remodelling it in the image and likeness of a

retorically resurrected ancient ideal of the aristocratic and culturally rich life of Greece and Rome. This was a very serious and dangerous task; a heavy load for a mere mortal man to carry alone, like an Atlas or a mighty Hercules holding up the whole world. A task worthy of Hellenic Hero, a Promethean man, and a Nietzschean Superman. Nietzsche tried honourably and, like a tragic hero, he failed. The tragic failure does not diminish the value of his vision and his heroic acts and literary accomplishments in the service of what he considered a noble ideal worthy of great artistic, spiritual, and intellectual battles of his time as well as our time and the time to come. For ideals never die, even when they are seemingly defeated.

So, I will conclude that, as we celebrate Nietzsche's century, we may admire his vision and the power of the will that sustained it and tried to embody it in a series of beautiful books that he left behind. We may honour the author of these works created with a great pathos. However, as a classical philologist with philosophical pretensions, Nietzsche will be held accountable, I believe, by the future generations, as they read him with more care and understand him deeper and better, not simply for his unfair treatment of Socrates, which surpasses even that of Aristophanes; but for having drawn the dividing line of European culture in such a clumsy way as to put one half (and arguably the better part) of Hellenic Philosophy on the side of its and his own arch-enemy, namely Christianity. Such a division is historically unjustifiable and philosophically problematic and questionable, as I have shown in my book: *The Hellenic Philosophy: Between Europe, Asia, and Africa*.

Ironically, this odd division makes Nietzsche's task of radical reevaluation of European values even more difficult than it would be with such natural allies, as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, on his side. As a Classical philologist, critic of culture, and philosopher, he should have known better and he should have treated such serious matters of culture with more care. Unfortunately, he did not. But, then, again his will to power was in the look out for resisting forces, not for helping hands and friendly free spirits. And that is, at the end, what makes Nietzsche what he actually was, a tragic and unforgettable embodiment of the will to power and the Dionysian Spirit that he praised and preached so eloquently.

May his free spirit, finally freed from all fetters, dance and play in Dionysus' hands as his beloved and gay god rests amorously at Ariadne's beautiful and eternally blossoming bosom! Amen!