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Similarities, Commonalities and Parallels in the Contributions of Thorstein Veblen and Friedrich Nietzsche

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Abstract: This inquiry seeks to establish that similarities, commonalities, and parallels can be identified in selected contributions advanced by Thorstein Veblen and Friedrich Nietzsche. In the main, their *commonness* is noted to appear in the critical approaches that also includes expressing deep-seated skepticism regarding the course to modernity, singling out institutions ruling society, and especially the economy—in the case of Veblen. Specialized in Philology, as Nietzsche extolls his Dionysian orientation this inquiry introduces the idea that Veblen’s foundation for his distinctly critical approach to ruling institutions also reflects a Dionysian perspective. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-85) Nietzsche introduces a character whom he develops as “The Last Man.” In *The Vested Interests and the Common Man* (1919), Veblen introduces a character whom he labels as his “Common Man:” shaped by particulars of America’s “vested interests,” and who could also be identified as a parallel extension of Nietzsche’s “Last Man.” (words: 148)

JEL Classification Codes:

B15 – Historical, Institutional, Evolutionary

B31 – History of Economic Thought, Individuals

B41 – Economic Methodology

Keywords: Common Man, Thorstein Veblen, Friedrich Nietzsche,
Last Man, Institutions

“Wow, I have been thinking about the Veblen/Nietzsche comparison for about ten years, myself, but have done nothing with it. It is definitely there to be developed. ... I think there are fascinating links to be drawn....”

Excerpted from an email sent by Sidney Plotkin, 27 February 2023.

Introduction

This inquiry seeks to establish that similarities, commonalities, and parallels can be identified in selected contributions advanced by Thorstein Veblen and Friedrich Nietzsche. In the main, their *commonness* is noted to appear in their critical approaches that also includes expressing not only doubts but also a deep-seated skepticism regarding transitions towards modernity, focusing especially upon the spurious institutions ruling society, and the economy—in the case of Veblen. While Nietzsche extolls his deep-seated interests in Philology and Hellenism, particularly, while outwardly developing his Dionysian orientation, this inquiry endeavors to establish that Veblen’s foundation for his distinctly critical approach to ruling institutions could be identified as similar to Nietzsche’s and is borne out in his studying classical languages that could prove foundational with his formulating a Dionysian perspective. Towards the end of his *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* [1885-87], Nietzsche introduces a character whom he develops as “The Last Man.” Arguably serving as a character rooted in Nietzsche’s thinking and then extended further, Veblen’s “Common Man”—along with those of whom he categorized as members of the “vested interests”—could be interpreted as pursuing consumption as a way of achieving “happiness,” rather than mustering the *will* to deal with the existential challenges that Nietzsche had outlined.

As this inquiry seeks to advance the thesis that similarities, commonalities, and parallels can be identified in the writings of Veblen and Nietzsche, we shall proceed and do so over connected parts. Following this “Introduction,” the first part considers the subject at hand by identifying a major gap in the literature that notes but scant connections between

Nietzsche and Veblen—a gap which this inquiry seeks to fill. In the second part we shall turn our attention towards addressing issues that might have served to thwart inquiries based upon a fusing of the disciplines of Economics and Philosophy. In the third part we shall consider that Nietzsche and Veblen were focused upon expressing doubts in the dominant institutions at the transition to modernity. The fourth part poses and deals with the question: should we consider Veblen as an economist, a social scientist, or more generally as a philosopher? This segs smoothly into a fifth part, which considers the Dionysian orientation of Nietzsche, while speculating that Veblen exhibits a similar orientation evidenced by his devotion towards the study of classical languages, especially Greek when he studied at Carlton College. The sixth part explores the philosophical foundations upon which Nietzsche constructs his notion of “The Last Man.” Then, Nietzsche’s last man is juxtaposed to Veblen’s “Common Man,” focusing upon what could be argued as a parallel extension of the Nietzschean character. A “Conclusion,” considers whether sufficient evidence regarding the similarities, commonalities, and parallels in the contributions of Veblen and Nietzsche has indeed been identified for inviting in additional inquiries into the ways in which Veblen’s contributions might also reflect Nietzsche’s influences?

Part I, The Extant Literature

A search through the literature suggests that in his book: *The Barbarian Temperament: Toward A Postmodern Critical Theory*, author Stjepan Mestrovic (1993) considers Veblen and his potential relations to what he defines as “barbarism.” Mestrovic also considers Friedrich Nietzsche in connection to “barbarism,” and the index suggests that in this book Nietzsche is considered on about forty different pages of the almost three hundred pages of text. Nevertheless, Mestrovic falls short and never actually relates Veblen to Nietzsche, and vice versa.

As a scholar oriented towards expanding upon the rich intellectual legacy of Thorstein Veblen, author Rick Tilman registers in my research as the only author whose writings have actually considered connections between Veblen and Nietzsche. These connections that he notes appear in his book *Thorstein Veblen and His European Contemporaries, 1880-1940: A Study of Comparative Sociologies*. In this book's Index Tilman (2011, 483) lists approximately twenty pages that consider plausible commonality between these two authors—within the more than four hundred pages that compose the main text of his book. However, after considering the twenty pages that Tilman offers to the Nietzsche/Veblen connection, readily we can note that, in Tilman's view, there is little in the way of similarities, commonalities, and parallels that he could identify connecting these two thinkers.

Along with considering Veblen and Nietzsche, Tilman also brings into his discussion two noted playwrights: namely, George Bernard Shaw and Henrik Ibsen. What interests Tilman are the relationships that these four authors share with what he terms as: "women's emancipation." In his account, Veblen (1894; 1898)—along with Shaw and Ibsen—are argued to support women's emancipation and do so in their writings and, in cases, theatre performances. When Tilman (2008, 278-288) considers Nietzsche's relation to this broad movement aiming for women's emancipation, he finds nothing noteworthy to report. In sum and relatedly, when considering this lengthy book in which Tilman explores Veblen's influences, he has very little to offer in the way of commonness that we might identify connecting Veblen and Nietzsche and vice-versa.

Part II. Economics and Philosophy: Too Seldom Do the Twains Meet

Ideas advanced in the literature review suggest that identifying similarities, commonalities, and parallels **linking** ideas advanced by Thorstein Veblen (1857-1929) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) has hardly taken place—at least not to date. Perhaps such could be

attributed to a host of variables affecting researchers: such as, a lack of insights, shortfalls in imagination, focusing too narrowly on issues related to women's emancipation; with these undertaken at the expense of thinking creatively across the two key disciplines of Economics and Philosophy.

Those with interests in the Discipline of Economics and with Political Economy, especially those with a heterodox orientation and a commitment towards advancing what is recognized as Original Institutional Economics (OIE), do indeed carry out inquiries into Veblen's legacy. As but two examples, please consider Tilman (2011) and Plotkin and Tilman (2015). In contrast, Nietzsche's contributions fall under Philosophy, with adherents to this area of inquiry often left unaware of contributions to economics and even social science thinking. It is not like Rudyard Kipling's view on west and east, that "never the twain should meet." Rather, the issue is that all too seldom do the twains—or areas of inquiry understood as Economics and Philosophy—meet. One useful indicator to consider is that of the twenty main categories listed, along with their many dozens of subcategories readily found in the American Economic Association's "*Journal of Economic Literature* Classification Codes," there exists no category noting or even suggesting the minor importance of an integrated area of inquiry labeled as "Economics and Philosophy." In sum, the classification codes suggest that at the level of the dominant and far-reaching American Economic Association, a worrisome disconnect separates these two disciplines.

Though it needs to be acknowledged that a tri-annual publication titled: *The Journal of Economics and Philosophy* is published in the United Kingdom. However, the journal's focus appears to be on the Philosophy of Economics and does not appear to offer an equal weight to Philosophy as an area of inquiry in and of itself.

However, if we were to consider noteworthy philosophers whose ideas have wielded influence over Veblen, we could readily note Immanuel Kant (1727-1804), a scholar and

lauded thinker focused upon advancing what could be categorized broadly as Continental Philosophy. Under this rubric we could identify his area of “Epistemology” (how do we know what we know?) that includes inquiries into morality and ethics laid out during the secular-oriented era following the Lutheran Reformation. In addition to influences from Kant, Robert Griffen (1998), coauthors John Hall and Oliver Whybrow (2008) along with Alan Dyer (1986) and some others, have emphasized that Veblen was indeed influenced by the thinking of Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), the notable American philosopher credited with establishing the American School of Pragmatism, or as Peirce further distinguished: “Pragmaticism.” At the start of the 1880s when Veblen was studying at Johns Hopkins University, Peirce served as one of Veblen’s classroom lecturers, (Griffen, 1998) offering a course in “Logic.” Dyer (1986) relates Peirce’s advancing his use of the term “abduction,” and how Veblen twisted its meaning to a definition of “induction.” However, the aim of this inquiry is not to dwell on the philosophical influences that Veblen may have drawn from Kant and Peirce, but rather to seek to answer the question: might we identify similarities, commonalities, and parallels connecting the contributions of Thorstein Veblen and Friedrich Nietzsche?

After considering Kant and Peirce, we could also consider another category of thinkers who appear to have influenced Veblen’s thinking and writing; largely by advancing ideas that appear to have excited his ire. Stated differently, when considering Veblen’s influences, we could include thinkers like Kant and Peirce (noted above), whose writings appear to have offered subject matter and methodologies which Veblen would later develop as integral to his contributions to the literature. Then we need to also consider thinkers with writings that provoked his ire and stimulated responses appearing as critiques with Veblen’s pointing out the shortcomings, all the while seeking to undermine the validity of their ideas. We could surely include John Maynard Keynes, whom, in his review of *The Economic*

Consequences of the Peace (1919), Veblen (1920) exposed him as a faux scholar seemingly compromised and quietly lending support to the “vested interests,” that is, the “absentee owners” with investments in Germany industry, with the additional, underlying idea that in the destructive wake of the first world war Germany could also serve as a bulwark sufficiently strong for containing the westward expansion of bolshevism emanating out of post-czarist Russia. Karl Marx also **provoked** Veblen’s ire. True, Veblen (1906, 1907) lauds the logical consistency found in Marx’s writings; however, he criticized Marx’s narrowness of focus and limitations associated with the selection of categories, as well as other shortcomings integral to Marx’s research agenda and methodological approach. But more importantly than Keynes and Marx, we need to emphasize one John Bates Clark (1847-1938), whose writings appear to not only have stimulated strong responses, (see, Veblen, 1899A,B,C, 1908A,B, and 1909) but whose use of marginalist thinking appears—it shall be argued and emphasized—to have pulled Veblen away from inquiries into Philology and Philosophy and towards dealing with pressing questions in Political Economy, an area of great concern for Veblen (as well as for Professor Clark), taking Veblen down a path far afield from Nietzsche’s.

As shall be developed in more detail in the following section, Veblen focused the lion’s share of his scholarly energies on writings about topics pertinent to Political Economy, the area of thinking to which he strongly identified as he sought to go forward in his professional life, and that later would describe the faculty positions to which he aspired. Such suggests that Veblen was developing subject matter that would fall far beyond Nietzsche’s scope, as—in the relatively short time on earth before the insidious onset of his having contracted syphilis started to show—Nietzsche considered in depth what he had identified as the profound questions facing what Veblen (1921, 1) defines as “Christendom” and “Occidental civilization upon entering the modern era. There is also an age difference to

consider. Nietzsche was born in Year 1844, approximately thirteen years prior to Veblen. What this age difference suggests is that during the years when Veblen was reading Philosophy at Johns Hopkins, and later when completing his Ph.D. in this discipline at Yale University in 1884, it appears both plausible and proves easy to imagine that Veblen was reading Nietzsche's writings; as his books were being published one-after-the-other over a span of years (starting in 1872) and rendered available—at least in the German language—by publishing houses based in Europe. As an assiduous scholar whose writings have dealt with a host of subjects, Rick Tilman has noted that Veblen read widely and absorbed a range of ideas from numerous Europeans. However, in his *Veblen and His Contemporaries, 1880-1940*, what registers as Tilman's major study into Veblen's sources of inspiration (or at least influences), he neglected arguing in favor of the possibility that Nietzsche should be added to his list.

We need to consider that a good portion of Nietzsche's major and minor works were already published by 1884. To emphasize: at least for this inquiry, Year 1884 needs to be considered as a watershed year, as this marks the year in which Veblen completed his Ph.D. at Yale University. Charles Camic and Geoffrey Hodgson (2011) and some others write confidently that Noah Porter (1811-1892) was not only a lauded specialist in the contributions of Immanuel Kant, but that he also served as Veblen's dissertation adviser. In his dissertation written for the Philosophy Faculty at Yale, Veblen focused upon aspects of Kant's inquiries into "reason." In his biography of Veblen, Camic (2020, 176) notes that back in the 1880s at Yale, to complete requirements for a Ph.D., the "thesis" meant "something different from the behemoth dissertation of today." Camic takes his thinking a step further, expressing confidence that the 1884 article, "Kant's Critique of Judgment," that appeared in the prominent *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, effectively served as Veblen's doctoral thesis. That Veblen focused so intensely on the writings of Kant suggests to me that Veblen

was indeed receptive to mastering the ideas advanced by at least one German philosopher: so why not add in Nietzsche?

As early as 1872 and at the age of 27, and in his faculty position as *Philologieprofessor (Professor of Philology)* at the University of Basel in Switzerland, Nietzsche had published his first book titled: *The Birth of Tragedy: Out of the Spirit of Music (Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik)*. In 1881 Nietzsche had published another book, this one with the title: *The Dawn of Day*, also translated simply as *Daybreak, (Morgenröte: gedanken über die moralischen Vorurteile)*. In 1882/1887 he had published *The Gay Science* also noted as *The Joyful Wisdom (Die fröhliche Wissenschaft)*. In Years 1883-1885 *Thus Spoke Zarathustra (Also sprach Zarathustra)* was published. Then in Year 1886 *Beyond Good and Evil* appeared (*Jenseits von Gut und Böse*). In 1887 Nietzsche had published *The Genealogy of Morals (Zur Genealogie der Moral)*. We need to consider that a portion of these years of publication led up to and coincided with the timeframe in which Veblen was intensely focused upon Philosophy at Hopkins and Yale. In addition, Veblen did not have to wait for translations of Nietzsche's books, as he is noted by Tilman (2011) and Camic (2020, 100) for his fluency in a host of languages, including the German language.

Part III. Of Nietzsche, Veblen and Institutions

Opening with the first sentence of his very first book, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Veblen (1899, 2) framed his understanding of a "leisure class" as an *institution*, which he considered in a drawn-out, detailed analysis. In many of his subsequent writings Veblen continually focused upon the centrality of institutions as well as tendencies for their evolution. In contrast to Veblen, Nietzsche does not introduce and rely upon the term "institution," at least not per se. Though it shall be argued that "institutions" are indeed implied. In his efforts to advance his ideas, Nietzsche does indeed focus upon institutions,

and like Veblen, he emphasizes that institutions can lag behind, becoming outmoded and thusly imbecilic—as relics of the past hampering life in the present.

Veblen introduced the idea that history proceeds in discernable eras, and what interested him in his key book, *The Theory of Business Enterprise* [1904], are the difficulties emerging in the transition from the era of handicrafts to the modern era, which seems synonymous with the Rise of Big Business and that could also be seen as inextricably connected with the emergence of “The Machine Process,” the title and subject matter of Chapter II of this particular book.

Nietzsche was of the understanding that the Enlightenment and the accompanying advancements in scientific inquiry that spread out to include a broad base of population helped to bring into doubt the foundations for Christianity. While the scientific view advanced and became more and more broadly accepted among members of the public, leaders as well as followers of major religions, effectively balanced this hypocrisy by remaining seemingly content with the mismatch of physical laws offering great insights into the world and its workings relative to the enduring legacy of Abrahamic theological explanations. Nietzsche’s aim was to challenge such hypocrisy by boldly advancing what he sought to establish as truths.

Influenced by a Dionysian orientation (that shall be elaborated upon in more detail below), Nietzsche advanced a philosophical position that emphasized the hypocritical character of institutions that had come to dominate and—as it were—to constipate and mislead the Occidental civilization of his day. In Nietzsche’s view, such institutions should be exposed and torn down in the interests of human freedom and a reopening of life’s possibilities. Nietzsche was not alone in his critique of the hypocritical tendencies accompanying the start of the modern era. At least for a time as a fellow traveler, the music composer Richard Wagner also sought to tear down the institutions that had come to stifle the

human spirit at the start of the modern era—essentially to liberate members of society from the constraints of the dominant institutions through music and the pitch of drama that became trademark to many of his operas.

Part IV. Pulled Away from Philology and Philosophy

It could be counter-argued that connections between Veblen and Nietzsche are not there to be identified, rendering this inquiry's effort to identify similarities, commonalities, and parallels as a fruitless exercise. After all, Veblen never offered any references to Nietzsche's writings! Such might help to explain why the connections and commonness between Veblen and Nietzsche were wholly missed by Rick Tilman as a noted Veblen scholar. As we move deeper into this inquiry, seeking to identify the commonness between ideas and contributions advanced by Nietzsche and Veblen, we should first and foremost consider that Friedrich Nietzsche was recognized for his intellectual prowess and scholarly abilities. Early on in his career he held faculty posts as philologist and as a philosopher.

This Discipline of Philology involves the study of ancient civilizations and their cultures, and this includes religions and languages. As a point for identifying commonness, Thorstein Veblen also expressed his interest in Philology and Philosophy at the start of his six years of undergraduate education at Carlton College, that went in two, three-year programs: with the first three years in a preparatory program (Camic, 2020, 83). However, we need to consider that Veblen's research interests evolved over the years as he studied and was associated with institutions of higher learning; that would include Carleton, Johns Hopkins, Yale and later through his associations with Cornell and University of Chicago. While Nietzsche's interests in Philology and Philosophy prove easy to establish as these were ongoing and life-long, establishing Veblen's interests proves difficult. That is, should we consider Veblen as an economist, or more broadly, a social scientist? Or should we go back

and consider his early aspirations that—like Nietzsche—leads us to think of Veblen as an aspiring philologist and philosopher?

Charles Camic (2020, 83) teaches us that at the start of the first three years of his college years Veblen enrolled in the “classics” track, taking courses in Latin and/or ancient Greek and **this would continue** for seventeen of the eighteen terms that he was enrolled at Carlton. We can note that Veblen also studied Political Economy at the undergraduate level after he enrolled at Carlton. During his undergraduate studies, Economics, or more correctly, Political Economy proved to be the discipline that appeared to have captured the focus of his attention and retained his attention over a very long term—were it so easy? (Footnote 1.)

When Thorstein Veblen departed from the family homestead in Rice County, Minnesota and got set up at Carleton College in nearby Northfield, he could live in a house that his father had built for his children for attending college. It was at Carleton that Veblen appears to have entered into a dialogue (mostly, one way) with John Bates Clark. Veblen, as the ambitious student, and Clark, as the promising, young professor, appear to have quickly developed a relationship that was based upon mutual respect for each other’s aptitudes and untiring interests in Political Economy. Though remaining friendly and respectful over the course of their lives, still Veblen maintained deep-seated disagreements with the marginalist, theoretical approach upon which Clark was advancing his ideas and establishing his national and global reputation. The ire generated in Veblen by Clark’s theoretical leanings would set him up as Clark’s long-term intellectual adversary, and their dialogue appears to be focused upon Veblen’s disagreeing with every theoretical perspective that Clark advanced. Moreover, this disagreeing would extend over decades, and clearly influenced a good portion of the subject matter that Veblen developed in his published writings, and this, in my judgment, is what appears to have led him away from inquiries into Philology and Philosophy and into the field of Political Economy. Later in his life when his academic career was clearly faltering,

Camic (2020) notes, that Veblen aspired to join faculties and offer his strength, not in “mental and moral” philosophy in which he was well-credentialed, but as a political economist, having distinguished himself nationally and internationally through his contributions to the literature appearing in prominent journals and published as books.

In the second half of the 1870s Veblen was learning of Clark’s distinct approaches to economic theory at Carleton. Mark Blaug (1986, 251) teaches us that Clark would establish his reputation through advancing an application of marginal productivity theory that he relied upon for explaining the functional distribution of income earned through factors of production, i.e. land, labor and capital. In addition, Blaug notes that Clark advanced what could be considered as his distinct theory of capital.

Offering more background, Blaug (1986, 51) teaches us that Clark had arrived at Carlton College in 1875 as a young lecturer, which would be about one year prior to Veblen’s arrival. In which ways and to what degrees did Clark influence Veblen’s thinking? Drawing from the literature that he generated, a sizeable portion of Veblen’s articles appearing in quarterly journals—that could be judged as especially prominent not only back in his day but also currently—appear to have been authored in response to Clark’s theoretical assumptions. We could convincingly note that Veblen would take Clark’s perspectives and assertions to task, challenging these over a span of decades. An inquiry into the literature which he generated suggests that Veblen sought to counter and even undermine Clark’s reasoning on marginal productivity theory as well as Clark’s understanding of capital.

If we were to consider Veblen primarily as an economist, or more precisely as a political economist, I think it correct to note that the thrust of his scientific efforts were aimed at undermining Clark’s stressing of marginal productivity theory. To this end, Veblen had published an article in Year 1908 with the title: “Professor Clark’s Economics,” appearing in the already (and still) prominent *Quarterly Journal of Economics (QJE)*. In 1909, the year

following this article's appearance, Veblen had published three articles in sequential issues of the *QJE*, appearing under the titles "The Preconceptions of Economic Science," I, II, and III. (see: Veblen (1909a, 1909b, 1909c). In Year 1908, also appearing in the *QJE*, Veblen had published two articles that challenged Clark's understanding of capital. These appeared with the titles "On the Nature of Capital I: The productivity of capital goods" (1908) and "On the Nature of Capital II: Investment, intangible assets, and the pecuniary magnate." As emphasized by the Australian scholar Tony Aspromorgos (1987), "Neoclassical Economics" needs to be appreciated as a term actually coined by Veblen for referring to a distinct school within Economic Science that could readily be traced to precepts and ideas regarding "utility" initially advanced by Jeremy Bentham back in 1789, and just over ninety years later W. Stanley Jevons enshrined Bentham's notion of *utility* in the early chapters of his then pioneering work: *The Theory of Political Economy* (1871). Alfred Marshall's *Principles of Economics*, first published in 1890, assisted in institutionalizing this Bentham/Jevons "neoclassical" thinking across what in those decades was the far-reaching British Empire.

Veblen was also interested in things German. Viewed in historical perspective as a political economist would be wont to do, his *Imperial Germany and the Industrial Revolution* (1915) affirms Veblen's interest and detailed knowledge of German history and its importance. This monograph was structured around explicating a distinct pattern of "late" industrialization. However, we should emphasize that Veblen's interest in things German appeared at an earlier stage in his intellectual journey: that is, when in 1884 he published "Kant's Critique of Judgment" in the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*.

Part V. Their Shared Dionysian Perspectives?

When I first read the subtitle to Camic's *Veblen: The Making of an Economist Who Unmade Economics*, two words (not contained in the title) came to mind, and in this order:

“Nietzsche” and “Dionysus.” However, after I moved beyond what I viewed as a telling subtitle and I read Camic’s text, I found that in his lengthy biography he neither referenced nor mentioned Nietzsche and Dionysus. To think of Veblen as a “contrarian” would have foundation. However, the meanings associated with this term would prove too simplistic for describing Veblen. Camic (2020, 49-50) seems to prefer the term “iconoclast” to describe Veblen, **but** does not venture further. My reading of Veblen’s contributions suggests to me that we could identify lines of thinking reflecting traditions of Nietzsche as well Dionysus (*Διονύσιος*). While Nietzsche has been considered at some length above, we can also note that Nietzsche expressed such a deep and enduring interest in Dionysus that he should be considered a “Dionysian.”

As background, Dionysus was noted for holding an especially prominent position in the pantheon of ancient Greece and who, in Nietzsche’s view, needs to be thought of as adding necessary dimension when juxtaposed to Apollo, another prominent figure in the **Greek** pantheon.

It was in *The Birth of Tragedy: Out of the Spirit of Music* that Nietzsche first extolled the importance of the Dionysian tradition. Originally published in 1872, in this first book Nietzsche emphasized the importance of the tragedy (*η τραγωδία*) as it comes to us from the ancient Greeks. As a philologist, Nietzsche held the view that tragedy served as the highest form of art. His perspective is rooted in the juxtaposing and creative mixing of “Apollonian” and “Dionysian” features into a reflexive whole. This juxtaposing and mixing the characteristics of two Greek gods could afford the onlookers of a theatrical performance taking place in ancient Greece, promising prospects for experiencing a full range of important possibilities that we could associate with the human condition.

In the Greek language—both ancient as well as modern—the word *Κόσμος* (Cosmos) refers to the “World” in a broad, philosophical sense, and not necessarily to Planet Earth.

Dionysus is suggested to bring a tragic perspective into our world that assumes a special significance. In Nietzsche's perspective, a *tragic* world view was needed for restoring the importance for *heroism*, as a hero could rise to the occasion and attempt to mitigate tragedy. So important proves tragedy for Nietzsche that he lamented its loss during the transition to the modern era. His aim was to revive our understanding of tragedy's importance and, for a host of reasons, including offering impetus for the emergence of a hero: sometimes noted as a "superman." However, if we were to remain true to the original text, we could think of Nietzsche's notion of the superman as the *Übermensch*.

As a prominent figure in the Greek pantheon, Dionysus should be more correctly classified not as a "god" but as a "demi-god." Dionysus is noted as the son of Zeus, revered as the "god of Thunder and Lightning," who came into union with the mortal "Semele," a reputed daughter of Cadmus, the King of Thebes. Zeus' union with a mortal is what renders Dionysus a somewhat lesser god, that is, a *demi-god*. As a character in the pantheon of gods, Dionysus is also noted to have evolved over time. After the Roman conquest of the Corinthians in 146 b.c. Dionysus would get appropriated and added to the Roman pantheon as "Bacchus," and revered as the god of wine drinking along with other worldly pleasures. Consequently, his significance and relation to tragedy would end up trivialized by the Romans.

In Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, the Greek god Apollo was introduced as representing clarity, harmony, progress, logic, and also what is emphasized as a "principle of individuation." What this suggests is that some particular thing could be identified as distinct from other things. In Nietzsche's understanding, Dionysus is posed as representing the opposite of Apollo: namely, chaos, emotion, intoxication, ecstasy, and unity. Dionysus is also associated with fertility. As an added point, with Nietzsche's interpretation of Dionysus the "principle of individuation" does not appear. For the ancient Greeks—and as was

emphasized by Nietzsche—the interplay of the Apollonian and Dionysian tendencies would generate a special dynamic that would help to create our world. Following Nietzsche’s leads in a purist sense, Apollo and the Apollonian tradition becomes represented in sculpture, a medium with possibilities for projecting perfection through form. In contrast, the Dionysian tradition comes to our world represented through music. When taken together, the Apollonian perfection found in sculpture, and the Dionysian chaos associated with music, can be thought of as generating a dynamic synthesis leading to a primordial unity.

The complicating factor when considering the similarities, commonalities, and parallels that we might identify in the contributions of Veblen and Nietzsche rests upon whether Veblen could be viewed as a philologist and philosopher, but whose orientation got derailed. As noted above, Veblen’s encounter with his Professor Clark appears to have led to his earnestly focusing upon clarifying questions pertinent to political economy. Relatedly, Veblen could then be categorized as a bona fide political economist but bearing latent Dionysian leanings that would steadily come out, helping to define what we think of as his own, unique brand of “Veblenian Political Economy.” In my interpretation of Veblen’s contributions, his view was not only that Economics needed to be “unmade”—as Camic (2020) emphasized in the subtitle to his biography—but that the capitalist system also needed to be “unmade.” That is, after World War One, the capitalist system needed to be broken down, recast, and reworked, with, for example (Veblen, 1921) the engineers, operating as a “soviet of technicians,” therewith replacing the businessmen limited by their over-emphases on private property and too narrowly focused upon their own pecuniary gain over serviceability of output. As Veblen develops this and other positions in his book: *The Engineers and the Price System* (1921), such suggests to me that indeed he can be described and understood as much more than an “iconoclast.” Rather, an apt description of Veblen

would but more realistically note him as: “an especially well educated and able political economist with latent Dionysian tendencies.”

VI. Nietzsche’s “Last Man” and Veblen’s “Common Man”

In 1919 Veblen had published a book titled: *The Vested Interests and the Common Man*. His developing this character that he dubbed the “common man” appears in his Chapter VIII, which is the last chapter of this book. Might we identify similarities, commonalities, and parallels between Veblen’s notion of a “Common Man” and Nietzsche’s “Last Man” developed in the prologue of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883, 1885). (Footnote #2)

Could Nietzsche’s Zarathustra introduced near the mid-1880s be viewed as providing a foundation for Veblen’s very first book: *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, published in 1899—just one year prior to Nietzsche’s passing. One could remain content to interpret *Leisure Class* as a critique of the approach to consumer theory that had been drawn from Bentham’s notion of utility and that got imported into economics by Jevons and which, over time, and through Alfred Marshall’s assistance, became broadly accepted as the foundation for thinking on consumer choice rooted in calculations of utility and marginal utility. However, it remains questionable whether a critique of Bentham’s seminal ideas behind Jevons’ and Marshall’s choice theory was—in actuality—Veblen’s primary intention?

Early on in his publishing efforts and in his book *The Gay Science* (1882) Nietzsche introduced the phrase: “God is Dead.” Admittedly, this Nietzschean phrase is strongly worded and evocative. Nevertheless, the question begs answering: how should the words in this phrase to be interpreted?

As noted above, Nietzsche held the view that with The Enlightenment and the broad, public support for knowledge gained through scientific inquiry, this cultural change had shifted interpretations of our world in favor of science and away from theological

explanations. In this sense a Nietzschean view of the world suggests that including a supreme being—namely, God—in society’s understanding no longer proved necessary. If we were to build from the phrase that indeed “God is dead,” in the Nietzschean sense this leads to a host of connected ideas, one being that reality in the modern era should be characterized by a meaninglessness leading to despair. How members of society should deal with meaninglessness and despair takes us the core of Nietzsche’s thinking on this subject, offering insights into the philosophical foundations that help to define the modern era and the philosophical school that he advanced, namely, “Existentialism.” Nietzsche held the view that with the idea of God being undermined by scientific reasoning, then those following the Abrahamic religious traditions would face pessimism, despair, and nothingness, thereby suggesting a tendency for nihilism.

As a way of addressing these tendencies, Nietzsche introduced a character noted as *der Übermensch*, to take the term directly from Nietzsche’s text. Responding to the reality that God had been undermined by the rise of science, this *Übermensch* (in the plural form: *die Übermenschen*) would rely upon *der Wille*; that is, *the will* to find direction and also to create meaning in life, understanding that they—themselves—would be faced with assuming full responsibility for their paths and moral choices. The rub that Nietzsche notes is that not everyone would possess the strength of *will* necessary to emerge as an *Übermensch*, resulting in a sizeable portion of members of the human community stuck and faced with suffering difficulties associated with pessimism and nihilism. Rather than taking the harder road required—members of this segment of society whom Nietzsche identified as the *Untermenschen*, were faced with seeking to mitigate these challenging circumstances and would respond by compromising; that is, accepting hypocrisy and settling upon lives oriented towards maintaining levels of creature comforts that contributed to “happiness.” For Nietzsche, this is the origin of his understanding of his notion of “The Last Man:” the

compromised *Untermensch* seeking security and creature comforts in place of mustering the will necessary for dealing with the demanding existential struggle associated with accepting the reality that indeed God is dead.

Invoking his background in Philology, Nietzsche draws from ancient Persian sources and traditions and—in particular—to a character reflecting the tenets of a religious community known as “Zoroastrians.” As a Zoroastrian, the Nietzschean character Zarathustra travels about, endeavoring to bringing his message to the **groupings** of people collecting to hear his words. However, the experience would leave him disappointed. Listeners were not moved by his encouragement to rise to the challenges and shift away from their complacent lives. Rather, the masses he addressed voiced their preferences for lives of complacency, of comfort, choosing the easy way forward that did not demand exerting their wills and rising to deal with what—with time—we have come to conceptualize and frame as life’s existential challenges.

My understanding suggests that Veblen had read and carefully considered Nietzsche’s thinking on the “Death of God,” and the decisions on the part of the mass of the *Untermenschen* to seek creature comforts over rising to deal with major existential challenges related to what Nietzsche articulates with his choice wording as: “The Death of God.” In my judgment, it is the Nietzschean philosophical foundation that offers Veblen’s inquiry into the *Leisure Class* its enduring richness.

Why Veblen’s 1899 book has endured and continues to be read and cited for more than one hundred and twenty years has—in my understanding—but little to do with its critique of Neoclassical consumer theory, and much more to do with the fact that Veblen’s book offers a sequel to Nietzsche’s description of “The Last Man.” In sum, an interpretation **and parallel** could be noted as implying that **members** belonging to (or those aspiring to belong to and emulating) America’s *leisure class* should be understood as representative of

the Nietzschean *Untermenschen*, those lacking in the *will* to rise-up to meet the pressing challenges of living in a world in which nihilism has come to rule. Rather than mustering the necessary *will*, members of this variegated mass have taken to consuming as a way of offsetting and avoiding dealing with the existential challenges of having to make and then act upon hard choices related to ethics and morality. In my view, this is a *parallel* that we can identify, suggesting a commonness in the writings of Veblen and Nietzsche. In sum, Veblen appears to have recognize this societal tendency that Nietzsche defined, and then in his book he carries the analysis steps further by framing his notion of a “leisure” class composed of leaders and emulators, against the context of a Nietzschean philosophical challenge.

We could identify other yet plausible parallels between Nietzsche’s “The Last Man” and the “common man” whom Veblen describes. My interpretation, generally, is that in the main Veblen’s notion of his “Common Man” provides a sequel to the Nietzschean “Last Man.” To wit, Veblen takes his analysis quite far, explaining the circumstances of his “common man” within a political economy framework, in which he is well-educated and fully qualified to undertake. That is, Veblen’s “common man” is presented as everything that members of the “vested interests” are not. Members of Veblen’s *vested interests*, whom Veblen (1919, 162) designates as members of the “kept classes” are discernable by their abilities to acquire “something for nothing.” Members of the larger group defined as **depicting** the *common man* are, in the view of Veblen (1919, 162), suggested to never get anything for nothing—or *nothing for nothing*, to emphasize with use of a double negative. In contrast to members of the vested interests, Veblen’s common man is faced with struggling to gain the material foundations for existence. Clearly, this could include undertaking what Veblen refers to in his writings as “irksome” labor. Essentially, Veblen’s common man is posed as anathema to members of the *kept classes*: those enjoying advantages afforded by their association with the *vested interests*. Members of this privileged community could also

be interpreted as taking what Nietzsche seems to characterize as the easy path (gaining something from nothing), and then focusing their efforts upon securing creature comforts as a way of obtaining *happiness*, leading to the emergence of a societal dynamic as the lesser classes seek to emulate the *kept classes*. This notes a parallel in the contributions of Nietzsche and Veblen **that appears to serve as the foundation of his 1899 book, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*.**

VII. Conclusion

This inquiry has sought to establish that similarities, commonalities, and parallels can indeed be identified in selected contributions advanced by Thorstein Veblen and Friedrich Nietzsche. The gap in the literature was noted, suggesting that their commonness had not yet been addressed, thusly rendering the thrust of this inquiry as wholly novel. It was then argued that barriers could be identified which serve to thwart dealing effectively with issues that include fusing the two disciplines of Economics and Philosophy. In addition, it was emphasized that both Nietzsche (implicitly) and Veblen (explicitly) were focused upon the importance of institutions, and their writings expressed their disagreements regarding how *Occidental civilization* was proceeding with transitions to modernity. What helps to differentiate Veblen from Nietzsche is his ongoing and particularly earnest efforts to critique and undermine the marginalist approach advanced by John Bates Clark. Relatedly, time and energy were expended, and years of scholarly effort were invested for authoring many pages published as articles in what—back in the day—were influential journals. It was argued that Veblen's relation to Professor J. B. Clark is what pulled him away from his earlier interests in Philology and Philosophy, so that later in his life when his academic career was faltering, he would aspire to hold faculty posts in Political Economy; with his publication record suggesting mastery of this area of inquiry. While not ostensibly acknowledging the importance of a Dionysian orientation, it has been speculated that Veblen, nevertheless,

exhibits a similar orientation and this tendency could be read **in Veblen's penchant for generating intellectual chaos implied in Camic's subtitle** that seeks to establish Veblen: as "An Economist Who Unmade Economics." After considering Nietzsche's notion of "The Last Man," it has been argued that Veblen's "Common Man" could be considered as an extension; namely, as a character emerging in a post-Nietzschean realm in which "consumption" is turned to in a desperate effort to achieve a cheap and crass form of *happiness* that would offset the decline in relevance of an Abrahamic-based, moral foundation. This suggests to me that Veblen had understood Nietzsche and carried his thinking steps further and into the twentieth century. That Veblen aspired to carry forward a well-founded Nietzschean perspective into his social science thinking helps to explain why—after nearly one hundred years of his passing in 1929—so many thinkers continue to devote attention towards interpreting the richness of Veblen's intellectual legacy.

That Nietzsche was about fourteen years Veblen's senior suggests that the direction of influence would have gone from Nietzsche to Veblen. Nothing suggests otherwise. Tilman (2011) characterizes Veblen as an assiduous reader, taking in the writings of many authors also based in Europe—with Germany included. Nothing suggests that Nietzsche was similarly oriented as he remained focused upon his research into Philology and Philosophy that, in addition to Ancient Greece, would include the Ancient Persian theology of the Zoroastrians. It has been noted that Veblen's first journal publication appeared in 1884 and his first book was published in 1899, with both appearing years after Nietzsche's publication efforts were well underway, and his 1899 book inquiring into the *Leisure Class* appeared just one year prior to Nietzsche's passing. Admittedly, no hard evidence exists in the way of citations to Nietzsche, or notes and letters, for example, sent to Veblen's older brother, Andrew. However, in a personal email sent to me back in 2017, author Sidney Plotkin stressed: "Indeed, Veblen can be legend for not sharing his sources." These words coming

directly from an eminent Veblen scholar have encouraged me to press on in advancing this inquiry with the hope that my efforts would encourage further research into identifying the similarities, commonalities, and parallels connecting these two grand thinkers and their insightful and engaging ideas that continue to endure well into the twenty-first century.

(7,092 words)

Footnotes

1. To accurately differentiate *Economics* (or *Economic Science*) from *Political Economy* we need to consider how these areas of inquiry emerged and stabilized within the American academy back in the 1870s and 80s, and such would involve a lengthy and drawn-out story. Very ably, in *Veblen: The Making of an Economist Who Unmade Economics* (2020), author Charles Camic performs this service, devoting many pages towards clarification he introduces the origins of and distinctions between *Economics* and *Political Economy* as these areas of inquiry relate to Thorstein Veblen, his studies, and his professional life. What can be drawn from Camic's text is that *Political Economy* developed through a close association with the study of *History* and tends to rely on inductive reasoning and can also be associated with exponents of the German Historical School. In contrast, *Economics* can be taken to refer to a distinctly English approach to inquiry that carries out reasoning through relying upon a deductive method. For a more detailed explanation, please see Camic (2020). Following Camic's lead, and in the interests of convenience in discourse, this manuscript also takes the liberty to conflate these two distinct but related areas of inquiry.

2. The title to Nietzsche's famous book can offer verb forms that differ. We can find: *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Invoking another verb form and spelling we can also find: *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. In the interests of standardizing the text of this manuscript, I have chosen to use the verb "Spoke" when referring to Nietzsche's book. However, in the Bibliography, I use the word "Spake" when this verb appears in a particular edition.

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