

Truth in Context: Nietzsche's Affirmation of Tragic Morality

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Abstract:

In *Ancient Tragedy and the Origins of Modern Science*, Michael Davis states that the “beauty of tragedy is its presentation of the moral necessity of chance” (3). The work of Friedrich Nietzsche, using metaphor and ambiguous, paradoxical language, can be decoded as a discussion regarding the human desire for, yet inability to reach, autonomy. Nietzsche, though flirting at times with the realization of establishing human autonomy, ultimately affirms the kind of morality relative to the ancient tragedian’s worldview. Nietzsche develops this intellectual discussion through the means of conceptual thought experiments and an analysis of mythical archetypes.

Introduction

In the preface to *The Gay Science*, Friedrich Nietzsche writes, “We no longer believe that truth remains truth when the veils are withdrawn; we have lived too much to believe this” (38). Nietzsche proposes that there comes a point when one who inquires into truth, a philosopher, rejects the possibility of knowing the truth about something outside of its context. This essay will not contain an argument that Nietzsche in any sense affirms a transcendental, absolute notion of truth; it seems to go without saying that for Nietzsche, absolute, transcendental truth is an impossible idea to realize. Absolute truth is a notion of truth outside of context. Leaving absolute ideas of truth behind, Nietzsche posits a truth that can only be realized in relation to its milieu. It is possible that truth cannot be realized apart from some kind of context; context is inextricably linked with understanding truths about objects of investigation. Nietzsche’s metaphoric use of the term “veils” encapsulates the necessity of context—the given, symbols, abstractions, history, inherited notions of meaning—for understanding the truth. A dependence on context defines the actual human condition; the human condition finds meaning in the world and in itself through the means of establishing context, analyzing a situation with inherited means. Another aspect of the human condition is the arguably unreachable goal of all to establish an autonomous relationship with truth, to see the truth of something with the veils removed. In *Ancient Tragedy and the Origins of Modern Science*, Michael Davis operates with the thesis that both ancient tragedy and modern science treat the same essential subject; human life is “essentially self-contradictory desire for autonomy” (4). He connects the desire for autonomy with a desire to efface different forms of context that exist outside of human control, be it “chance,” “the given,” or “our past” (Davis 3). Davis sees this milieu the human condition finds itself in as the existential conditions found in ancient tragedy, fertile for the maturation of morality; the “beauty of tragedy is its

presentation of the moral necessity of chance” (3). The work of Nietzsche—though rife with metaphors and ambiguous, sometimes paradoxical, language—can be decoded as various ways of approaching an epicenter from which radiate many questions regarding the human desire for, yet inability to reach, autonomy. The argument in this essay is that Nietzsche, though flirting at times with the realization of establishing human autonomy, ultimately affirms the kind of morality relative to the ancient tragedian’s worldview.

Two concepts that can be derived from Nietzsche’s work, “the captivity of the will” and “the eternal return,” are found respectively in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and *The Gay Science*. They serve as enigmatic thought experiments that force the close reader to examine the struggle between a worldview that sees actual human autonomy as a realizable goal and a worldview that acknowledges the utility yet unrealizable nature of the human desire for autonomy. In the previously named works by Nietzsche and *The Birth of Tragedy*, he discusses Orpheus, an Egyptian youth, and King Midas as examples of figures who attempt to strip the veil. Among these characters, Orpheus’ desire seems to be the least tainted by a desire for autonomy because he descended to the depths to claim his love. These figures illuminate the attempts at establishing autonomy analyzed by Davis. In *Ancient Tragedy*, he discusses the eponymous character Meno, in Plato’s dialogue *Meno*, as the representative individual attempting to realize autonomy, as well as the philosophical origins of modern science as philosophical and theological-political attempts at realizing autonomy. Nietzsche’s discussion of the aforementioned figures suggests that the lesson his characters, as well as Davis’, teach readers is that even though the human condition strives for autonomy, to strip the veils off of truth and realize it apart from context, ultimately, any attempt to realize truth in this immature fashion should lead to an embrace of the value of truth’s coverings. The unveiling leads to a realization that context, the given, is what is

available as a beginning point for truth analysis, to what Nietzsche says in praising the Greek worldview, to “stop courageously at the surface,” to become “superficial—*out of profundity*” (“Gay Science” 38).

A World without Chance?

Michael Davis asks his reader to imagine a world without chance, what I argue is relative to conceptions of context and Nietzsche’s “veil” metaphor. Key to Davis’ argument is the necessary role chance, context, or the given plays in existence and moral life. Davis states: “The beauty of tragedy is its presentation of the moral necessity of chance” (3). Placing ancient tragedy in a dialectical framework, Davis compares it to modern science, both being different approaches of answering the same question, the question regarding the reach and realizability of human autonomy. “Ancient tragedy and modern science can be paired because they represent alternative answers to the same question. They are both concerned with the question of human autonomy” (2). According to Davis, the human desire for autonomy is “essentially self-contradictory” and “doomed to frustration” (4). Through examining Sophocles’ character Ajax, Davis posits the definition of unhindered autonomy, of which this essay will make extensive use. Davis states that Ajax does not recognize the role of chance: “In a world without chance the good, the instruments of purposiveness, can fail only when failing to exert themselves” (2). Absolute autonomy is the realization of an unhindered will, purposive instrumentation facing no resistance from events outside of its control. The realization of this kind of autonomy in human life is, as Davis asserts, “doomed to frustration” (4). However, the desire for autonomy, to assert one’s will against his or her milieu, is a useful and even needed conceptual framework shaping human action.

Davis' idea is that ancient tragedy depicts the desire to establish autonomy as the character flaw certain to set off the chain of cause and effect leading to the character's downfall. Tragedies regularly depict a person's "attempt to be the complete cause of one's fate" (Davis 4). The tragedian Sophocles shows that only "by committing the most criminal of acts, parricide and incest, can Oedipus collapse the difference between two families and become whole" (Davis 4). For Oedipus, becoming whole entails attempting to take control of his fate to remove what Davis refers to as "chance." The goal of establishing human autonomy is to efface the "intervention of the gods," to establish an existence "without change" where "the good, the instruments of purposiveness, can fail only when failing to exert themselves...when they are not good" (Davis 2-3). In this process, Oedipus initiates actions that appear to have their origins in his action, his "instruments of purposiveness;" however, Davis states that Oedipus's "past, the given, becomes confused with that of which he is the cause" ("Introduction" 4). This intermixing of "the given" and "instruments of purposiveness" exhibited by the actions of Oedipus within his milieu demonstrates Davis' argument that "the beauty of tragedy is its presentation of the moral necessity of chance" (Davis 2-3). In light of Davis' argument, contained within the structure of tragedy is a critique of attempts of establishing autonomy. The worldview of tragedy includes an inherent despair, positing an unattainable desire that leads to confusion and even destruction. In its very essence as an art form tragedy warns future generations about the danger of attempting, as Nietzsche might put it, to realize an object (in the case of tragedy, the self) apart from veils or apart from context.

Contrasting the worldview of tragedy with that of modern science, Davis examines modern science as an answer to the question of the realizable nature of human autonomy by being ultimately concerned with the origins of phenomena that have framed their own origins in

narratives that absolutely separate them from their historical and social context. Davis' focus on the rhetoric of modern science becomes a discussion of what it would ideally take to absolutely establish autonomy, to establish a grasp on truth prior to one's experience, to find Descartes' Archimedean point. As Davis observes, modern science was introduced as "the 'new' science of nature," a designation that "implies that it had a beginning, a genesis" (2). By positing a beginning for science, Davis posits a clear distinction between science's narrative progression and the narrative that existed before science, a stark division between "before and after." Science dismisses the contingency, flux and context in which it formed as a worldview. To create the impression of autonomy, modern science "self-consciously rejected the understanding of nature which they took to be the teaching of antiquity" (Davis 2). Under the arguably inaccurate pretense of accomplishing a radical break from historical intellectual traditions, modern science establishes itself as something independent of the context in which it was historically formed, and therefore claims to have a form of autonomy. Davis sees modern science as the assertion of the realization of human autonomy that effaces context, a movement that sees itself as having realized truth apart from veils.

The Captivity of the Will

Davis identifies Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* as a work where Nietzsche wrestles with the problem of human autonomy: "Nietzsche saw the problem as '*wie man wird was man ist,*' or how one becomes what one is" (Davis 3). Davis links the desire for autonomy to the desire to become a god: "To be a god might be possible; to become a god is something more difficult" (3). He implies that identifying things as they are is possible, but changing nature requires a dedication perhaps inaccessible to human subjectivity, an absolute beyond reach. This action requires making oneself one's target: "To become more than you are means necessarily to

turn on yourself. The obstacle to any willing is always what is already present, the given” (Davis 3). The effacement of “the given” required to establish autonomy also becomes an attempt to dissolve one’s historical context. The possibility of this kind of assertion of one’s will without question begs some questions. Countering this attempt at severing ties with history is possibly beyond our efforts. Davis asserts, “We are what we are largely because of what has been. As it seems impossible to change what we have been, it seems impossible to control what we are” (3). Davis makes reference to Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* as a text intended to address the human desire for autonomy.

In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche wrestles with the difficulties that Davis raises regarding the problems inherent in ideas of absolute autonomy, issues such as the need to “turn” on oneself in order to achieve self-mastery, to efface chance and the given, the necessary elements of tragic morality, to establish purposive instrumentation. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, though a work of philosophy, is presented in a narrative form one might find reminiscent of the Christian gospels. It features a character of Nietzsche’s construction based on the ancient Persian prophet, Zoroaster. The character that moves the action along, Zarathustra, is presented as a traveling messenger of a seeming divine message; everywhere he travels, followers, “disciples,” flock to him. In the section titled “On Redemption,” Zarathustra reaches a great bridge where he is surrounded by “the cripples and the beggars” (“Zarathustra” 109). He is greeted by a “hunchback” who tells Zarathustra: “The people too learn from you and are gaining faith in your teaching; but in order to believe you completely, they need one more thing”; Zarathustra is then told that what remains is for him to convince “us cripples!” (“Zarathustra” 109). The hunchback then makes a statement that alludes to issues found in Davis’ work regarding the difficulty of negating the context in which humanity attempts to assert autonomy: “You can heal the blind

and make the lame walk; and for the one who has too much behind him, you could surely take a bit away” (“Zarathustra” 109). In essence, the hunchback suggests that with ease Zarathustra can completely remove people from their respective contexts. Nietzsche’s use of the phrase, “one who has too much behind him,” seems to allude to a concept of context or what Davis calls “the given.”

To the ones who suffer, the “cripples and the beggars,” Nietzsche may be implying that they are representative of all who have a history, a given, much more difficult to negate than the quest for human autonomy suggests. The condition in which they exist indicates that chance is at work in the world humanity is attempting to master. It appears at first that Nietzsche is suggesting that the problem of suffering must be mastered before the message of Zarathustra can be accepted; however, Nietzsche’s protagonist returns with an affirmation of suffering. “If one takes the hump from the hunchback, then one takes his spirit too...” (“Zarathustra” 109). Entirely removing someone from his or her given situation may be an impossible task, and if removal were possible, what would remain of the person? History and experience, arguably, shape individual subjectivity, and a sudden evacuation of one’s accumulated given situation possibly negates the self. Zarathustra says that “the one who makes the lame walk causes [the lame] the greatest harm;” in healing the lame man, Zarathustra asserts that “his vices run away with him...” (“Zarathustra” 109). Nietzsche, at this point appears to see a connection between one’s context and one’s moral development. The immediate absolute negation of personal context leaves a person merely with an unhindered will, a will that perhaps only becomes capable of realizing, as Nietzsche suggests, “vices.” The person liberated from his or her personal context would resemble the actualization of Ajax’s ideal, the realization of unfettered purposive instrumentality.

After Zarathustra's exchange with the hunchback, he appears to address his whole audience. He speaks about the tendency of humans to develop capacities out of proportion to other capacities, not allowing an internal synthesis to develop to create a holistic person. "I see and have seen worse, and some of it so hideous that I do not want to speak of everything . . . namely human beings who were missing everything except the one thing they have too much of—human beings who are nothing more than one big eye, or one big maw or one big belly or some other big thing—inverse cripples I call such types" ("Zarathustra" 109). These "inverse cripples" as Nietzsche denotes them are some of the celebrated individuals of the day: "the big ear was not only a human being, but a great human being, a genius" ("Zarathustra" 109-10). It seems that the one Nietzsche terms the cripple, the one who suffers, is dependent on his or her malady to have definition; it is arguable that all of humanity is in a sense crippled, equally dependent on context for subjective definition. The inverse cripple may represent one who has attempted to efface his or her context, to find definition in isolation. Nietzsche's Zarathustra expresses frustration that these individuals seemingly deprived of context, individuals who have attempted to attain autonomy, are all that surrounds him. He also states that when he looks to the past he sees the same fragmentation: "And if my gaze flees from the now to the past; it always finds the same: fragments and limbs and grisly accidents—but no human beings!" ("Zarathustra" 110). These fragmentary human beings become a vision of the future for Zarathustra: "I walk among human beings as among the fragments of the future; that future that I see" (110). An ambiguity arises; on one hand, it seems Nietzsche asserts a need for context to define the individual, yet he also seems to see the inherited context as problematic for realizing a holistic vision of humanity. Nietzsche sees that the problem lies in individuals attempting to assert their autonomy, resulting in highly developed individual organs that do not function in the context of a

whole body. He then seems to suggest that this attempt to assert autonomy has been a constant in human history; it is the context humanity inherits, resulting in the gaze Zarathustra gives to the present and past delivering a sight of “fragments and limbs.” This problem would seem to indicate that though humanity’s realization is dependent on context or “the given.” That “given” is not holistic; it is full of attempts at asserting autonomy. It is a context that will perpetuate incompleteness. Perhaps, there is a need for “redemption.”

After identifying this problem, Nietzsche, through Zarathustra, posits what he conceives to be the redemption of humanity:

And how could I bear to be a human being if mankind were not also creator and solver of riddles and redeemer of accident? To redeem those who are the past and to recreate all it was into “thus I willed it!”—only that would I call redemption! (“Zarathustra” 110)

It may seem from this quote that Nietzsche is proposing a kind of purposeful instrumentality achievable by the will. Still, just as Davis observes the human quest for autonomy, that it is humanity’s frustratingly unattainable aim, Nietzsche’s Zarathustra also acknowledges the challenges inherent in asserting autonomy through the will, in effacing “accident,” the moral necessity of tragedy. Zarathustra states: “the will itself is still a prisoner. Willing liberates, but what is that called, which claps even the liberator in chains?” (“Zarathustra” 110). The will is asserted to be impotent “against that which has been—it is an angry spectator of everything past” (“Zarathustra” 111). The will is impotent in efforts to establish human autonomy apart from “the given.” “The Will cannot will backward; that it cannot break time and time’s greed—that is the will’s loneliest misery” (“Zarathustra” 111). In essence the will can be imagined as a completely free agent that, like Ajax’s ideal in Sophocles’ tragedy, would remove any ambiguities caused by chance or what is accidental. This ideal would

be the world where the only driving force would be one's purposive instrumentation. Nietzsche's affirmation of the captivity of the will indicates that the establishment of autonomy is more complicated than a mere ideal would suggest.

The Eternal Return as an Affirmation of Chance and Contingency

In one of the most famous and puzzling sections of *The Gay Science*, "The Greatest Weight," Nietzsche asks, in a highly metaphorical way, whether the given context, will always be as it has been. Will the past always perpetuate itself, recreate itself, with or without human willing? Can, as Zarathustra theorizes, the will "redeem those who are the past and...recreate all 'it was' into 'thus I willed it...'"? The passage begins like a parable:

What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliness and say to you: "This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more" ("Gay Science" 273)

The demon postulates that the person it speaking with has lived and accumulated a context full of memories, of contingencies. However, this person has lived life up into the present as it is currently and was in the past; in their life there will be, as the author of the Biblical book *Ecclesiastes* says, "nothing new under the sun." The "demon" continues:

"and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence . . ." ("Gay Science" 273)

The demon's message implies that this repetition of one's given will have both positive and negative effects on the person realizing the unwilled milieu he or she must inhabit. The greatest seeming significances and the smallest supposedly obvious negligible details show to be equally determined and accidental ("Gay Science" 273). The demon stresses the subject's negligible

place in the flux of context: “The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it” (“Gay Science” 273). Will the subject of this existence merely allow the flux of repeated contingencies to merely wash over him or her after realizing his or her place in the flux of history? Nietzsche conveys two diverging roads the subject bearing this knowledge can take:

Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: “You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine.” If this thought gained possession of you, it would change you as you are or perhaps crush you. (“Gay Science” 273-4)

At first the demon’s audience, perhaps like Zarathustra’s imprisoned will, “is an angry spectator of everything past” (“Zarathustra” 111). However, the captivity of the will may only be the subject’s mere passivity, allowing the flux of history to flow over him or her, maintaining a stance that autonomy can be asserted against history. It could be that the will’s freedom lies in the realization that within this flux there are moments that seem to make all the rest seem worth it. Perhaps at this point, the will becomes a willing accomplice with contingency. Finally, Nietzsche leaves the person who has benefited from the hidden wisdom of the demon with a question meant to direct his or her will to an affirmation of the given, of chance, and of history: “The question in each and every thing, ‘Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?’ would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight” (“Gay Science” 274). The question after one realizes that he or she is dependent on context, on chance, on contingency, on history, becomes: “If I consider that the life I experience will repeat itself *ad infinitum*, does the action I am performing at this moment measure as something I would want repeated forever and ever?”

The weight of the knowledge that there is infinite repetition of minor and great details creates a consciousness that desires to will desired repetitions, whether the will has an effect or not. It also becomes a willing of chance, of the world of tragic morality that recognized chance as a “moral necessity” (Davis 3).

The Archetypes: Truth as an Object of Investigation

The conceptual discussions addressed in the first part of this essay hover around a locus of issues involving subjectivity in relation to context—the self as an object of truth can only be realized in relation to veils, context, history and other givens. In the final part of this essay, the self as an archetype inquiring into truth as an object comes to the fore. The issues regarding the quest for human autonomy that Nietzsche raises in metaphoric discussions of concepts, *the captivity of the will* and *the eternal return*, also find expression in discussions of three archetypes: Orpheus, an Egyptian youth, and King Midas. These issues are also discussed in depth in Davis’ exploration of Plato’s character, Meno. Each of these archetypes (in the hands of Nietzsche, Michael Davis and, less directly, Plato), in different ways, explores what is involved in establishing autonomy by inquiring into truth as an object. In this discussion, it will be shown that besides discussing the problems of the individual establishing autonomy in relation to context, Nietzsche and Michael Davis also discuss the attempt to realize transcendent truth, truth isolated from veils.

Nietzsche’s Three Archetypes

As noted, Nietzsche uses the word “veil” to connote a system of representation that is inextricably related to unmediated truth. Truth remains inaccessible without the use of veils. One archetype he uses to illustrate this point is that of the Egyptian youth in a temple with a veiled statue. There comes a point when the developing philosopher realizes the dependence truth has

on some kind of context. He proclaims the arrival at this realization as a momentous occasion in the development of a philosopher, the seeker of truth:

And as for our future, one will hardly find us again on the paths of those Egyptian youths who endanger temples by night, embrace statues, and want by all means to unveil, uncover, and put into a bright light whatever is kept concealed for good reasons. (“Gay Science” 4)

As Walter Kaufmann points out in his footnote to this passage, Nietzsche is here alluding to a poem by Schiller, “*Das verschleierte Bild zu Sais*,” that recounts the story of a brash Egyptian youth who has a lust for knowledge, to unveil the truth at any human cost. Nietzsche refers to this veil as being “concealed for good reasons” (“Gay Science” 4). Nietzsche alludes to a warning the Hierophant guiding the youth through the temple delivers to the youth about the prohibition against impiously grasping the veil, the “thin partition” separating the boy “from the truth” (“*Bild zu Sais*” 36-37). The youth focuses on the physical limitation separating him from the goal he lusts after; his guide interjects and reminds the boy of the “law,” appealing to what Nietzsche interprets as “good” reason (“*Bild zu Sais*” 38). Here, through alluding to Schiller’s poem, Nietzsche seems conscious of the value of established prohibition, “good” reason, an objective point external to the subject forbidding certain actions. Perhaps the process of attempting to peer past the veil, to transgress objective prohibitions, leads upon return to the surface to an affirmation of external borders forbidding certain actions. Though, upon return, external prohibitions may become self-conscious abstractions meant to provide a sense of direction where no objective direction is present. Still, what motivates this Egyptian youth? Does he want to see the statue’s beauty? Or, is the thought that behind the veil is “truth” all that draws him?

Nietzsche's early work in *The Birth of Tragedy* seems to probe this theme of the value of abstractions, limits interposed between subjectivity and unmediated existence, for the enrichment of actual lived human experience. To make this point, Nietzsche gives an illustration of an unveiling, a glimpse into perhaps an aspect of human nature that is better kept under wraps. He briefly relates details of the story of Silenus's capture at the hands of King Midas. Upon being captured, Silenus is asked by Midas "what was the best and most desirable of all things for man" ("Tragedy" 3). To this question Silenus was at first silent; then suddenly he answers Midas. According to Nietzsche's summary, Silenus "gave a shrill laugh" before saying that "[w]hat is best of all [for humankind] is utterly beyond [its] reach: not to be born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*"; he then gives the supposedly next best option: "to die soon" ("Tragedy" 3). This response is arguably not the answer for which Midas was looking. In this supposed revelation, Greek culture glimpsed "an abyss" and quickly turned away, avoiding its awful returned glare ("Beyond" 146). Nietzsche observes: "The Greek knew and felt the terror and horror of existence" ("Tragedy" 3). Still, this knowledge, this possible truth, was quickly covered up: "That he [the Greek] might endure this terror at all, he had to interpose between himself and life the radiant dream-birth of the Olympians" ("Tragedy" 3). As the seventy-eighth aphorism from *The Gay Science* suggests, an abstraction such as "the Olympians" removes humanity from the "foreground," the foreground that Silenus's wisdom suggests should be whisked away from consciousness. In a sense, Midas in his quest to catch Silenus and implore from him hidden wisdom, resembles Nietzsche's allusion to Schiller's poem, the "Egyptian youths" in the "temples by night" attempting to unveil the secrets of the statues. Nietzsche warns that this desire in human nature ultimately is unattainable; truth must be accompanied by veils: "We no longer believe that the truth remains truth when the veils are withdrawn" ("Gay Science" 38).

This abstracted world that the Greeks interposed between themselves and the raw unmediated truth spoken by Silenus is likened to “a transfiguring mirror” that seduces “one to a continuation of life” (“Tragedy” 3). As will be discussed further in the discussion on Orpheus and the philosopher as poet, Nietzsche makes use of the image of transfiguration to illustrate how artificial means of thinking about life such as art and philosophy are means of investing life with value. Nietzsche sees a value in this human tendency to conceptualize fictions or logical structures of thought for giving humanity the ability to escape its perceived milieu, and it seems for this kind of art to have its effect, art needs to be abstracted, clearly distinct from reality. Nietzsche’s garlanding of art that interposes clear distinctions between art and reality in turn becomes a scathing attack on art movements that attempt to report reality as it is and represent it in a form supposedly without much variation from the genuine article:

You sober people who feel well armed against passion and fantasies and would like to turn emptiness into a matter of pride and an ornament: you call yourselves realists and hint that the world really is the way it appears to you. As if reality stood unveiled before you only, and you yourselves were perhaps the best part of it—O you beloved images of Sais! But in your unveiled state are not even you still very passionate and dark creatures compared to fish, and still far too similar to an artist in love? (“Gay Science” 121)

Seemingly, Nietzsche is suggesting that the Realist aesthetic is of lesser value to the cultivation of human life than a form of aesthetics clearly distinct from reality. He critiques the conceit that there can be an art that presents truth raw and unmediated, unveiled, the conceit that an individual has access to truth without a veil. When Nietzsche does mention the virtues of art and particularly the theater, he highlights their value for removing reality from the foreground, to allow real existence a shroud, freeing it from observers stumbling into the temple.

The presence of Orpheus as an archetype in Nietzsche's work seems to point to Nietzsche's conception of the poet and the philosopher, two roles he seems to see as kindred. In mythology, Orpheus is known as the poet, the lyre-player, who famously descended into the Underworld to bring Eurydice, his deceased wife, back from the depths. To keep his wife alive, Orpheus had to avoid looking at Eurydice as they ascended to the surface, but Orpheus stole a glance and lost his wife a second time.

In Phaedrus' telling of this story in Plato's *Symposium*, it is said that the form of Eurydice that Orpheus claimed from the depths of Hades was an illusion, "only a shadow of the woman he'd sought;" this simulacrum was offered to Orpheus because he, as a musician, was supposedly "a coward and soft" (179d). Phaedrus, comparing Orpheus to Admetus' wife, Alcestis, says that Orpheus, unlike Alcestis, "preferred to sneak his way into Hades while still alive rather than die for the sake of the beloved" (179d). Relating this tale to Nietzsche's use of the term veil, Orpheus snuck past the veil, and was given (in Phaedrus' telling) an illusion in place of what he sought; he was given another veil that caused him to return to the surface. This veil proved real enough for Orpheus to glance at and, in doing so, granted him the appearance of a second loss of his wife's ontological being.

Still, noting that though Orpheus did not die for his beloved, he was drawn to look past the veil with an arguably erotic interest. As Diotima notes to Socrates, also in the *Symposium*, regarding love: "...Love [according to Diotima, the offspring of Want and Wherewithal] is constantly drawn to beautiful things..." (203c). Diotima quickly moves to identifying Love as seeking wisdom: "Endlessly resourceful, he is constantly on the trail of truth and wisdom" (203d). This desire for truth and wisdom is carried out through his desire for beauty, and this

state of desire is considered a state between absolute knowledge and absolute lack of knowledge, a state of dependence on context and inability to fully grasp the object of truth:

Isn't it obvious by now, Socrates, that those who love wisdom are not wise or ignorant but the ones in between, like Love himself. In addition, the young god Love loves wisdom because wisdom and knowledge are the most beautiful things we know of, and Love is always drawn to beauty. It follows that Love must be a lover of wisdom and that all lovers of wisdom, that is, all philosophers, like Love himself, are somewhere in between total ignorance and complete omniscience. The cause of this generally in-between state lies in Love's parents: his father as you recall, was wise and resourceful, while his mother, well, his mother was not. (204b)

Perhaps, rather than being "a coward," as Phaedrus suggests, Orpheus is in the in-between state of the philosopher, attracted to beauty, the beauty of even his wife's ephemeral likeness, the beauty that he steals a glance at and that slips past his grasp yet again, a beauty he cannot absolutely possess. According to Diotima, Love is reaching, pursuing his desire, but the fact that love is reaching suggests that love never absolutely possesses its object of desire; love is perpetual movement towards the ineffable. This revelation apparently is a correction to her student, Socrates: "For you thought that Love always played the role of the beloved, the object of love, rather than the pursuing lover" (204c). Perhaps Orpheus' tragic flaw is that he is still seeking truth and wisdom through a particular form of beauty. He fell for his wife once; he lost her to death and then fell again for that particular form. As Diotima conveys in her famous description of the trajectory of Eros in search of the good, the initiate in the ways of love should "become a lover of all beautiful bodies without distinction;" his "obsessive attraction" to the particular "should begin to diminish..." (210b). Taking into consideration Diotima's thoughts on

the dynamics of Eros, love being the pursuit of truth and wisdom through the appearance of beauty, it is reasonable to consider an alternative view of Orpheus' motivations for peering past the veil. Consider the possibility that both Midas and the Egyptian youth are examples of attempting to bypass the pursuit of beauty in the pursuit of truth, and seemingly, one could say that this kind of movement towards the object of truth is motivated by a desire for autonomy, to make a power grab.

In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche articulates an epistemological movement that resonates with the physical movements depicted in the myth of Orpheus. Nietzsche portrays a model for a movement of discovery, peering past the veil, followed by return to what was known before:

from such abysses...from the sickness of severe suspicion, one returns *newborn*, having shed one's skin, with a tenderer tongue for all good things, with merrier senses, with a second dangerous innocence in joy, more childlike and yet a hundred times subtler than one has ever been before. ("Gay Science" 37)

This process of descent and emergence is also likened to ascent and return to the ground:

And is not this precisely what we are again coming back to, we daredevils of the spirit who have climbed the highest and most dangerous peak of present thought and looked around from up there—we who have looked *down* from there? Are we not, precisely in this respect, Greeks? Adorers of forms, of tones, of words? And therefore—*artists*? ("Gay Science" 38).

Nietzsche depicts this process as foundational to the creation of an artist or a philosopher, Orpheus being the mythological archetype of the poet. A poet or philosopher must at one point attempt to see past the veil, but ultimately realize that what he or she seeks is nonexistent apart from what he or she attempts to strip away. The artist, the philosopher, is the one who leaves the

world of appearance, attempts to strip his or herself of context, but this artist ultimately returns to and lives in apparent contingency.

Nietzsche sheds light on the kind of world he imagines his Orphic philosopher to return to from the depths; it is likened to the world the Greeks inhabited: “What is required for that is to stop courageously at the surface, the fold, the skin, to adore appearance, to believe in forms, tones, words, in the whole Olympus of appearance [, superficial] *out of profundity*” (“Preface” 4). The artist, the poet, the philosopher finds his or herself stopping “courageously at the surface,” stopping and inhabiting context, realizing both personal meaning and the meaning of things in relation to other things. Nietzsche’s conception of this movement from the depths of unmediated profoundness and return to the world of “forms, tones, words” seems to indicate a different fate for the Nietzschean Orphic philosopher, a reward for learning from attempting to peer past the world of appearance, a reward for seeking truth through erotic means. As Nietzsche suggests in the preface to *The Gay Science*, perhaps the reward for glimpsing past the veil through erotic means is to become an artist. It is certainly arguable that Nietzsche values what the artist is able to give to humanity, and he sees the process of becoming an artist as similar and perhaps synonymous with the process that gives birth to a philosopher.

Nietzsche sees the value in the artist’s ability to remove human attention from itself, to interpose a veil between human subjectivity and raw unmediated reality. In a sense, the artist not only realizes that truth cannot be recognized apart from veils; the artist is the one specially skilled in erecting veils in the form of abstractions that are capable of revealing hidden aspects of human nature: “Only artists, and especially those of the theater, have given men eyes and ears to see and hear with some pleasure what each man *is* himself...” (“Gay Science” 132-3). Not only has the artist allowed humanity to see itself in a way perhaps obscured in a less self-conscious

existence, Nietzsche states that this skilled individual throughout successive ages has “taught us to esteem the hero that is concealed in everyday characters...[the artist] taught us the art of viewing ourselves as heroes...” (“Gay Science” 133). Nietzsche identifies that this gift of perception is accomplished through a particular means. The artist creates a view of humanity that is seen “from a distance...simplified and transfigured...” (“Gay Science” 133). Nietzsche’s use of the word “transfigured” here echoes a thought he conveys in the preface to *The Gay Science*; in these opening pages he describes the “health” of the philosopher, stating that the philosopher “has traversed many kinds of health” and in turn has “passed through an equal number of philosophies” implying that each physical and psychological state is in some form related to new modes of abstracting empirical reality: “[the philosopher] simply *cannot* keep from transposing his states every time into the most spiritual form and distance: this art of transfiguration *is* philosophy” (“Preface” 35). In this passage, Nietzsche describes a very similar process to that of the artist that the philosopher also carries out in relation to actual lived existence. Nietzsche retains use of the same word in both instances, “transfigure,” and in both instances a similar function is described for the philosopher’s and the artist’s service to humanity. Both the philosopher and the artist allow humanity to view itself with “the most spiritual form and distance,” “simplified and transfigured.”

Meno: The Truth that is Revealed and Obscured

In his preface to *Beyond Good and Evil*, Friedrich Nietzsche famously poses a provocative question: “Suppose that truth is a woman—and why not? Aren’t there reasons for suspecting that all philosophers, to the extent that they have been dogmatists, have not really understood women?” (3). Nietzsche invites his reader for a moment to take another look at the traditional object of philosophy, truth. This playful (or some may say sexist) question in an

obvious comic sense makes a buffoon out of the socially awkward philosopher or academic failing in an attempt to make a romantic connection. Nietzsche's fun at the expense of one who may claim to live the life of the mind critiques the hypothetical investigating subject's approach to his object. On one hand, these scholars are unable to accept what is mysterious or capricious about life (or the opposite sex), thinking that if they find the right formula, all will fall in place in a fashion that bypasses the need for social graces.

Beyond the social sphere, this academic approaches the subject of "truth" from the wrong angle. Truth, whatever it may be, Nietzsche suggests, cannot be accessed directly, just as the woman he postulates will also reject obvious, too forward, advances from the academic planning the details of his courtship before he even casually greets her. One may see similarities between Nietzsche's hypothetical inquirer into truth, the dogmatic philosopher, and Plato's character, Socrates' interlocutor in the quest to get to the truth of the origin of "virtue," Meno. Davis brings forward the idea that Meno, in his quest to find where virtue comes from, is attempting to attain a level of absolute and final perfection that eschews the perpetual human need to strive for perfection. Davis notes:

Meno is essentially lazy. He wants to know without learning, and he wants to be virtuous without trying. His laziness is not simple, but rather points to what lies behind serious laziness, that there is something necessarily effortless about perfection. (Davis 135)

Meno's desire to know virtue's origin reveals a desire to grasp and possess virtue, to escape the human need to strive for the ineffable that escapes absolute human possession. He is attempting to skip the uncertain courtship of truth, and he desires a certain legal relationship with truth, a marriage. Truth is merely an object for Meno's taking. Davis goes further into Meno's relationship with truth: "Meno's laziness, his reluctance to try, has a foundation in his awareness

that there is something ugly in trying. To work is to admit one's incompleteness, one's lack of autonomy" (Davis 134). The work ahead of the inquirer into truth is the perpetual dialectic beginning with individual opinions about one's existential setting. Truth remains something ineffable to those attempting to finally tie it down.

In the dialogue *Meno*, Meno asks Socrates if virtue is something that can be taught, or if it can be practiced, or if it is innate in some and missing in others. Meno poses a question regarding the origin of virtue, in essence asking where it comes from. Socrates' self-deprecating reply subtly shifts the discussion from a question of origins, virtue's transcendent essence, to identifying what virtue is in the context of a human milieu, virtue's immanent essence: "I happen not to know at all what that thing virtue itself is" (71a). Michael Davis notes that Socrates evades answering a question regarding virtue's *genesis*, replacing it with a question regarding the "essence, or *eidos* of virtue" (Davis 102). According to Davis, Socrates' evasion may be more profound than it may at first appear: "The question 'How does virtue come to be?' is replaced by the question 'How does the question 'How does virtue come to be?' come to be?'" (Davis 103). Meno takes the bait and scoffs at Socrates' confessed lack of knowledge: "But do you, Socrates, truly not know what virtue is...?" (71c). Socrates then says he does not think he has met anyone who did know what virtue is. This reply causes Meno to desire to defend his master Gorgias who Socrates once heard speak still not affirming him as one who knows, an implicit denoting of Gorgias as a sophist.

The dialectical discussion between Socrates and Meno regarding what virtue is soon becomes an attempt to define what an ontological phenomenon's essence is in the context of human existential experience—if the essence of virtue cannot be comprehended, what is shape? When asked what shape is, Socrates says it is "that which alone, of all the things that are, which

always happens to accompany color” (75b). According to Michael Davis, Socrates’ answer corresponds to identifying shape by appearance or *eidos*. Socrates as Nietzsche might say is stopping “courageously at the surface” (“Gay Science” 38). Meno replies: “but if, indeed, someone should declare that he does not know color but is at a loss about it in the same way that he is about shape, what do you suppose you would have answered him?” (75c). Meno probes Socrates for an answer that isolates shape from the context of color, assuming that you are speaking to one unfamiliar with the concept of color. He attempts to probe past his existential milieu of the experience of shape, an immanent understanding of shape as always involving color in some form, something contingent, to an absolute, transcendent, *a priori*, truth of shape. Harkening back to Nietzsche’s allusion to Schiller’s Egyptian youth, Meno attempts to peer behind the veil, to see truth unadorned, separated from its context.

According to Davis, Meno, unlike Socrates, is interested in discovering the origin, the genesis, of shape (Davis 112). Socrates answers again, and this answer according to Michael Davis is inferior to the first answer Socrates gives: “[shape is] that at which the solid ends, that is shape...shape is the limit of a solid” (76a). Davis sees this definition as “less revealing” than the first answer, the answer that grasped the immanent essence of shape (112). Davis says that Meno accepts the second definition “because it defines an unknown in terms of a known” (Davis 112). Questioning Meno’s approval of Socrates’ answer, Davis asks: “but in what sense is solid more known than color?” (112). In answer to his own question, Davis suggests that Meno’s approval is due to the mathematical form the answer took, a form familiar to him (112). He suggests that Meno operates under the illusion that the second answer did not rely on presuppositions, but his approval comes from presuppositions of which he is unaware, presuppositions that are “invisible to him” (112). Meno’s insistence on seeing the origin of shape apart from context, apart from

presuppositions, possessing the starting point of knowledge, places his naïve assumptions in the same sphere with some of the assumptions Michael Davis asserts can be found in the founding of modern science. As noted earlier in this essay, modern science, unlike tragedy, is concerned with finding the origins of phenomena. Modern science has even generated a narrative of its stark and absolute beginning that is isolated from the stew of intellectual disciplines from which it actually arose, disciplines such as philosophy. As much as Meno (and those that carry his epistemological legacy) attempts to obscure the presuppositions that shape his ability to recognize truth, Plato's reader is able to see that presuppositions actually reveal truths. They allow truths to briefly emerge from obscurity.

Still, the context, the presuppositions and the veils, used to arrive at an understanding of truth are in a certain sense incomplete; they both rescue truth from obscurity and inevitably obscure truth. To comprehend this aspect of presuppositions, Davis discusses the value of beauty (in Greek, *kalon*) as a particularity taken by the senses as a whole. Davis uses an example of a clock's parts only functioning in relation to their contribution to the whole. He notes that "from the inside [the clock] would look like chaos"; from within, the experience of contingency appears to be unordered, random, not contributing to an ordered whole (115). Davis states: "If each part of the whole were to have its function and fulfill that function perfectly, no single part would itself point to the whole" (115). In essence, Davis is suggesting that perfection lies in apparent imperfection. Each part apart from the whole is fallible, but contributing to the whole, the part participates in perfection beyond human perception. Davis gives an example of what would be an example of the grotesque, a miniature clock appearing within the actual clock: "Let us suppose...within this perfectly ordered clock we introduce a perfect miniature, a model of the whole clock" (115). Davis notes that this "accurate model...would have to look utterly detached

from any of the other parts” (115). Davis uses this example to demonstrate that attempts to know the invisible *eidos*, only seen in examples of particular instances without fail destroy the perfect function of the whole, unjustified by models demonstrating its operation: “It looks as though *the* condition for the knowability of the whole is the imperfection of the whole” (116). Still, Davis does not see that the making of models of the whole within the actual whole is necessarily tied to a damaging of the actual whole: “the knowable whole is more perfect than the unknowable whole; these wholes within the whole do make it more rather than less perfect” (116). Models necessarily distort the actual whole, making the whole “more rather than less perfect.” Still, these distortions, these anthropomorphic impositions on unmediated reality, have an ambiguous nature; they both reveal and obscure that which they reveal: “their presence ensures the incompleteness of the very knowledge which they make partially possible” (Davis 116). Taking models as an example of the purpose presuppositions and context (self-contained fragments that appear to depict the whole) serve in helping human cognition grasp aspects of the actual whole. Understanding the importance of grasping that context is not the whole, and context not only is not that which it helps to understand. In the process of understanding the whole with the aid of context, the whole is in turn partially obscured. This may be why Nietzsche states in the preface to *The Gay Science* that “[w]e no longer believe that truth remains truth when the veils are withdrawn; we have lived too much to believe this” (38). Nietzsche states that he “no longer believes in a kind of truth realized apart from veils (*The Gay Science* 38). He has moved past a presumption. His assertion that truth is only understood with the aid of “veils” is perhaps counterintuitive; the correction to this presumption only happens through accumulating experience or having “lived too much” (*The Gay Science* 38). In closer examination, Nietzsche’s statement is not as much of an assertion; rather, it appears to be a possible concession, a

realization of the inevitable flaws inherent in understanding truth with the help of context or veils. Veils both reveal and obscure the truth, but they are the tools available for philosophical inquiry.

Conclusion

Through examining two concepts in two of Nietzsche's seminal works, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and *The Gay Science*—*the captivity of the will* and *the eternal return*—and then four archetypes that Nietzsche and Davis examine, light has been shed upon issues relevant to Davis' contemporary work regarding human autonomy and the value of context can be found in the highly metaphoric and poetic style of Nietzsche. It can be seen that Nietzsche wrestles with the desire for, yet inability to realize, absolute human autonomy. In this wrestling, Nietzsche can be understood as affirming the kind of moral universe acted out in ancient tragedy, the worldview that Davis states affirmed "the moral necessity of chance" (Davis 3). Of course, due to the highly aphoristic style of Nietzsche's prose, this essay does not end on a note that Nietzsche without question in all instances affirms the morality of ancient tragedy. Still, this affirmation finds representation in his work, and this affirmation of tragic morality found in Nietzsche's work demonstrates that these issues are part of the fabric of Nietzsche's philosophic work.

"On Redemption" from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* through a meditation of the complexities of given situations, of historical context, Nietzsche betrays a conception of the will as redeemer, a redeemer ultimately captive. In this section of *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche offers no answers as to how humanity can realize the kind of autonomy "possible" if only the will were free from history. "The Greatest Weight" from *The Gay Science* further interrogates the role that history and context, the given, play in perpetuating a repeating cycle of history. This section ultimately appears to once again affirm a kind of futility the human will exercises in opposition to historical

context, the given, or chance. The will ultimately needs to become self-conscious of a repetition outside of its control, something external to it, and in this realization, a subjectivity that “wills” repetition is created, a will that affirms the given, that actively embraces the beauty of tragic morality.

After having seen the futility of the will rising against its milieu, an examination of several archetypes in various forms examined the will’s attempt to assert itself in action. Orpheus, through his erotic investment into peering past the veil of his given world, is used by Nietzsche as an example of how one becomes an artist, a role he likens to the philosopher. This examination revealed that the artist, through the use of abstractions, generate more contexts that reveal hidden aspects of human subjectivity, a truth realized in context, a truth that is dependent on abstractions. The mention of the Egyptian youth explored Nietzsche’s surprising affirmation of abstract prohibitions against the will, and the tale of King Midas’ inquiry about the truth, revealed how a glimpse into the abyss, unmediated raw truth, is followed by the interposition of abstractions. Veils are the very things that were stripped away to gain knowledge of the truth; veils are interposed to establish a relationship with a truth that needs context to be known. Davis’ discussion of Plato’s character, Meno, probed the necessity of context for the realization of truth.

All of these examples point to a relationship between human subjectivity and the objects it investigates. Davis’ key point, that chance plays an indispensable part in the world of ancient tragedy’s conception of morality, more generally demonstrates that chance, as relative to other terms for milieus outside of the control of human subjectivity such as context, the given, history, are realities outside of the reach of human subjectivity’s absolute control. The will’s lack of control, its inability to assert absolute autonomy, translates into the subject’s inability to realize the truth about itself or the object it investigates apart from some kind of given, some context.

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