

NIETZSCHE'S GREEK ETHICS: HIS EARLY ETHICAL SYMPTOMATOLOGY RECONSTRUCTED

Martine Béland (*Collège Édouard-Montpetit/Centre canadien
d'études allemandes et européennes*)

*This paper seeks to circumscribe the concepts, sources, and limits of Nietzsche's early ethical thought through a reconstruction of his ethical "symptomatology." In the 1870s, Nietzsche stressed that the Greeks understood the true nature of the political phenomenon, and that this could correct fundamental errors that were responsible for the illness of German culture. His definition of the Greek ethos radically challenges modern democratic politics through a reassertion of aristocratic, heroic, and agonistic values. But because Nietzsche did not systematically describe his early ethics, a reconstruction is necessary. His metaphor of the philosopher as a "physician of culture" is a guide for this reconstruction. Using concepts of wellness and illness, Nietzsche identified different symptoms and possible remedies, and hoped to cure German culture through a therapeutic transvaluation of modernity. To reconstruct this symptomatology I turn to *The Greek State*, *Homer's Contest*, and *The Birth of Tragedy*. First, I define the notions of "agon" and "eris" that are central to his reading of Greek ethics. I then describe four ethical symptoms and their remedies. I conclude with interpretative hypotheses that address issues that were left unanswered by Nietzsche. This symptomatology shows that his reading of Greek ethics functions as a radical—albeit fragmentary—normative critique of his time, and of our democratic age.*

Friends, the school of a philosopher is a hospital. When
you leave, you should have suffered, not enjoyed yourself.
— Epictetus

In 1980, sixty years after his first published book but still more than
fifteen years before his last one, the prolific German essayist Ernst

Jünger—a long-time Nietzsche reader¹—made an important confession in an interview with the French literary critic Frédéric de Towarnicki. Towarnicki questioned Jünger regarding the form of ethics that could correspond to the figure of the Worker that he had depicted in his 1932 eponymous essay, *Der Arbeiter*. Jünger answered that as far as ethics were concerned, “it is better to remain silent.”² This confession could well describe Friedrich Nietzsche’s early position towards ethics. During the first half of his Basel years, Nietzsche repeatedly compared the Greek world and the contemporary age. He stressed that the Greeks had understood the true nature of the political phenomenon, and he wished for this understanding to be once more valorized so as to correct fundamental errors that were responsible for what he deemed the “illness” of 19th-century German—and more globally European—culture. His definition of the Greek *ethos* radically challenges the foundations of modern democratic politics through a reassertion of aristocratic, heroic, and agonistic values. As his first readers noticed, Nietzsche’s thought can thus be defined as “radical aristocratism.” In an 1887 letter to the literary critic and Kierkegaard scholar Georg Brandes, who coined the expression for the title to his five Copenhagen talks on Nietzsche³, the latter wrote that he approved of the phrase: “The expression ‘aristocratic radicalism,’ which you use, is very good. If you permit me to say so, it is the cleverest word I have yet read about myself.”⁴

¹ See for instance Michel Vanoosthuyse, *Fascisme et littérature pure: La fabrique d’Ernst Jünger* (Marseille: Agone, 2005), 113–14. See also Reinhard Wilczek, *Nihilistische Lektüre des Zeitalters: Ernst Jüngers Nietzsche-Rezeption* (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 1999).

² Ernst Jünger, “Le Travailleur planétaire: Entretien avec Ernst Jünger,” in *Cahier de l’Herne Martin Heidegger*, (ed.) M. Haar (Paris: L’Herne, 1983), 148.

³ These conferences led to the essay first published in 1890 in the *Deutsche Rundschau*. Georg Brandes perceived Nietzsche as “the most interesting writer in German literature at the present time,” and he wished to show how “the greater part, as well as the more original” of Nietzsche’s works were “concerned with moral prejudices.” Georg Brandes, *Friedrich Nietzsche* (New York/London: Macmillan/W. Heinemann, 1915), 3. On the importance of Brandes for the reception of Nietzsche in the German-speaking world, see Klaus Bohnen’s introduction to the German reissue of Brandes’s essay, *Nietzsche* (Berlin: Berenberg, 2004), 20–23, and Adrian Del Caro, “Reception and Impact: The First Decade of Nietzsche in Germany,” *Orbis Litterarum*, vol. 37 (1982): 32–46.

⁴ Nietzsche to Brandes, 2 Dec. 1887, KSB 8, 206. All quotations from Nietzsche’s writings (except *Encyclopædie der klassische Philologie*) are taken from *KSA* (works) or *KSB* (letters). Works are cited by title, *KSA* volume number, and then page or paragraph number. Letters are cited by *KSB* volume number, followed

Nietzsche did not systematically describe his ethics in his early works. Part of the reason for this surely lies in the fact that all but one of his 1870s essays on the Greeks were left unfinished in private works not intended for publication. A certain amount of “reconstruction”⁵ on the part of the Nietzsche scholar is therefore necessary. But also, one senses that the “radicality” of some of Nietzsche’s early ethical theses could have prompted him to “remain silent,” as Jünger later proposed, as to their possible social and political implications. Differently put: Nietzsche presents intuitions on ethics in his early essays on the Greeks, but he does not develop an ethical system nor does he describe practical politics.

The ethical aspects of Nietzschean thought have long interested scholars and political theorists. The issue was recently brought up in these terms:

Over the last twenty years or so Nietzsche’s significance for political thought has become the single most hotly contested area of Nietzsche research, especially in the English-speaking world: ...is he an aristocratic political thinker who damns democracy as an expression of modern nihilism—or can his thought, especially his thought on the Greek *agon*, be appropriated for contemporary democratic theory?”⁶

This question shows that two issues are at stake here: one regards the political nature of Nietzsche’s thought while the other concerns the significance of his ethical thought for political theory. In recent years, the latter has been essentially the issue of Nietzsche’s use for democratic theory, as when Lawrence Hatab asks whether Nietzsche’s critiques of liberal democratic ideals (universal suffrage, equal respect, human rights) “presume a refutation of these ideals or [whether they] open up the possibility of redescribing these ideals in

by page number. All italics are Nietzsche’s. Reference to *KSA*: Nietzsche, *Kritische Studienausgabe*, (ed.) G. Colli and M. Montinari (Berlin: De Gruyter/DTV, 1999, 15 vol.). Reference to *KSB*: Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Briefe. Kritische Studienausgabe*, (ed.) G. Colli and M. Montinari (Berlin: De Gruyter/DTV, 2003, 8 vol.).

⁵ I borrow this term from Quentin Taylor, *The Republic of Genius: A Reconstruction of Nietzsche’s Early Thought* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 1997).

⁶ Herman Siemens and Gary Shapiro, “What Does Nietzsche Mean for Contemporary Politics and Political Thought?,” *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, no. 35–36 (2008): 3. See also Christian J. Emden, *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 1–3.

quasi-Nietzschean terms.”⁷ As Hatab recognizes, Nietzsche’s thought radically challenges the normative foundations of democratic politics: “we cannot assume the truth of universal suffrage, equality, and human rights by ignoring Nietzsche’s trenchant attacks.”⁸ Among Nietzsche scholars who do embrace this challenge, positions are very much contrasted. Some—such as Hatab—seek to “redescribe democratic ideals in the light of Nietzschean suspicions of their traditional warrants” in order to theorize a democratic *agon* and thus “to support a democratic appropriation of Nietzsche.”⁹ Others—such as Don Dombowsky in *Nietzsche’s Machiavellian Politics*—underline Nietzsche’s (exoteric and esoteric) “overt opposition to liberal democratic principles,”¹⁰ and situate his thought “in relation to the political issues, critiques and movements of his own period,”¹¹ in order to show that “the radical liberal democratic reading of Nietzsche” fails to acknowledge “that his work contains a latent politics,” and thereby misunderstands “the implications of his philosophy.”¹² As Dombowsky shows, it is perhaps difficult to separate both issues at hand: to debate over the political nature of Nietzsche’s thought is to bring forth interpretative elements towards deciding on its significance for political theory. Now, as Christian Emden has shown in his contextual study of Nietzsche’s understanding of modern political thought, “Much of the disagreement about the actual orientation of Nietzsche’s political ideas is a result of the way in which recent political fault lines tend to overshadow the context within which Nietzsche’s own ideas developed.”¹³ Indeed, as Martin Ruehl rightly points out, “Nietzsche, in the different phases of his philosophical development,

⁷ Lawrence J. Hatab, “Prospects for a Democratic Agon: Why we can Still be Nietzscheans,” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, no. 24 (2002): 138.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 142.

¹⁰ Don Dombowsky, *Nietzsche’s Machiavellian Politics* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 70.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹² *Ibid.*, 3. Dombowsky agrees with 1920s French scholar Charles Andler in saying that Nietzsche was a disciple of Machiavelli: “*Ce sera la faiblesse ou la force de Nietzsche, à tout jamais, d’avoir été un disciple de Machiavel... Il faut ici évaluer avec précision la dette de Nietzsche. Il a tenu le machiavélisme pour la politique parfaite.*” Charles Andler, *Nietzsche, sa vie et sa pensée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1958), vol. 2, 538. But Dombowsky further shows how Nietzschean political thought amounts to a radicalization of 19th-century aristocratic liberalism (that of Taine, Tocqueville, and Burckhardt).

¹³ Emden, *Nietzsche and the Politics of History*, 3.

consistently upheld a number of deeply anti-egalitarian, illiberal views."¹⁴

It is not my aim here to further contextualize Nietzsche's thought—as Emden and Dombowsky, among others, have successfully done. Rather I wish to turn to another methodological standpoint which is also too often neglected by studies of Nietzsche's ethics or politics, that of a thorough reading of Nietzsche's early essays. Most studies of Nietzsche's ethical or political thought have carried out discussions of the books that he published quite assiduously as of 1878's *Human, all too Human*. Indeed, political theory seems to cultivate a weak interest for Nietzsche's early writings.¹⁵ This could be due, in part, to a relative inaccessibility: some of these essays were published later than Nietzsche's other works and were not translated as quickly. They were thus left aside, as though they were not part of Nietzsche's oeuvre. But as James Porter points out, "Few things can be more important to understanding Nietzsche than understanding his views of classical antiquity."¹⁶ It is thus important to correct the lack of studies pertaining to early Nietzschean ethical thought *per se*, and to counteract the trend to overlook early Nietzschean thought in the name of later Nietzschean essays¹⁷—a tendency proper to contemporary liberal democratic theorists who seek to make way for a Nietzschean politics of authenticity and egalitarianism (through ideas of perspectivism, openness of identity, and self-constitution). A study of Nietzsche's early writings on the Greeks can show that there is more to his early ethical thought than *agon*,

¹⁴ Martin A. Ruehl, "Politeia 1871: Young Nietzsche on the Greek State," in *Nietzsche and Antiquity: His Reaction and Response to the Classical Tradition*, (ed.) P. Bishop (Rochester: Camden House, 2004), 82.

¹⁵ See, e.g., David Owen, "Equality, Democracy, and Self-Respect: Reflections on Nietzsche's Agonal Perfectionism," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, no. 24 (2002): 113–31; and Bruce Detwiler, *Nietzsche and the Politics of Aristocratic Radicalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

¹⁶ James I. Porter, "'Rare Impressions.' Nietzsche's *Philologica*: A Review of the Colli-Montinari Critical Edition," *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, vol. 6, no. 3 (Winter 2000): 409.

¹⁷ For instance, Mark Warren turns to Nietzsche's early essays inasmuch as they are anticipations of his later themes. See Mark Warren, *Nietzsche and Political Thought* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), xiv. James Porter summed up the challenge: "the still greater task will be putting the Nietzsche of the later decades, especially the 1880s, back into touch with the Nietzsche who lived and thought in broad and ambitious ways prior to *The Birth of Tragedy*" (Porter, "Rare Impressions," 430). Hatab is perhaps an exception in this respect, as his "Prospects for a Democratic Agon" make substantial use of Nietzsche's *The Greek State* and *Homer's Contest*.

and that some of his positions (regarding economic slavery or the origin of the state, for instance) are rarely considered by advocates of a democratic appropriation of Nietzsche. Indeed, what did Nietzsche actually say about *agon*? What characteristics of the Greek age (and of which Greek age) was he defining as potentially beneficial to his time? And what were the limits of his intentions in this regard?

But first, one needs to decide how to “reconstruct” Nietzsche’s early ethical thought. A metaphor often used by Nietzsche himself in his 1870s writings proves most effective for this task: that of the philosopher as a “physician of culture.” Nietzsche echoed Epictetus’s saying that a philosopher’s school is a hospital¹⁸, when he stated that philosophy is essentially a medical activity. This metaphor as well as concepts and terms related to medicine and health are recurrent in his writings.¹⁹ In his notes from the winter of 1872–1873, the sentence “*Der Philosoph als Arzt der Cultur*” appears centred and underlined, as would a title idea for an upcoming book.²⁰ If the analogy is accurate, then Nietzsche believed a philosopher’s occupation to be metaphorically identical to a physician’s. Generally speaking, a physician’s activities consist in observing a patient’s symptoms, deciding on a therapy, and forecasting a prognosis on the evolution of the sickness. Generally speaking, that is what Nietzsche did: using concepts of wellness and illness, he evaluated his age in respect to past times of “great health.”²¹ As Thomas Long wrote in a study on Nietzsche’s philosophy of medicine, the “Nietzschean concept of health is...an evaluative interpretation of a fact.”²² Nietzsche hoped to cure German culture through therapeutic forces that would amount to a transvaluation of modern ethics. His medical philosophy led him to consider different types of symptoms as well as their possible remedies. In order to reconstruct this ethical symptomatology and to identify Nietzsche’s early ethics inasmuch as they are present in his essays, I specifically turn to two short posthumous essays, *The Greek State* and *Homer’s Contest*²³, which are part of the *Five Forewords to Five Books that have not been Written* that Nie-

¹⁸ Epictetus, *Discourses and Selected Writings*, (ed. and tr.) R. Dobbin (London: Penguin Classics, 2008), 172.

¹⁹ See Malcolm Pasley, “Nietzsche’s use of Medical Terms,” in *Nietzsche: Imagery and Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 123–58.

²⁰ Nietzsche, *Nachlaß*, KSA 7, §23[15].

²¹ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, KSA 3, §382.

²² Thomas Long, “Nietzsche’s Philosophy of Medicine,” *Nietzsche-Studien*, vol. 19 (1990): 118.

²³ *The Greek State* stems from notes taken for *The Birth of Tragedy*. See KSA 7, §10[1] (Jan. 1871).

tzsche offered as a gift to Cosima Wagner during the 1872 Christmas holiday—the year at the beginning of which the young professor had published his first essay, *The Birth of Tragedy* (which will also prove helpful here). The 1872 *Forewords* address the issues Nietzsche was then working on, but from a perspective more ethical than aesthetic (as in *The Birth of Tragedy*).

My demonstration in this paper has three stages. First, I circumscribe the notions of “*agon*” and “*eris*” that are central to Nietzsche’s early reading of Greek ethics. I then describe four ethical symptoms and their possible remedies, which Nietzsche distinguished while comparing the Greek *ethos* and modern morality.²⁴ This symptomatology discloses Nietzsche’s early ethical thought and shows that his reading of Greek ethics functions as a radical—albeit fragmentary—normative critique of his time. I conclude with interpretative hypotheses that address some issues that were left unanswered by Nietzsche’s “radical aristocratism,” some of which remain most ambiguous in his essays. It must be clear that the aim of this paper is not to build Nietzschean ethics, whether democratic or not, but rather to circumscribe the concepts, sources, and limits of Nietzsche’s early ethical thought through a reconstruction of his ethical symptomatology.

Eris and Agon

Although he was a professional philologist, Nietzsche believed his calling to be in philosophy. In a January 1871 letter to Wilhelm Vischer-Bilfinger, the dean of the University of Basel, the young philologist applied for the chair of philosophy by arguing that his “real task,” to which he “should sacrifice any profession,” was his “task as philosopher.”²⁵ Consequently, as his 1869 inaugural Basel lecture *Homer and Classical Philology* immediately exposed, his early writings other than his course-work consider the Greeks mostly from a philosophical perspective. In a book on *Nietzsche and the Greeks*, Dale Wilkerson writes that Nietzsche’s “primary goal” when studying the Greeks “is anything but bookish and pedantic. It is nothing short of the wholesale transvaluation of modernity.”²⁶

²⁴ In this section, I draw on ideas that I have developed at some length in the second part of my recent book *Kulturkritik et philosophie thérapeutique chez le jeune Nietzsche* (Montreal: Presses de l’Université de Montréal, 2012)

²⁵ Nietzsche to Vischer-Bilfinger, January 1871, KSB 3, 174–78.

²⁶ Dale Wilkerson, *Nietzsche and the Greeks* (London/New York: Continuum, 2006), 20.

Wilkerson is right in saying that the question of values is already at the core of Nietzsche's thought in the early 1870s. In his 1872 essay on *Homer's Contest*, Nietzsche writes that he perceives an "abyss" between Greek and modern moral judgments, and he stresses that "nothing separates more the Greek world from our own than the color of particular ethical concepts that derive from legitimizing combat and victory."²⁷ His posthumous *Five Forewords* pinpoint fundamental axiological distinctions between ancient Greek ethics and modern morality. One can accurately maintain that for Nietzsche in the early 1870s, the essential difference between the Greek age and the Modern world is ethical. Yet one must keep in mind that Nietzsche's interpretation of the Greeks is itself "colored" by his philosophical standpoint: that of pessimism, ancient and modern. At the start of his career, Nietzsche's "modern" pessimism is essentially that of Schopenhauer, whom he comments upon and abundantly quotes in *The Birth of Tragedy* and other 1870s essays.²⁸ As for his "ancient" pessimism, it echoes Plutarch's rendering of the tragic wisdom of Silenus in his *Letter of Condolence to Apollonius*²⁹ and Pindar's poetry.³⁰ In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche observes that the ancient Greeks "knew and felt the terrors and horrors of existence" (BT, §3), and lived according to this tragic wisdom. In order for life to remain possible and to flourish despite this tragic outlook, the Greeks had to invent a sense to life—hence their thriving creation of gods and myths. But it is in fact nature's own Dionysian and Apollonian impulses that are at work in this creative impetus. Nietzsche's understanding of the Greek world is thus utterly aesthetic, as his contemporaries did not fail to remark.³¹ *The Birth of Tragedy* depicts nature as a whole of organic impulses whose interactions result in creation. Since "human beings are wholly natural" (HC, 783), natural

²⁷ Nietzsche, *Homer's Contest*, KSA 1, 786. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as HC.

²⁸ Nietzsche constantly read Schopenhauer between 1865 and 1878. See Thomas Brobjer, *Nietzsche's Philosophical Context: An Intellectual Biography* (Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 254–55.

²⁹ Nietzsche describes it in *The Birth of Tragedy*, KSA 1, §3. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as BT.

³⁰ Nietzsche quotes him in *The Greek State*, KSA 1, 765. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as GS.

³¹ After reading *The Birth of Tragedy*, philologist Otto Ribbeck wrote to philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey on April 29, 1872: "the book is a dithyramb of aesthetical philosophy much in the spirit of Schopenhauer and Wagner...but for the bulk of it (which, in fact, is not that new), it is penetrating and interesting throughout." Quoted in *Querelle autour de La naissance de la tragédie*, (tr.) M. Cohen-Halimi, H. Poitevin, and M. Marcuzzi (Paris: Vrin, 1995), 75 n.

impulses are at work within them as well. Some of these impulses have essentially artistic results, while others rather have political functions. *Homer's Contest* circumscribes the political impulse as *agon*—an impulse that must manifest itself through a “good” *eris*. Both these concepts determine Nietzsche’s early understanding of Greek ethics.

As regards ethical concepts that were legitimate in ancient Greece but that are proscribed in the modern democratic age, Nietzsche first mentions *eris*. When capitalised, *Eris* is the Greek goddess of strife, the opposite of Harmonia—hence the noun’s use to name discord, ambition, or envy, such as in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*.³² In *Homer's Contest*, Nietzsche refers to *Eris*, one of the daughters of the Night, as she appears in the opening of Hesiod’s *Works and Days*. As he recalls, the Greek poet announces that there are two types of discord: “There was not only one race of Strifes, but over the earth there are two. The one a man when he perceived her would praise; but the other is blameworthy.” This second *Eris* causes wars and conflicts—it should therefore never be sought. “The one supports evil war and contention: she is cruel; no mortal is fond of her.” However, there is also a “good” Strife: this one “rouses a man to work even if he is shiftless.”³³ Nietzsche believes “this is one of the most remarkable Hellenistic thoughts, and it is worth being inscribed for the visitor to see above the doorway of Hellenistic ethics.” (HC, 786) In fact, while Hesiod differentiates two *divinities*, two goddesses of discord, Nietzsche distinguishes between two *ethical concepts*, of which only one is useful for mankind.

Nietzsche’s interpretation of Hesiod was certainly inspired by that of his colleague Jacob Burckhardt.³⁴ In his 1870 Basel lectures on *The Greeks and Greek Civilization*, Burckhardt stressed the importance of the good *eris* in Hesiod’s view: “The good *Eris* was the first to be born (while the bad was only a variant form fostering war and conflict) and Hesiod seems to find her not only in human life but also in elemental Nature, for Cronos had placed her among the very

³² Aristotle, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, (tr.) G. A. Kennedy (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1387b–1388a. See HC, 787.

³³ Hesiod, *Theogony. Works and Days. Shield*, (tr.) A. Athanassakis (Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 51–53.

³⁴ See Ruehl, “*Politeia* 1871,” 88–92. See also Christa Davis Acampora, “Nietzsche’s Problem of Homer,” *Nietzscheforschung: Jahrbuch der Nietzsche-Gesellschaft*, vol. 5/6 (2000): 556, and Giuliano Campioni, *Les lectures françaises de Nietzsche*, (tr.) C. Lavigne-Mouilleron (Paris: P.U.F., 2001), 136–40.

roots of the earth.”³⁵ Following Burckhardt, Nietzsche notes that the good *eris* entices individuals to measure one another through competitions: “through covetousness, jalousie, and envy,” it “incites men to act.” (HC, 787) As Burckhardt puts it: “It is the good *Eris* who awakens even the indolent and unskilled to industry; seeing others rich, they too bestir themselves to plough and plant and order their houses, so that neighbour vies with neighbour in striving for wealth.”³⁶ The Swiss historian concludes from his interpretation of Hesiod and other ancient Greek authors that the good *Eris* permeates all of Greek life: it encourages the Greek man to work, to succeed, and to surpass himself and others. In other words, the good *Eris* encourages the Greeks to strive for victory—but not by annihilating the weakest. Burckhardt and Nietzsche again agree on this point. The historian writes: “victory in the *agon*, that is noble victory without enmity, appears to have been the ancient expression of the peaceful victory of an individual.”³⁷ Indeed, the good *eris* has a limitative effect: “because the Greek man is envious, at each gain of honor, richness, splendor, and bliss, he feels the envious eye of a god upon him, and he fears this divine envy. It reminds him of the futility of human destiny; his happiness scares him, he offers its best part in sacrifice, and he bows to the envy of the god.” (HC, 787) According to Nietzsche, the “good envy” thus has three beneficial effects, both at individual or collective levels: it entices action; it bounds individuals (or nations) in fruitful competitions; and it limits ambition and competitiveness by reminding individuals (or nations) to avoid excessiveness or immoderateness—in other words, to avoid *hubris*. Nietzsche stresses that *hubris* can cause a person’s death and a nation’s ruin, as the history of both Sparta and Athens shows.³⁸

As strife or envy, the concept of *eris* is naturally bound to that of *agon*. The Greek word “*agon*” (“*Wettkampf*” in Nietzsche’s essay) renders ideas of competition, contest, or even duel. Nietzsche believes *agon* was decisive for the development of ancient Greek life, as he writes in *Homer’s Contest*: “Take away competition from Greek life, and your eyes will plunge directly into a pre-Homeric abyss of savage cruelty composed of hate and of lust for destruction.” (HC,

³⁵ Jacob Burckhardt, *The Greeks and Greek Civilization*, (ed.) O. Murray, (tr.) S. Stern (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 165.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 166.

³⁸ See the end of *Homer’s Wettkampf*: Athens and Sparta “haben auch, nach dem Beispiele des Miltiades, durch Thaten der Hybris ihren Untergang herbeigeführt, zum Beweise dafür, daß ohne Neid Eifersucht und wettkämpfenden Ehrgeiz der hellenische Staat wie der hellenische Mensch entartet.” (HC, 792)

791) In other words, *agon* has played an essential role for the development of classical (*i.e.*, post-Homeric³⁹) Greek civilization as a whole. Nietzsche's interpretation on this point is again akin to that of Burckhardt's. According to the historian, *agon*—defined as the urge “always to be the first and outdo all the others”⁴⁰—was a major cultural and political factor in ancient Greece: “While on the one hand the *polis* was the driving force in the rise and development of the individual, the *agon* was a motive power known to no other people—the general leavening element that, given the essential condition of freedom, proved capable of working upon the will and the potentialities of every individual. In this respect the Greeks stood alone.”⁴¹ Following Burckhardt, Nietzsche believes *agon* shaped ancient Greek life in its political, ethical, social, educational, literary, artistic, and sportive dimensions. In short, as Burckhardt said, “the whole of life was directed to this activity.”⁴²

These descriptions show that Nietzsche distinguishes two political impulses that are central to pre-Socratic ethics: *agon* and *eris* are natural impulses that shape human civilizations and help maintain a structured social order. Nietzsche writes in his notebooks that the goal of a civilization is to maintain a fragile equilibrium between all natural impulses.⁴³ The political impulses therefore have fundamental functions for human life: without competition and good envy, human culture runs the risk of becoming *uncivilized* as was pre-Homeric or pre-classical Antiquity.⁴⁴ “[W]ithout envy, jalousie, and ambitious competition, the Greek *polis* degenerates and so does the Greek man. He becomes malicious and cruel, vindictive and impious—in short, he becomes ‘Prehomeric.’” (HC, 792) Accordingly, one can maintain that Nietzsche opposes to modern civilization a three-part model of Greek ethics: ancient philosophical pessimism versus the modern scientific optimism; tragic art and Dionysian music as

³⁹ See James I. Porter, “Nietzsche, Homer, and the Classical Tradition,” in *Nietzsche and Antiquity: His Reaction and Response to the Classical Tradition*, (ed.) P. Bishop (Rochester: Camden House, 2004), 16. See also note 44 below.

⁴⁰ Burckhardt, *The Greeks and Greek Civilization*, 162.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 165.

⁴³ See Nietzsche, *Nachlaß*, KSA 7, notebook 19; and BT, §§18 and 21.

⁴⁴ Classicist James Porter has shown that for Nietzsche Homer “presents a window onto the preclassical era of classical antiquity” (“Nietzsche, Homer,” 8): “the received Homer was too tame for his tastes, too Apollonian and ‘cheerful,’ and insufficiently strange, brutal, and threatening” (*Ibid.*, 15). On Nietzsche's turn to the archaic age of the Greeks, see Hubert Cancik, *Nietzsches Antike* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1995), Chapter 3.

metaphysical comfort to ease the painful effect of this philosophical pessimism⁴⁵; and finally, good envy and competitive impulse, allowing for striving yet limited individual and collective activities. In order to see how this Greek “ideal-type”⁴⁶ functions, one must now turn to Nietzsche’s symptomatology.

An Ethical Symptomatology

On the basis of his interpretation of Greek ethics in his early 1870s essays, one can pinpoint four symptoms that Nietzsche presents as the fundamental ethical situation (*Lage*) of his age. This symptomatology, along with what Nietzsche believes to be possible remedies or palliatives, show the “aristocratic radicalism” of his early ethical thought.

(1) A first symptom acknowledged by Nietzsche is *the fundamental contradiction between the value of work and the value of art*. Although modern societies combine them in an “unnatural mixture” (GS, 765) these activities address fundamentally different needs. According to Nietzsche, art is the result of the will to live well: it promotes a “higher form of existence” (GS, 766), and it opposes Dionysian asceticism whereby humans become loath to act. (BT, §7) Work, on the other hand, is the result of the need to live *no matter what*: it labours to conserve one’s own existence. In other words, work expresses a banal need: “Work is degrading because existence has no value in itself” (GS, 765), as ancient philosophical pessimism shows. Because work entails mere survival, Nietzsche holds that it is impossible that it have dignity. On the other hand, art expresses a fundamental philosophical knowledge: that of pessimism, ancient or modern. Artistic activity has dignity and value—but for art to exist, Nietzsche believes that a majority of people must be obligated to work, as was the case in ancient Greece. Work is a process whereby an individual ensures her material survival while also guaranteeing the survival of others who do not work, and who therefore have time for art. Simply put, this is to Nietzsche a “cruel truth”: *art depends upon slavery*.⁴⁷ That is what Keith Ansell-Pearson calls society’s

⁴⁵ As in Aeschylus’s tragedies (see BT).

⁴⁶ Taylor, *The Republic of Genius*, 9.

⁴⁷ “Demgemäß müssen wir uns dazu verstehen, als grausam klingende Wahrheit hinzustellen, daß zum Wesen einer Kultur das Sklaventhum gehöre: eine Wahrheit freilich, die über den absoluten Werth des Daseins keinen Zweifel übrig läßt.” (GS, 767)

“economic slavery for the majority of individuals.”⁴⁸ Accordingly, work and art cannot be simultaneously valorized, unless contradictorily. To repair this contradiction, Nietzsche, on the one hand, explains why slavery is at the basis of all civilizations, and implies that slavery still exists in the modern world. This should act to correct the fundamental philosophical misunderstanding regarding pessimism. On the other hand, he must explain how slavery can receive positive value in contemporary societies. This should act to create a new, un-modern form of politics—but this he does not do.

(2) A second ethical symptom is *the lie regarding the origins of the state*. Nietzsche writes that “the Moderns have veiled the origins and significance of the state” in an “illusory splendor.” (GS, 769) It is noteworthy that Nietzsche has a non-juridical concept of “state,” following which the noun becomes synonym for “the political.” That explains, for instance, how he can speak of “the general concept of the Platonic state.” (GS, 777) The “*griechische Staat*” thus means the Greek *polis*.⁴⁹ Now Nietzsche defines the state as nature’s “iron hand”: it forges societies as a way for her to reach new forms. (GS, 770) In other words, “state” is nature’s means of structuring human social life—but for *her own* purposes. As such, the political has two foundations. The first is nature’s intrinsic violence and cruelty. As both Hubert Cancik and Ernst Behler have noticed, “Nietzsche revitalized the idea, maintained by Ernst Curtius, of the profoundly agonistic character of the Greeks and therefore articulated the wish that life should maintain its violent nature.”⁵⁰ Nietzsche’s “ancient” pessimism is evident when he writes in *The Greek State* that “every birth is the death of innumerable beings,” and that “reproduction, life, and murder are one and the same thing.” (GS, 768) Because the *bellum omnium contra omnes* (GS, 772) that characterizes nature is transferred into the political sphere, “power is always malevolent”

⁴⁸ Keith Ansell-Pearson, “Introduction: On Nietzsche’s Critique of Morality,” in Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, (ed.) K. Ansell-Pearson, (tr.) C. Diethel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), xxi.

⁴⁹ In a 1941 article, Carl Schmitt has explained this “*Erhebung des Staatsbegriffes zum allgemeinen Normalbegriff der politischen Organisationsform aller Zeiten und Völker*,” according to which “*dieser Begriff Staat...im 19. Jahrhundert zu einem auf alle Zeiten und Völker übertragenen Allgemeinbegriff...gemacht werden konnte*.” Carl Schmitt, “Staat als ein konkreter, an eine geschichtliche Epoche gebundener Begriff,” in Schmitt, *Verfassungsrechtliche Aufsätze aus den Jahren 1924–1954: Materialien zu einer Verfassungslehre* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1954), 376.

⁵⁰ Ernst Behler, “Nietzsche’s Antiquity,” *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, vol. 4, no. 3 (Winter 1998): 422.

(GS, 768), and the state represents only the law of the strongest. (GS, 770)

The second foundation of the political order is genius. Nietzsche does not define clearly his conception of “genius,” and it is therefore instructive to refer to an important philosophical reference of his at the time. In *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer writes that genius is the “perfection and energy of intuitive knowledge” which consists in an “excessive” “development of the faculty of knowledge” whose only possible use is therefore “to be applied to a knowledge of that which is general in being”: hence the genius’s “dedication to the service of humanity as such.”⁵¹ Nietzsche follows his philosophical guide’s definition, but he adds an ingredient: nature. He believes the production of genius to be nature’s end as an aesthetic process. A genius is thus an individual in whom nature chooses to surpass herself in aesthetic completion—and this is only possible within a state where work is *unequally* divided. The state is thus nature’s means of producing genius, inasmuch as the work of a majority of people, and moments of relative calm, can permit certain chosen individuals to create. Nietzsche furthers his analysis by saying that because the modern age chooses to ignore the two foundations of the political order (violence on the one part, and genius on the other—or simply put: cruelty and inequality), the foundations for culture and education—or *Bildung*—are also forgotten. Indeed, Nietzsche understands *Bildung* as an authentic “need for art.” Culture, he writes, asks that the “vast majority be subjected to slavery and to a life of constraint for the service of a minority,” in order for this minority to “produce and satisfy a new world of needs”—*i.e.*, the world of culture. (GS, 767) As such, culture rests upon the “terrifying” acknowledgement of nature’s inherent inequality and cruelty. As Nietzsche told his students in his 1871 introductory course to philological studies, “indeed very sad facts rest in the essence of things.”⁵² To reveal and counter the lie regarding the state’s origins therefore asks, once more, to reiterate the use and value of slavery. But Nietzsche also means to emphasize the prophylactic effect of war. In *The Greek State*, he inquires how war could be “nature’s instrument” to create genius through military action. By

⁵¹ Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, (tr.) E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1969), Chapter 34.

⁵² Nietzsche, « Encyclopædie der klass. Philologie », in Nietzsche, *Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, (ed.) G. Colli and M. Montinari, vol. 2, part 3: *Vorlesungsaufzeichnungen (SS 1870–SS 1871)*, (ed.) F. Bornmann and M. Carpitella (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 1993), §7, 371.

turning to Lycurgus's Sparta as "the original military state," Nietzsche recognizes military society as the original form of political order. (GS, 775) But for combat and competition to regain cultural purpose, *eris* must once again be valued.

This set of two symptoms shows that early Nietzschean ethical thought considers "universal equality of all men," "rights of all men," "value of human life," and "dignity of work" as mirages rooted in the modern incapacity to acknowledge the ontological foundations and the ethical and political implications of philosophical pessimism, ancient and modern. These two symptoms therefore reveal a fundamental philosophical misunderstanding proper to modern European political culture. Now the second set of symptoms rather reveals a lack of what Nietzsche calls "*Staatstendenz*." (GS, 774)

(3) A third symptom is that the "*Staatstendenz*" is being replaced by a "*Geldtendenz*" that amounts to "ethical egoism." On the one hand, Nietzsche believes that minority elites stand out from the majority because "they know what *they* want from the state and they know what the state must grant them." (GS, 773) But because elites lack a *Staatstendenz*—which could translate as an "intimate political sense"—their egoistic will to shape the state according to their private interests is not harnessed: guided solely by their *Geldtendenz*—or "financial instinct"—they strive to install peace inasmuch as stability can guarantee their own interests. They thus consider the state "as an *instrument*, whereas all others are submitted to the power of the state's unconscious intentions for which they are but means to an ends." (GS, 773) On the other hand, Nietzsche stresses that the vast majority of people also lack political sense—and this is revealed through cultural utilitarianism. Nietzsche interprets the equation between increase in knowledge, production of cultural needs and goods, and search for profit as well as for comfort and happiness, as proof that henceforth the biggest possible profit is the major justification for culture.⁵³ That is a regrettable contemporary fact: *Bildung* now owes its survival to a financial instinct. Moreover, this endeavour is guided by the Prussian *Kulturstaat*, the "cultural state." For Nietzsche, this is a sure sign of the "deviation of political sense into financial sense." (GS, 774) He argues that the state must not offer protection for individual egoisms. The political must be subordinated to culture, rather than organize and protect the production of cultural goods, as the *Kulturstaat* does. The state has a much higher function than to fulfill "all too human" needs. Indeed, in Nietzsche's view the state's greatness is its "*elevation to the dignity of*

⁵³ See Nietzsche, *On the Future of our Educational Institutions*, KSA 1, §3.

serving as an instrument for genius—that is, an instrument for nature’s aesthetic realization. (GS, 776) To counter the rise of financial instinct, Nietzsche suggests to value once more the “good” form of envy, as an antidote against egoism and political utilitarianism. As I have said earlier, he believes the good *eris* can be beneficial to the health of a people: it entices action, it turns politics towards a perpetual competition between rival forces, it limits superb ambition (*hubris*), and it acts as a reminder of the tragic understanding of human life. Good envy thus orients human existence towards what is exterior to, and greater than, the individual, and it thereby reiterates the importance of modesty. In this way, *eris* can renew the sense of the state. Nietzsche suggests it can found ethics, develop mechanisms for interior and foreign politics, and affirm a fundamental philosophical standpoint.

(4) Finally, the fourth symptom is *the loss of the “mythical homeland,”* which Nietzsche comments upon extensively in § 23 of *The Birth of Tragedy*. Like his mentor Richard Wagner, Nietzsche laments that in Germany one “wanders without homeland, one presses oneself to foreign tables, one frivolously divines the present time or lazily rejects it—and all of this is done *sub specie sæculi*, from the point of view of the ‘now.’” He adds: “These are identical symptoms that permit us to decipher one same lack at the heart of this civilization: the destruction of the myth.” (BT, §23) Nietzsche believes that only a “horizon circumscribed by myth can ensure the closure and unity needed for an evolving civilization.” That is why he holds the myth to be the most powerful “unwritten law”: it sanctions the state’s representations of its origins. (BT, §23) Without it, the state has but hollow institutions and abstract political laws. Myths give content to such abstractions: Nietzsche believes that they are therefore the original source of a civilization. In his 1874 second *Untimely Meditation*, he argues that this symptom and the excess of critical, historical spirit occur simultaneously. He diagnoses that Germany is suffering from what he calls a “historical sickness”⁵⁴: critical, historical spirit is the opposite of what is necessary to a people’s health—that is, a certain amount of forgetfulness and illusion, a “protective veil.”⁵⁵ In other words, history is the opposite of myth. To counter this mythical deficiency, Nietzsche battles for the rise of the German myth. What he calls the “*rebirth of the German myth*” in § 23 of *The Birth of Tragedy* appears as a remedy to renew a sense of the state. He stresses that while it is important for a people to reject foreign

⁵⁴ Nietzsche, *On the Use and Disadvantage of History for Life*, KSA 1, §10.

⁵⁵ See *Ibid.*, §7.

influences, it is most valuable to do so under “the protection of domestic gods,” in “presence of a mythical homeland,” and with the restitution “of all German things.” (BT, §23) At the time, there is no doubt for him that the German mythical renewal will have the voice of Wagnerian music. Since the 1850s, Richard Wagner, who also believed in the artist’s curative force, stressed that art feeds from a “fertile popular element” whereby it has a beneficial effect on a people. That is why the *Kunstwerk der Zukunft* must be a “collective work.”⁵⁶ The rebirth of tragic art, as a re-enactment of the summit of Greek art, is necessary to “purify” German art, to orient ethics, and to permit philosophy and aesthetics to “seriously think about the narrow and necessary entanglement of the roots of art and people, of myth and morals, and of tragedy and state.” (BT, §23) In both Nietzsche’s and Wagner’s views, tragic art is essential to the ethical cure of German culture.

Fragmentary Ethics

Throughout this symptomatology that describes early Nietzschean ethics, one cannot but notice the importance of the naturalistic yardstick: nature is the standard measure to which Nietzsche compares states of health and illness. Quentin Taylor is right in stating that “nature, in both its (quasi) metaphysical and empirical forms is the principal (and only universal) sanction in Nietzsche’s early philosophy.”⁵⁷ This orients Nietzsche’s “*unzeitgemäß*” conclusion: the Prussian *Kulturstaat* does not recognize that a civilization is a natural aesthetical path towards genius, and it ignores the axiological difference between work and art—therefore German civilization will eventually perish, a sure sign of the decline of European culture. One reads in *The Greek State*: “if it were to be true that the Greeks perished because of slavery, then it is much more certain that we will perish from a *lack* of slavery.” (GS, 769) Although he was certain of the acuteness of his view, Nietzsche developed this radical argument in a text he intended to keep private.⁵⁸ But whether one finds the distinction between esoteric and exoteric texts to be important or

⁵⁶ Richard Wagner, *Opéra et drame*, in Wagner, *Œuvres en prose*, vol. 4–5, (tr.) J.-G. Prod’homme (Plan-de-la-Tour: Aujourd’hui, 1982), 116 (facsimile of the 1910 French ed.). See also Wagner, *L’œuvre d’art de l’avenir*, (tr.) J.-G. Prod’homme and F. Holl (Plan-de-la-Tour: Aujourd’hui, 1982), 232 (facsimile of the 1910 French ed.).

⁵⁷ Taylor, *The Republic of Genius*, 9.

⁵⁸ The *Five Forewords* were first published in 1956 by Karl Schlechta.

not changes little to the commentator's work: what can one conclude regarding the political implications of Nietzsche's early ethics?

The *Five Forewords* do suggest what a healthy civilization would be, in Nietzsche's view. In regards to his 1870s ethical symptomatology, there is no doubt as to the following characteristics: a healthy civilization would give positive value to the agonistic impulse; it would see the rule of the right of the strongest (GS, 770); it would be consciously oriented towards accomplishing the aesthetic goals of nature; and it would rest on the obligatory work of the majority. This civilization would therefore be characterized by *contest, force, and art*—as was the case in Burckhardt's and Nietzsche's ancient Greece. As Henning Ottmann has noted, a healthy civilization, in Nietzsche's view, would be *aristocratic, heroic, and agonistic*.⁵⁹ But although one can identify the fundamental characteristics of such a civilization, one nevertheless faces difficulties—and silence—upon questioning early Nietzschean ethics. First and foremost, Nietzsche does not define his concepts. One must therefore revert to the philosophical or cultural context of his discourse in order to underline, for instance, what he meant by "state" or "genius," as I did using Carl Schmitt to qualify Nietzsche's non-judicial concept of the "state," and Schopenhauer to specify Nietzsche's naturalistic concept of "genius." But also, much like other early writings of Nietzsche's other than *The Birth of Tragedy*, the *Five Forewords* are fragmentary: they were means to pursue conversations Nietzsche had had with the Wagners. Does that explain why some essential questions are left unanswered? To finish this study, I would like to raise a few of these issues.

(1) Because the *Five Forewords* are not programmatic, it is not clear how and when Nietzsche would have thought judicious to proceed to reassert the value of slavery and to reduce the value of work. Although one can imagine that the Western world could come to recognize that a form of "economic slavery" does exist and that it supports the living conditions in most Western countries today (one must only think of the conditions under which most products consumed and deemed essential in the West are produced in the East), one must keep in mind that Nietzsche went much further than this by arguing that in order for a society to strive and create a world of culture through genius, slavery must be *institutionalized* and *regulated*, not contested. How could the democratic age collectively face the idea of a "new," "modern" form of slavery? What could be a

⁵⁹ Henning Ottmann, *Philosophie und Politik bei Nietzsche* (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 1999, 2nd ed.), 48.

“good” or “properly-managed” form of slavery? On these issues, Nietzsche remained silent.

(2) According to Nietzsche, war or battle is a form of *agon* or competition. He believes it to be “as necessary to the state as slavery to society.” (GS, 774) At the political level, *agon* is the “eternal foundation of the Greek state’s life” (HC, 788) because it permits the renewal of power through competitions: “he who surpasses the others is set aside so that the play of rival forces can regain its vigor.” (HC, 788–89) It is in this fashion that Nietzsche understands ancient Greek ostracism: *agon* is a political means of protection against the supremacy of one individual. But Nietzsche makes no distinction between domestic and foreign politics. He seems to assimilate two concepts under one name: on the one side, battle as a mechanism for interior politics (that is, contest or *agon* between political individuals), and on the other side, battle as a mechanism for exterior politics (that is, war or antagonism between Greek city-states or between European nations). In other words, Nietzsche does not differentiate interior and exterior levels or spheres of political action. Regarding this issue, his early essays surely lack detail.

(3) It is noteworthy that Nietzsche wrote his apology of war just after Germany had victoriously ended warfare in the 1870–1871 Franco-Prussian war. But he did not keep these ideas entirely private, since he also developed his argument in 1873 in the opening paragraph of his first *Untimely Meditation*, in which he wrote that a great victory is also and foremost a great danger.⁶⁰ He thus warned that humans deal better with defeat than victory. Defeat functions as a spur to entice new battles, whereas victory leads to self-satisfaction and inertia. Against these, Nietzsche believed *agon* to be an effective remedy—even if it meant war. But because of the mass destructions entailed by war, shouldn’t one conclude that war is the result of the “bad” envy rather than the “good” one that spurs *agon*? And as such, wouldn’t war be condemnable, just as Hesiod had suggested? Despite his time being precisely one of repetitious combats, did Nietzsche give sufficient thought to the concept of war, although he did believe war to be an essential part of the political order? One can perhaps recognize here a trend to aestheticize war—much the same process which Walter Benjamin condemned when he read it in Ernst Jünger’s early writings.⁶¹

⁶⁰ See Nietzsche, *David Strauss, the Writer and the Confessor*, KSA 1, §1.

⁶¹ Walter Benjamin, “Theorien des deutschen Faschismus,” in *Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974–1989), vol. 3, 238–50.

(4) Nietzsche stated that because myth is a necessity, a civilization without a “mythical homeland” would necessarily proceed to “transplant a foreign myth.” He believed this process was under way, and that Germany’s ambivalent position towards France as of the Franco-Prussian war was a sure sign of it. Boasting its victory, Germany claimed the French military defeat was essentially a cultural demise. But Nietzsche strived to show that France remained Germany’s cultural yardstick. He defended this polemical idea throughout the early 1870s and explained that without national myths, Germany was condemned to suffer of “eternal hunger” while “digging and scouring for roots.” (BT, §23) But in this context of mythical “famine,” how is one to understand the widespread reluctance to join Richard Wagner’s project of precisely giving German myths to the German people? Wagner’s cultural viewpoint was far from popular at first, and Nietzsche’s participation in Wagnerianism was the most frequent issue raised by his contemporary critics.⁶² Apart from these considerations, another question remains: what is to be the role of the philosopher in the rise of the “mythical homeland?” Tragic art is necessary for philosophy, but which of the two comes first? Who must be the designer of the “new ethics”—the artist, the philosopher, or both? And how will their agonistic competition be resolved? Some scholars have raised this issue and have shown that in his 1870s notes, Nietzsche constantly hesitated between a philosophical art and an artistic philosophy as cure for German culture.⁶³

(5) On this topic, yet another question can be raised. Nietzsche and Wagner regarded revolutions as foreign (*i.e.*, Latin) actions, and reforms and renovations as properly German. Nietzsche speaks at length of the “Wagnerian reform” in his fourth and last *Untimely Meditation*.⁶⁴ Wagner has praised reform and renovation and has criticized revolution notably in his 1870 essay *Beethoven*, which Nietzsche thoroughly read and enjoyed.⁶⁵ What reforms would an ethical transvaluation of Germany have entailed in Nietzsche’s view? If this project meant to create a new, non-modern, and non-democratic form of politics, was it not necessarily revolutionary?

⁶² See Martine Béland, “Nietzsche avant Brandes: Une étude de réception germanophone (1872–1889),” *Nietzsche-Studien*, vol. 39 (2010): 561.

⁶³ See, *e.g.*, Paolo D’Iorio, “L’image des philosophes préplatoniciens chez le jeune Nietzsche,” (tr.) N. Ferrand and P. D’Iorio, in “*Centauren-Geburten*”: *Wissenschaft, Kunst und Philosophie beim jungen Nietzsche*, (ed.) T. Borsche, F. Gerratana, and A. Venturelli (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1994), 383–417.

⁶⁴ See, *e.g.*, Nietzsche, *Richard Wagner in Bayreuth*, §4; see also Nietzsche, *On the Future of our Educational Institutions*.

⁶⁵ Nietzsche to Rohde, 15 Dec. 1870, KSB 3, 166.

Possibly one of the biggest ambiguities of early Nietzschean ethics lies in this chasm between the will for transvaluation and the refusal of social and political revolution. Nietzsche's parting with Wagnerianism was also a farewell to socio-cultural reform projects for Germany and to the difficulties and contradictions facing them. Nietzsche thereby chose a more contemplative and a less socially active philosophy. It is well known that throughout his later works, he repeated the necessity for a transvaluation of modernity. Yet one must bear in mind that he never regarded politics as a high and dignified activity. In his 1874 notes, he judged the effect of politics on philosophy as being utterly negative: "I believe it impossible to emerge from the study of politics as a man of action," to what he concluded: "I wish for a cure to politics."⁶⁶ Nietzsche maintained this disdain for politics in his later works: as one can see in *Beyond Good and Evil*, he hoped philosophers would be able to find means "of securing calm in the face of the turmoil and tribulations of the *cruder* forms of government, and purity in the face of the *necessary* dirt of politics."⁶⁷

It goes without saying that Nietzsche left many questions unanswered regarding the project he embraced in the early 1870s—that is, the aristocratic transvaluation and curing of modern ethical life in the democratic age. The aristocratic, heroic, and agonistic characteristics of early Nietzschean ethics are nevertheless unmistakable. His early ethical thought is a form of radical aristocratism. One who accepts the challenge of facing Nietzsche's attacks upon the axiological foundations of the democratic order must recognize this radicalism—as early readers of Nietzsche were not afraid to do.⁶⁸

martine.beland@cegepmontpetit.ca

⁶⁶ Nietzsche, *Nachlaß*, KSA 7, §32[63].

⁶⁷ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, KSA 5, §61.

⁶⁸ I wish to thank Nandita Biswas Mellamphy, Frank Cameron, and Daniel Conway for their comments on an earlier version of this essay. Many thanks, also, to Peter Heron.