

Logical Structure of The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music, or Hellenism and  
Pessimism

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Post-Modern Philosophy

35.4141/6-001

January 15, 2003

In The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music, or Hellenism and Pessimism, Friedrich Nietzsche claims that the Greeks are the pinnacle of human achievement because they had the greatest art, tragic drama. His argument is divided into many parts. First, he states the subject and method in the two titles of the work. Second, in the preface to Richard Wagner, he breaks off from the tradition of philosophy as associated with science, and instead associates himself with the artists. Then, he outlines the two different parts that come together to create tragedy, and why the Greeks are the first and last civilization to do so. He ends with a critique of our times from the point of view of the Greeks, and tells us how we rediscover the tension in our souls, and go back to producing great art.

Nietzsche gave this work two titles. The first, The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music, gives the reader a statement of the subject upon which he is about to embark. Birth is a natural process where two things with a common property join together to form something new. In this case, that is Tragedy. Tragedy is a story in which the hero possesses a virtue that is the cause of his downfall or destruction. Therefore the birth of tragedy is the natural process that causes the excellence of a character to cause his downfall in literary art. The Greeks were the first to have tragedy as a dramatic literary art. Nietzsche claims that what allowed them to have tragedy first was the same natural forces, or Spirit, that caused humans to produce music. The music that Nietzsche is referring to is musike. Musike is a form that combined words, music and dance, and has a semi-divine origin within ancient Greece. The full first title asks the question: How is it that a combination of natural forces and spiritual notions, found in music, come together in the Greeks to find a distinct mode of art called tragedy? Nietzsche will try to answer.

The second title is Hellenism and Pessimism. The first part, Hellenism, refers to the Greeks as Winkelman, a predecessor of Nietzsche's, had pictured them. He wrote of them as the

most beautiful people in history, as evidenced by their art. He was right, but only for part of the time. Some Greek art is indeed beautiful. Some of it certainly is not. Nietzsche wanted to study all Greek art. He looked to Homer and saw that Odysseus is described as sly, sneaky and ugly. In Euripides, the Greeks are described as violent, passionate, and unpredictable people. The second part of the title, Pessimism, refers to the belief that in the future, a certain event will happen that will cause pain and misery to a person. It was believed that only weak civilizations, at the brink of collapse, were pessimistic. Nietzsche thought otherwise. He claimed that the Greeks were pessimistic, and that pessimism is a sign of a strong and noble civilization, as well as a weak one.

In the Preface to Richard Wagner, Nietzsche makes a revolutionary declaration that is seen as an irresponsible act during his time. He associates himself, as a philosopher, with artists, not scientists. He associates philosophy with art because art is philosophy to begin with. Art is the highest human activity, in that it is what makes us most different from the animals. It is also the truest metaphysical activity. He says this because there are properties of human existence that have no possible idea in physics, and are unknowable in that way, and these are the cause of art. He is, in this way, presenting himself as a metaphysician, interested in what is beyond physics.

The method that Nietzsche uses in this work is a natural method, based on metaphysical materialism. He is arguing that tragedy is the result of a natural process. This natural process assumes atheism. If there is no God, then there can be no moral appeal to a divinity, and when natural death occurs, human beings cease to exist, just like the rest of nature.

The beginning of his argument deals with the natural cause of humans producing art in the first place. What is this cause? If humans are natural animals, without any sort of God, there are consequences they cannot face. Rational self-consciousness, a natural drive, makes life unendurable and meaningless. It cannot be sustained without a complementary property, the

biological phenomenon, creativity, that makes life bearable. It allows us to create illusions to separate us from the truth, the meaninglessness and unendurability of life, presented by rational self-consciousness. Creativity has two drives.

The first is the Apollonian art drive, characterized by dreams. It creates an alternative universe for which the individual is the cause (a creator). This is typically a drive to create beauty, and the typical creation is religion. It is named for Apollo, the God of music, medicine and prophesy. These are all partly rational human enterprises that help reduce the fear of death.

The second is the Dionysian art drive, characterized by hallucination. It makes the individual part of something that continues beyond his lifetime. It is named for the god Dionysus, who was the god of wine, reproduction, and drama. He represents the fight against death through reproduction and community, since both allow the individual to continue.

The problem is that humans have both drives. They want to simultaneously create beauty and live by desire. Any civilization that lives by the first will be destroyed. Any civilization that lives by the second will destroy itself. The best civilization is one that combines the two.

How did the Greeks do this? The Greeks allowed the Apollonian art drive to be their primary art drive, but they found it to be incomplete. It gives no account of the purpose of sexual passion, loneliness, violence or conformity that were common. They allowed the Dionysian art drive expression to create illusions from these facets of life. From sexuality came the illusion of immortality through offspring and love, violence gave the illusion of immortality as a conqueror, loneliness gave imagination, whose expression in literature would let your name live on, and conformity gave the illusion that your existence would go on through your group. These four are difficult to express conceptually, but they can be felt through music, which is the primary form

of art of the Dionysian art drive. The Greeks were the first in history who were able to do this, and so produced tragic art.

Nietzsche defines art as a naturally caused phenomenon that is the perfection of nature. It creates the illusion that separates rational self-consciousness and material causality, and allows them to continue in their same creative, chaotic way. Art is inseparable, and in fact indistinguishable, from metaphysics.

Tragedy, for the Greeks, was expressed in their dramas. The chorus and the characters were distinct. The characters, from the Apollonian art drive, only skim the surface of the truth of the meaninglessness of existence, while the chorus endured the horror of life. The Greeks had taken Dionysian knowledge and expressed it in Apollonian form. Tragedy is a presentation of the conflict between the two drives in an ordered, rational form, where art represents the levels of awareness of these forms. The characters are trying to live as if life is worthwhile, always suspecting that it is not. They still manage to assert themselves against the meaninglessness by an act of will. This last step is what makes the Greeks different. It made them cheerful, and they created the greatest art. The purpose of tragedy for them was metaphysical solace. It showed them that life is chaotic and destructive for the individual, but life itself is indestructible and joyous.

The downfall of tragedy, Nietzsche claims, is Socratic optimism. Socrates said reason should be used to solve all conflicts, and this led to a group of people who are unable to confront the truth of human existence and who cannot stand suffering. This reduces the ability to create art so much that it is now non-existent.

The opposition to tragedy that now appears is science, which Nietzsche claims is optimistic. However, science has limits beyond which it cannot have knowledge. Once it reaches

this point, “ and its claim to universal validity [is] destroyed by the evidence of these limits” tragedy can realize its rebirth. (Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy, Section 17, p. 106) We are on the verge of reaching this point. Socratic optimism and science are beginning to show their limits. Science is being used by great men to show its own limits, as well as the limits of general knowledge. Even logic has been attacked, and shown to be relative. This can cause the rebirth of a tragic culture. From there we must learn from the Greeks, and humans will once again be able to produce great art.

## Bibliography

1. Nietzsche, Friedrich. The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music. From Basic Writings of Nietzsche, trans. Walter Kaufmann. Modern Library: New York. 1992