

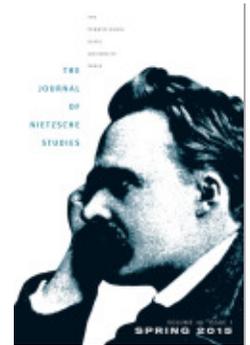


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The Smile of Tragedy: Nietzsche and the Art of Virtue by
Daniel Ahern (review)

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(Review)



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In short, these first three volumes of the *Nietzsche-Kommentar*, while displaying slightly different editorial approaches on the part of their two authors, provide good reason to believe that, when complete, it will quickly attain the status of indispensability it has set for itself. The production values of these volumes reflect the high standards one expects from De Gruyter, and the pricing—while evidently not cheap—makes them relatively inexpensive for what they offer and compared with the costs of individual monographs. In supporting scholarly research of this kind, the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences and Arts is performing a genuine service to the academic community, and one wishes other funding bodies would follow its example. In the conclusion to his review in *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* of March 7, 2013 (vols. 1/1 and 6/1), Lüdger Lütkehaus makes an important point about how Nietzsche's engagement in *The Birth of Tragedy* with the thematics of being an epigone or a decadent reflects "the central life-philosophical question behind the cultural critical, intellectual historical façade," and makes a case for remembering the existential urgency behind Nietzsche's rhetoric. But how Nietzsche's philosophy can (or cannot) be turned into existential praxis is a separate question from that of how his writings are to be interpreted, and the *Nietzsche-Kommentar* offers anyone interested in Nietzsche (and with a modicum of German) a remarkable degree of insight into his writings. So much so that, especially given Nietzsche's habit of citing his sources from memory and aside from the question of whether one could *understand* Nietzsche better than he himself did, the reader could well be said now to be in a position (and this is perhaps a slightly alarming thought) to *know* him better than himself.

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Socrates was for Nietzsche the "vortex and turning point of so-called world history" (BT 15). For readers of Nietzsche, however, investigating the *problem* of Socrates involves much more than the already difficult task of interpreting a widely anthologized essay from *Twilight of the Idols*. That essay, "The Problem of Socrates," because of its humorous and shocking tone and content, masks and reveals what is for Nietzsche a complex set of issues that are to be approached with the greatest seriousness: Who is Socrates in the ancient world? How did he get himself taken seriously? And what does the Socratic ideal indicate, both in the ancient world and in Western intellectual history?

A litany of questions emerging from considerations of the problem of Nietzsche's Socrates could be developed well beyond what has been posed here. So it is surprising that this problem has not generated more reflection in the Nietzsche literature. And, it is the virtue of Daniel Ahern's *The Smile of Tragedy* that so much of his study leads up to and then delivers an insightful and thought-provoking analysis of this problem: "who is Nietzsche's Socrates?" Ahern approaches this important question in a rather streamlined, even reductive, manner, analyzing elements of the so-called Dionysian pessimism of the Greeks before Socrates and then "tracing the revolution of these elements with the emergence of Socratic philosophy" (7). This approach is not without risks, however, and so we must examine Ahern's maneuvers in the book's short introduction and opening chapters before returning to his insight into Nietzsche's Socrates.

The book's introduction stresses the importance of understanding "Dionysian pessimism" for what follows. Ahern takes this key term from *The Gay Science* (GS 370) with little concern shown for the thematic context from which it is drawn. There is no mention of the self-criticism with which Nietzsche begins this aphorism, nor is there discussion of his allusions there to his "vision growing keener" over the years or to his claims that "Dionysian pessimism" belongs to the future, while the word "classical" now "offends" his ears. Apparently, such claims are of no concern because, for

Ahern, the thread of a consistent “attitude”—so-called Dionysian pessimism—may be followed through Nietzsche’s work. In order to avoid getting lost in Nietzsche’s later, experimental concepts, we are told, readers would do well to understand this attitude and remember that Nietzsche “always looks back” when “giving a name to our tomorrow” (8).

Chapter 1, “Dionysian Pessimism,” begins with the issue of later Nietzsche’s self-criticisms and finds in the second preface of *The Birth of Tragedy* (of all places) a confirmation of the overall coherence of the “task” Nietzsche follows throughout his productive life (8). Nietzsche’s professional life after the debacle of *The Birth of Tragedy*’s reception leads him into philosophy with appreciation for the differences between antiquity’s “healthy and degenerate” epochs (10). One begins to wonder, here, whether Ahern’s Nietzsche could further tease out the differences *within* each of the two “epochs.” Apparently, for Ahern, entertaining this possibility is unnecessary, and for this reason his study alludes to all that Nietzsche deems to have flourished *before* Socrates as one epoch: “the tragic age.” This move seems perilous and is at the very least important to note, and not only for the reason Ahern mentions—namely, that later Nietzsche seems to abandon the coinage “tragic age” (11). The larger question here is whether it is correct to say that Nietzsche understood the so-called “tragic” and “Homeric” ages to be essentially the same, as this study suggests. Even more remarkable, however, is the suggestion that the “tragic age” is indistinguishable from pre-Homeric times and the cruel, horrible, and dark recesses of human and cultural development “before history” (*GM* II:2). For Ahern, these various stages of pre-Socratic human physiology and history can be understood rather neatly as “the tragic age,” because “the tragic age . . . is the womb of everything Hellenic” (16) (another quote taken out of context, here from “Homer on Competition,” in which Nietzsche is claiming that the “pre-Homeric world” is actually such a womb) and because with the Dionysian pessimism of the tragic age the Hellenic world created values in accordance with master morality. “We are speaking here, of course, about ‘master morality’” (20), he writes flatly. There are also some equivocations in this chapter concerning the precise nature and meaning of the warrior-poet’s all-important attitude toward death, whether this type is merely willing to *risk* its death (in the fashion of a Hegelian struggle for recognition) or whether it positively *seeks* its own annihilation (as would a martyr), and there is no discussion here about the varying implications of these two attitudes.

Chapter 2, “The Good and the Beautiful Body,” begins with the provocative observation that “ethics” and “aesthetics” were not distinct fields of thought in the tragic age—but rather, a unitary phenomenon. That Nietzsche conceives of the integral embodiment of virtue and beauty to have coincided in the body of the warrior-poet, and that this embodiment is manifested in Dionysian pessimism, are the central themes of this chapter. Here, the key to understanding the noble’s attitude is not merely to account for how it regards death. More specifically, the “suffering” of the one who resolutely stands with death must now be considered. In wagering death, and the “suffering-unto-death,” the warrior-poet achieves an elevated social rank. Conversely, in being so elevated, the noble’s risk becomes a “gift” of the body, which for Ahern’s Nietzsche means that this ethical gesture is both “selfless” (while intended to earn individual acclaim) and “useless” (while intended to enhance Greek culture and the warrior class). As with the first chapter, Ahern attempts here to bring out the finest features of Dionysian pessimism, but does so to the point of endangering precision. But the real problem Ahern is preparing to investigate concerns the difference between this warrior-poet’s being-toward-death and the attitude of Nietzsche’s Socrates, who deemed his life to be of so little value that he eagerly and cheerfully drank his hemlock, in the death scene portrayed in Plato’s *Phaedo*.

Before discussing Ahern’s investigation of that problem, it should also be noted that his emphasis on Nietzsche’s “physiology” of virtue and beauty (a theme Ahern had explored in his earlier study, *Nietzsche as Cultural Physician*, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995) betrays a predilection to highlight the internal, creative energies of the warrior-poet, almost to the exclusion of acknowledging the noble’s exterior world, except for noting its establishment of “rank,” which is not fully explored here. For Ahern’s Nietzsche, the “sovereignty of the self” emerges as the Apollonian drive is “stimulated” by the Dionysian element and by anything that impedes this sovereignty, such that “[t]he ‘world’ and ‘cosmos,’ and all that we can possibly mean with reference to these terms, affirm the precious ‘I’ within the perspective of the instinct of self-preservation” (49). By now it begins to

appear, however, that Ahern's analysis has no place for examining the exemplar's lived experience, as could have been developed for example with a discussion of Greek culture's competitive, "*agonal* instinct" (which is omitted from Ahern's study) or in a more complete discussion of the tragic age's aesthetic sensibilities.

Also omitted from this study is consideration for Nietzsche's philological work and his explorations of specific poets and tragedians (his work on the pre-Socratic philosophers is briefly discussed). While it is true that later Nietzsche—with a few notable exceptions—was content to make rather grand and abstract claims about psychological "types," the early Nietzsche did by contrast examine the works of specific poets (Homer, Hesiod, and so on), tragedians (Aeschylus and Sophocles), and pre-Socratic philosophers (from Thales to Anaxagoras). Ahern chooses not to comment on those important materials and thus fails to demonstrate how the elements of Dionysian pessimism in the tragic age can be observed in the works of these writers, as Nietzsche understood them. (A glance at the index shows only three brief references to Homer, one to Pindar and none to Hesiod or Theognis, one reference to Aeschylus and none to Sophocles, and other curious omissions.) Perhaps it should come as no surprise, then, that the study's most persuasive chapter is concerned not only with Nietzsche's interpretation and critique of the epoch of "Socratism" but also with Nietzsche's specific encounter with Socrates.

Chapter 3, "The Socratic Cure for Life," raises the complicated question of how Nietzsche understands Socrates' death. In order to approach this question, Ahern follows Nietzsche's key distinction between "Socrates" and the "Socratism" that began to develop in the philosophy of Plato, for whom "philosophy"—and not the sacrifice of the warrior-poet's body—is the truly virtuous act. Rather than wagering the body, virtue in the guise of philosophy now serves the purpose of preserving the true (rational) self (88). Whereas Socrates attempted to "salvage his culture" by disciplining the instincts, Socratism in the hands of Plato "abandons" the physical world and with it the tragic age (91).

According to Ahern, then, Nietzsche's Socrates belongs to the tragic age insofar as he understood himself to be attacking the body and its passions for the sake of Greek culture. Yet, Socrates's hate and mistrust for the body was so profound that his death seemed insignificant to him, though he did perhaps find it useful to pass "himself off as a martyr for philosophy" (93). In the final analysis, however, Socratic pessimism negated life and in this it differed fundamentally from what it replaced. Whereas Dionysian pessimism considered the body to be the site of the positive creation and enactment of virtue, Socratic pessimism considers the body to be an impediment to virtue. Whereas the former risks the body as a gift to Greek culture, Socratism strives only for self-improvement and thus severs the body from the rational self. Socratism then takes virtue, the good, and justice to be concepts understood through rational inquiry, and creates another world in order to eternalize these concepts (93–94). This analysis is quite well done. Ahern's study adds a fourth chapter (not mentioned in the book's introduction) that seeks to find evidence of Nietzsche's own Dionysian pessimism within his writings about war, suffering, annihilation, and the like. The main point here seems to be that "Dionysian pessimism [for Nietzsche] is by no means a sadomasochistic death wish" (117) but rather the core element of a "physiology of [master] aesthetics" (120).

Ultimately, Ahern's book delivers an insightful, if somewhat uneven, elucidation of a complex set of problems in Nietzsche studies: the development, nature, and meaning of Nietzsche's Socrates. The historical decay of "instincts" in the Greek world in the days of Socrates was stressed by Nietzsche, especially in the well-known "The Problem of Socrates," which is understandably highlighted in chapter 3 of Ahern's study. For this reason, a focused discussion of the development of the Greek world's "attitude" emerging from these instincts—what Ahern calls "Dionysian pessimism"—is perhaps warranted, even if Ahern's approach risks the problems noted.

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