

3 Nietzsche's Subversive Rewritings of *Phaedo*-Platonism

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I. Introduction to Subversion

Against his many intellectual enemies, Nietzsche deploys a variety of rhetorical weapons. The marshalling of reasons for the frontal assault of logical argument is rarely among them. Rather, his tactical approach more often inclines toward indirect acts of subversion. He redefines or revalues traditional concepts,¹ employs allusive mockery,² or impugns his opponents' motives.³ This strategy of implicit engagement provides Nietzsche a measure of freedom that would be unavailable were he to confront his philosophical rivals head-on. The philosophers whose influence he is most eager to challenge regularly appeal to reasoned arguments to establish their positions, so direct engagement with the logical apparatus of their ideas would involve him in precisely the sort of analysis and refutation whose rational presuppositions he is often at pains to undermine. The very method of Nietzsche's opposition to the tradition fortifies his position even as it communicates his hostility to traditional modes of philosophic thinking.

That Nietzsche understood the effectiveness of irrational, or a-rational, rhetorical tactics is well known from his exposure in *On the Genealogy of Morals* of the linguistic dissembling of proponents of slave morality who apply virtue-words associated with merit and praise to those of their actions which, from the perspective of master morality, exhibit the vices of weakness, timidity, and groveling (GM 2.14).⁴ That he employed similar rhetorical tactics himself is also well known, most obviously perhaps from his redefining, and revaluing, the terms "good," "evil," and "bad" in *Beyond Good and Evil* 260 and the "First Essay" of GM. And to note a less familiar variation on this same theme, consider Nietzsche's rhetorical trick of presenting the same deed or thought, often his own, in both moral and amoral terms. When addressing the importance of nutrition in *Ecce Homo*, for example, after specifying the value of food in contributing to an individual's acquisition of "moraline-free virtue," he remarks, employing an amoral term, that when he was young he ate "badly," which he then glosses, "morally speaking," as "impersonally," "selflessly," and "altruistically" (EH "Clever" 1). Similarly, in his late preface to *The Birth of Tragedy*, he refers to "the resolve to be so

scientific about everything” as, “morally speaking, a sort of cowardice and falseness,” but “amorally speaking, a ruse” (BT “Attempt” 1). Variations on the same trope even provide the opportunity for subversive humor, as when he writes in *Beyond Good and Evil* that “a curiosity of my type remains after all the most agreeable of all vices,” then immediately adds, “sorry, I meant to say: the love of truth has its reward in heaven and even on earth” (BGE 45). By shifting like this between moral and amoral descriptions of one and the same phenomenon Nietzsche suggests the substantive point that morality is a linguistic-conceptual interpretation of a morally neutral reality; and by suggesting this point rather than stating it explicitly and arguing for it, he side-steps the burden of proof while simultaneously introducing the idea into the stream of his readers’ way of thinking, which indirectly reinforces his occasional direct statements of the same idea.

All this is to say that Nietzsche often works against the tradition from the inside, as it were, by donning the mask of standard philosophical discourse, only to alter its features and thereby transform its original character. The resulting appearance is recognizable but somehow also unmistakably different from the prototype. Playing mischievously in this way with concepts and terminology, Nietzsche upsets established hierarchies and unsettles his readers’ expectations and assumptions. We might apply any number of labels to this rhetorical tactic of *reimagining* and *rewriting* one mode of discourse in the terms of another—linguistic manipulation, inversion, transvaluation—but for the purposes of the present essay, I shall employ the term *subversion*. In what follows I shall examine several instances of Nietzsche’s subversive reimaginings and rewritings of Plato’s dialogues, particularly those in which Plato offers prescriptive accounts of the nature of philosophy and the habits and practices of the ideal philosopher.

II. Reimagining the Dying Socrates

Nietzsche creatively subverted Plato’s texts right from the start of his career. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, for example, he reimagined the philosophical meaning of the confrontation between “the dying Socrates” and the tragic *Weltanschauung* that the influence of Socratic philosophy undermined and ultimately overthrew. According to Nietzsche’s account, sometime during the late sixth century, the Greeks brought the Apollonian force of order and comforting illusion into vibrant union with the contrary Dionysian impulse toward irrationality and a pessimistic insight into the terrifying heart of reality. The tragic drama, and tragic culture more generally, was the result. Socrates came of age during the zenith of this period of Greek tragic culture, yet he opposed both the mode and the message of the tragic world-view. He privileged Apollonian harmony and understanding to the total exclusion of the chaos and unreason of the Dionysian vision. The tragedians came to their tragic insights “only by instinct” (BT 13), Nietzsche explains, whereas Socrates deplored such lack of clarity and explicit understanding,

valuing consciousness and reason above all else; and whereas the tragedians accepted, and at times even affirmed, the bitter fact of human suffering, Socrates took it upon himself to “correct existence” (BT 13), or, in another formulation, to “heal the eternal wound of existence” (BT 18). An anomaly at the heart of the tragic age into which he was born, Socrates was the progenitor of a new spirit. He was, in Nietzsche’s words, the first example of the “theoretical man” (BT 15), the ideal type of “Alexandrian culture,” which sets itself against myth and Dionysian art in the name of the scientific pursuit of knowledge by way of causal analysis, always with the optimistic hope to understand and even to correct being (BT 15, 17–18).

Socrates regarded his drive to understand and improve upon being as a divine mission imposed on him by Apollo. Therefore, he refused to shirk his duty or even to temper his actions in fulfillment of it. His commitment and intransigence motivated him to engage in public interrogations of men with a reputation for wisdom, and this led eventually to his trial, conviction, and execution, and, more relevant to the argument of this essay, to his conduct during and after his trial. Nietzsche speculates that Socrates willingly brought about his own death despite the fact that the Athenians would have been satisfied to exile him (BT 13). Thus he died a martyr to his anti-Dionysian, theoretical, optimistic cause. The shocking impact of this event, so unexpected and unnecessary, reverberates to this day, and Nietzsche suggests that Socrates anticipated this, even willed it to be so. In death, and indeed, in his particular manner of dying, even more than in his life, Socrates so altered the course of the development of Western culture that Nietzsche identifies him as “the one turning point and vortex of so-called world history” (BT 15).

As Nietzsche tells the story, the clear-headed and calm confrontation with death represented by “*the dying Socrates*” replaced the obscurities and terrors inherent in the tragic vision of man to become “the new ideal . . . of noble Greek youths” (BT 13). Foremost among these young men was Plato, who, Nietzsche says, was particularly susceptible to the lure of the Socratic worldview, especially to its core of “optimistic dialectic.” Plato, in short, was seduced by the healing potential of *science*, which, as implicit in the Socratic pursuit of knowledge through reason, seemed to promise freedom from the fear of death (BT 15). Socrates’s proto-scientific, optimistic dialectic would become the leitmotiv of the Platonic dialogue, and of Plato’s conception of the ideal philosopher. The enormous influence of Plato’s style of philosophizing and writing was the means by which Socrates’s hostility to the tragic *Weltanschauung* and tragic art redirected history.

At this point in his analysis, precisely upon introducing Plato, Nietzsche is moved to reimagine the telos of the Socratic worldview and the trajectory of Western intellectual history inaugurated by Socrates’s distinctive style of philosophy. With reference to the ancient story that Plato began his creative life as a poet and tragedian, Nietzsche somewhat begrudgingly admits the artistic merits of the Platonic dialogues (identifying them as the precursor to the novel) and says that Plato was “constrained by sheer artistic necessity to

create an art form that was related to those forms of art which he repudiated" (BT 14). In short, try as he might to subordinate his youthful poetic-tragic tendencies to the dialectical requirements of philosophy as practiced by his master, Plato's artistry could not itself be mastered. This recognition leads Nietzsche to speculate that the superficially anti-tragic force of Socrates's influence may after all be compatible with tragic insight and art, that we might even be permitted to imagine an "artistic Socrates" (BT 14).

Drawing on Schopenhauer's metaphysics, Nietzsche insists that causal explanations apply only to phenomena; they cannot reach the thing in itself.⁵ Causality and causal explanations operate horizontally, as it were, along the surfaces of things as they appear to us; causes do not arise vertically from, nor do causal explanations penetrate vertically to, the Will, which Schopenhauer identifies as the one true reality that objectifies itself as the multiplicity of phenomena. Therefore, the man of science, the theoretical man stamped in the mold of Socrates, having followed unto exhaustion the endless chain of causes, must conclude that although causal relations bind one thing to another through the influence of natural laws, the things themselves as well as the laws remain forever mysterious in their essences. We make use of them, but we do not know them. Indeed, we *cannot* know them, for they operate behind, beneath, or within the phenomena to which alone science provides access. Thus science, like the dialectical logic at its core, in the course of every investigation inevitably "coils up . . . and finally bites its own tail," at which point one attains, or returns to, the "tragic insight" that theoretical knowledge can neither fathom being nor correct existence. Reason is not, after all, a panacea. Only art, including myth as a form of art, can protect one from the sufferings consequent on existence or soothe the pain of one already suffering (BT 15).

Nietzsche's vision of an artistic Socrates passing through science to return to tragic insight was no arbitrary fantasy. He was directly inspired by Plato's portrait of the dying Socrates in the *Phaedo*. Early in this dialogue, the philosopher's friends, gathering round him on the last day of his life, inquire into the significance of his writing poetry in prison, specifically of his versifying Aesop's fables and composing a hymn to Apollo. Socrates explains that he has often been visited in dreams by a figure urging him to practice *mousikê*, which is to say those arts presided over by the Muses. He had always assumed that the dream was encouraging him to continue engaging in philosophy, which he regards as the supreme form of *mousikê*; but now, he admits, he does not want to die without being certain that he has obeyed the admonitions of his recurring dream. Therefore, he is trying his hand at the common forms of the Muses' arts (Phd. 60c-61c). Nietzsche picks up on this enigmatic turn to art in Socrates' otherwise thoroughly unartistic life, and from this he imagines Socrates wondering whether "there is a realm of wisdom from which the logician is exiled," and whether "art is even a necessary correlative of, and supplement for science." This is the specific inspiration of his imagining the possibility of "the birth of an 'artistic Socrates'" (BT 14).

Nowhere in Plato does Socrates explicitly state such radical misgivings concerning the power of dialectic to know the truth and orient men to the good. Nowhere does he suggest that in the end we may have to turn to art as a remedy for those epistemic, ethical, or existential wounds that science is powerless to understand or to heal. There is only this hint—if we may be permitted even to consider Socrates's dream a hint of this particular insight—in the *Phaedo*. This "music-practicing Socrates" that Nietzsche proposes as the symbol of the culture in which tragedy has been reborn upon the realization of the limits of logic and science is a product of his own creative reading of Plato's *Phaedo*. By reimagining the argument of Plato's text, or the course of Western intellectual history inspired by Plato's portrait of the dying Socrates, Nietzsche subverts the hierarchy according to which, in Plato as well as in the culture his life's work helped to summon into being, science is superior to art, which also subverts the traditional ideal according to which philosophy is more closely allied to science than to art.⁶

III. Platonism Inverted

In a notebook entry from the end of the period during which he composed *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche wrote, "Simply to acknowledge the fact: Socrates is so close to me that I am almost continually fighting with him."⁷ It may be that Nietzsche was *too* close to Socrates, for in his early period he shows no indication of recognizing the significance of the difference between Socrates and Plato. Yet, as we have seen, the dying Socrates of Nietzsche's concern is thoroughly bound up with Plato, and with Plato's *Phaedo* in particular. Plato himself notes early in the *Phaedo* that he was not present on the day that Socrates died (Phd. 59b), which might at least motivate suspicions concerning the historicity of his account of the day's events and conversation. And his calling attention to the incompleteness of Socrates's arguments for the immortality of the soul (Phd. 84c, 107b), as well as his undermining of Socrates's distinction between the philosopher's concern with *logoi* and the poet's concern with *mythoi* (Phd. 61b5, 61e2, 70b6, 114d8), might also suggest that Plato as author is aiming at a goal distinct from that of his protagonist, Socrates. Ultimately, it is difficult to determine whether in *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche's actual opponent is the historical dying Socrates or Plato's portrait of the dying Socrates in the *Phaedo*, for his account draws on material some of which might plausibly be traced back to the historical figure, some of which we have no good reason to believe to be anything other than Plato's own invention. Be this as it may, we can say with confidence that, in one way or another, the *Phaedo* was on Nietzsche's mind throughout his career, from beginning to end.⁸

In the *Phaedo*, Plato expresses his standard metaphysical dogma in its most radically anti-naturalist form. Unlike the *Republic*, in which he gives the body its due (the philosopher-kings, after all, are drawn from the warrior class, who engage in gymnastic and military training), in the *Phaedo*, Plato

repeatedly condemns the body as the source of all that is bad. Indeed, one of the central themes of the dialogue is the philosopher's concentrated efforts to separate his soul from his body as thoroughly as possible while alive, by way of the ascetic discipline of "purification" (*katharsis*), until he attains the actual and complete separation of death. This extreme and uncompromising expression of tendencies that appear in mitigated form elsewhere in the dialogues has been so influential that it may be useful to distinguish it from more moderate manifestations of related Platonic propensities, to which end I designate it "*Phaedo*-Platonism." This is the distinctive version of Platonism that Nietzsche has in mind when he labels Christianity "Platonism for 'the people'" (BGE "Preface"), a phrase he deploys with reference to Platonic purity and Socrates's death—and thus indirectly to the *Phaedo*—and which has as a background Nietzsche's associating both Christianity and Platonism with an exaggerated reaction to desire involving extirpation and castration rather than mastery and economizing (WP 383), which also derives more obviously from the *Phaedo* than from any other Platonic dialogue.⁹

In another note from his early period, Nietzsche referred to his own philosophy as "inverted Platonism."¹⁰ This stress on Plato rather than Socrates makes perfect sense in context, for in this particular note Nietzsche is concerned with ontology (rather than with ethics or existential value judgments), which he would more readily associate with Plato the dogmatic metaphysician than with Socrates the quizzical dialectician. Plato includes in his ontology both being and becoming, but he privileges the former as "true" and "really real" while disparaging the latter as mere "appearance" or "phenomenon." Nietzsche would later reject this Platonic distinction, the ontology as well as the implied value judgment, but in this note he accepts both terms in order to privilege appearance over being in radically, and symmetrically, anti-Platonic fashion. "The further removed from true being," he writes, "the purer, the more beautiful, the better it is." The references to purity, beauty, and goodness are no doubt intended to recall Plato's *katharmos*, *kalon*, and *agathon*, and, by associating these with appearance rather than being, Nietzsche turns traditional Platonic rankings of value on their head. He goes so far as to state his aim (*Ziel*) as "life in appearance" (*Schein*) rather than, like Plato, striving to transcend appearance into reality. Nietzsche's inverted Platonism, then, is an early manifestation of an intellectual tendency to which, as we shall see, he would give expression throughout his career: rather than reject Platonism outright, he often employs its conceptual apparatus, structural organization, and intellectual assumptions precisely in order to subvert the overall doctrine from the inside out.

IV. Rewriting Socrates's Last Words

By the time Nietzsche completed his first specifically philosophical work, *Human, All Too Human*, he had thoroughly rejected traditional conceptions of being as well as the Platonic distinction between reality and appearance

(if not all forms of this distinction). In this way, he entered into his so-called "middle period." This phase culminated, just prior to the profound departure of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in *The Gay Science*, near the end of which he takes up once again the theme of the dying Socrates as presented in Plato's *Phaedo*.

Nietzsche's portrait of Socrates's death in GS 340 (entitled "The dying Socrates") differs from his reimagining in *The Birth of Tragedy* in that there is no trace of hope that Socrates's theoretical optimism might lead beyond the dead-end of science to a regeneration of art. Socrates is here a thoroughly negative figure, and the focus is not on his poetry as inspired by his dream's commanding him to practice *mousikê*. Instead, Nietzsche concentrates on Socrates's final, enigmatic, words. His interpretation of their significance is meant to expose the old philosopher as the paradigmatic life-denier, a No-saying figure for whom Nietzsche's antipathy only deepens throughout the remainder of his career.

As reported at the end of the *Phaedo*, some minutes after drinking his poison in prison, and just seconds prior to dying, Socrates addressed an old friend, saying, "O Crito, we owe a rooster to Asclepius. So offer it and do not neglect it" (Phd. 118a). One hardly knows what to make of these words, and Plato provides no clear guidance for interpreting them. Nietzsche's own imaginative reading is inspired by the general thrust of the content of the *Phaedo* together with the nature and function of the god Asclepius. I have already characterized *Phaedo*-Platonism as the most unyielding version of Plato's metaphysically oriented anti-naturalism. In the *Phaedo* the soul is not only ranked above the body ethically, ontologically, and epistemologically, as is usual in Plato, but the body is relentlessly condemned as the source of all ignorance, vice, and the impure drudgery of reincarnation. In contrast, the soul is the source of knowledge, virtue, and potential liberation from the cycle of rebirth. In *The Gay Science* Nietzsche characterizes Socrates's hostility to the body as a form of weakness, and he infers the root cause of Socrates's condition from the fact of his concern with Asclepius. Asclepius was the god of healing, to whom the Greeks sacrificed in hopes of, or in gratitude for, relief from illness or suffering. With this in mind, Nietzsche takes Socrates's last words to imply that he regarded life as a sickness for which death is the cure. Indeed, he even *rewrites* Socrates's last words as, "O Crito, *life is a disease*." In his version of Socrates's "ridiculous and terrible" utterance Nietzsche finds evidence of a gloomy fact about the man himself. Socrates, he concludes, was a pessimist. More, he was a pessimist because he "*suffered from life*." And worse still, Socrates wanted, even needed, revenge for his suffering. With a stunning lack of magnanimity for the psychological well-being of his friends, and indeed for all those who would later encounter and grasp the implication of his last words, Socrates gave voice to "his ultimate judgement," a verdict against embodied mortal life in favor of the immortality of the pure, disembodied soul. But since according to Nietzsche, there is no incorporeal soul of the sort that might live eternally beyond the

confines of the physical world (BGE 12), Socrates's position collapses into a gruesome form of life-denial.

Plato passed this Socratic denial of life on to Christianity in the guise of *Phaedo*-Platonism, and the West has labored under its debilitating assumptions for two millennia since. When Nietzsche introduces his doctrine of Eternal Return and his figure of Zarathustra in the final two sections of *The Gay Science*, immediately following his account of "the dying Socrates," his intentions are clear: he concludes the book by introducing a counter-movement to the life-denial and nay-saying of the Socratic-Platonic-Christian worldview. In short, Nietzsche reimagined and rewrote Socrates's last words in order to make their meaning, and their historical significance, explicit,¹¹ for only by understanding the corruption at the core of the Platonic-Christian *Weltanschauung* will we be able to subvert and finally overcome it,¹² and only by imaginatively conceiving a novel type of philosophical figure will we transcend the Socratic ideal into a superior philosophy of the future.

V. Spiritual Pregnancy Naturalized

I shall return to the *Phaedo* for the final two examples of Nietzsche's reimagining and rewriting of Plato's work, but the next example centers on the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*. In the seventh and eighth sections of the "Third Essay" of *On the Genealogy of Morals* ("What is the Meaning of Ascetic Ideals?"), Nietzsche writes at length of the nature of the philosopher,¹³ and although he masks the fact, his discussion throughout engages with, and subverts, Plato's account of the philosopher in Diotima's speech in the *Symposium* and Socrates's second speech in the *Phaedrus*. Nietzsche's allusions to these two dialogues, once noted, are unmistakable, but as he directs his readers' attention to Schopenhauer and the Buddha, mentioning Plato and Socrates only in passing, scholars have failed to notice the actual focus of his attention. Nietzsche doubtless covered his tracks by design, for, as I have noted, he understood the value of indirect communication, and he employs the technique particularly during his late period.

Nietzsche introduces his discussion of the philosopher by way of a consideration in GM 3.6 of aesthetics, and more specifically of Schopenhauer's adoption of Kant's conception of the beautiful. The analysis of beauty is precisely the context in which Diotima situates her speech in the *Symposium*, and it also appears in the culmination of Socrates's speech in the *Phaedrus* concerning philosophical madness. In the *Symposium*, Diotima engages with Socrates first by objecting to his claim that the god Eros is good and beautiful. Eros, she insists, is neither beautiful nor ugly, neither good nor bad. Rather, he is a lover of the beautiful (Symp. 204a-b), and he loves the good by way of the beautiful (Symp. 206a-b). Socrates's mistake, Diotima explains, was to regard Eros as a passive object of love rather than as an active lover, which is what he is (Symp. 206c). Similarly, Nietzsche objects to the Kantian-Schopenhauerian account of beauty on the grounds that it

regards the work of art as a passive object of aesthetic contemplation rather than from the perspective of the artist actively striving to create a beautiful work. The artist himself is not disinterested, as Kant and Schopenhauer would have it, and as Eros would be if he were merely the beautiful object of others' interest; rather, the artist is seeking something, most interestedly, just as Eros is in search of the beautiful. In the *Phaedrus*, too, the beautiful is an object of the lover's passionate interest. Beauty inspires love in those who behold it in physical form (Phdr. 249c-252b), and who, by way of loving properly, which is to say philosophically, overcome the lust for physical satisfaction and thereby transform their love into virtue (Phdr. 252c-256e). This transformation mirrors Diotima's account of the so-called "ladder of love" (Symp. 209e-212a).

This particular manifestation of interest in the beautiful introduces another point of contact between GM 3.7-8 and Plato's two great erotic dialogues, namely the matter of sensuality. Nietzsche concludes his discussion of aesthetics in section six with reference to Schopenhauer's concern to liberate himself from the lure of "sexual 'interestedness,'" and he begins section seven by noting Schopenhauer's personal animosity toward "sexuality," "woman," and "sensuality." Moreover, he concludes his discussion of the nature of the philosopher at the end of section eight by returning to Schopenhauer's treatment of "sensuality" and "sexual excitement." His point throughout is that Schopenhauer hoped to overcome sensuality by way of contemplation of the beautiful. Thus Nietzsche situates his discussion of the philosopher, from beginning to end, in precisely the same setting as Diotima's treatment of philosophy in the *Symposium* and Socrates' account in the *Phaedrus*, namely eros, sexual desire, and the philosopher's aim to subdue the sexual impulse, the most recalcitrant and dangerous of desires, to liberate himself from the distracting lure of physicality and thereby to realize his proper end.

Despite these contextualizing similarities, Nietzsche intends to subvert the substantive core of the Platonic account. When he concludes his discussion by denying that Schopenhauer could ever "overcome" sensuality through aesthetic contemplation, insisting instead that at most sensuality can be "transfigured" into something other than "sexual excitement" (GM 3.8), he is providing a specifically non-Platonic example of his generally anti-Platonic point. He develops this point at length when, near the beginning of section seven, he introduces the theme of the "peculiar philosophers' irritation at and rancor against sensuality" and writes that

Every animal—therefore *la bête philosophe*, too—instinctively strives for an optimum of favorable conditions under which it can expend all its strength and achieve its maximal feeling of power; every animal abhors, just as instinctively and with a subtlety of discernment that is "higher than all reason," every kind of intrusion or hindrance that obstructs or could obstruct this path to the optimum (I am *not* speaking

of happiness, but its path to power, to action, to the most powerful activity, and in most cases actually its path to unhappiness).

(GM 3.7)

This passage engages directly with Plato's account of the philosopher in the *Symposium*, subverting several of Diotima's specific claims. I shall relate these one by one.

Early in her account Diotima addresses the object of the lover's love of beautiful things, and she concludes that all people love the good and desire to possess it forever because, she says, whoever possesses the good attains happiness, and this is the one final goal at which all men aim (Symp. 204d-206b). Nietzsche explicitly denies this. The philosopher, according to his account, seeks the highest outlets of his proper activity and power, which may well lead to his *unhappiness*.

Diotima claims that not just humans but "all the animals"—footed animals and winged animals (Symp. 207a), the weakest and the strongest animals (ibid.), specifically non-human animals (Symp. 207c)—long to give birth in beauty for the sake of attaining the only type of immortality available to mortals, namely reproduction of offspring (Symp. 206c-208b). The philosopher, however, is different from animals and most humans, for he is pregnant in his soul, and he approaches immortality through ascending the ladder of love to attain an intellectual vision of the Form of Beauty itself, which is "unalloyed, pure, and unmixed, not infected with human flesh and coloring and so much other mortal nonsense" (Symp. 210a-212b). Nietzsche disputes this account too, arguing instead that all animals, including the philosophical animal, aim to discover and institute those highest conditions of their lives that conduce to an increase of their feelings of power and the discharging of their strength. This is anything but a rejection of "human flesh" and "mortal nonsense"; it is rather a recognition that mortal humanity is man's highest possible condition. More, it amounts to an *affirmation* of that condition. Indeed, Nietzsche glosses his point by remarking that having attained his "optimal condition," the philosopher "does *not* deny 'existence,' he rather affirms *his* existence . . ." This is in contrast to Diotima's (i.e., Plato's) denial of existence by way of a misguided asceticism that rejects the value of "a face or hands or anything else that partakes of the body" (Symp. 211a), which devalues, in short, the entire physical world for the sake of an illusory metaphysical realm of pure ideas.

Diotima's philosopher aims to generate arguments (*logôn*) about virtue (Symp. 209b), and to acquire learning (*mathêma*) about, and knowledge (*gnôti*) of, the Beautiful (Symp. 211c-d) by ascending the ladder of love through the exercise of pure unaided reason. Nietzsche's philosopher, on the other hand, is guided by natural instinct, which is "higher than all reason." Thus, whereas Plato distinguishes the philosopher from the other animals who desire the good by attributing to him alone the superior aim of transcending his animal-physical condition into rational knowledge of, and

perhaps the unification of his rational element with, an incorporeal metaphysical realm,¹⁴ Nietzsche assimilates the philosophical animal to all the other animals by attributing to him a corporeal end attained through animal instinct.

Moving on now from Nietzsche's engagement with the *Symposium* in GM 3.7, we find that in the first part of section eight he turns to Socrates's second speech in the *Phaedrus*—delivered as an act of purification (Phdr. 243a), a theme which calls the *Phaedo* to mind¹⁵—before returning to the *Symposium* and the theme of spiritual pregnancy. Continuing his account of the object of the philosophical animal's striving, Nietzsche writes that the philosopher seeks "the air of the heights through which all animal being becomes more spiritual and acquires wings." The philosopher's asceticism, he adds, is of the cheerful variety "of an animal become fledged and divine . . ." Note the emphasis on acquiring wings (*Flügel bekommt, flügge geworden*), which is central to Socrates's account of the soul of the philosopher in the *Phaedrus* (e.g., Phdr. 246b-e; 248e-249d; 251b; 256a-e). Note also the use of "spiritual" and "divine," these terms recalling the *Phaedrus*, according to which the winged soul, more than anything that pertains to the body, has a share in divinity (Phdr. 246d). Yet Nietzsche's divinely spiritual winged animal does not aspire to gaze from the rim of heaven upon the immaterial really existing beings that inhabit the metaphysical realm beyond (Phdr. 247c-d). Rather, he seeks the freedom from distractions, the clarity of mind and high spirits, the physiological calm, and the burgeoning insight required by the thinker and writer who would accomplish his intellectual-creative task.

Recall Nietzsche's contradicting the claim of the *Symposium* by insisting that the philosopher seeks the "path to [his] optimum," *not* happiness. Similarly, in this section alluding to the *Phaedrus*, he insists that the poverty, humility, and chastity that philosophers often employ to attain the "conditions of their best existence, their *fairest* fruitfulness" are *not* virtues. In the *Phaedrus*, philosophical lovers resist the lure of sexuality by obeying the superior elements of their minds and liberating that part of the soul that is the source of virtue, and in doing so, they lead happy lives and acquire wings after death (Phdr. 256a-b). It is no easy task, and Plato allegorizes the effort required as a charioteer struggling against a brutish winged horse that lusts after sexual pleasures (Phdr. 254a), yanking violently on the horse's bit to check his prideful passion (*hubris*) (Phdr. 254e). For Nietzsche, there is no such superior part of the mind, not anyway in the sense of an original source of rational insight into true virtue. The Nietzschean philosopher comes to his fairest fruitfulness and attains his winged state by following his "dominating instinct," which, like Plato's charioteer, but without the suggestion of rationality, must "put a check on an unrestrained and irritable pride or a wanton sensuality."

I have quoted just above Nietzsche's reference to the philosopher's "fruitfulness" (*Fruchtbarkeit*), which we might also translate as "fertility." And this brings us back to Nietzsche's engagement with the *Symposium*. Recall

that Diotima claims that everyone is pregnant, in body and soul alike (Symp. 206c), though some are more pregnant in soul than in body (Symp. 208e-209a). These, she says, are the philosophers, men who desire to give birth to practical wisdom (*phronêsis*) and the rest of virtue, and who, when in the company of a beautiful partner, finally deliver the ideas with which they had been pregnant for so long. She also claims that ideas about virtue, and virtuous deeds, are the best sort of offspring, for they are more beautiful and more immortal than human children (Symp. 208e-209c). Nietzsche's philosopher has his "periods of great pregnancy" too, as well as his "states of great spiritual tension and preparation," which he nurtures with his "maternal instinct." He, too, has something "growing in him" that will secure his "little immortality" more surely than would any human "children." But in the womb of his mind there are no thoughts of Platonic virtue. The Nietzschean philosopher, like every great artist, carries within him an "evolving work," and, who knows, it may even have to do with "the ordering and regulation of city-states and pre-urban dwellings" (Symp. 209a), like the first essay of Nietzsche's own *Genealogy*. If so, however, its account of "moderation and justice" (ibid.) will read like a subversion of the Platonic account.

That in GM 3.7-8 Nietzsche intends to reimagine and rewrite Plato's account of the philosopher in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* is demonstrated by the similarities of structure, theme, and vocabulary, as laid out above. In sum, for Plato the love of the beautiful leads the philosophers among animals and rational humans to transcend the sexual impulses of the body, ascend on the wings of the soul to a vision of true Beauty and real being, and give birth to virtue, which results in happiness in this life and immortality in the afterlife. For Nietzsche, on the other hand, the love of beauty does not overcome sensuality, nor is it the philosophical animal's business to transcend his physicality. Rather, his spiritual pregnancy is induced and nurtured by instinct, which leads the philosopher to adopt the physical conditions of his optimum of strength, and thus "floating above life" on the wings of his smoothly functioning body and cheerful mood, he gives birth to his naturalist anti-Platonic ideas as written in his books, through which his name survives and he acquires a philosopher's and artist's form of immortality. The subversive similarities are unmistakable. That Nietzsche conceals his intentions by diverting his readers' attention from Plato to Schopenhauer and the Buddha is consistent with his description of the *Genealogy* in *Ecce Homo* as "uncannier than anything else written so far" in "expression, intention, and the art of surprise," and in places even "calculated to mislead" (EH "Books" GM).

VI. Rewriting Socrates's Last Words Again

Nietzsche wrote several short books the year after he published his *Genealogy*. In one of these works, *Twilight of the Idols*, he returns quite explicitly to the subject of the dying Socrates as portrayed by Plato in the *Phaedo*, and

specifically to the implications of Socrates's last words. As he had done in *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche rewrites these words to express his own imaginative interpretation of their meaning and significance, but in the interval he had developed a new and deeper account of Socrates's "disease." Introducing his primary theme in the first section of the chapter entitled "The Problem of Socrates," Nietzsche writes that as Socrates died he said, "To live—that means to be sick a long time: I owe Asclepius the Savior a rooster" (TI "Socrates" 1). In the final section of this same chapter, returning to an idea he had proposed in *The Birth of Tragedy*, namely that Socrates wanted to die, Nietzsche rewrites Socrates's last words yet again. Now, however, there is no indication that Socrates willed his own death for the sake of martyrdom to his cause of theoretical optimism, hoping by the shock of his execution to convert even more young Greeks to his way of thinking than he had already done while alive. Rather, Socrates wanted to die because he understood the fact of his sickness and longed at last to be rid of it. Nietzsche makes his point by attributing to Socrates the following revealing declaration: "Socrates is no physician; here death alone is the physician. Socrates himself has merely been sick a long time" (TI "Socrates" 12).

Nietzsche has a word for Socrates's sickness: decadence. In general terms, decadence indicates a "decline" and "degeneration" of the human animal, and one indication that Socrates was a declining type is the fact that he saw "a problem in the value of life" (TI "Socrates" 2). Value judgments for or against life, Nietzsche explains, "can . . . never be true." They certainly can never be known to be true. But they may serve as symptoms of the physiological and psychological health of those who issue them. A man, after all, is a living organism. Therefore, his condemnation of life amounts to a self-condemnation. But what sort of creature condemns itself? A *suffering* creature, a *sick* creature, which is to say, a *decadent* creature.¹⁶

Nietzsche relates an ancient story according to which a physiognomist who visited Athens diagnosed Socrates as full of "bad vices and appetites," to which Socrates replied, "You know me, sir!" (TI "Socrates" 4).¹⁷ Nietzsche's gloss on this exchange is that Socrates suffered from an "anarchy of the instincts," which he regards as a symptom of decadence (TI "Socrates" 5). "To *have* to fight the instincts," he says, "is the formula of decadence" (TI "Socrates" 11). Socrates did have to fight his instincts, and his chosen method of resistance amounts for Nietzsche to yet another expression of his decadence. Socrates struggled to impose order on his instincts through insight into virtue arrived at by dialectic, the search for reasons and proofs in opposition to instinct and authority (TI "Socrates" 4-5), and he struggled in this way because he suffered from a "hypertrophy of the logical faculty" (TI "Socrates" 4). Socrates's exaggerated faith in reason, his inflated sense of the value of logic, is as decadent as his anarchic instincts. Then there is the "equation" he hit upon as a formulation of the rational cure of his self-diagnosed illness, "reason = virtue = happiness." As "opposed to all the instincts of the earlier Greeks" (TI "Socrates" 4), this

characteristically Socratic equation is sufficient in Nietzsche's mind to justify his claim that Socrates was "pseudo-Greek, anti-Greek" (TI "Socrates" 2).¹⁸ Nietzsche reminds his readers that he first identified Socrates (and Plato) in these terms in *The Birth of Tragedy*, and, indeed, his analysis in *Twilight of the Idols* recalls elements of his earlier account. In section thirteen of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche refers to the "hypertrophy" of Socrates's "logical nature," and in the following section he condemns the optimistic Socratic maxims "Virtue is knowledge; man sins only from ignorance; he who is virtuous is happy," in which we can easily read the equation "reason = virtue = happiness."

From the beginning to the end of his career, Nietzsche blames Socrates (and Plato) for the demise of the best period of Greek culture. The terms of his analysis shift somewhat, as for example from "Socrates as Alexandrian theoretical man" to "Socrates as decadent"; but the substance remains the same. The hyper-rationalist, moralizing, anti-natural, life-denying perspective of Socratic philosophy, inherited and radicalized by Plato, overwhelmed the tragic orientation of earlier Greek philosophy and cult, leading ultimately to their replacement by a naively optimistic dialectical philosophy and the otherworldly religious orientation of Christianity. Plato's portrait of the dying Socrates in the *Phaedo* is the central node from which these two dead-end avenues branch, the locus of all those "anti-Greek" forces that brought the tragic age of the Greeks to an end. Hence Nietzsche's proclivity periodically to reignite the struggle against *Phaedo*-Platonism: he recognized this doctrine as the mightiest foe on the field on which the battle for the soul of the philosopher, and indeed for western culture in general, has been, and must continue to be, waged.

VII. Philosophical Purification Naturalized

I have raised doubts about whether Nietzsche really was always fighting with Socrates, suggesting that from the beginning his dispute was with Plato and Plato's portrait of Socrates every bit as much as with the historical Socrates, if not in fact more. Nietzsche eventually seems to have had glimpses of this fact himself. In a postcard sent to a friend not long after he completed work on the *Genealogy*, he speculated that "perhaps this old Plato is my true great adversary?"¹⁹ I have argued that this is at least partially the case with respect to Nietzsche's analysis of the dying Socrates in *The Birth of Tragedy*, and certainly the case in the seventh and eighth sections of the Third Essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Given that we have no way of knowing whether Socrates's enigmatic last words were actually spoken by the man himself or fabricated and put into the character's mouth by Plato, it may well be true also of his analyses of Socrates's debt to Asclepius in *The Gay Science* and *Twilight of the Idols*. And to come to the final example of Nietzsche's reimagining and rewriting of Plato's texts, it seems to me that Nietzsche is engaging with Plato, and specifically, once again, with Plato's portrait of the

ideal philosopher in the *Phaedo*, in *Ecce Homo*, particularly in the chapter "Why I Am So Clever."

Nietzsche wrote *Ecce Homo* to explain himself to his readers, to say, as he put it, "*who I am*" (EH "Preface" 1). It may well be that in every one of his works Nietzsche writes above all about himself, and more specifically about his life and activities as a philosopher. But *Ecce Homo* is the one book that he dedicated explicitly to this task. Similarly, in the *Phaedo*, Socrates is moved to offer a "defense" of his calmness in the face of his impending death (Phd. 63b, 63e-64a), which amounts to a defense of his life and activities as a philosopher. His defense begins with his famous assertion that "those who engage philosophy correctly . . . practice nothing other than dying and being dead" (Phd. 64a; cf. 67e), which practice he sums up with the word "purification." As we have seen, philosophical purification involves the philosopher's purging himself of concern with, and dependence on, the physical body in order to identify as closely as possible with the incorporeal soul. Since death is the literal separation of the soul from the body (Phd. 64c, 67d), and purification is the practice of approaching this state as nearly as possible while alive (Phd. 67c-d), the philosopher engaged in purification is always training for death. He should, therefore, not only *not* grieve, but he should be *happy* when confronted with the prospect of actually entering the state that he has been approximating throughout his life as a philosopher.

In *Ecce Homo*'s "Why I Am So Clever," Nietzsche reimagines the philosophical purification characteristic of *Phaedo*-Platonism through his descriptions of his own practice of philosophical self-discipline. It would not be misleading, and in fact I shall argue that it is quite appropriate, to regard EH "Clever" as Nietzsche's account of a *naturalized version of Platonic purification*. To summarize the matter for now in a general way, whereas Plato in the *Phaedo* concentrates on the separation of the soul from the body in radically ascetic terms, presenting the body in particular as an impediment to the philosophical life (Phd. 66c-e), Nietzsche in EH "Clever" attributes every success of his philosophical pursuits to physical states and conditions. The loving detail with which he describes his own activities is everywhere on the surface of his account and is therefore impossible to miss. But since his allusions to Plato are as suppressed as those in GM 3.7-8, one must read closely to detect them.

As Nietzsche writes of Schopenhauer and the Buddha more than of Plato in GM 3.7-8, so in EH "Clever" he writes about Christianity and "idealism" without mentioning Plato at all. Of course, he is concerned to undermine the influence of Christianity, but we need not take this to imply that Plato is not on his mind. In the chapter "What I Owe to the Ancients" from *Twilight of the Idols* (written within weeks of *Ecce Homo*), Nietzsche calls Plato "pre-existent Christian" and labels Plato's philosophy "idealism" (TI "Ancients" 2). Moreover, the contrast between the "true world" and the "apparent world" that he condemns in the second section of the preface to *Ecce Homo* derives more evidently from Platonic philosophy than from

Christian theology.²⁰ That Nietzsche is thinking of Plato is suggested also by the fact that in EH “Clever” he employs terms and ideas that recall GM 3.7–8, which, I have argued, alludes to Plato throughout. For example, the question he poses in section one concerning the best method “to attain your maximum of strength” recalls his account in GM 3.7 of the philosophical animal’s striving for “an optimum of favorable conditions under which it can expend all its strength and achieve its maximal feeling of power,” which I have quoted above, and which I have shown to be replete with allusions to Plato. His mention of “spiritual pregnancy” in section three not only echoes his discussion of this phenomenon in GM 3.8, but it is in itself an unmistakable allusion to Plato’s *Symposium*. And finally, his description of himself in section nine as one who never sought honors, women, or money is a restatement of his description of the philosopher in GM 3.8 as one who avoids “fame, princes, and women,” in which he situates his anti-Platonic discussion of spiritual pregnancy. These facts alone suggest that Nietzsche intends to allude to Plato throughout EH “Clever,” despite his withholding his name. That he is also specifically concerned with the *Phaedo*, and even more specifically with the philosophical purification at the core of *Phaedo*-Platonism, is suggested by the following facts.

Nietzsche begins *Ecce Homo*, in “Why I Am So Wise,” by playing with the oppositional states of life and death, as Plato does throughout the *Phaedo*.²¹ The very first claim he makes about himself is that he is dead (as his father), while at the same time living (as his mother) (EH “Wise” 1). Later, he says that he is “merely my father once more,” for he is his father’s “continued life after an all-too-early death” (EH “Wise” 5). Given this extraordinary condition, Nietzsche is “a decadent” (EH “Wise” 1–2), but he is simultaneously “the opposite,” namely, “healthy” (EH “Wise” 2). Indeed, this “dual series” of opposite states and experiences is “repeated in [his] nature in every respect” (EH “Wise” 3).

Nietzsche’s point in stressing his experience of constantly cycling through these various series of opposite states, beginning with the opposition of life and death, is that he has *learned from them*. His experience of being both alive and dead has provided him “freedom from all partiality in relation to the total problem of life,” also “a dialectician’s clarity *par excellence*,” and, most importantly, “the know-how . . . to *reverse perspectives*,” which prepares him for the world-historical task of a revaluation of values (EH “Wise” 1).

All of this is very Platonic, but with a subversive twist. Platonic purification is training for dying and being dead through a living imitation of death, which separates the soul from the body to the extent this is possible for one still alive, precisely in order to attain knowledge (or to prepare one to acquire knowledge in the post-mortem state). Nietzsche stresses being dead while alive, which enables him to separate from the perspective of the healthy man to look toward the opposite perspective and thereby to acquire insight into life, and in this way to develop his philosophy. The structural

similarities between the purification characteristic of *Phaedo*-Platonism and Nietzsche’s self-conception are striking, but the subversive differences are striking as well. Unlike Socrates in the *Phaedo*, Nietzsche does not look forward to his actual death (much less *will* it, as we have seen him insist that Socrates willed his own death). To the contrary, he developed his philosophy from his “will to health, to *life*” (EH “Wise” 2). His aim is not to separate his soul from his body, for of course he does not believe in a soul that can exist independently of the body. His “training” (EH “Wise” 1) is not the training for death of spiritual purification, with its constant ranking of the soul over the body; it is rather a matter of physical, bodily, health, and thus a training and experience in the best practices of physiology (EH “Wise” 2, 6).

In contrast to the life-denial of *Phaedo*-Platonism, exemplified by Plato’s version of Socrates’s last words, Nietzsche’s philosophy amounts in sum to “the great Yes to life” (EH “Wise” 3). He concludes EH “Clever” by contrasting himself with “the men who have so far been honored as the *first*,” men, he says, who “are monsters of sickness and vengeful instincts . . . and revenge themselves on life” (EH “Clever” 10). These are the very terms in which Nietzsche is accustomed to characterize Socrates, as we have seen.²² And when in this same chapter he denounces the harmful lies of the concepts “God,” “soul,” “virtue,” “sin,” “beyond,” “truth,” and “eternal life,” he obviously has Plato in mind (among these concepts, only “sin” has a ring more distinctively Christian than Platonic). Indeed, Plato—and more specifically the philosophical purification at the heart of *Phaedo*-Platonism—is on his mind throughout this chapter.²³

In EH “Clever” 9, Nietzsche discusses his famous exhortation, derived ultimately from Pindar, to *become what you are*. Surprisingly, however, he insists that to attain this end “one must not have the faintest notion *what one is*” (EH “Clever” 9). Indeed, one must make a point of keeping the dominant task of one’s life clear of the “whole surface of consciousness,” pushing it instead “deep down,” into what today we would call the subconscious (*ibid.*). Thus, submerged in the depths, beyond the reach of reason, one’s great “organizing ‘idea’” is worked on by, and begins to operate as, “instinct.” Note the thoroughly anti-Platonic implications of this program, which we may sum up in the maxim, “Do *not* know thyself.”²⁴ Whereas purification in the *Phaedo* is centered in the soul, its capacity for reason and its search for knowledge, Nietzsche’s “*self-discipline*” operates on the purely physiological level of animal instinct and the “self-preservation” of corporeal “fitness.” This not-knowing oneself may lead the man whose highest condition is actualized through “self-preservation” and “selfishness” to wander astray from his path into “neighbor love” and “living for others.” But this would be only a temporary diversion down a “side road,” which would actually function as a “protective measure” operating in the service of “self-concern” and “*self-love*” (EH “Clever” 9).

In EH “Clever” 8, Nietzsche attributes the healthy individual’s inclination toward self-concern to an “instinct of self-defense.” In particular, his

“instinct of self-preservation” manifests most fully in his separating himself from all those situations and conditions of life that might impede the development and expression of his highest personal potencies. He wants “[n]ot to see many things, not to hear many things, not to permit many things to come close.” He wants, in short, “to separate [himself] from anything that would make it necessary to keep saying No.” Here we have the separation characteristic of Platonic purification as reflected in Nietzsche’s anti-Platonic mirror. Rather than separate the soul from his body for the sake of spiritual well-being, Nietzsche would separate his body from the causes and conditions of physiological “impoverishment” and “energy *wasted*.” The end of all this determined self-concern, this “higher-protection” manifested by “instinct,” is the ripening and leaping forth in perfection of that which is growing in the healthy individual loyal to his dominant task (EH “Clever” 9). These allusions to pregnancy bring us back even more unambiguously to Plato.

The content of EH “Clever” 3 connects directly to the theme of separation in section eight and the allusions to gestation and parturition in section nine, the connection being interrupted by an interlude addressing varieties of “recreation” (to which I shall return). In this section, Nietzsche writes that “any kind of stimulus from the outside” must be avoided by one in the state of “profound tension to which pregnancy condemns the spirit.” More, when in the condition of “spiritual pregnancy,” he says, one must employ “a kind of walling oneself in” as an “instinctive precaution.” The “fertility” to which Nietzsche alludes here is the gestational period of his own “work,” which is to say his ideas as recorded in his books, which he discusses one by one in the following chapter. Thus, as in the case of his allusions in the *Genealogy* to spiritual pregnancy in the *Symposium*, Nietzsche suggests in *Ecce Homo* that he gives birth not to insights into, and enactments of, Platonic virtue, but to anti-Platonic, immoralist treatises.

Whether or not Platonic virtue can be summed up in a single concept—wisdom, say, or justice—it is most definitely bound up with the proper ordering of the soul, which in places Plato likens to health (e.g., *Republic* 444c ff). In the famous section on the hatred or mistrust of reason (misology) in the *Phaedo*, he associates a proper attitude of trust in reason and argument (*logos*) to the health of one’s soul (Phd. 90e). Nietzsche, in contrast, is concerned in EH “Clever” with outlining the conditions of the health of his body, with a stress in section two on “physiology” (which is to say, knowledge of *physis*, or nature), as opposed to the Platonic stress on an “idealist” *psychology* (which is concerned with knowledge of *psychê*, or soul). And in an even more radically anti-Platonic fashion, Nietzsche attributes his finally coming “to reason” to his “sickness” (EH “Clever” 2), by which he means those actual physical “torments that go with an uninterrupted three-day migraine, accompanied by laborious vomiting of phlegm” (EH “Wise” 1). Indeed, it was during a “long period of sickness” in and around 1879 that Nietzsche “turned [his] will to health . . . into a philosophy” (EH “Wise” 1).

I have noted that Plato indicates in the *Phaedo* that he was not present for Socrates’s final conversation and death. He puts this information into the mouth of the narrator of the dialogue, Phaedo, who, in the course of supplying the names of all those who were in attendance, reports that “Plato . . . was sick” (Phd. 59b). But this is to say that Plato himself makes a point of informing his readers that he did not witness the events of Socrates’s last day, including any conversation that may have taken place among those who were present. If this is his way of intimating that the long conversation recorded in the *Phaedo* is his own invention, then we may say that from his sickness Plato derived no affirmative will to life, like Nietzsche, but rather the life-denying and radically anti-natural philosophy of *Phaedo-Platonism*.

Nietzsche’s anti-Platonic, naturalized version of Platonic spiritual purification amounts to attending diligently to attitudes and activities that might appear “small things” to the undiscerning eye, “matters of complete indifference.” But these apparently small things, namely, “nutrition, place, climate, recreation, the whole casuistry of selfishness,” are in fact “inconceivably more important” than all the grandiose idealist concepts in which Platonic philosophers (and Platonizing Christian theologians) have traditionally sought the “divinity” of human nature (EH “Clever” 10). “Why I Am So Clever” is in fact dedicated to assessing the value of these minutiae in detail, particularly their contribution to the philosopher’s “animal vigor” (EH “Clever” 2), through which he attains his maximum of strength. Section one focuses on nutrition, section two on place and climate, sections three through seven on recreation, and eight and nine on selfishness as self-defense. Taken together, these practices constitute a naturalized version of purification that upends Platonic purification as a route to metaphysical knowledge and empowers Nietzsche to “know a few things *more*” as a philosopher (EH “Clever” 1). All this is to say that we may read significant stretches of the first two chapters of *Ecce Homo* as Nietzsche’s reimagining and rewriting of one of the central themes of Plato’s *Phaedo*. As we have seen him do with the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* in GM 3.7–8, in *Ecce Homo* Nietzsche borrows elements of the structure and conceptual apparatus of Plato’s text in order to subvert them from the inside to suit his own anti-Platonic perspective.

VIII. Conclusion: Nietzsche Behind Plato’s Mask

I have quoted from the postcard on which Nietzsche identified Plato as his “true great adversary.” Here I add that he followed this observation with the remark, “But how proud I am to have such an adversary!” That he wrote this note within a month of finalizing the text of *On the Genealogy of Morals* is testimony to the fact that despite his references to Christianity throughout (and to the Buddha, too, in the sections I have discussed), his most fundamental concern was with Plato—and *Phaedo-Platonism* in particular. The note suggests as well that he had finally begun to distinguish between Plato, Plato’s character Socrates, and the historical Socrates. From

the beginning of his career he had written of the dying Socrates as if he were writing of the man himself rather than of Plato's creation, and in fact he never really completely abandoned this approach (as is evident from the chapter "The Problem of Socrates" in *Twilight of the Idols*). Yet this note from 1887 suggests that at least on occasion late in his career he remarked and reflected on the distinction. Nor is this note the only suggestion. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, the work that immediately preceded his *Genealogy*, Nietzsche observes that "Plato took the whole Socrates only the way one picks a popular tune and folk song from the streets in order to vary it into the infinite and impossible—namely, into all of his own masks and multiplicities." He suggests, moreover, that "the Platonic Socrates" is nothing other than "Plato in front and Plato behind and Chimaera in the middle" (BGE 190). The expression "Platonic Socrates" is telling, for it implies that Nietzsche recognized that the character one encounters in the dialogues is distinct from the historical original. This is not to say that there is no relation between the two. Of course there is, and Nietzsche implies as much when in this same section of BGE he attributes doctrine to the historical Socrates that we know best by way of the character Socrates who appears in the Platonic dialogues. But more important for our purposes than this distinction between versions of Socrates is the distinction between these versions and Plato. Plato deploys the character Socrates as a mask, Nietzsche says. The suggestion is that in his dialogues Plato intentionally hides himself behind the features of various Socratic ideas, perspectives, modes of argument, and items of conceptual terminology, with the aim of manipulating them in such a way as to communicate his own non-Socratic (though not, admittedly, *anti*-Socratic) philosophy. This is a model for what I have suggested that Nietzsche does with Plato, especially in his later works. At times, he explicitly disagrees with Plato and states the terms of his dispute unequivocally. At other times, however, he employs Platonic terminology and conceptual relationships (as between, for example, sensuality, beauty, spiritual pregnancy, and philosophical insight) for decidedly anti-Platonic ends. Thus, whereas sometimes he outright denounces the terms and characteristic positions of Platonic philosophy, he also sometimes subtly reimagines and rewrites Plato's texts, which subverts them as thoroughly as full-throated denunciation, and, considered as to their rhetorical force, perhaps even more effectively.

In the preface to *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche writes of "Platonism in Europe" as a "monstrous and frightening mask" behind which some great thing stalks the earth. What did Nietzsche think he had detected behind the mask of European Platonism? The "dogmatists' philosophy," he suggests, was "a promise across millennia." But a promise of what? Plato was one such dogmatist. So, again, what exactly is the object, or the content, of the promise lurking behind the mask of dogmatic Platonism? Nietzsche does not say. There is the suggestion implied by his remark that the "fight against Plato . . . has created in Europe a magnificent tension of the spirit the like of which [has] never yet existed on earth." Since Nietzsche admits that he feels

in himself "the whole need of the spirit and the whole tension of the bow," it is not unlikely that he intends to suggest that *he himself*, as "the last disciple and initiate of the god Dionysus" (BGE 295), as friend of Zarathustra (BGE "From High Mountains: AFTERSONG"), and as founder of the most thoroughly anti-Platonic philosophy so far, is the great thing lurking behind the mask of Platonism.²⁵ The suggestion would not be inappropriate, for as Nietzsche is one who "instinctively needs speech for silence and for burial in silence and who is inexhaustible in his evasion of communication," he is one of those "profound spirit[s]" who "needs a mask" (BGE 40). Despite his silence and evasiveness, Nietzsche communicates the spirit of his philosophy most profoundly whenever he dons the Platonic mask from behind which to reimagine, rewrite, and ultimately subvert the life-denying anti-naturalist philosophy of *Phaedo*-Platonism.

Notes

1. See, for example, his account of "good" and "evil" throughout the "First Essay" of GM.
2. He mocks the Englishman's striving for happiness in TI "Maxims" 12.
3. He attributes Kant's distinction between "a 'true' and an 'apparent' world" to his being "an underhanded Christian" in TI "Reason" 6.
4. Nietzsche mostly likely learned of this rhetorical technique of linguistic subversion from Thucydides, who analyzed the phenomenon in his history of the Peloponnesian War. (That he was familiar with the relevant section is evident from his reference in WS 31 to Thucydides's account of the civil war on Corcyra, at the conclusion of which the historian shares his observations on linguistic subversion.) In a famous passage describing the behavior of men during periods of *stasis* (civil war or revolution), Thucydides remarks that in such circumstances, men regularly "changed the value of words with respect to deeds," and he provides as examples their revaluing the relations between "unreasoning recklessness" and "loyal courage" or "cautious delay" and "masked cowardice" (3.82.3–4). (For my translation, particularly the expression "value of words," I rely in part on John T. Hogan, "The ἀξίωσις of Words at Thucydides 3.82.4," *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 21 (1980), 139–149. I intentionally apply a specifically Nietzschean spin to arrive at the translation "value." Translations from the Greek throughout this essay are my own.)
5. Nietzsche labels the thought that causal explanations generate knowledge "a profound *illusion*" (BT 15). For Schopenhauer's argument, see in particular *The World as Will and Representation*, Book 1, sections 4–7, and Book 2, sections 24–27.
6. Herman Siemens has written that in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche "revises the *Phaedo*." See "The first Transvaluation of all Values: Nietzsche's *Agon* with Socrates in *The Birth of Tragedy*," in *Nietzsche and Ethics*, Gudrun von Tevenar, ed. (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), 171–196. There is nothing objectionable in the image of *revision*, but I prefer *reimagining* and *rewriting* because, to my ear, they have a more appropriately radical ring.
7. Daniel Breazzeale, ed. and tr., *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the Early 1870s* (Amherst: Humanity Books, 1990), 127. The note is from 1875.
8. By the time he completed *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche had taught the *Phaedo* at least four times. He taught the work primarily to Pädagogium students, so

the focus most likely was more on grammar than deep philosophical issues. But as anyone who has taught a text repeatedly to young students well knows, one learns much more about the work, and thinks more deeply about it, than one shares in class. The close reading of a text required in order to teach it well, even at an introductory level, is an ideal preparation for writing about it with subtlety and in detail. Nietzsche taught the *Phaedo* at least two more times before he retired. (I write “at least” because, apart from teaching the *Phaedo* specifically, Nietzsche taught general courses on the dialogues, in which he may or may not have attended particularly to the *Phaedo*).

9. Since Nietzsche’s subversion of Plato’s account of the nature of philosophy and the ideal philosopher is a central theme of this essay, one might expect some treatment of the *Republic* and its famous figure of the philosopher-king. I omit the *Republic* because there is no evidence that Nietzsche was particularly interested in the dialogue. As I have noted in the body of this essay, the *Republic* differs from *Phaedo*-Platonism in (among other things) acknowledging the value of the body to at least some extent. This not to deny that recognizable elements of *Phaedo*-Platonism appear in the *Republic* (the central metaphysical sections are obviously at least compatible with *Phaedo*-Platonism).
10. KSA 7:7[156]. The note was written sometime between the end of 1870 and April of 1871.
11. For indications that Nietzsche may also have noted Socrates’s last act, which is more obscure even than his last words, see Mark Anderson, *Plato and Nietzsche: Their Philosophical Art* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 133–138; hereafter PN.
12. Paul Loeb has revealed in great detail the many traces of the *Phaedo* in Nietzsche’s presentation of his doctrine of the Eternal Return in *The Gay Science*, as well as his extending and reinforcing these traces in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. See Paul Loeb’s, *The Death of Nietzsche’s Zarathustra* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 32–84.
13. Sections nine and ten concern the philosopher as well, but specifically in the context of the origin of philosophy, not of the nature of the philosopher in general.
14. That humans alone possess a distinctively rational element, *logismos*, is clear from *Symp.* 207b-c. That humans alone can attain knowledge of, and, perhaps, unify with the metaphysical, is evident from the terms of Diotima’s account of the ladder of love.
15. Also reminiscent of the *Phaedo* is the association between purification and Socrates covering and uncovering his head (*Phdr.* 237a, 243a-b). See the reference in note 11 above on Socrates’s last act.
16. For this line of reasoning, I rely on section 15 of *The Antichrist*.
17. Although Nietzsche does not make the connection, this exchange recalls Socrates wondering in the *Phaedrus* whether he is “some monster . . . more tangled and inflamed than Typhon” (*Phdr.* 230a).
18. I overlook the social-political element in Nietzsche’s analysis of Socrates’s decadence because (a) it has little relation to those other parts of his work that I discuss in this essay, and (b) it strikes me as misguided, as I have attempted to demonstrate in my “Socrates as Hoplite,” *Ancient Philosophy* 25 (2005), 273–289.
19. Postcard to Paul Deussen, 16 November 1887 (KGB 954).
20. Similarly, in TI “True World,” the Christian version of this distinction is merely a development of the original Platonic version.
21. See in particular Plato’s “argument from opposites” to the effect that the soul is immortal (*Phd.* 70c-72d).
22. See in particular TI “Socrates” 1.
23. Having begun my analysis in this paragraph with EH “Clever” 10, in what follows I work systematically through the other sections of this chapter in reverse order.

24. In GS 335, which concludes with the cry, “We . . . want to *become those we are*,” Nietzsche writes that “the maxim ‘Know thyself!’ addressed to human beings by a god, is almost malicious.”
25. That Nietzsche has himself in mind in the Preface of BGE is not a novel insight, yet there is no agreement among scholars concerning the specific implications of his references and allusions to himself. For the most recent example of an attempt to address the matter, an attempt which, like others before it, has failed to generate scholarly agreement, see Maudemarie Clark and David Dudrick, *The Soul of Nietzsche’s Beyond Good and Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

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