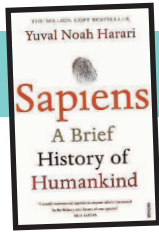




Books

Brian J. Collins critiques Yuval Noah Harari's ethical and political incoherence, while Brad Rappaport meditates on a humanist reading of the Hebrew Bible. For Classics, Rose Thompson relates a redeeming myth by Friedrich Nietzsche.



Sapiens by Yuval Noah Harari

THE FOUNDATIONAL principles of representative democracy are under attack globally. In the US

we are still dealing with the fallout from the Trump administration and the blatantly anti-democratic sentiments that were manifested in the January 6 Capitol attack. Globally, there are many further examples of democratic systems under stress, but there are also many more implicit and less extreme examples that demonstrate people's distrust and antagonism towards democracy right now. When these sentiments crystalize into politically influential actions the pendulum swings towards stunningly fascistic and dictatorial policies and governments. Regardless of where each of us sits on the political spectrum, *nobody* wants to be governed by a dictator that they disagree with, but that's always the danger with dictatorships. Given this broadly-shared opposition to authoritarian politics, then, we should be able to agree that we need to rein in the current anti-democratic enchantment. What we desperately need are enlightened and persuasive public intellectuals who can help us see through the fog of our fear, anger, and disillusionment, to find our rational political commitments again.

One of these public intellectuals is undoubtedly Yuval Noah Harari, the best-selling author of three recent books – *Sapiens*, *Homo Deus*, and *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*. Harari is also a frequent contributor in the popular press, and a guest on shows, podcasts,

panels, and as a keynote speaker. Add to all this that Harari is acting on his lofty academic ideals through 'Sapienship', a multidisciplinary organization he cofounded that advocates for global responsibility, clarifies the global conversation, and focuses attention on the most important global challenges.

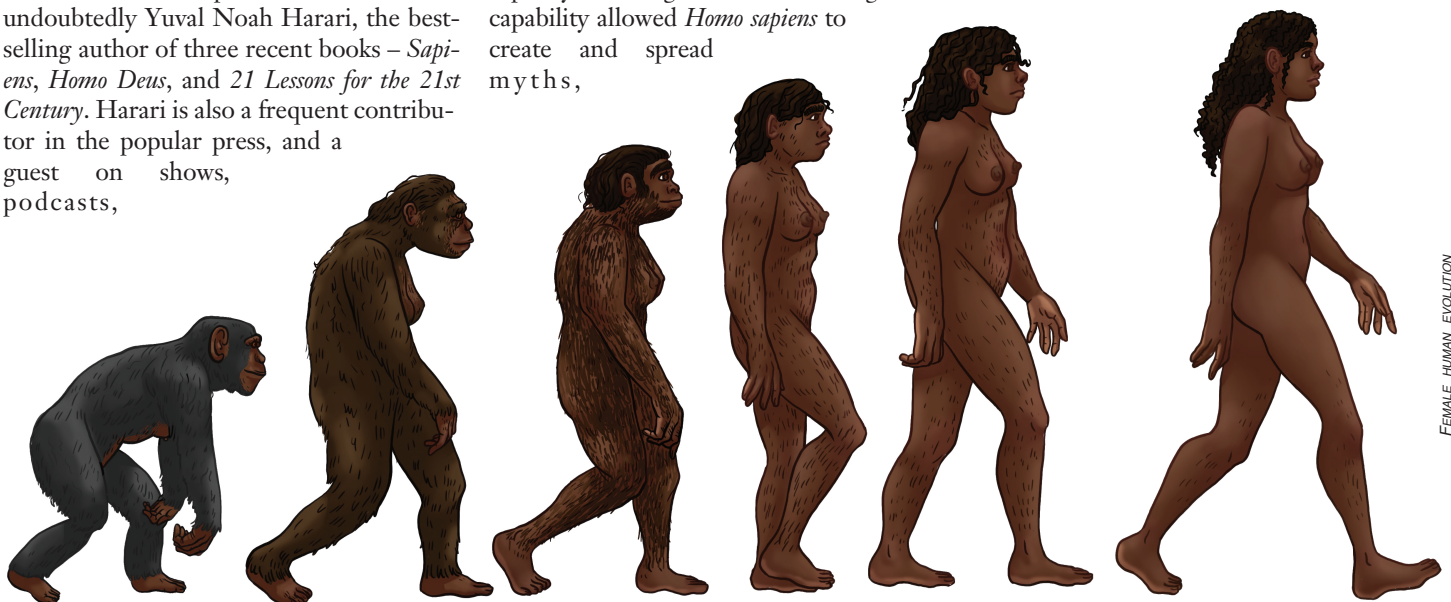
I single out Harari because I presume many *Philosophy Now* readers will be familiar with his work. He is certainly one of the fastest rising stars of public intellectualism. Unfortunately, his work is undercut by the philosophical positions he put forth in his first bestselling book, *Sapiens*. In this review I wish to show that in order for Harari to advance a coherent political or ideological argument, he must first shore up his philosophical commitments.

Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind (2011) has sold over twenty million copies (and counting), and has been translated into over sixty-five languages. In it Harari offers a history of humanity that includes at least six different species of humans (*Homo*), and offers a theory for why *Homo sapiens* ultimately survived while the other species did not. Ultimately, Harari agrees with the general scholarly consensus that *Homo sapiens* thrived because of their advanced cognitive abilities. However, he argues that the real advantage to our mental superiority was our capacity for imagination. This imaginative capability allowed *Homo sapiens* to create and spread myths,

which opened the door for large-scale cooperation: we were able to form larger communities based on commonly accepted fictions. This large-scale communal cooperation allowed for increasing geographical, ecological, and species domination. Harari argues that the imagined stories making this domination possible are our religions, our political and legal institutions, our economic systems, and our ethical codes. He believes that it was these sort of common myths that allowed for the agricultural revolution, the continual expansion of civilizations and cities, and the scientific revolution. Ultimately, they still hold our loose global society together today. In summarizing his position Harari writes:

“Any large-scale human cooperation – whether a modern state, a medieval church, an ancient city or an archaic tribe – is rooted in common myths that exist only in people's collective imagination. Churches are rooted in common religious myths... States are rooted in common national myths... Judicial systems are rooted in common legal myths... Yet none of these things exists outside the stories that people invent and tell one another. There are no gods in the universe, no nations, no money, no human rights, no laws, and no justice outside the common imagination of human beings.”

(*Sapiens*, p 27-28, emphasis added)



Harari on his website claims then that all these advanced social institutions are merely imaginary constructs: “*Homo sapiens* rules the world because it is the only animal that can believe in things that exist purely in its own imagination, such as gods, states, money and human rights.” But Harari is making extreme philosophical claims here without supporting them with adequate arguments. This is more than a philosophical *faux pas*, it ultimately undermines his ability to respond to anti-democratic attacks.

Harari is not opposed to philosophy, in fact, he has said that philosophy is now more important than ever (*Experts on Experts: Armchair Expert No. 45, Yuval Noah Harari*, D. Shepard & M. Padman, Hosts, Oct 4, 2018). He even describes himself as a ‘historian and philosopher’ on his website. His brilliance is obvious, his position as one of today’s leading public intellectuals is well deserved, and I am delighted that he sees himself as a philosopher and recognizes philosophy’s importance. However, to make progress in the betterment of society, the underlying philosophy needs to be done well. Specifically, Harari’s political views need to work in concert with his philosophical commitments. To achieve this consistency, Harari needs to first recognize that his philosophical position in *Sapiens* (and in *Homo Deus*) is undermining his overall work. His contention that ethical codes, political systems, and legal systems, are all merely ‘myths and stories’ misses some important conceptual distinctions and ultimately undercuts any prescriptions he makes about how we should be acting and organizing our society and our political and legal policies.

Problematic Relativism

As a public intellectual, Harari has been quite outspoken about some of the possible dangers of humanity’s relationship with technology, and some specific societal problems, including political corruption, wealth inequality, dictatorial data ownership, immigration, and what ‘freedom’ and ‘nationalism’ really mean. These are all important topics in the battle against anti-democratic sentiments, but Harari needs a solid philosophical foundation in order to support his claims. This is where his previous work betrays his current endeavors.

As I said, in *Sapiens*, Harari contends that all theories of ethics and social/moral codes are merely stories and myths, including the contemporary ethical framework of human rights. As he writes, “human rights are all

figments of our fertile imaginations” (p.32). But he doesn’t stop there: he extends this claim by saying that the same holds for *all* social and political principles. From the Code of Hammurabi (c.1776 BC) to the American Declaration of Independence (1776 AD), and for all other social and political orders, Harari believes that these are myths, and that we form social norms and order through communal acceptance of these myths. For instance, concerning the political principles underlying the US political and legal system, he says: “the American Declaration of Independence claim[s] to outline universal and eternal principles of justice... Yet the only place where such universal principles exist is in the fertile imagination of *Sapiens*, and in the myths they invent and tell one another. These principles have no objective validity” (p.108). In saying this sort of thing, Harari is claiming that there can be no definitive method for deciding (say) between Hammurabi’s code and the principles put forth in the US Declaration, or any other conception of morality.

This ethical and political position is called ‘relativism’ – the view that ethical and political principles are simply conventions which can only be evaluated relative to the context giving rise to them. For ethical relativists, claims about right and wrong and how we should or shouldn’t organize a society are completely dependent on a framework for assessing the claim. Two common frameworks that relativists use are, the cultural norms and beliefs

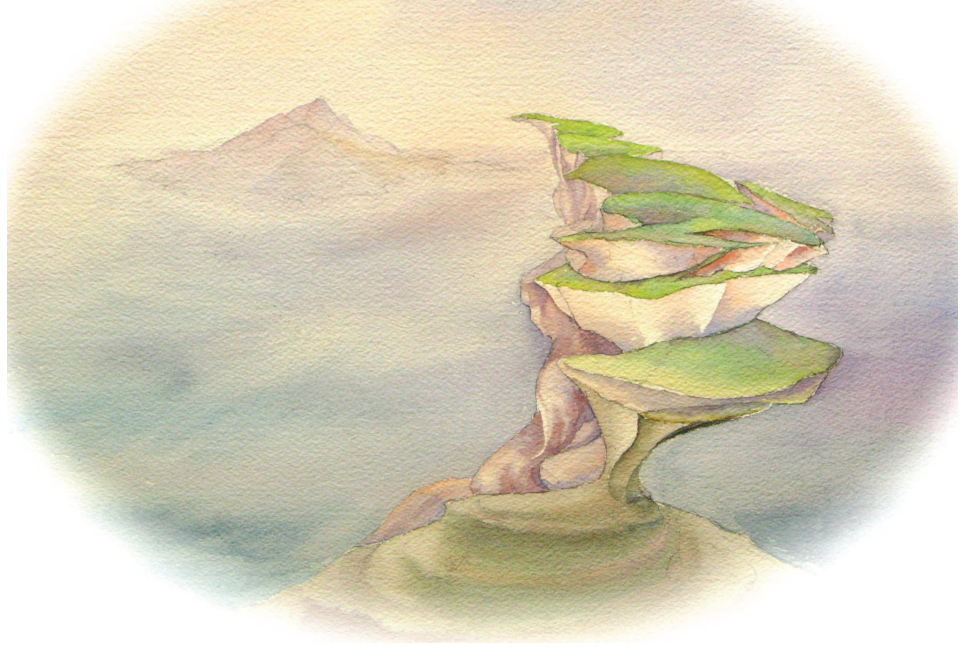
within which a claim is made (this is called ‘cultural relativism’), or an individual’s standards and beliefs (‘individual relativism’). According to cultural relativism, there is no culturally independent way of even analyzing a question about how things should be. For example, the cultural relativist might say that we can’t determine if it’s right or wrong to establish a certain political system in a society until we know what its cultural norms and beliefs are. Or as another example, the individual relativist would say that we can’t determine if it’s right or wrong to steal until we examine an individual’s own standards and beliefs concerning stealing. If the individual thinks it is okay to steal, then it is okay, *for them*; and if the individual thinks it is not okay to steal, then it isn’t, *for them*.

These might seem like enlightened and open-minded positions at first, as they appear to allow a nonjudgmental live-and-let-live approach to a diversity of cultural norms. But upon closer inspection, one will realize that if this view is accepted then we lose the capacity to substantially criticize or defend any and all policies and subsequent actions, as no system of ethics is better than any other.

Descriptive vs. Normative

People do often operate psychologically in ways that relativism suggests. If we think something is okay then we feel free to do it, and if we don’t think something is okay then we refrain. However, the relativist is not

**High Road
to Nowhere**
by Paul Gregory



simply describing how humans make decisions. They are making the much stronger claim that this is how *we should* make decisions – in such a way as we can't decide between competing ethical claims, such as concerning how we should treat immigrants, or over FGM.

In ethics and political philosophy we often make this distinction between *descriptive* and *normative* claims – between claims of how things *are*, and how things *should be*. But this is something that Harari seems to completely miss. Harari seems to believe that he is always making descriptive claims – simply describing 'how things are' – and not making the bigger claim about how things should be. However, once one is familiar with the descriptive/normative distinction, it is easy to see that Harari is often making normative claims about how things should be, and not simply describing how things are. When he speaks out against radical nationalism or against the absolute power of tech companies and governments to control our data, he is making ethical claims – claims about how things ought to be; about what we ought to do and believe; and about how our political and legal policies should be in line with these facts. However, if ethical and political principles are merely myths and stories we tell one another, as he contends in *Sapiens*, then there is no more ultimate reason to accept his arguments against radical nationalism than to accept the opposing position that favors radical nationalism. If ethical and political principles are merely myths, then neither position is objectively superior because there is no objective truth to either – it's just a question of what we want to believe and accept. This type of radical relativism is extremely dangerous, because once you accept it you can't substantively criticize *any* ethical, political, legal, or economic positions, principles, or theories, no matter how absurd, contradictory, or morally repugnant they might seem. If all of them are 'mere myths' and simply 'figments/features of our imagination', then there is no way to say one system is atrocious and others better.

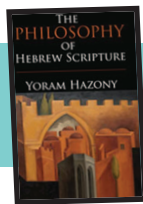
My criticism is not that Harari is making normative claims. It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, for people dealing with the wide sweep of human history, as Harari does, to restrict themselves from discussing how they think things should be. In fact, descriptive and normative judgements both seem to be an essential part of human experience: noticing how things appear to be *and* thinking about, and making judgments

about, how things should be. Indeed, well-defended democratic and humanitarian normative claims are exactly what we need in the intellectual battle against radical nationalism and authoritarianism. My criticism is that Harari apparently doesn't recognize that he is making normative claims, and non-relativistically too. He's put himself in the position of defending ethical relativism in his books, then operating as a public intellectual by making non-relativistic claims. As a self-proclaimed 'philosopher', he needs to do better.

© BRIAN J. COLLINS 2023

Brian J. Collins is Associate Professor & Chair of Philosophy at California Lutheran University as well as the Founder & Director of the SoCal Philosophy Academy.

• *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind, Yuval Noah Harari, Harvill Secker, 2011, £9.95 pb, 456 pages, ISBN: 978-1846558238*



The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture by Yoram Hazony

YORAM HAZONY IS A political philosopher, and *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture* is written with a political aim, namely to introduce Hebrew Scripture into the university environment as a work of reason on a par with any Greek philosophical text. Hazony states this explicitly, and proffers his book as a how-to guide for those who might wish to do so. It is written in an accessible style, deliberately tailored for a Christian as well as a Jewish audience, and is far more interesting than any agenda-driven work has a right to be.

The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture aims to set aside the dichotomy between reason and revelation in terms of which, Hazony claims, Hebrew Scripture is often mistakenly seen. He says this results in it being considered unworthy of or unsuitable for consideration as a rational text. Hazony instead understands Hebrew Scripture to have been composed by men with a purpose in mind, namely to teach the reader about the life well-lived, which in this context means lived by the Mosaic law. This he staggeringly identifies with natural law, praising the prophet Jeremiah for his elevation of it to the level of a law that all nations should follow.

Hazony likens talk of God in Hebrew Scripture to the Greek talk of gods in texts

seen as unambiguously philosophical. He has in mind Parmenides' account of the nature of being, which he said had been revealed to him by a goddess, or Socrates' claim in various Platonic dialogues to be guided by a divine sign telling him when to abstain from doing things he might otherwise be inclined to do. If we approach these Greek texts with an eye to extracting what is of benefit to us, then why should we not look upon Hebrew Scripture as admitting of the same kind of interpretation?

Hazony wants to undermine the idea that Scripture commands obedience while philosophy cultivates independence of mind. The modern university, he says, puts a very high value on the wisdom of the ancient Greeks, while seeing Scriptural wisdom as, at best, a private virtue. This, he complains, is a result of the deprecation of the Jews in nineteenth-century Germany – the time and place of the origin of the modern university – as having no original ideas to offer. We might, for example, think of Goethe's line quoted approvingly by Freud in *Civilization and Its Discontents*: "He who possesses science and art also has religion; but he who possesses neither of those two, let him have religion!"

Aiming to further destabilize the notion of an impermeable barrier between philosophy and religion, Hazony borrows a distinction pushed into the foreground by twentieth-century phenomenology, between truth as correspondence of statement to fact, and truth as a calling, or fidelity to purpose. Walking a path, seeing with the crispness of vision, at a time before asphalt roads and glasses, the time of Biblical Israel, is a doing of a kind evoked by Hazony as pregnant with meaning in a way that mere correspondence of statements to facts is not. A road or a vision that is true is one that is reliable, that serves its purpose of guiding one faithfully to one's destination or seeing accurately what is coming towards us from afar off. Talk of God's truth, then, is talk of a reliable promise that saves in the sense of providing material benefit. We might say that characterizing the land of Israel as 'flowing with milk and honey' aims to convey a vision of goodness as plenty, much as the Bible's book of Ecclesiastes says that our highest hope is to enjoy the fruits of our labors. Hazony is careful to specify that salvation in the Hebrew Biblical narrative has nothing to do with immortal souls.

For the Hebrew Scriptures, says Hazony, political and material benefit are one. Fidelity to the Law of Moses brings an

ordered society in which all have a stake. Of the Messianic times envisioned by the prophets, we might observe, the prophet Micah said simply that “every man shall sit under his own vine and fig tree, and there shall be none to make him afraid.”

Hazon distinguishes between two types of person in the Hebrew Bible: the farmer and the shepherd. He orients the reader by discussion of the story of Cain and Abel. Cain follows in the tradition of their father Adam, working the land (which Adam has been cursed to do by God) while Abel opts for shepherding, having the sheep do the work of grazing. As the story goes, it is the shepherd’s animal sacrifice that God prefers to farmer Cain’s sacrifice of grain. Since God commanded Adam to work the land, Hazon reads this as an endorsement by the Bible of enterprise rather than a submission to fate. He also calls our attention to the fact that so many of the heroes of the Bible turn out to be shepherds, whether Abraham, Jacob, Moses, or David.

Interpretation & Opinion

They say that everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not to his own set of facts, and as an interpretation of Hebrew Scripture, Hazon’s work does not violate this rule. But any interpretation by necessity suppresses other readings. Hazon mentions in a footnote that he takes issue with the traditional classification of the Bible’s books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job as ‘wisdom literature’, and proceeds to ignore them. Doubtless this is because their ready intelligibility stands in contrast to the imaginative historical narrative of the books of Moses and the Prophets, which have produced a tradition of rabbinic interpretation – of which Hazon is not a part – precisely because they are less transparent in their teaching. The contrast militates against his argument that the latter are rational, and the strain of his labor to render them such shows.

Moreover, Hazon seems content to leave the spiritual inheritance of Jewish monotheism for Christianity to claim as its own, to the exclusion of the Jews. But a critical approach to the divine is shared by Greek philosophy and Jewish monotheism both. No interpretation is necessary to get to the bottom of Xenophanes’ idea that “Men think the gods are born and have clothes and voices and bodies like their own”, or Heraclitus’s claim, “And they pray to the images of the gods, which is like trying to have a conversation with a house;

for they do not know the true nature of gods and heroes.” Compare this with Isaiah talking about making idols from wood: “Half of it he burnt with fire, on half of it he ate meat, he roasted a roast and became sated; he even warmed himself and said, ‘Aha, I am warm, I see fire.’ And what is left over from it he made for a god, for his graven image; he kneels to it and prostrates himself and prays to it, and he says, ‘Save me, for you are my god.’ Neither do they know nor do they understand, for their eyes are bedaubed from seeing, their hearts from understanding.” This to my mind is more fertile ground for claiming that Greek philosophy and Hebrew Scripture converge in such a way that they can both be read for wisdom, for both depend on the subversion of idolatry in the name of the unity of the divine.

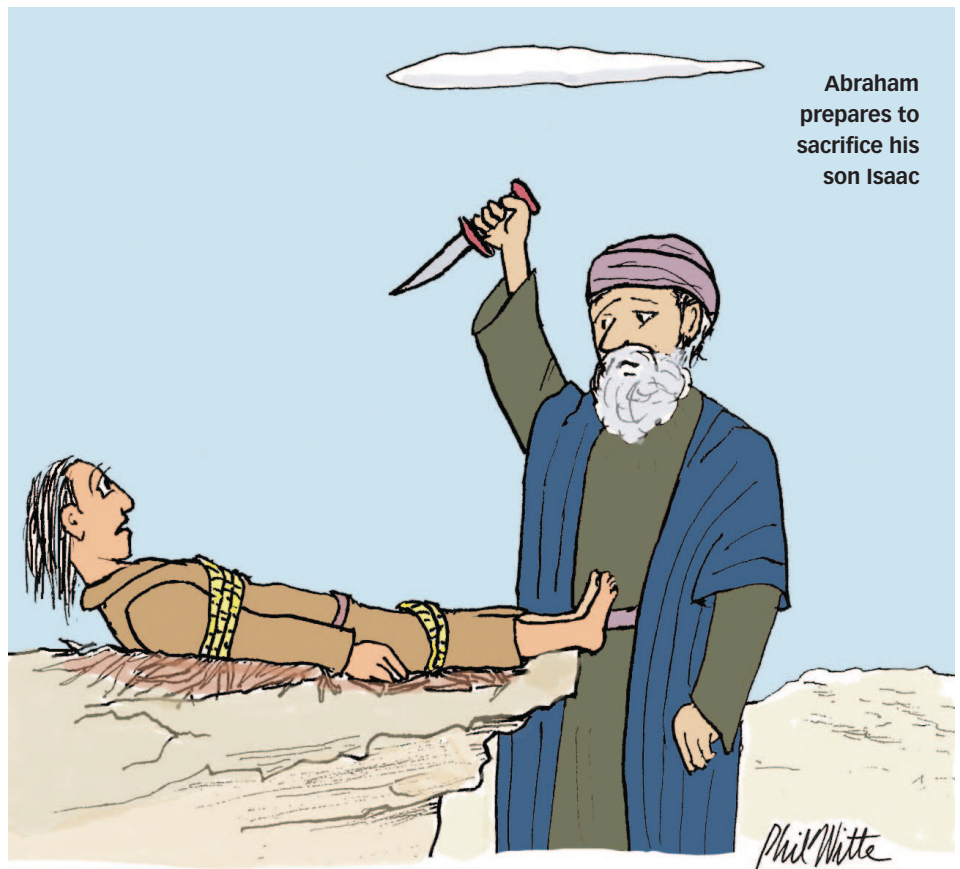
Hazon would likely grant us our right to differ with him in our reading of Scripture as greater in spiritual than political significance. He adopts the contrary view to our own, but also says that Hebrew Scripture is intended to present a diversity of viewpoints from which one can approach a central teaching

that one must seek out rather than being given. The need to question things for oneself – just as one finds out in time whether a road leads one safely to a destination or whether what is seen afar off is seen accurately – indeed Hazon wishes to emphasize is a legacy of Scriptural teaching akin to the questioning encouraged by Greek philosophy. This is in keeping with his goal of flattening out the differences between the two genres, in order that the kind of understanding we think we gain from Greek philosophy may be complemented by the kind of knowledge we can gain from Hebrew Scripture which guides us towards what is of benefit to us – namely, the embrace and espousal of a law-governed peace.

© BRAD RAPPAPORT 2023

Brad Rappaport holds a B.A. in Philosophy from Johns Hopkins University and has also studied philosophy at the University of Essex and Vanderbilt University.

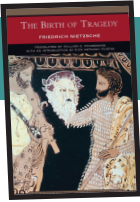
• *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture, Yoram Hazon, Cambridge University Press, 2012, \$32.99 pb, 394 pages, ISBN: 9780521176675*



Abraham prepares to sacrifice his son Isaac

CARTOON © PHIL WITTE 2023

“Father, I fear a modern reader of the Bible will have difficulty contextualizing this.”



The Birth of Tragedy by Friedrich Nietzsche

“Greek art, and Greek tragedy above all, held the destruction of myth at bay” – Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE (1844-1900), who would on occasion be a little bombastic, referred to art as “the highest task and the truly metaphysical activity of this life.” As an atheist, he believed that existence could be justified, or life worth living, only as an aesthetic phenomenon. But it was Greek art, notably, fifth century BC Greek tragedy, that he revered most highly. Think *Oedipus Rex*, *Hecuba* or *The Oresteia Trilogy* by the great tragedians Sophocles, Euripides, and Aeschylus respectively. In *Oedipus*, the title character unwittingly fulfils a prophecy in which he kills his father and marries his mother. The play ends with Oedipus gouging his own eyes out. Obviously it’s pretty bleak. But the Greeks couldn’t get enough tragedy; and neither could Nietzsche.

Nietzsche’s response to the paradox of tragedy – the seemingly inexplicable fact that it can be pleasurable to watch human calamity unfold – revolves around a polarity and fusion of what in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) he called ‘Apollonian’ and ‘Dionysian’ forces. Apollo was the Olympian deity of light, sculpture, and any dreamy, celestially-raised art form. A lucid dream – one in which the dreamer knows they’re dreaming, but wants to go on living in it – is a paradigm of Apollonian pleasure. We know it is unreal and the frontiers of reality are clearly signposted, but it still provides an ordered, desirable experience.

Whilst the Apollonian belongs to the individual, the Dionysian draws the individual closer to the muddled ground of unified human experience. Dionysus was the Greek god of wine, revelry, and unbridled passion – the Earth-bound ecstasies. According to Nietzsche, the Dionysian artistic impulse is best understood through an analogy to intoxication, either under the influence of alcohol, or other fertile terrestrial delights, such as dancing or the onset of Spring. Nietzsche’s core idea in *The Birth of Tragedy* is that in Greek tragedy, these two artistic forces merge: Apollonian idealism and artistic grandeur fuses with the Dionysian imitation of the chaotic human will. The Apollonian effect rises beyond the heavens in imagination, whilst the Dionysian is tethered to the Earth through passions and emotions. The audience are then enraptured in a shared



NIETZSCHE © WOODROW COWHER 2023
PLEASE VISIT WOODROWSPICURES.COM

redemption as human suffering is elevated to the divine through exquisite prose and music.

Humans desire a myth that coexists with our reality, in order to make the latter bearable, and to help us navigate it. Nietzsche believed that Greek tragedy was in a class of its own in this respect because in it the myth is revealed, rather than veiled, as it is in some religions, and Greek mystery cults. Nietzsche also here discloses the origin of a rapture that yields a sense of purpose. For Nietzsche, tragedy is the equivalent of staring nihilism in the face – except instead of turning away from life, one pours one’s existential dread into an artistic medium. Tragedy provides a metaphysical consolation and a catharsis. It provides a myth for myth’s sake, that is not met with cynicism but rather, with a sobering willingness to entertain it for what it is. It is a necessary illusion that transfigures the sharpest-edged reality into something more, even something beautiful.

Nietzsche blamed Socrates for the death of Greek tragedy – or more exactly, he blamed Socrates’ and Euripides’ enlightened devotion to reason and rationality. Euripides, the ‘critical thinker’ playwright, felt disconcerted and thus offended by the overly grand language, structure, and enigmatic choruses of his predecessors’ tragic creations. In his own theatrical work, he sought a consoling companionship in none other than the great Socrates, who shared his disdain of the genre. Socrates could never grasp tragedy, and thus, could not respect it. Under Socrates’ influence, Euripides dared to pursue a new kind of art – and, according to

Nietzsche, with this pursuit came the destruction of myth and the rise of the ‘theoretical man’.

The Birth of Tragedy consists of a twofold argument. The bulk of the text contains Nietzsche’s controversial thesis about the birth, nature, and demise of Greek tragedy, but in the final chapters he creates a manifesto for the reformation of contemporary German culture. Linking the Socratic rationalism which purportedly destroyed Greek tragedy to the decadent state of modern German life, Nietzsche argues for one myth over another: the myth of art over the myth of scholarship (or science). His attack on rationalism and his idolisation of myth undoubtedly vexed scholars, but also attracted the ire of the novelist Thomas Mann, who criticised Nietzsche for preferring ‘instinct over intellect’.

As Nietzsche’s main thesis could not be tested, *The Birth of Tragedy* was itself regarded as unscholarly, and thus his aim to influence classicists and to instill a new impetus for cultural reform failed. Nonetheless, it’s hard to deny the seductiveness of Nietzsche’s argument, especially when his own reading reads like a late Romantic prose-poem. Had it not been dressed in a scholarly cloak, it would have been considered a masterful work of art in its own right. To paraphrase Nietzsche’s own *Attempt at a Self-Criticism* (1886), he should have sung this ‘new soul’ of art, not spoken it.

© ROSE THOMPSON

Rose Thompson is a writer and student of philosophy.