**Nietzsche’s Greek Pessimism**

Daniel Wolt

*Abstract*. Despite his opposition to Schopenhauerian pessimism, Nietzsche repeatedly characterises himself as a pessimist of sorts. Here I attempt to take this assertion seriously and offer an interpretation of in what sense Nietzsche can be called a pessimist. I suggest that Nietzsche’s pessimism has to do not with life in general, but with life in its common form: such life is bad because it is characterised by meaningless suffering, and lacks aesthetic value. Against the Christian tradition, Nietzsche denies that there is a value inherent to life itself, and thinks instead, that value must be achieved, but rarely is. This form of pessimism is rooted in Nietzsche’s engagement with the ancient Greeks, and bears important affinities to the thought of Burckhardt on Greek pessimism.

**1. Introduction**

(That there still *could* be an altogether different kind of pessimism, a classical type--this premonition and vision belongs to me as inseparable from me, as my *proprium* and my *ipsissimum*; only the word ‘classical’ offends my ears, it is far too trite and has become round and indistinct. I call this pessimism of the future--for it comes! I see it coming!--*Dionysian* pessimism.)

These are the final words of section 370 of *The* *Gay Science*.[[1]](#footnote-0) They are striking for several reasons. Not only does Nietzsche seem to endorse a kind of pessimism, but he suggests that this form of pessimism is central to his philosophical project and even his very being--it is his *proprium* and *ipsissimum*.[[2]](#footnote-1) The first line contrasts this form of pessimism with what earlier in the text he calls Romantic pessimism--the pessimism of Schopenhauer and Wagner. Opposition to Schopenhauer’s pessimism, and a corresponding attempt to provide a basis for life-affirmation, are by anyone’s accounts among Nietzsche’s central philosophical projects. It is natural to construe this project simply as opposition to pessimism.[[3]](#footnote-2) If pessimism is understood as a condemnation of life, the view that life is somehow intrinsically bad or not worth living, if the wisdom of Silenus--that it would be better never to have been--really is wisdom, how could pessimism fail to amount to life-negation? How could there be a life-affirming pessimism?

But there is another intriguing idea in the quoted passage. Nietzsche suggests that his own pessimism--whatever it might consist in--is somehow shared by the ancient Greeks: it is classical or Dionysian. How did Nietzsche understand the pessimism of the Greeks and how did this understanding shape his own approach to the question of the value of life?

This essay constitutes my attempt to answer these questions. While much has been written about life-affirmation and the Dionysian in Nietzsche,[[4]](#footnote-3) comparatively little has been written about Nietzsche’s pessimism.[[5]](#footnote-4) Part of the reason for this is that many have been tempted not to take Nietzsche’s occasional avowals of pessimism entirely seriously, or at least not literally. Perhaps Nietzsche’s ‘pessimism’ consists simply in accepting certain descriptive facts about the ubiquity of suffering, without evaluating suffering as bad.[[6]](#footnote-5) While there is much that can be said for this reading, it should be noted that it is not a form of pessimism, at least as that term is ordinarily used. Pessimism both today and in Nietzsche’s day, in both popular usage and philosophical discussions, is normally meant to pick out an evaluative stance.[[7]](#footnote-6) Second, this reading makes the great emphasis that Nietzsche places on his pessimism in our passage (‘proprium’, ‘ipsissimum’) rather puzzling. Accepting that life is full of suffering but affirming it nonetheless, after all, is common even to certain forms of Christianity, as Schopenhauer himself acknowledges.[[8]](#footnote-7) Hence, even if we accept that the revaluation of suffering is in a way central to Nietzsche’s philosophical project, there must be more to Nietzsche’s pessimism (if indeed it is his proprium) than this conjunction of a descriptive view with a cheerful evaluative outlook.

Still, I do not pretend to have a knock-down argument against anti-pessimist readings of *GS* 370 and similar passages.[[9]](#footnote-8) Rather, I aim simply to offer an alternative which I think is more attractive. That is the main project of this essay. My strategy for doing this is to lean heavily on the connection that Nietzsche draws above and repeatedly elsewhere between his own pessimism and the pessimism of the ancient Greeks. One invaluable and underutilised resource for understanding Nietzsche’s thought on this topic are the lectures on Greek culture by his friend and colleague Jacob Burckhardt, in which Greek pessimism features prominently. From Burckhardt it is possible to construct an understanding of the peculiar character of Greek pessimism that coheres closely with Nietzsche’s own thought in both his early writings (i.e. while he was still working at the University of Basel)--discussed in section 2--as well as his later writings, discussed in section 3.

On the picture that results, the pessimism of the Greeks was closely tied up with the aristocratic character of Greek values. The Greeks, on this reading, did indeed regard life as centrally characterised by suffering. They regarded this, moreover, as a *problem*. Where they differed from other pessimistic cultures (e.g. Buddhist cultures), is that they regarded this not as a reason to condemn life altogether but rather to elevate those higher expressions of life that *achieve* value. In other words, the Greeks were pessimists in that they regarded life in its common form, as having negative value. But rather than leading them to resignation and life-denial, this led them to exalt the exception, to strive to be the best, as the Homeric imperative had it.

This same framework can be used to explain Nietzsche’s own remarks about pessimism. Nietzsche’s pessimism differs from Schopenhauer’s as that of the Greeks differed from that of the moderns. Nietzsche’s remarks in *GS* 370 and elsewhere[[10]](#footnote-9) about a pessimism of strength is precisely the kind of aristocratic pessimism he attributes to the Greeks--a pessimism that consists not in condemning all life as such, but which is nevertheless recognizable as a kind of pessimism by virtue of its negative judgement of life in its common form, mere life.

**2. Greek pessimism in Burckhardt**

I begin with Jacob Burckhardt’s lectures on Greek culture, first delivered in 1872 and published posthumously as *Griechische Kulturgeschichte*.[[11]](#footnote-10) There are several reasons for this. First, Burckhardt is one of the scholars most responsible for promoting the view of Greek culture as pessimistic. This, indeed, was a landmark contribution because it flew in the face of a tradition, dating back at least to Winckelmann and notably exemplified by Schiller, that regarded the Greeks as fundamentally cheerful, even optimists.[[12]](#footnote-11) This alone would be reason enough to pay serious attention to Burckhardt in this context, but, of course, the ties to Nietzsche are much deeper. Not only were Nietzsche and Burckhardt friends and colleagues at Basel, but Nietzsche attended Burckhardt’s lectures on Greek culture, owned at least one copy of the manuscript, and regarded him as a philosophical ally. Aside from their shared interest in Schopenhauer, Nietzsche had great admiration for Burckhardt’s understanding of Greek culture, calling him ‘that profoundest student of [Greek] culture now living’.[[13]](#footnote-12) Obviously this does not mean that we can simply attribute any of Burckhardt’s views to Nietzsche,[[14]](#footnote-13) but it does suggest a method for approaching our topic: start by extracting an account of Greek pessimism from Burckhardt and then see how it compares with Nietzsche’s own remarks on the matter. While Burckhardt’s aim, as he puts it, is merely ‘the collation of facts with statements’, and he does not attempt to provide a single unifying picture, let alone a philosophical account,[[15]](#footnote-14) it is nonetheless possible to construct a distinctive account of Greek pessimism (i.e. a picture of a kind of pessimism that is distinctively Greek) from his remarks. That is what I will try to do here.

Burckhardt’s Greeks are pessimists in the familiar sense of the word. Human existence is characterised throughout by suffering, of many kinds.[[16]](#footnote-15) Humans are constantly subject to the caprice of Fate and amoral gods.[[17]](#footnote-16) Our fellow humans are mostly wicked.[[18]](#footnote-17) Moments of happiness are rare and fleeting.[[19]](#footnote-18) Like Nietzsche,[[20]](#footnote-19) Burckhardt finds in the dictum of Silenus--that it would be better never to have been (*mê phunai*)[[21]](#footnote-20)--the definitive statement of Greek pessimism.

However, it is clear from Burckhardt’s account that he regards Greek pessimism as distinctive in some ways. Consider, first, his remarks about Greek attitudes towards suicide and voluntary death. This topic constitutes a surprisingly large portion of Burckhardt’s discussion,[[22]](#footnote-21) and it is important because it helps to draw out part of how the Greek view of life differs from the modern one. Here Schopenhauer is useful background. Schopenhauer discusses at least two different grounds for Christian opposition to suicide, and provides some of his own. The Christian opposition to suicide, for Schopenhauer, is rooted in Christian optimism which, however, comes in different forms. One, vulgar form is to deny the centrality of suffering to existence. The other, higher form, accepts suffering as ubiquitous but imbues life with a moral significance which requires that we accept, even embrace that suffering.[[23]](#footnote-22) On Schopenhauer’s own view, suicide is usually wrong because it usually comes about precisely as a result of an excessive attachment to life. The strength of feeling that causes the despair that propels most towards suicide is itself a symptom of an excessive attachment to the Will.[[24]](#footnote-23)

If we take these three views as representative of contemporary thought about suicide, then we find a striking contrast with the ancient Greek case.[[25]](#footnote-24) Against vulgar Christian optimism, of course, Burckhardt’s Greeks accept the centrality of suffering to life. Similarly, against ascetic Christian optimism, they do not find a moral justification for suffering. And while Burckhardt does discuss cases of suicide as a reaction to passionate despair,[[26]](#footnote-25) he places a great deal of emphasis on (to us) much less familiar cases where suicide is calmly chosen as a result of a kind of frank, unsentimental assessment of one’s life.[[27]](#footnote-26) Suicide was widely accepted as a reasonable response to an incurable illness, old age, and defeat in war (indeed, Burckhardt recounts a number of remarkable examples in which entire cities committed mass suicide as a result of defeat).[[28]](#footnote-27)

What’s more striking, however, is not simply that suicide was *tolerated* in these cases, but positively enjoined. In the case of serious illness, for example, Burckhardt points out that ‘the prolongation of life for such an invalid by medical skill was openly disapproved of’.[[29]](#footnote-28) Similarly, it was regarded as incumbent upon women to commit suicide rather than be taken captive by enemies.[[30]](#footnote-29) Men too, when faced with inescapable danger were regarded as obligated to commit suicide. Remaining alive in these circumstances was a form of cowardice.[[31]](#footnote-30) Failure to conform to these and similar norms was met with great contempt as a reflection of the vice of *philopsuchia* (love of life). Burckhardt quotes Sophocles: ‘only a coward or a fool will cling to life in misfortune’.[[32]](#footnote-31)

One thing that is quite important about *philospsuchia* is that in the passages that Burckhardt cites it is often seen not only as a vice, but specifically as a vice characteristic of the vulgar or common sort of person. As Burckhardt points out: ‘Servants and slaves are often accused of “loving life”, a low trait which distinguishes them from free men’.[[33]](#footnote-32) And this comes across clearly in some of the passages he cites. For example, in Plutarch’s biography of Aemilius Paulus, who defeated King Perseus of Macedon, the latter is singled out for reproach for going to live comfortably among the very Romans who defeated him: ‘And here, in particular, [Perseus] made it manifest that he was possessed with a vice more vulgar (*agenesteros*) than love of money (*philarguria*) itself, namely, the fondness of life (*philopsuchia*); by which he deprived himself even of pity, the only thing that fortune never takes away from the most wretched’.[[34]](#footnote-33) Notice the clear references to class here: *agenes* is a term whose original meaning just pertains to low-birth. Like the English word ‘vulgar’ in its original sense, it is here being used to pick out objectionable qualities associated with the lower classes. One such quality is love of money; another is *philospuchia*. The picture is clear, and familiar to anyone well-acquainted with Greek literature: while the low-born, the vulgar, are primarily focused on bare existence, the higher, nobler types care about loftier concerns, most notably honour and excellence or virtue (*aretê*).

There are many similar passages which Burckhardt could have cited. I would like to call attention to one, which is especially illuminating. Consider the *Peri Aretês* (*On Virtue*) of the Anonymous Iamblichi, an unnamed sophist, probably from the 5th century BC. There *philopsuchia* is singled out for special attention and, just like in the passage from Plutarch, is connected to the vulgar desire for money. We are told that the virtuous man will pay little attention to matters having to do with money because he will pursue virtue and not care much about life. The common sort of person, by contrast, does place great weight on financial matters precisely because they suffer from the vice of *philopsuchia:*

They are pusillanimous [*philopsuchein*, literally ‘they love their souls’], because this is what their life is, namely their soul [*psuchê*]; hence they care about this and they feel a great desire for it because of their love for life and because of their familiarity with what they were raised with.[[35]](#footnote-34)

Hence, their fear for all the evils that life can bring causes them to prioritise money-making as a form of security against them. The truly virtuous man (*an*ê*r* *alêthos agathos*), by contrast, seeks renown (*doxa*) only through his own excellence. He concludes:

if it befell the man who cared about his life, unless he was killed by someone else, to be ageless and deathless for the rest of time, then he would be easily forgiven. But since what befalls a life that is prolonged is old age, which is worse for people, and not to be deathless, it is truly both a great foolishness and the effect of habituation to wicked words and desires to preserve this [*scil*. life] at the cost of a bad reputation, and not to leave behind in its place something deathless, a renown that is everlasting and always alive instead of one that is mortal.[[36]](#footnote-35)

When reading these lines, one cannot help but be reminded of Achilles’ pursuit of ‘undying fame’ (*kleos aphthiton*).[[37]](#footnote-36) Achilles after all goes to fight in the Trojan war knowing that he is going to die, preferring a short but glorious life to a long but undistinguished one. Whether the Anonymous meant to allude to Homer or not, he is expressing an Homeric idea. This resonance is unsurprising. For, as Burckhardt points out,[[38]](#footnote-37) Homeric values and myth persist in one form or another throughout the later periods of Greek history as well. And, as Burckhardt also points out (and as any reader of Homer already knows), Homeric values are deeply aristocratic.

The aristocratic character of the Greek evaluative outlook is seen repeatedly elsewhere in Burckhardt’s account. One way in which Greek pessimism manifests itself, for example, is in attitudes to labour, the banausic. The idea that labour is a prime source of suffering in life is, of course, hardly novel. One is reminded of the curse that the God of the Old Testament--for Burckhardt, like Schopenhauer, a fundamentally optimistic text--places on Adam and Eve as a result of their disobedience.[[39]](#footnote-38) But Greek views about labour are different, according to Burckhardt, to those found in the ancient East and elsewhere. In the ancient East, contempt for work was the reserve of the ruling elite who had ‘appropriated power, war, hunting and good living, and left everything else to the rest of the population’.[[40]](#footnote-39) Similar attitudes are seen in the elite of mediaeval Europe. The key difference is that in the latter, the emergence of a middle class gave rise to a parallel and contrary evaluation of work (whereas in the ancient East there was little middle class to speak of).

Where Greece differs from both of these civilizations is that, although contempt for work may have emerged from the same origin--a small, warrior-aristocracy--it did not remain the reserve of the elite:

For the evaluation of work, the period and circumstances in which a nation evolves its ideal of existence are the most important considerations. In modern Europe, that ideal derives principally from the mediaeval burgher class, which slowly became not only superior to the nobility in wealth but also its equal in education, though indeed this was a different kind of education from that of the nobility. In contrast, the Greeks had their image of the heroic period, that is of a non-utilitarian world, and never rid themselves of it. Their relationship to the world of heroes, comprising only battles, dynastic tragedies and divine interventions, was immeasurably closer than the relationship of the mediaeval citizen to the world of Germanic legend.[[41]](#footnote-40)

There are two important points here. First, there is the general point, which I have suggested is important for Burckhardt’s account, which is that Greek culture as a whole, maintained an aristocratic outlook long after the time when Greek states were actually ruled by warrior-noblemen. The second point, although not explicit, allows us specifically to make the connection between Greek contempt for the banausic and Greek pessimism: unlike some cultures, like the mediaeval (or modern) burgher class, which develop evaluative outlooks which elevate work and imbue it with dignity, the Greeks as a whole, including many of those consigned to work for a living, do not have this ideological salve.[[42]](#footnote-41) Unlike the ancient Hebrews who were able to imbue work with moral purpose (a punishment from god, or a moral obligation), or the modern bourgeois who is able to do the same (by re-evaluating the dignity of work), the Greeks were left to confront the hard truth about the nature of work, and the lives that are devoted to it.

It is by virtue of this aristocratic outlook that Greek pessimism differs markedly from other types. Where Greeks viewed work with contempt, they correspondingly elevated the *agôn*, the contest, as the appropriate focus of their energies. This too had its roots in the aristocratic past: where the ruling aristocracy was once a class of warriors whose time were devoted largely to warfare, in later periods, the competitive instinct found outlets in many other areas of life: first in athletic contests, originally as an extension of the very training undertaken for war,[[43]](#footnote-42) but eventually in creative and artistic pursuits as well, including, for example, the production of tragedies (a notable example for Nietzsche). This institution, the *agôn*, is how even in later times the Greeks honoured Peleus’ injunction to Achilles ‘to always be the best’ (*aien* *aristeuein*).[[44]](#footnote-43) The *agôn*, on Burckhardt’s account, is the ultimate expression of the aristocratic drives that underlie Greek culture. It is this same competitive drive that distinguishes Greek pessimism from the pessimisms of ‘Eastern cultures’:

The important characteristic of the Greek people was that they felt their sufferings intensely and with full awareness. In contrast to the resigned acceptance of the human condition in Eastern cultures, and to any contemplative quietism, the Greeks were exposed and vulnerable to physical and mental afflictions. Nations, in their beginnings, have only a collective consciousness of life which may even last into fairly advanced phases of civilization, but the Greeks had become individuals earlier than others, and experienced the glory as well as the pain of this condition.[[45]](#footnote-44)

He goes on to discuss how the Greek competitive instinct, the desire to be the best, was a source of great suffering, in the competitions themselves, in the jealousy of one’s comrades, and in the crush of defeat. While somewhat unclear, I take it that the idea in this passage is that the *agôn* is an expression of a sort of orientation to life which prevents Greek pessimism from leading to ‘resigned acceptance of the human condition’ or ‘quietism’. While the Greeks regarded life as lamentable in many ways, they do not reject life altogether. The Homeric/aristocratic drive for glory prevents this.

This is quite important for our subject. While Burckhardt does not say much more about the matter than this, it is possible to piece together from these remarks a general account of what is distinctive about Greek pessimism. I take it that it is by now clear that what is distinctive about it is *not* that it involved a neutral valuation of suffering. Quite the contrary, as I have already indicated, for Burckhardt the Greeks were pessimists for quite familiar reasons, mainly the ubiquity of suffering. However, I suggest, the connection that I have found in Burckhardt’s account between Greek pessimism and the aristocratic nature of Greek values in general, and the *agôn* in particular, does provide a useful clue for identifying something distinctive about Greek pessimism. The Greeks suffered in part because of a particularly strong will, which is expressed in the competitive instinct and the agon. It is this strength of will that prevented them from lapsing into world-renunciation and passivity. This instinct, in turn, is part of their inheritance from their aristocratic roots. This very same aristocratic inheritance is what compels them to view mere life as something contemptible, which should quickly be sacrificed in exchange for preserving one’s dignity, or, better, achieving honour or fame. If, then, we wanted to try to formulate Greek pessimism in terms of a specific view or proposition about life, it would be a mistake simply to do so in terms of the view that life is not worth living. While it is true that the *mê phunai* dictum is taken by Burckhardt as emblematic of Greek pessimism, it shouldn’t be taken literally. If all life is equally worthless, then surely Achilles’ striving for eternal fame is wrongheaded. The *agôn* would be merely another source of misery, an instance of the striving of the will that ought to be negated. But that is not the conclusion the Greeks came to. If we wish to try to sum up the Greek view of life in a sentence, then, I propose that it be understood as the view that life *in its common form*, life as it *typically* appears, *mere* life, is bad, something which must be overcome. Not only does this cohere quite well with, for example, the discussion of *philopsuchia* above, but it explains how a pessimistic view of life can be reconciled with the passionate engagement with life that the *agôn* implies. It is precisely because life is bad in its common form that value must be achieved through contest, through the achievement of *kleos* or *doxa*. This I take to be the core of Greek pessimism, as presented by Burckhardt.

Of course, this might all be correct as far as Burckhardt goes, but at odds with Nietzsche’s views. I will argue, though, that careful consideration of Nietzsche’s views in both his early and later works shows much the same perspective.

**3. Greek pessimism in early Nietzsche**

I will begin by focusing on two essays, both written in 1871 or 72 and presented as a gift to Cosima Wagner: ‘The Greek State’ and ‘Homer’s Contest’.[[46]](#footnote-45) The reason for focusing on these two texts will become clear: not only are they very close temporally to Burckhardt’s lectures but the thematic affinity of the works is obvious. Both works share with Burckhardt an interest in rebutting a certain view of the Greeks, and both works pick up themes that are prominent in Burckhardt: the *agôn* in ‘Homer’s Contest’ and the violent foundation of the *polis* in ‘The Greek State’. Most importantly for my project: both works give clear expression to a version of pessimism which resembles the pessimism of the Greeks discussed above, but which clearly differs from the quetistic pessimism of Schopenhauer. I begin with ‘Homer’s Contest’.[[47]](#footnote-46)

To begin, a bit more background will be useful. As I pointed out above, an important part of Burckhardt’s project in the *Kulturgeschichte* was to oppose the view of the Greeks as cheerful. In opposing this view, Burckhardt is taking issue with a certain idealised image of the Greeks that was highly influential in the German classicist tradition. On this view the Greeks were presented as the embodiment of a sort of ideal of culture not only on the basis of their art, but on the basis of the cultural and individual virtues that this art was thought to represent. Opposition to this view of the Greeks is an important commonality between Burckhardt and Nietzsche and it features prominently in ‘Homer’s Contest’. Nietzsche takes aim at this interpretation of the Greeks from the very beginning of the essay. There is a simplistic understanding of humaneness (Humanität) according to which this is simply a matter of overcoming nature: ‘Man, at the finest height of his powers, is all nature and carries nature’s uncanny dual character in himself’.[[48]](#footnote-47) Like Burckhardt, Nietzsche is not disputing the idea that the Greeks represented man ‘at the finest height of his powers’, but does dispute the way in which this was commonly understood by classicists. Specifically, they have neglected the dark, violent, even barbaric characteristics of Greek life. From Homer to the Peloponnesian War to Alexander the Great, one finds in the Greek world persistent war, including internecine war, which, moreover, is often characterised by extreme cruelty. This violence is aestheticized, even falsified, by Homer, but can be seen in its full form in the ‘pre-Homeric world’. The myths of creation present a highly pessimistic vision of reality:

The names of Orpheus, Musaeus and their cults reveal what were the conclusions to which a continual exposure to a world of combat and cruelty led - to nausea at existence, to the view of existence as a punishment to be discharged by serving out one’s time, to the belief that existence and indebtedness were identical.[[49]](#footnote-48)

The Orphic cult, to which Nietzsche alludes here, is treated by Burckhardt along with Pythagoreanism as exceptional examples of world-denying, ‘genuine religious pessimism’ in the Greek world.[[50]](#footnote-49) Burckhardt regards these cults or movements as cases in which Eastern pessimism, which regards this world as evil and urges its rejection in hopes of another world or life, made a brief appearance amidst the fundamentally different pessimism of the ancient Greeks. Nietzsche, although he agrees with the general characterization of the Orphic cult, presents an importantly different picture. First, as we see in the above quote, he dates Orphism to the pre-Homeric period. This chronology is not accepted by scholars today, who date it to the 6th century, but it is nonetheless informative: adopting this timeline allows Nietzsche to present a particular narrative about Greek pessimism. On this view the asceticism and world-denial of Orphism is in some sense the natural reaction to, as he puts it, ‘continual exposure to a world of combat and cruelty’.[[51]](#footnote-50) In Orphism and other world-denying religions, the reaction to this world is to deny the underlying principle, the will, or the aspect of human nature responsible for this strife in the first place.[[52]](#footnote-51) Nietzsche does not say why this movement did not last. But part of his point is that the underlying impulse to violence is never completely overcome. The Orphic aim to suppress the will failed, and in the subsequent history of Greek civilization an alternative solution is found:

In order to understand it, we must assume that Greek genius acknowledged the existing impulse, terrible as it was, and regarded it as justified: whereas in the Orphic version there lay the thought that a life rooted in such an impulse was not worth living. Combat and the pleasure of victory were acknowledged: and nothing severs the Greek world so sharply from ours as the resultant colouring of individual ethical concepts, for example Eris and envy.[[53]](#footnote-52)

The solution, in other words, consists in affirming the impulse or the will, in some sense. How this is supposed to be a solution to the problem is elaborated in the subsequent discussion, starting with the case of *Eris* alluded to in the last line.

In Hesiod, there are two goddesses of Eris (envy). Whereas one promotes ‘wicked war and feuding’ the other ‘drives even the unskilled man to work; and if someone who lacks property sees someone else who is rich, he likewise hurries off to sow and plant and set his house in order; neighbour competes with neighbour striving for prosperity. This Eris is good for men. Even potters harbour grudges against potters, carpenters against carpenters, beggars envy beggars and minstrels envy minstrels’.[[54]](#footnote-53) Envy begins with a perceived inequality: the subject of envy feels himself worse off in some way than the object of envy. Envy is a desire for this inequality to be remedied to one’s own advantage. But there are at least two ways that this can be done. One is to bring the advantaged party down to the level of the worse off--levelling-down. The other is to bring the worse off party up to the level of the better off. The good Eris is the latter, the bad Eris is the former. The way in which ‘the Greek genius’ directed the competitive instinct toward the good Eris is through the institution of the *agôn*. The *agôn* is both a celebration of the good Eris, and also a way of containing, to some degree,[[55]](#footnote-54) the bad consequences of the bad Eris. The hope of victory in the *agôn* provides a healthy or pro-social outlet for the envious feelings, ubiquitous among the Greeks. When there is a great inequality making genuine competition impossible, not only is the positive spur of competition to develop the instincts lost, but the negative, destructive envy reappears. Hence, Nietzsche connects the *agôn* to the practice of ostracism: ostracism--the banishment from the *polis* of individuals who were especially pre-eminent--was a way of preventing a monopoly which would endanger the *agôn*.

Returning to the theme with which the essay began, Nietzsche’s main point is not that the Greeks managed to expunge the dark, violent, barbaric impulses seen in early Greek history and periodic outbreaks of grotesque violence. Rather, they managed to sublimate this dark competitive instinct, and through the institution of the *agôn*, direct it towards the cultivation of excellence. It is worth noting here that this coheres quite well with the picture we find in *The Birth of Tragedy*. The agonal age, the age which in *The Birth* Nietzsche calls the tragic age, is marked by the interaction of both the Apollonian and the Dionysian. Importantly, Nietzsche distinguishes the Dionysiac Greeks from Dionysiac barbarians, who are separated by a ‘massive chasm’.[[56]](#footnote-55) In Greece the Dionysian was moderated and limited in a certain way by the Apollonian,just as the dark Eris is limited and moderated in certain ways. In both texts, moreover, Homer plays a key role: in *The Birth* Homer is paradigmatic of Apollonian art, whereas in ‘Homer’s Contest’ Homer is instrumental to the cultural elevation of good Eris. In both texts the picture seems to be that the Greek genius consisted in the imposition of some kind of Apollonian order upon a chaotic, barbaric, Dionysian substrate, in which the aesthetic images of Homer are instrumentally key. I will leave a fuller discussion of these issues for another occasion.

What does this tell us about Greek pessimism? Here it is worth thinking a bit more about the connection between Homer and the *agôn*. Although Nietzsche does not say much about Homer in the essay, he does make clear, through both the title and the main text, that his question is largely about Homer: what does the Homeric veneration of violence mean? ‘Why did the whole Greek world rejoice over the pictures of battle in the Iliad?’[[57]](#footnote-56) The answer seems to be that Homer represents the competitive instinct and its fruits, victory, in such a way as to inspire veneration. Peleus’ imperative to always be the best was adopted as the motto of the Greek people in general,[[58]](#footnote-57) even the humble potter. Just like in Burckhardt, then, the key to the Greek avoidance of nihilism is the peculiarly aristocratic nature of Greek values. Since, as we saw above, the aristocratic perspective which disdains the common, the ordinary, and the typical can itself be thought of as pessimistic in a way, there is nothing about this picture which should make us think any differently. Moreover, the central illustration of the two types of Eris supports the point. What is characteristic of the good Eris is precisely the desire to leave behind the status of the common or mediocre in order to ascend. This virtually implies a kind of negative valuation of the common or mediocre. The bad Eris, by contrast, takes the opposite evaluative outlook: low position of the subject is taken for granted, either because there is no hope of leaving it behind or because the subject is complacent about it or both, and hence their rage at the presence of inequality is directed solely to destructive purposes. Here a psychological analogy might be helpful. I take it to be a familiar fact that a low estimation of oneself can manifest in very different ways. In some people, a feeling of low self-worth drives them to great achievement, in an attempt to realise through their own efforts a sort of value that they feel is lacking in themselves. By contrast, a sense of low self-worth can also manifest itself in, essentially, giving up, resignation, lack of ambition. These are two different ways of responding to a lack of value: resignation, despair, or effort. The latter, I take it, corresponds to the perspective of Greek pessimism, the former to the perspective of Eastern pessimism.

It makes sense to venerate the will, the competitive instinct, and its expression the *agôn*, because the *agôn* is an attempt to escape an initial state of worthlessness or disvalue through one’s own efforts. It is the result of marrying the aristocratic desire for distinction, to rise above the common lot of mankind, with a view of life in its common form as lamentable, something that needs to be escaped or overcome. The good Eris drives its subject to be better, to distinguish himself from the rest. We can marry these two perspectives without contradiction, in other words, by understanding the pessimism as in some sense partial: there is a condemnation of life, in some sense, but it is not a categorical condemnation. It is a condemnation of life in its common form. This interpretation, I propose, finds powerful confirmation in ‘The Greek State’, which I turn to now.

‘The Greek State’ picks up on a comment in §18 of *The Birth of Tragedy* in which Nietzsche warns against a certain danger of ‘the optimistic view of existence’.[[59]](#footnote-58) Modern culture, in its veneration of science, is Alexandrian, as Nietzsche puts it. It is also optimistic. These two tendencies, however, are in tension:

Alexandrian culture needs a slave class in order to exist in the long term; but in its optimistic view of existence it denies the necessity of such a class and therefore, once the effect of its fine seductive and consoling words about ‘the dignity of man’ and ‘the dignity of labour’ has worn off, it slowly drifts towards terrible destruction. There is nothing more terrible than a barbaric slave class that has learned to consider its existence an injustice and sets about taking its revenge, not only on its own behalf, but on behalf of all past generations.

Modern culture is optimistic precisely in the sense that it attributes to life, a sort of inherent moral value. This value or dignity (*Würde*) is extended to labour as well. This optimism is at odds with the cultural aspirations of Alexandrian culture, which needs the slave class for its continued existence. As it stands, this remark is rather cryptic, but it gets elaborated in ‘The Greek State’.

Just as in ‘Homer’s Contest’, the flowering of the Greek individual was revealed to rest on a sublimated impulse to violence and destruction, here the beauty and cultural achievements of the Greek *polis* are revealed to rest on the horrific foundation of slavery. Slavery is necessary in order to provide the conditions under which a small number of ‘Olympian’ men are able to create culture. Importantly, Nietzsche connects this to a certain view of life. Unlike moderns, he writes, who take for granted the inherent dignity of man and view work as dignified as well:

The Greeks have no need for the conceptual hallucinations like this, they voice their opinion that work is a disgrace with shocking openness--and a more concealed, less frequently expressed wisdom, nevertheless alive everywhere, added that the human being was also a disgraceful and pathetic non-entity and ‘shadow of a dream’. Work is a disgrace because existence has no inherent value: even when this very existence glitters with the seductive jewels of artistic illusions and then really does seem to have an inherent value, the pronouncement that work is a disgrace is still valid -- simply because we do not feel it is possible for man, fighting for sheer survival to be an artist.[[60]](#footnote-59)

Here Nietzsche is clearly describing Greek views of the banausic, and the parallels with Burckhardt are obvious. Like Burckhardt, Nietzsche points out that the Greek mind was free from the illusions that lead moderns to talk of the dignity of work. The Greek condemnation of work is also rooted in pessimism about the value of life: if life in itself (*an sich*) has no value, then work in itself, understood as something that is merely necessary for life, has no value.[[61]](#footnote-60) And, just as Burckhardt contrasted the lowly drive for mere existence (*philopsuchia*, as the Anonymous had it) with the higher drives of the noble or heroic, here we find a similar albeit different contrast: between the drive for existence or ‘sheer survival’ and the artistic drive referenced in the last sentence.

The passage goes beyond Burckhardt, however, in philosophical depth. Here there is an attempt to identify in much clearer terms an underlying perspective about the value of life: ‘existence has no inherent value’. This requires some unpacking. Part of what Nietzsche is doing here is taking issue with a certain popular and philosophical discourse about the value of life. Christianity provided a kind of moral justification for life and work. In the modern era, the same was done by Christianity’s secular philosophical progeny, most notably Kant.[[62]](#footnote-61) And in more popular discourse bourgeois ideology and democratic egalitarianism both similarly attribute a kind of inherent dignity or worth to life. This contrasts sharply with the Greek view, which Nietzsche manifestly favours. For the Greeks there is no moral justification for life. Worth or dignity is not something won by virtue of being a human being, a practical agent that sets their own ends, or for that matter a hardworking taxpayer. Value in life is, rather, an achievement, reached by a few.

But what kind of achievement is it? What does this achievement involve? I take it that part of the answer is that it involves overcoming in a way ‘the horrifying struggle for existence’, ‘the toil and moil of the millions…to exist at any price’ that Nietzsche mentions earlier.[[63]](#footnote-62) The achievement of value, in other words, is not merely a matter of adding value to something which is value neutral.[[64]](#footnote-63) Rather, the initial condition of mankind is presented as something of *dis*value, 'horrifying' even. This coheres well with Nietzsche’s comments elsewhere,[[65]](#footnote-64) and is classically pessimistic. The value that is achieved, moreover, is aesthetic. This is indicated in the last line in the passage above: what is wanted is for man to be an artist, to create aesthetic value of their life. This, of course, is what we would expect given Nietzsche’s commitment to the idea that ‘it is only as *an aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally *justified*’.[[66]](#footnote-65)

The picture that emerges, then, is recognizably pessimistic: Nietzsche accepts that life as it commonly exists is dreadful. But the essay also suggests that Nietzsche has the resources to avoid the wholesale condemnation of life to which many similarly minded pessimists were drawn. One important idea in the essay is that the Greek institution of slavery, horrific though it was, finds a kind of justification and redemption through the flourishing of culture that it made possible. Even life in its lower, miserable forms can be justified and redeemed through the production of the conditions for a higher type of life.[[67]](#footnote-66) So, there is a hopeful note at the heart of the essay, and one which fits nicely with ‘Homer’s Contest’: the badness inherent in life can be overcome, in a way, and this fact ought to lead us, away from resignation, to the drive to distinction, beauty, in Greek terms excellence or *aretê*.

This is the main point for my purposes, and with it in mind, I want to return briefly to the passage quoted above. Recall the reference to man as a ‘shadow of a dream’. This is a line from Pindar, not an insignificant reference.[[68]](#footnote-67) Pindar was a paradigmatically aristocratic poet all of whose poems deal with the *agôn*: they are odes to victors of athletic contests, in this case a wrestler from Aegina called Aristomenes. If one looks at the surrounding context of the line, it is clear that the form of pessimism that Pindar is expressing is not exactly Schopenhauerian:

Creatures of a day! What is man? What is he not?

He is the dream of a shadow; yet when Zeus-sent

brightness comes

a brilliant light shines upon mankind and their life is serene.[[69]](#footnote-68)

Pindar is not condemning all existence (that would not suit his purpose at all). Rather he is suggesting that through his victory Aristomenes has in some sense overcome the worthlessness of life itself, and it has become something ‘serene', even divine. This is wholly of a piece with the view of the *agôn* as a source of redemption, the solution to the problem of existence, as well as Nietzsche’s point in ‘The Greek State’: the fact that life has no inherent value is important because it suggests that value must be *achieved* in some way. The genius of the Greek state consisted in the embodiment of this truth. The reason Nietzsche seems in both cases willing to affirm the outcome is that in both cases the condition of mere life is something that must be overcome. By any ordinary use of the term, this is a pessimistic view. It is also not a one-off: the perspective of these two essays is echoed throughout Nietzsche’s later works. I turn there now.

**4. Later Nietzsche: Life in ascent and descent**

Turning to the works of the ‘mature’ Nietzsche, there is much more material to work with. Lest this project become unmanageable, I will try to restrict my attention somewhat narrowly. I will try to show that the very same themes found in ‘Homer’s Contest’ and ‘The Greek State’ and their corresponding view of life, are both picked up and elaborated in the mature works.

To begin, let us return to one of the topics that features’ most prominently in Burckhardt’s discussion of Greek pessimism: suicide and voluntary death. Nietzsche’s thoughts on this topic are important for my purposes for several reasons. At a number of points, Nietzsche speaks favorably of suicide, and disfavorably of the instinct that seeks to hold on to life at any cost. In *Human All Too Human*, for example we find the following passage.

*Old age and death*. - Disregarding the demands made by religion one might well ask: why should it be more laudable for an old man who senses the decline of his powers to await his slow exhaustion and dissolution than in full consciousness to set himself a limit? Suicide is in this case a wholly natural and obvious action, which as a victory for reason ought fairly to awaken reverence: and did awaken it in those ages when the heads of Greek philosophy and the most upright Roman patriots were accustomed to die by suicide. On the other hand, the desire to carry on existing from day to day, anxiously consulting physicians and observing scrupulous rules of conduct, without the strength to get any closer to the actual goal of one's life, is much less respectworthy. - The religions are rich in excuses for evading the demand of suicide: in this way they ingratiate themselves with those who are in love with life.[[70]](#footnote-69)

The Greeks, according to Burckhardt, regarded stubborn attachment to life in face of serious illness to be a contemptible trait, one which merited the disparaging attribution of *philopsuchia*. Here Nietzsche makes the same point. In doing so, moreover, he not only explicitly identifies this sentiment as ancient Greek and Roman, but even seems to allude in the last line to *philopsuchia* with his reference to ‘those who are in love with life’.

Nor are these isolated sentiments. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in a section titled ‘On Free Death’ we find much the same sentiment, although he extends it somewhat. Dying too late, we are told, is also a mistake. Death at the right time, by contrast, is something to be admired, even celebrated,[[71]](#footnote-70) especially, but not only, when it is the choice of the decedent himself:

My death I praise to you, the free death that comes to me because *I* want.

And when will I want it? – Whoever has a goal and an heir wants death at the right time for his goal and heir.

And out of reverence for his goal and heir he will no longer hang withered wreaths in the sanctuary of life.

The mention of laying ‘withered wreaths in the sanctuary of life’ is clearly a reference to those who continue to value their own lives once their purpose or prime has passed: ‘some become too old even for their truths and victories; a toothless mouth no longer has the right to every truth’. Using a fruit metaphor, he suggests that it is better to die before one becomes ‘ripe’.

The *Zarathustra* passage, moreover, contains at least one clear allusion to the ancient Greek context. It occurs near the beginning of the passage, immediately following Zarathustra’s injunction to die at the right time:

To be sure, how could the person who never lives at the right time ever die at the right time? Would that he were never born! – Thus I advise the superfluous.

The reference to never being born is clearly an allusion to the *mê phunai* of Silenus, Theognis, and Sophocles. Hence, it seems that Nietzsche, through Zarathustra, is signalling partial agreement with that conclusion. It is only partial agreement though: Zarathustra is not condemning life as such, all life, but he is suggesting that life of certain types, specifically, which has failed to develop or acquire purpose and value, would have been best avoided.

In the *Twilight of Idols*, he makes this point even clearer. To die from old age, from natural causes, Nietzsche says, is to die at the wrong time; it is to die a coward’s death. True love of life should dispose us against this: ‘From love of *life* one ought to desire to die differently from this: freely, consciously, not accidentally, not suddenly overtaken’.[[72]](#footnote-71) Hence, for Nietzsche, not only is suicide not inherently at odds with the ethos of life-affirmation. On the contrary life-affirmation positively requires it sometimes. This is an important idea, one which deserves more exploration, but for now I take it that the idea is that the affirmation of life implies a certain respect or admiration for life’s highest forms and, conversely, a sort of aversion to those forms that are furthest removed from this. To use a loose analogy, one might compare the revulsion that a music lover feels when hearing a particularly bad rendition of her favourite symphony, or the displeasure that a lover of literature feels when seeing a great book adapted into a tacky Hollywood film. Or, a bit of a closer analogy: think of how a low quality sequel to a classic film does a disservice to the series, by extending it beyond its proper ending.[[73]](#footnote-72)

In Nietzsche’s comments about suicide and voluntary death, then, we find not only a clear example of the influence of classical antiquity, but we also find precisely the same idea that we found in ‘The Greek State’. Just as there we found the idea that life in its ordinary form is of disvalue, and that value, rather, is something that must be achieved, here too we find the idea that suicide is justified or, more challengingly, obligatory, when that purpose or source of value has expired or is otherwise missing. Nietzsche’s thoughts about suicide, then, are rooted in a considered view of the value of life, one which dates to at least 1872.

Yet, the later works allow us to add substantial depth to this picture. Consider again the passage from the *Twilight* about suicide just quoted. In that passage Nietzsche’s immediate opponent is the Christian moral view of suicide, which regards it as wrong because of the some value that attaches to life itself. Nietzsche, as we have seen, denies this value. Somewhat unexpectedly, towards the end of the passage he introduces a new adversary: Schopenhauerian pessimism. Schopenhauerian pessimists are *décadents*, as Nietzsche puts it, and the phenomenon of this form of pessimism in a society is a symptom (rather than cause) of decadence or morbidity.[[74]](#footnote-73) Elsewhere he associates Christianity itself with decadence.[[75]](#footnote-74) Hence in this passage, Nietzsche’s two main opponents are both expressions of decadence, which, paradoxically have come to opposite views about the value of life, and, at least, different views about suicide. Beneath this opposition, though, there lies a deep symmetry. Both proceed from a kind of exhaustion with life, characteristic of decadence.[[76]](#footnote-75) In the case of Schopenhauerian pessimism, the result is the denial or negation of life. In the case of Christianity, the result is a denial or negation of *this* life, in favour of the next. Both evaluate life--all life--in categorical terms, and this is what allows Nietzsche to lump them together in the *Twilight* passage. Nietzsche’s whole point is that not all lives are equally worth living, either for the good (Christianity) or for the ill (Schopenhauerian pessimism).[[77]](#footnote-76)

The fact that both great *décadent* movements--Christianity and Schopenhauerian pessimism--eliminate distinctions in this way, is not a coincidence. Later on in *Twilight*, Nietzsche makes clear that this tendency to eliminate distinction is itself a characteristic of decadence. The weakness and decadence of our age is reflected by our virtues--‘our virtues of work, of unpretentiousness, of fair play, of scientificality [?]’:

Our virtues are conditioned, are demanded by our weakness… ‘Equality’, a certain actual rendering similar of which the theory of ‘equal rights’ is only the expression, belongs essentially to decline: the chasm between man and man, class and class, the multiplicity of types, the will to be oneself, to stand out -- that which I call pathos of distance--characterises every strong age.[[78]](#footnote-77)

Strong ages, for Nietzsche, are noble ages--ages in which the values of the aristocracy are dominant.[[79]](#footnote-78) In these cultures, inequality, the principle of hierarchy, the disposition to distinguish between higher and lower, better and worse, is central. By contrast ‘declining life, the diminution of all organising power, that is to say the power of separating, of opening up chasms, of ranking above and below, formulates itself in the sociology of today as the ideal’.[[80]](#footnote-79) This idea is, of course, familiar from ‘The Greek State’ but, we can now see how it can be extended even to such seemingly unrelated questions as the morality of suicide. Nietzsche’s view, in which I locate his pessimism, is that life in its common form is lacking in value. The source of value in a life is external or acquired, creating the possibility of orders of rank and difference between lives. This is why Nietzsche thinks that suicide is often justified or obligatory.

This is also, I take it, an important part of what is wrong with Zarathustra's Last Man,[[81]](#footnote-80) himself a paradigmatic *décadent*. The Last Man has lost the ability to draw distinctions between higher and lower types. This is why the last man ‘dislike[s] hearing the word “contempt” [Verachtung] spoken of [him]’ and he ‘can no longer have contempt for [verachten] himself’, despite being, as Zarathustra says, ‘the most contemptible [Verächtlichsten] man’. The implication clearly is that there are some degraded forms of life that are worthy, in some sense, of our contempt, and the loss of the ability to feel contempt is itself a symptom of decline. This is also why the age of the Last Man is a time at which all distinctions between people are eliminated (‘Everyone wants the same thing, everyone is the same’[[82]](#footnote-81)) and all have been reduced to the herd (‘No herdsman and one herd’). I take it that this same loss of the ability to draw distinctions is implicated in the Last Man’s hedonism. In a condition of exhaustion, where one has lost the drive toward any higher purpose or goal,[[83]](#footnote-82) one defaults to the most basic and widespread desires, the desire for pleasure, comfort, the aversion to pain, difficulty.[[84]](#footnote-83) Hence, the last men ‘have their little pleasure for the day and their little pleasure for the night’ and even work is undertaken only for entertainment.

The Last Man, then, provides a striking contrast to the noble taste for rank and distinction, which lies at the root of the *agôn*. The ancient Greeks in general and the aristocracy in particular, were, for Nietzsche, driven by an unusually strong will to power. This, in contrast to the classicist interpretation of the Greeks, Nietzsche identifies at the very heart of Greek culture. He makes this clear in a passage in *Twilight* strongly echoing ‘Homer’s Contest’:

From scenting out ‘beautiful souls’, ‘golden means’ and other perfections in the Greeks, from admiring in them such things as their repose in grandeur, their ideal disposition, their sublime simplicity--from this ‘sublime simplicity’,[[85]](#footnote-84) a *niaiserie allemande* when all is said and done, I was preserved by the psychologist in me. I saw their strongest instinct, the will to power, I saw them trembling at the intractable force of this drive -- I saw all their institutions evolve out of protective measures designed for mutual security against the explosive material within them. The tremendous internal tension then discharged itself in fearful and ruthless external hostility: the city states tore one another to pieces so that the citizens of each of them might find peace within himself. One needed to be strong: danger was close at hand - it lurked everywhere.[[86]](#footnote-85)

These institutions, prominently including the *agôn*, as Nietzsche goes on to make clear, were means for containing the ‘overabundance of life’ of these people. The philosophers of the Socratic schools were, by contrast ‘the *décadents* of Hellenism, the counter-movement against the old, the noble taste’.

If this much is right, then it not only shows that Nietzsche in *Twilight* remains attached to the basic view of the Greeks found in ‘Homer’s Contest’ but it adds an additional element. The agonal instinct just is the will to power, and the overabundance of the will to power just is the overabundance of life, to which Nietzsche frequently refers.[[87]](#footnote-86) This condition expresses itself in tireless, often destructive competition, and in a certain set of values--prominent among which is a hierarchical view of life. When we combine this picture with the view that life in its common form as ‘contemptible’ or worse, then it fits well the Greek contempt for the common, for the banausic, for the many.

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We are now in a position to return to the passage with which we started, *GS* 370. In that text the distinction between life in ascent and life in decline features prominently. Every art and every philosophy, we are told, presupposes suffering and sufferers: ‘But there are two kinds of sufferers: first, those who suffer from the over-fullness of life--they want a Dionysian art and likewise a tragic view of life, a tragic insight--and then those who suffer from the impoverishment of life and seek rest, stillness’. What we have seen above allows us to give content to the idea of suffering from the over-fullness of life. The Greeks at their apex were the paradigmatic sufferers of this type: their mode of life was characterised by the will to power, the agonal instinct, in an unusually strong form. This gave rise to a great deal of suffering, both in the form of the desire for distinction itself and in the conflicts that this desire engendered. This lends itself to a taste for tragedy and the tragic because tragedy, like the *agôn*, on Nietzsche’s reading, is fundamentally a celebration of the will. Hence, in *Twilight*: ‘Bravery and composure in the face of a powerful enemy, great hardship, a problem that arouses aversion--it is this victorious condition which the tragic artist singles out, which he glorifies’.[[88]](#footnote-87)

As representatives of the impoverishment of life, Nietzsche places Epicurus alongside Schopenhauer and Wagner. Epicurus is the opposite of a Dionysian pessimist, we are told, and the forerunner of Christianity. The association between Epicurus and Christianity is odd at first glance. After all, while the ascetic Christian finds value in suffering and locates the worth of life in morality, the Epicurean is a hedonist. Similarly, while the vulgar Christian locates the source of life’s value in reward from God in the afterlife, an important part of Epicurus’ philosophy consisted in arguing that the gods take no notice of us, and that there is no afterlife.[[89]](#footnote-88) However, I think Nietzsche intends to be intentionally paradoxical here in order to bring out the essential commonality between Epicureanism and Christianity. For Epicurus happiness in its truest, most reliable form comes from the diminution of desire, eliminating all desires except those that are both natural and necessary. Among the desires that must be eliminated are precisely the competitive instincts, the drive for fame and honour that defined Greek culture, for Nietzsche all the way to the classical period.

Epicurus, then, is a particularly good representative of decadence in Greek philosophy, better than either Plato or Socrates. Socrates and Socratism, to be sure, represented a fundamental shift away from the aristocratic sensibility of the Greek tragic age.[[90]](#footnote-89) But even Socrates did not reject the *agôn* as such; rather, he invented a new form of it.[[91]](#footnote-90) Plato too has much of the aristocratic sensibilities in him. Most importantly Plato and many others, even among the Socratics, shared the intense will to power on the basis of which Nietzsche tell us that they secretly longed to be tyrants, and consoled themselves with the idea that a great many more of their fellow citizens were slaves than would appear to meet the eye.[[92]](#footnote-91) Epicurus, by contrast, recognizes even these sublimated forms of the will to power as objectionable,[[93]](#footnote-92) and formulates a philosophy whose cornerstone is precisely the diminution of the will.[[94]](#footnote-93) This presumably accounts for Nietzsche’s association of Epicureanism with Christianity, which he, in turn, thinks of as a forerunner to a potential European Buddhism.[[95]](#footnote-94)

The takeaway for our purposes is that if what is definitive of Epicureanism as the opposite of Dionysian pessimism is a condemnation of the will, then, conversely, the glorification or affirmation of the will should be central to Dionysian pessimism. This brings us to the core question: in what sense is this still a form of pessimism? The key part of the text for my purposes occurs shortly after the discussion of Epicurean and Christian decadence:

The desire for *destruction*, change, and becoming can be an expression of an overflowing energy that is pregnant with future (my *terminus* for this is, as is known, ‘Dionysian’); but it can also be the hatred of the ill-constituted, disinherited, and underprivileged, who destroy, *must* destroy, because what exists, indeed all existences, all being, outrages and provokes them. To understand this feeling, consider our anarchists closely.[[96]](#footnote-95)

I propose that the distinction between two forms of desire for change, becoming, even destruction, here is best understood on the model found in ‘Homer’s Contest’ between the good Eris, whose aim is to lift the subject up, and the bad Eris whose aim is to tear the opponent down. The anarchists of the last sentence, as Nietzsche repeats elsewhere are men of *ressentiment*, fuelled by hatred of the powerful, the rich, the better off.[[97]](#footnote-96) From weakness the prospect of elevating themselves to the status of these others is or is perceived to be impossible, so the form that their envy takes is primarily destructive,[[98]](#footnote-97) directed at ‘levelling-down’. The strong, those who feel a robust sense of possibility whose future is ‘pregnant’, as Nietzsche puts it, are capable of a different form of Eris, which may also seek destruction but of a different sort.[[99]](#footnote-98)

This picture makes good sense of why Nietzsche calls his pessimism in the final lines of the section his *proprium* and *ipsissimum*. It is his *proprium* because it encompasses central elements of his philosophy including the will to power, the celebration of appearance, the aesthetic justification of life. But it is also distinctively Greek and distinctively pessimistic. It is Greek in the sense that it is to a large extent a version of the aristocratic outlook that is so central to Greek culture. By that same token it is, in a sense, pessimistic: the aristocratic view of life involves at its core, a demanding evaluative standard, by which most of mankind falls short. It involves a hierarchy on which most of mankind is near the bottom. It is a view that elevates the exception over the common, the latter being seen as miserable, pitiable, or contemptible. It is an agonistic ethos, on which only a few can be winners. As Nietzsche puts it somewhere, ‘it has been what is rare in man…that made men noble',[[100]](#footnote-99) by contrast ‘what can be common has ever but little value’.[[101]](#footnote-100)

**Conclusion**

The basic thought that has driven my project here is, in a way, quite simple: Nietzsche was deeply steeped in the literature of Greek antiquity, and anyone who has read much from the Greeks is able to recognize in those texts a view of life that is deeply different from our own. It is inegalitarian, demanding, harsh, elitist. In a word, it is aristocratic. By virtue of its harsh assessment of the common, *hoi polloi*, life in its common form, this aristocratic outlook can sensibly be called pessimistic. I have tried to show here that this Greek perspective, or something deeply influenced by it, can be found throughout Nietzsche’s career. Nietzsche does deserve to be called a pessimist, in some sense: his is not a Schopenahauerian pessimism, but a Greek pessimism.[[102]](#footnote-101)

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The following abbreviations and translations were used. The German is from KSA.

*A* = *The Antichrist*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale. London: Penguin, 2003.

*BGE* = *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale. London: Penguin, 2003.

*BT* = *The Birth of Tragedy*. Translated by S. Whiteside. London: Penguin, 2003.

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1. Italics original. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. The use of *proprium* here is interesting. The common meaning is 'not common with others, one’s own, special, particular, proper' (Lewis and Short *sv*.). In the Aristotelian philosophical tradition, though, the term has a technical meaning: a *proprium* (*idion* in Greek) is a characteristic which is not a part of the essence but follows from the essence (e.g., risibility is a proprium of human beings). The common meaning of proprium seems to work in this passage, but it is also possible that Nietzsche has the technical sense in mind. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Indeed, Nietzsche himself often speaks of ‘pessimism’ without qualification as his adversary, by which he apparently means to refer to the kind of pessimism espoused by Schopenhauer (see, e.g., *D* 114, *GS* 134, *BGE* 225). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. For life-affirmation, see, e.g., Reginster 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. I know of two book-length treatments of Nietzsche’s relationship to the *Pessimismusstreit*: Hassan 2023 and Dahlkvist 2007. Both contain much valuable discussion, but neither has much to say about Nietzsche’s own alleged pessimism. Similarly, Came 2022 persuasively connects Nietzsche’s interest in life affirmation to theodicy, but says little about the sense in which he may still be a pessimist (see next note). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. This reading is very common. See, e.g., Soll 1988, Came 2004, 41-2 (cf. Came 2022, 39-40), and Dahlkvist 2007, 232. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. *Pessimismus* comes to German from the French *pessimisme*, which in turn, is coined in response to the *optimisme* of Voltaire’s Leibniz (see *Candide, ou l'Optimisme*). *Pessimiste* first occurs in the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française* in 1838 (*pessimisme* is only added in 1878) and is defined as 'Celui qui croit que tout va mal, qui voit tout en noir' [‘someone who believes that everything is going poorly, who sees everything in black’]. On the popular meaning, then, not unlike the meaning today, pessimism implies a negative evaluative outlook. In philosophical discussions, matters are somewhat more complex, but as Dahlkvist puts it, the 'primary meaning' of pessimism is 'the notion that existence cannot be justified, which means as much as that non-existence is preferable to existence' (2007, 13-14). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. See *Parerga and Paralipomena* XIII, 309-10, which I will return to below. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. After all, it is plausible that in calling himself a pessimist, Nietzsche is speaking loosely (he has been known to do this). And even if a merely descriptive view might not be pessimistic strictly speaking it makes a certain amount of sense to call such a view pessimist, given that we ordinarily take suffering to be bad. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. References to this kind of pessimism occur at *BT*, ‘Attempt at Self-criticism’ 1, *HH* II, 7, and numerous places in the *Nachlass* (e.g. *WP* 80, 91, 134). Cf. *BGE* 192. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. 1898-1902 in four volumes, edited by Jacob Oeri. This work has never been translated in its entirety into English, but an abridgment has been translated under the title *The Greeks and Greek Civilization* by Oswyn Murray and Sheila Stern. In what follows I shall provide the reference to the Oeri edition followed by a reference to the Murray-Stern [MS] translation. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. I shall have more to say about this background in section 3 below. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
13. *TI* 4. This compliment is quite noteworthy because Greek culture and history were not Burckhardt’s scholarly specialities. He calls himself a dilettante in the subject and refused to publish the *Kulturgeschichte* during his lifetime because he feared that it would be attacked by philologists (Weintraub 1988, 275). These fears turned out to have been well-placed, for after its posthumous publication it was the target of harsh criticism from many philologists, including Nietzsche’s own most famous philological foe, Wilamowitz-Moellendorff (*ibid*., 274). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
14. Or, for that matter, assume that those commonalities that do exist are cases of Burckhardt influencing Nietzsche. As many have pointed out, there is plenty of reason to believe that Burckhardt and Nietzsche independently converged on certain views (e.g. Nietzsche was already interested in the *agôn* while he was a student, before meeting Burckhardt) and it is also possible that Nietzsche influenced Burckhardt in some ways despite the latter being senior. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
15. As Weintraub 1988, 277 points out, Burckhardt avoided mixing philosophical speculation in the work and was distrustful of Nietzsche’s philosophy. Cf. Burckhardt 1943, 15-16. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
16. Burckhardt cites, e.g., Sophocles 'There is no one without suffering, the happy are those who have the least of it' (frag. 376 Nauck, quoted on 2: 405, MS 101). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
17. 2: 392; MS 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
18. 2: 403-4; MS 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
19. 2: 405, MS 101, [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
20. See *BT* 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
21. 2: 410-3: MS 104-6. The classic formulation of this sentiment is from Sophocles (*Oedipus at Colonus* 1211, quoted on 2: 410; MS 105):

    Not to be born is best, when all is reckoned,

    But when a man has seen the light of day

    The next best thing by far is to go back

    Where he came from, and as quick as he can.

    The idea is found in many other places in Greek literature, however. E.g., Burckhardt, like Nietzsche, refers to a dialogue from a lost work of Aristotle’s between Midas and Silenus where the latter expresses the sentiment (p. 105). See also Theognis, 425-428; Herodotus, I 32; Plutarch, *Consol. ad Apoll*., 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
22. About a third of Burckhardt’s discussion of Greek pessimism by page count is devoted to suicide and voluntary death. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
23. See *Parerga and Paralipomena* XIII, 309-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
24. See *World as Will and Representation* Vol. I, sec. 69, pp. 471-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
25. Interestingly, Schopenhauer himself points out that the ancients had a different view of suicide both from his own disapproval and the harsher Christian condemnation. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
26. For example, the Leucadian rock, where it was common for people suffering from romantic disappointment to commit suicide by jumping into the sea (2: 427; MS, 116). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
27. This theme appears elsewhere in Burckhardt’s discussion as well. For example, he points out that it was socially acceptable to speak frankly to old people about the proximity of their own death (2:395-6; MS 94-5). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
28. See 2: 428-430; MS 117-119. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
29. 2: 428; MS 117, citing *Republic* 407D. Notice the echo with *TI* 36, which I will return to below. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
30. 2: 431-2; MS 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
31. 2: 432-3; MS 120-1. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
32. Frag. 866 Nauck, quoted on 2: 433; MS 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
33. 2: 433; MS 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
34. *Aemilius* 26.7.4-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
35. 4.2. Translation from Laks and Most 2016 with minor modifications. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
36. 5.1-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
37. *Il*. IX 413. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
38. 2: 377, MS 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
39. See *Genesis* 3:18-19. This is not to say, of course, that the view of labour in the Bible is negative overall. Even in the Garden of Eden, Adam is supposed to work (*Gen*. 2:15), and there are many passages which praise labour. E.g., *Ecclesiastes* 3:12-13, 22, 5:12; *Ephesians* 4:28. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
40. 4: 123; MS 184. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
41. 4: 123-4; MS, 185. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
42. At least not to the same degree. It is true that one finds praise of work in a number of writers, most notably Hesiod (see, e.g., *WD* 311), as Burckhardt acknowledges (*ibid*.). [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
43. 4: 124; MS 185: 'The members of the ruling class by right of birth were no longer a small minority; instead there came into being a large urban aristocracy, living chiefly on income from property, whose aim in life, and ideal was combat--not so much in the military sense as in that of equals pitted against each other. The whole nation was convinced that this was the highest thing on earth [...] Many sites for competition thus developed, and many types of contests, and gymnastics as the preparation for them became the chief purpose of education. However this way of life was incompatible with any economic activity; the *agôn* occupied the whole of existence'. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
44. *Iliad* XI 784. Cf. VI 208. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
45. 2: 396, MS 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
46. References to these two essays are from KSA 1, accompanied by a reference to the corresponding page in Diethe’s translation. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
47. In discussing these works I will have occasion to say a bit about *The* *Birth of Tragedy* as well. I am devoting comparatively little attention to that work, perhaps the most important work. There are two main reasons. First, many of the themes dealt with in the *Birth*, mainly the nature of the Dionysian, are simply too complex to be suitably dealt with here. Second, I believe that much of Nietzsche’s thinking from this period that is most relevant to my topic was intentionally excluded from *BT*, perhaps because it displeased Wagner. I shall say a bit more about this below when I turn to 'The Greek State' below. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
48. 783, Diethe 174. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
49. 785, Diethe 175 [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
50. 2: 405, MS 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
51. Cf. *WP* 23: 'Nihilism is the *normal* condition' (italics original). It is likely that in making this point Nietzsche means to respond to certain pessimists. E.g., Plümacher (1879, 69) presents pessimism as an achievement of a mature people: 'To the unreflective mind in the juvenile age of individuals as well as of the race, life in itself is no problem'. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
52. For the Orphics, the part of our nature that comes from the Titans. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
53. 785-6; Diethe 176. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
54. *Works and Days* 12-26, quoted by Nietzsche, 786, Diethe 176. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
55. That is not to say eliminating. An important part of Nietzsche’s view seems to be that the good Eris cannot be fully severed from the bad Eris. This type of unity of opposites is, of course, an important, recurring theme throughout Nietzsche’s work (we will see it again in 'The Greek State'), as well as, incidentally, much of Burckhardt’s (see, e.g., the discussion in *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* of the way in which the great cultural production of that period is linked to the chaotic, even barbarous political environment). [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
56. *BT* 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
57. 784; Diethe 175. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
58. Cf. *Zarathustra* I, 'Goals'. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
59. As he was writing what would later become *The Birth*, Nietzsche wrote an essay titled 'The Origin and Aim of Tragedy' which dealt heavily with the social and political background to Greek tragedy; in 1871 he discussed this essay with Richard and Cosima Wagner. Presumably as a result of the unfavourable reaction of the couple, Nietzsche purged the social and political material from the essay which was later incorporated in the *The Birth*. See Ruehl 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
60. 765, Diethe 165. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
61. Notice that in this formula the lack of value to work in itself is not a function of the fact that work is painful. As Gemes and Sykes 2014 show, for Nietzsche the problem of existence has more to do with lack of meaning than with suffering as such. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
62. Presumably this is why Nietzsche somewhat surprisingly calls Kant a 'philosophical labourer' (*BGE* 211): because much of Kant’s moral philosophy consists in justifications for already dominant values. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
63. 764; Diethe 164. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
64. This sort of view of life is not uncommon today, and it is not in itself especially pessimistic. Many philosophers today would agree that life itself is value neutral (see, e.g., Kagan 2012, 259), but also think that value is quite easily and indeed usually achieved due to the abundant opportunities for pleasure that life provides. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
65. E.g., in the *Untimely Meditations*, we find the idea that the 'great majority' are 'taken individually, the least valuable exemplars' of life (III 6). For the later works, see, e.g., *BGE* 43, 61, 258, *GS* 55 (see next section). [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
66. *BT* 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
67. Huddleston 2014 has argued persuasively that the slaves themselves, on this picture, benefit in a way by their subjugation: they thereby achieve a sort of purpose which is capable of conferring value or dignity to their lives. This might seem to conflict with my interpretation of Nietzsche’s pessimism, because it might be taken to mean that even the lives of the slaves are good (I thank Ken Gemes for raising this point). I don’t think that this is a problem for my account, though. Briefly, it may be true that these lives achieve a sort of value in this circumstance, but that is consistent with their being bad in many other ways, taken on their own. A necessary evil, is valuable qua necessary, but it retains in itself a negative character. Nietsche himself seems to have the negative character of slavery in mind, when he describes the Greek view of it as a ‘necessary disgrace’ associated with ‘the horrifying, predatory aspect of the Sphinx of nature’ (767, Diethe 166). [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
68. This same line is also cited by Burckhardt 2: 409, MS 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
69. Verity 2008 translation. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
70. *HH* I 80. Cf. *HH* II, *WS* 185: 'What is more rational, to stop the machine when the work one demands of it has been completed – or to let it run on until it stops of its own accord, that is to say until it is ruined?'. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
71. Hence, Zarathustra complains: 'Everyone regards dying as important; but death is not yet a festival. As of yet people have not learned how to consecrate the most beautiful festivals’. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
72. *TI* 36, Italics original. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
73. I thank Ken Gemes for this analogy. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
74. Cf. *TI*, ‘Errors’, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
75. See, e.g., *A* 7, 17, 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
76. Cf. *GS* 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
77. I take it that this is also why in *TI*, ‘Problem’ 2, Nietzsche is dismissive about the very question of the value of life. Individual lives may have value or disvalue, but it is simply a mistake to attribute value or disvalue to life itself (something which Nietzsche does not do on my interpretation of his pessimism). Hence, my interpretation of that passage differs from both the epistemic reading, supported by Elgat 2018, and the metaethical reading offered by Came 2022, 50-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
78. 'Expeditions', 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
79. Cf. *BGE* 257, *A* 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
80. *Ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
81. *Z* I, 'Prologue' 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
82. Cf. *BGE* 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
83. Even such an ordinary goal as the desire for wealth is foreign to the Last Man: 'Nobody grows rich or poor any more: both are too much of a burden'. And again this aimlessness is connected to the Last Man’s egalitarianism: ‘Who still wants to rule? Who obey? Both are too much of a burden’. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
84. Hence, I take it that for Nietzsche what hedonism, democratic egalitarianism, and the morality of pity have in common is that they are expressions of decadence or exhaustion. This is why he links them at, e.g., *BGE* 44 (cf. eKGWB/NF [1885]: 37 [8], *D* 174, *GS* 338, *BGE* 225). Cf. Also Nietzsche comments connecting democracy to decadence at, e.g., 'Attempt at Self-criticism' 4 and 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
85. ‘Hohen Einfalt’. As Tim Stoll pointed out to me, this is a clear reference to Winckelmann’s ‘edle Einfalt’ (noble simplicity). [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
86. *TI*, 'Ancients' 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
87. Cf. *BGE* 259: 'life is will to power'. For discussion see Reginster 2006, Ch. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
88. 'Expeditions', 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
89. See *Letter to Menoeceus* 124-7 (where, incidentally, Epicurus invokes the dictum of Silenus as the view which he wishes to avoid). For the contrast and affinity between Epicureanism and Christianity see *A* 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
90. As Nietzsche puts it in *TI*, 'Socrates' 3: 'Socrates belonged, in his origins, to the lowest order: Socrates was rabble [...] Was Socrates a Greek at all?' [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
91. *TI*, 'Socrates' 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
92. *GS* 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
93. See *BGE* 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
94. What Gemes 2008, calls ‘affective nihilism'. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
95. See, e.g., *GM* I 5, *BGE* 202. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
96. Italics original. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
97. See, e.g., *GM* II 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
98. It can also be creative, in a way. After all, *ressentiment* can also become pregnant and give birth to new values (*GM* I 10). But even in that case the starting point is hatred (*GM* I 15), and the values are based on negation (*GM* I 7). [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
99. Cf. *WP* 33 where we are told that one of the causes of pessimism (understood as pessimism of resignation) is that the most powerful, 'pregnant with future' (zukunftsvollsten) desires have been slandered. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
100. *GS* 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
101. *BGE* 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
102. I am grateful to the participants at the 2024 ISNS in Porto and the London Nietzsche Seminar for their comments and suggestions. Comments and questions from Ken Gemes, Andrew Huddleston, Brian Leiter, Bernard Reginster, Tim Stoll and others significantly improved the paper. Thanks also to James Kinkaid and Ken Gemes for their written comments. Finally, special thanks to Tim Stoll for his invaluable feedback and conversation at various stages in the development of this essay. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)