

# Nietzsche: Interpretation of the Primordial

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Nietzsche's works explicate various interpretations of the effects of the primordial on human behavior and culture. Amongst the most notable concepts that Nietzsche advanced is the innovative conception of contextualizing life in terms of the dynamic tension between the Dionysian Principle and the Apollonian Principle. This conception appears in Nietzsche's first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, the implications of this conceptualization mature and develop in tandem with the sophistication of Nietzsche's reasoning. Accordingly, Nietzsche's conception of the Dionysian and Apollonian serves as a fundamental predicate from which his perspectives on chaos and cosmos, subjectivism and objectivism, reification and the myth of objectivity essentially arise. Some may accuse Nietzsche of not being a systematic thinker. Contrarily, an attentive reader will readily discern the conceptual interrelation of many of Nietzsche's core ideas, which resonate throughout his various works. As such, Nietzsche reveals himself to be a highly associative thinker, whose penetrating insight apprehends the subtleties of contextualization.

Nietzsche's employment of mythic amplification depicts the two Greek gods of art, Dionysus and Apollo, in the context of opposite and warring principles that co-exist in a dynamic state of tension. Dionysus (Bacchus) is the orgiastic god of the vine, wine being a most apt symbol of the paradoxical nature of the god himself. As such, Dionysus is a god of revelry, ecstasy, *joie de vivre*, inspiration and instinct. Yet, the Dionysus that Euripide's *Bacchae* poignantly depicts, also represents cruelty, savageness, violence, madness and suffering.<sup>1</sup> The Dionysian Principle represents a realm of paradox where the brutal and the blissful exists simultaneously. It is a realm of primal, titanic and instinctual forces that regards no law extrinsic to itself. Julius Evola in *The Hermetic Tradition*, aptly describes such a nature which is symbolized by Oroboros, the serpent swallowing its tail: "It rejoices in itself, it feeds on itself, it dominates and subjugates itself."<sup>2</sup> The essential nature of the Dionysian realm is remarkably well captured by the symbol of Oroboros. Accordingly, the nature of the Dionysian exemplifies the principles of wholeness, unity, life, death, regeneration and transcendence. Nietzsche describes the Dionysian realm as "the mysterious primordial unity."<sup>3</sup> An encounter with the Dionysian is fraught with danger, for this fiery and volatile primordial energy is extremely potent, raw, and amoral. It is experienced as a direct and powerful influx of energy without the benefit of any filtering mechanism to separate the blissful and restrain the brutal. Accordingly, Dionysian festivals "centered on extravagant sexual licentiousness, whose waves overwhelmed all family life and its venerable traditions; the most savage natural instincts were unleashed, including even that horrible mixture of sensuality and cruelty," which had always seemed to [Nietzsche] the real 'witches brew'.<sup>4</sup>

Conversely, Apollo "the shining one," is the god of repose, cultivated aesthetic emotion and intellectual contemplation. Apollo epitomizes logic and reason, personifying knowledge of pattern and order, contra to the wild chaos of Dionysus. Nietzsche identifies the Apollonian as the "Principle of Individuation," for the reason that Apollo embodies the quintessence of all that is rational.<sup>5</sup> What is rational is necessarily derived from separation- from extracting a portion (ratio) from the whole. Moreover, the Apollonian dynamic requires constraining the instinct in favor of the intellect. "Apollo, the god of all plastic energies, is at the same time a soothsaying god."<sup>6</sup> As a god of "plastic energies," (an analogous term for the media of the plastic arts), the function of the Apollonian nature is not only to recognize the primal forces, but also to possess the requisite knowledge and skill to reformulate and manipulate their properties so as to be able to generate a pattern which can be applied to and impose upon the chaos an order out of which manifestation can arise. Consequently, Nietzsche correlates the Apollonian with *maya*, (the realm of illusion), stating that, "Apollo himself the glorious divine image of the principium individuationis, through whose gestures and eyes all the joy and wisdom of 'illusion,' together with its beauty, speak to us."<sup>7</sup> The rational nature of the

perception of individuation is necessarily subjective. That is, the focus of the attention shifts towards identification with an "I" that is a separate and distinct entity. Thus, a direct cognition of the reality of the primordial unity of subject and object becomes a disorienting experience that collapses one's subjective perception of being individuated, and as such leads to a realization of the holistic nature of the Dionysian, "where everything subjective vanishes into complete self-forgetfulness."<sup>8</sup>

If, for the moment we do not consider the question of our own 'reality,' if we conceive of our empirical existence, and of that of the world in general, as a continually manifested representation of the primal unity, we shall then have to look upon ... a still higher appeasement of the primordial desire for mere appearance.<sup>9</sup>

Therefore, Nietzsche regards individuation as a fragmentation of the creative unity of life, holding that it is "the primal cause of evil" and the "origin of all suffering," which he claims is "something objectionable in itself."<sup>10</sup>

On Nietzsche's view, the world itself is fundamentally a chaos ruled by chance. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche states that:

The astral order in which we live is an exception; this order and the relative duration that depends on it have again made possible an exception of exceptions: the formation of the organic. The overall character of the world is, to the contrary, in all eternity chaos - in the sense not of a lack of necessity but a lack of order, structure, form, beauty, wisdom, and everything else named by our aesthetic anthropomorphisms.<sup>11</sup>

The characteristics that Nietzsche associated with life are growth, creativity, change and constant fluctuation. Actually, Nietzsche affirmed Heraclitus' notion of life as a constant state of flux and becoming. Similar to David Hume's position in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Nietzsche did not conceive of a deterministic world ruled by that which might ensue at the interface of causal events.<sup>12</sup> Nietzsche's Will to Power claims that, "A necessary sequence of states does not imply a causal relationship between them ... A 'thing' is the sum of its effects."<sup>13</sup> For Nietzsche, what "is now" present, is predicated on the unstable conflation of creative energies whose properties result in the emergence into manifestation of that which is continually becoming. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche informs us that, "we ourselves are a kind of chaos."<sup>14</sup> Yet, this chaos is pregnant with affirmative possibility, as Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* proclaims, "I say unto you: one must still have chaos in oneself to be able to give birth to a dancing star. I say unto you: you still have chaos in yourselves."<sup>15</sup> Thus, we are tasked with the challenge of constructing ourselves and our lives out of the possibility and potentiality present in the primordial chaos in which we exist. Naturally, a chaotic ground state precludes any form of absolutism.

This opus magnum of constructing a structure to be imposed upon the chaos may not be undertaken in a perfunctory manner. In *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche provides a perspective from which to approach this challenge, he directs us, "Not 'to know' but to systematize- to impose upon chaos as much regularity and form as our practical needs require."<sup>16</sup> This is due to the conception of the world in itself existing in a constant state of chaos. This condition precludes "knowing" the world, not because it is enigmatic, but rather because the inconstant and ephemeral nature of the world's chaotic flux provides no fixed properties from which to derive knowledge of the thing in itself. On this point, Nietzsche provides this admonishment, "Let us beware of positing generally and everywhere anything as elegant as the cyclical movements of our neighboring stars."<sup>17</sup> The closest Nietzsche comes to positing any sort of constructive cosmology is to be found in his conception of "eternal recurrence", as set forth in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*:

Everything goes, everything comes back; eternally rolls the wheel of being. Everything dies, everything blossoms again; eternally runs the year of being. Everything breaks, everything is joined anew; eternally the same house is being built. Everything greets every other thing again; eternally the ring of being remains faithful to itself. In every Now, being begins; round every Here rolls the sphere of There. The center is everywhere. Crooked is the path of eternity.<sup>18</sup>

This passage occurs during Zarathustra's convalescence as an "abysmal thought," an objectionable conception to be overcome. More precisely, as the Dionysian character of the passage suggests, it presents a fundamental paradox of life to be resolved. Insight into the resolution of this paradox yields a formidable perspective from which to interpret life. Perspectivism is such that one's pre-conceptions, values, beliefs and inclinations inform one's interpretation of what is. The clearer and more comprehensive one's individual

awareness, understanding and contextualization is, the more acute and effective one's interpretations of things will be. Due to apprehending the dynamics of the patterning that is being generated and the order that such imposes, one's perspective becomes endowed with comprehension and foresight. As such, Nietzsche's perspectivism is epistemic, and as he warns, presumably on pragmatic grounds, that not all perspectives are equal, some are superior to others.

Nietzsche's perspectivism correlates with his conception of subjectivity and objectivity. Nietzsche expresses a holistic worldview wherein all things are interconnected and as such, their characteristics are ontologically dependent on this interrelation. "Every atom effects the whole of being-... it expresses the characteristic that cannot be thought out of the mechanistic order without thinking away this order itself."<sup>19</sup> That the notion of a thing-in-itself, with an ontology independent of its relation to other things, is implausible for Nietzsche is stated explicitly, "Things that have a constitution in themselves- a dogmatic idea with which one must break absolutely."<sup>20</sup> Given such a premise, nothing can exist independently of any other thing, that is, the existence of nothing can be predicated upon its own intrinsic properties. "That things possess a constitution in themselves quite apart from interpretation and subjectivity, is a quite idle hypothesis; it presupposes that interpretation and subjectivity are not essential, that a thing freed from all relationship would still be a thing."<sup>21</sup> Nietzsche's radical view does not admit of an independent subject. "The 'thing-in-itself' is nonsensical, if I remove all the relationships, all the 'properties', all the 'activities' of a thing, the thing does not remain over."<sup>22</sup> Nietzsche rejects the premise that an object can possess the properties that constitute it in isolation from other objects. Nietzsche elucidates such a conception by proposing an example:

Suppose all unity were unity only as organization? But, the 'thing' in which we believe was only invented as a foundation for the various attributes. If the thing "effects," that means: we conceive all the other properties which are present and momentarily latent as the cause of the emergence of one single property; i.e., we take the sum of its properties - 'x' - as cause of the property "x" - which is utterly stupid and mad.<sup>23</sup>

For Nietzsche, an object is not a sustainable substance that subsists by virtue of its inherent properties. In fact, Nietzsche does not consider such reasoning to be harmless. In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche contends that we derive this delusion from the unjustifiable belief that the soul is an entity in its own right and so we proceed to project, "this faith in the ego substance upon all things."<sup>24</sup> Accordingly, by adopting such beliefs, whether consciously or not, we incline towards reification. Reification is the process of transforming human properties, relations, concepts, actions, etc. into things. Therefore, Nietzsche concludes that, "the *causa sui* is the best contradiction that has been conceived of so far; it is a sort of rape and perversion of logic."<sup>25</sup>

## References

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- 2 Evola, Julius, *The Hermetic Tradition*, translated by E.E. Rehmus (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 1995), 21
- 3 Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Birth of Tragedy*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 2000), 1
- 4 Ibid., 2.
- 5 Ibid., 1.
- 6 Ibid., 2.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid., 4.
- 10 Ibid., 16.
- 11 Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Gay Science*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974), 109
- 12 Hume, David, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, edited by Eric Steinberg (New York: Hackett Publishing, 1977), 17-19

<sup>13</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Will to Power*. (Trans.: Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale), (Ed.: Walter Kaufmann ). New York: Random House, 1968, 551.

<sup>14</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Beyond Good and Evil*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 2000), 224

<sup>15</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Press, 1966), 5

<sup>16</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 515

<sup>17</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 109

<sup>18</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 13

<sup>19</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 634

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 559

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 560

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 558

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 561

<sup>24</sup> Nietzsche Friedrich, *Twilight of the Idols*, translated by Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Group, 1968), 5

<sup>25</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 21