
From self-knowledge to becoming-self. Is Nietzsche anti-platonic in this respect?

*Del autoconocimiento al devenir uno mismo.
¿Es Nietzsche antiplatónico a este respecto?*

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Abstract: Nietzsche criticizes the Apollonian ideal of self-knowledge, which is at the heart of Socrates' and Plato's theoretical ideals. From this point of view, the Dionysian process of becoming oneself seems to counter it. Our aim here is to show that the Delphic sentence, as taken up by Plato, is not at all content to be a theoretical ideal but leads directly to practice and to becoming oneself.

Keywords: Nietzsche, self-knowledge, Plato, Delphic sentence.

Resumen: Nietzsche critica el ideal apolíneo del autoconocimiento, que está en el corazón de los ideales teóricos de Sócrates y Platón. Desde este punto de vista, el proceso dionisiaco de llegar a ser uno mismo parece oponerse a él. Nuestro objetivo aquí es mostrar que la sentencia delfica, tal como la retoma Platón, no se limita en absoluto un ideal teórico, sino que conduce directamente a la práctica y a convertirse en uno mismo.

Palabras clave: Nietzsche, autoconocimiento, Platón, sentencia delfica.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the work of M. Dixsaut, it has been well known that Nietzsche's relationship with Plato is ambivalent, to say the least, and that far from being absolutely antagonistic, the two authors agree on the position of the main problems of philosophy, and even on a *way* of philosophizing.¹ I have also shown that Nietzsche's imperative to become oneself, inherited from Pindar, was in fact already a reappropriation of the Delphic sentence ("know thyself") by the poet: "*Genoi' hoios essi mathôn*",² who emphasized action in the agonic setting of the Pythian Games.³ The latter then argued that Nietzsche's injunction to become oneself was not in fact contrary to, but a form of deployment of the Delphic sentence to which Plato was to give its letters of nobility.⁴ It is in the vein of this double interpretation that we propose here a rereading of certain key texts by Plato and Nietzsche. We want to show first how Nietzsche reads the apollonian/platonic imperative as leading us to self-restraint and in a way preventing the process to become oneself, before demonstrating that, in Plato's interpretation, it is on the contrary leading to it and even allow the human to become close to the gods.

I. THE APOLLONIAN IMPERATIVE OF SELF-KNOWLEDGE LEADING TO SELF-RESTRAINT

According to traditional Greek wisdom, for which 'Know thyself' is

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1. See in particular on this point Monique Dixsaut, *Platon-Nietzsche, L'autre manière de philosopher* (Paris: Fayard, 2015).
 2. Pindar, *Pythics*, II, 131. This formula is often translated as "Be as you have come to know yourself", and Nietzsche will translate it for himself as "Become who you are (*werde, wer du bist*)".
 3. Nicolas Quérini, *De la connaissance de soi au devenir soi. Platon, Pindare et Nietzsche* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2023).
 4. Griswold stresses the vital importance Plato attaches to this imperative, making it the key that gives the *Phaedrus* its unity of reading [Charles L. Griswold, *Self-Knowledge in Plato's Phaedrus* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986)]. He thus writes: "A major thesis of this book is that when the *Phaedrus* is interpreted with the former-and-content maxim in mind, the dialogue comes to light as a whole unified by the theme of self-knowledge" ("Introduction", 2).

a formula equivalent to Solon's 'Nothing to excess', this first imperative enjoins us to take our own measure, the measure of the human, and not to take ourselves for a god.⁵ Indeed, the wise fear nothing so much as hubris, the excess that threatens to seize man and plunge him into misfortune. Xerxes, the Persian tyrant traditionally known as the 'Great King', epitomized this excess when he whipped up the sea after a storm had swept away half his fleet.⁶ If we are human, and only human, we must fight against these insane dreams of power and this desire to equal the gods. 'Know thyself' would bring us back to our rightful place in the world. It is this Greek wisdom that Nietzsche still speaks of in *The Birth of Tragedy*, embodied in the figure of Apollo, whom he sees as the divinization of the principle of individuation. Apollo is the god of Delphi, whose temple bears the inscription 'Know thyself (*Gnôthi seautón*)'. And thus, Apollo is the god of limits, which also allow us to define ourselves as a particular individual. Nietzsche writes:

If it can be seen as at all imperative and prescriptive, this deification of individuation knows but a single law, the individual; that is, the maintenance of the boundaries of the individual, *moderation* in the Hellenic sense.⁷ Apollo, as an ethical deity, demands moderation from his followers and, in order to maintain it, self-knowledge. And thus the admonitions 'Know thyself' and 'Nothing to excess!' coexist with the aesthetic necessity of beauty, while hubris and excess are considered the truly

5. As Helen North notes: "The best-known of the sayings, *Gnôthi sauton* ("Know thyself") and *Mêden agan*, were inscribed in the late sixth century over the entrance to the Alcmaeonid temple of Apollo, who in the archaic age fulfils the hint of the *Iliad* that he will become the god of sophrosyne. The great development of the influence of the Delphic oracle belongs to this same period — a time during which the priests of Apollo preached measure and restraint in public and private life and encouraged decency and civilised behaviour in religious rites. It was at this time that sophrosyne acquired a strongly religious flavour." [Helen North, *Self-Knowledge and Self-Restraint in Greek Literature* (Coppell, TX: Sophron Editor, 2019), 12, 13]. As she notes above, the first traces of self-knowledge as a component of "sophrosyne" are present in Apollo's response to Poseidon's invitation to battle (*Ibidem*, 5).

6. Herodote, *The Histories*, VII, xxxv.

7. *Das Mass* in German refers to the Greek *to metron*.

hostile spirits of the non-Apolline realm, and hence qualities of the pre-Apolline, the word of the barbarians.⁸

Nietzsche remains faithful to this tradition, since he too links self-knowledge with its neighboring precept—in the literal sense, they are inscribed side by side on the pediment of the Temple of Delphi—and he links the precept that would later be described as Socratic with the precept sometimes attributed to Solon, which tells us ‘Nothing to excess’. According to Nietzsche, it was Apollo and the Delphic oracle who came to save the Greeks from their folly and their ills by teaching them the art of moderation. The arrogance (*Selbstüberhebung*) and excess (*Übermass*) that Nietzsche saw as the hallmarks of earlier times were synonymous with evil for the Greeks. For the Greek man, evil consisted not in accepting his human condition, but in wanting more, in wanting to fly with the gods.

Nietzsche sees Aeschylus’ Prometheus in chains as a hymn to impiety.⁹ Prometheus is no longer a god, but the representation in divine form of the man who wants to rise to a titanic stature, the individual who wants to transcend his limits and transcend his condition. He is also the one who wants to grant divine privilege to men; the mortal condition that the gods have granted to men is not sufficient for him. Nietzsche continues:

Once we understand the innermost core of the Prometheus myth—the necessity of sacrilege that confronts the Titanically striving individual—we must also immediately perceive the non-Apolline qualities of this pessimistic idea. For Apollo seeks to pacify individuals by drawing boundaries (*Grenzlinien*) between them, and by repeatedly calling them to mind as the most sacred universal laws in his demands for self-knowledge (*der Selbsterkenntniss*) and moderation (*des Maasses*).¹⁰

8. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. by Shaun Whiteside, ed. Michael Tanner (London: Penguin, 2003), § 4, 26.

9. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, § 9.

10. *Ibidem*, § 9, 50.

There's a gap, a tension, even a contradiction (at least initially) between the Apollonian tendency, which can be identified with self-knowledge (in the first sense, i.e., possessing well-defined human limits), and the Dionysian tendency, which wants more, which wants to tear itself away from its limits. As Céline Denat notes in her introduction to *The Birth of Tragedy*: "Dionysianism is characterized by the abolition of limits and individuality, and thus by the loss of self, which gives way to a feeling of union with the natural totality, beyond the separations and oppositions inherent in empirical reality. [...] Dionysian man feels himself 'like a god', elevated above the limits inherent in individual human existence".¹¹

On the one hand, then, the Apollonian is a trend to express itself as an imperative towards humility, advocating self-knowledge, which for the human individual coincides with the recognition of the very human limits and the clear perception, on the basis, of what distinguishes him from the divine species. On the other, the Dionysian tendency, consists in going beyond his limits and opening up to a more-than-human horizon. The individual then loses himself, wavering on what characterized him as an individual—"individual" in a weak sense, according to our reading, since he is not absolutely individual in the sense of "personal", as was Socrates, for example (we will return to this theme later). He loses himself in order to unite with the whole (including the divinity). Thus, the individual undergoes a moment of self-forgetting, a loss of self that is necessary for self-transcendence, a loss of self whose driving force is seen in later texts as self-loathing. But from the moment he dissolves, forgets or despises his original individuality, the man of titanic stature, inhabited as he is by the Dionysian, can feel like a god. We find this tension again in the *Second Untimely Meditation*, with, on the one hand, historical knowledge that always carries the risk of taking us back to an unsurpassable past, and, on

11. Friedrich Nietzsche, *La Naissance de la tragédie*, trans. by C. Denat (Paris: Flammarion, 2015) ("Introduction" 33). A few lines earlier, the translator wrote: "Where Apollo symbolized the principle of individuation, Dionysus represents its dissolution, and consequently an experience in which the individual, in the instant when he loses himself, becomes as other and more than himself" (*Ibidem*).

the other, life, the Dionysian that leads *us* to recapture this past in order to go beyond it.

Against the imperative of self-knowledge, Nietzsche defends the idea that self-forgetfulness is necessary:

there is a degree of sleeplessness (*es giebt einen Grad von Schlaflosigkeit*), of rumination (*von Wiederkäuen*), of historical sense (*von historischem Sinne*), which is harmful and ultimately fatal to the living thing, whether this living be a man or a people or a civilization.¹²

Historical knowledge, when limited to being only knowledge, risks killing the life in man, his capacity for regeneration and self-transformation that enables him to adapt to the present and anticipate the new forms of life that will be needed to face the future:

To determine this degree, and there with the boundary (*die Grenze*) at which the past has to be forgotten if it is not to become the gravedigger of the present, one would have to know exactly how great the *plastic power* of a man (*wie groß die plastische Kraft eines Menschen*), a people, a culture is: I mean by plastic power the capacity to develop out of oneself in one's own way, to transform and incorporate into oneself what is past and foreign, to heal wounds, to replace what has been lost, to recreate broken moulds.¹³

Nietzsche underlines the real danger of self-knowledge, which must be understood here first and foremost in a specific sense. Since the individual is primarily a man, he will first identify himself with other members of his species. It is to this end that he resorts to history, which enables us to know the human past, and thus what men have shown themselves to be capable of. Knowing ourselves would then

12. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, trans. by R. J. Hollingdale, ed. Daniel Breazeale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), II, § 1, 62.

13. *Ibidem*.

consist in knowing the history of men, what they have done, etc., in order to understand the human limits and the boundaries of our power. Historical knowledge always aims to bring men back to what is possible, the possible being defined by the men of the past. To say: “we must learn from history” is also to say that, since men have always failed to do this or that, the challenge we set ourselves is beyond human power. The desire to create something new is therefore irremediably hubris.

However, there is a danger in simply confining ourselves to this historical sense, to the imperative of self-knowledge, which we must at times know how to forget, how to silence, in order to listen to the voice of Dionysus, which we can identify here with life. Nietzsche speaks of an “antinomy between life and wisdom”, which can be compared to the antinomy between becoming oneself and self-knowledge (Nietzsche does not make this parallel himself, but we think we can, given the way he articulates these themes in his work). Either man gives priority to life, to creation, and gives himself the means to become himself (to do this, he has the “plastic force” that enables him to modify the present and the future), or he gives priority to knowledge of his history from the point of view of culture and the species, but also of his individual past, which teaches him on the one hand the limits of the human species, and on the other his own (we will nuance this simplistic binary schema later). From that point onwards, he refrains from doing anything that, in his eyes, exceeds human capacities and his own individual abilities. This “wisdom” is therefore self-defeating and leads to inaction. To know oneself from a historical point of view is to assimilate oneself to a culture, to determine oneself from the outside, and thus to fail oneself in reality: “The history of his city becomes for him the history of himself (*Die Geschichte seiner Stadt wird ihm zur Geschichte seiner selbst*).”¹⁴

This citation can be contrasted with a posthumous fragment from the time of *The Joyous Science*: “knowledge, based on the belief in persistence (mass, people, humanity) [...] tends to eliminate

14. *Ibidem*, § 3, 73.

and kill off the subtlest forms, the idiosyncratic taste —it works against individualization, against the taste that is a condition of existence only for one.”¹⁵ In this way, knowledge always brings us back to the identical, always inscribes the individual in a larger whole, and thus misses out on what is properly individual about him or her. The individual is confused with that which transcends and encompasses him; he is not an individual in the strong sense of the word, since he is not an individual, but merely a sample of the human species of a given era, and of the particular history of a place that determines him. Paradoxically, self-knowledge in this sense prevents the individual from being himself in the sense that Nietzsche will later give to this notion. On the other hand, there is the Promethean, which Nietzsche will identify with the Dionysian, the titanic aspiration of someone who sees in man a superior possibility, and who refuses to accept the clear-cut distinction between two worlds, that of men and that of the gods. What we want to quickly show in a second step is that there is also, in our view, a Promethean motif in Plato.

II. SELF-KNOWLEDGE AS AN IMPERATIVE LEADING THE HUMAN TO BECOME WHAT HE IS

In the Dialogues, Plato thus always admits a *sungeneia* of the human and the divine, a *sungeneia* meaning affinity, kinship, or literally a common genus and origin. In its proper sense, *genos* means lineage or race, so that man would not be of a race radically different from that of the gods. The Greeks thus trace their lineage back to the Olympian gods to explain the dignity of their race, this time in the sense of the Greek *genos* (containing the qualities that are hereditary to us and characteristic of our lineage). In the *Timaeus*, Plato writes:

we [...] can affirm very truly that this soul raises us above the earth (*apò gês hēmas aîrein*), because of its affinity with heaven

15. Friedrich Nietzsche, eKGWB/NF-1881,11[156] — Nachgelassene Fragmente Frühjahr–Herbst 1881 (we translate).

(*en ouranôi sungéneian*), for we are not an earthly plant (*óntas phutòn ouk éngeion*), but celestial (*allà ouráñion*).¹⁶

If our roots are celestial and not terrestrial, it is clear from the outset that Plato's strict opposition between the human and the divine species will be widely called into question. It is in this interpretative vein that we can understand a passage in the *Charmides* (164b-165b), in which Plato makes the Delphic precept sounds like a welcome addressed to mankind by the divinity. But this word is not to be understood as an ordinary greeting enjoining us to rejoice, writes Plato. The precept that invites us to know ourselves is certainly, in the first instance, a call to humility: don't think you know too much until you know yourself. And we should not forget that, in the first instance, it is not a question of salvation between equals: this salvation is divine, it comes to us from above, and, in a sense, it scorns men and their self-importance. It is therefore first and foremost the measure of a superior excellence that is presented here: Don't rejoice in your knowledge, little human, at least until you know yourself. Only then (when you know yourself) can you truly rejoice and be akin to the divine. In short, man should not rejoice in being man, in being human, too human, if he does not seek to surpass his condition or to fulfill the best it has to offer, the divine part of man.

And so, surprisingly enough, Plato seems to be building a distance between this precept and the one that tells us 'Nothing to excess (*mêdèn ágan*)'. Self-knowledge is not merely a call to humility, an advice to avoid hubris. It is a greeting (*khaîre*) from the god. And if the god greets us, it is because he recognizes man's kinship with his own condition. So, it is not an advice to "be wise", but rather a greeting that means "learn what your true condition is", i.e., "know yourself" not only as a human being, but also insofar as the human condition can be likened to the divine condition. This salvation is an invitation to become aware of what is divine in man. Lack of measure, then, also consists in holding a narrow vision of man and not bringing him to what is nobler and better. At this stage, once we have understood that

16. Plato, *Timaeus*, 90a, we translate.

self-knowledge as a human being must take into account the divine part of the human being, what human life must then achieve in its individuality is a true assimilation of the divine.

The injunction to imitate the divine is found in the *Theaetetus*. This imperative would thus be the goal of Platonic ethics, showing once again that, far from widening the distance between the human and the divine, Plato, on the contrary, thinks of their kinship. The famous lines from the *Theaetetus* begin as follows: “But it is impossible for evil to disappear, Theodore, for there will always be, necessarily, an opposite of good.”¹⁷ Two paradigms are thus set up within reality: one good, the other evil, one divine and immortal, the other mortal. These two paradigms are distinguished from an ethical perspective: we must escape from here to there as quickly as possible. It is imperative to escape as quickly as possible because as long as we fail to do so, we expose ourselves to the corruption of evil.

This escape is also only possible at the price of an effort, of a tension of the self towards that beyond the self that constitutes the divine paradigm. In language borrowed in part from Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra*, we could say that Plato already thinks of man as a rope stretched between the beast and the divine, since he participates in either. Unless he tends towards the divine, man will be drawn back towards the beast. Self-knowledge does not consist in finding one’s place between the beast and the god, and contenting oneself (out of modesty) with this position; human nature does not have a fixed place assigned in the cosmos between the beast and the god. This position would be untenable anyway, since the divine paradigm cannot tolerate evil within it. Human nature is a tension and each individual assimilates to one of the two poles. Except that man’s natural (in the sense of ‘common’ here) inclination leads him back towards the beast. We must therefore make an effort to free ourselves from this natural inclination and rediscover our true nature, our original nature, if we are indeed a celestial plant, as the *Timaeus* says. To understand that man has a divine measure is not to deny him any measure, but to give him back his true measure.

17. Plato, *Theaetetus*, 176a (we translate).

Nietzsche, for his part, goes even further, accepting hubris in *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, §7, which shows his admiration for the figure of Heraclitus. Nietzsche makes Heraclitus a thinker of hubris, a notion he sees as central to his philosophy. Where a classical interpretation of the Delphic oracle and Greek wisdom in general makes excess the worst vice, Nietzsche's interpretation of Heraclitus is at odds with it. In Nietzsche's interpretation of Heraclitus, hubris even becomes a value, a spontaneous tendency of the living that must be cultivated, and which would be virtually synonymous with the will to power. Indeed, Nietzsche urges us to live dangerously, not to be content with what we are (the human in us), but to push back our limits, in other words, to verge on excess:

That dangerous word hubris is indeed the touchstone for every Heraclitan. [...] Do guilt, injustice, contradiction and suffering exist in this world? They do, proclaims Heraclitus, but only for the limited human (*den beschränkten Menschen*) mind which sees things apart but not connected, not for the con-tuitive god. For him all contradictions run into harmony, invisible to the common human eye, yet understandable to one who, like Heraclitus, is related to the contemplative god. Before his fire-gaze not a drop of injustice remains in the world poured all around him.¹⁸

Self-knowledge, which brings the “limited man”, leads to a miserable, guilty existence, full of suffering. As Zarathustra would have it, we must turn our gaze towards the superhuman, beyond human limits. Only then will we be able to see the world as something other than suffering. Then we will be able to look at the world in an affirming and creative way. For Heraclitean Nietzsche, it is not just a matter of accepting contradiction and seeing the world as nonsense. On the contrary, going beyond one's limits is an opportunity to rediscover a new harmony.

18. Friedrich Nietzsche, “Preface”, in *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, trans. by Marianne Cowan (Washington DC: Regnery Publishing, 1962), § 7, 61-62.

According to the reading of Plato's dialogues that we suggest, finding a new harmony within oneself is also the goal of self-knowledge. We have seen that there is a first level of self-knowledge, by which we mean that we are not immediately a god. Self-knowledge thus consists first and foremost in freeing us from an ignorance that leads us to esteem ourselves more highly than we should, as in the case of Alcibiades, who wants his name to resound throughout Greece even though he does not yet possess the qualities necessary to become what he claims to be, i.e., a true politician capable of leading a city. But there is then a second level of self-knowledge, which consists in seeking out human limits on the side of the divine, assimilating oneself to the gods, and finally knowing oneself at one's best once this transformation has taken place. Only then does the human soul find its true harmony, and the species that make it up take a common direction. In the *Alcibiades*, self-knowledge as a soul must therefore lead to self-care.

In the same way, Nietzsche understands self-knowledge as a condition for self-transcendence. We need to understand our own limits in order to be able to go beyond them, which for Nietzsche paradoxically means becoming ourselves. Already at the end of the *Second Untimely Consideration*, we were to understand that history, which we have equated with self-knowledge from an individual point of view, could and should serve to rethink a new horizon for humanity, and thus enable it to surpass itself. There is a positive use of history, and hence of self-knowledge for the sake of life itself. This is what is meant by the strange reference to Delphi at the end of the book:

When the past speaks it always speaks as an oracle: only if you are an architect of the future (*Baumeister der Zukunft*) and know the present (*Wissende der Gegenwart*) will you understand it.¹⁹

The oracular word, the word of the Delphian priests, is not bad in itself. It is only bad if knowledge of the past reifies our present

19. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, § 6, 94.

and future. But far from being purely negative and limiting, self-knowledge that consists first and foremost in mastering our past can also enable us to project ourselves into the future. The author continues:

The extraordinary influence of the Delphic oracles, so remote and so profound, is now mainly explained by the fact that the Delphian priests had an in-depth knowledge of the past. The moment you look into the future, the moment you set yourself a sublime goal, you simultaneously master that exuberant analytical instinct which now ravages the present for you and makes it almost impossible for you to remain calm, to develop peacefully, to mature. Raise around you the rampart of a sublime and vast hope, of a hopeful aspiration. Form yourself an image (*Formt in euch ein Bild*), to which the future must correspond (*dem die Zukunft entsprechen soll*) and forget to believe that you are epigones, which is a superstition.²⁰

The individual must not understand the past and its predecessors as the only possible standard, but must recapture the best and highest aspects of the past in order to form an image of the future. At several points, Nietzsche uses the notion of the model as an image that we project before ourselves to give us the means to become ourselves. But in order to project oneself into the future and give oneself the means to create, we have to be willing to destroy or kill the past.

We think we can go so far as to say that to know oneself is to kill oneself, or almost to kill oneself. This is true from the point of view of the species we must kill, in the sense that we must accept to go beyond, and therefore consider as dead, the forms of life we have given ourselves in the past. Equally from an individual point of view: if self-knowledge reifies us and thus limits our capacities, we have to kill ourselves in order to surpass ourselves. So, we should not perceive this perdition as negative alone. To kill humanity by knowing it, by marking its limits, is also to give oneself the means to

20. *Ibidem*.

surpass it, as Zarathustra would have his disciples understand. More clearly, Aphorism 335 of *The Joyous Science* articulates the problem of becoming-self²¹ with the difficulty of self-knowledge:

How many people know how to observe (*beobachten*)? And of the few who do —how many observe themselves (*beobachten sich selber*)? ‘No one is a neighbour to himself — all the triers of the reins know this, much to their chagrin; and the saying, ‘know thyself (*erkenne dich selbst*)’, in the mouth of a god and spoken to man, borders on cruelty.²²

Very few people ever get to know themselves, first of all because most men do not even try to know themselves, which is why the self-knowledge sentence is almost cruel and may be considered a wickedness or a malice. Indeed, it is more of a malice since it is an imperative that is very difficult to uphold —‘No one is a neighbour to himself’, and Plato’s *Alcibiades* is therefore undoubtedly right to make otherness a condition of self-knowledge— but it is undoubtedly also a malice because what we will discover is hardly cheering. Of course, getting to know oneself objectively, understanding one’s flaws, etc., is disgusting. But it is all in the ‘almost’ (it “borders on cruelty”, which we can translate as “almost a malice”), if a life that does not take the time to look back onto itself and know what it can accomplish better is a failed life. If, on the other hand, this knowledge gives us a glimpse of what we can become, then Nietzsche also sees room for self-knowledge conceived as a dynamizing activity that immediately orients us towards becoming ourselves. This knowledge must then retain a vague dimension because it does not want to become objective knowledge, instead, knowledge that links the current self and the limits of the self, the horizon of the self we can become. It is more a question of interpreting oneself than of knowing oneself in the strict sense.

21. Present at the end of the fragment (quoted below).

22. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Joyous Science*, trans. and edited by R. Kevin Hill (London: Penguin, 2018), § 335, 212.

Aphorism 335 of the *The Joyous Science* insists on the fact that, up until now, we have mostly believed that we can recognize ourselves in ideals that are external to us and formed by others, and which are therefore an obstacle to our becoming ourselves. We therefore need to challenge the pre-established ideals that alienate us and create our own tables to give us the means to become what we are. Since the self is individual, there is no point in saying that an action must always be done in a certain way. We cannot think of a generic morality that would apply to all men, like the one proposed by Kant, for example. This is why we need to create new tables of what is good that are our own, as continues Nietzsche, to find our own morality, or rather our own personal ethics:

The time has come for us to turn away in disgust from all this nonsense of some standing in moral judgement over others! The whole thing is in such bad taste! Let us leave this nonsense and this bad taste to those who have nothing better to do than to keep the past alive a little bit longer and who never live in the here and now —let us leave them to the many, to the great majority! We, however, *want to become who we are* (*wollen Die werden, die wir sind*)— something new (*die Neuen*), unique (*die Einmaligen*), incomparable (*die Unvergleichbaren*), self-legislating (*die Sich-selber-Gesetzgebenden*), and self-creating (*die Sich-selber-Schaffenden*)!²³

Nietzsche is disgusted by this moral chatter, by supposedly universal values; on the contrary, one must create oneself, find one's own table of values. This dimension of self-creation is necessary where no precedent exists, if to be “new” is to be an individual in the strongest sense, absolutely individual, for whom no table of pre-existing values is possible. It is a question of “creating” oneself, and Nietzsche insists on the novel dimension. We must not be epigones of the past, but individuals in the strongest sense of the word, exceptional in the literal sense, different from what the entire human

23. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Joyous Science*, 214-215.

past has offered up to now: “incomparable”, writes Nietzsche. And it is from this disgust with prevailing values, with the morality that confines the individual to what he or she is not, that we can give ourselves the means to truly become ourselves.

In fact, we also find this motif in Plato, a motif that is perfectly embodied in the figure of Socrates, the *atopos*, the extravagant, the one who does not fit into any predefined class. We have, for example, this “characterization”, so to speak, of Socrates as ἄτοπος in the *Phaedrus*²⁴ at the very moment when self-knowledge is being discussed: “I am still incapable of obeying the Delphic inscription and knowing myself.”²⁵ When, in *The Symposium*, Alcibiades praises Socrates, he insists on this particularity. There are normally, he tells us, classes of men, ideal types to which individuals correspond. For example, there is the type of the great, noble and courageous general, whose representatives are, in Homeric antiquity, Achilles, and, among contemporaries, the Spartan leader Brasidas; there is the type of the eloquent and wise statesman, whose contemporary representative is Pericles. But Socrates does not fit into any of these classes. Indeed, in a fragment from the summer of 1875, Nietzsche says: “Socrates, to simply confess it, is so close to me that I almost always have to fight with him (*Socrates, um es nur zu bekennen, steht mir so nahe, dass ich fast immer einen Kampf mit ihm kämpfe*).”²⁶

Socrates, who embodies for us the Delphic precept of self-knowledge, would be the individual par excellence, the true *atopos*, the one who is not defined by any commonplace. Once again, the imperative of self-knowledge, properly understood, does not consist at all in defining the limits of the human being in general. It is the individual who must apply it to himself, in his particular existence, in order to give himself the means to become himself, and we see with Socrates that this self is a self in the very individual sense. In her introduction to *The Birth of Tragedy*, Céline Denat writes:

24. See Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. by Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 229c. The present translation, however, does not render the Greek pun on Socrates’ oddness.

25. *Ibidem*, 229e.

26. Friedrich Nietzsche, eKGWB/NF-1875,6[3] (we translate).

Socrates may seem to embody the figure of the adversary, of that which must be fought, but at the same time he represents what the philosopher must be: an individual who, in order to be necessarily a man of tomorrow and the day after tomorrow, has always found himself and must find himself in contradiction with his today.²⁷

Far from being an individual who is only interested in theoretical ideals, Socrates is an individual in the strongest sense of the word—which is why he is eventually killed by the Athenian city—and he seems to be a being who has always surpassed himself²⁸, becoming himself in contradiction with what he was before.

CONCLUSION

Far from constituting an inversion of Platonic philosophy, Nietzsche does indeed criticize self-knowledge, but as a theoretical ideal, and this criticism fails to hit the mark if it seeks to encompass Plato, according to whom self-knowledge leads precisely to a form of becoming-self that takes the human being far beyond what traditional Greek wisdom considers its measure. Likewise, Nietzsche's becoming-self, an epigone of the Pindar sentence, is in fact itself rooted in the same Delphic wisdom he criticized when writing *The Birth of Tragedy*.

In conclusion, Nietzsche, who knows Plato so well that he considers him his great adversary, and that he is proud to have such a great adversary,²⁹ seems to us to be much closer to Plato than he is willing to admit, on this topic particularly.³⁰ What we wanted to show, then, is that Nietzsche is undoubtedly right in his criticism of self-knowledge, provided we do not include Plato in this criticism.

27. Friedrich Nietzsche, *La Naissance de la tragédie*, Introduction by Céline Denat, 63-64.

28. Friedrich Nietzsche, eKGWB/NF-1875,5[128].

29. Letter to Paul Deussen, November 16, 1887.

30. Nietzsche says he is also astonished by the extent to which his Zarathustra 'Platonizes' in a letter to Overbeck, dated October 22, 1883.

While this sentence is traditionally understood as a call to humility, which in a sense reduces or diminishes human potential, this is not how Plato understands it, reworking it into a dynamic imperative that must lead to what we must call a becoming-self.

And if Nietzsche is initially particularly critical of the Socratic ideal of self-knowledge, it must be acknowledged that he is particularly critical of such knowledge, which carries with it an objective claim, like he will write more clearly in the § 80 of *Beyond Good and Evil*. I have argued elsewhere that Nietzsche did not condemn all self-knowledge, and that such knowledge, conceived as self-interpretation, could on the contrary accompany the movement of becoming oneself.³¹ In this respect, Nietzsche is as much a critic of Plato (insofar as he places self-knowledge at the foundation of life) as he is an heir to him.

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