BOOK SUMMARY

Socrates and Greek Tragedy

by Friedrich Nietzsche

The struggle between tragic art and Socratic confidence in reason.

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Key ideas

1. **Socratic optimism.** The belief that knowledge can understand and correct existence leaves no room for the tragic acceptance of suffering.
2. **Euripides on stage.** Euripides brought the everyday spectator onto the stage, making drama more self-conscious, realistic and argumentative.
3. **Aesthetic Socratism.** To be beautiful, everything must be intelligible, a principle that drained tragedy of its music and mystery.
4. **Instinct turned upside down.** In Socrates consciousness creates and instinct only warns, a reversal Nietzsche calls a monstrous defect.
5. **Music and tragedy.** Once music and the chorus were pushed aside by plot and argument, tragedy lost the root it grew from.

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CHAPTER 1

How Greek Tragedy Died

Socrates and Greek Tragedy is a short text Nietzsche had privately printed in 1871, in a small number of copies for friends. It reworks the public lectures he gave at Basel in early 1870, above all Socrates and Tragedy, and much of it reappears, revised, in the middle sections of The Birth of Tragedy the following year. Its subject is a death. Unlike the other forms of Greek art, which faded gradually, Greek tragedy, Nietzsche says, died by suicide, as the result of an insoluble conflict within itself. It is one of the earliest texts in which Nietzsche sets out his case against Socrates.

The figure he holds responsible is Euripides, the youngest of the three great Athenian tragedians. Nietzsche's charge is that Euripides brought the spectator onto the stage. In the tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles, the characters were heroic and larger than life. Euripides gave the stage to ordinary people with ordinary speech, and taught audiences to watch themselves: how they argued, calculated and reasoned. Drama became a mirror of everyday life rather than a window onto something greater. In Nietzsche's account, the ordinary citizen now saw and heard himself on stage, and was pleased to find that he could speak so well.

Nietzsche links this change to what came after. The New Attic Comedy that flourished after Euripides, with its clever slaves and domestic plots, inherited his methods, and its poets revered him. The old tragic seriousness gave way to a cheerfulness that Nietzsche finds shallow, the cheerfulness of people who no longer take anything great or difficult seriously and care only about the present. It is the cheerfulness, Nietzsche suggests, of people with nothing great to strive for and no stake in the past or the future, and later generations mistook this late mood for the essence of the Greeks.

For Nietzsche this is not just a story about literary taste. Tragedy, in his view, was the highest expression of Greek culture, the art form in which the Greeks faced the suffering of existence and affirmed life anyway. Its collapse therefore signals a change in the Greek attitude toward life as a whole, and he wants to find the deeper force that drove Euripides to make it. He finds that force not in Euripides alone but in an idea that spoke through him, which he associates with Socrates. The rest of the text is an attempt to name that idea and measure its consequences.

CHAPTER 2

Euripides and Aesthetic Socratism

Nietzsche portrays Euripides as a thinker who sat in the theatre and found the older tragedies puzzling. He saw obscurity, unexplained depths and a chorus whose role seemed unclear, and as a critic he could not accept what he did not understand. When he wrote his own plays, Nietzsche suggests, he wrote for two spectators only: himself as thinker, and Socrates. Most people met his doubts with a distrustful smile, but in Socrates, Nietzsche argues, Euripides found a spectator who also did not understand the old tragedy and therefore did not esteem it. In alliance with him he could challenge Aeschylus and Sophocles, not with essays but with plays of his own.

The principle behind his reforms is what Nietzsche calls aesthetic Socratism: the idea that to be beautiful, everything must be intelligible. It mirrors the Socratic conviction that only the person who knows is virtuous. Euripides applied it everywhere. His prologues tell the audience in advance what will happen, so that no suspense distracts them from following the arguments. His endings often bring in a god to settle the plot and announce the future. Characters explain and debate their motives. The mysterious, intoxicated element of tragedy is pushed out in favour of clarity.

Nietzsche sums up the contrast with an image drawn from the philosopher Anaxagoras, who taught that mind ordered the world. Just as Anaxagoras seemed like the only sober man among drunkards, Euripides saw himself as the sober poet among the older tragedians, who created, as Nietzsche puts it, without knowing what they did. Euripides wanted art made with full consciousness, and that ambition, in Nietzsche's view, was fatal to an art that grew from music and ecstasy. Sophocles, by contrast, was said to have credited Aeschylus with doing what was right even though he did it unconsciously.

The result was that tragedy lost its Dionysian root. The chorus, which for Nietzsche was the heart of tragedy, shrank in importance, and music was subordinated to plot and argument. Nietzsche notes that Euripides seemed to recognise the cost late in life: in The Bacchae, written at the end of his career, the god Dionysus takes terrible revenge on a king who denies him. But by then, he argues, the victory of the new spirit could not be reversed. The recantation came too late, and in Nietzsche's image the temple already lay in ruins.

CHAPTER 3

Socrates, the Man of Theory

Behind Euripides stands Socrates, whom Nietzsche treats as the true new force in Greek life. Socrates went through Athens questioning statesmen, poets and craftsmen, and found that they acted from instinct without being able to explain what they did. He concluded that their competence was illusory, and condemned existing art and existing ethics alike for this lack of insight. Nietzsche reverses the judgment: for him, instinct is the creative power in healthy people, and the attempt to replace it with conscious reasoning is the strange new thing Socrates introduced into Greek life.

He finds the evidence in Socrates' famous inner voice, his daimonion. In Socrates, Nietzsche observes, this voice never urges him on; it only warns and holds him back. In most creative people instinct drives and consciousness criticises, but in Socrates the roles are reversed: consciousness creates and instinct merely objects. Nietzsche calls this a monstrous defect, and he sees in Socrates a type that had never existed before, the theoretical man. He also notes the calm with which Socrates met his death, an image that became a new ideal for the noble youth of Athens.

This new type had enormous influence. Nietzsche points to Plato, who as a young man wrote tragedies and, according to the ancient story, burned them after meeting Socrates. Plato's dialogues, he suggests, became a refuge in which older poetic forms survived under the rule of dialectic, so that poetry became the handmaid of philosophy. Socratic optimism, the belief that thinking can reach the depths of being and even correct it, spread from philosophy to the stage. Nietzsche even sees in the dialogue the ancestor of the novel. Philosophy now ruled over poetry.

Nietzsche identifies this optimism as the deepest enemy of tragedy. If virtue is knowledge, and wrongdoing comes only from ignorance, and the virtuous person is happy, then there is no room for the tragic hero who suffers without deserving it. The world becomes a problem to be solved rather than a mystery to be borne. Tragedy, which showed suffering as part of existence, could not survive a culture that believed every suffering had an explanation and a cure. The poetic justice of later drama, in which virtue is duly rewarded, is in Nietzsche's view a symptom of this change.

CHAPTER 4

Reason, Music and the Tragic View

Nietzsche does not simply dismiss Socrates. He treats him as a figure of real greatness, the model for the scientific spirit that would shape later European culture. The confidence that the world can be understood and improved through knowledge begins, in his account, with Socrates, and it has achieved a great deal. His complaint is that it promises more than knowledge can deliver. His respect for Socrates is real, and much of the text's force comes from treating him as a worthy opponent rather than a villain. He is the rival who must be understood.

He finds a hint of doubt in Socrates himself. In prison before his death, according to Plato's Phaedo, Socrates told his friends that a recurring dream had urged him to practise music, and that he had begun composing verses. Nietzsche reads this as a sign that even the great rationalist sensed something missing, a region of wisdom from which the logician is excluded. Perhaps, Nietzsche suggests, art is a necessary companion to science rather than its defeated rival. Nietzsche presents this as the one moment in which the great logician seems to doubt the limits of logic.

This question sets up the hope that runs through Nietzsche's early work: that a culture shaped by Socratic reason might one day give birth again to tragic art. The privately printed text was written for a circle of friends that included Richard and Cosima Wagner, and the belief that Wagner's music drama could revive the spirit of Greek tragedy lies in the background. The Birth of Tragedy would make that hope explicit. Readers of the later book will recognise the same hope in its final sections. The text points toward that future.

Read on its own, Socrates and Greek Tragedy is the clearest early statement of the conflict between tragic art and Socratic reason. It is shorter and more focused than The Birth of Tragedy, without the book's elaborate theory of Apollo and Dionysus or its later chapters on opera and Wagner. Its central claim, that rational optimism killed the art that could look suffering in the face, would remain one of Nietzsche's lasting concerns, and he returned to the problem of Socrates as late as Twilight of the Idols. It is a short text with long consequences.

About Friedrich Nietzsche

Friedrich Nietzsche was born on 15 October 1844 in Röcken, a village near Leipzig in Prussian Saxony, the son of a Lutheran pastor who died when Friedrich was four. He studied theology and then classical philology at Bonn and Leipzig, and in 1869, at just 24 and before he had formally completed his doctorate, he was appointed professor of classical philology at the University of Basel. There he became a close friend of Richard Wagner, whose music and cultural ambitions shaped his first book, The Birth of Tragedy, in 1872.

Chronic illness forced Nietzsche to give up his professorship in 1879. For the next decade he lived on a small pension, moving between the Swiss Alps, the Italian Riviera and Turin, and wrote the books for which he is best known: Daybreak, The Gay Science, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Beyond Good and Evil, On the Genealogy of Morality and the works of 1888. In January 1889 he suffered a mental collapse in Turin from which he never recovered, and he died in Weimar on 25 August 1900.

After his collapse his sister, Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, took control of his papers and published selections from his notebooks, most famously The Will to Power, shaping his reputation in ways later scholars rejected. The critical edition by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari restored his texts. His ideas about the death of God, the will to power, eternal recurrence, the Übermensch and the genealogy of values went on to influence existentialism, psychoanalysis, modern literature and much of twentieth-century philosophy.

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