
Nietzsche, Freedom, and Writing Lives

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Of all their various qualities and achievements, why is it apparently most important to Nietzsche that Socrates was ugly, and that Caesar suffered from terrible headaches? And how do Caesar's headaches contribute to his status as "the highest type of free man"? This paper presents an interpretation of the concept of freedom in Nietzsche's late book, *Twilight of the Idols*.¹ A main focus will be the passage *Twilight* "Skirmishes" 38, entitled "My Conception of Freedom." It is helpful to pick out only one of Nietzsche's texts, because he changes his mind so much throughout his writings.² However, by focusing on *Twilight*, I do not mean to suggest that this represents Nietzsche's best or most mature account of freedom. Nor do I present this as something like his "considered position" on freedom, whatever one takes that dubious phrase to mean. While Nietzsche isn't consistent across his various texts, I will be assuming for the purposes of this paper that he is consistent within *Twilight*. So, for example, if he says something about a particular person in one place, I'll assume that it is connected to what he says about that same person in another place (and that the reader is meant to make that connection). This will be significant later on.

I intend, furthermore, to emphasize an aspect of Nietzsche's writing which has received relatively little attention from critics: namely, the way he writes about famous people. A very helpful way of approaching Nietzsche is to look at the kinds of questions that he asks, rather than the kinds of answers that he gives. More often than not, he isn't interested in the internal structure of a metaphysical, religious, or

moral view; rather, he's interested in the kind of person who holds such a view. The question is not: "Is view X correct?" Rather, Nietzsche asks, "What kind of person would hold view X?" or "What kind of psychological (or physiological) need might be served by becoming an adherent of X?" This is particularly effective (and this is not often brought out) because the views Nietzsche discusses most frequently (e.g., Christianity, Kantianism, liberalism) are, he thinks, obviously and comprehensively false. This obvious falsity motivates the switch from questions about empirical evidence and internal logic to questions about why on earth somebody would believe something so stupid. A beautiful example of this is the comment about Christianity in *The Anti-Christ*: "One is not 'converted' to Christianity—one must be sufficiently sick for it."³ Christianity is so evidently false that one must look to the underlying lack of health in the Christian to explain his worldview.

Of course, if this is Nietzsche's general outlook—that philosophies, religions, and values often come after or in response to the needs of the people who hold them—then we shouldn't be too surprised to find him writing about real people and how they relate to their value systems. That is one of the reasons why Nietzsche's writing is littered with the names of the famous. Often these do not function merely as examples, but have a more intricate connection with the subject matter. In *The Anti-Christ*, Paul's psychology is intimately connected with Christianity such that the two are inseparable: in a certain sense, Christianity is just a function of Paul's asceticism.⁴ The same might be said for Wagner and modern music in *The Wagner Case*, or for Euripides and the decline of tragedy in *The Birth of Tragedy*. This paper concentrates on individuals in *Twilight* who relate to freedom: Caesar, Napoleon, and Catiline. We can't understand freedom (in *Twilight*) unless we take time to understand these individuals; and, I'll go on to argue, an understanding of them helps us to understand the most significant character in *Twilight*: Socrates.

Finally, I'll try to say something about Nietzsche's writing and his style. To put it roughly, I argue that Nietzsche doesn't really know why he's writing *Twilight*; that correspondingly, we don't as readers understand how to respond to it; and finally, that Nietzsche expresses an awareness of this in the text. I want to present Nietzsche in a dilemma: for certain reasons, he wants to change the way the world is; for other reasons, he suggests that he doesn't know quite how to achieve this, and perhaps that it isn't even possible. As I say, this third claim must remain vague for the moment; I shall return to it towards the end.

My interest in Nietzsche's reasons for writing *Twilight* (and in how readers might respond to it) arises, in part, as a response to a certain kind of Nietzsche criticism which is prevalent at the moment. It is common to offer an analysis of Nietzsche which ultimately produces an "ought" or a take-home message of some kind. There is a sense that Nietzsche must be telling us what to do and it's just a question of reading him carefully or selectively enough to draw this out. One problem here is that the resultant "oughts" are often rather peculiar. Anybody who has been to a Nietzsche talk and been told to "become what you are" or "lay yourself down for the Superman" may have an inkling of what I'm getting at. It would be foolish to say that Nietzsche never gives his readers moral instruction. However, one of my interests here lies in presenting a case in which he very definitely does not. Thus, in the present case, Nietzsche's conception of freedom does not give us a "you-ought-to-become-free-like-this" answer. Of course, if Nietzsche isn't writing in order to get us to do something, then one may well ask why he is writing at all. Writers may in general have a wide variety of reasons for writing, and they needn't have only one reason. We might imagine Nietzsche's writing as a kind of self-exploration, although that doesn't seem to be the pose he strikes in *Twilight*. More likely, *Twilight* might be written to unsettle its readership, rather than to offer them a take-home message. Its subtitle—"How to Philoso-

phize with a Hammer" —would certainly suggest that much. I'll return to these considerations, with respect to freedom in *Twilight*, towards the end.

Two background concepts which are crucial to understanding Nietzsche's conception of freedom in *Twilight* are those of "the *Unzeitgemässe*" and "decadence." As we shall see, the two are related. The word *unzeitgemässe* is normally translated into English as "untimely." Hence we know the *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen* as the "Untimely Meditations." The section of *Twilight* which provides much of the material for this paper is called *Streifzüge eines Unzeitgemässen*: "Skirmishes of an Untimely One." The English fails to capture the German. We rarely use "untimely" except to speak of an "untimely death," meaning usually that the person died young. We could, I suppose, speak of the "untimely" death of a very old man if he died as the result of a clinical error or was murdered. Still, the point is that the death occurred sooner than it should have. Conversely, a "timely intervention" is one which happened at just the right moment. The German carries a slightly different connotation. To be *zeitgemäss* is, literally, to correspond to or be appropriate to your time. So, whereas in English one only really speaks of specific "timely" events or actions, in German a person or institution might be *zeitgemäss*—appropriate to its particular time.

The German (and my English explanation of the German) nonetheless carries with it an ambiguity, which is worthy of consideration. What is it to be appropriate to your time? This could mean either (i) a typical product of your time or (ii) just exactly what your time needs. When Adorno wrote that the V1 rocket-bomb was the perfect symbol of the times (i.e., the Second World War),⁵ he meant that it was an embodiment of everything that characterized the modern world as he saw it; he didn't mean that the V1 rocket was "appropriate" in the sense that it was just what everyone needed. The V1 rocket, then, was *zeitgemäss* in the first and not the second sense. One can imagine an appropriateness that was ex-

actly the other way around. It might be appropriate for a university faculty which has an extremely narrow focus to expand and to become more diverse; but this is very unlikely to come from within the faculty, and even if it did, it would hardly be a typical product of the latter. (If it were a typical product, then there wouldn't have been a problem in the first place.) Hence this kind of "appropriateness" would be of the second kind, but not of the first. Finally, we can imagine an appropriateness which is both a product of its time and what its time needs. Nietzsche seems to have thought that the right kind of society or social environment will do just that. Hence, one way of interpreting Nietzsche's admiration for Greek culture (as expressed in *The Birth of Tragedy*) is that it typically produced the very things that it needed, in the form of certain works of art.

When it comes to the modern era (Nietzsche thinks) these two ideas fall apart: it is characteristic of the modern age precisely to fail to produce that which it needs. The *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen*—an early collection of essays—are meditations which express untimely ideas; but they are also meditations on the subject of the untimely, on the need for untimely kinds of thinking. In that respect, the *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen* are a timely (i.e., much needed) intervention in what Nietzsche sees as a modern catastrophe of culture. It is appropriate (in the second sense, above) to our time that we take an interest in that which is not of its time (in the first sense): "If you want biographies, do not desire those which bear the legend 'Herr So-and-so and His Age,' but those upon whose title-page there would stand 'A Fighter against His Age.'" ⁶

Although the term (*un*)*zeitgemäss* is ambiguous in the manner described, for the rest of this paper I'll use it (as I think Nietzsche most often does) to mean "(not) a typical product of the time." That is, corresponding to the first of the two senses given above. In *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche gives, as an example, the *zeitgemäss* man who grows up in the wine country and decides to become a wine-

drinker.⁷ The point is clear enough: that's exactly what we'd expect of someone who grew up in the wine country.

I want to say a little more about the notion of the *Unzeitgemässe* (i.e., the atypical, etc.), which also carries with it the sense of something unfashionable, unusual, out of place, unexpected. There's something distinctly uncomfortable about being *ein Unzeitgemässer*: The *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen* have therefore been rendered the "Thoughts out of Season" or "Unfashionable Observations."⁸ Although much changed in Nietzsche's thought, two broad ideas seem to have remained constant with regard to the *Unzeitgemässe*. First, Nietzsche thinks (and this is surely right) that in general your values are the product of what we might call your "context," where that includes (among other things) your education, century, language, nationality, and inherited traits.⁹ However, more often than not, our values do not seem to us to be context-dependent; instead, we feel as though we have chosen them because they are right, just, or true; we even think that we haven't chosen them at all—that they have chosen us. Perhaps the most famous example from Nietzsche's work lies in *On the Genealogy of Morals*.¹⁰ There, he argues that Christian values claim to be universal and context-independent, but in fact they are highly contingent. The project of the *Genealogy* is to explain the contingent, psychological history of how these values came about.¹¹

The *Unzeitgemässe* is, for Nietzsche, a *pro tanto* cause for admiration. Whoever you are, and in whatever respect, if you are *unzeitgemäss* then Nietzsche shows respect for you. But note that being *unzeitgemäss* in itself isn't sufficient for full, unqualified admiration. As we shall see, Nietzsche's Catiline is *unzeitgemäss*, but he is also a degenerate, dysfunctional wreck. Similarly, Nietzsche accords Jesus some credit for being *unzeitgemäss*;¹² but given that he does so in a book called *The Anti-Christ*, we may be justified in thinking that his admiration is somewhat qualified.

Second, there's often some specific conception of what is

zeitgemäss, what is typical of the age, in the pejorative sense. That is to say: although Nietzsche always thinks that there's something wrong with the modern world, and that this wrongness is passed from the context to the individual, he doesn't have a unitary conception of just what the problem actually is. Hence, although he respects *ein Unzeitgemässer* in general, he is often more interested in a particular kind of *Unzeitgemässe*, which corresponds to a particular conception of what is wrong (and *zeitgemäss*) in our society. This specific and problematic feature of the time changes, and sometimes directly switches throughout his work. Hence, for example, in the second of the *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen*, "On the Uses and Abuses of History for Life," Nietzsche argues that what is wrong with our society is that we are much too scientific: *ein Unzeitgemässer* in this context will set himself free with certain kinds of artistic and philosophical activity. Conversely, in *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche wastes no time in telling us that it is characteristic of our times to ignore science in favor of art, philosophy, and religion: to be *unzeitgemäss* in that context is to take seriously the lessons of science and the scientific method—this is a key feature of *Human, All Too Human's* "free spirit." If the *Unzeitgemässe* is to play a part in our analysis, then it is important to identify the relevant feature of our society which Nietzsche considers *zeitgemäss*. In *Twilight*, I argue, one is *zeitgemäss* if one is "decadent." Hence, I now turn to Nietzsche's concept of decadence.

In *Twilight*, Nietzsche thinks that the negative and *zeitgemäss* feature of mankind is to be something he calls "decadent." What is this decadence? One way to answer this might be to look at who Nietzsche thinks is decadent and then work from there. But this approach is flawed, mostly because he seems to think that everybody is decadent. Drawn from across *Twilight*, Nietzsche's list of decadents includes: Socrates or Greek contemporaries of Socrates;¹³ Christians and those with Christian values;¹⁴ Kant or Kantians;¹⁵ Schopenhauer or Schopenhauerians;¹⁶ those who

make mistakes or are unable not to react to a stimulus;¹⁷ liberals;¹⁸ socialists and anarchists;¹⁹ the German Reich;²⁰ Herbert Spencer;²¹ those who are excessively rational;²² and those who are immoderate towards an enemy.²³

It's more helpful to look at what seems to lie behind Nietzsche's conception of decadence. In common with much of his later work, Nietzsche's interest lies not in the beliefs of the various decadents but in their psychology. (It is no accident that the working title for *Twilight* was "A Psychologist's Leisure.") It turns out that decadence is a psychological configuration. Nietzsche puts this most concisely when he describes Socrates' decadent Greek contemporaries: "No one was any longer master of himself, the instincts were mutually antagonistic."²⁴ We all have instincts: instincts to eat, drink, fight, flee, and so on. These have evolved to suit our environment. However, Nietzsche offers a kind of history of our instincts and society, according to which these instincts turn on each other and compete for control over us. This antagonism can have a weakening effect upon us: we no longer have a unitary purpose and must cope with conflicting instincts. Nietzsche's history of the instincts seems to pan out as follows:

- We used to be instinctive and aggressive creatures.
- Civilized and urbanized, we can no longer rely on our instincts, which turn against each other.
- The result is weakness, confusion, desperation, dissatisfaction: "decadence."

Obviously, there's an important difference for Nietzsche between "having instincts" and "acting instinctively"; both play a part in this story. We all have instincts or drives which make demands upon us. However, we do not all live instinctively; that is to say, our instincts do not combine to guide us in a particular way, so that we can act upon them without reflection. In a sense, Nietzsche is outlining a history of what happens to our instincts such that we can no longer act in-

stinctively. In our pre-civilized past, we could live and be guided by our instincts (i.e., act instinctively). Note also that Nietzsche wants to say something about what those instincts were like: to survive, we had to be aggressive—aggressive to catch prey, aggressive towards predators, aggressive towards competitors. In the modern context, we can no longer rely upon these aggressive instincts, because no society could function with such hostility allowed free rein. However, we still feel the force of these aggressive instincts: they find expression by turning on each other.

Nietzsche often uses the phrase “disgregation of the instincts”: the image is one of a herd, which used to move and react together, but has disintegrated into a mass of conflicting individuals. The disgregation, the lack of unity and purpose, makes us weak, because we can no longer rely on ourselves. We can no longer live instinctively. For Nietzsche, decadence is intimately connected with the “herd morality.” The choice of *disgregation* of the instincts as a cause for the herd morality is instructive: humans in fact behave like a herd—and develop a herd morality—due to the break-up of an inner *herd* of instincts.

Once understood in this way, some (at least) of the decadents on the long list above become more comprehensible. Take liberalism, for example. The decadent man must rely upon others, because his instincts are no longer a guide to life. This other-reliance has, for Nietzsche, a further undesirable consequence. If I rely upon you for my survival—if I cannot survive on my own—then there is a limit placed upon the extent to which I am able to feel superior to you. A natural consequence of the decadent psychology might well be a commitment to the notion that all men are equal—that all should have equal rights or that all opinions ought to be taken into consideration and are equally valid. The liberal-decadent commitment to equality goes against a fundamental belief for Nietzsche about the strong (and thus good) society. In *Twilight*, “Skirmishes” 37, Nietzsche summarizes his attack on the value of equality: “The chasm between

man and man, class and class . . . the will to be oneself, to stand out—that which I call ‘pathos of distance’—characterizes every strong age.” The great are great in virtue of the feeling of difference between them and the ordinary. To make all equal is not to raise the lowest to the level of the highest, but rather to level down. Hence: “Liberalism: in plain words, reduction to the herd animal.”²⁵ Note that this criticism of liberalism uses just the format I described above. Nietzsche doesn’t discuss the internal complexities of liberal theory; instead, he concludes that needing to adhere to such a view is a sign of weakness.

I have said that the *Unzeitgemässe* remains important for Nietzsche throughout his writing, but that his particular focus for what is *zeitgemäss* varies greatly. The relevant sense of *zeitgemäss* in *Twilight* corresponds to Nietzsche’s conception of decadence, of the instincts that have turned on each other, and the resultant breakdown of the instinctive life. So it is significant to note that Catiline, Napoleon, and Caesar—the three figures used by Nietzsche to present freedom in *Twilight*—all have instincts which are *unzeitgemäss* in their strength. The decadent/*zeitgemäss* man has conflicting, confused, mutually antagonistic instincts; Catiline, Napoleon, and Caesar are exceptions to this rule: they all have unusually strong, unified, wild instincts. The “Lives” Nietzsche writes for them trace their development in the context of these strong instincts.

Nietzsche tells the story of three different lives which share the same starting point (i.e., unusual strength and unity of instinct). Catiline (the typical criminal) is destroyed by his own strength; Napoleon (the “exception”) uses his strength to dominate those around him; Caesar (the “free man”) presents a combination of the admirable features of the other two.

Catiline²⁶ was a member of the Roman senatorial nobility who tried to seize Rome by force, and he eventually died at the hands of the senatorial army in 62 bc. Catiline and Caesar are often compared as examples of how differently his-

tory will treat you if you have the misfortune to lose rather than win. Catiline died just thirteen years before Caesar crossed the Rubicon—to succeed in taking control of Rome where Catiline failed. History, it is argued, remembers Caesar as a glorious hero; but if he'd lost he might have been remembered very differently. Catiline suffered particularly in this regard. We have two main sources: first, Cicero, whom Catiline tried to murder and whose main claim to fame was his defeat of the Catalinarian conspiracy; second, Sallust, who delights in presenting Catiline's life as a tale of how bad things happen to an Evil Man. Hence Sallust tells us immediately that Catiline was "evil": he had "a vicious and depraved nature" which was "possessed by an overpowering desire for despotic power."²⁷ He "delighted in civil war, bloodshed, robbery, and political strife"²⁸ and kept the company of "debauchees, adulterers and gamblers . . . cut-throats and perjurers."²⁹

I mention the Catiline/Caesar comparison not merely out of interest, but also because (I'll go on to argue) Nietzsche is playing on this connection when he talks about Caesar. For the moment, however, consider what Nietzsche says about Catiline, who represents the "criminal type":

The criminal type is the type of the strong human being under unfavorable conditions, a strong human being made sick. What he lacks is the wilderness, a certain freer and more perilous nature and form of existence in which all that is attack and defense in the instinct of the strong human being comes into its own.

Catiline is a "strong human being made sick": he would be at home in the wilderness, just as all human beings (or their ancestors) in the long-distant past would have been. However, whereas most are born weakened, decadent, and fit for civilization, Catiline has the misfortune to be born ready for the "attack and defense" of pre-civilized existence. Catiline acts instinctively and aggressively, but he must confront a society which does not welcome such aggression: "It is society, our tame, mediocre, gelded society in which a hu-

man being raised in nature . . . necessarily degenerates into a criminal. . . . He has never harvested anything from his instincts but danger, persecution, disaster"; hence "his feelings . . . turn against these instincts."

Catiline meets nothing but "danger, persecution, disaster" when he trusts his own instincts (acts instinctively). Hence, of course, he begins to mistrust his instincts. In most cases, the antagonism of the instincts among regular decadents leads to weakness—a low-level but functional life devoid of any great purpose or strength. However, when someone as strong as Catiline experiences a turning inwards of the instincts, the result is much more volatile. Rejected by society, Catiline is completely destroyed. We might summarize Nietzsche's account of his life as follows:

- Catiline's instincts were too strong for his time.
- Therefore he was punished by society.
- Therefore he began to mistrust and turn against himself.
- Therefore he became "anemic" and "physiologically degenerate."

Catiline's case is typical of the criminal. Stronger, aggressive, more purposeful than those around him, he is crushed by society's hostility, which he eventually internalizes.

Where Catiline is "typical," Napoleon's case is the exception to the rule: "A human being raised in nature³⁰ . . . necessarily degenerates into a criminal. Or almost necessarily: for there are cases in which such a human being proves stronger than society: the Corsican Napoleon is the most famous example."³¹

Nietzsche's reference to "the Corsican Napoleon" is meant, I think, to draw our attention to the very previous section, in which he claims that Napoleon's Italian heritage enables him to take control of post-revolution France. France after the revolution could never have produced a Napoleon (perhaps because it was riddled with weak notions such as Liberty and Equality, but Nietzsche isn't explicit about this);

but the Corsican Napoleon, who spoke French with an Italian accent, was “different.” Napoleon simply masters France, due to his outsider’s strength. His similarity with Catiline therefore ends at the first stage:

- Napoleon’s instincts were too strong for his time.
- Unlike Catiline, he was very much stronger than those around him.
- Therefore, he was able to become master in post-revolution France.

Nietzsche is clearly impressed with the “genius” of Napoleon.³² However, it is not Napoleon who is named the free man (that title goes to Caesar). Why isn’t Napoleon free? The answer is that he never had to face and overcome the kind of self-doubt or inner conflict associated with the experience of Catiline.

This implicit criticism of Napoleon is an instance of a larger trend in the way Nietzsche attacks his targets: namely, to take the property of the target which he (i.e., the target) considers most secure and defining and then to attack him for being insufficient in precisely this regard. Hence, for example, Nietzsche accuses Wagner (who had effectively created a festival in his own honor) of not thinking big enough;³³ and elsewhere he attacks secular scientists for being too religious.³⁴ In this case, Nietzsche accuses Napoleon, victorious in some forty battles, of not seeking out conflict. Of course, the accusation is that Napoleon did not experience inner conflict. One can compare Nietzsche’s Napoleon with Tolstoy’s on this question of lack of inner conflict. As might be expected, Nietzsche (in general) shows much more respect for Napoleon than does Tolstoy; but both agree that he acts instinctively and without any self-doubt. Thus Tolstoy describes a meeting between Napoleon and Balashev, the Russian envoy. Balashev had met him earlier that day—a meeting during which Napoleon exploded into an embarrassing fit of petulant rage. Balashev now expects to find him ashamed and apologetic. Instead:

[Napoleon] not only showed no sign of constraint or self-reproach on account of his outburst that morning, but, on the contrary, tried to reassure Balashev. It was evident that he had long been convinced that it was impossible for him to make a mistake, and that in his perception whatever he did was right, not because it harmonized with any idea of right and wrong, but because he did it.³⁵

This might be helpful in understanding what Nietzsche is getting at: Napoleon may have shaped the nineteenth century (though Tolstoy would, of course, disagree with that), but there's something rather unimpressive about somebody who achieves even such greatness without ever stopping to question himself.

Napoleon and Catiline reflect two different features of freedom. In Catiline, we find strong inner conflict without outward mastery; his self-doubt crushes him. In Napoleon's case, we find outward mastery but a lack of inner conflict. Caesar, the free man, combines the inner conflict with the outward mastery. Another way of looking at this would be to speak in terms of a "productive tension." Nietzsche is concerned with productive tension throughout his life, beginning most famously with the tension between Apollo and Dionysus in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Like Heraclitus, Zarathustra speaks of productive tension in terms of a bow and arrow:³⁶ too little tension and the arrow won't fly; too much tension and the bow will break. It seems to me that in Catiline's case the bow has snapped and in Napoleon's case it has never been strung. We shall return to this important concept of productive tension towards the end of the paper. For the moment, I turn to what Nietzsche says about Caesar, in the passage entitled "My Conception of Freedom": "One would have to seek the highest type of free man where the greatest resistance is constantly being overcome: five steps from tyranny, near the threshold of the danger of servitude. This is true psychologically when one understands by 'tyrants' pitiless and dreadful instincts, to combat which demands the maximum of authority and discipline towards oneself—finest type Julius Caesar."³⁷

The freest man is constantly overcoming a great resistance: he is constantly in danger of being dominated and destroyed, in this case by his inner instincts. Nietzsche connects Caesar with the Catiline/Napoleon schema when he claims that Catiline is a "phase of his development."³⁸ Earlier, I pointed out the traditional relation between Catiline and Caesar: that Caesar represents what Catiline would have become, had he been successful.³⁹ Nietzsche internalizes this structure within Caesar's psychological development: that is, he presents Caesar as having the same psychic configuration as Catiline—but whereas Catiline was destroyed by this inner turmoil, Caesar was able to overcome it. Hence, Nietzsche claims, Catiline is "the antecedent form of every Caesar." Being Caesar (being free) requires overcoming the Catalinarian existence. In this respect, the free Caesar does represent the combination of the better parts of Napoleon and Catiline:

- Caesar's instincts were too strong for his time.
- He suffered as a result of having such strong instincts.
- Therefore he began to mistrust and turn against himself (all stages so far identical to Catiline).
- Under normal circumstances, this would have led to physiological degeneration and decadence.
- However, Caesar continued to struggle against these instincts and he remained "aloft" and free.

Note that Caesar is not free-because-strongest or -noblest. Instead, Nietzsche suggests that Caesar is somehow internally unstable. It takes all his effort to maintain control of himself and he's free because he (just) manages. I have already shown why Nietzsche considers liberalism a symptom of decadence: unable to live instinctively and fend for ourselves, unable to feel stronger and superior in relation to others, we have to cling to equal rights for all. Nietzsche's conception of freedom is carefully contrasted with the liberal (decadent) conception of freedom as equal rights. Before lib-

eral policies are put in place (Nietzsche thinks), while liberals fight for their liberal institutions, liberals are in fact free. But they are free because they are fighting for something, against other people. However, the moment they succeed in implementing their policies, they undermine freedom precisely because they make everyone equal and hence reduce all to the same level.

Again, it's helpful to think in terms of productive tension. The tension between liberals and their enemies is productive; during this struggle, they are in fact free in the Nietzschean sense. But once in power, they undermine productive tension between individuals by claiming that everyone is equal; hence they lose the freedom they had while fighting. Nietzsche wants to emphasize that freedom is not, for him, something a government or ruler can give to his subjects. It is a feeling one has when one is struggling and fighting for something.

With this in mind, I turn to one of the most enigmatic characters in Nietzsche's writing.

While Caesar, Napoleon, and Catiline feature relatively little in *Twilight*, their lives (and their relationship to Nietzschean freedom) help us shed light on the most important "Life" of *Twilight*: Socrates. Socrates had already played a key role in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche's earliest book, and in *Twilight*, the last book Nietzsche saw through to publication, he is given his own chapter. A clear understanding of Nietzsche on freedom in *Twilight* enables us to take a fresh look at Nietzsche's claims about Socrates in that book.

I have already named Socrates among Nietzsche's long list of decadents. This identifies him as one whose instincts are in conflict, one who can no longer live instinctively. In fact, Nietzsche had already, in *The Birth of Tragedy*,⁴⁰ linked Socrates to the decline of the instinctive life in Athens. Aeschylus and Sophocles were instinctive artists; but it is very important to Nietzsche (in *The Birth of Tragedy*) that Socrates dislikes precisely that which is done "only by instinct": "'only by instinct': the phrase goes to the heart and

center of the Socratic tendency. With these words Socrates condemns existing art and existing ethics in equal measure."⁴¹ For Socrates (in *The Birth of Tragedy*), everything must be rationalized, nothing instinctive.

Initially, *Twilight* looks the same. Socrates the decadent, his instincts in conflict, unable to live instinctively, struggles among the noble, instinctive Athenians. Nietzsche describes a weak, poor, bitter, ugly Socrates in a society which values strength, wealth, and beauty. In a pure and noble society, Socrates entertains "every foul vice and lust." Deprived of the usual means of achieving power or greatness, he adopts the dialectic method. This is a sign of weakness among the Athenians, who used to warn their children against it.⁴² The dialectic method also allows Socrates to engage with the beautiful Athenian youths: "Sokrates war auch ein grosser Erotiker."⁴³

In an essay on the epigram,⁴⁴ Lessing argues that modern epigrams internalize the role of the ancient epigram—the latter being found on statues and monuments. In the ancient world, the passer-by saw a monument and asked himself what the monument represented or commemorated; the epigram existed to satisfy his curiosity. The modern epigram, says Lessing, miniaturizes this structure. The writing itself (acting as the monument) must arouse the curiosity of the reader; then (performing the function of the ancient inscription) it must satisfy this curiosity. For Lessing, then, a modern epigram should have a kind of natural break: before the break the text arouses curiosity, and after the break the curiosity is satisfied. The Nietzschean aphorism—prose, unlike Lessing's poetic epigram—retains something of this two-part structure. Typically, the second part not only explains the first part, but also casts it in a new light. The break becomes a kind of twist or sting in the tail. Consider this aphorism from the earlier *Human, All Too Human*: "Das Leben des Feindes—Wer davon lebt, einen Feind zu bekämpfen, hat ein Interesse daran, dass er am Leben bleibt." (The life of the enemy—Whoever lives to fight an enemy has an interest in keeping the enemy alive.)⁴⁵

The second part of this aphorism (“has an interest . . .”) not only provides more information; it also forces us to reconsider the first part. Whoever lives to fight an enemy had better make sure the enemy isn’t destroyed, or else he would lose his reason for living. Bearing that in mind, we come to see “whoever lives to fight his enemy” in a completely new light: namely that he isn’t trying to destroy his enemy, but rather keep him alive so that life retains its significance. This thought is given further attention in *Twilight*, when Nietzsche explores the notion of being “fruitful in opposition.”⁴⁶

Although *Twilight* is not written in the strictly aphoristic style that Nietzsche had previously employed,⁴⁷ it retains certain aphoristic features. Notably, Nietzsche is extremely fond of this twist or break in the text, which forces the reader to look back on the previous passage in a completely revised light. This is one of the reasons why Nietzsche quotations, taken out of context, are liable to give the wrong impression—and why quotations from unpublished notes are even more liable to mislead. Taking the Socrates chapter as a whole, we find two such turns. Nietzsche is clear that Socrates is a decadent. He is unable to rely upon himself and we are told explicitly of the conflicting forces within him. Yet Nietzsche doesn’t leave things there. At *Twilight* “Socrates” 9, we find the first turn. Socrates looks around him and realizes that “his case, his oddity of a case, was already unexceptional . . . old Athens was coming to an end.” The picture until *Twilight* “Socrates” 9 presents a Socrates in inner conflict, where the other Athenians are strong and unified. Yet at *Twilight* “Socrates” 9, we realize that Socrates was typical: everyone else was decadent too. Socrates appears exceptional only in that he appears to present a “cure” for decadence: namely, fanatical devotion to reason and radical rejection of the passions (i.e., the subjects of the following two chapters of *Twilight*).

If the first “turn” reveals to us that Socrates is unexceptional, the second “turn” makes us think that perhaps he is exceptional after all, but for different reasons. Nietzsche re-

minds us in *Twilight* "Socrates" 12 that Socrates "chose to die": he could have escaped his death sentence, but he opted out of life. Nietzsche interprets this death wish as a decision by Socrates to escape his decadence. Having persuaded Athens to follow the "Socratic methods" of reason, Socrates himself realizes that this won't work: "Rationality at all costs . . . this itself was just an illness, a different illness. . . . Did [Socrates] himself understand this, that cleverest of all self-out-witters? Did he ultimately tell himself this, in the wisdom of his courage unto death? . . . Socrates wanted to die." 48

Socrates understood what the so-called "Socratics" failed to understand: that dying was the only way he could escape decadence.⁴⁹ How does this relate to the question of freedom in *Twilight*? Nietzsche, I would argue, intends for us to make a connection between Socrates and Caesar. Consider what Nietzsche says about the psychology of the Socratic Greeks: "Everywhere the instincts were in anarchy; everywhere people were but five steps from excess: the *monstrum in animo* was the universal danger. 'The instincts want to play the tyrant; we must devise a counter-tyrant who is stronger.'" 50

Caesar, we are later told, is free because he is "five steps from tyranny"⁵¹ and he struggles successfully to avoid being tyrannized by his inner instincts. Yet this is also the position of the Greeks who take on the Socratic methods. They too are "five steps from excess," which turns out to be the excess of the tyrant-instincts. Nietzsche's language here ("five steps . . .") suggests that he intends us to make this connection.

Socrates and the Socratics find themselves threatened with inner tyrant-instincts. Caesar is unusual both in the strength of the inner tyrants and in his ability to overcome them. Yet notice what Socrates claims when he is accused of being plagued by the most terrible inner vices and lusts: "'That is true,' he said, 'but I have become master of all of them.'" 52 Socrates is claiming precisely Caesar's freedom. He is claiming that although he has the utmost inner conflict to contend with, he has been able to overcome it.

Of course, the methods we see Socrates employ in his lifetime (fanatical devotion to reason and radical opposition to the passions) are a failure; much of *Twilight* is devoted to explaining how and why they are harmful. But by eventually choosing death, Socrates does in a very limited sense achieve Nietzschean freedom—or, at least, he faces up to its challenge. As he dies, Nietzsche's Socrates acknowledges that "Socrates is no physician": he can't cure the people of their decadence.⁵³ In *Twilight* "Skirmishes" 36, Nietzsche offers a "morality for physicians." In certain circumstances, he argues, when nothing is left for them, certain people ought to choose death "accomplished at the right time, brightly and joyfully, among children and witnesses." Socrates didn't exactly die among children—he died among other philosophers; but he surely gives us the most famous example of a conscious, bright, joyful decision to die. For someone without other options, Nietzsche claims, such a death is "the most admirable thing there is: it almost earns you the right to live." It would be a "death chosen freely."

In the Socrates chapter, Nietzsche asks the question, "Was Socrates a typical criminal?" but he is careful not to answer it. Only later do we understand the implications of this question. As we have seen, the "typical criminal" is much later defined via Catiline: unusually strong, he is broken by a society which cannot support this strength. If Nietzsche is employing that term with the sense he would later give it (an assumption, certainly, but not an unreasonable one), then this question raises the possibility that Socrates was a strong figure made sick by his decadent, weak contemporaries—precisely the opposite, then, of the Socrates of *The Birth of Tragedy*. Just like Caesar, Socrates confronts the resultant sickness; but he can only succeed by choosing to end his own life. In suicide, he achieves a certain kind of freedom, and "almost earns the right to live." In spite of what he says, Socrates is a physician, but he is a physician who "heals" only himself. Those around him fail to understand the meaning of his death; they cling to the methods which he himself discarded.

If Socrates achieves his (limited) freedom by choosing to die, we may well wonder what Caesar does to stay free: what are his methods for remaining aloft with respect to his terrifying inner conflicts? In fact, Nietzsche does say something about how Caesar copes with such troubles. The list consists of going on "long marches," the "simplest form of living," "uninterrupted sojourn in the open air," and "continuous toil."⁵⁴ I trust I am not alone in finding this something of an anticlimax. Surely there must be more to Nietzschean freedom than joining the Boy Scout movement?

I suggested at the beginning that deriving a take-home message from Nietzsche's texts often seems to do them a severe disservice. It's not clear what the "message" should be and it's even less clear whether we can really take it to heart. Nietzsche's list of Caesar's methods to combat his inner tyrants is taken from Plutarch's *Life of Caesar*. In fact, Plutarch is an instructive place for us to begin this discussion. Plutarch is clear that he writes the *Lives* to offer psychological insights into his subjects. He selects those sayings and anecdotes which offer "signs of a man's soul." Yet Plutarch has a further aim in mind: he wants his reader to become more moral. The virtue of his subjects, he claims, "by the bare statement of its actions, can so affect men's minds as to create at once both admiration of things done and desire to imitate the doers of them."⁵⁵ Plutarch's *Lives* are often taken to have a morally beneficial effect upon the reader. Hence: "Plutarch taught me high thoughts; he elevated me above the wretched sphere of my own reflections to admire and love the heroes of past ages." So, at least, says Dr Frankenstein's creature.⁵⁶

The case with Nietzsche is much more confusing. Does he, like Plutarch, intend that we come away with an idea of how to act or, if not to act, then how in general to live? On a careful reading of *Twilight*, this question doesn't yield a yes or no answer. There is a conflict embodied in the text: on the one hand, Nietzsche is careful not to offer a freedom we can realistically aim for; on the other hand, he doesn't present a

value-neutral account of freedom and decadence. I'll say a little more about each of the horns of this dilemma.

On the one hand, then, it's not clear how we could realize Nietzschean freedom. The three "free" people discussed in this essay remain somewhat elusive as objects of aspiration. Yes, the liberals are in a sense "free," but only when they aren't in power (when they are in power, they undermine freedom). Socrates achieves a limited freedom—but only by ending his own life. The best option looks to be Caesar, the "highest type" of free man. Obviously, it wouldn't be appropriate to copy Caesar. We don't have Caesar's inner psyche; nor do we face the same challenges, environment, background, and so on. More specifically, we can't even aim for the general structure of Caesar's freedom. It's not enough to seek out conflict, as is clear from the Napoleon case. If we tried to turn Caesar's case into a general formula, it would go something like this: "Be born stronger than those around you; then make sure that your strengths lead you into trouble, so that you begin to doubt and mistrust them; see that the resultant inner turmoil nearly destroys you, such that you constantly overcome it (but only just)." I don't have to spell out the absurdity of trying to act on such a principle.

On the other hand, we can't read Nietzsche as a neutral describer of states of affairs. I doubt any reader of *Twilight*, or any other Nietzsche text, could conclude that Nietzsche doesn't wish to influence us with his writing. That, presumably, is why he chooses to speak in terms of "decadence" and "freedom"; after all, these are not value-neutral terms, and he could easily have chosen others. *Twilight*, and its exploration of decadence, amounts to a description of what is wrong with the world. I don't say we have to choose between these two options: we don't have to say that Nietzsche definitely does or doesn't want us to act in response to his analysis. But I do present this as a problem for Nietzsche and one of which he demonstrates a certain awareness.

I have said that Caesar represents a kind of productive tension: not too little (Napoleon) and not too much (Cati-

line). Nietzsche contrasts productive tension with “‘peace of soul,’ the Christian desideratum.” “Peace of soul” represents the aim of having no tension at all, which Nietzsche ridicules. “Peace of soul,” he tells us, is more often than not “something else which is just unable to give itself a more modest name,” for example, “laziness persuaded by vanity to dress itself up in moral garb.” Note that this is an example of the typical Nietzschean argument I discussed at the start. What kind of person could possibly want “peace of soul”? The answer (for example): a lazy person who wants to pretend that he’s doing something moral. The section ends: “Twilight of the Idols: who knows? Perhaps just another kind of ‘peace of soul.’”⁵⁷

Admittedly, this passage is far from lucid. But it is explicable in the context of my claims about *Twilight*. We might expect Nietzsche’s freedom to furnish us with some kind of goal or aim, but *Twilight* offers us nothing of the sort. Why did Nietzsche write it, then? Here, I think, Nietzsche seems to acknowledge that *Twilight* is itself unproductive, just a kind of “peace of soul.” Hence, not only does *Twilight* give us no specific moral instruction—it doesn’t even leave us confident that such a thing is possible; and yet it reminds us again and again of the lamentable, decadent state of modern life. Freedom in *Twilight* isn’t something you can aim for, and this must call into question Nietzsche’s reasons for writing it. I don’t necessarily see that he has a solution to this problem: “But in the end,” he laments in the final section of the *Streifzüge*, “who knows if I even want to be read today?”⁵⁸

notes

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1. *Twilight of the Idols* and *The Anti-Christ*, R. J. Hollingdale, trans. (London 1968).

2. I suspect that other attempts to explain Nietzschean freedom may have suffered in this regard—and the specificity of this project may mean that I am unable to engage with them fruitfully.

3. *The Anti-Christ*, §51 in *Twilight of the Idols* and *The Anti-Christ* (note 1).

4. *The Anti-Christ*, §41–47.

5. T. W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (Berlin 1951), §33.

6. “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” §6. This is the second of the *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen* (*Untimely Meditations*, R. J. Hollingdale, trans. [Cambridge 1983]).

7. *Human, All Too Human*, R. J. Hollingdale, trans. (Cambridge 1996), vol. 1, §226. Nietzsche doesn’t use the word *zeitgemäss* here; my point is that this is typical of his concerns.

8. Or *Unmodern Observations*, William Arrowsmith, gen. ed. (New Haven and London 1990). Arrowsmith also discusses the meaning of *(un)zeitgemässigkeit* in his forward.

9. It should be obvious, then, that I’m not taking the *Zeit* (i.e., “Time”) in *zeitgemäss* too literally. In one year, there may be different, say, intellectual trends in different continents, countries, communities. These may be a question of different *places*, not times. My use of the word “context” is meant to make this clear.

10. *On the Genealogy of Morals* in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, W. Kaufmann, trans. (New York 2000).

11. As I understand it, the tension between context and the individual forms the heart of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. For a full discussion, see my “Nietzsche on Context and the Individual,” *Nietzscheforschung* 15 (2008).

12. *The Anti-Christ*, §32.

13. *Twilight*, “Socrates.”

14. E.g., *Twilight*, “Skirmishes” 34–36.

15. *Twilight*, “Reason” 6.

16. *Twilight*, “Skirmishes” 36.

17. *Twilight*, “World” 2.

18. *Twilight*, “Skirmishes” 37.

19. *Twilight*, “Skirmishes” 34–37.

20. *Twilight*, “Skirmishes” 34–37.

21. *Twilight*, “Skirmishes” 34–37.

22. *Twilight*, “Skirmishes” 34–37.

23. *Twilight*, “World” 2.

24. *Twilight*, “Socrates” 9.

25. *Twilight*, “Skirmishes” 38. Again, humans in fact behave like a herd—and develop a herd morality—due to the break-up of an inner “herd” of instincts.

26. All quotations about Catiline are taken from *Twilight*, “Skirmishes” 45.

27. Sallust, *The Jugurthine War* and *The Conspiracy of Catiline*, S. A. Handford, trans. (London 1963), 177–78.

28. Sallust (note 27), 178.

29. Sallust (note 27), 184

30. *Ein naturwüchsiger Mensch* implies something more than merely “a human being raised in nature”; it suggests a man grown vigorously and without excessive cultivation. This, of course, is part of Nietzsche's point about Napoleon.

31. *Twilight*, “Skirmishes” 45.

32. Napoleon is the star of *Mein Begriff vom Genie*, where Caesar is the star of *Mein Begriff von Freiheit*.

33. *The Case of Wagner*, §7 in *The Birth of Tragedy* and *The Case of Wagner*, W. Kaufmann, trans. (New York 1967). I'm grateful to David Wellbery for first pointing this out to me.

34. Notably in the third essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals*.

35. Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, L. and A. Maude, trans. (Ware, Herts. 1993), book 9, chapter 7.

36. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, R. J. Hollingdale, trans. (London 1961), prologue, §5. Compare “The cosmos works by harmony of tensions, like the lyre and bow” in *Heraclitus: Fragments*, B. Haxton, trans. (London 2001), fragment 56, page 37.

37. *Twilight*, “Skirmishes” 38.

38. *Twilight*, “Skirmishes” 45.

39. Not to mention the hints in Sallust and Plutarch that Caesar himself may have been implicated in Catiline's plot.

40. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, R. Speirs, trans. (Cambridge 1999).

41. *The Birth of Tragedy* (note 40), §13.

42. *Twilight*, “Socrates” 5.

43. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke*, G. Colli and M. Montinari, eds. (Berlin 1967–), 6.71.

44. Reprinted and translated as “Essay on Epigram” in Lessing, *Fables and Epigrams* (London 1825).

45. *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches* 1.531, *Kritische Studienausgabe* vol. 4.2, G. Colli and M. Montinari, eds. (Berlin 1988). My translation.

46. See *Twilight*, “Morality as Anti-nature.”

47. E.g., in *Human, All Too Human* and *Daybreak*.

48. *Twilight*, “Socrates” 11–12.

49. A similar point is suggested in W. Dannhauser, *Nietzsche's View of Socrates* (Ithaca, ny 1976), 221–22.

50. *Twilight*, “Socrates” 9.

51. *Twilight*, “Skirmishes” 38.

52. *Twilight*, “Socrates” 9.

53. *Twilight*, "Socrates" 12.

54. *Twilight*, "Skirmishes" 31. It may be relevant to note that Nietzsche himself was a man of notoriously ill health, and that he would combat this ill health with long walks and simple living.

55. "Pericles," *Plutarch's Lives*, vol. I, J. Dryden, trans. (New York 2001), 1.3. This and other relevant passages are discussed in A. J. Gossage, "Plutarch," in *Latin Biography*, T. A. Dorey, ed. (London 1967).

56. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, chapter 15.

57. *Twilight*, "Morality" 3.

58. *Twilight*, "Skirmishes" 51.