Nietzsche and the Ancients: Philosophy and Scholarship

George P. Grant

It is with an ambiguous mixture of approval and hesitation that one reads an article by the Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford on "Nietzsche and the Study of the Ancient World". Professor Lloyd-Jones begins by speaking of "the unfortunate prejudice which for most of this century has prevented most American and English people from recognizing the immense importance of this writer."[1] The purpose of this article is to explain my ambiguous reaction, not only because the relation of Nietzsche to the study of the ancient world is intrinsically interesting, but also because it can be used as a paradigm through which to look at the current relation between scholarship and philosophy. The pedagogical question as to why we should encourage students to read Nietzsche turns into the more important question as to how we can teach students to read Plato from out of non-historicist assumptions. The study of Plato as if it were more than a preparation for modern philosophy is well illustrated in J. N. Findlay's article in volume II of *Dionysius*.

It is easy to state the cause of immediate pleasure in Lloyd-Jones' article. He makes amends for all the misinterpretation and disregard of Nietzsche which has taken place in the English scholarly world. I simply repeat the bare outline of the story of that misinterpretation in Germany and England. When Nietzsche published *The Birth of Tragedy* in his twenties, the German scholar Wilamowitz launched a series of attacks on Nietzsche's scholarship, from which he drew the conclusion that his account of Socrates was not to be taken seriously. Wilamowitz' position only had a short run in Germany, because the relation between philosophy and scholarship was too deeply rooted in that society. After 1900 it was difficult for educated Germans to avoid Nietzsche's conclusion that those who faced the consequences of scientific positivism were likely, if they were moderns, to become historicist existentialists. Nietzsche's portrait of Platonism was clearly a keystone in the thinking of that historicism. He had stated that scientific and philosophical rationalism had come forth from that arch-seducer, Socrates, as a means of turning away from what was given in the art of tragedy. Now, after more than two

---

1. See *Studies in Nietzsche and the Classical Tradition*, the University of North Carolina Press, 1976, pp. 1-15.

Dionysius, Vol. III, Dec. 1979, pp. 5-16

thousand years of dominance, that rationalism had produced in modern science and scholarship the means of overcoming itself. Human beings had at last the means of living beyond its seductions. Because of the power of Nietzsche's statement of historicism in German intellectual life, the accusation that his account of the ancient world was unscholarly did not have much influence in Germany in this century. It had some influence, however, in that Heidegger took the opportunity to answer it at the beginning of his thousand page commentary on Nietzsche. Heidegger is not a writer much given to the use of wit, but he uses the high style of comedy in ridiculing those who claim that there is no need to read Nietzsche because he is not a respectable scholar.[2]

The situation in the English-speaking world was different. That world was entering politically the stage of open competition between itself and Germany — the competition which was to lead to two massive world wars. Everything German, once having been praised, was becoming suspect. Moreover, the English-speaking societies had so long dominated the political world, first in the power of Great Britain and later in that of the U.S.A., that they were immensely confident of their own traditions, which were those essentially of contractual liberalism. Societies which are so confident of their power in the world have little need of philosophy. "The owl of Minerva only begins to spread its wings in the dusk". Therefore there was every reason for English-speakers to disregard what Nietzsche had written. The British classical scholars ridiculed or disregarded Nietzsche. The analytical philosophers made out that he was some kind of romantic rhetorician who disregarded the evident truth of modern science and wrote in a style so turgid as to be beyond the pale. This assessment was given added justification when Nietzsche seemed to be taken up by the most immoderate and indeed perverted side of the German political spectrum — the national socialists. Nietzsche's doctrine of the *Übermensch* could be taken by those who did not need to read him as a precursor of the vulgarest racism. Nietzsche was accused of the anti-Semitism which had been present in the intellectual gutters of Europe, and he was accused of it even in the light of his arguments that it was a terrible contemporary disease and even when almost his last written words were a cry for the destruction of that gutter anti-Semitism.

---

2. Heidegger's *Nietzsche* is surely a *sine qua non* for anybody who would understand Nietzsche. Commentaries of one great thinker on another are so rare that they should never be neglected. It is a pity that the first volume of textual exposition is not available in English.

Let me state in parenthesis how interesting it is that Frege is taken as a central founder of mathematical logic, and his wild anti-Semitic diatribes forgotten by the analytical philosophers. Nietzsche, who spoke early in the 1870s and 1880s of European anti-Semitism as a secular disease of terrible portent, has been condemned in England as a racist. This mixture of misinterpretations made Nietzsche a ridiculed, unread and even proscribed writer in the English-speaking world till recently.

Lloyd-Jones says that he is a classical scholar and not a philosopher (whatever that may be in the current English-speaking context). Nevertheless he has read Nietzsche, not only in his early stage as a classical philologist, but also the main body of writings when he had given up that occupation. For those of us who do not know the details of the history of philology in Europe, Lloyd-Jones is clear about Nietzsche's place in the various academic schools and their quarrels. He is particularly interesting about Nietzsche's early philological writings from the time of his professorship at Basle. He clears out the negative political prejudices of the English world. But he is chiefly interested in Nietzsche as the man who first set in motion the movement of scholarship which was concerned with 'the irrational' in Greek civilisation,

> . . . the great movement that culminates, or seems to us to culminate, in *The Greeks and the Irrational* of E. R. Dodds . . . Nietzsche saw the ancient gods as standing for the fearful realities of a universe in which mankind had no special privileges. For him what gave the tragic hero the chance to display his heroism was the certainty of annihilation; and tragedy gave its audiences comfort not by purging their emotions but by bringing them face to face with the most awful truths of human existence and by showing how those truths are what makes heroism true and life worth living. In comparison with such an insight, resting on a deeper vision of the real nature of ancient religion and the great gulf that separates it from religions of other kinds, the faults of Nietzsche's book, glaring as they are, sink into insignificance. (p.9)

One is grateful for this summary of what Nietzsche said about ancient polytheism in the *Birth of Tragedy*. Yet the gratitude is accompanied by disquiet for the following reasons. How far does Lloyd-Jones want to go with Nietzsche? What will be the effect of bringing Nietzsche onto the stage of English-speaking classical scholarship, especially if it be inevitable that he enter centre stage? It is obviously proper for Lloyd-Jones to limit himself to the influence of Nietzsche on classical scholarship. But the question

remains: as classical scholarship is but part of knowledge of the whole, can Nietzsche's influence be limited, even within that scholarship itself? As Nietzsche wrote in his extremity: "After you had discovered me, it was no trick to find me; the difficulty now is to lose me."[3] This raises the more general question of the relation of any historical scholarship to philosophy. In any sane educational system (and I am not implying that the North American system is that), scholarship must see itself not as an end, but a means in the journey of minds towards the truth concerning the whole. Moreover, any scholarly activity is carried on by human beings who come to know what they know about the past in terms of some assumptions about the whole, that is in terms of some partaking in philosophy, however inexplicit. Nietzsche is above all the thinker who first laid before the western world the doctrine of historicism radically defined. This teaching has now become the dominant methodological principle underlying most contemporary scholarship. I mean by historicism the doctrine that all thought (particularly the highest) depends, even in its very essence, upon a particular set of existing experienced circumstances — which in the modern world we call 'history'. Nietzsche gave us his account of the ancient gods within that historicism, and understands that account as part of the 'truth' of that historicism. The question then is whether one can limit his influence upon classical scholarship to the recognition of his interpretation of 'irrationalism' in Greek religion.

The tensions in the relation between modern scholarship and philosophy are illustrated in E. R. Dodds' *The Greeks and the Irrational,* which Lloyd-Jones praises so highly. Dodds' book is a fine product of a long life of scholarly reading among a wide variety of ancient authors. It lays before the reader many aspects of Greek life which had not been emphasised by the scholars who looked at the world through the eyes of a dying 'idealism'. To a political philosopher such as myself, whose central reading is not with such authors, and yet who wishes to have knowledge of the ancient world, the book brings much that is not otherwise available. Nevertheless, the facts are presented from out of an assumed British liberalism as that creed was expressed by decent Oxford gentlemen. Dodds goes so far as to identify very closely the 'rationalism' of fifth century Athens with nineteenth century English 'rationalism'. How far that goes may be seen when he identifies Socrates in 'Protagoras' with Jeremy Bentham (p. 211). Indeed in such an identification, the gap between scholarly and

3. Letter to Brandes 1888.

philosophical reading is startlingly present. Also, by the twentieth century, Oxford gentlemen were talking more openly about sex in their scholarship, and Dodds continually refers to his debt to Freud. But Dodds' Freud is essentially a therapist of sexual difficulties whose view of human life is well contained within British liberalism. The book ends with a peroration that western 'rationalism' (by this he means the English variety) may be able to save itself from 'the failure of nerve' which caused the end of Athenian rationalism, because we have the advantage of Freudian therapy which will allow us to come to terms with our irrationalism and contain it within our rational tradition. This final peroration is appropriate because it was presented first as lectures in California during the 1950s. At that time, the wisdom of American academia insisted on the close alliance of liberalism and psycho-analysis. Dodds' Oxford Freud is not far from the Y.M.C.A. Freud prevalent in his day in the U.S.[4]

The difficulty of such Freudianism united with a good-willed theory of democracy is that one doctrine of man takes over the private realm, while another is asked to rule in the public. Such a compromise may be practically acceptable in a society for a short span, but in the longer term such elementary inconsistency becomes apparent even to busy public men. Why should constitutional regimes be considered superior to their alternatives if human beings are basically 'ids'? It is well to remember for the purposes of my present argument that it was not Freud but Nietzsche who first and most consistently expounded the doctrine that human beings are 'ids'. Although Dodds' book provides the reader with interesting facts about the classical world, the mish-mash of ultimate presuppositions makes the book a confused read for a political philosopher.

Because Lloyd-Jones praises Dodds as the culmination of classical scholarship about 'the irrational' in an article praising Nietzsche's influence in the same field, one cannot leave alone the jumble of assumptions within which Dodds carries out that scholarship. The mixed assumptions raise the question of the relation between classical scholarship and philosophy. They also raise the question of what happens to classical scholarship if it takes philosophy as Nietzsche takes it. I hope it will not be considered impertinent trespass for somebody in 'another field' to touch this subject.

---

4. An even more complacent book in the same tradition is Sir Kenneth Dover's recent *Greek Homosexuality*. The book's coziness flattens out all the complexities of that subject.

It seems true to this outsider that classical studies before the enlightenment were considered chiefly valuable as the necessary preparation for the study of philosophy. This study was allowed by rulers, not because it was thought intrinsically good, but as a necessary preparation for political judgement and theology. The study of Homer, the dramatists and the poets was secondary to this end. In short, classical studies were sustained in the great tradition of rationalism — above all because they led to the study of Plato and Aristotle. Whatever else Nietzsche's writings may be, they must be taken as the most sustained, the deepest and most comprehensive criticism of that great tradition. The depth of that criticism is sustained throughout all his writings in his pondering on Socrates as the great seducer. From this follows his comprehensive attack on Plato. The purpose of classical scholarship must surely become very different if that comprehensive attack is taken as successful. In this sense the thought of Nietzsche cannot be taken as something that contributes to classical scholarship within a given account of what that scholarship is. It must be taken as something which if true, will change the purposes of that activity fundamentally.

What will be the place of classical scholarship in our universities as historicism becomes more articulate in the English-speaking world? In some ways historicism seems a closer friend of Greek studies than the long tradition of positivism which preceded it, and in which positive classical scholarship stood on one side and philosophy on the other, and the gap between them increasingly widened. Historicism has been both a cause and effect of that engrossment with the human past which so characterises our best modern universities, and which is supported in our societies because of the desire to understand our inheritance in the midst of a fast changing world. This engrossment guarantees the continuance of chairs of classics. In this sense, historicism seems a friend of classical studies. Also historicism, in its grandeur in the thought of Nietzsche and Heidegger, recognises that we as westerners come forth from Socratic rationalism above all, and therefore educated men should study Greek philosophy to understand what they have to overcome.

Yet at a deeper level one may ask whether such historicism is really the friend of classical studies. What is the effect on classical studies when crude historicisms in anthropology and archaeology teach that it is equally illuminating to the young to study the Incas and the Philistines as to study Greek civilisation. Among the various historicist substitutes for philosophy, anthropology now adds its name to that of sociology, economics and psychology.

Classical studies will continue in the universities not only because they have been there, but because among the vast variety of past societies Greece and Rome are accidentally our own. But our own will be less important amidst the smorgesbord of the past. In such an atmosphere, classical studies will be further detached from the conception that they bring something unique to be known, and will increasingly be concerned with filling out the details of the past (setting Thucydides right, as the expression goes).

To repeat, among the articulate historicists there will be a continuing interest in Plato and Aristotle because we can only understand ourselves in terms of the problem of Socrates. But this study of the ancients will be a kind of modern therapy — the understanding of them so that we can free our minds of that rationalism of which they were the origin. For the highly educated, that historical therapy is necessary to allow them to become authentic moderns. Socrates turned away from tragedy (and what was given in its truth about sexuality) in saying that what was final was not the abyss, but good. The greatest achievement of modern scientists and philosophers was the destruction of Greek rationalism with its 'substances', its 'truth' and its 'good'. The study of the classics leads us to understand that up to this point the greatest height for man was laid bare in Greek tragedy, in that it made plain that the basic fact of existence was our encounter with an abyss — our encounter with the finality of chaos. Classical rationalism is seen as a species of neurotic fear, a turning away from the elementary fact of the abyss by means of a shallow identification of happiness, virtue and reason. Our study of it must therefore be a kind of historical therapy (similar to what Nietzsche proposes to free us of Christianity). That therapy is a means for the educated to bring themselves to an even greater height than that proclaimed in tragedy. It will be a greater height because it will now take into itself both the primacy of the abyss and the overcoming of chance made possible through scientific technology. This will enable the great and the noble to be 'masters of the earth'. The combination of the primacy of the abyss with technology will produce the *Übermensch* — those who will deserve to be the masters of the earth. Humanity has been a bridge in evolution between the beasts and those who are higher than human beings. Nietzsche may have been the great political critic of Rousseau, but he accepts his account of human origins. Reason does not open us to the eternal; its greatness has been to transcend itself in its modern manifestations, so that we are both enabled and deserve to be masters of the earth. Nietzsche is not an 'anti-technological naturalist', but one who believes that modern technology has

allowed a new height for men.[5]

For this reason one looks with fear as well as pleasure at praise of Nietzsche from the Regius Professor of Greek. There is some truth in Lloyd-Jones' statement that Nietzsche was a valuable inspiration to classical studies because he turned attention to the irrational. But is it possible to take Nietzsche in this context and not take him seriously as the most sustained critic of Plato? What will happen to classical studies if they are even further removed from their traditional role as a means to the truth to be received in the study of classical philosophy? If this study is a therapy to allow us to realise that modern philosophy has freed us from the power of Socratic rationalism, will not this further weaken the power of classical studies in western society? The Greeks will be our Incas which we study for their mythology. Already in the English-speaking world analytical philosophy has done much to weaken the study of ancient philosophy. The discovery of the irrational among the Greeks may through its historicism seem to enliven an interest in classical matters. But will this interest be of sustained seriousness when it is undertaken within existentialist historicism? It is this which makes one think that the praise of Nietzsche from Lloyd-Jones (and others like him) is a Janus as far as the future of classical studies is concerned.

II

There is no escape from reading Nietzsche if one would understand modernity. Some part of his whole meets us whenever we listen to what our contemporaries are saying when they speak as moderns. The words come forth from those who have never heard of him, and from those who could not concentrate sufficiently to read philosophy seriously. A hundred years ago Nietzsche first spoke what is now explicit in western modernity. When we speak of morality as concerned with 'values', of politics in the language of sheer 'decision', of artists as 'creative', of 'quality of life' as praise and excuse for the manifold forms of human engineering, we are using the language first systematically thought by Nietzsche. At the political level his thought appears appropriately among the atheists of the right; but equally (if less appropriately) it is on the lips of the atheists of the left. When we speak of our universities beyond the sphere of exact scientific technologies, what could better express the general ethos than Nietzsche's remark: "Perhaps I have experience of nothing else but that art is worth more than truth." And of course radical

5. See J. A. Doull "Quebec Independence and an Independent Canada", paper in unpublished volume of essays in honour of George Grant, 1978.

historicism is everywhere in our intellectual life. It even begins to penetrate the self-articulation of the mathematicised sciences.

In such circumstances there is need to read Nietzsche and perhaps to teach him. One must read him as the great clarion of the modern, conscious of itself. If the question of reading Nietzsche is inescapable, the question of whether and how and to whom he should be taught is a more complex matter. It is particularly difficult for somebody such as myself, who in political philosophy is above all a lover of Plato within Christianity. The following story is relevant. A man with philosophic eros was recently asked the rather silly question: "At what period of time would you best like to have lived?" He answered that he was lucky to have lived in the present period, because the most comprehensive and deepest account of the whole has been given us by Plato, and the most comprehensive criticism of that account has been given us by Nietzsche. In the light of that criticism, one can the better understand the depth of Platonic teaching. That is, one should teach Nietzsche as the great critic of Plato. The difficulty of reading Plato today is that one is likely to read him through the eyes of some school of modern philosophy, and this can blind one. For example, many moderns have in the last century and a half followed Kant's remark in the first Critique that he was combining an Epicurean science with a Platonic account of morality. With such spectacles how much of Plato must be excluded. The great advantage of Nietzsche is that such strange combinations are not present. His criticism of Plato is root and branch. In the light of it the modern student may break through to what the Platonic teaching is in itself.

Nevertheless, the teacher who is within the philosophic and religious tradition, and who also takes upon himself the grave responsibility of teaching Nietzsche, must do so within an explicit understanding with those he teaches that he rejects Nietzsche's doctrine. If I were not afraid of being taken as an innocent dogmatist, I would have written that one should teach Nietzsche within the understanding that he is a teacher of evil. The justification of such a harsh position is difficult, particularly in universities such as ours in which liberalism has become little more than the pursuit of 'value-free' scholarship. This harsh position is clearly not 'value-free'. Moreover, such a position is ambiguous in the light of the fact that I do not find myself able to answer comprehensively the genius who was the greatest critic of Plato. But there is no need to excuse myself. Who has been able to give a refutation of radical historicism that is able to convince our wisest scientific and scholarly friends?

Without such capability, what is it to say that one should teach within the rejection of Nietzsche? Is not this the very denial of that openness to the whole which is the fundamental mark of the philosophic enterprise? Is it not to fall back into that dogmatic closedness which is one form of enmity to philosophy? I will attempt to answer that by discussing Nietzsche's teaching concerning justice. As a political philosopher within Christianity, my willingness to teach Nietzsche within an understanding of rejection, while at the same time I am not capable of the complete refutation of his historicism, turns around my inability to accept as true his account of justice. At least we need have no doubt as to what Nietzsche's conception of justice is, and the consequences of accepting it.

A caveat is necessary at this point in the argument. I am not making the mistake that is prevalent in much condemnation of Nietzsche — namely that there is no place for justice in his doctrine. His teaching about justice is at the very core of what he is saying. To understand it is as fundamental as to understand the teaching concerning "the eternal recurrence of the identical". This is said unequivocally in a fragment written in 1885, towards the end of his life as a writer.

> It happened late that I came upon what up to that time had been totally missing, namely justice. What is justice and is it possible? If it should not be possible, how would life be supportable? This is what I increasingly asked myself. Above all it filled me with anguish to find, when I delved into myself, only violent passions, only private perspectives, only lack of reflection about this matter. What I found in myself lacked the very primary conditions for justice.[6]

This quotation does not give content to Nietzsche's conception of justice. Its nature appears in two quotations from the unpublished fragments of 1884. "Justice as function of a power with all encircling vision, which sees beyond the little perspectives of good and evil, and so has a wider advantage, having the aim of maintaining something which is more than this or that person." Or again: "Justice as the building, rejecting, annihilating way of thought which proceeds from the appraisement of value: highest representative of life itself."[7]

6. *Nietzsche Werke,* Naumann, Leipzig, 1904, XIV, p. 385. This translation and the ones that follow are my poor own. How does one translate properly this polysyllabic language of compounds, into a language which has reached its greatest heights in the use of the monosyllable? How does one not lose both the substance and rhetoric of that immoderate stylist?
7. Neitzsche, *op. cit. Nachgelassene Fragmente* 1844.

What is the account of justice therein given? What is it to see "beyond the little perspectives of good and evil"; to maintain "something which is more than this or that person"? What is "the building, rejecting, annihilating way of thought"? What is being said here about the nature of justice would require above all an exposition of why the superman, when he is able to think the eternal recurrence of the identical, will be the only noble ruler for a technological age, and what he must be ready to do to "the last men" who will have to be ruled. That exposition cannot be given in the space of an article. Suffice it to speak popularly: what is given in these quotations is an account of justice as the human creating of quality of life. And is it not clear by now what are the actions which follow from such an account? It was not accidental that Nietzsche should write of "the merciless extinction" of large masses in the name of justice, or that he should have thought "eugenical experimentation" necessary to the highest modern justice. And in thinking of these consequences, one should not concentrate alone on their occurrence during the worst German regime, which was luckily beaten in battle. One should relate them to what is happening in the present western regimes. We all know that mass foeticide is taking place in our societies. We all should know the details of eugenical experimentation which are taking place in all the leading universities of the western world. After all, many of us are colleagues in those universities. We should be clear that the language used to justify such activities is the language of the human creating of quality of life, beyond the little perspectives of good and evil.

One must pass beyond an appeal to immediate consequences in order to state what is being accepted with Nietzsche's historicist account of justice. What does a proper conception of justice demand from us in our dealings with others? Clearly there are differences here between the greatest ancient and modern philosophers. The tradition of political thought originating in Rousseau and finding different fulfilments in Kant and Hegel demands a more substantive equality than is asked in Plato or Aristotle. What Hegel said about the influence of Christianity towards that change is indubitably true. But the difference between the ancients and the moderns as to what is due to all human beings should not lead us to doubt that in the rationalist traditions, whether ancient or modern, something at least is due to all others, whether we define them as rational souls or rational subjects. Whatever may be given in Plato's attack on democracy in his *Republic*, it is certainly not that for some human beings nothing is due. Indeed to understand Plato's account of justice, we

must remember the relation is his thought between justice and the mathematical conception of equality.

In Nietzsche's conception of justice there are other human beings to whom nothing is due — other than extermination. The human creating of quality of life beyond the little perspectives of good and evil by a building, rejecting, annihilating way of thought is the statement that politics is the technology of making the human race greater than it has yet been. In that artistic accomplishment those of our fellows who stand in the way of that quality can be exterminated or simply enslaved. There is nothing intrinsic in all others that puts any given limit on what we may do to them in the name of that great enterprise. Human beings are so unequal in quality that to some of them no due is owed. What gives meaning in the fact of historicism is that willed potentiality is higher than any actuality. Putting aside the petty perspectives of good and evil means that there is nothing belonging to all human beings which need limit the building of the future.Oblivion of eternity is here not a liberal-aesthetic stance, which still allows men to support regimes the principles of which came from those who had affirmed eternity; oblivion of eternity here realises itself politically. One should not flirt with Nietzsche as a flirtation for the purposes of this or that area of science or scholarship, but teach him in the full recognition that his thought presages the conception of justice which more and more unveils itself in the technological west.

McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario