

“To Nietzsche our Dionysian side is not an embarrassing afterthought but an essential and rightful part of our whole self.”

Tragedy — a walk on the wild side

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) is much celebrated but generally poorly understood. Nietzsche saw the human mind not as an instrument directed towards seeking truth but as a weapon in our struggle for an authentic existence and for power.

Nietzsche initially studied classics and philology at Leipzig. His first published work *The Birth of Tragedy* analyses the development of the Greek tragic theatre from Aeschylus to Euripides. He draws more profound conclusions than the average weekend theatre critic.

Nietzsche argues that Greek tragedy portrays humans as having a dual nature, which he identifies with the Greek gods Apollo, the god of truth and reason, and Dionysus, the god of wine and rampant pleasure. On the one hand we are rational Apollonian beings, able to use our reason to manipulate the world and achieve goals. But on the other hand these goals themselves are driven by Dionysian desires and emotions, and we are beings capable of wild ecstasy and folly. One is reminded of Hume’s belief that our ‘reason is the slave of the passions’.

Nietzsche identifies the rational dialogue of Greek tragedies with an Apollonian mode of thought and the constant wailing background of the chorus with the Dionysian unrestrained drive of our desires. The early tragedians Aeschylus and Sophocles present us with this balance of Apollonian and Dionysian humanity. The later work of Euripides downplays the role of the chorus. Nietzsche links this with Socrates, whom he accuses of misdirecting us towards an unnatural and unhealthy rationality. He sees the Enlightenment as driving us further down a blind alley. To Nietzsche our Dionysian side is not an embarrassing afterthought but an essential and rightful part of our whole self. Both sides seek to dominate us: we are caught in an eternal battle between our desires and our reason. (Next month we will look at Nietzsche’s solution to this dilemma.)

So was Nietzsche correct? Look around and everywhere you will see Nietzsche’s model. If you think we are rational beings then watch the 10 o’clock news. Are our own desires dictated by reason or do we use ‘reason’ to follow our desires? Go to the cinema or the opera and ask yourself does

Apollo or Dionysus rule? Many writers have compared Nietzsche’s model of the self with Freud’s Ego and Id, although Freud denied any direct influence from Nietzsche (perhaps denial is indeed the appropriate term?).

In his later writings Nietzsche rejected both the traditional Western view of history and Western post-Christian ethics. Nietzsche questions the possibility of any enduring notion of ‘truth’, stating that truth ‘is a mobile army of metaphors’. He takes the concept of truth back to a pre-rational context. In this respect he stands as the first major relativist, and in many ways he is a prophet for postmodernism, albeit almost a century before the term was invented.

So can I reconcile my desires and emotions with my reason? Isn’t it just called growing up? Not all of us do it, but if examined honestly, surely life itself is the best form of psychotherapy?

CPD further study and reflective notes

The notes in Boxes 1 and 2 will help you to read and reflect further on any of the brief articles in this series. If this learning relates to your professional development then you should put it in your annual PDP and claim self-certified CPD points within the RCGP guidelines set out at <http://bit.ly/U5sdql>.

If your reading and reflection is occasional and opportunistic, claims in this one area should not exceed 10 CPD credits per year. However, if you decide to use this material to develop your understanding of medical philosophy and ethics as a significant part of a PDP, say over 2 years, then a larger number of credits can be claimed so long as there is evidence of balance over a 5-year cycle. These credits should demonstrate the impact of your reflection on your practice (for example, by way of case studies or other evidence), and must be validated by your appraiser.

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Box 1. Reflective notes

- Can we recognise a Dionysian side in ourselves?
- How do we balance or reconcile our Apollonian and our Dionysian natures?
- ‘If examined honestly, surely life itself is the best form of psychotherapy?’ Is this statement more than just an opportunity for a reflective entry in your appraisal portfolio?

Box 2. Further reading

Primary source: Nietzsche F. *The birth of tragedy: out of the spirit of music*. London: Penguin Classics, 1993.

Further study: Chapman AH, Chapman-Santana M. The influence of Nietzsche on Freud’s ideas. *Br J Psychiatry* 1995; **166**(2): 251–253.

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