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Nietzsche and governance: meritocracy, democracy, and agonal oligarchy

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Thesis

NIETZSCHE AND GOVERNANCE:
MERITOCRACY, DEMOCRACY, AND AGONAL OLIGARCHY

by

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, there has been a move among Nietzsche scholars to attempt to smooth over many of Nietzsche's seemingly reprehensible moral attitudes, and in so doing, make Nietzsche's philosophy both less radical and more amicable to the existing moral ethos. Nowhere is this trend more apparent then as regards Nietzsche's stance on democracy and egalitarianism. The intent of this paper is to push back against this trend by demonstrating the necessary role Nietzsche's anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian stance plays in his overarching philosophical position. To do so, and in order to elucidate the core of Nietzsche's critique of democracy, two of the strongest proponents of what will be called the “reconciliatory project,” Maudemarie Clark and David Owen, will be challenged. As will be demonstrated, Nietzsche is ultimately concerned with the aggrandizement of humanity, both in general and on an individual level, by allowing for radical competitive pluralism, tempered by the unifying greatness of his “higher” humans. This goal, in conjunction with his understanding of human flourishing, leads him to reject egalitarianism wholesale, and in so doing, any democracy rooted therein. This critique will be used to illuminate several of the defining characteristics of a political and social organization conducive to (and perhaps necessary for) the full realization of Nietzsche’s ethical perfectionism. Consequently, my conclusions will
largely concern the *structure* of a Nietzschean politics, not its content. This structure is roughly oligarchic, rooted in a culture steeped in agonalism.
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We have a different faith; to us the democratic movement is not only a form of decay of political organization but a form of the decay, namely the diminution of man, making him mediocre and lowering his value. Where, then, must we reach with our hopes?

(BGE 203)

I. Introduction

The attempt to interpret Beyond Good and Evil 203 (quoted above) has defined one of the most contentious and multifaceted conversations in recent Nietzsche scholarship: the status of Nietzsche’s perspective on liberal democracy and egalitarianism. This development is not at all surprising as this passage, and the many like it, apparently point towards a violent revision of the set of principles most central to the contemporary western political ethos, namely democracy as based in the liberal tradition. Thus far, the proponents of the growing philosophical conversation have fallen into roughly three camps. First, several contemporary thinkers follow in the wake of Walter Kaufmann's existentialist interpretation, which suggests that Nietzsche was primarily an apolitical thinker who was almost exclusively concerned with the way a

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1 I will be using the standardized abbreviations of Nietzsche's various texts in this essay, and unless otherwise noted, the Walter Kaufmann translations.

2 My use of the term “liberal” in relation to modern democracy is strongly informed by Siemens' discussion in his Nietzsche contra Liberalism on Freedom in A Companion to Nietzsche (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006). Neither a fully fleshed out conception of liberalism nor of democracy are necessary for my purposes here, but it is important to note that by “democracy” I mean any political system designed to give all (or nearly all) citizens a manifestly equal voice and influence in crafting political decisions by way of an electoral system. By “liberalism,” I mean the social and political tradition, growing out of the Enlightenment, which is focused on the concepts of liberty, individualism, and equal rights for all humanity. The details and aspects of these doctrines or schools of thought which are most salient will be presented as necessary.
given individual should interact with his or her social and political environment and not with proposing a concrete political system.\(^3\) Second, there are those who argue that Nietzsche was fundamentally hostile to democracy in its current form,\(^4\) or more dramatically, that he was hostile to any system of government which can be accurately described as “democratic.” Finally, there are a growing number of philosophers who seek to find reconciliation between Nietzsche's ostensibly anti-democratic rhetoric and modern western democracy.\(^5\)

The purpose of this essay is not simply to chart a course among these three positions and thus determine to what extent Nietzsche can or cannot be safely considered a “democratic” thinker. My intent here is to analyze Nietzsche's critique of democracy so as to elucidate several of the defining characteristics of a political and social organization conducive to (and perhaps necessary for) the full realization of Nietzsche’s ethical

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\(^3\) Exactly what constitutes a political or legal structure is itself the subject of much discussion, and, while it is not the purpose of this essay to weigh in on that debate, it is important to say a few words concerning what exactly is meant by the phrase “political organization.” Strictly speaking, nearly any organization of two or more people can have political elements, but unless otherwise noted, by “political organization” I mean that which is commonly called the organizing principle or principles of any given “nation state”—a large, often ornately systematized series of doctrines and philosophies which organizes masses of individuals into a cohesive and self-identifying unit. For instance, constitutional democracy, Soviet communism, or authoritarian monarchy are all political structures or organizations. Some philosophers (H.L.A. Hart for instance) attempt to orient these structures around legal “rules of recognition,” while others point to more general binding theories or principles. Unless otherwise noted, I will use terms like “political organization,” “political structure,” “political system,” and “system of government” synonymously.

\(^4\) See Keith Ansell Pearson, An Introduction to Nietzsche as Political Thinker; Bruce Detwiler, Nietzsche and the Politics of Aristocratic Radicalism; Lawrence J. Hatab, A Nietzschean Defense of Democracy: An Experiment in Postmodern Politics; Richard Rorty, Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity; Mark Warren, Nietzsche and Political Thought. Many thanks to Maudemarie Clark (1999) for compiling this insightful list.

\(^5\) For the purposes of this essay, I primarily will be referring to David Owen (2002) and Maudemarie Clark (1999) as representatives of this perspective.
perfectionism. Consequently, my conclusions will largely concern the *structure* of a Nietzschean politics, not its content.

I begin Section II by examining two influential attempts to reconcile Nietzsche's political statements with liberal democracy: David Owen's 2002 “Equality, Democracy, and Self-Respect: Reflections on Nietzsche's Agonal Perfectionism” and Maudemarie Clark's 1999 “Nietzsche's Antidemocratic Rhetoric.” Owen's goal is to draw out exactly what sort of democracy Nietzsche is criticizing, and, in so doing, determine those sorts of democracies or democratic movements which Nietzsche would be most amicable towards and why. Clark attempts to illuminate the sort of societal values which would cause a democracy to avoid Nietzsche's critiques. I intend to cast doubt on their general project of reconciling Nietzsche's body of work with any understanding of “democratic” political structure (I will label their endeavor the “reconciliatory project”). To Nietzsche, democracy both signifies and elicits a sort of “decay” and diminution both of political structure and of the people who inhabit that structure.

In Section III I will draw on Clark, Owen, and also Herman Siemens to point toward several of the necessary conditions of a political system which would take into account Nietzsche's philosophical observations concerning human flourishing. Though not an explicitly political thinker, I will argue that Nietzsche’s ethical perfectionism requires us to consider the form and role of social and political structures. To conceptualize Nietzsche’s meta-ethical critique on a purely individual level threatens to abjure his entire project by insisting that an individual can exist in a social and political vacuum. Though Nietzsche is not at all interested in giving a fully developed account of adequate political governance (at least as of the end of his tragically short philosophical
career), the principles he does espouse lead toward, and may even require, a sort of agonal oligarchic meritocracy. He leans away from a democracy of the masses and toward a system in which a small group of properly competitive “higher” individuals would develop a political and social direction for society through discourse and meaningful competition.

Although the purpose of this paper is not to present a fully developed account of what I have labeled an “agonal oligarchic meritocracy,” I intend to draw from both Clark and Owen to indicate the sort of governmental system which Nietzsche would see as conducive to human flourishing, and why.

II. The Negative Account: Nietzsche's Critique of Democracy

II.1. Democracy, respect, and egalitarianism: Owen's Agon

The first step in coming to a positive Nietzschean politics is to uncover exactly what Nietzsche takes issue with concerning democracy. It is useful then, to elucidate the relevant structural elements of democracy in general. First, any system of government which can be called a democracy must be based on the notion that public opinion and (though under some formulations, or) public consideration should largely (though perhaps not entirely) determine the course of the nation. To use Ronald Dworkin's words, “democracy [simply] means government by the people” (241). Most broadly, a democracy is a government which takes into account the needs, values, opinions, and status of each of its citizens in a roughly equal manner. There have been a great many

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6 'Status' here again refers to Dworkin's articulation of constitutionalism, i.e., that public opinion is less important than the treatment of all citizens as of equal moral and political status, thus garnering equal consideration by the government (Dworkin 2002). Here, Nietzsche's criticism is even more direct than it is against what Dworkin calls the “majoritarian premise,” that majority public opinion should direct
vastly divergent articulations of both the justification for and the philosophical structure of democracy, yet they all have this common principle at their core: that a government should not only be for the sake of its citizens, but that it should be orchestrated by them in some way or another. In modern democracies, individuals are presumed to possess the right to self-governance and determination, and yet are limited by the wills and needs of their fellow citizens. Democracy mediates these forces by allowing individuals to choose the path and form of their nation corporately. There are various ways in which this opinion can be communicated and mediated, but the core tenet of the democratic system of government holds that the only way to fairly determine the course of a nation is to take into consideration everyone therein, that is, to consider them all equally, most commonly, by asking them. When democracy is taken to be an equality of voting privilege, public opinion is reducible to the collective opinions of each citizen, weighed equally against each other. In this case, public opinion simply is the collective opinions of each individual. In modern democratic systems, there are generally mechanisms instated to governance. 

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7 This particular sort of argument for the intrinsic justification of democracy in terms of an individual's right to decision making has been championed by many, particularly Carol Gould (1988).

8 Dworkin (2002) reworks this formulation slightly by emphasizing general egalitarianism over any sort of equality of vote. As will be seen, this shift in emphasis exacerbates Nietzsche's concerns rather than alleviating them.

9 There have been varying degrees of democracy throughout history, but the general democratizing trend, at least recently, has been to put the power of governance in more people's hands. As it will turn out, the problem Nietzsche sees with pseudo-democracies is not that they exclude vast portions of the population, but that the various rubrics on which those groups have been excluded are ill founded.

10 This is only one understanding of 'public opinion,' but it is the one with which we are most concerned. Abstracting public opinion from the various opinions of individual citizens is one of the primary tasks of democratic government.
try to prevent a tyranny of the masses and to slow rash decisions, but these are little more
than tailoring features—the core principle, that everyone should have an equal say in
governance or be taken into equal account by the government,\textsuperscript{11} is maintained.

The principle of (near) universal suffrage present in many modern democracies is
most often argued for on the basis of the liberal notion of egalitarianism, roughly, that “all
men are created equal,” and, as such, are of approximately equal worth and so should
have equal opportunity to influence their government. At the very least, liberalism holds
that if people are not actually created equal, they should be treated \textit{as} equals by the state,
particularly in the process of political decision making.\textsuperscript{12} It is this universalized
actualization of the notion of equality that is often touted as democracy's crowning
achievement, and, as such, a universal sense of equality becomes a defining cultural
value. Though there are many factors, particularly in modern representative democracies,

\textsuperscript{11} The historic fact that there was a great deal of debate surrounding the inception of
many democratic states as to the problem of the tyranny of the masses is non-issue
here. Not only has this debate waned over the centuries, giving way to a general
acceptance of egalitarianism, the core issue, that citizens should have the \textit{right} to
influence their government regardless of their personal merits, was never really at
issue. Rather, the worry regarded the problem of run-away public opinion. As such,
the mechanisms designed to combat tyranny focus on slowing down legislation and
providing checks, such as a bicameral legislature, to power grabs by individuals, not
on allowing for great individuals to have great sway over the direction of the nation.

\textsuperscript{12} Arguments to this effect can be found throughout the history of western political
thought (at least since Locke). One of the most recent and interesting articulations of
egalitarianism as the basis of democracy can be found in Joshua Cohen's 2002
“Procedure and Substance in Deliberative Democracy,” which opens with the claim
that “the fundamental idea of democratic legitimacy is that the authorization to
exercise state power must arise from collective decisions of members of a society who
are governed by that power” (18). This position is echoed and expanded in Thomas
Christiano's 2002 “An argument for Democratic Equality.” Though egalitarianism and
democracy can be theoretically delineated, democracy, at least in its modern Western
embodiment, is always rooted in some notion of equal rights and/or privileges, if not
on the supposition of actual human equality.
which limit the actual equality of voters, the notion of egalitarianism pervades nearly
every aspect of such cultures, much in the same way that the pathos of distance (which
Nietzsche claims must exist in great societies), would pervade aristocratic society.

The (near) universal suffrage qualification required by modern democracy
constitutes the first of two interlocking aspects of the social “leveling” at which
Nietzsche rankles in BGE 203. The structure of democracy, particularly as based on the
notion of universal popular vote, suggests that every voting person in a given country is
of effectively equal (causal) worth in that they all have an equal say in determining the
fate of the country. To grossly oversimplify, if there are 100 people living in a fictional
pure democracy, all of which can and do vote, then any given person has a 1% influence
on the direction of the country, within the given perimeters of a particular up/down vote.\(^\text{13}\)

In a more common representative system, the electoral process is designed, not to give a
particular individual political ascendancy and power over the crowd, but to establish
modes of communication so that the crowd may be swayed in a particular direction by
individuals. To again use Dworkin's words, the “defining aim of democracy...[is] that
collective decisions [should] be made by political institutions whose structure,
composition, and practices treat all members of the community, as individuals, with equal
concern and respect” (242). At least according to Dworkin, the representative

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\(^\text{13}\) 'Pure' here means that every public decision is made by a straight and simple vote.
This formulation extracts a person's direct influence on an election (via their vote)
from their potential indirect influence (via rhetoric, social clout, etc.). Obviously,
there has never been and never will be a pure democracy in this sense. This thought
experiment, designed to examine the most simple form of democracy imaginable, is
intended to illustrate that, regardless of how democracy is formulated (in this case, in
terms of vote), its core principle remains the same—equal influence and consideration
of all or nearly all citizens, i.e., egalitarianism.
democratic political structure should act as a conduit for the “equal status of all citizens” (243). The opinions of certain individuals may matter more than others, but only in that they are supported by the opinions, status, needs, and rights of other individuals.

As a consequence, an elected official's power is directly derived from the support she can garner from the general public. Such officials routinely declare that they are merely representatives of the will of their constituents, and are beholden to that will through regular elections. The essence of their power is determined by their ability to sway the opinions of others, not instate their will by fiat, and the value of their positions is deliberately subject to the “court of public opinion.” There are two prongs to this dilemma. First, any great individual who wishes to ascend to a governing position must, to a great degree, tailor her positions and actions to the will of the masses, thus limiting the individual's potential to express their own will. Second, and relatedly, the masses are far more likely to select leaders who embrace the same values as themselves. A system which rests on the “court of public opinion” must implicitly assume that public opinion itself will provide the most effective means of governance. Even a more Dworkinian articulation requires that public representatives take into account the particular positions of their constituents, expressed in terms of their shared status and particular needs, though not necessarily their ostensible opinions.

To Nietzsche, this sort of leveling of the social force of an individual's opinion and status is dangerous in that it propagates the opinions and moral worths of the masses at the expense of more capable (or in Nietzsche's terms, those “higher”) individuals, actually shifting the culture away from valuing exceptional individuals and qualities and towards valuing the mediocre (BGE 203). This is the second aspect of the leveling
feature of egalitarianism. While the assertion of the equality of the value of opinions is only a certain specific sort of equality, it stems from and reinforces a deeper notion that all people are in (nearly) every way actually equal, and so, should have an equal voice and status in determining the course of their government. Although in actual democratic societies there are many who are considered to be of greater worth for a host of reasons, they still share this fundamental political equality.

The culture of egalitarianism which inevitably surrounds a political democracy asserts that individuals should be treated equally because at some base ethical level, they simply are equal. Thus the cultural motif of egalitarianism reinforces and is reinforced by large scale democratic government. Roughly speaking, this results in a sort of political-ethical feedback loop. The ethical predispositions of a certain group of people (i.e., the framers of a given constitution, and, in this case, based on Enlightenment principles) informed and shaped the design of the government they created. This government continued to propagate these ideals, effectively imparting them to the vast majority of the population (though it was not the only source of these ideals). Over time, the people in question promulgate ever more egalitarian principles and legislation, which, in turn, further stress the principles of egalitarianism on the people.\textsuperscript{14} The ethical predispositions

\textsuperscript{14} Even Nietzsche would not find all of the consequences of this egalitarianization of popular ethics detrimental. The escape from unthinking autocratic aristocracy and the tyranny and slothfulness it often signified, which resulted in part from the notion that no one person had an inherent hereditary right to dominate another, implicit in egalitarianism, allows for “neglect, decline, and death of the state, the unleashing of the private person (I am careful not to say "of the individual")-this is the result of the democratic concept of the state; this is its mission. If it has fulfilled its task (which, like everything human, includes much reason and unreason), if all the relapses of the old illness have been overcome” (HH 472). Unfortunately, democracy ultimately cannot fulfill its own task, but its advent allows for the conception of a person as private, and in a certain sense, autonomous. Further, Nietzsche points out in HH 479
of a people become woven into that people’s political framework and that framework in turn impacts the ethical predispositions of a people. In democracy (as based on egalitarianism) this feedback loop promulgates the “degeneration and diminution of man into the perfect herd animal;” it propagates an evening out and leveling of both evaluative appraisal of man and a reduction in mankind’s available goals and “tasks” (BGE 203). In short, Nietzsche objects to democracy, not as such, but in that it (inevitably, at least in the modern context) relies on and promotes a radical sense of egalitarianism, and as such, promulgates and expands herd mentality and ideals.

Owen attempts to trace a way around Nietzsche’s objection to egalitarianism by attempting to compose a sort of non-egalitarian democracy. He does so by proposing a democracy realized in the context of an agonal culture which would recognize the that “nobility” is not a strictly hereditary trait. Wealth, provided by heredity allows for the leisure necessary for the development of greatness. Thus, though great families may be noble, it is not because of any necessity in their “blood” or heredity, but because of the leisure their wealth allows them.

If egalitarian were somehow to be rendered, rather, as the proposition that all human beings should be granted a series fundamental privileges, despite their divergent worths, so that they may have the opportunity to better themselves, then it could possibly be tolerated by Nietzsche, depending on the source and nature of such privileges. The right to vote, unfortunately, could not be one of these for the reasons outlined above. In a legal sense, strictly political democracy does not necessarily posit the strong egalitarian principle, that all people are essentially ethically equal (though many democracies make such proclamations in their founding cultural documents, i.e. constitutions), but only politically equal, in terms of voice and direct causal power. It does, however, at least historically (and probably necessarily), lead to and often stem from the more robust sense of egalitarianism, that all men actually are created equal.

This analysis bears some resemblance to John Richardson's interpretation in his 2004 Nietzsche's New Darwinism of Nietzsche's stance against “herd ethics.” According to Richardson, Nietzsche sees the notion of general human equality as not only expressive of the herd mentality or instinct, but also as reinforcing that instinct, weakening mankind, both on an individual and societal level (Richardson 144-145). The “agonal” qualification is remarkably complex in Nietzsche. For both Owen and Nietzsche, a culture which is agonal would be characterized by pervasive and expansive mechanisms which promote and regulate competition among individuals.
fundamental difference between the ranks of certain individuals and allow for what Nietzsche called a “pathos of distance”\(^{18}\) by encouraging contests of “strength” (either of ideas, personalities, or some other characteristic deemed to be valuable) to determine leaders and legislators (Owen labels this political structure “appraisive democracy”). A cultural emphasis on agonalism would, theoretically, circumvent the leveling effect of democracy by abjuring or at least diminishing the cultural motif of radical\(^{19}\) egalitarianism, thus allowing for the aggrandizement of individuals through the pathos of distance. Owen claims that Nietzsche’ criticism of democracy is directed towards any political structure or system that forms rules and organizes its citizens in light of the assumption that people share a base humanity, and thus, are fundamentally equal simply qua people, such as the United States\(^{20}\) or Western Europe, rather than a political system and social groups. For Nietzsche, such competition would serve to elevate the aspirations of individuals while selecting for characteristics of greatness and maximization of power. However, the exact nature of the competition, both in terms of its form and its motivation (i.e., over what will society compete and how should that competition be regulated and implemented), is left somewhat vague and will be discussed in greater depth below. Regardless, both Nietzsche and Owen point towards classical Greek culture as the paragon of this cultural motif.

\(^{18}\) Most simply, the “pathos of distance” is the belief in “the long ladder of an order of rank and differences in value between man and man” that engenders “the craving for an ever widening of distances within the soul itself, the development of ever higher, rarer, more remote, further-stretching, more comprehensive states—in brief, simply the enhancement of the type 'man,' the continual 'self-overcoming of man’” (BGE 257). The pathos of distance inspires potentially great individuals to take the steps necessary to achieve greatness, both negatively and positively, by demonstrating the great breadth of human potential, and setting examples of behavior (BGE 257). It is one of the essential, and perhaps most fundamental, spurs towards personal and cultural greatness.

\(^{19}\) “Radical” here means based on shared humanity. We are all human, so we are all equal in a way significant to ethics and politics.

\(^{20}\) It is conspicuously unclear whether or not Owen would describe the governmental systems United States and Western Europe as based on sense of universal equality of citizens qua humans or as agonal. There has been some discussion recently concerning whether or not the original formulation of the United States under the Constitution is
which gives weight to certain individuals who, through personal merit and struggle, have earned political ascendancy.\textsuperscript{21}

Unfortunately, a great deal of the weight of Owen's argument lies in a troubled conflation of two senses of the word ‘humanity.’ In short, Owen links an individual’s humanity to their mere ability to be self-sovereign,\textsuperscript{22} and then claims that this ability could be used as a foundation for an appraisive democracy. Obviously, the broadest notion of humanity includes the entire human species, and therefore, any potential member of a given social or political community. However it is not at all clear that Nietzsche ever intended to use the notion of “human” quite this broadly, particularly in his discussion of the sovereign individual. Owen claims that Nietzsche's sovereign individual in GM II:2 “represents human beings as self-conscious beings capable of standing in autonomous ethical relations to themselves” (115). Owen is somewhat unclear on what exactly would constitute such a relationship, but he seems to have in

\begin{quote}

even intended to be a democratic government in the sense discussed above, especially considering the limitations on suffrage imposed by the original framers. However, many documents, including the Declaration of Independence, indicate a strong democratic and egalitarian strain, and later legal developments (particularly amendments 1-10, 13-15, 17, 19 and 24) have shifted the government of the U.S. to a more strongly democratic system deeply steeped in egalitarian culture and assumptions.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{21} Whether the current representative electoral system can be considered agonal in this way will be discussed below.

\textsuperscript{22} 'Sovereignty' and 'self-sovereignty' are variously and intricately described by Nietzsche, and significantly re-defined by Owen. One of the clearest articulations of sovereignty can be found in GM II.2, which describes the sovereign individual as “like only to himself, liberated again from morality of custom, autonomous and supramoral...in short, the man who has in own independent protracted will and right to make promises.” Nietzsche goes on to say, “the emancipated individual with the actual right to make promises” is “master of a free will.” This sovereign individual is Nietzsche's “child” from Z, The Three Metamorphoses, who, after overcoming the moral shackles of culture, can assert his own independent morality will. Owen's understanding, at variance with Nietzsche's, will be elaborated below.
mind an individual much like the “child” described in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, i.e., someone who has overcome their own socio-ethical baggage, created their own value prescriptions, and has the strength of will to live out these values to their fullest extent (*Z, The Three Metamorphoses*). For Owen, this “capacity to stand to oneself as a sovereign individual represents one's humanity” (115). Also according to Owen, Nietzsche posits that the mere *ability* to be a sovereign confers, or at least indicates, an individual's humanity. This inference is both misguided and misleading. It is misguided in that it does not necessarily follow from the quotation Owen employes (GM II:2) that Nietzsche sees the *capability* of sovereignty as the litmus test of humanity. Instead, Nietzsche clearly sees *actual sovereignty* as the mark of the “‘free’ human being” (GM II:2, emphasis added). The passage in question does not even mention the potential sovereign, but only the actual sovereign, so it is hard to see from where Owen draws the notion that the merely potential sovereign is essentially human. Nietzsche does not discuss “human beings as self-conscious beings capable of standing in autonomous ethical relations,” but human beings who *actually are* standing in autonomous relations to themselves (Owen 115, emphasis added).

Owen's inference is misleading in that it suggests that all members of the human species fall into the “capable of being a sovereign” category and are therefore worthy of some level of respect. In GM II:2, Nietzsche states that only a small fraction of humanity is capable of such sovereignty, as the sovereign is only the very “ripest fruit” at the end of the long historical process of the human race torturing itself so as to burn morality into its memory and give itself the ability to keep its word (GM II:1). The sovereign “has mastery...over all more short-willed creatures” and “is bound to reserve a kick for the
feeble windbags who promise without the right to do so” and is possessed with “the proud awareness of the extraordinary privilege of responsibility, the consciousness of this rare freedom” (GM II:2). For Nietzsche, while many people may occasionally act sovereignly, or at least express a few sovereign characteristics, very few have ever achieved true, meaningful, and enduring self-sovereignty. Unfortunately, Owen not only misidentifies the central aspect of self-sovereignty as merely one's capability to be self-sovereign, he incorrectly attributes the ability to be self-sovereign to all people. Consequently, even if we grant Owen's problematic notion of humanity, popular democracy is still un-Nietzschean because it takes as one of its core principles the supposed equality among all individuals qua human beings (since Owen believes that all biological humans are capable of self-sovereignty), and on that basis, establishes political equality of voice. Any democracy built with the Nietzschean principle of self-sovereignty as the litmus test of political equality would at best be a selective oligarchy in which the great majority of human beings would have a severely limited say in the working of their government.  

If the fundamental notion of democracy is that all people should have an equal say in the development of their government, then Owen's argument does little to square Nietzsche's writings with democracy. In short, Owen’s position fails because he claims, contra Nietzsche, that all people are in fact capable of being self-sovereign.

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23 In short, I think this is exactly what Nietzsche is advocating, though perhaps not entirely for Owen's reasons. In this very particular way, it is not so much that this aspect of Owen's analysis is off base, but that he misunderstands the fallout of his own conclusions.
II.II Aristocracy and Oligarchy

The next challenge to any account of a Nietzschean politics is the problem of aristocracy. Many have found odd and troubling Nietzsche’s somewhat frequent claims, particularly in BGE and GM, that some sort of aristocratic society is conducive to, and possibly necessary for, the development of exceptional individuals and great societies. Probably the clearest and most often cited instance of Nietzsche’s apparent praise of aristocracy comes in BGE 257, where he writes “every enhancement of the type 'man' has so far been the work of an aristocratic society—and it will be so again and again—a society that believes in the long ladder of an order of rank and differences in value between man and man, and that needs slavery in some sense or other...” However, even from a simply material perspective, it is clear that a traditional aristocracy is entangled in far too many disadvantages to be politically or personally advantageous over time.24 According to Owen, Nietzsche indirectly discounted his own ostensibly pro-aristocratic position in his later writings (at least by Genealogy of Morals) by describing noble morality as “predicated on both intra-social relations of domination...and extra-social expressions of ‘the old instincts for freedom’” (Owen 122). The conjunction of the “overhuman” and “inhuman” of noble morality, which might disconcert a 21st century

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24 A somewhat trite (and misguided) objection to Nietzsche’s position often raised by new students consists of pointing out the obvious fact that aristocracy does not select for any of the great-making traits Nietzsche favors, but rather, simply propagates a heredity, often leading to slothful and retrograde aristocrats and leaders. This objection is misguided, mainly because it assumes that an aristocratic society would necessitate a hereditary aristocratic political order, which is clearly not the case. A hereditary political order could actually undermine the pathos of distance (which again, is predicated on a sensation of distance, not necessarily actual distance) by making too rigid and insurmountable the distinctions between classes. A medieval peasant may feel the distance between herself and her feudal lord, but she feels no compulsion to overcome that distance as her state in life is fixed.
Western audience, seems to imply that the only way to attain Nietzsche's positive virtues of self-affirmation, honesty, courage, etc., is by engaging in the denial of egalitarianism, and, therefore, in the degradation of a large portion of the population. Under this simple reading, Nietzsche is fundamentally opposed to any significant conception of popular democracy because such a system would not be conducive with treating large portions of society as of lesser worth than others.

Owen argues against the necessity of the conjunction of the inhuman and overhuman by drawing a distinction between a literal hereditary aristocracy and an aristocratic culture. Though Owen only briefly discusses political structure and process, he suggests that a culture which would enable his appraisive democracy would look a great deal like the previously mentioned Greek agon, or the system of institutionalized struggle between individuals and social groups. Owen claims that “the extent that [a democratic system] cultivates an agonal political culture in which citizens strive to develop their capacities for self-rule [i.e., self-sovereignty] in competition with one another” is the extent to which it would fall outside of Nietzsche's criticism of the “democratic movement of our times” (126). If such a culture could exist around an appraisive democracy (where the litmus test of humanity, and thus of equal treatment, is the capability of self-sovereignty), it would supposedly preserve the overhuman while undermining the inhuman.

Nietzsche's agonal principles can be drawn most easily from his 1872 “Homer's Contest,” which describes the development of the feeling of envy towards one's superiors.

Owen also points to the “slave revolt of morality” outlined in GM as separating sovereignty from material conditions. This assertion is troubled, but has no bearing on the rest of the discussion, and so will not be addressed here.
into an ambition to overcome said superiors with the effect of personal development and a positive disposition towards a general advancement of personal and cultural standards of excellence. Politically, this would constitute an omnipresent and ongoing competition among members of the government for supremacy of will, self-rule, and efficacy of political ideas. In a democracy, this agonalism could be realized through competition for electoral support. In fact, since a democracy can overcome and redefine its constitution while simultaneously being bound by that very same constitution, it represents an interesting parallel to the sovereign individual, who is governed by his own personal morality, but has the ability to redefine it. Owen also posits that a modern constitutional democracy can allow for this sort of interplay, again, if it is surrounded by a more general agonal culture. A proper democracy, under this schema, is the image of self-governance, and the pinnacle of Nietzschean politics. It is not clear from “Equality, Democracy, and Self-Respect” if and how such a system would differ significantly from those current systems of the United States and Western Europe—another weakness in Owen's account.

Unfortunately, while struggle and democracy (at least in the looser sense of modern “democracies” such as the United States and Britain, which, strictly speaking, are democratic republics) are certainly not mutually exclusive, it seems a society which emphasizes Nietzschean agonalism would eventually become hostile to democracy.

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26 Owen says little about how his agonal culture would differ from existing democratic society, which is obviously characterized by a great many and many great struggles of its own. The greatest difference would likely be in the degree and intensity of participation in the political process by the masses. Political leadership would (somehow) become the first and highest goal of the majority of the population, thus creating the sense of difference Owen imagines between those who manage to attain political power and people of the nation as a whole.
mainly due to democracy's tendency to limit the scope of such agonalism in favor of leveling value expectations. The principles of agonalism and egalitarianism are diametrically opposed: agonalism (especially given Nietzsche’s articulation) is intended to condition a sense of difference of rank and quality among human beings, accentuating is rooted, are constructed around a presupposition of radically shared humanity. They their differences so as to inspire the potentially great to seek out true greatness, distancing themselves from those beneath them.

Egalitarianism, and modern democracy in which it subsists, emphasizes commonality and ordinariness, positing as most important that which everyone shares. Agonalism emphasizes the uncommon and extraordinary, overlooking commonality for the very reason that it is common. An interesting example can be drawn from Owen's own text. Though he points to the Greek agon as a potential model for a Nietzschean society which could play host to a democracy, he omits the historical fact that ancient Greek culture was based largely on slave labor and that only the social elite could participate in either the democratic process or in the competitions of strength Owen values. Owen would obviously (and rightly) abhor and disparage slavery while trying to maintain the higher echelons of Greek culture. Yet for the pathos of distance to be maintained, there must not only be a higher rank for potentially great people to aspire to, but also a lower rank for them to fear, an underclass to avoid at all costs. For the ancient Greeks, the slaves were members of just such an underclass. Though slavery itself may be contingent, the notion of an underclass is not. Where there are victors, there are also the defeated, and these defeated, as much as the victors, encourage the potentially great to push the boundaries of their potential. The sensation of difference in rank need not (and
perhaps should not) be construed along simple economic or even social lines, but along creative moral strength of will to power. In this way, the distance between slave and senator in the Greek state serves more as a metaphor than an actual example of the sort of distance Nietzsche desires. As Owen's agonal democracy requires both (near) universal popular vote and the competition of politicians for public support and as it is founded on a misunderstanding of Nietzsche's position concerning self-sovereignty (and thus is a species of egalitarianism), it cannot avoid the downfalls of egalitarian democracy. His proposition is agonal in name only, and egalitarian in principle.

On another level, a society which emphasizes agonal competition and victory would be less than amicable towards enduring democracy because popular democratic politics necessitates a degree of social, ethical, and political leveling. In the same way, a truly democratic and egalitarian political order would be hostile to an agonal society. If the society and culture hosting a democratic political system is largely constituted by anti-democratic values, such as an emphasis on the pathos of distance, a democratic political system would likely not long survive. By insisting on both agonalism and appraisive democracy (i.e., democracy based on the supposedly universal potential for self-sovereignty—a species of egalitarianism), Owen is insisting on a contradiction. However, Owen’s observations that: a) the aristocratic, at least in principle, can be separated from hereditary aristocracy; and b) any adequate discussion of the principles of governance must be intertwined with a discussion of the founding principles of the cultural framework of government, are well taken.

The only way egalitarianism and agonalism can be construed so as to avoid direct and immediate contradiction is to treat egalitarianism, not as a proposition concerning a
human being's intrinsic qualities and worths, but as concerning the rights to be granted to all human beings regardless of such qualities. In general, such attestation of rights to be granted is argued for from a stance of radical egalitarianism (a position affirming intrinsically equal worths), but even when argued for from a instrumental (and rights oriented) standpoint, egalitarianism, especially as propagated by democracy, leads to the cultural leaving of the egalitarian-democratic feedback loop by promoting equal treatment of all individuals by the state regardless of their personal merits. Again, the value of radical egalitarianism is then promulgated by the government. Even when egalitarianism is construed non-radically, it tends to engender a culture of radical egalitarianism.

From Owen and his mistakes we have learned two things. First, as Owen suggests, any system of government which Nietzsche could endorse must subsist in and be complemented by an agonal culture that promotes the pathos of distance. Second, contrary to Owen, any such culture and governance must be decidedly anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian. Owen is right to claim that Nietzsche finds problematic the notion that individuals deserve an equal say in governance simply because of a shared biological humanity, but his attempt to conceive of a democracy in terms of self-sovereignty would not constitute a democracy, even if it succeeded on its own terms, which it does not. However, as will be demonstrated by Clark, neither monarchy, nor aristocracy, nor collective governance more generally are necessitated by the rejection of egalitarianism. In fact, the very nature of agonalism necessitates an open-ended governmental structure which would allow for both the advancement of individuals within the system based on merit and the parallel advancement of ideas. What is left
unsaid is the exact character of the agonal struggle in question, outlined in terms of the
development (or revaluation) of the values employed by Nietzsche's higher humans, and
whether and how such a struggle could be propagated in a particular political context.

**II.III. Clark and the end of aristocracy**

If the exact character of the culture in which a political system is embedded is
essentially and, in some ways, determinately linked to the structure and functioning of
that system, it is necessary to uncover the orienting principles and features of said culture.
For Nietzsche, this question must be framed in terms of the structure and orientation of
agonalism. Agonalism itself is a nearly content-less structural feature which must be
filled in with certain ethical and evaluative tenets to give it cultural and political efficacy.
Attempting to fill in this gap (though rarely in political terms) occupied much of
Nietzsche's philosophical career and is bound up (as is the structure of agonalism itself)
in the current debate concerning whether and to what extent Nietzsche should be taken as
a species of naturalist, as a more perspectival ethical thinker, or some middle ground
between the two.\(^27\) In terms of the present context, the question concerns what the

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\(^{27}\) This question cannot be entirely resolved here. What follows is not an attempt to step
into the afore mentioned debate directly, but to outline some of the necessary
conditions for the ethical foundations of an agonal culture and elucidate the impact
said conditions must have on the resultant political structure. Martin Heidegger's
*Nietzsche* (particularly vol. IV, entitled “Nihilism”) is always an interesting place to
start for a non-naturalistic understanding of Nietzsche's ethics. Refer to *Nietzsche on
Morality* (2007, edited by Leiter and Sinhababu) for a series of helpful articles mostly
representing a naturalistic perspective on this topic. Bernard Reginster's *The
Affirmation of Life* (2009) provides a somewhat different perspective, oriented around
Nietzsche's understanding of Nihilism. Alexander Nehamas' somewhat older
*Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (1985) outlines a more strictly perspectival
understanding. Finally, Paul Katsafanas' forthcoming *Agency and the Foundation of
Ethics: Nietzschean Constitutivism* (2013) presents a novel and quite promising
approach to this problem, oriented around an understanding of the ethical implications
of action.
various actors in an agonal society would compete over, why, and how such competition would spur the pathos of distance and thus human growth. Maudemarie Clark's 1999 article, “Nietzsche's Antidemocratic Rhetoric,” (NAR) takes a few initial steps in this direction.

Though Clark's primary goal in NAR is to undermine what she calls the “near-consensus” view concerning Nietzsche's politics (NCV), namely, that Nietzsche is hostile to any and all forms of democracy and that he is committed to an aristocratic political system. Her most interesting observations are presented in the latter half of her paper, in which she first separates aristocratic ethics from aristocratic politics and then attempts to establish on what grounds such an agonalism could be based.

Though her reconciliatory project is ultimately unsuccessful, her argument against the NCV reading of BGE 257 is quite illuminating. BGE 257 opens with the claim that “every enhancement of the type 'man' has so far been the work of an aristocratic society —and it will be so again and again—a society that believes in the long ladder of an order of rank and differences in value between man and man, and that needs slavery in some sense or other.” Ostensibly, this section presents a relatively clear-cut articulation of what sounds like an aristocratic political system, but here Clark, much like Owen, draws a stark line between aristocratic society and aristocratic politics (125). She argues that the above statement (and the rest of BGE 257) can be understood as proposing a particular value system, not a system of governance. For her, “slavery” could easily refer to people like Nietzsche's “philosophical laborers” (BGE 211), who are not slaves in the traditional sense, but rather “menial” laborers dedicated to providing the raw materials for new
philosophers to craft into revalued values. For Clark the most salient aristocratic value is belief in a difference in rank between human beings (the pathos of distance) and, thus, a belief that there is a certain sort of higher value available to particular individuals beyond those available to the masses (137). Clark links this distance with a sense of virtue or excellence of character (132). Democracy, as it currently exists, discourages the pursuit of actually higher values by proposing that all people already have access to the highest values. By way of the leveling character inherent in its essential dependence on egalitarianism, democracy emphasizes values such as family, monetary gain, sexual gratification, etc., those very values to which nearly everyone has equal access. In so doing, democracy abjures those values exclusively available to Nietzsche's higher beings, such as self-sovereignty, the ability to promise, and radical creativity. Given Nietzsche’s repeated emphasis on the importance of creative art (be it of Beethoven, Goethe, or the political artistry of Napoleon) and the will to power, such an ethical basis for governance will likely be rooted in some sort of expressive creativism, an emphasis on human productive and creative potential, both on an individual and a cultural scale. Such an emphasis could be grounded in either perspectivism or naturalism. Regardless, the

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28 Despite the negativity of this language, Nietzsche sees such an individual as incredibly valuable (BGE 211).
29 This “virtue” is, in fact, both the crux of Clark's argument and its most useful component. Clark points out that simple agonalism is not sufficient to structure a Nietzschean society, but the nature and object of that agon is of utmost importance. It may also be that the content of “higher value” is intentionally left open by Nietzsche, as such content (under many moral anti-realist readings of Nietzsche, including Brian Leiter's) can, and perhaps should, change dramatically depending on the current cultural ethos. What is most important is that such virtue is available only to the very few. It is precisely this content that needs to be filled out in the re-vlauation of values by Nietzsche's philosophers of the future. Thus, I have deliberately left these higher values undefined.
universal values are touted as the greatest possible values, while those available to only a
select few are relegated to obscurity as those actually capable of perusing higher values
are, if not actively discouraged from doing so, decisively distracted from them. The
values employed to orient the agonal system will have to be of a decidedly different
character and motivation than the more base values.

The second major boon of Clark's reconciliatory project comes in the refutation of
one of her textual arguments surrounding BGE 203 (the epigraph of this paper). Though
Clark meets with great success in undermining the assumption that Nietzsche advocates a
political aristocracy in the traditional hereditary sense, she falls short of actually
reconciling his writings to democracy. However, she illuminates an important component
of a more Nietzschean paradigm—a high degree of organization, allowing for the
advancement of a society as a whole. In short, Clark asserts that Nietzsche, as is his
wont, is speaking elusively and esoterically in BGE 203. She attempts to reinterpret his
use of 'decay,' not as a sort of death and degradation of political and social efficacy, but as
a necessary prelude to the growth and flowering of individuality and personal autonomy,
actually “mak[ing] possible things of even higher value, e.g., the development of
individuality” (Clark 125). While her general point about “decay” is well taken in
principle (Nietzsche does not always mean to suggest a negative valuation when he uses
terms most often associated with a negative valuation), it is not likely the case that he
uses decay positively in this section. One need only read a line past the text Clark quotes
to find that the democratic decay of political structure is also “but a form of the decay,

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30 This is another aspect of the leveling mechanism of democratic culture (and its
relationship to democratic politics); values beyond the standard set acceptable to
everyone are undermined.
namely the diminution of man, making him *mediocre and lowering his value*” (BGE 203, emphasis added). Though Nietzsche *is* often veiled, I think Clark would find it hard to argue that he sees “decay and diminution of man,” a true move towards mediocrity, and “lowering of value” as a positive. Throughout his writing, Nietzsche consistently uses terms like 'diminution,' 'mediocre,' 'lowering,' and the like to denote retrogression in human flourishing, while remedying this retrogression is one of Nietzsche's foremost goals. 31 Though this retrogression often appears to be reversible, it is rarely a direct or necessary prelude to growth.

Elsewhere Nietzsche makes it clear that, in general, more and larger -cale political organization would be beneficial. Particularly, he claims:

...the opposite [of the diminution of Europe] would be rather more after my heart—I mean such an increase in the menace of Russia that Europe would have to resolve to become menacing, too, namely, to *acquire one will* by means of a new cast that would rule Europe, a long terrible will of its own that would be able to cast its goals millennia hence—so the long-drawn-out comedy of its many splinter states as well as its dynastic and democratic splinter wills would come to an end. The time for petty politics is over: the very next century will bring the fight for

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31 The passages which support this reading are numerous and multifaceted, but they can readily be drawn from the prelude of Z and from EH. Less clear is the exact character of this flourishing. Fortunately, an extended debate over this term is not necessary for the present discussion, it is sufficient to say that: a) Nietzsche sees flourishing as enormously positive; b) flourishing goes beyond mere subsistence and happiness; c) flourishing is deeply intrenched in and with the will to power and its maximization; d) while flourishing can be particularized to individuals it can also be generalized to consider a culture or even humanity at large.
dominion of the earth—the *compulsion* to large-scale politics. (BGE 208)

Such a situation would require more, not less or “decayed” and disorganized political structure. While it is not necessarily the case that the “caste” need be organized as an hereditary aristocracy, in conjunction with BGE 203, it cannot be democratic, nor can it be what Nietzsche is proposing. Apart from the obvious negative reference to ending the “long-drawn-out comedy” of European disunity and “democratic splinter wills,” the above passage highlights one aspect of what Nietzsche takes issue with in the political climate of Europe, namely, the absence of a cohesive direction, unified vision, or shared goals. One of the greatest flaws of the democratic system of government, stemming from its emphasis on egalitarianism, is its overly multifarious nature and propensity, because of the unending plethora of ideas and ideals, to lack a cohesive direction.\(^\text{32}\) Certain sorts of plurality, as will be demonstrated, are extraordinary valuable if cast in a particular way in certain environments, but with egalitarian democracy, Nietzsche sees little in the way of mediating mechanisms to sort out political direction on a large and extended scale other than the ever-shifting public will (which he particularly disparages as “splinter[ed]”). Such fickleness makes meaningful extended movement (which could be read as progress) in any particular direction difficult, leaving the development of culture and society almost completely to the chance whims of the electorate. With democracy, culture stagnates and becomes more uniform. As Clark argues, Nietzsche may be using “ruling caste” partly as a metaphor. He certainly does not consider a return to traditional landed hereditary

\(^{32}\) Again, the point here is purely structural, though the nature of said goal or direction would also be of utmost importance.
aristocracy as a valid option (123-4). However, such a position does not permit him, much less commit him to the view that democracy is an appropriate system to adopt. Certainly any system he would defend would contain some democratic elements and even espouse certain democratic values, but the overly disjointed character of a democratic state must be avoided.

III. The Positive Account: Nietzsche’s Agonal Oligarchic Meritocracy—A Preliminary Sketch

III.1. Clark, Owen, and Democracy

Clark, like Owen, employs a very abstract sense of value and does not explain how the mechanics of a democracy would continue to function if all significant senses of equality, as Nietzsche understands them, were abolished. The most obvious conclusion to be drawn from the notion that people and, consequently, their opinions concerning the direction the country should take are of differing value, even to the point that some people and opinions are not valuable at all politically, is that not everyone should have an equal say in governance, i.e. should not have an equal vote (or to use Dworkin's formulation, not everyone should be equally considered). Though this conclusion is quite uncomfortable to a contemporary Western audience, Nietzsche has never been known to shy away from the uncomfortable. Without a generic and significant sense of human equality (which Owen at least tries to preserve), popular democracy loses its normative force. Another way to frame this conversation is to observe that, in at least one relevant sense, democratic political institutions depend on a notion of significant baseline equality, or denial of “distance” between human beings (BGE 203). Nietzsche’s rejection of
egalitarianism may itself be subject to criticism, but without the assumption of egalitarianism, there is little intrinsic reason to endorse large scale liberal democracy.\textsuperscript{33} For Nietzsche, the sensation of distance between the evaluative worths of individuals is essential to spur potentially exceptional human beings to become actually exceptional (GM III.16). Democracy actively works to subvert this sensation, not only in its traditional rhetoric and current manifestations, but by expressly valuing equally the opinions of all of its citizens and valuing the rule of the majority and, therefore, claiming that all citizens deserve an equal say in their governance. This cultural motif not only denies the possibility of higher values not available to most people, it implicitly denies that some people could make better decisions for the country than the combined masses, or at least claims that it is better overall that the incorrect and incoherent masses decide than more qualified individual or individuals. In doing so, democracy denies the efficacy of individual superiority and subjects individuals and the course of the nation as a whole to the crude mob.

The casual reader of Nietzsche will have little trouble coming to the simple version of the conclusion that Nietzsche is anti-democratic. After all, there are several passages which illustrate Nietzsche's apparent distaste for what he calls the “democratic movement” of our time (BGE 203, 208, 242, 256-260, etc.). As Clark acknowledges, \textsuperscript{33} Whether or not there is any instrumental value to democracy, particularly in comparison to other political systems, is not discussed extensively by Nietzsche. He clearly sees some instrumental advantages to certain aspects of democracy (particularly its emphasis on pluralism, even if unqualified), but ultimately, democracy's propensity to emphasize herd morality, and thus, lower humanity, is enormously and instrumentally disadvantageous. The challenge is to compose a system which takes into account the instrumental and intrinsic values of plurality while diminishing democracies tendency to produce a herd culture.
BGE, one of the most “political” of Nietzsche's works “seems to support a truly obnoxious, indeed despicable, aristocratic attitude and politics, and to have nothing but contempt for democracy and the majority of people, which it seems ready to have reduced to 'incomplete human beings' for the sake of some higher type” (Clark 119). Obnoxious or not, Nietzsche does appear frequently and vehemently as a callous elitist. Clark and Owen's rejection of this naïve caricature is apt. As many readers have pointed out, Nietzsche seems to be interested in more than simply debasing democracy wholesale (Siemens 2006). The above arguments are attempts to tease out in what way Nietzsche objects to democracy and in what ways he wishes to retain some of its components. Unfortunately, as has been demonstrated, the reconciliatory attempts tend to “squeeze a square peg into a round hole” by endeavoring to understand Nietzsche as endorsing modern democracy more or less wholesale. These sorts of arguments suggest (as in Owen's case) that Nietzsche exclusively critiques some of the particular democratic movements of his day and, as such, our superior system is largely exempt. Such attempts tend to limit Nietzsche's arguments to a cultural realm while excluding the political.34

In short, both Clark and Owen successfully demonstrate that Nietzsche is not committed to a literal political aristocracy, but only to the sensation of difference in rank between individuals (that is, the pathos of distance). However, neither Clark nor Owen successfully take account of Nietzsche's anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian statements,

34 Such tendencies are tied to the somewhat older conception of Nietzsche as an apolitical thinker interested primarily in personal development rather than governmental systems (Walter Kaufmann). While this conception has some merit—Nietzsche certainly seems more interested in personal and culture development than governance—it cannot be the case that he has nothing discernible to say about governance given the deep connection between government, culture, and the particular individuals therein.
and so fail to reconcile Nietzsche's body of work with a literal democratic political system. However incomplete their analyses may be, these thinkers do offer valuable insights. Both Clark and Owen ostensibly argue against the last third of the following “naïve view” of Nietzsche's politics: that a) Nietzsche's advocating of a dramatic reworking of morality entails an equally dramatic revolution in political thought and structure; b) rejects democracy as destructively egalitarian and; c) seems to propose, if not a completely aristocratic political structure, a society which embodies and pursues certain aristocratic values, particularly egoistic assertion and manifestation of power.

III.II. Tyranny, Pluralism, and Oligarchy

Two questions remain concerning the Nietzschean agonal paradigm—the question of general structure (i.e., what would replace the democratic political process and structure) and that of ethical foundation. Neither can be answered fully here. As regards the latter question, some headway has already been made in response to Clark and little more can be made without resolving the perspectivism/naturalism debate. As was stated earlier, the exact character of the height of human achievement is the work of the philosophers of the future. The more direct purpose of this paper is to outline “a favorable accumulation and increase of forces and tasks,” i.e., the structural characteristics of a political system which could foster such a revaluation (BGE 203).

As regards the former, we have already determined that any properly Nietzschean structure must: a) be based in a culture of struggle (agon); which b) grows out of and accentuates a pathos of distance; and c) serves to organize and unify cultural direction; finally, it is essential that such a system d) allows for an explosive and productive plurality of ideas and ideals supplied by higher individuals. Such a system could not be
completely stagnant or necessarily all that “safe,” but rather, would deliberately create obstacles for great individuals to overcome (refer to Nietzsche's notion of strength in GM 13). This is a tall order for any philosopher, which may be part of the reason why Nietzsche shied away from any explicit formulation of government or culture. Ironing out the tension between Nietzsche’s emphasis on the importance of individual higher beings (BGE 208) and his interest in unifying cultural direction and efficacy (BGE 203) relies on an understanding of interaction between individuals and culture more generally.

Herman Siemens' 2009 “Nietzsche's Critique of Democracy (1870-1886)” offers key insights into a potential new direction for analysis. The significance of Siemens' work is to frame the democracy discussion in the larger context of Nietzsche's struggle with the tension between tyranny and pluralism. According to Siemens, Nietzsche was most concerned with isolated concentrations of vast power and the ability of said power to undermine individual sovereignty early in his philosophical career, traversing a series of phases during which he experimented with different methods of overcoming such tyranny, though always through the mediating force of radical pluralism. In Siemens' terms, Nietzsche is interested in a pluralism of ideas, moralities, and personal types that could foster a community in which competition among individuals within the plurality

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35 For an additional discussion of the nature of power assertion in an agonal political culture and its relation to the tyrannical impulse, refer to Strong's 2008 “Nietzsche and the Political: Tyranny, Tragedy, Cultural Revolution, and Democracy” and Seimens' 2006 “Nietzsche contra Liberalism on Freedom” in Blackwell Publishing's A Companion to Nietzsche.

36 HH 261 offers an interesting analysis of the tyrannical attitudes of ancient Greek philosophers and the problems such tyranny engenders. Refer also to HH 472 for a discussion of this mediating political force.
would generate positive forward motion\textsuperscript{37} as opposed to the stagnation and total lack of
direction evident in Nietzsche’s interpretation of democracy (Siemens 209).

Siemens’ point is rather contentious. There have been a number of philosophers
who have interpreted Nietzsche as a sort of self-righteous egoist only interested in the
personal development of particularly great individuals in an almost pre-Randian
philosophy of individual dominance. These sorts of readings have led to the perversions
of Nietzsche’s philosophies as adopted by the Nazi party and 19\textsuperscript{th} century anarchists.
Such readings ignore the collectivist character of such passages as BGE 203. It is true
that Nietzsche maintains a certain contempt for existing state governments and a distrust
of human collective activity in general and looks to great individuals to “put…an end to
that gruesome dominion of nonsense and accident that has so far been called ‘history’—
the nonsense of the ‘greatest number’ is merely its ultimate form” (BGE 241). However,
he goes on to say, “at some time new types of philosophers and commanders will be
necessary for that, and whatever has existed on earth of concealed, terrible, and
benevolent spirit, will look pale and dwarfed in comparison. It is the image of such
leaders that we envisage” (BGE 203). The emphasis in this passage is placed squarely on
the necessary leadership of such individuals. Leadership is defined by the existence of
followers; in describing these philosophers of the future as leaders, Nietzsche has placed
the value of their aggrandizement as, at least in this way, secondary to that of humanity as
a whole. His concern a few sentences later with the degeneration of “man” in general
suggests that he is interested in both man as an individual and man as a type or species

\textsuperscript{37} The exact direction and character of this motion would be determined by the re-
valuation of values—what is more important here is that society is moving in a
cohesive and deliberate direction at all.
whole. The “nonsense of greatest number” (here likely a reference to democracy’s emphasis on mob rule) may be a detrimental result of “gruesome dominion of nonsense and accident” that is history, but such a claim does not tie him to a complete devaluation of either humanity as a type or humanity as a general body. Ultimately, Nietzsche is interested in human flourishing, both on an individual level (in terms of the great individuals) and on a species level. Which of these is primary (if either) is completely inconsequential (if such an ordering is even possible) as it is clear, particularly in BGE 203, that the greatness of the individual and the greatness of the type “man” are inextricably intertwined.

Nietzsche's fundamental interest in the flourishing of humanity itself never significantly shifted, nor did his stance on the nature of human flourishing. Rather, his understanding of how best to promote said flourishing evolved. As Siemens explains, “culture is not just about great art...rather it is the medium for enhancing and extending human possibilities, the laboratory for all those experiments in human excellence that are [Nietzsche's] real concern,” and further, “exceptional or singular individuals figure not as the exclusive beneficiaries but as the great experimenters, as the key to realizing a perfectionist demand that has a generic or general orientation towards humankind” (21, 30). Nietzsche recognizes that for there to be such cultural experimentation, there must be a certain segment of the population that has the time, energy, and motivation to explore its own possibilities. Perhaps ideally, the entire human race would have the opportunity to attempt to express such freedom (though few would succeed), but material necessities as they currently are, only the smallest fraction will ever have this opportunity and only with the support of the masses. More crucial for the current discussion is the
sense of distance that must be maintained between the great and the mob, which, as Nietzsche believes, fosters the drive for greatness in those who may be capable of it.

While Nietzsche always admired some of democracy's emancipatory claims and goals, he rejected the means by which it sought to attain them. In HH 472, Nietzsche characterizes democracy as an outgrowth of the pluralization of society, particularly along religious lines. As the state slowly recedes from its position as the representative of God on earth, a multiplicity of religious perspectives engenders a “distrust of anything that governs, the insight into the uselessness and irritation of these short-lived struggles, must urge men to a quite new decision: the abolition of the concept of the state, the end of the antithesis 'private and public.”’ (HH 472). The individual spiritual and political tyranny of monarchy and aristocracy have been overcome, but a new tyranny, that of the rule of the mob, looms. HH 472 is primarily concerned with manifestly religious pluralism, but as Nietzsche often reduces religiosity to an expression of a system of values, his understanding of plurality in HH 472 can be extended to a more general understanding of a plurality of values within a given social context. Plurality, in this context, refers to a multitude of often vastly divergent values and value systems existing together within a given culture. The value of the democratic way of thinking lies in its ability to allow for such coexistence. In monarchy or hereditary aristocracy, one set of values and ideals (in this context, Christian theism) destroys all competing valuations almost instantly. In pluralism manifest in democracy, such antagonism does not cease all together. It continues, but in a less destructive form. Instead, ideas and values begin to impact and shape each other, discarding their weaker elements while adopting the strengths of those to which they were opposed. Pluralism allows for the competition and
growth of values, but in democracy, pluralism is stunted by the baseness of its participants and its degeneration into mob rule. Despite its manifest pluralism, democracy becomes the most severe sort of tyranny against the people most vulnerable to it, those who experiment with morality, culture, and ideas (i.e., Nietzsche's higher and potentially higher humans), by subjecting them to the will of the masses. It thus “confronts us with an irresolvable conflict between the interests of one type of disposition, which comes to dominate under democratic conditions, and the interests of the species as whole...we must choose either for the future of humankind—its enhancement [flourishing in the language of this essay]—or for compassion with actual lives, at the cost of the species—its contraction” (Siemens 31).

Nietzsche is left with this conundrum: neither aristocracy nor democracy can offer the pluralism necessary for emancipation and the aggrandizement of humanity. How is it possible mitigate both the tyranny of the mob and the tyranny of the aristocrat? Perhaps oligarchy, the rule of the many by the few, but, in this case, of those few great geniuses who can limit each other and thus generate a productive plurality, can move beyond the detrimental mob or herd oriented equality of democracy and the obvious historical problems of aristocracy.

Nietzsche maintains many (though not all) of the fundamental objectives of liberalism (autonomy, person-orientation, emancipation from needless oppression, etc.).

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38 For a discussion of the various forms and facets of the despotism of democracy and the way in which it limits freedom, refer to Siemens 2006 in A Companion to Nietzsche. An interesting complication to this view arises in BGE 242 which, in many ways, seems to run directly counter to BGE 203 and 256, but it appears that Nietzsche is thinking of potential instrumental implications of the growth of democracy much in the same way he describes the benefit of Christian asceticism as the fostering of the will to truth in GM II, yet in A, “condemns” Christianity (A 62).
though he posits that liberalism's espoused methods of attaining such goals are insufficient and enormously destructive, that liberalism inappropriately prioritizes certain values, tenets, and objectives, and that it may conceptualize such goals inadequately. True and total emancipation requires a freedom from the traditional Judeo-Christian moral framework (and à la Owen, the ability to be self-sovereign), yet egalitarianism is grounded in that very framework. A particular example of this last mistake comes in section 8 of BGE where Nietzsche criticizes “Englishmen” such as Bacon, Hobbes, Hume, Carlyle, Locke, but especially Darwin, John Stuart Mill, and Herbert Spencer as “lacking real power of spirituality, real profundity of spiritual perception” and latching on to “mediocre” truths (BGE 252-3). While these thinkers may have useful insights, they fail to appreciate the values and principles that “spirits of a high type” can engage with. Owen's mistake (and possibly Clark's as well) lies in the conflation of the desire for the fulfillment of certain liberal goals with the liberal democratic position itself. However, Owen does identify a core aspect of Nietzsche's solution: competition. Any Nietzschean political system must include a specific species of competition outlined above as agonalism, not merely for the support of an electorate, but between exceptional individuals over the efficacy of their ideals. It would be the merit of these individuals and their ideals in relation to and in concert with each other that would provide said individuals with the power to govern the masses in addition to themselves. Political competition would simply be one of the highest forms and outgrowth of an agonalism carried out on nearly every level of society. The question of how such merit would or even could be assessed is deliberately left open here in part because such assessment would need to be fluid enough to accommodate the shifting values of the “congress” of
higher humans, yet solid enough to allow for cohesive direction over time. However, to analyze merit in terms of the conjunction of flourishing and assertion of power, as outlined in BGE and perhaps GS, either in terms of optimizing individuals or humanity as a whole, would likely be a good place to start.

Oligarchy is free from many of the failings of democracy as it is not subject to the whims of the mob, but neither can it be co-opted by a single tyrant. It relies on competition between individuals in which they would both elevate themselves and theoretically have the cognitive power to govern efficiently. Further, such a culture of meaningful competition would help to alleviate the system of “guilt” brought on by ascetic Christianity by providing a productive outlet for the bad conscience engendered by living in a society (Katsafanas, 31, forthcoming). Agonal oligarchy would thus help avoid the feedback loop of the cultural values necessitated by democracy founded on egalitarianism. This system would need to be open to all, unlike a hereditary aristocracy, allowing the entire population the possibility of entrance into the decision making hierarchy so as to net the greatest pool of potential higher humans, but would need an enormously rigorous selection criteria based on the intellectual and personal merits of the candidates.

The greatest difficulty for any sort of Nietzschean oligarchy comes in the determination and selection of such candidates. Clearly, an oligarchy could be established which would simply perpetuate and reinforce the existing cultural ethos, particularly if such oligarchs were drawn from the existing political system or if the new system selected for the same characteristics as the old. There are two questions at work here. First, it is important to determine what such a system would look like once it was
established. Second, for Nietzsche, it would be equally important to determine how the
Europe of his day could move in the political direction he advocates. In some ways, the
answer to the second question is easier than the first. In BGE 208, Nietzsche refers to the
rising “menace of Russia” that would force Europe to “resolve to become menacing, too,
namely, to acquire one will by means of a new caste that would rule Europe, a long,
terrible will of its own that would be able to cast its goals millennia hence.” Nietzsche
seems to think that a great challenge and powerful enemy would impel Europe to rise to
that challenge through the elevation of a new “caste” of leaders. Whether or not (and to
what extent) the history of the 20th century has proven Nietzsche wrong on this account is
another question entirely. Regardless, such a politics would need to develop alongside
and in relation to a shift in culture. As has been outlined, culture and politics interact and
inform each other—a dramatic shift in one or the other, if not all together impossible, is
at least unsustainable. Culture shifts politics only slowly and vise versa.39

To a certain extent, the first problem (of who such oligarchs would be, and how
they would be selected) would be mitigated by the structure of oligarchy itself. Much as
democracy founded on egalitarianism leads to a culture which produces leaders that
advocate mob rule and morality, an oligarchy founded on the notion of the pathos of
distance would likely encourage society to produce leaders which value and advocate that

39 Revolutions tend to occur when the gap between culture and politics becomes
unsustainable, normally as a result of entrenched political conservatism or
experimental political liberalism (i.e., when politics adjusts to culture too slowly, or
changes too quickly for culture to keep up), or when an external force imposes a
political order too divergent from the cultural ethos of the people group in question.
Yet politics is not simply slave to culture, as can be seen in the extreme case of North
Korea’s absolute and dictatorial deification of the monarch, or, to use the example at
hand, in that democracy promotes egalitarian herd ethics.
distance. Ultimately, the criteria to select such leaders would have to be linked to their self-sovereign expression of will to power. Turning to Nietzsche's paradigmatic examples of higher humans (Goethe, Beethoven, Shakespeare, Napoleon, and Nietzsche himself to name a few) only provides a partial answer. Such individuals embody many of the characteristics Nietzsche most values: creativity, singularity and power of vision, the ability to overcome tremendous obstacles, self-sufficiency, and so on, which would be necessary for any Nietzschean oligarch. However, save Napoleon, few of Nietzsche's higher types exhibited any political aspirations. There are many potential explanations for this omission that do not imply that higher types would deliberately or necessarily avoid politics, but it seems likely that any endeavor into politics would be as an expressive means or medium rather than any sort of ends. The desire would have to be an expression of will and a willingness to reform culture and politics as a reflection of that individual’s personal development and ethical positions. However, such an oligarch would also have to be willing to compete with others of the same “caste.” The higher human's (and thus, the Nietzschean oligarchs) ability to express their own particular and unique will to power is most essential for agonalism, as is the ability for such oligarchs to interact and compete with one another over their expressions of power. This is the fundamental difference between a Nietzschean oligarch and a aristocratic tyrant.

40 There may have simply been few as of yet as politics is so deeply intrenched in the existing cultural ethos. As has been demonstrated, politics and culture are deeply intertwined. Simply imposing a new politics would not create a new culture, the two grow in tandem. Up until and including the present political-cultural system, it is easier by far to express one's self-sovereign creative potential in the relative autonomy of an artistic medium and thus subtly shift culture, than it is be to act within the rigors of the political realm. Only in the chaos of the aftermath of the French Revolution could someone like Napoleon express his will to power in the political medium.
For such oligarchs and potential oligarchs, politics, like art would be a medium for the expression of power. Not every higher or potentially higher human would be interested in positions of political power, but it seems likely that many would as politics, as the expression of power over the masses, provides a grand and complex canvas for the direct expression of cultural and personal ideals. It also may provide the greatest challenge to any potentially higher human. With art, music, literature, and to a lesser degree, philosophy, the challenge is mostly intrinsic. An artist, for example, struggles with conveying her ideas on a canvas, overcoming the material obstacles of expressing ideas in paint. The resultant work of art is often placed in the public realm and forced to compete with other works of art for cultural influence, but the primary struggle is over the first manifestation of the work. The politician must also struggle to convey their ideas through the medium of rhetoric and discourse, but also must compete directly with other politicians for the support of their fellow oligarchs directly. In a way, this sort of competition and challenge is more straightforward than artistic competition (not that there is no subtlety in politics), but in being straightforward, such competition has the potential to be more desperate, explosive, and even “violent.” The intrinsic struggle, in many ways, becomes secondary to the extrinsic struggle, but the extrinsic struggle also forms the politician into a work of art in her own right. Politicians, in agonal oligarchy, are not mere mouthpieces for ideas, but avatars of a particular will to power in direct competition with other individual wills. The politician is her own work of art. This direct competition would likely appeal to certain higher and potentially higher humans more than others.

It is also not necessary that every oligarch is an actual higher human but only that
they aspire to that height and proximately do so. For Nietzsche, “higher human” is not an end state or goal, but a part of a spectrum, potentially without a top demarcation. The purpose of an agonal oligarchy would be to promote the growth of potentially higher individuals on a grand scale. This process would be without end, and theoretically, each generation would surpass the last. Currently, if such a system were instated, especially by fiat, there would likely not nearly enough humans of great enough stature to fully embody an Nietzschean oligarchy, but they would not need to. Over the course of generations, the ever expanding pathos of distance would encourage the potentially great to better themselves along a great many rubrics, slowly building a culture with ever increasing capabilities. This growth engenders by the conjunction of agonal culture and oligarchic politics would take the same structure as the more detrimental feedback loop of egalitarian culture and democratic politics.

Though a few higher types can exist and have existed apart from that political-cultural system most conducive to their advent and flourishing (i.e., agonal oligarchy), their power and its scope are necessarily limited to the cultural realm. Goethe, Beethoven, and Shakespeare affect the development of humanity only obliquely because they exist outside of the primarily cultural and political ethos of their day. Within a properly agonal and oligarchic political-cultural ethos, such individuals' influence would be far greater, more immediate, and broader, namely, because they would exist in a culture (supported by a political system) more conducive to the expression of will to power than one which promotes herd morality. Culture and politics themselves would become the direct and deliberate expression of the collective will to power of humanity through the medium of an agonally selected oligarchy of those greatest individuals
humanity can produce. Thus, there would be (at least and potentially overlapping) two sorts of higher types, those who participate in politics directly, shifting humanity through legislation, and those who continue to influence the development of humanity obliquely through culture.

Politically speaking, this new agonalism would likely play out in terms of a small, likely compartmentalized, yet loosely defined, senate with particular seats granted to individuals with certain expertise (i.e., a ministers of technology, science, culture, agriculture, business, etc.) drawn from the general population. Ideally, individuals would be able to submit ideas for legislation to this committee without restriction and the committee would select individual applicants to its ranks, either on an ad hoc basis as members leave the committee or perhaps at regular intervals to ensure new perspectives are regularly incorporated. At the highest level, there could be direct competitions between individuals (in the form of peer reviewed written and verbal debates) for admission to the governing body and the selection of ideas to promote. Obviously, voting would still be the primary decision making mechanism of the governing body, but only after rigorous debate. In this way, the new senate would not be wholly different than the existing parliamentary systems of Western democracies. The primary difference would be in who was part of that parliament, why, and how they attained their position. Regardless, such a senate could not simply instate a new agonal culture (and could not exist without a dramatic shift in existing egalitarian culture), but would slowly shift it, with the help of the great individuals working on the cultural level directly (artists, musicians, writers, philosophers, etc.), towards an agonalism designed to accentuate the pathos of distance. Over time, such shifts would become mutually reinforcing in the
same way egalitarianism and democracy are mutually reinforcing in contemporary Western cultural-political systems.

The notion of the pathos of distance implies the possibility of self-enhancement, not only on a social scale, but on the level of personal merit. It may turn out that few individuals are actually capable of traversing such a distance, but the opportunity to do so should ideally be afforded to as many people as possible.\textsuperscript{41} These requirements would likely have to be fluid enough to allow for dramatic shifts in cultural values, especially as the greater revaluation of values progresses, but rigid enough to prevent abuse and to ensure, with some degree of reliability, that the oligarchs remain committed to the betterment and flourishing of their society, however that was defined. A regularly revised constitution of some sort would likely be necessary to achieve these ends.

Contemporary western culture, as it is entrenched in egalitarianism, is very far from a culture that could sustain oligarchy as outlined. As such, it is almost impossible to imagine the founding conditions of such a government. Regardless, for Nietzsche at least, its merits are plain.

\textbf{IV. Conclusions}

It is almost banal to point out that there is a psychological tendency, even among great philosophers, whenever reading a work of import and value, to attempt to integrate that work into preexisting philosophical schema. This urge is never greater than when we encounter a work we find both contentious and illuminating, as is often the case with

\textsuperscript{41} Here I \textit{may} be departing from Nietzsche slightly, though again I point to the controversy surrounding why Nietzsche placed such a high value on great individuals if not to aggrandize humanity as a whole.
Nietzsche's writings. There are many ways in which this urge can be beneficial, but often, in order to understand the potential importance of a work, we must embrace its contentiousness. Nietzsche, possibly more than any other recent thinker, understood this psychological “collating” phenomenon and actively worked against it by deliberately crafting arguments designed to debase current philosophical and intellectual conventions while maintaining their valuable components. A part of the great value of Nietzsche as a thinker is his ability and drive to challenge commonly held beliefs and systems. Modern democracy and the near ubiquity of its acceptance are just one such commonly endorsed system. To attempt to reconcile Nietzsche's thought with a group of political systems to which he is so obviously and vehemently opposed serves only to detract from the thrust of his critique and ignore his greater challenge, in this case, to move beyond our preconceived notions of governance. Much like Marx, Nietzsche presses his audience to critically consider the damaging aspects of existing social-political systems and to determine to what extent they need to be re-imagined, retooled, and even reconstituted. Unlike Marx, Nietzsche does not give us a concrete system with which to replace the old, nor any assurance that such progress is forthcoming. Nietzsche was intent on galvanizing select individuals to critically appraise and fundamentally transform the world and in warning against the danger of inaction. If, as Owen claims, Nietzsche simply advocates a slight reworking of existing culture, renewing our emphasis on competition, then he is merely a moderate. Whether or not Nietzsche's criticism of democracy is sufficient to justify its abandonment, or at the very least, its radical retooling to the point that we would no longer be comfortable calling it a democracy, is another subject entirely. The
interpretation I have pointed to is one possible way to begin to formally outline Nietzsche's criticism in a new positive format in the political sphere.

To close, I would like to point to one last passage from HH that lends a great deal of credence to the above formulation:

The period of the tyrants of the spirit is past. In the spheres of higher culture there will always have to be a sovereign authority, to be sure—but sovereign authority will hereafter lie in the hands of the oligarchs of the spirit. Their spatial and political division notwithstanding, they constitute a close-knit society whose members know and recognize one another, a thing which public opinion and the judgments of the writers for the popular papers may circulate as expressions of favor and disfavor. The spiritual superiority which formerly divided and created hostility now tends to unite. (HH 261)

Siemens and Clark both would note that HH falls into the middle period of Nietzsche's political thought during which he was most amicable towards democracy both as a cultural movement and as a political system, but even here Nietzsche shies away from a traditional democracy. While he values the debate and interactions intrinsic to the functioning democracy (especially representative democracy), he abhors its accompanying attestation and propagation of egalitarianism. Simultaneously, he is interested in a “hostility” which “tends to unite” rather than the old aristocratic hostility that merely focused on distance and division. Oligarchy is one obvious solution. If Nietzsche is pointing towards a species of oligarchy, there is no need to stretch the
boundaries of interpretation in order to make sense of his ostensibly antidemocratic comments, nor is there a need to discount HH as merely a democratic phase, nor to assume a certain naivety and callousness in regards to the efficacy and sufficiency of a traditional aristocracy. It is important to note that Nietzsche's political suggestion is not a variety of utopianism. Oligarchy would merely be the next step in the ever changing human landscape of the will to power. The key difference between the democracy of egalitarianism and the oligarchy of the pathos of distance is that the latter would allow for a more cohesive and deliberate cultivation of humanity and its powers. Oligarchy would signify mankind taking hold of its own development and direction and, in that way, is analogous to Nietzsche's discussion of the child in the Three Metamorphoses (Z). The full structure and content of such an oligarchy have yet to be fleshed out in their entirety, but some headway has been made concerning the constraining conditions to be imposed on such a system and, perhaps more importantly, why such constraints were significant to Nietzsche in the first place.
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