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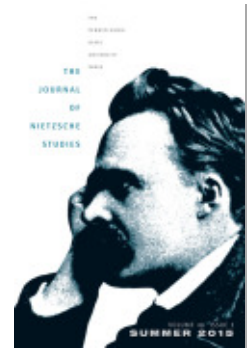
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Nietzsche's Early Perfectionism: A Cultural Reading of  
"The Greek State"

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# Nietzsche's Early Perfectionism

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## A Cultural Reading of "The Greek State"

JEFFREY CHURCH

ABSTRACT: Nietzsche's early essay "The Greek State" has been understood as unambiguous evidence of Nietzsche's "aristocratic radicalism," that he rejected liberal democracy and advocated slavery, war, and the sacrifice of the many for the few. This article challenges the scholarly consensus. I argue that "The Greek State" critiques liberal culture, not its institutions, and it proposes modern functional alternatives to ancient practices of slavery and war. The broader aim of my article is to move beyond the debate between "aristocratic" and "democratic" readings of Nietzsche's perfectionism.

KEYWORDS: perfectionism, culture, aristocracy, slavery, exemplars

In recent years scholars have made a compelling case that Nietzsche's ethics is a form of "perfectionism," that for Nietzsche the human good consists in the perfection of distinctively human capacities. However, these scholars disagree as to the character of Nietzsche's perfectionism and the implications for social and political life. On the one hand, John Rawls and Thomas Hurka have argued that Nietzsche's perfectionism is aristocratic or elitist, that only a few individuals can be or are worthy of being perfected.<sup>1</sup> Hence, social and political institutions should be constructed to foster this goal, such that these institutions should redistribute primary goods from the many to the few. On the other hand, Stanley Cavell and James Conant contend that Nietzsche's perfectionism is democratic, that all individuals can achieve and are worthy of perfection, and so social and political institutions should encourage each individual to strive for the perfection of his or her own highest self.<sup>2</sup>

My view, which I defend in this article, is that both parties are wrong in their articulation of the character and implications of this perfectionism. Or rather, to be more precise, they are one-sided. Rawls and Hurka are right to claim that Nietzsche's perfectionism is aristocratic but wrong to claim that this aristocratism is political in nature—rather, Nietzsche defends an aristocracy of culture. Cavell and Conant insightfully grasp the strain of egalitarianism in Nietzsche's thought, namely, that all individuals are by nature capable of perfection or human excellence. However, they misunderstand the character of this perfection for

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Nietzsche. It is not that we should perfect our own higher self but rather that we should live an excellent human life simply—the life of a great artist, saint, or philosopher such as Rousseau, Goethe, or Schopenhauer—and for Nietzsche, the achievement of such an excellent human life is exceedingly rare.

This disagreement between the aristocratic and democratic readings has focused on Nietzsche's early period text "Schopenhauer as Educator." In this essay, I focus on another early period text that bears on this disagreement, "The Greek State." I discuss this unpublished essay for two reasons. First, it predates *SE* by a few years, and tackles (from a different angle) the same issue discussed there, namely, what is the highest or perfected life, and how should we construct our social and political institutions to foster this life? Accordingly, this essay can help resolve the debate by clarifying the ambiguous passages of *SE*, those that have been read to sanction quite contradictory social and political systems.

Second, this essay has been universally interpreted by scholars as Nietzsche's announcement of his aristocratic politics and his defense of slavery. Even readers who are critical of the aristocratic interpretation, such as Maudemarie Clark,<sup>3</sup> nevertheless claim that the early Nietzsche of *GSt* defended slavery and aristocratic politics. Close attention to the details of this text and its philosophical context in Nietzsche's early period writings, however, reveal that this standard interpretation is wrong. My argument is that the scholarly focus on politics and political institutions is misplaced in the interpretation of this essay. Nietzsche's main motivation in writing the essay is to shame modern liberal *culture* for its defense of a debased view of the good. In place of this liberal culture, I argue in what follows, Nietzsche advocates a nobler view of culture for the modern world. However, he does not advocate slavery and aristocratic politics as mechanisms to achieve this culture in the modern age, since these were appropriate only in the Greek culture. Rather, he suggests that there may be other institutional means to foster this nobler view in the modern world.

In general, this essay moves beyond the debate between "aristocratic" and "democratic" readings of Nietzsche's perfectionism. In my view, the philosophical contributions of Nietzsche's early period view of culture are obscured if we consider him either as an "aristocratic radical" or as a democratic perfectionist. *GSt* is too easily dismissed on these interpretations as an unfortunate and misguided early reflection on politics.

### Nietzsche's Democratic Perfectionism?

At first glance—and even upon consideration—Nietzsche's 1871 unpublished text *GSt*, with its rather emphatic endorsement of slavery and war, provides unambiguous evidence that Nietzsche's perfectionism requires an

aristocratic politics.<sup>4</sup> As the “aristocratic” readers point out, in this essay Nietzsche rejects the basic assumptions of liberalism—the “dignity of man”—and holds that “slavery belongs to the essence of a culture,” along with war, to which Nietzsche “occasionally sings a paean” (*GSt* 178, 184).<sup>5</sup> For Nietzsche, modern liberalism has transformed human beings into weak, fragmented, and inartistic animals. By contrast, the hierarchical and manly Greek state provides institutional guidance for devoted Nietzscheans hoping to rejuvenate modern culture.

These considerations provide strong evidence against the democratic perfectionism of Cavell or Conant, who read *SE* in a distinctly non-elitist and even egalitarian way. These scholars indeed develop an ingenious reading of even the most elitist passages in this essay, including this commonly cited one: “How can your life [. . .] receive the highest value, the deepest significance? [. . .] Only by your living for the good of the rarest and most valuable exemplars!” (*SE* 6). Conant argues that the “rarest and highest exemplar” mentioned here is not “some other person” or elite but rather “me,” my own higher self.<sup>6</sup> Living for this exemplar, therefore, involves not enforced hero worship, but rather attention to the exemplary or higher self implicit in all of us.<sup>7</sup>

However, three years earlier, in *GSt*, Nietzsche offers a remarkably similar comment, which Conant does not consider:

Every man, with his whole activity, is only dignified to the extent that he is a tool of genius, consciously or unconsciously; whereupon we immediately deduce the ethical conclusion that “man as such,” absolute man, possesses neither dignity, nor rights, nor duties: only as a completely determined being, serving unconscious purposes, can man excuse his existence. (*GSt* 185)

If there is some ambiguity in the *SE* 6 passage, there is little ambiguity here. Two features of this passage in particular challenge the core idea of Conant’s reading, namely, that the “exemplar” or “genius” could be my own higher self. First, Nietzsche claims that “man” gains dignity only in virtue of becoming a “tool of genius.” The metaphor of “tool” is difficult to square with the personal self-development reading. How can my future, higher self utilize my present self as a tool? The more plausible interpretation is the aristocratic one, namely, that there are two separate individuals here, an excellent human being and an average one, the latter a tool for the former. Second, it is difficult to understand how we could engage in personal self-development “unconsciously.” Conant’s reading relies on *SE* 1, in which Nietzsche asks us to reflect on our higher selves and elevate ourselves out of our present slavish devotion to public opinion. As such, Conant’s project of self-development is emphatically conscious and self-reflective, quite distant from Nietzsche’s picture of us serving the genius “unconsciously.” The more plausible reading again is the aristocratic one in which one individual may serve another individual unwittingly.<sup>8</sup>

## Nietzsche's Aristocratic Perfectionism?

The aristocratic readers, then, are right that *GSi* decisively challenges the democratic interpretation. However, I argue in what follows that we should not accept the standard aristocratic political reading either. The main problem with this reading is that it assumes that, for Nietzsche, what was appropriate for the Greeks should once again be appropriate for the moderns.<sup>9</sup> In fact, Nietzsche understands the ancients and the moderns as possessing fundamentally different cultural and political worlds. The purpose of Nietzsche's essay is not to recommend a return to Greek institutional models. Indeed, in *UM* Nietzsche forecloses the possibility of reactionary turning back the clock given his view of the "infinite" historical self-consciousness he thinks emerges in the modern age (*HL* 4).

In fact, in *BT*—on which *GSi* was originally intended to expand—Nietzsche does not advocate the return to Greek tragedy (*KSA* 7:10[1]). Rather, he uses Greek tragedy to critique modern slavish aesthetic ideals and to present the superior Greek cultural ideal. However, Greek tragedy was itself fatally limited in that it did not incorporate the Socratic moment of self-consciousness, and so was defeated by it. The advantage of modern culture is that Socratic culture is in decline and hence artists can once again produce a tragedy that retrieves the old "Apollinian" and "Dionysian" drives, but now on the basis of Socratic self-consciousness, thereby achieving a yet higher level for the tragic stage (*BT* 15, on the "music-making Socrates").

We can expect that Nietzsche would apply this same logic to the state. If the modern state can incorporate the self-consciousness of the modern age and still produce culture, it is a higher form of the state than that of the Greeks, who speak about the state merely "simply and expressively" (*KSA* 7:10[1], 336).<sup>10</sup> My argument, then, in what follows is that the purpose of *GSi* is to critique modern culture, not to offer a blueprint for its politics but rather a higher possibility for modern politics and culture. Three features of the essay provide support for this argument: (1) Nietzsche's critique of liberal democratic ideals, not institutions, (2) the "shamefulness" of slavery, and (3) the functional alternatives to slavery and war that Nietzsche adumbrates.

First, the purpose of Nietzsche's essay is to critique not the institutions of the modern world, as most commentators assume, but the modern ideals behind these institutions. Nietzsche excoriates the "dignity of man" and the "dignity of work," ideals he associates with the "French Enlightenment and Revolution" (*GSi* 176, 183). The "aristocratic" readers understand that Nietzsche's criticism of these ideals amounts to a rejection of individual rights and liberal institutions. But in the text, Nietzsche objects not to liberal institutions, but to the ethical implications of liberal ideals such as the "dignity of man." As Quentin Taylor puts the point, "Nietzsche is not denying that it is necessary and reasonable that men be granted certain 'rights' and protections. Rather, he is challenging the liberal dogma that all men are created equal."<sup>11</sup>

What is the problem with the ethical ideal of the “dignity of man [Würde des Menschen]”? For Nietzsche, the human condition compels us to face the horrifying struggle for existence by making such a grueling existence meaningful in light of a self-created ideal. One such ideal modern human beings have created is the “dignity of work,” which gives meaning to the laborer’s existence: “we struggle wretchedly to perpetuate a wretched life; this terrible predicament necessitates exhausting work which man [. . .] now and again admires as something dignified” (*GS* 176). As Tracy Strong glosses Nietzsche’s point, such ideals are “rationalizations that the slave gives to himself in order to hide his condition from himself.”<sup>12</sup> These ideals of the “dignity of work” and “dignity of man” have replaced religious ideals as modern, secular consolations in the face of the harshness of nature.

Yet for Nietzsche these ideals provide us with no impetus for a higher life. In most human cultures, according to Nietzsche, ideals are generated by an aristocratic class that enjoins culture to self-transcendence. Nietzsche bemoans that in the contemporary world “these are ill-fated times when the slave needs such ideas and is stirred up to think about himself and beyond himself” (*GS* 177). For Nietzsche, the problem with these optimistic ideals is that they give rise to an infinite longing for equality among human beings, a final condition in which all people equally recognize one another’s dignity. For Nietzsche, this infinite longing supplants our desire for excellence and transcendence. The “cry of pity” for the workers of the world tears “down the walls of culture [Kultur]” because “the urge for justice [Gerechtigkeit], for equal sharing of the pain, would swamp all other ideas” (*GS* 179).<sup>13</sup>

At the same time, these abstract liberal ideals point away from collective ethical goals and toward individual goals, toward the value of individuals over groups. The “dignity of man” presupposes that individuals’ worth precedes or stands apart from their function in any political or cultural community. As individuals internalize this abstract conception of humanity, they may “recognize the state only to the extent to which they conceive it to be in their own interest” and regard the state “as a means” to their own individual ends (*GS* 182–83). In other words, these abstract ethical ideals attenuate our connection to particular communities and hence throw us back upon our own “selfish” material aims (*GS* 183). The liberal ideals may indeed point toward perpetual peace, the “most undisturbed co-existence possible of great political communities,” but they do so because peace allows individuals to “pursue their own purposes without restriction” (*GS* 182).<sup>14</sup> Nietzsche’s worry in this development of liberal ideals is that as states become less powerful and individuals appropriate state power for their own uses, there will arise a group of “international, homeless, financial recluses” who “have learnt to misuse politics as an instrument of the stock exchange, and the state and society as an apparatus for their own enrichment” (*GS* 183).

It is in this context that Nietzsche “sings a paean to war.” That is, he does not do so out of an aestheticized love of violence or out of some need for power natural to

human beings. Rather, war is in Nietzsche's view the only means of overcoming the atomistic individualism resulting from the Enlightenment ethical ideals: "the only counter-measure to the threatened deflection of the state purpose towards money matters [. . .] is war and war again" (*GS* 183). He is drawing on the Greek model here of the constant war among the city-states that in Nietzsche's view kept the citizens' ethical dispositions trained on the collective life of the city rather than in their own selfish pursuits. Nietzsche's argument is not unusual in the German tradition, but in fact was most famously argued by G.W.F. Hegel. For Hegel, the collective ethical life of the state can be maintained in modernity only by the constant possibility of war and of death. Hegel's worry, and Nietzsche's as well, is that the rise of modern commercial society encourages individuals to pursue their own self-interest, so that there must be mechanisms to transform this self-interest into a commitment to the common good.<sup>15</sup> Nietzsche offers a nearly identical account, though his more prescient worry was the rise of a global economic elite who would use the state for its own interest. The reminder of the collective ethical life brought on by the possibility of war restricts the power of these economic elite and redirects human purposes back to cultural ends.

However, contemporary scholars have been led to assume that Nietzsche is speaking about politics based on his de Maistre-esque claim that "absolute man [absolute Mensch]" possesses "neither dignity, nor rights, nor duties" (*GS* 185). Yet Nietzsche's point is still an ethical rather than a political one, namely, as he proceeds to say, this abstract ideal of "absolute man" does nothing to "excuse [entschuldigen] [our] existence." The abstract notion that the Enlightenment relies on—"man as such"—is an abstraction of reason, which cannot provide any ethical substance for human lives. In this way, Nietzsche's critique of the abstractions of the Enlightenment should be read in light of the earlier Romantic and Hegelian attempt to retrieve the ethical salience of particular attachments and loyalties, as well as the later communitarian critique of the liberal "encumbered self." In line with this tradition, Nietzsche argues that only as an encumbered self, a "completely determined being" serving an ethical ideal higher than ourselves, can our existence take on meaning (*GS* 185).

In sum, Nietzsche argues that we should jettison the faulty ideals of liberalism such as the "dignity of man," not because liberal practices such as the rule of law and individual rights undermine culture, but because the liberal ideals arrest the striving of human beings toward cultural aims higher than themselves and turn all individuals toward selfish aims.

Let us turn to the second point about *GS* that challenges the received aristocratic reading. In the essay, Nietzsche criticizes not only modern culture, but also the Greek institution of slavery. Nietzsche readers will be surprised by this claim, as scholars focus on Nietzsche's statements that the Greek institution of slavery is necessary in order to secure the material preconditions for a leisured, cultural life for the few.<sup>16</sup> However, Nietzsche does not exult in the slavery of

the many, nor does he regard it with the shrug of indifference, as the received interpretation implies. Rather, he states that the necessity of slavery was for the Greeks a “terrible premise”; it aroused “shame,” and it is a “truth” that “gnaws at the liver of the Promethean promoter of culture” (*GS* 178). “Culture [Kultur], the voluptuous Cleopatra,” Nietzsche says, sheds “tears of pity for the slave and the misery of slavery” (*GS* 179–80). Slavery allowed the “artistically free life of [Greek] culture [Kultur]” to flourish as the beautiful “torso of a young woman” (*GS* 178). Yet beneath this torso there lies the “horrifying, predatory aspect of the Sphinx of nature,” the representation of the slave’s struggle for existence (*GS* 178). We can see here that Nietzsche recognizes the injustice at the heart of the institution of Greek slavery. It was a necessary injustice, but an injustice nonetheless. For Nietzsche, the problem with this practice is that it treated human beings as objects or animals struggling for existence rather than as possible sources of human excellence, the “unique miracles” that we are (*SE* 1).

Nietzsche’s tragic assessment of slavery reveals his general political attitude. In *GS*, he is not offering in a utopian account of political society. Rather, he gives voice to a realism or anti-utopianism, a tragic sense of the limits of human progress. On this view, evil cannot be extirpated from human community. Nevertheless, it is still possible—and we will see below how—that Nietzsche could consider other modern institutions that could functionally replace the institution of slavery, hence elevating the modern state above the Greek state without jettisoning his melancholy realism about political community. Nietzsche begins the essay with the ironic statement that “we moderns have the advantage over the Greeks with two concepts given as consolation, as it were, to a world which behaves in a thoroughly slave-like manner” (*GS* 176). Though Nietzsche is ironic in this opening statement, he also means seriously that the moderns do have an advantage over the Greeks in the fact that we need not accept the shameful injustice of politically sanctioned slaves.

The final point about *GS* that challenges the consensus reading is that Nietzsche does not literally advocate slavery and war for the modern age, but rather he sees “slavery” and “war” as functional terms that can be embodied in any number of empirical forms. Nietzsche claims that “slavery belongs to the essence of a culture [Kultur],” yet it is not clear what he means by “slavery.” In discussing the Greek state, he clearly means the political institution of slavery. However, he states in the first line of the essay that moderns behave in a “slave-like [sklavisch] manner” (*GS* 176); slavery in modernity goes “under a more moderate name,”<sup>17</sup> and in his later work he goes on to speak of slavery “in some sense” being necessary (*HH* 283; *GS* 18, 377; *BGE* 242, 257). Nietzsche contrasts the “naiveté of the ancients in their distinction between the slaves and the free” with the moderns who are “prudish and refined, slavery is in our character” (*KSA* 7:3[44]). In all these passages, Nietzsche is suggesting that modern citizens may serve the function that the slaves played in the Greek world while



still retaining legal rights. Such a reading is supported by Nietzsche's expansive definition of a slave, which is any individual who devotes his or her life to the "struggle for existence." Under this definition, many individuals in a modern economy—for instance, "wage slaves"—fit this description.

Indeed, in *GS*, Nietzsche's criticism of the liberal "ideology" of the "dignity of work" is similar to contemporary socialists', though Nietzsche has an utterly different purpose in mind.<sup>18</sup> Nietzsche and the nineteenth-century socialists recognize that the modern economy drives the mechanization and extreme specialization of human labor, the reduction of much of human effort to repetitive, mindless tasks, such as the assembly line production of pinheads in a pin factory. Nietzsche and the socialists hence find the liberal declaration of the "dignity" of this work to be laughably mistaken. These workers are akin to slaves in the sense that they must devote themselves to hard and arduous labor just to survive; they submit to and are enslaved by material necessity, unable to rise above the struggle for existence to dedicate themselves to distinctively human spiritual things. However, unlike the socialists, Nietzsche argues in an anti-utopian vein that the complete liberation of these workers is not practicable. This latter anti-utopian conclusion kindles the "hatred" of the "Communists and Socialists, as well as their paler descendants, the white race of 'Liberals' of every age against the arts" whose infinite longing for human equality balks at the thought of the necessity of evil in human society (*GS* 179). Finally, Nietzsche's view that there ought to be a class devoted to providing the preconditions for a cultured class is not an unusual or radically conservative view in the nineteenth century. Consider Hegel's view of the "universal estate" that oversees the direction of the whole—it must "be exempted from work" in order to perform its function, and this work is carried out by the other "estates" in Hegel's system.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, individuals in Hegel's state are not assigned by a coercive state to one class or another but rather choose their vocations.<sup>20</sup>

In sum, Nietzsche envisions modern wage workers as the slave class. Since there already exists a widespread form of social and economic "slavery" in the modern age, it is implausible that Nietzsche would call for an additional politically sanctioned institution of slavery as the aristocratic reading suggests. Calling for political slavery on top of such economic slavery would be extravagant and otiose. Most important for Nietzsche is the transformation of our ethical understanding of the best human life. By maintaining the principle of the "dignity of work," we prevent ourselves from recognizing the higher life of culture beyond the struggle for existence characteristic of the life of labor.

Similarly, Nietzsche argues that "war is as much a necessity for the state as the slave for society" (*GS* 184). However, "war" too can take on other functional incarnations. Nietzsche does not discuss any in *GS*, but in a note from 1871 Nietzsche defends the notion of "military service" as a way "to break the greedy need for industry" (*KSA* 7:9[70], p. 300). In this note, Nietzsche makes the same Hegelian claim that to overcome the egoism of the modern market requires the

threat of death from an external enemy and the rallying of a nation for war. Here, however, he argues that military service, not war itself, can perform the same function. If military service can perform the same function, then we need not read *GS* as championing blood and iron. Rather, it can be compatible with the political philosophy underlying the policy of compulsory military service in countries such as Israel. The idea behind this policy is that military service ennoble the character of the citizenry from selfish to civic-minded.

Nietzsche's appeal to Plato's *Republic* at the end of *GS* hence takes on quite a different meaning in light of these considerations. Detwiler offers a characteristic reading of Nietzsche as "advocat[ing] a variant of 'Plato's ideal state,' which would place a form of genius at its apex."<sup>21</sup> Yet Nietzsche advocates no such thing in this passage. Notice that Nietzsche does not advocate using Plato's *Republic* as a political blueprint. Plato's *Republic* does "place genius [. . .] at the head of his perfect state [vollkommene Staat]." However, Nietzsche argues that the significance of Plato's *Republic* lies rather in "the wonderfully grand hieroglyph of a profound secret study [Geheimlehre] of the connection between state and genius, eternally needing to be interpreted: in this preface we have said what we believe we have fathomed of this secret script" (*GS* 186). For Nietzsche, the *Republic* is not a blueprint but rather a hieroglyph, a sacred pictorial representation of a general idea. Unlike a blueprint, a hieroglyph does not outline a universally clear pattern of politics for all peoples, but rather "eternally" needs to be interpreted. As such, each new generation must interpret this general idea for its own time. Each new generation ought to grasp the "connection between state and genius," that is, how the political community is to foster culture and genius. Since each new generation must "interpret" this idea anew, Nietzsche implies that each will apply this idea differently for different circumstances.

### Nietzsche's Cultural Perfectionism

In his early period, Nietzsche understands culture to be central to our ethical perfection or human excellence. For Nietzsche, the cultural pursuits of art, religion, and philosophy express what is highest and distinctive to humanity: our capacity to "live according to our own laws and standards" (*SE* 1). The great "geniuses" of history, such as Rousseau, Goethe, and Schopenhauer, "guard and champion humanity, the inviolable sacred treasure gradually accumulated by the most various races" (*SE* 4). Culture collects and transmits the lives and works of these individuals and hence is that "presentation [bilden] of the most noble moments of all generations in a kind of continuum, in which one can live further [weiter leben]" (*KSA* 7:8[99]). At the same time, Nietzsche regards much of human existence as a "continuation of animality," according to which we do not pursue some ideal truth, the divine, or artistic excellence, but are driven by

some natural, animalistic urge or another (*SE* 5). On the basis of this conception of humanity, Nietzsche argues that our lives can "receive the highest value, the deepest significance" by "living for the good of the rarest and most valuable exemplars" (*SE* 6). For Nietzsche, if we cannot become "geniuses" ourselves, we live best by transmitting the cultural geniuses of the past so as to prepare the way for more geniuses in the future.

As we saw above, the aristocratic readers correctly identify the elitist sentiment in Nietzsche's thought. However, they err in their assumption about the mechanism Nietzsche advocates for advancing culture. Namely, they assume Nietzsche defends state coercion to advance cultural aims. Detwiler, for instance, claims that "Nietzsche is quite willing to sacrifice the interests of 'the enormous majority' to better the circumstances of 'a small number of Olympian men,' just as he talks darkly of the need for a new kind of enslavement."<sup>22</sup>

In my view, *GSt* does not advocate such political coercion. We can see why by first looking a bit more closely at the crucial passage quoted above from *SE* 6. In it, Nietzsche argues that human life can be meaningful only by "your living for the good of the rarest and most valuable exemplars." Culture is the "child of each individual's self-knowledge and dissatisfaction with himself. Anyone who believes in culture is thereby saying, "I see above me something higher and more human than I am; let everyone help me to attain it, as I will help everyone who knows and suffers as I do" (*SE* 6, my emphases). The "consecration to culture" Nietzsche defends in *SE* must in other words be a self-consecration. We must will the end of culture. As such, in order to satisfy the condition Nietzsche outlines in the passage, we cannot be sacrificed to the exemplary individuals, as Detwiler and other aristocratic readers suggest.

Instead, Nietzsche develops a different mechanism for moral transformation. Rather than coercing individuals, Nietzsche draws on the power of shame that excellent individuals can arouse in the majority. For Nietzsche, each of us has an "immeasurable longing to become whole," and exemplary individuals embody such wholeness (*SE* 6). Their success in living up to their humanity reminds us of our own failure and makes us "ashamed of [ourselves]" and come to "hate [our] own narrowness and shriveled nature" (*SE* 6). By experiencing shame, we will be inspired to commit ourselves to becoming more human and to overcome the animal temptations distracting us from our own moral perfection.

If we turn back to *GSt*, written two years earlier, we see Nietzsche beginning to offer a similar analysis of shame. The Greeks felt shame, Nietzsche observes, when they witnessed human beings subjected to the "compelling force" or the "necessity of work" for "individual preservation" (*GSt* 178). These human beings do not live up to their vocation as free beings but rather are driven by imperatives beyond themselves, becoming "just a tool of infinitely greater manifestations of the will" (*GSt* 178). In this passage, Nietzsche invokes Schopenhauer's

notion of the will—the aimless, formless force structuring and impelling all things to action—to describe the subjection to necessity as a form of unfreedom unbecoming to human beings.

The “undignified” nature of this work can, however, be transformed “to the extent that [such a person becomes] a tool of genius” (his use of “tool [Werkzeug]” of genius is a subtle play on his use of “tool [Werkzeug]” of the will). Only by consecrating ourselves to the free activity of culture—in contrast to the necessity of will—can “man [Mensch] excuse his existence.” On Nietzsche’s view, we must aspire to be “worthy” of being such a “means for genius” (*GSt* 185). As such, Nietzsche cannot hold that the state compels individuals into service to culture, because subjecting individuals to physical necessity is just another form of subjection to the “will.” Obeying the state’s whip—even if the state has a laudable goal—is another form of the “extension of animality.” Only by individuals subjecting *themselves* to culture can they prove their worth as distinctively human beings. Though Nietzsche does not elaborate his theory of cultural consecration in *GSt*, the basic elements are present in this essay, on which he would expand in *SE*.

Nietzsche’s use of shame as opposed to coercion is only the beginning of a theory of cultural renewal. Nietzsche composed *GSt* late in 1872 after he had delivered his public lectures “On the Future of Our Educational Institutions.” In these lectures and surrounding notes, Nietzsche describes how shame can be employed in education to exhort students to consecrate themselves to the transmission and perfection of culture. These lectures are beyond the scope of this essay, but I point them out to cast further doubt on the political aristocratic reading of *GSt*. In 1872, far from outlining a political plan for enslaving the vast majority of humanity, Nietzsche was developing a noncoercive means to foster culture, namely, through education reform that would draw on the moral-psychological theories he eventually develops most fully in *SE*.

Against the scholarly consensus, then, my claim is that *GSt* targets the cultural, not the political failing of modern liberal democracy; it does not advocate slavery but rather subtly critiques the institution; it points toward alternative functional mechanisms for slavery and war. I have developed this reading to criticize the prevailing understandings of Nietzsche’s early ethical perfectionism. Nietzsche was neither a “democratic” nor an “aristocratic” perfectionist, but rather a “cultural” perfectionist. If we read Nietzsche as a “cultural” perfectionist, we can see more clearly the development of Nietzsche’s early ethical views into its mature form in *SE*, and resist the temptation to dismiss *GSt* as misguided juvenilia.

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## NOTES

1. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971); Thomas Hurka, *Perfectionism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).
2. Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); James Conant, "Nietzsche's Perfectionism: A Reading of Schopenhauer as Educator," in *Nietzsche's Postmoralism*, ed. Richard Schacht (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 181–256.
3. Maudemarie Clark, "Nietzsche's Antidemocratic Rhetoric," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 37.S1 (1999): 119–41, 127–28.
4. See Bruce Detwiler, *Nietzsche and the Politics of Aristocratic Radicalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 40.
5. Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Greek State," in *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), cited parenthetically in the text by page number. Other translations cited in this article include *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazzeale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), and *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Ronald Spiers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
6. Conant, "Nietzsche's Perfectionism," 198, 202.
7. For critical responses to Conant's reading, see Thomas Hurka, "Nietzsche: Perfectionist," in *Nietzsche and Morality*, ed. Brian Leiter and Neil Sinhababu (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 9–31, and Keith Ansell-Pearson, "'Holding on to the Sublime': On Nietzsche's Early 'Unfashionable' Project," in *The Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche*, ed. Ken Gemes and John Richardson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 226–51.
8. See Vanessa Lemm, "Is Nietzsche a Perfectionist? Rawls, Cavell, and the Politics of Culture in Nietzsche's 'Schopenhauer as Educator,'" *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 34 (2007): 5–27, for another critique of Cavell's and Conant's reading of *SE* that differs from the aristocratic one.
9. See Mark Warren, *Nietzsche and Political Thought* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988): "with respect to these [cultural] needs, Nietzsche believed modern societies to be in precisely the same situation as ancient Greek societies" (239). Detwiler, *Nietzsche*, claims that it is "indisputable that in Nietzsche's view the Greeks of antiquity represent history's highest elevation of humanity" (41). Henning Ottmann, *Philosophie und Politik bei Nietzsche* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1987) argues that Nietzsche's ideal "Kulturstaat" is a "backward-facing utopia," namely, "Plato's ideal state" or the "polis" with "slaves, warriors, and philosopher (-artists)" (47).
10. For excellent analyses of Nietzsche's view of the Greeks, see Tracy B. Strong, *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of Transfiguration* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000) and Quentin Taylor, *The Republic of Genius: A Reconstruction of Nietzsche's Early Thought* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 1997), 101–19. Strong argues, "Nietzsche never advocates 'returning' to the Greeks, nor making modern society over in their image" (136).
11. Taylor, *Republic of Genius*, 28. Taylor makes the good point later that in comparison to that of his contemporaries, Nietzsche's criticism of liberalism is mild: "the notoriously 'illiberal' Nietzsche never so much as opposes universal manhood suffrage, advocates the suppression of socialist movements, or calls for the curtailment of individual rights and liberties—positions taken by a number of Nietzsche's eminent and 'respectable' contemporaries" (164–65).
12. Tracy B. Strong, "Introduction to the 'Greek State,'" in *Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. Tracy B. Strong (London: Ashgate, 2009), 445.
13. See also Nietzsche's draft preface to Wagner in which he claims liberalism is "essentially anti-cultural [kulturwidrige] doctrine." Friedrich Nietzsche, *Writings from the Early Notebooks*, ed. Raymond Geuss and Alexander Nehamas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 82, cited parenthetically in the text by page number.

14. It is in this context of greedy manipulative elites and the “egoism of the masses [Masse]” that Nietzsche objects to the “spread of universal suffrage” (*GS* 183). In other words, his condemnation of universal suffrage is not based on the natural ineptitude of the many, as is characteristic of aristocratic thinkers such as Plato.

15. G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), §324.

16. See Strong, “Introduction,” for the background debate in the nineteenth century about slavery and Greek society to which Nietzsche’s essay was a contribution.

17. Nietzsche, *Writings from the Early Notebooks*, 71.

18. See also Strong, “Introduction,” who points out that Nietzsche’s “language is not all that different than that of those who protested against capitalism on the grounds that it made ‘wage-slaves’ out of human beings” (445).

19. Hegel, *Elements*, §205.

20. Hegel, *Elements*, §206. In this section, Hegel distinguishes the modern state with its rational articulation into estates and voluntary assignment to these estates with the “allocation of individuals to specific estates” by “rulers as in Plato’s *Republic*, or to birth alone, as in the Indian caste-system.” Nietzsche frequently refers to the *Republic* and the laws of Manu, and in my view Nietzsche’s argument is best understood to follow Hegel’s here. That is, the ancient models of social order gave us an ideal of unity and differentiation toward which we should strive, but they were deficient in not incorporating what Hegel calls “subjective opinion.”

21. Detwiler, *Nietzsche*, 63. See also Thomas Heilke, *Nietzsche’s Tragic Regime: Culture, Aesthetics, and Political Education* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1998), 127, 159–60.

22. Detwiler, *Nietzsche*, 106.