Nietzsche’s Revaluation of Socrates

Christopher C. Raymond

1 Introduction

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) holds a unique place in the history of Socratic reception. Few writers give Socrates a greater role in the shaping of Western culture, and none is so fervently critical of his influence. In Nietzsche’s first book, The Birth of Tragedy (1872), Socrates is both the “turning point and vortex of so-called world history” and the “most questionable phenomenon of antiquity.”1 In a notebook entry from the last year of his productive life, he is “a moment of the deepest perversity in human history.”2 But for Nietzsche that moment has not yet passed: modern culture is a thoroughly Socratic culture, and therefore a deeply perverse one. At every point, his chief purpose in writing about Socrates is to call into question our highest values—to force us to ask whether the examined life is the only livable one for human beings after all, or whether it could be our undoing.

From the first, responses to Nietzsche’s treatment of Socrates have tended toward the psycho-biographical—as though what needs addressing is not the content of the critique itself but the idiosyncratic mind that produced it. Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, in his otherwise substantive (albeit scathing, and perhaps short-sighted) pamphlet responding to BT, reduces the critique to a personal vendetta, stating that its author “fiercely hates Socrates for his non-mysticism” (my emphasis), declining to comment further: “to correct without any prospect of being understood is a futile task.”3 At the

---

1 The Birth of Tragedy (BT) §15 and §13 (KSA 1, 100 and 90).
2 Nachgelassene Fragmente (NF) spring 1888, 14[111] (KSA 13, 289).
3 Wilamowitz-Moellendorff 2000, 21, tr. Postl; German original repr. in Gründer 1969 (along with the replies of Rohde and Wagner, and Wilamowitz’s follow-up). Cf. 18: “Mr. N’s actual reason for associating [Socrates and Euripides] is the burning hatred he feels toward both of them. The means for venting this hatred do not embarrass him; he is happy with any means.” Wilamowitz calls correcting Nietzsche an Oknosarbeit, referring to the mythical figure Ocnus. On the Nietzsche–Wilamowitz controversy, see also Calder 1983; Mansfeld 1986; Zelle 1994; Porter 2011 (detailing Wilamowitz’s misquotations of BT); and for a concise summary, Wilson 2016, 492–3. Toward the end of his life, Wilamowitz would write about the episode: “For all my pamphlet’s boyishness, with the final outcome I hit the mark. Nietzsche did what I called on him to do: he gave up lecturing and scholarship (Wissenschaft), and became the prophet.
century’s turn, in an essay titled “The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche as a Psychopathological Problem” (1900), Rudolf Steiner claims that his subject’s “hatred for Socrates” stems from a more basic “repulsion against truth.” Four decades later, Crane Brinton similarly writes of Nietzsche’s “hatred for the tradition of European rationalism”—with Socrates serving as the main “villain” in his story.

In 1948, Walter Kaufmann published the provocatively-titled “Nietzsche’s Admiration for Socrates,” to correct what he considered a one-sided and superficial view of the matter. Responding to Brinton’s “villain” remark, Kaufmann goes so far as to claim that Nietzsche “appears to have modeled his entire philosophic enterprise in the image of Socrates” (472), and that “Socrates became little less than an idol for him” (474). The article was the initial overture in Kaufmann’s broader effort to make Nietzsche’s thought more palatable to Anglophone audiences in the wake of the Second World War. (If Nietzsche admired Socrates, how bad could he really be?) But Kaufmann’s argument itself depends on a tendentious reading of BT and a selective consideration of the evidence from the later works. His influence is nonetheless apparent in much later twentieth-century scholarship, which tends to speak not of Nietzsche’s “hatred” but of his “ambivalence” toward Socrates. What unites these more