

Rhythm from Art to Philosophy - Nietzsche (1867-1888) - part 2

Wednesday 1 June 2016, by [Pascal Michon](#)

[Previous chapter](#)

Heraclitean *Rhuthmos* vs Parmenidean Being (1873)

Nietzsche wanted to complement *The Birth of Tragedy* with an essay on *The [Birth of] Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*. This book was never completed but various fragments still remain: a few pages long piece, *Der letzte Philosoph. Betrachtungen über den Kampf von Kunst und Erkenntniss* (1872), a larger but unfinished essay *Die Philosophie im tragischen Zeitalter der Griechen* (1873), two more short fragments, *Der Philosoph als Arzt der Kultur* (1873) and *Wissenschaft und Weisheit im Kampfe* (1875) and, finally, extended lecture notes intended for a course on Presocratic philosophers taught four times between 1869 and 1875.

This new publication was first meant to add to his essay dedicated to art and aesthetics an extensive investigation devoted to science and ontology. Art and Science would meet as two opposite Dionysian and Apollonian forces under the aegis of Tragedy. Indeed, as the main poets of their time,

the ancient philosophers, Eleates, Heraclitus, Empedocles [were] *tragic* philosophers.
(eKGWB/NF-1870,5[94] — Sept. 1870-Jan. 1871)

According to Nietzsche, poets and philosophers, despite their divergent views of the world, shared the same “tragic view of existence.” Therefore the latter might shed some light on the former.

Introduction. Immortality of the great moments. The Greeks of the tragic era as a philosopher! How did they feel about existence [*das Dasein*]? Therein lies their *eternal* content. Otherwise, all systems eat each other up. Historical painting. We find again all epic and lyrical elements, all the props of tragedy, under a different guise. How do we live without religion, with philosophy? But, of course, in a tragic and artistic era. (eKGWB/NF-1872,21[19] — Sum. 1872-Beg. 1873)

Nietzsche's second aim was to reconstruct “the birth of Philosophy” i.e. to highlight some particular thinkers he considered, as he explained a few years later, as his forebears because they joined primacy of Nature and primacy of Becoming.

My forebears [*Vorfahren*]: Heraclitus, Empedocles, Spinoza, Goethe. (eKGWB/NF-1884,25[454] —

Spring 1884)

In the largest essay entitled *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, Nietzsche's inquiry starts by a few considerations on the very first philosophers: Thales of Miletus (c. 624 – c. 546 BC) and Anaximander (c. 610 – c. 546 BC). The question they both addressed was, from a logical perspective, that of Unity and Plurality or, from a temporal perspective, that of Being and Becoming.

Thales shows the need of simplifying the empire of plurality, and of reducing it to a mere expansion or disguise of the *one single* existing quality, water. Anaximander goes beyond him with two steps. Firstly he puts the question to himself: "How, if there exists an eternal Unity at all, is that Plurality possible?" and he takes the answer out of the contradictory, self-devouring and denying character of this Plurality. The existence of this Plurality becomes a moral phenomenon to him; it is not justified, it expiates itself continually through destruction. (*Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, § 4, trans. Maximilian A. Mügge)

However, although Anaximander went "beyond" his predecessor, he remained "within the deep shadows" and he could not really explain

how out of the Indefinite the Definite, out of the Eternal the Temporal, out of the Just the Unjust could by secession ever originate. (*Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, § 4, trans. Maximilian A. Mügge)

It was Heraclitus of Ephesus (c. 535 – c. 475 BC) who enlightened for the first time "this mystic night, in which Anaximander's problem of the Becoming was wrapped up and illuminated it by a divine flash of lightning." (§ 5) But, quite surprisingly, Nietzsche describes this Heraclitean divine intuition as a contemplation of the "eternal wave-surfing and rhythm of things."

"I contemplate the Becoming," he exclaimed,— "and nobody has so attentively watched this eternal wave-surfing and rhythm of things [*diesem ewigen Wellenschlage und Rhythmus der Dinge*]. And what do I behold? Lawfulness [*Gesetzmäßigkeiten*], infallible certainty, ever equal paths of Justice, condemning Erinyes behind all transgressions of the laws, the whole world the spectacle of a governing justice and of demoniacally omnipresent natural forces subject to justice's sway." (*Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, § 5, trans. Maximilian A. Mügge)

Out of hand, the notion of rhythm is thus used to characterize nothing less than the Becoming, that is, what Nietzsche considers as both one of the very first questions of philosophy and the most important philosophical issue in the 19th century.

What separates us from Kant as much from Plato and Leibniz: we believe only in the becoming in the mental as well, we are *historical* through and through. This is the great revolution of Lamarck

and Hegel—Darwin is only an after-effect. The *Heraclitean* and *Empedoclean* mode of thought has arisen again. (eKGWB/NF-1885,34[73] – Spring 1885)

Naturally such a definition raises a series of difficult questions. Why this strange characterization? In what sense is the Becoming rhythmic? What kind of rhythm is here involved? Why the rhythm, which was associated with Apollo, measure and architecture, is now considered as characteristic of the becoming? What are the relations, if any, with the interest in rhythm by artists and thinkers we already came across? And, since this definition reveals an aspect of Nietzsche's early philosophical reflection that has rarely been taken into account by specialists, does it change—and if it does in what way?—our comprehension of Nietzsche's later thought?

It is easy to see why Heraclitus appeals to Nietzsche: as the first philosopher who considered the Becoming as an absolute of Nature, he radically opened a new perspective for human thought, a perspective which still retains its full attraction twenty-four centuries later. But how does rhythm enter here into consideration?

From his first intuition Heraclitus drew, so Nietzsche says, "two coherent negations." First, he rejected any ontological dualism, any meta-physical conception.

He denied the duality of two quite diverse worlds, into the assumption of which Anaximander had been pushed; he no longer distinguished a physical world from a metaphysical, a realm of definite qualities from a realm of indefinable indefiniteness [*apeiron*]. (*Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, § 5, trans. Maximilian A. Mügge)

At the very end of his intellectual life, Nietzsche underlined again the rejection by Heraclitus of any substantial background world and came back to this theme almost in the same terms.

"Reason" is the cause of our falsifying the evidence of the senses. In so far as the senses show us a state of Becoming, of transiency, and of change, they do not lie. But in declaring that Being was an empty illusion, Heraclitus will remain eternally right. The "apparent" world is the only world: the "true world" is no more than a false adjunct thereto. (*The Twilight of the Idols*, 1889, "Reason" in Philosophy, § 2, trans. Anthony M. Ludovici)

Because "he could not keep back any longer from a still greater audacity," Heraclitus—and this is the decisive point—joined this radical critique of the belief in a true, permanent and indestructible world existing beyond appearances with the claim of the "lawfulness" of the course of things—the same "lawfulness" he found, at the end of *The Birth of Tragedy*, compelling both Apollonian and Dionysian drives "to display their powers in a strictly mutual proportion, in accordance with the law of eternal justice." (§ 25, trans. Ian Johnston)

Now after this first step he could neither be kept back any longer from a still greater audacity of

denying: he denied “Being” altogether. For this one world which was left to him,—shielded all round by eternal, unwritten laws, flowing up and down in the brazen beat of rhythm, [*umschirmt von ewigen ungeschriebenen Gesetzen, auf- und niederfluthend im ehernen Schlage des Rhythmus*—shows nowhere persistence, indestructibility, a bulwark in the stream. (*Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, § 5, trans. Maximilian A. Mügge)

Thus, the rhythms of the world are these “eternal, unwritten laws” of the flow of things [*den ewigen ungeschriebenen Gesetzen*], these “lawful measures” of the Becoming [*die Gesetzmäßigkeiten*]. And these laws and measures entail periodic cycles of ebb and flow [*auf- und niederfluthend*] or eternal wave-surfing [*ewigen Wellenschläge und Rhythmus der Dinge [...] im ehernen Schlage des Rhythmus*].

Two different views, one Pre-Socratic another Platonic, appear to be here overlapping. The becoming seems simultaneously considered as a continuous and eternally running flow and as a repetition of accents, periodic return, cycle. Should we then conclude that Nietzsche unconsciously—and much against his will—projected a Platonic view on the Heraclitean philosophy? That, as many commentators argue, Nietzsche found in Heraclitus the first intuition of the Eternal Return? And that the latter should therefore be understood as mere repetition and return of the same?

The issue of rhythm, as we see it, involves the main principle on which Nietzsche will attempt to base his late philosophy and which is at the center of most debate about it. We will see below that his intensive philological work on ancient rhythm, developed in the very same years, already challenged this rather simplistic interpretation. But some clues may already be found in the philosophical fragments written during this early period.

Nietzsche clearly rejects the harnessing of Heraclitus by Hegel, and rather compares him with Schopenhauer whose definition of being as “becoming” or better yet, as “activity” he explicitly recalls.

[We] must however also proceed at once to the next Heraclitean consequence and say that the whole essence of actuality is in fact activity, and that for actuality there is no other kind of existence and reality, as Schopenhauer has likewise expounded (*The World As Will And Idea*, Vol. I., Bk. I, sec. 4): “Only as active does it fill space and time: [...] Cause and effect thus constitute the whole nature of matter; its true being is its action. The totality of everything material is therefore very appropriately called in German *Wirklichkeit* [actuality]—a word which is far more expressive than *Realität* [reality]. That upon which actuality acts is always matter; actuality’s whole ‘Being’ and essence therefore consist only in the orderly change, which *one* part of it causes in another, and is therefore wholly relative, according to a relation which is valid only within the boundary of actuality, as in the case of time and space.” (*Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, § 5, trans. Maximilian A. Mügge)

Then Nietzsche establishes a link with what he has exposed in *The Birth of Tragedy*. The eternal and rhythmically regulated becoming of the world is due to the interaction of opposing yet solidary

principles.

Heraclitus accomplished this through an observation of the proper course of all Becoming and Passing, which he conceived of under the form of polarity, as the divergence of a force into two qualitatively different, opposite actions, striving after reunion. A quality is set continually at variance with itself and separates itself into its opposites: these opposites continually strive again one towards another. (*Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, § 5, trans. Maximilian A. Mügge)

As at the end of *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche emphasized the indivisibility of Apollonian and Dionysian opposite principles, and their endless rolling together, he now stresses the interdependence, the continuous “struggle” and the alternate dominance of opposite “qualities” in Heraclitus’s view of the world.

The common people of course think to recognize something rigid, completed, consistent; but the fact of the matter is that at any instant, bright and dark, sour and sweet are side by side and attached to one another like two wrestlers of whom sometimes the one succeeds, sometimes the other. According to Heraclitus honey is at the same time sweet and bitter, and the world itself an amphora whose contents constantly need stirring up. Out of the war of the opposites all Becoming originates; the definite and to us seemingly persistent qualities express only the momentary predominance of the one fighter, but with that the war is not at an end; the wrestling continues to all eternity. Everything happens according to this struggle, and this very struggle manifests eternal justice. (*Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, § 5, trans. Maximilian A. Mügge)

Quite convincingly, Nietzsche relates this conception with the new political life in the Greek city states.

It is the idea of a contest, an idea held by individual Greeks and by their State, and translated out of the gymnasias and palæstra, out of the artistic agonistics, out of the struggle of the political parties, and of the towns into the most general principle, so that the machinery of the universe is regulated by it. (*Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, § 5, trans. Maximilian A. Mügge)

This first conclusion is quite consistent with the teaching of *The Birth of Tragedy* and we could stop here. The rhythm of Becoming seems simply to designate the constant alternation of forces or qualities.

Yet Nietzsche develops a second approach which sets the issue of rhythm in a quite different perspective. In Section 6, he puts into Heraclitus’s mouth a question about the ontological status of the plurality and unity.

“What are all those qualities according to their nature? Are they immortal gods? Are they

separate beings working for themselves from the beginning and without end?" (*Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, § 6, trans. Maximilian A. Mügge)

Should we indeed understand the Heraclitean postulate of the primacy of the multiple as a roundabout resubstantialization of the being, that is to say, as a new metaphysics which does not admit being one? Is the essence of the multiple reducible to a multiplicity of essences? And by the same token, is the view that has just been exposed in Section 5 sustainable?

"And if the world which we see knows only Becoming and Passing but no Permanence, should perhaps those qualities constitute a differently fashioned metaphysical world, true, not a world of unity as Anaximander sought behind the fluttering veil of plurality, but a world of eternal and essential pluralities?" (*Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, § 6, trans. Maximilian A. Mügge)

In other words, did Heraclitus—and Nietzsche himself in *The Birth of Tragedy*—not replace, without realizing it, one metaphysics by another, one crude dualism by a more refined one?

Is it possible that however violently he had denied such duality, Heraclitus has after all by a round-about way accidentally got into the dual cosmic order, an order with an Olympus of numerous immortal gods and demons,—viz., many realities,—and with a human world, which sees only the dust-cloud of the Olympic struggle and the flashing of divine spears,—i.e., only a Becoming? (*Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, § 6, trans. Maximilian A. Mügge)

Did Heraclitus—and so Nietzsche—not reduce, ultimately, the sense of Becoming, which they had just discovered, to the simple game of eternal realities and thus to a Becoming that itself would not become?

However should it not seem now as if the Becoming is only the looming-into-view of a struggle of eternal qualities? When we speak of the Becoming, should not the original cause of this be sought in the peculiar feebleness of human cognition—whereas in the nature of things there is perhaps no Becoming, but only a co-existing of many true increate indestructible realities? (*Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, § 6, trans. Maximilian A. Mügge)

By submitting Heraclitus's ontology to this regressive doubt, Nietzsche wants to uncover its deepest content—and deconstruct the remaining pieces of metaphysics ingrained in his own thought. In Heraclitus, he notes, the becoming does not involve essential realities, it is itself essentially becoming. This is the meaning of the metaphors of the game and the fire.

These are unHeraclitean loop-holes and labyrinths [*Dies sind unheraklitische Auswege und Irrpfade*]; he exclaims once again: "The 'One' is the 'Many'." The many perceptible qualities are

neither eternal entities, nor phantasmata of our senses (Anaxagoras conceives them later on as the former, Parmenides as the latter), they are neither rigid, sovereign “Being” nor fleeting Appearance hovering in human minds. The third possibility which alone was left to Heraclitus nobody will be able to divine with dialectic sagacity and as it were by calculation, for what he invented here is a rarity even in the realm of mystic incredibilities and unexpected cosmic metaphors.—The world is the *Game* of Zeus, or expressed more physically, the game of *fire* with itself, the “One” is only in this sense at the same time the “Many.”— (*Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, § 6, trans. Maximilian A. Mügge with my correction)

In Heraclitus, fire replaces water as essential element. But the choice of fire enables him to eliminate what remained substantial in Thales’s and Anaximander’s views. Fire is *the fluid par excellence*; indeed, it is much more fluid than water; it goes not only through “three chief aggregate stages as something Warm, Moist, and Firm” but it also passes “in innumerable metamorphoses along the path of Becoming.”

About this fire he now enunciates the same as Thales and Anaximander had enunciated about the water: that in innumerable metamorphoses it was passing along the path of Becoming, especially in the three chief aggregate stages as something Warm, Moist, and Firm. (*Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, § 6, trans. Maximilian A. Mügge)

In this second instance, the dualistic ontology exposed in *The Birth of Tragedy* and the simplistic conception of rhythm of Becoming related to it seem to be definitively superseded. The Heraclitean ontology appear to posit the existence of a entirely fluid being, which entails no periodic aspect, no beat, no alternation of two main principles. The Platonic view of the rhythm seems to give way to a more genuine Pre-Socratic one.

But this conclusion triggers again a series of questions: what becomes of the concept of rhythm if it only designates the continuous, fluid and unaccentuated process of Nature? Is the fluid rhythm of fire an appropriate replacement for the repetitive rhythm of waves and tides? After having fallen into a Parmenidean and Platonic trap, do we not indulge in its sheer inversion? Is Heraclitus’s philosophy only a specular image of Parmenides’s and Plato’s?

Some signs show that Nietzsche is still dissatisfied with the result of his reflection and feels the deconstruction process must be carried further. In the following section (§ 7), he asks: while affirming the plurality and the essential impermanence of the world, while affirming the primacy of the fire, did Heraclitus not still balked at the terrible consequences of this view and ultimately considered the becoming in an ethical perspective? Did the fire not hide a deeper moral value: *hybris*, that is crime and punishment (Nietzsche translates *Hybris* by *Frevel*, sacrilege or crime)? Is the principle that explains the universal dynamism not itself a hidden anthropomorphic principle?

One may indeed ask oneself for a minute whether perhaps Heraclitus has derived that return to plurality out of the *Hybris*. Let us just take this thought seriously: in its light the face of Heraclitus changes before our eyes, the proud gleam of his eyes dies out, a wrinkled expression of painful resignation, of impotence becomes distinct, it seems that we know why later antiquity

called him the “weeping philosopher.” Is not the whole world-process now an act of punishment of the Hybris? The plurality the result of a crime? The transformation of the pure into the impure, the consequence of injustice? Is not the guilt now shifted into the essence of the things and indeed, the world of Becoming and of individuals accordingly exonerated from guilt; yet at the same time are they not condemned for ever and ever to bear the consequences of guilt? (*Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, § 6, trans. Maximilian A. Mügge)

But this last doubt is immediately dispelled by Nietzsche. No, Heraclitus strayed neither into a metaphysics of essential principles, nor in a moral and anthropomorphic conception of the essence of Becoming. Although he used the term *Hybris*, he went all the way with the question of being as becoming and becoming as being.

That dangerous word, Hybris, is indeed the touchstone for every Heraclitean; here he may show whether he has understood or mistaken his master. Is there in this world: Guilt, injustice, contradiction, suffering? Yes, exclaims Heraclitus, but only for the limited human being, who sees divergently and not convergently, not for the intuitive god [*nicht für den intuitiven Gott*]; to him everything opposing converges into one harmony, invisible it is true to the common human eye, yet comprehensible to him who like Heraclitus resembles the contemplative god. (*Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, § 7, trans. Maximilian A. Mügge)

Heraclitus saw in the Becoming the affirmation of the pure amoral destructive and creative power of Nature that only the philosopher, who is “like the contemplative god,” the “child” or the “artist,” may understand without projecting on him imaginary substances or moral judgments.

Before his fiery eye no drop of injustice is left in the world poured out around him, and even that cardinal obstacle—how pure fire can take up its quarters in forms so impure—he masters by means of a sublime simile. A Becoming and Passing, a building and destroying, without any moral bias, in perpetual innocence is in this world only the play of the artist and of the child. And similarly, just as the child and the artist play, the eternally living fire plays, builds up and destroys, in innocence. (*Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, § 7, trans. Maximilian A. Mügge)

Specialists usually present this last claim as a regression towards a Romantic view giving to the “Artist,” considered as a “Genius,” an intuitive power that is lacking to plain philosophers and scientists, both enslaved by reason. And we must admit that Nietzsche occasionally resorts to that kind of outdated pompous imagery.

Heraclitus was proud; and if it comes to pride with a philosopher then it is a great pride. His work never refers him to a “public,” the applause of the masses and the hailing chorus of contemporaries. To wander lonely along his path belongs to the nature of the philosopher. His talents are the most rare, in a certain sense the most unnatural and at the same time exclusive and hostile even toward kindred talents. The wall of his self-sufficiency must be of diamond, if it is not to be demolished and broken, for everything is in motion against him. (*Philosophy in the*

But such a myth, typical of the 19th century, should not divert us from preserving what remains valid in Nietzsche's reflection. Whereas the rhythm of Becoming was presented first as an eternal "wave-surfing," an infinite repetition of "ebb and flow," then as an alternating dominance of opposing and solidary "qualities," then as an eternal "fire," essentially mobile, dynamic, fluid and devoid of any order, it appears now as a "children game" or a process of "artistic creation."

This game the *Æon* plays with himself. Transforming himself into water and earth, like a child he piles heaps of sand by the sea, piles up and demolishes; from time to time he recommences the game. A moment of satiety, then again desire seizes him, as desire compels the artist to create. Not wantonness, but the ever newly awakening impulse to play, calls into life other worlds. (*Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, § 7, trans. Maximilian A. Mügge)

This last move is decisive but it cannot be understood without having been through the *regressive dialectic* Nietzsche deployed in the preceding pages of the essay. To avoid any misunderstanding, I am not arguing that Nietzsche proposes a synthesis of the two positions he first examined—his brand of dialectic is for sure not Hegelian—but a third, different and more profound view, reached thanks to the deconstruction of his own previous positions (on this specificity of Nietzsche's dialectic see Granier, 1966, p. 43 sq.).

Similar to a children game, the Becoming deploys itself "in an innocent frame of mind"; i.e. it entails no finality, no teleology, no moral value. But this does not mean that it has no rule, no order. On the contrary, it develops according to inner laws resembling to those a playing child both gives to himself and follows when "[he] builds, connects, joins and forms lawfully and according to an innate sense of order."

The child throws away his toys; but soon he starts again in an innocent frame of mind. As soon however as the child builds, he connects, joins and forms lawfully and according to an innate sense of order. (*Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, § 7, trans. Maximilian A. Mügge)

However this first comparison is rather vague and presupposes, in the final analysis, a quite mysterious "innate sense of order." This is the reason why Nietzsche introduces a second one that specifies, as much as could be done, the notion of *changing order* or *ordered change* he sees as supporting the Becoming. Heraclitus's view can be best understood when compared with the crafting and functioning of a work of art.

Thus only is the world contemplated by the æsthetic man, who has learned from the artist and the genesis of the latter's work, how the struggle of plurality can yet bear within itself law and justice, how the artist stands contemplative above, and working within the work of art, how necessity and play, antagonism and harmony must pair themselves for the procreation of the work of art. (*Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, § 7, trans. Maximilian A. Mügge)

The basis and the outcome of this final analysis must be strongly emphasized. By arguing that “the struggle of plurality can yet bear within itself law and justice” and that “necessity and play, antagonism and harmony must pair themselves for the procreation of the work of art,” Nietzsche actually revives, apparently without knowing it, the theories of rhythm developed by the artists, poets, philosophers of the second half of the 18th century and that were forgotten for more than 70 years. He projects on a cosmic scale theoretical intuitions concerning art that we already encountered in Diderot and some German Romantics.

Diderot, as one remembers, proposed the concept of “hieroglyph” in order to emphasize that all the elements that contribute to the poetic effect and which appear successively in the spoken chain, are actually related to each other by interactions that constitute a single organized expressive unit. Some years later, Schlegel explained that poetry “determines its own chronology by subjecting its flow to a law that it gives to itself” and he presented it as a “game” with the language resulting in a complex organization. And Hölderlin understood poetic rhythm as both genetic matrix of representations and tense order resulting from dynamic aggregation of the latter (see above chap. 2).

When replaced in the wake of this poetic tradition, Nietzsche’s interpretation of the Heraclitean Becoming appears less commonly or more powerfully Romantic. Its similarity with the artistic activity has nothing to do with the alleged genial power of the *artist* and much with the fact 1. that the *works of art* can be produced anew at any time and anywhere and therefore without any repetition nor any progress, and 2. that, however, *processes of artistic production* always integrate “necessity and play, antagonism and harmony” and result in organized individuals. In other words, the Becoming can never be reduced neither to plain circles bringing everything back, nor linear progressive transformations, nor sheer chaos or fluidity, and must be understood as both following and producing infinite manners and kinds of order.

That which he beheld, *the doctrine of the Law in the Becoming, and of the Play in the Necessity*, must henceforth be beheld eternally; he has raised the curtain of this greatest stage-play. (*Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, § 8, trans. Maximilian A. Mügge)

This positive and quite elaborate conception of the Becoming explains why Nietzsche opposes Heraclitus both to his predecessors Thales and Anaximander and to his successors Parmenides (c. 520/515 – c. 460/455 BC) and Plato (428/427 – 448/447 BC). Although they recognized the importance of the Becoming, the former built up pictures of the relations between the one and the many that amounted to a mere juxtaposition of two separate worlds. But the latter were about to stiffen up for centuries the ontological and logical framework of philosophy and make the dualism absolute, although they wanted to overcome it, by the denial of the Becoming and the affirmation of the primacy of a Being true, immobile and permanent, knowable only by thought, and totally opposed to the plurality, movement and temporality, considered as mere illusions generated by the senses.

Now [Parmenides] dived into the cold bath of his awful abstractions. That which is true must exist in eternal presence, about it cannot be said “it was,” “it will be.” The “Existent” [*Das Seiende*] cannot have become; for out of what should it have become? Out of the “Non-Existent” [*Aus dem*

Nichtseienden]? But that does not exist and can produce nothing. Out of the “Existent” [*Aus dem Seienden*]? This would not produce anything but itself. The same applies to the Passing [*Vergehn*], it is just as impossible as the Becoming, as any change, any increase, any decrease. On the whole the proposition is valid: Everything about which it can be said: “it has been” or “it will be” does not exist; about the “Existent” [*vom Seienden*] however it can never be said “it does not exist.” The “Existent” [*Das Seiende*] is indivisible, for where is the second power, which should divide it? It is immovable, for whither should it move itself? It cannot be infinitely great nor infinitely small, for it is perfect and a perfectly given infinitude is a contradiction. Thus the “Existent” is suspended [*So schwebt es*], delimited, perfect, immovable, everywhere equally balanced and such equilibrium equally perfect at any point, like a globe, but not in a space, for otherwise this space would be a second “Existent” [*ein zweites Seiendes*]. But there cannot exist several “Existents” [*mehrere Seiende*], for in order to separate them, something would have to exist which was not existing [*seiend*], an assumption which neutralises itself. Thus there exists only the eternal Unity. (*Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, § 10, trans. Maximilian A. Mügge)

Parmenides introduced into Greek and subsequently into most of Western philosophy a fatal distrust towards the body and the senses, and turned away from the magnificent view of the Becoming and its rhythms, “the order in its ups and downs,” exposed by Heraclitus.

If now, however, Parmenides turned back his gaze to the world of Becoming, the existence of which he had formerly tried to understand by such ingenious conjectures, he was wroth at his eye seeing the Becoming at all, his ear hearing it. “Do not follow the dim-sighted eyes,” now his command runs, “not the resounding ear nor the tongue, but examine only by the power of the thought.” Therewith he accomplished the extremely important first critique of the apparatus of knowledge, although this critique was still inadequate and proved disastrous in its consequences. By tearing entirely asunder the senses and the ability to think in abstractions, *i.e.* reason, just as if they were two thoroughly separate capacities, he demolished the intellect itself, and incited people to that wholly erroneous separation of “mind” and “body” which, especially since Plato, lies like a curse on philosophy. All sense perceptions, Parmenides judges, cause only illusions and their chief illusion is their deluding us to believe that even the ‘Non-Existent’ exists, that even the Becoming has a “Being.” All that plurality, diversity and variety of the empirically known world, the change of its qualities, the order in its ups and downs [*die Ordnung in ihrem Auf und Nieder*], is thrown aside mercilessly as mere appearance and delusion; from there nothing is to be learnt, therefore all labour is wasted which one bestows upon this false, through-and-through futile world, the conception of which has been obtained by being hum-bugged by the senses. (*Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, § 10, trans. Maximilian A. Mügge)

Maybe for the first but certainly not the last time in Western History, the Becoming and its *rhuthmoi* were repelled by the Being and its degraded appearances. A metaphysical dualism replaced the first simultaneously scientific and poetic monism.

All his life, Nietzsche remained faithful to his initial commitment to the Heraclitean worldview and his rejection of Parmenidean primacy given to Being, radicalizing it to the point where he seemed to reject his first attempts at defining the being through the model of art.

The total character of the world, however, is in all eternity chaos—in the sense not of a lack of necessity but a lack of order, arrangement, form, beauty, wisdom, and whatever other names there are for our aesthetic anthropomorphism. (*The Gay Science*, § 109)

[Next chapter](#)