

# Chapter 1

## The Humanistic Tradition

### I. Birth of a Philologist

At the age of 12, in his first year as a student at the pre-eminent German boarding school, Schulpforte, Friedrich Nietzsche attempted his first original philological proof. He had read in Livy about the Roman patriot Gaius Mucius Scaevola, who had thrust his hand into a fire to demonstrate his contempt for pain, thereby intimidating an enemy of the Roman Republic. In order to prove that this might actually have happened, Nietzsche held a handful of burning matches under the palm of his outstretched hand until he had burned himself badly; only the intervention of a prefect saved him from doing himself an even greater injury.<sup>1</sup>

This was the remarkable act of a remarkable child. A school-mate recalled that "there was something extraordinary in his voice and tone, as there was in his choice of expressions, that made him quite different from other boys of the same age." One of Nietzsche's friends in primary school said that he "looked at you in a way that made the words stick in the back of your throat"; and another compared this future "antichrist" to the child Jesus, disputing with the elders in the temple. But although Nietzsche's actions were always, even in childhood, extraordinary and calculated to shock his bourgeois contemporaries, his daring defense of Livy was in many ways merely an example of the educational methods of Pforta taken to a pathological extreme.<sup>2</sup>

Nietzsche's interest in Livy was, in the narrow sense, "humanistic"—that is, he wanted to draw a moral lesson from a reading of classical literature, just as the humanists of the Renaissance had done. Perhaps he had developed this aspiration as a result of his early experiences at Pforta, for his humanist teachers assumed that literary classics epitomized universal values, and that the great works could serve as powerful sources of moral instruction for the young. At the same time, the moral lessons that the 12-year-old Nietzsche attempted to draw from Livy happened to conform to the militarist ethos of neighboring Prussia. Thus the education that Nietzsche received at Pforta could be characterized as humanism which had been deliberately placed at the service of pan-German nationalism. This kind of appropriation came naturally to Pforta's teachers, who believed that their own morals were epitomized throughout the canon of the classics of literature. They believed that both they and the ancient Romans belonged to a single world-culture to which the only alternative was barbarism. Finally, Nietzsche showed a precocious concern for finding out whether the story of Mucius Scaevola could actually be true; thus he showed an inclination, typical of German humanism in the nineteenth century, toward a positivist reading of the classical past. In 1824, Leopold von Ranke had formulated the slogan of historical positivism with his claim that historians could discover "what actually happened." But he did so, characteristically, in the hope that objective history would help to justify a specific modern political ethos and the aspirations of the incipient German state. Thus positivism furnished the *method* of much nineteenth-century humanism, and nationalism frequently provided its motivation.<sup>3</sup>

Nietzsche was to renounce the militarist, positivist, and (above all) the humanist presuppositions that underlay the curriculum at Pforta. At the beginning of this book, I defined "humanism" as the project of teaching virtue using a canon of exemplary literary and historical texts. This was a project that Nietzsche associated with a whole tradition of Western thought, beginning with Socrates, Euripides, and the Sophists, passing through the humanists of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, and continuing in his own day in the educational system that prepared him to be a classicist. Nietzsche believed that humanism was essentially associated with several other tendencies in Western thought, so that the word could be used almost interchangeably with a whole set of abstract terms. First of all, humanists chose their exemplary texts and discussed them using critical, rational means. By "rational," I do not mean a commitment to any particular mode of reasoning, nor a belief in any specific truths. I just mean that people who are rational attempt to

convince others of their views by offering *reasons* for them; and if other people do not accept their methods of reasoning, then they try to offer reasons for their methods. These are practices that Nietzsche associated with Socrates, who refused to take traditional values on faith but demanded that they be justified. Thus, for Nietzsche, humanism was a species of Socratic rationalism.

Secondly, humanism implied that virtue and wisdom were teachable; good character was not, therefore, a matter of birth, but belonged to anyone who had the opportunity and intellect to receive a humanistic education. Thus humanism was at least in theory a democratic project. Furthermore, humanism was in principle cosmopolitan; if the criteria of excellence were universal, then each work had to be assessed on its merits without regard to its national or ethnic origins. And finally, humanism seemed to Nietzsche to require a specific set of ethical values. For example, in order to live up to the ideals of humanism, scholars had to treat both the texts they read and the students they instructed with tolerance, empathy, candor, reasonableness, and (where appropriate) respect. Anything else would have interfered with the process of rational inquiry and thus betrayed the project of humanism.

Thus, in Nietzsche's thought, "humanism" became a far richer concept than the one with which I began this book. In the following pages, I will offer an account of humanism as I think Nietzsche understood it. Nietzsche's understanding of humanism has been shared by many other thinkers, both humanists and anti-humanists. Moreover, his account of the connections linking humanism, democracy, cosmopolitanism, rationality and empathy seems reasonable. In order to illustrate the presuppositions and consequences of humanism as Nietzsche understood it, I will offer a brief account of both the specific educational practices that were employed at Pforta, and the tradition of humanistic thought that lay behind these practices. Nietzsche never defined "humanism" explicitly, and he used it less frequently than some related concepts, particularly rationalism and democracy. But something like the following was, I think, what he meant by the term.

## II. The Humanistic Tradition

Schulpforte was an ancient and highly respected school for boys, situated four miles from Nietzsche's home at Naumburg, within the high walls of a twelfth-century Cistercian abbey. As an educational community—in the words of the Rector, "a whole school-state"—it conformed to Voltaire's description of the court of Frederick the Great: "Sparta in the morning and Athens in the

afternoon.”<sup>4</sup> But, despite the apparent schizophrenia in Prussian mores that Voltaire had satirized so perceptively, the militarist and intellectual sides of German culture did not come together entirely accidentally. On the contrary, at Pforta, the search for knowledge about the past was conducted with discipline and self-sacrifice worthy of the battlefield, while the nationalist, militarist ideology of the period was bolstered with lessons taken from classical texts.<sup>5</sup>

The “Athenian” side of Pforta’s educational atmosphere was a direct legacy of the humanistic project of the Italian Renaissance. The term “humanist” had originated as a fifteenth-century Italian slang-word meaning a professor of the *studia humanitatis*, i.e., grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, and moral philosophy, all taught using Greek and Latin classics. Renaissance humanists believed that all classical authors had addressed the same moral issues from essentially the same perspective, and had drawn similar moral conclusions, which, they thought, had the virtue of being correct for all time. Their belief in an eternally constant “human nature” led them to mine history for examples of wise and virtuous action from the past, which they considered directly applicable to the present. John Dryden eloquently restated a humanist commonplace when he wrote of history that:

It informs the understanding by the memory: It helps us to judge of what will happen, by shewing us the like revolutions of former times. For Mankind being the same in all ages, agitated by the same passions, and mov’d to action by the same interests, nothing can come to pass, but some President of the like nature has already been produc’d, so that having the causes before our eyes, we cannot easily be deceiv’d in the effects, if we have Judgment enough but to draw the parallel. ... All History is only the precepts of Moral Philosophy reduc’d into Examples. ...<sup>6</sup>

The genealogy of this idea can easily be traced from the age of Renaissance humanism down to the mid-nineteenth century, when a highly rigorous, historically based education in ancient literature became an almost universal ideal for the European ruling classes. It may seem strange to us today that the sons of Prussian Junkers should have been forced to study Greek for six hours each week throughout their secondary education, and Latin for ten or 11 hours, and that the classical languages should have been the major intellectual accomplishment that they were expected to acquire. The responsibility for this lies with the leading figures of

the German Enlightenment, who, like their counterparts throughout Europe, had successfully reinforced and reinvigorated the humanists' commitment to teaching virtue by exposure to classical texts.<sup>7</sup> Leibniz, for example, had written that the goal of history, like that of poetry, is "to teach wisdom and virtue by example." For him, even the moral truths of revealed religion were historical facts (since they came to us in texts from antiquity); and only history could demonstrate the coincidence of reason and faith that was so central to his thought.<sup>8</sup> At Pforta in the 1860s, a tradition of fundamentalist Lutheranism still remained alive, if only in the person of the chaplain; but there was also a Leibnizian effort under way to teach the Hebrew and Greek Bibles as historical texts just like all the rest.<sup>9</sup> And along with this new willingness to subject the Bible to positivist criticism, biblical scholars still hoped, with humanist optimism, to draw moral lessons from Scripture, as they had from the other privileged texts of antiquity. "Moderns" like Leibniz had long argued for the expansion of the humanist canon to include non-classical texts, from the Bible to Machiavelli and Bacon. So, although Pforta remained for the most part a "Latin school" in which even Greek was treated as a somewhat exotic subject, both Nietzsche and Wilamowitz quickly learned (as Leibniz had) that humanist methods could be applied to a wide range of texts, many of them lying far outside the classical canon. They also learned the practical value of these methods; when Nietzsche's friend Paul Deussen was disappointed in love, Nietzsche tried to console him "with examples from history and literature."<sup>10</sup>

Above all, Pforta students were expected to develop a literary style by imitating those canonical authors whom the curriculum presented. At the age of 14, Nietzsche criticized the writing he had done before coming to Pforta, none of which "contains even a spark of poetry." Nietzsche recalled that in these first, failed efforts, "I had no models. I could hardly imagine how anyone could imitate a poet, and I molded [my poems] as my soul suggested them."<sup>11</sup> This was to change once Nietzsche began to study the classics seriously at school. In 1888, Nietzsche was still grateful for what he had learned about style at Pforta. In a section of *Twilight of the Idols* entitled "What I Owe to the Ancients," he recalled:

My sense of style, of the epigram as style, was awakened almost immediately when I encountered Sallust. I have never forgotten the astonishment of my honored teacher Corrsen when he had to give the highest grade to his worst

Latin scholar.... One will recognize in all my writings, even in my *Zarathustra*, a very serious ambition for *Roman style*, for the '*aere perennius*' in style.—It was no different when I first met Horace.<sup>12</sup>

In some respects, then, Nietzsche remained permanently devoted to the core principles of humanism as they had been articulated during the Italian Renaissance. Above all, he retained a typically humanist belief in the value of learning style through the imitation of the classics.

### III. The Origins of Humanism

I hope to have shown that humanistic education meant something quite similar in Renaissance Florence and nineteenth-century Pforta. The precise values that humanists tried to impart through the study of classical texts might have changed between the fifteenth and the nineteenth centuries, but Pforta's humanists continued to believe that the classics epitomized universal values, both moral and aesthetic. They even used many of the same authors (mostly Latin orators and poets) who had already been treated as canonical during the Renaissance.

The history of humanism can also be traced back into antiquity, to its roots in the Sophist school, which, as Nietzsche saw, anticipated most of the important characteristics of Renaissance humanism. The Sophists had taught virtue and eloquence to the young by exposing them to a canon of classical literary models, but they had treated these models critically, valuing reason (*gnomē*) over myth, emotion, or mere chance.<sup>13</sup> Nietzsche associated these values not only with the Sophists, but especially with Socrates, whom he considered the founder of science and reason. In fact, Nietzsche considered Socrates to have been "the first and supreme *Sophist*, the mirror and epitome of all sophistical tendencies."<sup>14</sup> Socrates and the Sophists had taught people to assess customs and myths by applying rational criteria to them: i.e., by asking *why* any particular myth should guide people. More specifically, Socrates' method was "rational" in that he proposed and defended specific methods and rules of reasoning, which were supposed to be universally valid and which could be used to evaluate myths, customs and received norms. Thus "Even the most sublime ethical deeds, the stirrings of pity, self-sacrifice, heroism and ... *sophrosune*, were derived from the dialectic of knowledge by Socrates and his like-minded successors, down to the present, and

accordingly designated as teachable."<sup>15</sup> This, in a nutshell, was the educational philosophy that modern humanists such as Leibniz had propounded. They taught wisdom and virtue from historical and literary texts, but they chose their examples using the light of critical reason (although they differed in their precise definitions of rationality).<sup>16</sup>

In the tradition-bound culture of Greece before Socrates (Nietzsche thought), the received values had been left unquestioned and it had been bad taste—at best—to seek reasons for them:

With Socrates Greek taste turns in favor of dialectics: what really happened there? Above all an *aristocratic* taste was thereby conquered; with dialectics the rabble rises to the top. Before Socrates, one declined dialectics in good company: it was considered bad manners, it laid things bare. One warned the young to stay away from it.<sup>17</sup>

By testing the received values of Athenian society against rational criteria, Socrates implicitly adopted a vantage point *beyond* his culture. From there, he could see “behind the aristocrats of Athens,” recognizing the groundlessness of their beliefs.<sup>18</sup> He began to pick and choose his values from a variety of cultures, using reason as his guide. Thus, with the arrival of Socrates and the Sophists:

The *polis* loses its faith in the uniqueness of its culture, in its right to rule over every other *polis*—One exchanges cultures, i.e., “the gods”—one thereby loses faith in the sole prerogative of the *deus autochthonous* [the indigenous god]. Good and evil of differing origin are mingled: the boundary between good and evil is blurred....<sup>19</sup>

In Nietzsche’s view, such a process must ultimately end in nihilism. Despite what Socrates might have thought, there were no universally valid or compelling grounds on which to choose one ethical view over another; such choices were always culturally contingent. So, by allowing the claims of reason to trump the “*deus autochthonous*,” Socrates was leading the way to moral nihilism. Besides, Socrates’ quest for foundations and reasons would ultimately have to be applied to his own method; people would ask whether rationality had grounds—in other words, whether there was any reason to choose reason.<sup>20</sup> No such ultimate foundation was available,

except via God; and God was dead, killed when Socratic rationalists discovered a plurality of religious beliefs and realized that all gods must be the mere products of local values and preferences.<sup>21</sup> Robbed of its (ultimately religious) foundations, Socratic rationalism appeared to be nothing but a compound of arbitrary values—a culture—and no more secure than any other. Anyone who looked “*behind* Socrates” would see that the Socratic way of life depended upon “divine naïveté and sureness”—in other words, on a complete lack of doubt regarding its own core principles.<sup>22</sup> Any culture, even the rational, objective culture of humanism, could preserve its values only by failing to view them rationally and objectively; that is why one had to warn the young to shun Socrates. Nietzsche believed that Socrates had, in the end, recognized the nihilistic consequences of his own method and had therefore committed suicide.<sup>23</sup> Thus, in his diagnosis of Socrates—as elsewhere—Nietzsche collapsed humanism, Sophism, and rationalism (not to mention democracy and enlightenment) into a single category and viewed them as part of a single project, the effort to view tradition in a critical light. But he called the value of this project into question, suggesting that it contained the seeds of nihilism.<sup>24</sup>

#### IV. Humanism and Philosophy

Nietzsche was being contentious or even paradoxical when he claimed that Socrates was a Sophist, for the Socrates who appears in Plato’s works was a great *enemy* of the Sophists.<sup>25</sup> Socrates and most of his Sophistic contemporaries probably had at least one thing in common: their commitment to rationality over myth. Thus Protagoras and several other Sophists were convicted, like Socrates, on charges of impiety and corrupting the young, because they had openly criticized Athenian myths and traditional laws on rational grounds.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, the Sophists’ critical methods differed from those of Socrates, resulting in a controversy that was depicted in detail (but not necessarily fairly) by Plato. In my view, such Sophists as Protagoras and Gorgias were more like the humanists of the Renaissance and Nietzsche’s Pforta than was Socrates. What distinguished them from Socrates was their attitude toward metaphysics: Socrates argued that values had to be grounded in general, abstract, *a priori* truths about the cosmos, whereas the Sophists believed that morality could be derived directly from the concrete particulars of history and literature.

For example, Protagoras refused to concede the relevance of



metaphysics to his educational methods. In Plato's *Protagoras*, Socrates repeatedly seeks to engage Protagoras in metaphysical discourse (wanting to discuss, for example, the abstract nature of virtue), but Protagoras keeps trying to change the subject to literary criticism. Protagoras' book entitled the *Antilogiae* apparently contained pragmatic attacks on speculative religion, and on many other *a priori* disciplines.<sup>27</sup> Instead of deriving moral truth from dialectic, he promised, like Leibniz, to "teach wisdom and virtue by example."<sup>28</sup> In the dialogue that bears his name, Protagoras describes his pedagogy as follows:

the works of the best poets are set before [children] to read on the classroom benches, and the children are compelled to learn these works thoroughly; and in them are displayed many warnings, many detailed narratives and praises and eulogies of good men of ancient times, so that the boy may desire to imitate them competitively and may stretch himself to become like them.<sup>29</sup>

As I have suggested, Protagoras' educational methods were still very much alive at Pforta in the nineteenth century. Even the list of "good poets" remained remarkably constant, at least from the Roman period on.<sup>30</sup> It was because of the Renaissance humanists' opposition to metaphysics that they had replaced the scholastic curriculum of the middle ages with one based upon history and literature, i.e., concrete particulars; and this remained the dominant educational philosophy at Pforta in Nietzsche's time: philosophy was not taught there at all, and even religion was given a historical grounding.

However, Socrates (as depicted by Plato) raised the following objection to this form of pedagogy: Sophists, he argued, possessed no independent means to decide which actions were virtuous and which immoral. Evil men had frequently chosen to imitate liars and scoundrels whom they found described in poetry and history; therefore, Socrates thought it prudent to expel the poets from the Republic altogether. If any stories were to be told to the young, they would have to be tales fashioned by philosophers, who always kept one eye on The Good.<sup>31</sup> A similar objection to the humanist method was made 2,000 years later by followers of René Descartes, who believed that "clear and distinct" moral ideas were not obtainable in literature and history, but only by means of rational introspection or divine revelation. And Kant wrote:

One cannot damage morality more than by seeking to borrow it from examples. For each example that is set before me must itself be judged first by principles of morality, whether it is worthy to be a primary example, *i.e.*, to serve as a model, but it no way can it dependably provide the conception of morality.<sup>32</sup>

Similarly, Nietzsche believed that it was impossible to make discriminations between good and evil—such as those which the Sophists and humanists made—without having at least a covert commitment to an absolute standard of the True and Good. Descartes, Kant, and probably Plato thought that such a standard was available by way of philosophy or religion; Nietzsche thought that no such standard existed, and therefore he abandoned both humanism and philosophy. Thus Nietzsche called Socrates a Sophist because he believed that the Sophists (and their humanist descendants) ultimately relied upon abstract standards of truth and value like the ones that Socrates had sought. They were just philosophers in disguise.

Some scholars believe that the Sophists tried to avoid establishing an *a priori* grounding for morals by finding morality inherent “in the objective historical structure of [their] nation’s spiritual life.”<sup>33</sup> In other words, instead of asking abstract questions about ethics, they advocated imitating the virtuous acts that were depicted in their culture’s literary heritage. However, as Nietzsche knew well, this approach would run into profound difficulties as soon as people realized that the world contained *numerous* cultures with conflicting notions of virtue; then, lacking an absolute and nonempirical standard of morality, every thoughtful person would have to become a relativist. The Sophists of antiquity were almost certainly not cultural relativists (although they have been consistently caricatured as such): they probably believed that the myths and historical narratives of Greece were superior to all others.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, critics of Sophism and humanism worried from the beginning that these schools (since they failed to articulate abstract, universal truths) offered no firm bulwark against relativism; and this fear only grew worse in the modern period, when Europeans began to practice comparative studies of diverse cultures and discovered what Jürgen Habermas calls “a rationally irresolvable pluralism of competing value systems and beliefs.”<sup>35</sup> This discovery was to lie at the heart of Nietzsche’s questioning of traditional values:

Just because our moral philosophers knew the facts of morality only very approximately in arbitrary extracts or in accidental epitomes—for example, as the morality of their environment, their class, their church, the spirit of their time, their climate and part of the world—just because they were poorly informed and not even very curious about different peoples, times, and past ages—they never laid eyes on the real problems of morality; for these emerge only when we compare *many* moralities.<sup>36</sup>

According to Nietzsche, humanists (like philosophers) rely on “accidental epitomes” to tell them the “facts of morality”; but they take these arbitrary collections of custom and art to be universal. For Nietzsche, any preference for one moral example over another (unless it is the preference of an Overman) must result from an underlying *Weltanschauung*; and these are plural and contingent. Nietzsche consistently asserts that we must either accept the implicit metaphysical preconceptions of our culture, or else, like Socrates, we can attempt to derive absolutely valid metaphysical doctrines to guide us. The first option is closed-minded and naive; the second is futile. However, contrary to Nietzsche, I think that there is another alternative: we can develop ethical standards through a universal discussion that is aimed at consensus.

This, I believe, was the humanists’ approach. For example, Isocrates argued that truth could emerge from a collective, rational discussion of law and literature, provided that all free men could participate and that the participants were trained in the critical, rational methods of the Sophists. And Protagoras believed that all men possessed a sense of justice and reverence that enabled them to arrive at moral truth through discussion.<sup>37</sup> In a daylong argument with Pericles, Protagoras apparently claimed that what is right *just is* what is universally believed by human beings.<sup>38</sup> These were central tenets of humanism. But Nietzsche thought that humanists had failed to recognize the existence of fundamental differences in perspective that would make communication—let alone consensus—impossible. Literature could not successfully instruct the young in ethics, because the standards that it contained would vary from culture to culture, and none could ever be universally valid.

## V. Humanism and Liberalism

In later chapters, I will argue that Nietzsche was wrong in his mature critique of humanism. But for now it will be useful to examine a little more closely the consequences of traditional humanism, in order to see what was at stake in Nietzsche's critique. In Nietzsche's view, the Sophists founded humanism by trying to turn the body of Greek literature, history and law into an objective entity to be studied and, if necessary, criticized. In the process, they contributed greatly to Greek notions of individuality, personal responsibility, and progress. To borrow categories invented by Karl Popper (which are, however, already implicit in Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations*), the Sophists participated in the move from a Closed Society to an Open Society that occurred in Greece during the classical period.<sup>39</sup> Closed Societies, in Popper's view, are marked by a "magical or irrational attitude towards the customs of social life, and [a] corresponding rigidity of these customs." Members of a Closed Society are unable to differentiate "between the customary or conventional regularities of social life and the regularities found in 'nature'...."<sup>40</sup> It would be a mistake to treat Popper's dichotomy of wholly open and wholly closed societies as anything more than a pair of ideal types. I will say more about this in Chapter IX, when I re-examine the closed/open distinction in the light of a paradigm that makes the very notion of a totally Closed Society appear implausible. But it does seem clear that societies become *relatively* more or less open in different periods, and that humanism plays a generally rationalizing and liberating role in any culture where it is allowed to operate. The enemies of humanism are the first to admit as much; for example, Heidegger's *Letter on Humanism* of 1947 is a sustained critique of the critical interpretive methods that the Sophists began, which, he says, imply a definition of humans as essentially rational. But such a definition, in Heidegger's view, alienates us from authentic "Being," and overvalues progress, ethics, and science.<sup>41</sup> Along similar lines, Nietzsche praised the pre-Socratics for having avoided the disease of objectivity that bedevils any society in which humanism is dominant.<sup>42</sup> He argued that Euripides, that alleged mouthpiece for Sophism and Socratic rationalism, had taught the Greeks for the first time to treat their myths objectively and critically:

Euripides brought the spectator onto the stage in order to make him truly competent to pass judgment.... [F]rom him the people learned how to observe, debate, and draw conclusions

according to the rules of art and with the cleverest sophistries.... If the entire populace now philosophized, managed land and goods, and conducted lawsuits with unheard-of circumspection, he deserved the credit, for this was the result of the wisdom he had inculcated in the people.<sup>43</sup>

But Nietzsche also found much to criticize in this new democratic spirit. His attitude towards the Closed Societies of the ancient world was not the pure nostalgia that many of his Romantic contemporaries felt, for he did not believe in the "indigenous gods" that had given these societies their coherence and direction. But Nietzsche also had serious reservations about modern, "open," democratic societies, which, he thought, teetered on the edge of nihilism. In 1860, his future colleague and friend at Basel, Jacob Burckhardt, described the humanistic culture of the Italian Renaissance as an Open Society, in contrast to the Closed Society that had preceded it:

In the Middle Ages both sides of human consciousness—that which was turned within as that which was turned without—lay dreaming or half awake beneath a common veil.... Man was conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family, or corporation—only through some general category. In Italy this veil first melted into air; an objective treatment and consideration of the State and of all the things of this world became possible. The subjective side at the same time asserted itself with corresponding emphasis; man became a spiritual individual, and recognized himself as such.<sup>44</sup>

Burckhardt described the Greeks in much the same way as he had described the Renaissance humanists: "The Greeks had a panoramic eye and an objective mind, and accordingly wrote the history of their own people and of other peoples as well. They were the first to observe something with detachment...."<sup>45</sup> Thus Burckhardt traced a tradition of enlightenment, beginning with the Greeks, passing through the Renaissance, and moving on into modernity. This tradition, for Burckhardt, was identical with the phenomenon of humanism. But Burckhardt spoke for many Germans of the mid-nineteenth century when he described the critical attitude of humanism in largely negative terms. For Burckhardt, as for the adult Nietzsche, the alienation of objective

and subjective worlds—in Max Weber's phrase "the specific and peculiar rationalism of Western culture"—had split the authentic Greek person in two, and had led to the disintegration of the holistic, all-encompassing community of the preclassical polis.<sup>46</sup> Thus, when Nietzsche worked out his early criticism of humanism in *The Birth of Tragedy*, he naturally turned to Greece before the Sophists as an example of a time when there had been no division of subjectivity and objectivity, in part because there had (allegedly) been no human subjects in the modern sense. But Nietzsche began to feel more and more strongly that the naive age of archaic Greece had become utterly unrecoverable, given the power and ubiquity of Socratic rationalism; and that nostalgia was an impediment to cultural rejuvenation.<sup>47</sup>

Thus Nietzsche certainly went far beyond a mere nostalgia for pre-Socratic, pre-rational culture—after all, he was a confirmed anti-Romantic. But there was one defining characteristic of pre-Socratic culture that Nietzsche found attractive throughout his life, and that he attempted to revive in his mature philosophy. This was the pre-Socratics' absolute antipathy to everything historical, to any sense that things could change fundamentally or that profane events could matter. Without a belief in the possibility of change, an Open Society is impossible. But, as Mircea Eliade has written in his *Myth of the Eternal Return* (the title is deliberately Nietzschean): "interest in the 'irreversible' and the 'new' in history is a recent discovery in the life of humanity." In pre-Socratic times, one "tolerates 'history' with difficulty and attempts periodically to abolish it."<sup>48</sup> Thus all the events which do occur in pre-Socratic culture are taken to be either repetitions of timeless archetypes, or else punishable infractions of the law. Individual decisions and opinions are of little importance. Nietzsche described Greek tragedy before Euripides as a ritual act in which the gods were actually present and archetypal myths repeated themselves on stage with the participation of a univocal audience. Until the "demise of tragedy," Nietzsche writes,

the Greeks had felt involuntarily impelled to relate all their experiences immediately to their myths, indeed to understand them only in this relation. Thus even the immediate present had to appear to them right away *sub species aeterni* and in a certain sense as timeless.<sup>49</sup>

Euripides' "sin" was to treat the same myths as quasi-historical events, whose meaning was open to interpretation by a critical

audience, responsible for its own role in making history. Thus Euripides, as a father of humanism and the Open Society, helped to introduce the Greeks to history—but Nietzsche considered this a mixed blessing. Along similar lines, Nietzsche expressed a lifelong interest in the ancient myth of the Eternal Return of the Same, which (writes Eliade), “as interpreted by Greek speculation, has the meaning of a supreme attempt towards the ‘staticization’ of becoming, toward annulling the irreversibility of time.”<sup>50</sup> One fundamental aspect of Nietzsche’s philosophy was his revival of this myth. Finally, he often expressed his admiration for those philosophers who seemed to stand aloof from time and history, showing contempt for historical events and disdain for the collective labors of scholarship that humanists advocated. Thus, for example, in his book on *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, Nietzsche described the opposite of “a republic of scholars,” namely, “the republic of geniuses: each giant calls to his brother across the desolate intervals of the ages, and, undisturbed by the wanton noises of the dwarfs who carry on beneath them, they continue their high spirit-talk.”<sup>51</sup>

As Nietzsche would be eager to admit, this “republic” of geniuses differs in some basic ways from an open society. For example, Popper argues that, insofar as a society is open, social change is possible and “we recognize rational personal responsibility.”<sup>52</sup> And Habermas concludes that in a society where particular norms are criticizable, the corresponding values must arise, not out of “an interpreted lifeworld immune from critique,” but out of “the interpretive accomplishments of the participants themselves, that is, by means of risky (because rationally motivated) agreement....”<sup>53</sup> Since the ability to participate in the formation of a rationally motivated agreement belongs, according to humanists, to all rational creatures, the move to an Open Society has strong egalitarian consequences. Sincere humanists, like Isocrates, abandon notions of racial or class superiority, and argue that all people can and should participate in the Open Society.<sup>54</sup> The Sophists were widely censured for charging money to teach rhetoric. But G. B. Kerferd argues that this disapproval cannot have resulted from the mere fact that they treated ideas and books as commodities, for poets and physicians who sold their products faced no similar condemnation. Rather, the Sophists attracted criticism for selling their ideas and skills to *anyone* who could pay for them; thus they made a potent kind of political expertise—rhetoric—available to a wide array of people without regard for hereditary status or nationality. In fact, some Sophists may not have been quite as egalitarian as their collective reputation suggested; but their elitist critics were

well aware that the skills they taught were potentially subversive and democratic.<sup>55</sup> As Bernard Knox writes in a discussion of the Sophists:

that group of studies we call the humanities came into being as an education for democracy, a training in free citizenship; all through its long history it has been the advocate of free thought and speech; it has flourished most brilliantly wherever those freedoms were respected and faced repression and banishment wherever they were not. And this is the strongest argument for the humanities today.<sup>56</sup>

The individualism, liberalism, egalitarianism and cosmopolitanism that are often associated with humanism stem not so much from the specific moral lessons that humanists draw from literary texts (for these lessons differ greatly), as from the methods that they use. Nietzsche recognized this; describing the Sophists, he wrote that theirs was an

essentially *republican* art: one must be accustomed to tolerating the most unusual opinions and points of view and even taking a certain pleasure in their counterplay; one must be just as willing to listen as to speak; and as a listener one must be able more or less to appreciate the art being applied.<sup>57</sup>

Humanists, as Nietzsche saw, generally believe that truth will emerge from a rational discussion which allows all participants to express themselves freely. For this reason, they often resist tyranny and censorship as irrational, and they are frequently democrats. According to Nietzsche, any form of objectivity and rationality has democratic implications: "*la science* belongs to democracy, that is clear as day."<sup>58</sup>

Needless to say, most humanists from the past seem to us to be seriously lacking in respect for the rights of large groups of human beings. Thus, for example, Seneca and Jefferson, both humanists par excellence, also owned large numbers of slaves; and few humanists before the modern age was willing to include women among those considered worthy of being educated. Nevertheless, it can be argued that humanism tends to undermine and oppose any effort to exclude rational human beings from education and public discourse. Humanists who do exclude groups of people from their definition of rational beings do so because of received



opinions about the alleged inferiority of these groups—opinions that they have as yet failed to test by rational means. When they do attempt in good faith to provide educational and political opportunities to such once-excluded groups, they invariably discover that members of these groups are competent to participate politically and socially as equals.<sup>59</sup> Thus, while humanism has by no means prevented the evils of racism, sexism, and class prejudice, it has tended, throughout history, to serve progressive, egalitarian, and increasingly inclusive political causes. Or, to describe the same phenomenon in Nietzsche's terms, humanism has been an anti-aristocratic, leveling force—an instrument “of the *ressentiment* of the rabble”—which has served the interests of “shopkeepers, Christians, cows, women, Englishmen, and other democrats.”<sup>60</sup>

## VI. The Ethics of Humanism

In addition to its democratic, rationalistic, and cosmopolitan implications, humanism seemed from the beginning to engender some specific modes of personal behavior. Thus by the late-Roman period, the two meanings of “humane”—on the one hand, learned; on the other, philanthropic—had already become confused, so that, according to Aulus Gellius, “humanism” had come to mean, in common language, “*philanthropia*,’ signifying a kind of friendly spirit and good feeling towards all men without distinction....” Gellius therefore found it necessary to remind his readers that “humanism” really meant only “education and training in the liberal arts.” Men who were *maxime humanissimi* would, for example, be acquainted with the works of Praxiteles from the books they had read. Gellius adds that the word “humane” does not mean, as “the common people” think, “good natured, amiable, and kindly, although without knowledge of letters, [but it means] a man of ‘some cultivation and education’....”<sup>61</sup> In a similar way, the humanists of the Renaissance were often described in ethical terms—as revealing an “emphasis on man and his dignity”—when all they essentially shared was a common educational method.<sup>62</sup>

Gellius implies that *any* connection between the word “humane,” as it is commonly used, and the technical term “humanities,” is merely coincidental. But scholarly methods have strongly ethical consequences, and this perhaps accounts for the perennial confusion of “humanists” with “humane” people. The humanizing effect of the humanities was already a cliché when Ovid wrote, “to study the liberal arts faithfully makes behavior (*mores*) gentle and permits people not to act savagely.”<sup>63</sup> But the fact that this sentiment is

ancient and a mainstay of platitudinous commencement addresses does not make the essential insight any less valid; the humanities really do engender or require certain standards of ethical behavior. For example, because humanists' goal is to interpret texts and ideas created by other people, they must show both empathy and detachment in their work. Without some degree of empathy, interpreters are likely to miss the full meaning and value of texts from alien periods; but without detachment, they can lose their ability to criticize these texts. Similarly, humanists frequently find that to hold opinions dogmatically would clash with their generally critical attitude towards authority, textual or otherwise; they are therefore forced to adopt a relatively modest and cooperative attitude. Even the technical apparatus of humanist scholarship—footnotes, bibliographies, and the like—signifies that humanists place themselves within a tradition and a community, that they attempt to justify their conclusions rationally, and that they expect their work to be criticized by scholars of the future.

Moreover, the success of their whole enterprise depends upon a certain amount of candor; for unless scholars make their sources and methods clear, others cannot readily build upon their work. Although scholars in the humanities, like any large group of people, are susceptible to snobbery, pedantry, deceit, and narrow-mindedness, their goals cannot be achieved unless they are open-minded, empathetic, candid and cooperative. The fact that scholars frequently fail to live up to these ethical standards means that the progress of humanistic disciplines is constantly being retarded. However, humanism at least depends upon ethical conduct for its very success, which distinguishes it from war, business, and even the fine arts. Moreover, the specific interpretive skills that humanists use are particularly important in a democratic society, where reaching consensus depends upon mutual understanding; and this, in turn, requires such "humane" values as openness, candor, empathy and detachment.<sup>64</sup>

For these reasons, it often proves difficult for true humanists to justify excluding any individual or group from the process of collective discussion and cultural interpretation, because to do so might interfere with the search for truth. In this regard, Wilamowitz provides an interesting case study. Despite his rabid anti-Semitism, for many years he readily acknowledged the contributions of Jewish scholars and even worked with them collaboratively.<sup>65</sup> For, as Nietzsche remarked, "nothing is more democratic than logic; it is no respecter of persons and makes no distinction between crooked and straight noses."<sup>66</sup> However, during the Weimar period, Wilamowitz became an activist for the right-wing

Fatherland Party, which had a proto-fascist program and advocated dictatorship.<sup>67</sup> But at the same time, Wilamowitz renounced his lifelong commitment to scholarly values, writing a "biography" of Plato that has been called a "historical novel" and a "cryptoautobiography, Wilamowitz' *Zarathustra*."<sup>68</sup> All his life, Wilamowitz had seen Nietzsche and Nietzscheans (notably the circle of the poet Stefan George) as the enemies of dispassionate scholarship who used the past to promote their own philosophical and political views.<sup>69</sup> In his last years, having lost his son in the First World War, having seen Prussian civilization succumb to "self-destruction [and] self-castration," and having committed himself to the cause of the "German sword, which alone can bring salvation to a diseased world," Wilamowitz was ready to make his peace with the Nietzscheans.<sup>70</sup> The official publication date of his biography of Plato was Nietzsche's 75th birthday.<sup>71</sup> Thus Wilamowitz' intellectual biography shows that humanism cannot by itself hold back the tides of history and personal embitterment. However, Wilamowitz could not remain simultaneously a humanistic scholar and a proto-fascist; as he knew, the two attitudes were incompatible, for humanism requires an attitude of openness, cosmopolitanism and rationality. Therefore, once he came to oppose these values, he had to abandon humanism as well. Although it would be inaccurate to call Wilamowitz' last work "Nietzschean" (for it lacked Nietzsche's irony, subtlety and political aloofness), Wilamowitz at least came to share Nietzsche's rejection of scholarly values.

## VII. Humanism Under Threat

Thus it seems clear that humanism is what turned the Prussian "Sparta" of Pforta into an "Athens"—at least some of the time.<sup>72</sup> But Pforta's Spartan character was nevertheless highly evident: for example in the disciplined organization of the boys' lives—they even swam in military formation.<sup>73</sup> Wilamowitz recalls some "liberal opposition to Bismarck at school" that influenced him temporarily, but this did not stop him from delivering a Latin elegy in honor of the Iron Chancellor at the school festival in 1867.<sup>74</sup> Like most students and teachers, he says: "I was black and white to the core."<sup>75</sup> Moreover, his "unconditional devotion to the fatherland, and the belief in its greatness, its honour, and its claim to a corresponding position in the world" went hand in hand with two other typical characteristics of nineteenth-century Prussian nationalism: contempt for the Slavs, and bitter anti-Semitism.<sup>76</sup>

Nietzsche, for his part, was unusually ambivalent about Bismarck's Prussia, as he was unusual in almost every other way. However, he found support for an even more radical German nationalism than Bismarck's as he began to read ancient Nordic sagas and Romantic poetry. Nonclassical texts still lay outside of the organized curriculum at Pforta, but the school's literary historian, Koberstein, nevertheless found time to introduce Nietzsche to the sagas of the Ostrogothic King Ermanarich, about whom Nietzsche wrote poetry and music.<sup>77</sup> In a typically Romantic fashion, Koberstein was trying to broaden the scope of Nietzsche's humanistic education to include texts from cultures that were alien to the classical tradition, but supportive of claims to German greatness. The values that these texts taught were far different from the lessons that could be picked up from Cicero or Isocrates. Nevertheless, Nietzsche acted like a good scholar and "rummaged around a great deal in pigskin-bound volumes and chronicles" until he had written a sixty-page essay on Ermanarich.<sup>78</sup> And the purpose of this essay was inspirational: "That twilight of the gods," he wrote, "as the sun goes black, the earth sinks into the sea, and whirlpools of fire uproot the all-nourishing cosmic tree, flames licking the heavens—it is the greatest idea human genius ever produced, unsurpassed in the literature of any period, infinitely bold and formidable, but melting into magical harmonies."<sup>79</sup> In the same spirit, Nietzsche read Novalis, and wrote heavily Romantic poetry; he admired Shakespeare and Byron, calling the latter's characters *übermenschlich*; and he picked out the then almost unknown Romantic author Hölderlin as his favorite poet. He wrote that whenever Hölderlin says "cutting truths" against the Germans, "not only are they well grounded all too often," but they are also "compatible with the greatest patriotism, which Hölderlin genuinely had in the highest degree. What he hated in the Germans was mere specialization, philistinism."<sup>80</sup> Nietzsche's final work at Pforta, his Latin dissertation, was a study of the Archaic poet Theognis of Megara. "I plan to complete the work with proper philological thoroughness," he wrote, "and as scientifically as I can."<sup>81</sup> But once again, Nietzsche's purpose was ethical and political; he was interested in the conflation of "good" with "aristocratic" that he found in Theognis.<sup>82</sup>

Thus Nietzsche was still very much a humanist when he left Pforta. The extent of his revolt against the school consisted in a rather sober reinterpretation of one classical text and some extra-curricular work on a few nonclassical books. Both Nietzsche and Wilamowitz left Pforta vowing to dedicate themselves to truly rigorous, positivistic scholarship in the service of humanistic learning and