

Example of essay on nietzsches problem with socrates vulgarity

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Philosophy has been one of the defining disciplines and characteristics of Western culture. This ideology is so ingrained in the thought processes of these people that one may not realize that a particular view responds to the philosophical tradition that began with the ancient Greeks. Socrates was one of the most important of these thinkers. Therefore, as this discipline has developed, his thoughts have been both acclaimed and refuted by subsequent philosophers. Notably, Friedrich Nietzsche was very critical of this father of philosophy and many others in his *Twilight of the Idols*. A line-by-line analysis of a paragraph from this book will reveal that Nietzsche's main criticism towards Socrates was that he defeated noble tastes by establishing the importance of reason through a vulgar dialectic, which served to undermine the intrinsic lack of knowledge about the value of life. Nietzsche begins the fifth part of "The Problem of Socrates" in his book *Twilight of the Idols, or How to Philosophize with a Hammer* by informing the reader the important change that this Greek philosopher had introduced: dialectics. "With Socrates, Greek taste takes a turn in favor of dialectic" (Nietzsche 14). According to Nietzsche, the pre-Socratics generally sustained elegant and refined arguments, rejecting their private points of view to favor a more sophisticated and accepted points of view. Opinions were not considered a part of philosophy, which is exactly what Socrates pretended to do through his introduction of dialectic, which will be the object of criticism for Nietzsche throughout the chapter, and what he will try to explain. After establishing the change that Socrates achieved within proper Greek society, the author questions the true movement that this provokes within philosophy and society. "What is really happening there?" (Nietzsche 14).

The German philosopher attempts to discern what is occurring at a structural level. While it is easy to see that Socrates is introducing his low life into philosophy, tainting it in Nietzsche's opinion, this sparked a revolution of thought that changed Western civilization ever after. Not content with this superficial change, Nietzsche examines what Socrates really changed.

The answer to the question that Nietzsche asks himself manifests the intolerance and contempt that the philosopher holds towards that which is vulgar. "Primarily, a noble taste is thereby defeated; with dialectic, the rabble rises to the top" (Nietzsche 14). This philosopher sustains that only elegant sensitivities were held to be philosophical before Socrates.

Nevertheless, with the latter philosopher, common thought processes were brought to the front. The connotations of rabble, the word that he employs to describe that which Socrates brings into play, are negative, showing the disdain that Nietzsche holds towards the common people.

Nietzsche argues that Socrates changed the point of view of society towards dialectics. "Before Socrates, dialectical manners were rejected in good society" (Nietzsche 14). Socrates, through his eponymous method, discussed the views of common people that he encountered in the street. Somehow, as will be discussed, he achieved the recognition of these opinions that were usually rejected by high society. Nietzsche also sustains this through an interpretation of the numerous references of Socrates' ugliness. The former believed that this was a sign of spiritual impurity being in connection with the physiognomy, as was often believed in Greek times. Nietzsche discusses Socrates' auditory hallucinations and his self-confessed depraved instincts as evidence for this evil nature within Socrates, the philosopher who raised this

rabble to the top, beating noble tastes.

The aspect that was seemingly most offensive about the dialectical process was the compromise that it implied. The hubris of the Greeks and their belief that their polis was the center of the world, combined with an essentially military state, caused their thought processes to be very rigid. They tried to establish certain codes of conduct and social patterns, which were not to be transgressed. Therefore, dialectical manners “ were taken to be bad manners, they were a compromising exposure” (Nietzsche 14). There was no need for compromise within the Greek society, especially with personal opinions, which is what Socrates was emphasizing.

This was such that it served as one of the reasons for Socrates’ trial: corruption of minors. Children were taught against regarding highly and expressing their own beliefs that contradicted those of the polis. Writing about dialectical manners, Nietzsche states, “ The youth were warned against them. And all such presentation of one’s own reasons was mistrusted” (14). As Socrates was emphasizing this type of discourse, he was tried, which ended in his famous suicide.

Greek society was very proper, enforcing its codes of conduct and maintaining an important difference between the classes. “ Respectable things, like respectable people, just don’t carry their reasons around on their sleeves like that. Showing you whole hand is improper” (Nietzsche 14).

According to Nietzsche, personal arguments were considered unworthy of society and were to be kept to oneself. It was vulgar to express one’s own reasons and noblemen did not do this. Even though Socrates was condemned for this, it surreptitiously engrained itself in Greek culture and

finally changed philosophy and Western culture forever.

Nietzsche proposes that Hellenic tradition favored evident truths. “ Whatever has to get itself proved in advance isn’t worth very much” (Nietzsche 14).

For this worldview, self-evidence was favored over arrival from reasoning.

These truths were sent and revealed by the gods and the oracles, so reasoning around them was considered improper. This was one of the ways that they kept the society together, and Socrates was slowly doing away with it.

For Greeks, directions took precedence over reason; those that chose to exalt the latter were ridiculed and not taken into account. “ Whatever authority is still considered good form, so that one does not ‘ give reasons’ but commands, the dialectician is a sort of clown: people laugh at him, they do not take him seriously” (Nietzsche 14). Nietzsche describes Socrates as a caricature, a buffo with many exaggerated characteristics that would normally cause him to not be considered in high society. Socrates’ famous method consisted in asking the opinions of those around him and inviting them to reason with him through their thought processes.

Nevertheless, Socrates was taken into account, becoming the father of Western philosophy; this seems strange to Nietzsche, and he tries to find an explanation for this. “ Socrates was the clown who got people to take him seriously: what really happened there?” (Nietzsche 14). The philosopher is bewildered as to how exactly his Greek colleague surpassed the ridicule that his ugliness, crassness and exaltation of reason would produce in his culture. Again, he attempts to discern the structural forces at play in this revolutionary moment in philosophical history.

While Nietzsche does not present the answer to his main question in the paragraph, he creates intrigue with rhetorical elements and lays the ground for the analysis that is to come. One may think of this section as a necessary path that connects the problem and the solution in a fluid and logical manner. Furthermore, this augmentation of intrigue and the statement of his questions allows the reader to follow him more closely, allowing for a more coherent read. Nietzsche's emphasis on Socrates' vulgar aspects and how his exaltation of reason was contrary to society sets the ground for the dissertation that will follow.

In the remainder of the chapter, Nietzsche will argue that because the value of life cannot be estimated, the Greeks understood that they could either destroy themselves or be absurdly rational, allowing for Socrates' rise. For the former philosopher, one cannot really know what life is worth, and the attempt to establish its value denigrates its nature. As Hellenic culture was in decadence because of individual vices, it decided to adopt Socrates' dialectic as a sort of flotation device. This emphasis on rationality allowed the culture to live on because it promised them a way to temper the vices that were in them. Reason seemed to be the way to escape the aggressive instincts that were threatening the destruction of the polis. This illusion and message of hope retained the attention of the people towards the clownish Socrates, giving birth to Western civilization.

In conclusion, a detailed analysis of a paragraph from Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols* evidences the contempt the philosopher had towards Socrates' crassness. The former was astonished that the type of clown could flourish in such a proper society. The many descriptions of Socrates' physical and

spiritual ugliness would more probably have been shunned than celebrated in Greek society, as in it, authority was more important than reason. Socrates' exaltation of the latter was vulgar in Nietzsche's perception, defeating the excellent noble tastes in favor of rabble. The Socratic Method included the unbecoming exaltation of personal reason, but it was not rejected because it offered hope for a decadent society. Nietzsche believes that Hellenic culture was in decline and it saw in Socrates its only way for possible survival; it believed that the impulsive instincts of its people could be calmed and commanded by reason, allowing them to put aside the problem of the un-estimable value of life. This historical and philosophical criticism is of much value as it allows the reader to see Socrates in a different light, revealing both his context and ours by default, as Western civilization owes so much to ancient Greece.

Works Cited

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Twilight of the Idols*. Trans. Richard Polt. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997. Print.