ON THE NEED FOR DIONYSIAN EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS TODAY
Sean Steel
Werklund School of Education
University of Calgary

ABSTRACT. Although much has been written about Friedrich Nietzsche's views on education over the years, and much has also been written about Dionysus, god of wine and ecstasy, very little attention has been given to the meaning of, and need for, Dionysian education. In this article, Sean Steel attempts to begin that project. Drawing Nietzsche's articulation of the Dionysian, Apollonian, and anti-Dionysian into the orbit of broader scholarship on Dionysus, Steel invites readers to think about what a Dionysian education might look like in a modern-day school setting, as well as to consider what challenges exist for the implementation of such a vision of education.

INTRODUCTION: NIETZSCHE ON THE DIONYSIAN, THE APOLLONIAN, AND THE ANTI-DIONYSIAN

Perhaps the best place to begin an inquiry into the significance of “the Dionysian” in education is with a careful introduction to Friedrich Nietzsche's most famous words of explanation concerning the precise meaning of that phrase. In his earliest book, The Birth of Tragedy, Nietzsche describes existence as a tension between two opposed “art-creating tendencies” that he calls the Apollonian and the Dionysian. Named after Dionysus, “the Dionysian” designates “the mystical Oneness,” “the primordial One,” and “the sole ground of being.”1 “The Dionysian” names the fundamental reality that human beings experience through different kinds of intoxication and ecstasy. In Dionysian experience, “not only does the bond between man and man come to be forged once more ... but nature itself, long alienated or subjugated, rises again to celebrate the reconciliation with her prodigal son, man.” By virtue of Dionysian existence, “each individual becomes not only reconciled to his fellow but actually at one with him” (BT, 23). The individual is “shattered,” forgetting himself completely as he merges with “the mystical Oneness.” Through this Dionysian merging, one realizes one’s own participation in a “higher community” and a Oneness that knows no boundaries. This practice of forgetting oneself, of allowing one’s false sense of oneself to dissolve in an experience of the Dionysian ground, is the beginning of wisdom, according to Nietzsche.2 The cultivation of this sort of experience and knowledge in an educational environment is the focus of the present article.

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy and the Genealogy of Morals, trans. Francis Golffing (Toronto: Anchor Books, 1956), 23. The work The Birth of Tragedy will be cited in the text as BT for all subsequent references.

However, experiencing the destruction of what Mircea Eliade calls “the psycho-mental” or individualized ego-self in mystical Oneness is a hard wisdom. How, after all, would such wisdom ever find a place in our schools? Indeed, Nietzsche contends that insight into the Dionysian ground of all things is “unbearable,” and that it petrifies human beings for action: “They realize that no action of theirs can work any change in the eternal condition of things” (BT, 51). Our schools have as their aim the creation of successful contributors to society. Exposure to the Dionysian ground, however, would most certainly act as a brake on such activities. Hence, wherever Dionysian insights might be cultivated educationally, ways must be found to overcome in joy and action the paralysis brought upon the one who sees. Here, we are bid to consider the importance of “fair illusions” in education.

Nietzsche uses “the Apollonian” to name this capacity and drive for illusion. As “the soothsaying god” of visions and dreams, Apollo is also the god of the poets and musicians. Dreams are the most basic Apollonian phenomena, “in the production of which every man proves himself an accomplished artist” (BT, 20). All human beings, as dreaming artists, forget the waking world in order to enjoy their dreams, saying of these fair illusions, “It is a dream! I want it to go on” (BT, 21). Following Nietzsche’s insights in the Birth of Tragedy, an education rooted in the Dionysian experience of ego dissolution in the Oneness would require the cultivation of a certain kind of Apollonian “naïveté” — perhaps through words (logoi) or fanciful stories (mythoi) — that might provide the one who sees with a narrative inspiring joyful acceptance of what is as what also must be — a deep love that Nietzsche later refers to as amor fati.

The Apollonian aspect of existence bestows upon the Dionysian womb of things what Nietzsche calls “the principium individuationis” (BT, 22). By this principle human beings gain the illusion of distinction between themselves and the Oneness of which they are a part. In this way, the Apollonian opposes the Dionysian in a kind of contentious struggle, or agon. Following Nietzsche, the cultivation of this agonal tension would be most important to any education for wisdom; where the tension between these two opposing forces is fierce, the insights derived from tragedy and Dionysian art are begotten, and such insights enable human beings to rejoice in the full panoply of their existence. “Joyful wisdom” is understood to be the result of such a genuinely Dionysian education.


SEAN STEEL is a public school teacher and a sessional instructor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Calgary, 2500 University Dr. NW., Calgary, AB, Canada, T2N 1N4; e-mail <sdsteel@ucalgary.ca>. His areas of scholarly interest include philosophy of education, philosophizing in the classroom, contemplative education, and wisdom-seeking pedagogies.
Even if this tension is not carried to its highest point, all human beings nevertheless suffer it to greater or lesser degrees. The Apollonian and Dionysian are, after all, primary opposing traits given to all of existence. For the purposes of this article, the important educational insight to glean from Nietzsche’s early writings on the Dionysian is that, when the tension between the Apollonian and Dionysian is heightened or maximized, at such times there is “redemption” and “transfiguration” (BT, 26). The “original Oneness” or “ground of being” is described by Nietzsche as “ever-suffering” and “contradictory,” and therefore “has constant need of rapt vision and delightful illusion to redeem itself” (BT, 32). This transfiguration or redemption is “the eternal goal of the original Oneness” (BT, 33); a genuinely Dionysian education would have such a transfigurative or redemptive power over its participants as well.

Nietzsche writes that such redemption occurs when Dionysian reality is mirrored in Apollonian illusion so that human beings may rejoice as participants in the ground of their being. He calls this the “metaphysical solace” of tragedy; namely, “that, despite every phenomenal change, life is indestructibly joyful and powerful” (BT, 50). In the education afforded by ancient tragedy, we see a reflection of the sole ground of being. Through Apollonian illusion “there arises, like the fragrance of ambrosia, a new illusory world, invisible to those enmeshed in the first: a radiant vision of pure delight, a rapt seeing through wide-open eyes.” (BT, 33). Put another way, the “redemption” brought about by a genuinely Dionysian education is achieved through illusion grounded in the experience of reality and reflected in a way that leads to eternal rejoicing in all of existence.

Nietzsche contends that both Dionysian and Apollonian tendencies must be present in opposition to one another. If one god is deserted, then the other god will also abandon the deserter: “[B]ecause you had deserted Dionysus, you were in turn deserted by Apollo” (BT, 69). This insight has ramifications for education. Without the Dionysian experience of Oneness, there is no wisdom or feeling for reality. Similarly, without a strong Apollonian leaning, there is only barbarism. If the Apollonian and Dionysian tendencies are not properly related to one another, then the individual becomes “egoistic.” Such an individual, perhaps bent on grades, wealth, success, or acclaim, can be thought of “only as an enemy to art, never as its source” (BT, 41). Nietzsche is clear that art — as an expression of the agonal tension of existence — is not the product of any individual subject or will. Rather, art and the artist are themselves tools in the hands of the original Oneness for its own redemption: “[T]o the extent that the subject is an artist he is already delivered from individual will and has become a medium through which the True Subject celebrates His redemption in illusion” (BT, 41). Nothing about Dionysian art is egoistic for Nietzsche. “[T]he entire comedy of art is not played out for our own sakes … nor can we consider ourselves the true originators of that art realm” (BT, 41). We are simply “aesthetic projections of the veritable creator and derive such dignity as we possess from our status as art works” (BT, 41–42). How much more so, then, in a genuinely Dionysian education, where the aim is a “joyful wisdom” arising from dissolution of the false, egoistic self in a celebratory knowledge of the Oneness?
The primary tension in Nietzsche’s corpus, however, is not between Apollo and Dionysus. Nietzsche certainly sees joyful wisdom as the result of heightened tensions between Apollonian and Dionysian forces in the soul; but he identifies the anti-Dionysian forces that serve to deny this redemptive agon as the primary cause for our modern suffering, decadence, and weakness. Careful readers of Nietzsche will recognize that all of his writings arise from his twofold experience of suffering this dichotomy: on the one hand, he is pained by our modern, anti-Dionysian “sickness” as himself a “convalescent”; yet, on the other hand, he suffers from thwarted Dionysian longings that always drive him toward battle against delusions that bury modern-day human beings, even going so far as to write famously of himself in Ecce Homo, “I am no man, I am dynamite.”4 Indeed, Nietzsche must be dynamite in order to explode, to scatter, and to destroy all the heavy anti-Dionysian confusions that suffocate his spirit and prohibit its growth into a fully Dionysian life. Nietzsche’s relentless attention to this antagonism between the Dionysian and the anti-Dionysian is the real heart of his philosophy. Although for him both Apollo and Dionysus continue to name “art-creating tendencies,”5 after The Birth of Tragedy he never again writes about the Apollonian–Dionysian agon as a cosmic principle, but instead focuses on the much more central antagonism between the Dionysian and the anti-Dionysian, hoping to embolden not only his own spirit, but also the spirit of his readers for the pursuit of Dionysian wisdom through first overcoming the anti-Dionysian forces that have run amok in our modern understandings and assumptions.6

In The Birth of Tragedy, Nietzsche refers to these anti-Dionysian forces that undermine the cultivation of joyful wisdom as “rationalistic optimism” — essentially the assurance that seeking out a certain kind of “knowledge” is the best way to live. Such “optimism” entails understanding everything in terms of strict rationality, reducing what is to the calculable, on the one hand, and attempting to “know” our own psychic states (that is, the veneer of the “I” that is dissolved through Dionysian experience) as though they were what is most real, on the other. In short, this form of optimistic “knowing” operates by denying the reality of the ground through the cultivation of egoistic attitudes. Put another way, anti-Dionysian forces provide us with false self-knowledge, identifying all knowledge with appearances rather than with underlying Dionysian reality. They are furthermore distinguished by their desire for mastery over the phenomenal and the fluctuating, and by the supposition that such “knowledge alone makes men virtuous” (BT, 79). They proceed in the soul not by assisting us in “forgetting” this false self in a deeper, courageous, and recollective awareness of the Oneness that dissolves all psycho-mentality into death, but by insulating

us against developing any awareness of this ground through rationalistic claims about “knowledge.” Finally, they would have us linger upon the self, fascinated by its appearance, drawing attention to the individual and away from the ground by manipulating “novel stimulants” that shock the soul — here freezing it with “cold paradoxical ideas in place of Apollonian contemplation,” and there consuming it with “fiery emotions put in place of Dionysian transports” (BT, 78–79). Anti-Dionysian stimulants sever the individual from both gods. The Apollonian effects of forgetting and delight cannot be achieved because the individual is not allowed to forget, but is made to dwell pensively upon his or her own individuated waking ideas; the individual loses awareness of the Dionysian ground by being turned away from it, and through continuous occupation with his or her own emotional and rational reactions to appearances and stimuli.

**Anti-Dionysian Schooling Today**

What does Nietzsche’s discussion of the Dionysian, Apollonian, and anti-Dionysian have to do with schooling? Our teaching in schools, for all its pretensions about “depth” and “engagement,” is largely anti-Dionysian in character. In recent times, school structures have become almost exclusively concerned with “accountability” to government-mandated standards of achievement. If you have taught anytime recently in a high school, you will know firsthand that nothing seems to matter more than the measurement, testing, and development of our students’ rational capacities and skills toward learning “outcomes.”\(^7\) This rational activity is not Apollonian in character, but anti-Dionysian — that is, it does not emerge in the form of a joyful, reconstituted principium individuationis from an underlying awareness of the Dionysian ground. As teachers, our constant “summative” measurements rank each individual student in an attempt to separate and distinguish rather than to conjoin. Instead of enabling students to see through their own egoistic selves into the Dionysian depths, our heightened emphasis on their academic performance according to government-mandated “objectives” only serves to exacerbate their egoistic concerns. Under the stresses of “high-stakes testing,” students become even less open to deep teaching that invites experience of the self’s dissolution in the Dionysian ground. The way that we “teach-to-the-test,” the way that we reward the successful demonstration of psycho-mental competencies and “knowledge,” on the one hand, and punish the failure to do so, on the other, only reinforces the sense among students that their own egoistic identity, with all of its diverse aptitudes, drives, and desires, is of the greatest significance — that there is, indeed, nothing else to education than honing this ego so that it may experience satiation in the achievement of all of its dreams and ambitions. And just as we use our “summative” assessments to distinguish and reinforce the supreme reality of the egoistic self, so too do we

---

design our “formative” assessments and pedagogical practices to strengthen one psycho-mental aptitude, to redirect another, and generally to shape the individual ego-selves of students under our tutelage for their future successes — as if this were the real nature of a genuine or deep education.

But as Nietzsche pointed out a century and a half ago, such anti-Dionysian activity is not deep at all; it merely pretends to depth while skimming along the surface of things, offering “novel stimulations” that reinforce, nurture, and reorganize the drives and capacities of the egoistic self, all the while paying no heed whatsoever to the Dionysian ground. The “depth” and “engagement” sought by schools is not aimed at Dionysian insight into the ground, but at “deeper” critical-analytic proficiency, more intensive and rigorous demonstrations of academic competencies, and deeper commitment to the orthodoxy of “rationalistic optimism” that supposes ever-heightened “engagement” in “the knowledge economy” will bring success to every individual learner in our society. Indeed, through anti-Dionysian education, each individual is meant to be prepared to pursue those goals, ambitions, and desires that are particular to his or her own individuated existence in successful competition against all others in a globalized economy.

To better serve these “optimistic” rationalistic purposes, our schools have begun to individualize educational programming through increasing technological controls and mastery. In the process, any hope of a burgeoning Dionysian insight into the Oneness that dissolves the false, egoistic self decreases as the technological mindset, with its need to control and shape everything ergonomically according to our own preferences, increases. Thanks to the surging commitment of schools to invest in “educational technology,” our ability to tailor the “delivery” of education according to each student’s psycho-mental identity seems to have increased dramatically. Indeed, the “personalized learning” that is espoused as the grail-like achievement of educational technology only reinforces anti-Dionysian ego fixations through the infinite variety of “novel stimulants” made instantly available to students on the Internet — stimulants that are euphemistically called “engagement.” By contrast, deep, immersive awareness of the Dionysian ground involves not the multiplication of novel stimulants, but the weaning away from all psycho-mental affectation in order to focus on what lies beneath once this false self has been dissolved. Such awareness is the focus of many ancient philosophical and contemplative traditions the world over, and many practical examples and case studies of how to incorporate this kind of contemplative-philosophical activity into the school day are thoroughly discussed in my recent book, The Pursuit of Wisdom and Happiness in Education.8 Suffice it to say here, in this much shorter space, that a genuinely Dionysian education would not engage in stimulations that reinforce the psycho-mental “I” — that is, the “i” in the iPhone, the iMac, the iPad, and the iPod — but demands the loosening of our attachments to ourselves

---

and our own preferences.⁹ Utilizing Nietzsche’s insights, we can see clearly that students in contemporary educational institutions are not taught for Apollonian en-joy-ment; they are not encouraged to revel in their own dissolution into Oneness, but to fear and loathe it. The cold calculus of “rationalistic optimism” has replaced “Apollonian contemplation,” while “fiery emotions” have been put in place of “Dionysian transports.”

**Modern Arrogance and Recovering the Dionysian in Mythos and Cultus**

In the English language arts classroom, it is normal practice to teach mythology. However, when students are introduced to myth, mostly the stories are presented as museum pieces with little relevance to their own lives. Myths are often used simply as curricular exercises in reading comprehension. In addition, they are commonly analyzed as bad science (“And that’s where lightning comes from”), as examples of primitive moral directives (“And that’s why you should never disobey your parents”), or as superstition (“And that’s why people feared eclipses”). Myths may also be read as exercises in the appreciation of cultural diversity, as case studies for the development of “critical literacy,” or perhaps out of duty to traditions about “what must be taught in schools.” But in all these cases, students are not through their encounter with myth invited to glimpse into the Dionysian depths of things: myths remain objects of cold, calculative study; they speak to nothing deep and undiscovered within us; and everything about them seems surpassed rather than lost or in need of recovery. Such a manner of studying myth does nothing to alleviate what Nietzsche identifies as our modern numbness for reality; we remain unable to feel the true joy of which Nietzsche speaks, and we leave such classes with our deluded ego-self unshaken. Here, readers are likely to ask how would truly Dionysian studies manifest in a modern-day classroom? In what follows, and by extending our inquiries into Dionysian reality to include writings beyond Nietzsche’s own corpus, this article argues that the means for any rediscovery of Dionysian reality must involve the re-sensitization of our consciousness — in particular, a burgeoning receptivity toward neglected elements of reality revealed through myth (mythos) and worship (cultus).

Eliade has written extensively about the deep significance of myth as an account of events that took place “in principio, that is, ‘in the beginning,’ in a primordial and non-temporal instant, a moment of sacred time.”¹⁰ Myths happen in a “non-temporal time,” in an instant without duration, much as certain mystics and philosophers conceived of eternity. Quite simply, myths take human beings out of their own time and project them, “symbolically at least, into the Great

---

⁹. For a more involved discussion of the manner in which our technological assumptions about education have affected our propensity to pursue wisdom in schools, see Sean Steel, “Contemplation as a Corrective to Technological Education,” *Canadian Journal of Education* 36, no. 3 (2013).

Time” ([IS, 58]. Merely by listening to a myth, Eliade writes, “man forgets about his profane condition, his ‘historical situation’” ([IS, 58]. In modern times, however, we have become less willing to listen to myths; or, rather, we still hear them, but only as though they spoke profanely about profane things, unwilling to recognize how they point beyond such things toward our participation in sacred or “Great Time.” This is, indeed, what was meant earlier when we spoke of our modern “numbness” for reality. Nonetheless, Eliade points out how mythic imagery still lingers in the modern world even where mythologies and theologies are largely discredited and “despised” ([IS, 19], and he insists that “these degraded images present to us the only possible point of departure for the spiritual renewal of modern man” ([IS, 18]. Myth, in his view, reveals an underlying reality that is transthistorical, eternal, or timeless, and that we all have a share in due to our more-than-historical being. According to Eliade, myth is a powerful tool for the awakening of our consciousness to this ground of being, such that “the more a consciousness is awakened, the more it transcends its own historicity” ([IS, 33].

In The Pursuit of Wisdom and Happiness in Education, I offer some in-depth, specific examples from my own high school teaching experiences of how we might use myths as a means to help students reconnect with their own transthistorical or “immortal” identity.11 Space restrictions in the current article preclude me from revisiting those examples here. Rarely in schools, however, are myths investigated as true stories that divulge deep insights to students about their own lives as transthistorical beings. Lacking the cultivation of any such awareness, the word “myth” naturally retains for students its pejorative sense as something untrue — as a “false belief” — both in their classrooms and in everyday speech. Even when the gods are given careful study by excellent scholars, it has long been common practice to isolate their spheres of relevance historically, culturally, and geographically. For instance, when Erwin Rohde wrote his extensive reference work Psyche, orthodoxy in academia followed his contention that “Dionysus” named not a ubiquitous and timeless reality, but rather a geographically and historically situated god whose origins were Thracian and who came as an invading foreigner to Greece.12 Dionysus became a historical curiosity rather than a timeless component of human existence; he was, as James Frazer remarked, “the god whom Homer hardly deigned to notice.”13 As such, Frazer enumerated many instances of Dionysian worship and mythology in his Golden Bough,14 placing them among that “monstrous accumulation of madnesses, cruelties and superstitions now happily abolished by the progress of mankind” ([IS, 28]. Thankfully, this “scholarly dogma” about the god of wine has long since been exploded by Michael Ventris,

who discovered that Dionysus was not so historically bound — that his origins descend far back into the mists of time, being among the oldest gods listed on Linear B tablets dated to 1250 BCE.\(^{15}\)

Sensitive writers like Walter Otto and Carl Kerényi have done much to retrieve the timeless relevance of “Dionysian awareness” as something “inherent in the world” that rises “from the depths of man himself.”\(^{16}\) Otto’s wonderful discussion begins with some exciting and astute observations about “Myth and Cultus.”\(^{17}\) It should here be noted that the term “cultus” — which very likely is associated negatively in the reader’s mind with “cults,” brainwashing, and so forth — is best understood to mean something like “worship.” Indeed, the translator for Otto’s great work writes in its foreword that “All actions which flow from and are determined by religious experiences are to be regarded as practical expressions or cult-ivate Dionysian awareness in our educational endeavors. Otto writes that, due to our reductionistic stress on utility, “cultus is the most alien of all the elements which seem foreign to modern thought” \(^{[DMC, 4]}\). Already we see how problematic it is to speak of the need to cult-ivate Dionysian awareness in our educational endeavors. Otto writes that, due to our reductionistic stress on utility, “cultus is the most alien of all the elements which seem foreign to modern thought” \(^{[DMC, 14]}\). Neither mythos nor cultus are strictly concerned with what is useful or practical; where myth is an expression of seeing “a holy reality,” or “a totality filled with true existence,” cultus is understood as the activity of service toward that reality \(^{[DMC, 16]}\). Owing to our lack of receptivity to what transcends use, Otto maintains, we have become “completely dominated and blinded by the self-confidence” of our own “rational and technical civilization” \(^{[DMC, 18]}\). Like Nietzsche, who wrote about how a rational-optimistic “knowledge” of self breeds anti-Dionysian conceit or egoism, so too does Otto see that our modern blindness to deeper, underlying Dionysian reality has bred within us an unwarranted fascination with and pride in our psycho-mental selves and our own historical moment. He contends that ancient peoples, being steeped in mythos and cultus, “knew more about life than we do” \(^{[DMC, 138]}\).

Carl Kerényi makes a similar observation about Dionysus when he suggests that the modern-day “multiplication of knowledge” in which we take so much pride does not really count as “an event in the history of thought,” for “if we interpret ‘thought’ very concretely as a broadening of man’s field of vision,” not every technological accomplishment celebrated today brings with it a broadening of our experience. Such thinking is merely “a potential event in the history of thought,” whereas ancient, deep forays into Dionysian experience by poets and philosophers are “the history of thought in the making.”\(^{18}\) Perhaps for this reason,

---


Kerényi remarks that in earlier times the “physical and psychic gifts” required for the cultivation of Dionysian insights were more abundant than is the case today.19

Our technological pride is a manifestation of our deluded claims to self-knowledge, and throughout this article, such arrogance (hybris) is understood as the result of our blindness to deeper, Dionysian reality. This hubristic blindness has consequences for education. Janice Rushing and Thomas Frentz make similar observations about our modern-day hybris in their discussion of the stress placed upon increasing “productivity” in postsecondary institutions. In their view, the rationalistic optimism that is embodied in “too much faith in human progress, too much pride in the controlling powers of reason and order” resembles the mythical resistance of Lycurgus or Pentheus against any incursions of Dionysus upon established order and authority. Rushing and Frentz point out that, classically, anti-Dionysian arrogance was always punished by “Dionysus’ revenge,” wherein our “reason-driven efforts” turn into their opposites.20 The scope of their warning is restricted to analysis of the malaise of the contemporary university; I, however, wish to extend this warning beyond the university and to ask how the overarching denigration and denial of the Dionysian discussed earlier in relation to schools might affect the spiritual health and happiness of human beings and of society as a whole.

Two Kinds of Life, Two Kinds of Death, and the Need for Descent–Ascent

Rushing and Frentz remark that our postsecondary institutions value speed over deliberation, “quantity over quality,” and “the up” over “the down”; but the same might be said beyond the boundaries of the university with regard to education and what we value en masse. In true anti-Dionysian fashion, we are continually goaded to pursue whatever confirms our sense of ourselves and whatever demonstrates or extends our powers of mastery. This “extension” we take as “the up.” Whatever reaffirms the reality of our own individuated ego-selves is welcomed; conversely, whatever might jeopardize the trajectory of our ego-affirming activities is eschewed most harshly as “the down.” It is for this reason that the Dionysian is so forcefully rejected.

Kerényi’s thoughtful discussion of zoe and bios helps to clarify the point we are making about the “up” and the “down” mentioned by Rushing and Frentz, as well as about the larger significance of properly understanding the meaning of ascent (anairesis) and descent (katabasis) in education.21 If we follow Kerényi’s analysis of the rich manner in which the ancient Greeks were able to differentiate

19. Ibid., 227.


21. For an extended analysis of this topic, see the concluding chapter to Steel, The Pursuit of Wisdom and Happiness in Education.
their experience of the deeper, immortal substratum of life (zoe) from ordinary awareness of the fleeting, particular forms or “outlines that distinguish one living thing from another” (bios), we come to see how our modern-day understanding is so much more narrow and reductionistic. Not only our university educators, but also our schoolteachers, principals, and policymakers — and very likely the majority of parents in our society — embrace anairesis, or going “up,” as a good directional metaphor for education. However, as we have seen in our examination of the anti-Dionysian nature of modern-day schooling, this is to conceive falsely of anairesis as evermore increasing our mastery and knowledge of bios (that is, the “rationalistic optimism” of which Nietzsche spoke), it is to suppose that one must go “up” — that is to say, one must always progress and demonstrate accountable improvement in one’s grades toward measurable and established standards — but one must never go “down.” The mantra in many Canadian schools today, for instance, is that “Failure is not an option!” The point in school is not to uncover one’s ignorance, but rather to demonstrate one’s knowledge. Any going “down” — that is, any dissolution that might thwart students’ abilities to pursue their dreams and ambitions through schooling by rendering a strict attention to bios problematic — looks to them like mindless nihilism, antisocial destruction, and death. But the Dionysian “Lord of Souls” — whom Heraclitus identifies with Hades, god of death — demands that we must die, that our mortal selves must be rent mythically limb from limb, and that the order we perceive and affirm as most real all around us in ordinary awareness be dissolved for the deepest and most true seeing (theoria). No wonder the god’s demands are rejected with such hostility!

Fears of “going down” certainly pervade schooling today with its demands for accountability, innovative excellence, and competitive rigor. However, all such anti-Dionysian fears are based upon a fundamental misunderstanding of what it means to know and to live. True Dionysian knowledge implies the necessity of “going down” in order to “go up”; it requires that we “die” to our mortal form (bios) in order to be reborn as conscious participants in immortal life (zoe). Put another way, anti-Dionysian blindness arises from too strict an adherence to a limited, perspectival understanding as though its orthodoxy were “the truth.” If we lack any deeper, Dionysian awareness of zoe that transcends the perspectival limitations of bios, then the life into which the god summons us will naturally appear to be the rejection of all knowledge; it will look like nothing more than descent into chaos and disarray, for such a one who descends has indeed become “dead” to the world with its ordinarily confirmed convictions, ambitions, and valuations. The anti-Dionysian perspective, in other words, detects a kind of death in the Dionysian, but fails to see any transformative rebirth. This is precisely why genuine philosophers since ancient times have appeared so ridiculous in the eyes of the many, and why mainstream education eschews the love of wisdom.

However, the lost sense of *katabasis–anairesis* is the precise meaning of Dionysus’s epithet as “the twice-born god.” The Dionysian initiate is able through revelatory experience to see that the anti-Dionysian pretense to knowing is only ignorance (*agnota*) masquerading as knowledge, and therefore that the way of life affirmed by anti-Dionysian orthodoxy is actually a kind of living death, being solely concerned with what is mortal and closed off to any awareness of our deeper, immortal nature. As Otto puts it, the Dionysian revelation of truth teaches us that “The world man knows, the world in which he has settled himself so securely and snugly — that world is no more. The turbulence which accompanied the arrival of Dionysus has swept it away. Everything has been transformed” (*DMC*, 95). Dionysian knowledge effectively teaches us that the “up” sought out through anti-Dionysian education is not the “true up” (*to alethos ano*). Knowledge of this “true up” is acquired only through our conscious participation in indestructible life (*zoe*); it is only made possible for human beings through a corresponding simultaneous descent (*katabasis*), death, or dissolution of the individuated mortal life (*bios*).

**Joy in School: On the Relation of Cultus and Leisure (Schole) to Dionysian Education**

Perhaps the clearest indication of our anti-Dionysian proclivities in schools is the lack of joy to be found within their walls. Schools have become such serious, high-stress places. In my own province of Alberta, Canada, for instance, not joy in learning, but overwhelming fear of being unable to succeed in an ever more competitive and global knowledge-based economy seems to be all that matters in current educational policy reforms. In fulfillment of our “rationalistic optimism,” we have endeavored to fashion schools aimed at enhanced academic performance, higher achievement, and successful living; but in the process, we have created schools that are especially designed to ward off Hades. As Rushing and Frentz point out, all such attempts at ascending without also descending inevitably incur “Dionysus’s revenge.” Put simply, our students are taught the means to acquire the knowledge and skills that may be used in the service of their multifarious egocentric drives, goals, and ambitions (that is, the “up”); but in the absence of true self-knowledge, which can only come from descending into the depths of the soul and examining the disorders found there in relation to the “ground of being” (that is, the “down”), such “knowledge” unwittingly brings about their undoing because it is not rooted in a Dionysian wisdom acquired through psychic death and rebirth.

Anyone who has set foot in a high school recently knows that such places are full of anxiety and the fear of having one’s ignorance exposed. However, not fear, anxiety, or loathing of this “death” of the self, but rather joy in stepping-outside

---


(ek-stasis) of oneself — in leaving the ego behind — is what is required for a genuinely Dionysian education. For this reason, academics like James Wheal have called for an “Ecstatic Pedagogy” that recognizes the “transformative power of ecstasy and joy.”25 As James Hillman explains, each of us must move toward such a death with celebration in our hearts. In order for the deep seeing [theoria] or Yea-saying vision of Dionysian reality to occur, we must enact “Persephone” in our souls: our maiden-souls must lie in wait, “lulled drowsy with innocence and pretty comforts until we are dragged off and pulled down by Hades, our intact natural consciousness violated and opened to the perspective of death.”26 This mythic movement toward self-knowledge through death is both downward and inward. And most provocatively, Hillman points out, “there is a joy in this.”27 Death is no longer something to be feared or staved off through “manic propitiations” designed to keep Hades at bay. Rather, as we allow our inner Persephone to descend, mythically the movement of our soul is transformed “from defense against Hades to love for him.”28 Therefore, when we seek to foster a genuinely Dionysian education in our classrooms, the most valuable question to ask is, “How do we encourage this joy in dying among both students and teachers?”

Eliade focuses on mythos as the primary means toward such joy. In his view, an attentive encounter with myth has enormous power to dispel pride and to prevent us from identifying the “non-reality” of our psycho-mentality with Reality [IS, 59]. Where Eliade stresses the value of myth for such awakening, Otto emphasizes cultus. However, being most foreign to our modern sensibilities, it is unsurprising that cultus would be out of place in our schools. And yet, lacking cultus, human beings are rendered unable to engage in the genuine, ecstatic joy or festivity that underlies all “school” in the original sense of that word as schole, or leisure. Now certainly, no student or teacher would say that joy is unimportant to education; at the same time, however, most would seek the joy while rejecting the concomitant necessities of schole and cultus. This failure to recognize the indissoluble relationship between schole, cultus, and joy seems to be the primary reason why joy escapes us today in schools, and why a deep, Dionysian education remains largely unavailable.

To render these connections intelligible for the modern-day reader, it will be important to recover the ancient meaning of cultus in relation to both leisure (schole) and contemplation (theoria). In antiquity, theoria was understood as simple, yet profound gazing upon or seeing what is. Aristotle writes that theoria is the highest form of human activity since the mind [nous] “is the highest thing

27. Ibid. [emphasis added].
28. Ibid.
in us, and the objects with which the nous deals are the highest things that can be known.”\(^{29}\) Being the perfection of our highest nature, theoria was viewed as the activity \(\textit{energia}\) of happiness \(\textit{eudaimonia}\), where happiness is not a means to any other end, but a good unto itself. This being the case, theoria is not an activity akin to work, which always has some extrinsic end in mind; rather, being the pursuit of genuine happiness and the quintessential love of wisdom, theoria is itself the most liberating of activities. As such, it transpires most naturally not in the laborious environment fostered in schools as “schoolwork,” but where an atmosphere of leisure, or schole, is cultivated. Indeed, our word “school” still pays lip service to the intimate relationship between a genuine education for happiness and leisure \(\textit{schole}\) with its associated activity of contemplation \(\textit{theoria}\). This ancient notion of school as schole, however, seems ridiculous to most modern-day people, who are only familiar with school as “schoolwork” — itself an oxymoronic word \(\text{[in Greek schole + ascholia; or in Latin, otium + negotium]}\) that would strike the ancient mind as utterly bizarre and nonsensical.

It is important to note that contemplation need not be understood as something out of reach for most people, or only as the culminating “achievement” of great spiritual and intellectual efforts and preparations. On the contrary, human beings engage quite regularly in theoria whenever we see with a loving gaze into what is. As the philosopher Josef Pieper writes most eloquently:

A man drinks at last after being extremely thirsty, and, feeling refreshment permeating his body, thinks and says: What a glorious thing is fresh water! Such a man, whether he knows it or not, has already taken a step toward that “seeing of the beloved object” which is contemplation. How splendid is water, a rose, a tree, an apple, a human face — such exclamations can scarcely be spoken without also giving tongue to an assent and affirmation which extends beyond the object praised and touches upon the origin of the universe. Who among us has not suddenly looked into his child’s face, in the midst of the toils and troubles of everyday life, and at that moment “seen” that everything which is good, is loved and lovable, loved by God! … Such nonrational, intuitive certainties of the divine base of all that is can be vouchsafed to our gaze even when it is turned toward the most insignificant-looking things, if only it is a gaze inspired by love. That, in the precise sense, is contemplation.\(^{30}\)

Much in agreement with Aristotle, Pieper points out that “precise attention” to things in the world as we experience them is itself a form of contemplative “beholding.” Theoria need not be understood as bypassing or blurring the reality of this world in preference for some imagined, secondary world; rather, “contemplation directs its gaze straight at the heart of objects. In so doing, it perceives in the depths a hitherto hidden nonfinite relationship. And in that perception lies the peculiar essence of contemplation.”\(^{31}\) Theoria is a possibility for all human beings who “gaze” with depth into the world of finite good things around and within themselves to intimate that which is infinitely good, becoming themselves filled

---


31. Ibid., 86–87.
with a “joyful wisdom” about what is. Readers are free to recall a multitude of instances in which they might have “theorized” in this manner; there is likewise a multitude of ways in which we can lead our own students in *theoria* if only we provide them with an atmosphere congenial to the cultivation of appreciation.32

Where *theoria* is defined as appreciative gazing upon what is, *schole*, or leisure, might best be understood as the atmosphere in which such activities are most especially encouraged: where one is not only invited to see, but where, leaving all else behind as being of little importance, one is encouraged to take whatever has been seen upward through more beautiful sights toward that “fundamental reality” and “ground of being.” Put another way, “leisurizing” takes *theoria*, this best of all activities done for itself, ever upward by creating an atmosphere in which all other concerns might be allowed — for a time at least! — to “die.” If you require an example here, then recall those experiences of gratitude or thankfulness through which your ordinary egoistic concerns were let to fall away, or where your gratitude and wonder led you to inquire beyond everything specific for the ground of your thankfulness. Here, we might again fruitfully cite Pieper on the nature of leisure: “Leisure is a way of looking at the world, born of an affirming oneness with the origin of all being and an authentically free, gracelike experience of the meaning of reality as a whole, in which one is festively raised beyond the instrumental contextuality of the workday.”33 Here, Pieper makes explicit the connection between seeing (*theoria*), leisure (*schole*), and joy in the experience of thankfulness toward what is. Pieper's comments share considerable affinities with Nietzsche: both authors establish these links between seeing, leisure, and joy; moreover, both Pieper and Nietzsche share the “crucial insight” that blesses all that is as what should be — what Nietzsche refers to most famously as *amor fati*. However, there are important differences. Most significantly, Pieper identifies in Nietzsche — that “baptizer” of the Dionysian faith,34 that self-proclaimed “last disciple” and “initiate” of Dionysus35 — a crucial shortcoming that led him to struggle as one convalescing from a mighty sickness of spirit: one that invariably sapped his own ability to take a true, Dionysian joy in all of existence. As Pieper remarks, “we find Nietzsche expressing the crucial insight — one painfully brought home, it would seem, as the result of terrible inner trials, for he was as familiar with the despair of being unable to take ‘enough joy in anything’ as with ‘the vast unbounded Yea- and Amen-saying.’”36

---

32. For extended analysis and some concrete examples of how this might be done in a classroom, see Steel, *The Pursuit of Wisdom and Happiness in Education*.


Most adroitly, Pieper diagnoses the torn state of soul into which Nietzsche had fallen as one who loved Dionysus, but who also found himself stricken by and recovering from a thoroughgoing anti-Dionysian illness. Although Nietzsche could see, he found it most difficult to leisurize; and without being able to leisurize, he could not take full joy in his vision of what is.

The missing element in Nietzsche’s Dionysian forays is what Otto identifies as cultus. We might begin to defend this statement by noting that Nietzsche’s writings are just as marked with bouts of loneliness, alienation, segregation, and radical individualism as they are with his earnest desire for communion in deep friendships. In fact, one might say with considerable confidence that genuine friendship is perhaps the greatest of all treasures sought by Nietzsche. However, in On the Genealogy of Morals, Nietzsche speaks hopefully to his unknown friends (that is, his readers), confessing to us: “as yet I know of no friend.”37 Bereft of such community, Nietzsche’s Dionysian aspirations have left him in quite a bind; as the “last disciple” of the god, he is one who would worship, but who finds himself without a cult in which to participate. Scholars like Walter Burkert who have studied Dionysian festivals and their ecstasies note that such divine states are not achieved by individuals on their own, but that they are a “mass phenomenon that spreads infectiously.”38 Without a shared celebratory element of cultus, it seems that Dionysian transports and the wisdom derived from them remains unavailable to solitary seekers of Dionysus such as Nietzsche.

In his own extensive writings on the subject of leisure, Pieper has carefully identified how schole (and the joy cult-ivated therein) must always have its deep roots in cultus:

Leisure derives its sense from the very same source that the festival and the holiday [holy-day] derive theirs: there is no festival that does not draw its lifeblood from the cultic. And the ultimate legitimation for leisure as well lies in its having a living relation to the cultic festival.39

Certainly the cultic language needed to speak about the character of schole poses a snarl of problems in a secularized public school system where discussion of such elements of reality is often strictly forbidden. Such is the case, for instance, in my own province of Alberta, Canada, where legislation passed in 2009 requires informed parental consent and a signed waiver prior to any such discussions.40 It may be possible by careful wording to tone down such language so that it appears

less “cultic.” But the central problem remains that the pursuit of Dionysian wisdom invariably involves us in reaching out toward these “forbidden” elements of reality; moreover, we lack any other language than the religious to speak about them.41

We might rephrase Pieper’s Christian insights about schole as celebration in less religious language by saying that, when we speak of schole as celebration, we mean that “rest” is first needed from ourselves in order that we might become contemplative. This language of “rest” and of leaving ourselves behind aptly articulates the experiential element of katabasis that must be part of any “leisurizing.” After all, it is in this state of rest that we directly encounter those higher realities on which our whole existence depends. Indeed, Pieper himself attempts to render his own articulation of leisure more amenable to non-Christian readers by putting the matter of schole’s celebratory nature in Aristotelian terms. However, even the Aristotelian insight that “man leads a life of leisure, ‘not as a human being, but in virtue of something divine within him’” requires the use of religious language in order to capture the “immortalizing” (athanatizein) aspect of philosophizing — that anairesis, or rebirth, that accompanies the aforementioned katabasis, or death.42 In other words, if in the name of the strict secularization of education we were to attempt to remove the divine or “cultic” element from schole, leisure would immediately be emptied of its “immortalizing” value. Even if a space might be carved out for the pursuit of Dionysian wisdom in the modern-day classroom, wherever the quality of celebration is not admitted entry into this space, schole will never develop; instead, all the worst fears of government overseers, administrators, parents, and teachers will have borne their fruit in the boredom, the restless idleness, and the sloth (akedia) of students who do not know what to do with their “free time” — who, instead of philosophizing or “pursuing wisdom,” resort to “killing time,” “goofing off,” or simply recharging their strength for more “schoolwork.”

Closing Remarks and Hopes for the Future of Dionysian Education

There are certainly great challenges to be faced by anyone who would advocate for the incorporation of Dionysian education into schools. This article demonstrates that the very atmosphere for the Dionysian pursuit of wisdom — namely, leisure or schole — is itself highly problematic in our schools. Although most of us experience school as “schoolwork,” we must remember that leisure is antithetical to the sort of work that is the mainstay of our educational systems. First and foremost, leisure requires the cultivation of appreciation and celebration; when we pursue wisdom, we are in effect “taking up” whatever it is that we love toward a more sublime vision of what is truly Lovable. However, this sort of celebratory atmosphere is mostly discouraged in schools, since at its heart it

41. For an extended analysis of this problem, see Steel, “The Problem of Introducing Schole into Schools Today,” chap. 8 in The Pursuit of Wisdom and Happiness in Education.

42. Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, X.vii.8 (emphasis added).
involves recognition of certain *cultic* elements of reality that are deemed beyond the scope of inquiry in public education. Second, there is a kind of *work* involved in “leisurizing,” but it is unlike the sort of work that we do in order to hone our critical thinking skills, to gain understanding of new concepts or information, or to complete a task. Indeed, leisure has nothing to do with finding success, ambitions, or attaining anything in particular. The *work* of “leisurizing” is rather a kind of *unlearning* than learning; it requires the emptying of the self rather than its aggrandizement. Aristotle is correct when he calls leisurizing “immortalizing,” but the activity of immortalizing is simultaneously the activity of dying to ourselves — to our own ego. It requires that we become purified from all of our selfish wants, desires, cares, and thoughts. This is also why Socrates refers to wisdom’s pursuit as “the art of dying.” Unsurprisingly, asking teachers and students to attend school in order that they might learn how to die is not likely to meet with a great deal of approval!

All these caveats being admitted, it is important to remember that *Dionysian education was indeed once widely practiced*. In the first volume of his immense study of Greek education, Werner Jaeger calls the Dionysian chorus “the high school of early Greece.”43 Human nature and Dionysian reality being constant, I propose that a Dionysian education is just as relevant and valuable *now* as it was 2,500 years ago. Where the solitary Nietzsche found himself unable to partake in the “mass phenomenon” of Dionysian joy, the atmosphere of friendship and community that exists in many schools still offers such possibility, and the inclusive, democratic quality of the Dionysian festival makes it perhaps amenable to mass public schooling.

Some final clarifications concerning the nature of Dionysian *cultus* are in order. Contrary to what is often said about the throngs of ancient festival revelers and the mysteries of Bacchic ritual, the modern-day Dionysian classroom would *not* be a proverbial “den of iniquity.” Rosemarie Taylor-Perry has pointed out that it is common to misapprehend the ancient Dionysian “orgy” as a vulgar indulgence in every base form of pleasure and vice — a tendency that, as noted previously, Nietzsche refers to as putting “fiery emotions in place of Dionysian transports” (*BT*, 78–79). Taylor-Perry thoughtfully notes that the word “orgy” — originally an innocent term for the ritual worship of Dionysus — was demonized and vilified by Christian polemicists; however, this Greek word is itself derived from the verb *orgazein*, which comes from the root *zoe* (in the form *zein*), meaning “eternal” or “indestructible life.”44 Otto famously articulated a similar insight by pointing out that what sets Dionysus apart from all the other gods, “whose passions are cooled by transient moments of possession, is the fact that his love is ecstatic and binds him to the loved one forever” (*DMC*, 177). It is this spirit of timeless or eternal love that dwells in the hearts of his female

worshippers, and “if an occasional off-colour scene shows up among the countless representations of the actions of Dionysus, the remaining scenes demonstrate in a most convincing manner that the maenads are characterized by a stateliness and a haughty aloofness” (DMC, 177). Otto further contends that “their wildness has nothing to do with the lustful excitement found in the half-animal, half-human companions who whirl around them” (DMC, 177). In his view, the “modesty” of the Dionysian women in ecstasy is explicitly emphasized in the face of the “malicious stories told about them” (DMC, 177). In short, ritual participation in Dionysian reality is not concerned with vulgar sensual gratification or expending the spirit in base pleasures and intensified stimulations; its intent is not to leave participants dazzled or preoccupied by the thoughts and feelings associated with the unexamined life (bios) of the individualized, fleeting, and mortal self. Rather, Dionysian worship (cultus) draws participants toward a deeper love and desire for the eternal, indestructible, and immortalized life (zoe) that is only discovered through the death or dissolution of the mortal ego-self. It is in this regard that some sort of Dionysian education is desperately needed in schools today.