

How the Philologist Became a Physician of Modernity: Nietzsche's Lectures on German Education

IN JANUARY OF 1869, FRIEDRICH Nietzsche was offered a peach of a job—a professorship in classical philology at the University of Basel. Nietzsche was just twenty-four and far from completing his dissertation, but the university's standards for employment were looser than those of its German counterparts.¹ Nietzsche was delighted, so much so that upon learning the good news, he broke into song: he spent the rest of the day singing melodies from *Tannhäuser*, his favorite opera. The position, to be sure, had what some scholars might have considered a drawback. On top of teaching eight hours a week at the University, Nietzsche would be required to give an additional six hours of instruction at a local *Gymnasium*.² But this wouldn't be a problem, Nietzsche had told his *Doktorvater*, Friedrich Ritschl, one of Germany's most renowned classicists. Ritschl passed that message on to the hiring committee, along with his imprimatur, and the appointment was made.³

When Nietzsche set off for Basel, then, Ritschl likely felt confident that he had helped launch another brilliant academic career.⁴ Yet only a year later, Nietzsche had begun to move away from the kind of work—studies of Diogenes Laërtius, contributions to an Aeschylus lexicon, analyses of Roman and Greek meter—that had so enthused his mentor, prompting him to tout Nietzsche as the most precocious student he had ever seen. Nietzsche had also begun to show signs of deep disillusionment. Indeed, he pledged to a friend that he would “publicly expose” the whole Prussian system of education.⁵

Nietzsche soon made good on his promise through a series of lectures titled *On the Future of Our Educational Institutions*, which were held at Basel's

ABSTRACT This article makes the case that the lecture series *On the Future of Our Educational Institutions*, which Friedrich Nietzsche held in 1872 and scholars have long neglected, marks a crucial point in the development of the philosopher's outlook. In doing so, the article shows that Nietzsche's lectures resonate in suggestive ways with twenty-first-century debates about higher education. REPRESENTATIONS 131. Summer 2015 © The Regents of the University of California. ISSN 0734-6018, electronic ISSN 1533-855X, pages 68–104. All rights reserved. Direct requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content to the University of California Press at <http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintinfo.asp>. DOI: 10.1525/rep.2015.131.4.68.

city museum between January and March of 1872. In these presentations, Nietzsche took aim at all of Germany's chief institutions of postprimary learning: the *Realschule*, the *Gymnasium*, and the university.⁶ He also attacked individual academic specializations, including his own field. Philology, he maintained, was both a key symptom and a cause of a larger process of cultural decline. Nietzsche's Basel lectures are notable for a number of reasons, including the new urgency and depth gained by Nietzsche's early reckoning with his discipline and the German educational system as a whole. When situated within the conditions and debates to which they respond, the lectures reveal how Nietzsche the philologist became the physician of modernity and its ills.⁷

Nietzsche never abjured his interest in the ancient world. His love of antiquity would persist throughout his life, as would its intermingling with concerns about modernity. In contrast to the writings of the 1870s, the works Nietzsche produced under Ritschl's guidance hewed to the formal and methodological conventions of philological scholarship. But both his early academic efforts and his mature works consistently address the relationship between antiquity and modernity. In *Nietzsche and the Philology of the Future*, James Porter successfully makes this point, dismantling the long-established notion that Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* represented a radical departure from his earlier philological undertakings.⁸ Porter shows that even as a student, Nietzsche saw ancient culture through the lens of modernity's problems. What Porter and other genealogists of Nietzsche's thought have given less attention to are the questions: Where did philology itself and the culture of nineteenth-century scholarship, or *Wissenschaft*, come into focus in Nietzsche's work as being among the most pressing of modernity's problems? At what moment did philology and *Wissenschaft* emerge as *the* features of modernity that distort and diminish precisely the resources that might help modernity redeem itself, namely, ancient forms of life? This crucial moment is *On the Future of Our Educational Institutions*, which Porter's book doesn't mention and to which Rüdiger Safranski's acclaimed recent biography of Nietzsche refers, briefly, just twice.⁹

Set up as Nietzsche's recollection of a dialogue in the woods, with the interlocutors being an irascible old philosopher who has much in common with Arthur Schopenhauer, the philosopher's younger companion, Nietzsche himself, and a fellow university student, the lectures on education often read like a literary experiment: They abound with elaborate descriptions of the sylvan scenery. Hence, at least in part, the tendency of Nietzsche scholars not to take the lectures seriously. Until now, there has been just one English translation, a rather slapdash effort from 1909. Yet it is in *On the Future Our Educational Institutions* that Nietzsche began to develop the critique of German academic culture that posterity would make into one of

his most consequential ideas. Through the old philosopher, Nietzsche impressed upon his audience in Basel the idea that the fate of ancient Greece might well turn out to be death by German scholarship: “Philologists founder and die due to the Greeks—we can live with that loss. But for antiquity itself to shatter due to the philologists!”

Nietzsche’s lectures of 1872 were not, however, a farewell to academia, an ur-example of what is now known as “quit lit.” Nietzsche held on to his professorship for another seven years, and during that time he took his teaching responsibilities seriously, even formally proposing improvements to the Greek curriculum at the *Gymnasium* where he taught.¹⁰ With *On the Future of Our Educational Institutions*, which attracted impressive audiences of more than three hundred people, he was joining a reform-minded conversation about German higher education rather than opting out. He brought to the discussion both familiar commitments and concerns and also more maverick ones, some of which well predated his appointment in Basel.

For as pleased as Nietzsche was to be entering the ranks of professional philologists, he had already expressed doubts about the field—and his place in it—in the years leading up to the hire. This was due in no small part to the influence of Schopenhauer, whose writings Nietzsche first encountered in 1865 and whose originality, stylistic vitality, and aristocratic model of cultural production made an immediate impact. By the autumn of 1867, Nietzsche was outlining an essay—which he would never complete—on Democritus and the “history of literary studies in antiquity and modernity,” the aim of which was to impress upon “the philologists a number of bitter truths.”¹¹ The first bitter truth was that “all enlightening thoughts” come only from a few “great geniuses,” or from individuals, to quote one of Nietzsche’s biographers, “who most assuredly did not pursue philological and historical studies.”¹² Nietzsche didn’t yet count himself among their number. But he certainly felt inspired by Schopenhauer, and he wondered whether a career in the discipline in which he was excelling would stifle the creative impulses he sensed welling within him. “Academic knowledge,” young Nietzsche repined, “has something dead about it.”¹³ As Safranski has put it, drawing on Nietzsche’s own words, even as a student Nietzsche “began to see himself as a philosophical writer who had moved beyond the confines of philology to a state of ‘drifting’ into ‘the unknown, with the restless hope of at some point finding a goal at which to rest.’”¹⁴ Hence Nietzsche’s remark from 1865: “How easy it is to be guided by men like Ritschl, to get pulled away onto the very paths that might be most alien to one’s nature.”¹⁵

In a word, Nietzsche was ambivalent. Writing to friends and family as a student in Bonn and Leipzig, he sometimes evoked the brilliance of his professors with breathless enthusiasm, and he engaged hotly with a number

of academic works. Yet the ones that really captivated him, such as Friedrich Lange's *History of Materialism* (1866), tended to encourage the epistemological skepticism that Schopenhauer had helped to awaken, and thus they, too, encouraged his inclination to express himself in a way that dispensed with any pretense of the vaunted objectivity of German scholarship.¹⁶

During his time as Ritschl's student, Nietzsche brooded over the idea of doing philology in a different, dithyrambic key. In July of 1868, he confided to Ritschl's wife: "Maybe I will find a philological subject that can be treated musically, and then I will babble like an infant and heap up images like a barbarian who has fallen asleep in front of an antique of Venus, and I will still be in the right despite the 'flourishing haste' of the exposition."¹⁷ Just a few months later, Nietzsche met Richard Wagner, a fellow admirer of Schopenhauer, and a man he regarded as the rare "living illustration" of what the word "genius" meant. It would be hard to overstate Wagner's importance for Nietzsche over the better part of the next decade, namely, the 1870s. Propelled by an element of personal infatuation—he would write rapturously in his correspondence about evenings spent at the Wagners' home in Tribtschen—Nietzsche soon came to see Wagner more or less as Wagner saw himself: as a driving force for cultural rebirth in a society degraded by a host of "modern" phenomena, like the press. The effect on Nietzsche's relationship to academia was profound. Not long after moving to Basel, Nietzsche considered giving up his professorship and setting off on a lecture tour that would promote the Wagnerian cause, a project he actually carried out in most of his work until the publication of *Human, All Too Human* (1878).

This agenda is certainly evident in the second public lecture Nietzsche gave in Basel, "Socrates and Tragedy" (1870), which lays out the basic argument of *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). Developing a theory that wouldn't sit well with his fellow philologists, but that resonated in Wagner's circle, Nietzsche claimed that Greek tragedy began to "decompose" when, as a result of the advent of "Socratism," language gained the upper hand over music. In the draft of the lecture Nietzsche gave to the Wagners, he went so far as to conclude with the line: "This Socratism is the Jewish press of today; need I say more?"¹⁸ Wagner had just been much criticized over the reissuing, in 1869, of his anti-Jewish essay of 1850, "Jewishness in Music," and while Nietzsche's loyalty was appreciated, the advice from Tribtschen was not "to stir up the hornets' nest" again.¹⁹ Nietzsche complied, but when he concluded the lecture with intimations of a coming rebirth of tragedy, it is likely that even though Wagner wasn't named, the audience knew whom the speaker had in mind as Europe's prospective cultural savior.

With Schopenhauer and Wagner as his lodestars, Nietzsche grew firmer and more ardent in the belief that he should himself be working toward

something like a revolution in culture. Teaching could play a role in such a mission, as could some new mode of philology. But after only twenty months in Basel, Nietzsche had begun to think that, in its present form, the university context didn't allow for the sort of activity he craved and saw as necessary for the broader culture.

In December of 1870, Nietzsche wrote a letter to his friend Erwin Rohde in which he dreams of creating an “untimely” alternative to the existing educational system. This alternative would draw inspiration from Schopenhauer's contempt for the dullness of the university lecture hall and would be analogous to Wagner's institution-building efforts in Bayreuth. Nietzsche's epistolary *cri de coeur* warrants citing at length:

Let us slog on in this university existence for a few more years; let us take it as an edifying sadness that must be tolerated earnestly and with astonishment. This should be, among other things, a period of learning for teaching, for which it is my task to train myself—only I have set my sights somewhat higher.

For, in the long run, I also realize what Schopenhauer's doctrine of university wisdom is all about. An utterly radical institution for *truth* is not *possible* here. More specifically, nothing truly revolutionary can proceed from here.

Later, we can become real teachers by hoisting ourselves with all possible means from out of the atmosphere of these times, and by becoming not just wiser but, above all, better human beings. Here, too, I feel the need to be true. And that is another reason why I cannot tolerate this academic air much longer.

Thus, one day we will cast off this yoke—for *me*, that is certain. And then we will found a new Greek academy. Romundt [a friend from Leipzig] must be part of it. From your Tribschen visit you will know of *Wagner's* Bayreuth plan. I have been considering if we, *for our part*, should not likewise break with philology as it has been practiced, and with its *views on education*. I am readying a big *adhortatio* for all who have not yet been completely suffocated and swallowed up by the present moment. How lamentable it is, though, that I must write to you about this, and that we have not yet *discussed* every idea together! And because you do not know the whole apparatus, my plan may seem to you like an eccentric whim. But it is not *that*; it is an urgent *need*.²⁰

It's hard to imagine that a lot of Nietzsche's fellow Germans harbored fantasies of founding a new Greek academy, but the general themes Nietzsche takes up in articulating his “urgent inner need” were on the minds of many around 1870.

Nietzsche arrived in Basel less than two years before the Prussian victory over Napoleon III in the Franco-Prussian War and the declaration of the German *Kaiserreich*. And he was a keen and engaged observer of the cultural conflict that emerged, thanks mainly to Otto von Bismarck's machinations, in the wake of war: the *Kulturkampf*, a decades-long conflict between the Catholic Church and a Protestant-dominated German state. Bismarck's battle

to secularize the Second Empire, waged through bureaucratic chicanery, was in Nietzsche's view a mere skirmish in the struggle to define Germany's religious and cultural future. Writing to a friend in 1870, just after the Prussian victory, Nietzsche warned that "we must be philosophers enough to remain sober in the universal ecstasy, so that the thief does not come and steal or diminish something that, for me, all the greatest military deeds, even all national uprisings, cannot compare to. For the coming period of culture, fighters will be needed. We must save ourselves for this."²¹ For Nietzsche, the sectarian hostilities between church and state roiling the new German empire should be seen within the context of an even more profound struggle for culture, and how things would turn out was far from certain. Like many of his contemporaries, Nietzsche doubted that political unity would readily translate into cultural and spiritual greatness. Indeed, while recuperating from the dysentery and diphtheria he contracted as a military medic, Nietzsche told his friend Carl von Gersdorff that he regarded Prussia "as a highly dangerous power for culture."²²

Opting In

With anxieties about the state of culture heightening, and with the educational landscape shifting in a newly unified Germany, there was naturally a great deal of debate about schools.²³ That Nietzsche would charge headlong into this debate stands to reason. He believed in the primacy of culture over other fields of human activity; indeed, education had been his life, aside from two brief, physically calamitous stints in the military.

When he was barely into his teens, Nietzsche began being groomed for an academic career at the storied *Gymnasium* (and boarding school) Schulpforta, the alma mater of such luminaries as the philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte and the historian Leopold von Ranke. From Schulpforta Nietzsche went to the University of Bonn, where he continued to distinguish himself as a student of Greek, developed a distaste for the "beer materialism" of fraternities (as a result of which he dropped out of one), and got to see up close the spectacle of petty academic politics. In fact, Nietzsche left Bonn for Leipzig soon after Ritschl had relocated, in part, because of his fight with a colleague over that great feud-starter in higher education: a backdoor hiring maneuver.²⁴

Furthermore, Basel, a city with a strong tradition of the kind of classical education that Nietzsche saw as having been overrun in Germany, was a propitious place for Nietzsche to deliver his message about cultural decline.²⁵ He stresses this himself in his introduction to the lectures.²⁶

With much justification, the preface Nietzsche wrote for a planned book version of the lectures distances his appraisal of education from

more standard, more practically minded ones. He emphasizes that he will not be giving his audience “tables and new hourly course plans for the *Gymnasium* and *Realschulen*.”²⁷ Yet throughout the lectures, Nietzsche advances positions that were widely shared. Indeed, some of the voices with which the lectures resonate belong to people whose cultural politics were otherwise very different from his. And some of them entered the schools debate later than he did. That is, they entered the debate after government measures like the creation of the category *Realgymnasien* (which seemed to flaunt the mingling of classical and vocational education) and the pedagogical saber-rattling of Wilhelm II (“I want soldiers, not students!”) had further stirred things up.

One such voice was that of the nationalist German historian Heinrich von Treitschke, a towering figure in the Second Empire.²⁸ In *The Future of the German Gymnasium* (1883), Treitschke frames a dry proposal for reform with an anxious account of his country’s cultural demise. Distressed about government attempts to open up the educational system and broaden the curriculum, Treitschke wonders, “Who will maintain the aristocracy of our learned *Bildung* and preserve the education of our youth from leveling?”²⁹ How, he asks, might the “decline of culture” be prevented?

The Discourse of Distraction

But Treitschke didn’t just warn of the diminishment of educational institutions; he feared for an entire culture of attention. “The greatest danger that threatens the culture of modern man,” writes Treitschke, is that he must read amidst “the never-ending distraction of our inner life, in the excess of mental impressions and information of all kinds that assails us daily, stripping our minds from nature.”³⁰ Modern man has become alienated from himself and from nature; the cause of this predicament is information overload. Invoking Socrates’s worries about the invention of writing in the *Phaedrus*, Treitschke goes on to claim that the “danger” of “*Scheinwissen* and *Scheindenken*” (pseudoknowledge and pseudothinking) has risen immeasurably since the invention of the printing press and the proliferation of newspapers and periodicals.³¹

The critique of journalism as a source of superficiality was, of course, nothing new. Almost half a century before Treitschke’s book appeared, Søren Kierkegaard had railed against the “tyranny of newspaper literature,” which, according to him, shrewdly marketed articles so vacuous and forgettable that it could keep repackaging the same pieces every few days. Journalism’s business model turned, Kierkegaard concluded, on the shoddiness of its product. Treitschke would likely have agreed, as did a number of later

critics of the medium, such as the Viennese satirist Karl Kraus, who admirably cataloged Kierkegaard's thoughts on journalism in 1925.³²

But it's also worth noting that Treitschke was writing in an era during which German-language journalism underwent major changes. The great liberal dailies published in German, among them two of the continent's best newspapers, the *Berliner Tageblatt* and the *Neue Freie Presse*, for example, were founded between 1854 and 1872. And for an observer like Treitschke, the boost in quality had the paradoxical effect of making matters worse. The better journalism became, the more easily its offerings of "pseudoknowledge" could be confused with their genuine counterparts. Moreover, thanks to new modes of financing and new mechanisms of production and distribution, the newspaper industry of the late nineteenth century grew to be just that: a modern industry, with thicker editions appearing more frequently. The increase in quantity was endlessly fretted over. "Modern man," laments Treitschke, reads "on average ten times more than he can mentally manage."³³ These modern reading habits contribute to a type of cognition that is "cursory" and result in a character formed by ephemeral impressions and incapable of recognizing, much less embracing, anything of lasting value and meaning.³⁴

For Nietzsche, too, modern print culture was embodied in journalism and its unremitting pursuit of the news, of what was of the moment. The timelessness that Nietzsche longed for was not simply a matter of transcending time and place. Instead, it consisted of an untimely refusal to succumb to the "idolatrous" cult of novelty: the latest headline, the latest commentary, the latest feuilleton. It manifested itself in the disposition of those rare individuals who hadn't been "caught up in the dizzying haste of our hurtling era."³⁵

Although the old philosopher, who has a contrarian streak, often rejects the assertions of others, one set of claims he readily endorses is the following diatribe against journalism, as uttered by his younger companion:

In practice, the daily newspaper takes the place of education, and anyone, even a scholar, who still lays claim to culture or education typically relies on this sticky layer of mediation grouting the gaps between every form of life, every social position, every art, every science, every field—a layer as reliable and sturdy as the paper it's printed on tries to be. . . . Now you tell me, my most excellent master, what hopes I should have in the struggle against this universally dominant reversal of all real educational striving—how courageously I, as an individual teacher, can act when I know full well that the steamroller of pseudo-education will crush every seed of true education I cast? Think how useless even the most laborious work is for a teacher who wants to lead even one student back to the infinitely distant and hard-to-grasp Hellenic world, the true homeland of our culture, when this same student an hour later will reach for a newspaper.³⁶

Here and elsewhere, the lectures resonate with the observations of today's technology critics, who worry that that our compulsive checking of Facebook

feeds, Twitter notifications, and e-mail alerts have left us hyperstimulated and underfocused. But the younger companion's stance is closer to Matthew Crawford's than to Sherry Turkle's. Of these two leading commentators on technology and the self, it is Crawford who tracks the deeper roots of what he deems our current crisis of attention in the well-formed dispositions that we bring with us when we come to rely on our new gadgets. Our iPhones haven't made us distracted; we already were. Those who design our new digital technologies are simply taking advantage of a broader cultural background.³⁷ Similarly, the younger companion maintains that journalism hasn't so much transformed us as exploited the social and cultural holes—"the gaps"—left in the wake of a modernity characterized by specialization and easily accessible information.

One of the paradoxes Nietzsche's lectures confront readers with is, indeed, that the journalist owes a great deal to an unlikely source: the academic specialist. The younger companion frames the remarks just cited by lamenting, "Now academic study is spread across such a large area that anyone with good though not exceptional talents who still wants to achieve something in his field will pursue an extremely specialized subfield and remain totally unconcerned with everything else." German society, according to the younger companion, encourages the specialist in this:

In Germany, where they know how to drape such painful facts in a glorious cloak of ideas, they even admire this narrow specialization among our scholars and view their straying ever farther from true education as a moral phenomenon: "loyalty to particulars" or "sticking to one's last" is celebrated above all else.

Concerned only with cultivating the "narrowest" expertise, German academics of the late nineteenth century have ceded broader questions and concerns to other, nonacademic writers and thinkers. And journalism has seized the moment. "We are already at the point," declares the younger companion,

where, in every general question of a serious nature, and especially the deepest philosophical problems, the scientist or academic as such no longer has anything at all to say, while a sticky, adhesive layer that has worked its way between all the sciences—journalism—finds its calling precisely here, and carries it out according to its nature: as day-labor, as its name suggests.

Despite sharing these views, and for all his crotchety, the old philosopher isn't as pessimistic about the prospects for real education. Neither was Nietzsche. In the introduction to the lectures, Nietzsche claims that aristocratic education is the natural order of things. In contrast to the current "culture of lies," real education has "nature" on its side. Nietzsche also exhorts readers to find solace in "thoroughly German tendencies" for "strengthening education," which are "full of promise for the future." And

Nietzsche saw further reasons for optimism. In the preface for his planned volume, he states that he is addressing himself to nondistracted readers, which, of course, presupposes the existence of at least some such readers.³⁸ Like the old philosopher, he seems not to have given up hope.

The Topography of the Schools Debate

Even as he lectured in Basel, Nietzsche saw himself as contributing to a specifically German debate about the future of educational and cultural institutions in an age of distraction. In doing so, he was trying to make himself heard in a crowded and complex arena. The traditional humanist *Gymnasium* emphasized the mastery of Latin and Greek, but its critics demanded a “modern” curriculum that included more than just ancient languages. Over time, their admonitions led to significant increases in the number of *Realschulen*, which expanded the traditional curriculum to include more mathematics, science, and modern languages like French and English. Between 1890 and 1914, the number of *Realschulen* surged from 138 to 180 in Prussia, while the number of *Gymnasien* edged up by only 13, to 367. Despite pockets of reform, the *Gymnasium* and the *Bildungsbürgertum* (cultured bourgeoisie) whom it served maintained their privilege throughout Nietzsche’s day. It’s true that not long before Nietzsche held his Basel lectures, the *Gymnasium* lost its monopoly on being the entryway to university study (which no doubt disturbed him deeply). During the 1880s, however, only about 3 percent of elementary school students went on to attend a *Gymnasium*, most from origins that were far from humble. Thus, more than 70 percent of the students at Prussian universities hailed, in the late Wilhelmine era, from upper-middle-class or outright wealthy families.

But there were also calls for reform—many of them, in fact—that neither demanded more science and mathematics nor had much in common with Treitschke’s narrative of cultural decline. Some of the more vociferous critics of the nineteenth-century *Gymnasium* fulminated against what they saw as its anachronistic humanism, while others singled out for abuse the institution’s role in shaping a hierarchy that was, to their minds, corrosive for society.

Consider the views of Paul de Lagarde, a right-wing firebrand who had a large following in Germany for much of the Second Empire. De Lagarde insisted that the humanist *Bildung* the *Gymnasium* touted was a blight, for it did nothing to prepare students to improve a modern world that was morally, spiritually, and socially corrupt. The *Gymnasium* abetted this corruption by maintaining the authority of the cultured elite.³⁹ Meanwhile, Friedrich

Lange, president of the *Realschulmänner* (men of the *Realschule*), charged the *Gymnasium* with instilling in the upper-middle classes the “sterile” scholasticism that, as he saw it, had come to dominate German culture.⁴⁰

Nietzsche shared elements of these views, but he had other concerns as well. Indeed, his response to the schools debate encompasses a number of positions that don’t readily cohere. The patchwork character of Nietzsche’s responses, or so he implies, is a function of the paradoxical nature of the debate itself. One task Nietzsche set for himself throughout the lectures was to demonstrate how trends that seemed at odds were actually working in tandem.

On the Genealogy of Miseducation

In the introduction to the lectures, Nietzsche sets forth as his “thesis” the idea that “our educational institutions, built originally upon entirely different foundations, are presently dominated by two tendencies, seemingly opposed but actually equally ruinous in practice and ultimately converging in their effects. One is the drive to *expand education* as much as possible; the other is the drive to *diminish and weaken it*.” Nietzsche doesn’t yet say where these drives proceed from. He merely remarks that the latter robs education of its independence by pushing it into the service of the state. In the lectures themselves, the situation turns out to be even more paradoxical. When the old philosopher condemns the ideal of broadly educating “the folk” as both the blueprint for a “saturnalia of barbarism” and as a threat to “the natural hierarchy in the realm of the intellect,” he could be attacking either progressive or capitalist educational aims. Both, suggest Nietzsche’s characters, are responsible for a “ruinous” expansion—and weakening—of the system. Progressive educational goals not only included that of expanding access to humanistic education but also the aim of using humanistic education as a way of liberating the “free personality” of the individual. Such thinking, suggest the lectures, has resulted in a pedagogy concerned mostly with helping young people express themselves.⁴¹ These modes of instruction instill in students a fateful impudence toward both language and real culture. Instead of learning reverence and seriousness, they become habituated to prattling on and putting forth ill-informed and unripe judgments about the most sacred matters. For Nietzsche, this is precisely the kind of thing cultural journalists do. Thus, from the *Gymnasium* on, students bear what the old philosopher calls “the repulsive stamp of our aesthetic journalism.”

But it’s the system and principles of advanced capitalism managed by technocrats—known in Germany then as national liberal economics—that

pose an even greater threat to real education. Or, at least, that is what the younger companion thinks: “I felt I could tell where the call for the greatest possible expansion and spread of education was coming from most loudly and clearly. Expansion is one of the favorite national-economic dogmas of the day.” Large swaths of the population, he argues, have bought into this dogma—and the notion of happiness in which it comes packaged—with catastrophic results for the educational system:

Any education that makes a person go his own way, that suggests goals above and beyond earning money, or that takes a lot of time, is hated by those who hold this view: they even try to dismiss these different educational ideas as “higher egotism” or “unethical educational epicureanism.” What the moral code operative here demands is the exact opposite: a *rapid* education, so that you can start earning money quickly, and at the same time a thorough enough education so that you can earn *large amounts* of money. Culture is tolerated only insofar as it serves the cause of earning money, but that much culture is also demanded. In short: humanity has a necessary claim to earthly happiness—and that is why education is necessary—but that is the only reason why!

Despite, then, what the introduction intimates about the drives dominating the educational system—seemingly opposed social drives are actually aligned, but have *different* sources—the “tendency” most responsible for pushing education toward expansion, German capitalism, is *simultaneously* the one most responsible for pushing education toward utilitarian narrowing. However, it’s a different force that the younger companion explicitly singles out as the great agent of weakening education. This isn’t the state—though with its desire for ever-more efficiently trained bureaucrats to serve in its expanding apparatus, it contributes massively to this process—but, rather, the culture of specialization that has pushed the important questions out of education and into journalism, the institution into which, in Nietzsche’s lectures, all the bad developments in modern society seem to feed.

Specialization and Its Discontents

Criticisms of academic specialization were leveled not just against universities but against humanistic study in the classical *Gymnasium* as well. De Lagarde and Lange, for example, discussed both secondary education and universities in much the same vein. None other than the future kaiser excoriated specialization in the schools even more directly. Writing to a friend in 1885, Wilhelm II complained about the “scalpel of the fanatical philologists” teaching at the *Gymnasien*, under which every sentence of antiquity was “halved and quartered until the skeleton was found.” Students

were malformed into spiritless dolts.⁴² A diverse group of critics, including Nietzsche, condemned instruction in classics that, to their minds, vivisected antiquity, rather than brought it to life.⁴³

One consequence of the Prussian educational reforms of the early nineteenth century was that *Gymnasium* teachers had to study philology at the university level. And this circumstance had what Suzanne L. Marchand has described as a “regrettable ripple effect on secondary education.” *Gymnasium* teachers “tended to hand on the specialized text-interpretive skills and detail-fetishism they learned in the seminar to their young students.”⁴⁴ At the same time, the great nineteenth-century pathologist and anthropologist Rudolf Virchow, who advocated rigorous study of classical languages at the secondary school level, was also sounding a familiar note when he complained that *Gymnasium* students graduated with far too little knowledge in the natural and physical sciences.

In 1888, several sides of the debate joined forces and organized a “Mass Petition for Thoroughgoing School Reform,” which advocated for specific changes in the educational system such as an expanded curriculum. Almost two years after receiving the petition, and only after being prompted by Kaiser Wilhelm II, the Prussian Minister of Education, Gustav von Gossler, convened a conference on educational reform. No one expected anything good to come of it. Conservative defenders of the humanist *Gymnasium* and university feared that their standards and distinction would be sacrificed to the “demands of the present,” either through a relaxing of classical language requirements or a fuller expansion of university admission to *Realschule* students.⁴⁵ Advocates of reform, for their part, doubted that a conference organized by a staunch defender of the classical *Gymnasium* would lead to any changes. The kaiser opened the proceedings with an implicit rebuke and an explicit jeremiad. By implication, he condemned his own minister’s failure to extricate German secondary schools from a “monastic” model of education that left students “unprepared for modern life.” Latin essays should be replaced by German essays; ancient history with German history; mental strain with physical strain.⁴⁶ Despite the royal impetus for change, however, the conference ended with resolutions for only minor reforms.

Crises of the Humanities

Not by chance, this debate about the future of secondary education took place just as the traditional humanist disciplines were ceding their dominance to science and mathematics at the postsecondary level. In the key forty-year period between 1841 and 1881, enrollment in philosophy, philology, and history within “philosophy faculties,” which traditionally

included all fields of study but law, medicine, and theology, declined from 86 percent to 63 percent. Enrollment in mathematics and the natural sciences increased, meanwhile, from 14 percent to 37 percent of all students matriculating at German universities.⁴⁷ Similarly, between 1868 and 1881, enrollments in the more humanities-oriented disciplines at Prussian universities dropped from 60 percent of the total to just over 53.5 percent, while in mathematics and the natural sciences the needle moved the other way, going from 20.6 percent to 32.4 percent.⁴⁸

These enrollment shifts were not catastrophic but they were significant enough to support narratives of decline. Humanistic scholarship flourished in late nineteenth-century Germany, leading one recent commentator to liken its culture of inquiry to that of the Italian renaissance.⁴⁹ And yet, the laments of some late nineteenth-century German humanists about their impending cultural irrelevance sound much like some of the complaints issued by the embattled English professors of today. In academia, as elsewhere, crisis is generally a matter of perception, and even in what today might seem like a “golden age” for humanists, German scholars worried about their own crisis of the humanities.⁵⁰

But this late nineteenth-century German crisis was not simply an effect of the timeless tendency of academics to see their situation as particularly imperiled. Broader shifts in the culture of scholarship really did threaten ideals that many humanist scholars held dear. Part of Wilhelm von Humboldt’s venerated genius as a theorist of the modern university was to braid together neohumanistic ideals of self-development—*Bildung*—with modern notions of specialized scholarship and research: *Wissenschaft* and *Forschung*. This configuration, however, proved difficult to keep in place, in part because of the success of the research seminar that followed in the wake of the reforms Humboldt initiated. Humboldt and contemporaries such as Friedrich Schleiermacher imagined professors and students challenging each other in a relationship of first among equals, with professors benefiting from the nimbleness of young minds and students gaining, above all, the *Bildung* that was purported to accompany robust, focused intellectual exploration. The seminars certainly helped German professors excel, in the humanities as well as mathematics and the natural and physical sciences. As professors strove to produce research for credentialed experts in their fields in accordance with new standards of excellence, however, the atmosphere of open exchange and the sense of the unity of knowledge, both of which Humboldt and his peers had prized, became harder to foster.

The research seminar, as Lorraine Daston and others have shown, soon began to function as *the* chief site of academic specialization and professionalization.⁵¹ Nineteenth-century scholars still argued that seminars formed a scholarly self characterized by distinct virtues such as openness to debate,

attention to detail, and a critical disposition. Over the nineteenth century, however, this scholarly self was increasingly seen as an impossible ideal, an etiolated remnant of Humboldtian *Bildung*. Humboldt himself never considered the university student's participation in the pursuit of *Wissenschaft* primarily as training for a career in academia. Rather, he saw university study as a process of mental cultivation that would make people more effective professionals; the process would thus benefit the state, but ultimately the flourishing of much more—one's humanity. Though always conceived of by Humboldt as an end in itself, *Wissenschaft* was thought to form young minds. By the middle of the century, however, students were being formed, as Nietzsche put it, into "servants" of a *Wissenschaft* that was more a bureaucratic system than a way of life.

As academic disciplines became more specialized and professionalized, they veered toward insularity and fragmentation. And philology led the way. It was the philologist August Böckh who, in 1812, launched the modern research seminar at the newly established University of Berlin. In the decades that followed, philology increasingly abandoned traditional humanist concerns with the good life or civic virtue and focused instead on historical reconstruction of passages, methodological questions, and technical debates that only a small circle of experts could follow. "We're turning out men who know everything about laying the foundations," worried one German philologist in 1820, "but forget to build the temple."⁵² "Universal geniuses," or discipline-crossing men of letters such as Humboldt himself, all but disappeared, as mastery of the "scientific" methods of a particular field came to characterize the ideal scholar.

Eventually, scholars began to theorize about the incommensurability of different branches of academic knowledge. The idealist philosophical systems that had underwritten much early nineteenth-century thinking about *Wissenschaft* gradually lost their purchase, and the meaning-bearing ideal of the unity of all knowledge became harder and harder to sustain. And yet the ideal of the unity of knowledge, of *Wissenschaft*, continued to hold sway over many German scholars. Longing to treat their work as a part of an organic whole but unable to do so, they felt diminished and adrift, like "journeymen" serving "no master," in the words of one of the most eminent historians in late nineteenth-century Germany.⁵³

Philosophy was hit especially hard by this loss. In the early years of the nineteenth century, it owed its new position atop the disciplines in no small part to the idea that it was better suited to work toward an understanding of the unity of knowledge—which, clearly, one couldn't hope to pursue by accumulating facts through natural science methods alone. Specialization and fragmentation affected natural scientists, who weren't immune from crises of purpose, too. Consider the physicist Hermann von Helmholtz, for

example. In 1862 he distinguished between the natural and human sciences and argued that, of the two groups, the human sciences were more properly scientific. In a time when the natural sciences were increasingly enlisted in the service of the state, the human sciences, he suggested, were engaged more directly with the essential task of *Wissenschaft*: separating “pure” from “impure” knowledge.⁵⁴ Yet Helmholtz surely found some solace in the sharp increases in state funding for the natural and physical sciences over the second half of the nineteenth century. Helmholtz, for one, received the dizzying sum of 1.5 million marks from the state to start a physics institute outside Berlin.⁵⁵

In this environment, the institutional authority of humanist scholars gradually began to wane, as natural and physical scientists increasingly ascended to the upper ranks of university administration and the academies. Humanist scholars thus had powerful incentives to characterize their research as useful and beneficial to the state in the ways that the natural and physical sciences had come to be. And many acted on them.⁵⁶ At the same time, some of the very scholars who pioneered big philology projects also doubled down on their commitment to the ideal of amassing knowledge for the sake of knowledge alone, doing so, moreover, in a manner that invited the charge of sterility. In 1855, Böckh proudly stated that no question was too small for serious scholarship.⁵⁷

For some humanists, then, the problems extended well beyond declining enrollments. Here is how the introduction to Fritz Ringer’s classic study, *The Decline of the German Mandarins*, evokes the sense of crisis in Nietzsche’s day:

Struggle as they will, the mandarins are likely to find their influence upon public affairs reduced. Party leaders, capitalists, and technicians will usurp their leadership. Not even the educational system will be exempt from attack. Ever growing numbers of students will come to the university for “some sort of an education,” and they will want to study such practical subjects as journalism and machine building, rather than Latin or metaphysics. The traditional schooling of the elite, designed to turn out mandarins, heroes and symbols of a broad culture, will no longer seem practical enough to modernists. All kinds of utilitarian considerations will be brought forth to advance the cause of technology. Some of the mandarin intellectuals themselves may unwittingly slide into forsaking spiritually meaningful learning for the more certain rewards of specialization and routine research.⁵⁸

Nietzsche was far from alone in taking a stand that will be familiar to anyone who follows twenty-first-century debates about the humanities and the purpose of higher education: if we reduce the value of higher education to the material return on a financial investment or to its mere utility to the state, and thus allow true humanistic study to be eclipsed, we risk winding up spiritually impoverished.

So what was distinctive about Nietzsche’s response to the sense of crisis? In marked contrast to the endless charts and tables that filled the reform

tracts of the day, detailing how many hours of Greek or biology *Gymnasium* students should take, Nietzsche offered conventional polemics, chiliastic-sounding appeals to a “purified German spirit” as the greatest and also most “mysterious” hope for change, and a series of nontabular ideas for addressing the situation: make language instruction productively rigorous; teach students to be “physically repulsed” by examples of Germany’s “pseudoculture”; use the classic German authors—for example, Goethe and Schiller—to help students develop the “sense of form” they would need in order to appreciate ancient models; recruit inspiring teachers; admit *Gymnasium* and university students more selectively, so that the ones with too little academic talent are weeded out and put on the useful path of vocational training; provide support for the talented students without means. The *Gymnasium* and university should be both meritocratic and aristocratic—no genius left behind! Although Nietzsche hazarded suggestions for improvement through his characters, he was more sensitive to the difficulty of reform than many of his contemporaries, and also than many of our own.

Few serious commentators on the crisis of education in the present-day United States suggest that substantive change will come easily. This goes for Mark Edmundson, William Deresiewicz, and Andrew Delbanco, three of the most prominent voices calling for American colleges and universities to honor the humanist mission of equipping young people to lead an examined life while guiding them toward a measure of civic-mindedness.⁵⁹ Delbanco, for example, states that with “economic pressures” bearing down on the system, “keeping the idea of college alive for more than a privileged few is a huge challenge.”⁶⁰ And keeping it alive in those rarified circles will be, he adds, no mean feat either, given that “many colleges, especially those high in the pecking order, have gotten too close to the world of money.”⁶¹

Edmundson, Deresiewicz, and Delbanco—all of whom work or have worked as English professors—are bothered by what they see as the state of higher education in postrecession America. Corporatized, status-crazed administrations abet and even celebrate the vocational spirit pervading many of the country’s best schools. Edmundson, Deresiewicz, and Delbanco would likely nod, knowingly and wearily, were they to read the following passage from Harvard’s 2013 report on the decline in its humanities majors and enrollments:

Research has demonstrated that university disciplines must do at least one of three things to draw the support of university administrators. To be successful, the discipline must either (i) be devoted to the study of money; or (ii) be capable of attracting serious research money; or (iii) demonstrably promise that its graduates will make significant amounts of money.⁶²

Yet if Edmundson, Deresiewicz, and Delblanco can seem cynical in their accounts of the problems besetting higher education in America, they are,

to an even greater extent, sanguine. Delbanco is representative of the group in suggesting that commonsensical moves, such as a renewed investment in undergraduate instruction at research universities, will go a long way toward ensuring that college is “what it should be”—namely, “a place where young people fight out among and within themselves contending ideas of the meaningful life, and where they discover that self-interest need not be at odds with their concern for one another.”⁶³ Like Edmundson and Deresiewicz, he believes that even though students at liberal arts colleges are opting in ever greater numbers to major in more preprofessional fields, both there and elsewhere young people still long to grapple with the big questions on which literature and philosophy challenge us to reflect. How do we become who we are? How should we live?

Similarly, Nietzsche wrote as a humanist concerned about the deleterious effects of utility thinking on students’ desires to study antiquity or the humanities more broadly. He also stressed the importance of excellent, committed teachers. And like his counterpart critics in the United States of the twenty-first-century, Nietzsche thought that students were capable of engaging with the material that matters most. Indeed, he has the old philosopher of his lecture series effuse over the learning potential of German university students. The philosopher lauds “the honest German drive for knowledge” that resides—and for the most part remains locked—within them.

But for Nietzsche, the problem of activating that drive was formidable for modern German students:

The feeling for classical Hellenic culture is so rare, resulting as it does from a combination of the most strenuous educational struggle and artistic gifts, that only a brutal misunderstanding enables the *Gymnasium* to claim to awaken it. And awaken it in people of what age? Young enough that they are still yanked blindly around by the gaudiest fashions and inclinations of the day, when they have not the slightest sense in themselves that this feeling for the Hellenic, *if* it ever is awakened, must immediately turn aggressive and express itself in a constant battle against the supposed culture of the present. For the *Gymnasium* student of today, the Hellenes as such are dead.

How could teachers induce students to truly engage material from a culture—antiquity, in this case—that was an inversion of their own? In what Nietzsche called the “pseudoculture” of modernity, with its incessant pursuit of the new, how could students be compelled to engage a culture that, for Nietzsche, stood in for everything that modern Germany was not? The best hope for overcoming the malaise of modernity was an embrace of radically foreign and ancient cultures. But such an engagement *required* the very shift of values that connection with antiquity promised to bring about. If true education was thus necessary for true education, to paraphrase a line in Nietzsche’s preface, where could education begin? Evoking this situation,

the old philosopher intones, “Helpless barbarian, slave of the present day, lying in the chains of the passing moment and hungering—always, eternally hungering!” How could teachers hope to revive a pedagogical ideal and its values when the culture upon which they depended was, in effect, “dead”?

In the lectures, when the younger companion, who has left his position as a teacher, despairs over what he takes to be the futility of imparting ancient Greek culture to students who will soon “reach for a newspaper,” the old philosopher tells him to have faith. But in trying to offer reasons to be hopeful, the philosopher only winds up deepening the hole of doubt. He asserts that a change for the better will happen. However, the mechanisms of change—for example, “the renewal of the true German spirit”—are fuzzy, and how they can be activated remains unclear. The same can be said of the more concrete vehicles for progress, such as German classicism. The old philosopher insists at one point that studying Schiller and Goethe properly will help *Gymnasium* students access the culture of ancient Greece. But he admits that students can’t even read the German classics, much less the Greek classics. Immersed in a culture that “stands in relation to the German spirit” as a “journalist to Schiller,” modern German students are drawn to linguistic pulp. Indeed, the old philosopher concedes that for the time being, the reasonable course of action is probably just to teach classical culture from the “limited” perspective of responsible “scholarly erudition.” The present is so far gone that “the narrowest, most limited points of view are in some sense correct, because no one is capable of reaching, or even identifying, the place from which all these points of view are in the wrong.” With “emotion in his voice,” the young companion responds to this remark by asking: “No one?” Thereupon both he and the old philosopher fall silent, and the third lecture comes to a dolorous end.

Throughout the lectures, the two figures raise such questions, alternately trenchant and hyperbolic, about the tenability of educational reform. Generally speaking, they are questions that Edmundson’s, Deresiewicz’s, and Delbanco’s nostalgia-flavored books, as well as countless others like them, leave unasked.⁶⁴ But the trenchant ones are precisely *the* questions that could deepen our own conversations about higher education today. The problem, as Nietzsche saw it, was not just one of specialization or even of the spirit of utilitarianism, but of the very cultures of modernity from which they had emerged.

Nietzsche vs. Humboldt

Nietzsche’s main response to these more fundamental questions was a radical, if rather vague, vision of a pedagogy of the future. The radical

side of it hasn't always been acknowledged. Indeed, it's been repeatedly said about Nietzsche's lectures on education that they essentially hark back to Humboldt's "neohumanism."⁶⁵ The claim has some merit, to be sure: like Humboldt, Nietzsche placed the formation of the individual through the free cultivation of the highest faculties at the center of the educational process. And Nietzsche's concerns about the intrusion of state interests into the university resemble Humboldt's own worries about the relationship of the university and the state.

At times, Nietzsche seems to identify with the tradition of neo-humanism. The lectures invoke the ideal of "classical education" (*klassische Bildung*), for instance, a phrase that has strong Humboldtian resonances. They lionize the great philologist Friedrich August Wolf, a friend of Humboldt's, who famously encouraged Germans to find inspiration in the culture of classical Greece. And several of the statements about the Greek model in *On the Future of Our Educational Institutions* read like attempts to channel the spirit of German classicism, something that many of Nietzsche's contemporaries eagerly set out to do in addressing the schools question.⁶⁶ Indeed, the old philosopher lyrically (or perhaps floridly) discusses how German students must have "these teachers, our classic German writers, to sweep us away with them under the wingbeats of their ancient quest—to the land of their deepest longings, Greece."

But ultimately the Greece that Nietzsche holds up as a model is very different from the one revered by German classicism, which, as in the case of Humboldt himself, praised in Greek culture such things as the harmonious balance of different characteristics, symmetry, and simplicity.⁶⁷ The old philosopher doesn't look to the study of Greece to facilitate a process of development—or *Bildung*—whereby Germans would take on those qualities. He wants a process wholly out of sync with the ethos of German classicism:

A true purification and renewal of the Gymnasium can proceed only from a deep and violent purification and renewal of the German spirit. The bond that truly links the innermost essence of the German with the genius of the Greek is a very mysterious one, extremely difficult to grasp. But until the true German spirit in its noblest and uttermost need reaches out for the saving hand of Greek genius, as though for a firm handhold in the raging river of barbarism . . . the Gymnasium's goal of classical education will sway back and forth in the breeze, untethered to anything.

"Violent purification" was decidedly not the kind of measure Humboldt or his contemporaries advocated in their writings on education reform and "*Bildung*." Nor would they have welcomed the stress Nietzsche's old philosopher lays on the curtailment of freedom: "All education begins with the very opposite of what everyone so highly esteems nowadays as 'academic

freedom.” Humboldt prized both the freedom of the educational process and freedom within the process. He thought that both schools and students needed academic freedom, and that anyone, or at least any man, had the potential to achieve *Bildung*. Humboldt’s classicism was a liberal one.

Nietzsche, by contrast, believed that real *Bildung* was the preserve of a select few, and he exalted restriction, subordination, and obedience as pedagogical principles.⁶⁸ Although the Basel lectures fault Prussia’s educational system for having an overly “strenuous” exam structure that fosters a bureaucratic mindset, this is a critique of their mechanical character, not of their difficulty.⁶⁹ Indeed, the lectures sound more often as though their object of scorn were the sort of teaching we would associate with, say, a Waldorf school in the Northern California of today, rather than with Prussian pedagogy in the time of the Iron Chancellor.

What sets the old philosopher off as much anything else is his sense that *Gymnasium* students are being coddled, that they are being misled into thinking that their individual self-expression is necessarily meaningful. The old philosopher becomes nearly apoplectic when he bewails how “every student is treated as being capable of literature, as someone *allowed* to have opinions about the most serious people and things,” when “any true education will strive with all its might precisely to *suppress* this ridiculous claim to independence of judgment on the part of the young person, and to impose strict obedience to the scepter of the genius.”⁷⁰ “With their essay assignments” that encourage self-expression, German *Gymnasien* “promote this despicable, unconscionable scribbling, as long as they refuse to take immediate, practical discipline in spoken and written language as their sacred duty, as long as they treat their mother tongue as nothing but a necessary evil or a dead thing, I cannot consider them educational institutions in the true sense of the word.”⁷¹

***Bildung* for Geniuses**

Culture, according to the old philosopher, is created and transmitted by genius, and genius is developed through the most arduous, disciplined, “all-consuming” training and the utmost seriousness, as the Greeks and Romans knew. Education, the ultimate value of which is its value for culture (and thus life), should therefore have as its ultimate end the promotion of genius; where genius isn’t nurtured properly, it will fail to flourish—to the detriment of the nation. At times, *On the Future of Our Educational Institutions* frames genius in conventional terms, namely, as the agency through which real works of art are produced: this is what Immanuel Kant had claimed.⁷² But Nietzsche was also thinking of Wagner, who may have attended the second Basel lecture. The younger companion frames

genius as the kind of cultural savior Wagner wanted to be—“the redeemer from the present moment.” And the lectures as a whole propose that genius should have the kind of significance for national identity that Wagner claimed for himself and his art.

The old philosopher posits that genius is of supracultural provenance; it has a “metaphysical origin” and “home.” And yet genius can also take on and exemplify the virtues of a particular people:

For a genius to appear, to emerge from a people; to reflect as it were the whole image of a people and its particular strengths in its full array of colors; to reveal this people’s highest purpose in the symbolic essence of an individual, and in that individual’s eternal work, thus linking his people to the eternal and freeing it from the ever-changing sphere of the momentary—all of this the genius can do only if he has been ripened and nourished in the motherly lap of his people’s culture.

The fact that only a small fraction of students possess such genius doesn’t matter to the philosopher. One genius, he contends, can have a transformative effect on those around him. The lectures conclude with the old philosopher trying to make just this point by conjuring a genius placed within an orchestra made up of the kind of boorish mediocrities whom, he suggests, nineteenth-century Germany has excelled at producing:

But finally, your imagination soaring, put a genius—a real genius—in the midst of this mass. Right away something unbelievable happens. It is as if this genius has entered by an instantaneous transmigration of soul into all of these savages, and now only a single inspired eye looks out of them all. Look and listen now—and you will never see or hear your fill! Now when you observe the orchestra in its sublime storms or heartfelt laments—when you can almost feel the agile tension of every muscle and the rhythmical necessity of every movement they make—then you too will feel what a pre-established harmony between leader and followers is like, and how, in the hierarchy of spirits, everything strives to create such structure. You can guess from my simile, though, what I see as true educational institutions, and why I do not in the least grant the university that status.⁷³

Lacking the right kind of discipline, Prussia’s schools yield, instead of a favorable environment for genius, a “reveling in anarchy and chaos; in short, the literary traits of our journalism and, no less, of our scholars.”⁷⁴ Thus, the lectures describe a vicious cycle in which Germany’s schools themselves do much to engender the very conditions of their demise.

Big Humanities and the Death of Greece

But the sorry condition of Germany’s modern media and educational institutions wasn’t simply an effect of this cycle and the political and

economic pressures that perpetuate it. The malaise in German letters and education was ultimately a symptom of a much deeper problem, of a culture struggling to find meaningful and sustainable forms of life in modernity, that is, after the death of God. The twilight of the gods and idols didn't spell the end of religion, or what Nietzsche considered practices for organizing life. Humans would always engage in these meaning-bearing techniques and habits. Nietzsche's concern was, rather, about the kinds of practices that would take hold once Christian ones had dissipated, about whether the new practices that would inevitably emerge in place of the latter would promote cultural health and strength. In the Basel lectures, and in other texts on antiquity written around the same time, such as *Homer's Contest* and *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche poses the same question: what forms of life can sustain a culture other than or parallel to those of Christianity?⁷⁵ For Nietzsche, Christianity stood in for unhealthy and distinctly modern ways of being in the world: practices that cultivated shame, guilt, pessimism, and a longing for a different world. New, healthier forms of life were needed.

Modern culture, in Nietzsche's view, found one of its most salient and sickly expressions in the new *Reich*, which he thought was characterized by the false individuality fostering, and massively reinforced by, the education and media machines. It was a commodified individuality that amounted to impotent assertions of preferences and opinions, which were in reality merely the products of larger cultural forces and institutions. What was needed were ethical resources that could help not only resist but also overcome this "leveling."

And ancient Greece provided such ethical resources, however fragmented and mythical its modern inheritance necessarily was. But in one of the deepest tragedies of modernity, scholars had stopped helping people access those resources in a way that would be advantageous for culture and for life. As modern functionaries, scholars instead desiccated antiquity. Indeed, *On the Future of Our Educational Institutions* suggests that scholarship—and in particular philology, which Nietzsche sees as having supplanted philosophy at the university—has had a negative effect on culture. The old philosopher describes contemporary philology as another example of cultural decline:

Gradually, a profound exploration of the same eternal problems has come to be replaced by a historical, in fact a philological, pondering and questioning: What did this or that philosopher think or not think, and is this or that text rightly ascribed to him or not, and even: is this or that reading of a classical text preferable to the other? Nowadays the students in our university philosophy seminars are encouraged to ponder emasculated philosophical considerations such as these, whereas I myself have long since been accustomed to see such scholarship as a branch of philology,

and to judge its practitioners according to whether or not they are good philologists. As a result, of course, *philosophy itself* is banished from the university altogether.⁷⁶

Philology, concludes the old philosopher, would have to be pursued outside the university, which is what he appears to have been doing all this time out in the woods.⁷⁷ And philology, which has now devolved into utter pedantry, needed to be revitalized.

A few years after he held the lectures on education, and three years after the very public and humiliating reception of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche penned a series of notes for a work that was to be entitled “We Philologists.” He further developed the critique of his discipline that began to find its mature expression in the lectures. Nietzsche still identified with his field (it’s *we* philologists, after all, and the use of the pronoun seems not to be entirely ironic); he just deplored what had become of the discipline. True scholarship, he writes, has been “falsified through the incapacity of the majority” of scholars with their “false standards.”⁷⁸ There once was a genuine *Wissenschaft*, a scholarly culture to be admired. But its downfall was now epitomized by the collapse of a branch of knowledge in which “99 out of 100 philologists,” as Nietzsche puts it, “shouldn’t be philologists.”⁷⁹ Most had entered philology as a profession and treated it as another instance of modern labor, taking on piecemeal tasks assigned by senior scholars in specialized forms of intellectual industry. They blindly labored under the delusion that industriousness and attention to detail would allow them to reassemble antiquity anew and whole.

According to Nietzsche, this modern type, “academic man” (*der wissenschaftliche Mensch*), “was a real paradox.”⁸⁰ As the catastrophe of modernity unfolded around him, “academic man” picked flowers and counted “petals.” He emended and managed textual minutia. His obliviousness, however, was born out of an eagerness to know. The modern, systematic scholar was driven by the desire to “expand the treasure of knowledge.” But the modern scholar also toiled as if the university were a factory in which “every squandered minute would be punished,” thereby closing himself off from actual reflection on his material.⁸¹

Here and elsewhere, Nietzsche was certainly thinking of figures such as Theodor Mommsen, who pioneered scholarly practices based on a division of labor, a move that, for some, challenged the place of genial hermeneutics—or dynamic interpretation—at the top of the enterprise of classical scholarship.

In his inaugural lecture as secretary of the Prussian Academy of Sciences in 1858, Mommsen, one of Germany’s foremost classical scholars, declared that the purpose of disciplines like philology and history was to organize the “archive of the past.”⁸² What Mommsen had in mind, as would become evident in the kinds of projects he chose to fund, was not some abstract archive of

ethereal ideas. He wanted scholars to collect data and shape it into meticulously arranged and edited printed volumes, in which the “archive” would take tangible form. Work on the scale that Mommsen imagined would require international teams of scholars and the “liberation” of scholars from what he dismissed as the “arbitrary and senseless” divisions among the disciplines.

Mommsen used his academy position to institutionalize his vision of big philology, or what he famously termed, at a time of rapid industrialization in Prussia, the “large scale production of the sciences” (*Großbetrieb der Wissenschaften*).⁸³ After securing a three-fold increase in the academy’s budget, he supported a series of monumental projects. He oversaw the internationalization and expansion of the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, which sought to do nothing less than compile all Latin inscriptions from across the entire Roman Empire. It eventually collected more than 180,000 inscriptions and ran to thirty volumes. Mommsen also helped church historian Adolf von Harnack secure 75,000 marks and a fifteen-year timeline for a project on *Greek-Christian Authors of the First Three Centuries*, the modest goal of which was to collect all of the handwritten manuscripts of early Christianity. Mommsen’s other projects included a comprehensive prosopography of ancient Rome, funded for a period of ten years.

But “big science,” as Mommsen acknowledged late in his career, faced some of the same problems then confronting “big industry” (*Großindustrie*) and the “big city” (*Großstadt*). The sheer scale of his scholarly projects required capital, or what he termed “*Betriebskapital*.” And this constant need for capital led Mommsen and his colleagues to seek out and cultivate ever-closer relationships with the state and particular bureaucratic figures such as Friedrich Althoff, the longtime director of the Prussian ministry of education. Althoff’s administration and rationalization of German scholarship sought to align the state with intellectual progress and elevate German *Wissenschaft* to international dominance. Under the so-called Althoff System, Mommsen’s “big science” became a part of the *Wissenschaftsstaat*.⁸⁴ Classical philology, promised Mommsen, could deliver results and prestige not just for *Wissenschaft* but also for the state. It only had to be organized and funded.

Looking back on what Mommsen had accomplished for modern scholarship, the German philologist and Mommsen’s son-in-law, Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff wrote, “The large scale production of science cannot replace the initiative of the individual; no one knew that better than Mommsen. But in many cases the individual will only be able to carry out his ideas through large-scale production”—call it the digital humanities of the nineteenth century.⁸⁵ Figures such as Mommsen introduced different scales to knowledge creation and different skill sets to humanistic scholarship. They developed, coordinated, and managed teams of people in order to organize vast sets of texts and data.

But what was the purpose of all this collecting, organizing, and managing? These questions permeate both the Basel lectures and “We Philologists.” Just as Mommsen was busy assembling the “archive of the past,” Nietzsche was excoriating his fellow scholars for losing sight of philology’s real task. Ultimately, he argued, philology was not about advancing knowledge or accumulating an “archive of the past.”⁸⁶ It aimed to cultivate stronger, healthier human beings on the model, or at least the idealized model, of the ancient and classical Greeks. The real philologist was not a detached observer, but rather a lover of antiquity, someone who sought to transform himself through a passionate encounter with a distant culture. Every good and worthwhile field of study, he wrote, should be kept in check by a “hygienics of life”—practices by which whatever one learned could be integrated into the culture of the here and now, into life.⁸⁷

The failure to recognize philology as something more than a profession—as something closer to a higher hermeneutic calling that involved endless reading, interpreting, and deciphering—undermined the value of antiquity as an ethical resource. Professional philologists disassembled antiquity and its exemplary culture “reason by reason,” while believing they would do the world a great service by recovering antiquity “as it actually was.”⁸⁸ Yet with their endless historicizing and critical microscopy, they hastened the irrelevance of the classical world. For true philology, Nietzsche believed, echoing Goethe, Schiller, and Friedrich Schlegel, ancient Greece was a culture of genius that inspired awe and self-transformation.⁸⁹ It had the potential to alienate moderns from their habits and assumptions. But, again, philology had succumbed to professionalization and its parsimony of the spirit. And the narrowing of the discipline had turned philologists into emblems—the best emblems—of the perils of modern academic knowledge. Their inveterate and reductive historicism cut them off from the potential that Greek antiquity represented for moderns and pulled against a visceral respect for a healthier culture. Their modern knowledge got in their way, and thus in the way of modern culture’s rebirth, too.

“The objective-castrated philologist” was another form of the cultured liberal philistine, the sad, pathetic figure of modern man.⁹⁰ He was another modern subject of knowledge whose education taught him to “sit lazily and inactively to the side,” even as he thought himself to be a model of assiduity, and rendered him “impotent,” incapable of creating a new culture that could sustain better forms of life.⁹¹ The university and its secondary institution, the *Gymnasium*, forced students to ask what they might do for *Wissenschaft*. How might they sacrifice themselves to *Wissenschaft* and find themselves (and their careers) in its practices and values? But for Nietzsche that was the wrong question; instead, they should be forced to ask, what is the value of *Wissenschaft for us* today? Is it a healthy, animating activity? Or

does it promote, like the *Gymnasium* in the Basel lectures, a culture that is “bloated” in the manner of an “unhealthy body”? Academic knowledge, the “We Philologists” notes propose, should be concerned ultimately with the problems of the present; the value of antiquity lay in the potential of its study to shed light on now. For Nietzsche, these were not primarily epistemic challenges—he never asserted that there were no facts about antiquity. Rather, the challenges were ethical and existential. What was the purpose of studying antiquity? What compelled a nineteenth-century German to devote his life to the detailed study of ancient texts?⁹²

What had happened to philology exemplified the “complete secularization of culture and education.” Culture and knowledge had been uncoupled from values and ethics and subordinated “to material gain under a crudely understood earthly happiness.”⁹³ And this is the point at which Nietzsche’s notational, often elliptical critique of philology—which echoes quite a few parts of the old philosopher’s indictment of bureaucratized academics—presages the account of the death of God in *The Gay Science* (1882). Philology was a “symptom” of a sick modern culture that formed pessimistic people, people of the neurasthenic ilk who feature so prominently in Nietzsche’s later work.

In his notes for “We Philologists,” Nietzsche compares the decline of philology to that of religion. “It’s all over for religions that believe in gods, providence, rational world orders, miracles, and sacraments, just as it is for certain kinds of holy living, and for asceticism. For now, sickness, disaster, and misfortune are explained by scientific assumptions and conclusions. Who still believes in the immortality of the soul!”⁹⁴

There is a clear parallel here in Nietzsche’s analysis of philology. The same atrophy of faith and corrosion of commitment, thought Nietzsche, had vitiated philology as well. Philologists had adopted the disposition of modernity. According to the old philosopher, the philological scholars and educators who are charged with conveying the redemptive power of the Greek model, but who fail to do so, “no longer believe in genius.”⁹⁵ Comparing the students of his own day to those of the present (1815, say, versus 1870), he complains that:

Consciously or unconsciously, they [students] are coming in great number to the conclusion that any direct contact with classical antiquity is pointless and hopeless for them; even the majority of philologists themselves now consider such studies sterile, unoriginal, and obsolete. All the more happily, then, does this horde fall back on linguistics: here, in an infinite domain of freshly cleared arable land, where today even the most limited minds can find useful employment and even their talents can be considered positive virtues, where a rank-and-file article is exactly what is most desired, the newcomer is not refused by a majestic voice resounding out from the ruined world of antiquity—no, in this domain everyone who approaches is welcomed with open arms, and even someone whom Sophocles and Aristophanes have never

once made any particular impression on, have never once produced a creditable thought in, even he can be set down before an etymological spinning wheel, or asked to collect the detritus of far-flung dialects, and so his day passes, in linking and dividing, collecting and scattering, running around and consulting reference books. But now this usefully employed linguistic researcher, of all people, is supposed to teach! He of all people, by virtue of his position, is supposed to have something of benefit to *Gymnasium* students to offer, about the same ancient authors who have never made any impression on him, much less brought him any insight!⁹⁶

What has been eroded, then, is nothing other than philology's true foundation: faith in the supremacy of Greek culture. Like religion, Greek culture in this sense has come to an end. It has been rationalized out of existence. And this development leaves modern culture with "no basis," no resources to fund its moral life, for as presently taught, the classics have no value.⁹⁷

Philologists were thus the consummate modern skeptics, incapable of belief and blind to the origins and effects of their lust for knowledge. They were the forerunners of the townspeople who mocked the madman who ran around the marketplace crying out incessantly, "I'm looking for God! I'm looking for God!" only to realize that "we have killed him—you and I!" Like the townspeople, whose haughty laugh betrayed the inability to fully grasp the consequences of the death of God, philologists had no idea what their destruction of antiquity had done. They suffered from that most modern of diseases, self-doubt, but had somehow managed to transform it into a disciplinary virtue.⁹⁸

The decline of philology into a skeptical practice of "purification" was just another sign of what had become of *Wissenschaft*.⁹⁹ What had once been a culture dedicated to the unity of scholarship and life had degenerated into a shallow, deluded culture of "wimps," a form of "Socratism."¹⁰⁰ For Nietzsche, the best future for philology would be its "destruction."¹⁰¹ The modern, positivist philologist was the Faustian figure of modernity, caught in the paradoxical relationship of ethics and epistemology. Like the anatomist who studies life by dissecting it, the philologist studied antiquity by collecting and organizing discrete facts. Antiquity and its particular forms of life could never be revived, despite the dogged optimism of the new philological positivists like Mommsen. And yet Nietzsche continued to insist that philology was still needed to help modern man develop his own forms of life in the post-Christian world to come. "Scholarship" (*Wissenschaft*), he writes, required a "doctrine of health," a higher form of oversight, a form of "surveillance."¹⁰² The "drive to knowledge" alone would be just as unhealthy as the "hatred of knowledge."

Philology presented a basic paradox. Like history more broadly, ancient history was necessary only to the extent that it had to be overcome. The goal of philology, Nietzsche claimed, was mimesis, emulation of antiquity. But

the only means of engaging in such mimesis, philology, inhibited impassioned emulation.¹⁰³ A critical, skeptical philology was necessary to stave off illusions and false claims about antiquity, but this disposition was, as Nietzsche would argue in *The Gay Science*, no way to live. The critical faculties of philologists should be directed primarily against their *own* times; this was the approach that could make philology a life-enhancing endeavor.

After invoking for himself the status of a “child of older eras, especially the Greek one,” Nietzsche writes in *Untimely Meditations*:

This much I believe I am permitted to say about myself on account of my position as a classical philologist. I wouldn't know what the point of classical philology would be in our time if it weren't as follows: to work upon our time in an untimely manner, which means working against our time and thus upon our time, and hopefully, in doing so, for the benefit of future times.¹⁰⁴

Nietzsche's exhortation to his fellow philologists was not to be more or less historical, but to understand their work as moral psychology, as insight into the subject of modern times.¹⁰⁵ Philology as academic knowledge, according to Nietzsche, was not eternal; “Its material could be exhausted.” What could not be exhausted, however, was “the always new adaptation of each epoch to antiquity.”¹⁰⁶ Antiquity had “always been understood from the perspective of the present,” wrote Nietzsche, but “should the present now be understood from the perspective of antiquity?”¹⁰⁷ Philology should be concerned above all with modernity's relationship to the past. “It is always the relationship to the present,” he wrote, “that attracts us” to the objects of our knowledge.¹⁰⁸ Hence Nietzsche's fondness for the following story about the seventeenth-century English philologist and Bible scholar Richard Bentley. When asked by his daughter if he regretted having expended his talents and energy on the critique of others' works instead of his own compositions, Bentley replied that he had been drawn to the genius of the ancient pagans because it would allow him see beyond—and with a new perspective back into—his present moment. Having come to doubt that he could reach their heights any other way, he had decided “to climb up and sit upon their shoulders so that he might look out over their heads.”¹⁰⁹

Classical antiquity was not some cultural relic that had been buried under the movement of time and now simply had to be recovered as an exemplary historical artifact. It was not a readymade form of life that could be repeated in a different historical moment. On the contrary, through inspired transmission it could live on in an eternal, untimely present. In a post-Christian world that had, tragically, lost its “belief in genius,” as the Basel lectures have it, antiquity could continue to provide a model of alternative forms of life, other ways of living. Yet it was also a necessary alternative

to the “sick” practices of “Christentum,” which Nietzsche used to describe not merely a particular religion, but a set of “unhealthy,” metaphysically infused, life-devaluing, other-world-oriented life practices.¹¹⁰

The purpose of philology and the study of antiquity was thus to gain a better understanding of one’s epoch and to develop cultural practices for living a better life. In this sense, Nietzsche’s vision of philology is unabashedly presentist. It shares the same ends as all forms of education, history, and science—the crafting of an individual life in a modernity that Nietzsche diagnosed as bad for one’s health. There is no institution that you should respect more “than your own soul,” Nietzsche writes in his “We Philologists” notes.¹¹¹ When he claims in *The Birth of Tragedy* that the “world is only justified as an aesthetic phenomenon,” he is saying that the world has meaning and value only to the degree that it is engaged through forms of ascesis, that is, through forms of training, practice, and habit. As with all types of knowledge, the purpose of philology was to form and craft the self. Philology at its best was the active curation and cultivation of ancient forms of life. And yet, the point was to put ancient history into the service of life, to integrate its spirit into ways of living in the modern world.

This historical problem—how to pursue knowledge of the past *and* put it in the service of life—was the basic paradox that would structure Nietzsche’s entire oeuvre, starting with *The Birth of Tragedy*. Yet the tensions were heightened even further in *On the Future of Our Educational Institutions*, which stresses the importance of creatively reimagining antique models of learning in a present whose pedagogical failures are at once causes and effects of just the modern ills Nietzsche would spend the rest of his career diagnosing. Antiquity had to be overcome to be a vital force in modernity. Cultures needed examples, models for how to become great, but the only way to become healthy was ultimately to break those models. The capacity to extricate oneself from this paradox was, as Nietzsche understood it, genius.

Notes

A drastically compressed version of this essay will serve as the introduction to the forthcoming translation by Damion Searls, co-edited by Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon, of Nietzsche’s *Anti-Education* (New York Review of Books Classics, 2015). An excerpt from Searls’s new translation recently appeared as “Nietzsche Transformed: How the Philologist Became Modernity’s Philosopher with a Hammer,” *Hedgehog Review* 16, no. 3 (2014): 93–100, with a brief introduction by Wellmon that draws on the ideas and material developed in the present article. The authors would like to thank Bob Holub and Jeffrey Church for sharing (excellent) not-yet-published work that deals with Nietzsche’s lectures on education; we have profited greatly from their research. The Nietzsche

scholar Christian Emden was similarly generous in sharing his expertise with us. He read a draft of the present article and offered many useful corrections and insightful suggestions. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are ours.

1. This is not to suggest that the position at Basel would have been thought of as a particularly desirable one. Professorships in Germany were more prestigious and better paid, and the University of Basel made a practice of hiring talented young men from the German system on the assumption that they would likely return to it after a few years, as Nietzsche's predecessor had. Still, the city was beautiful, and with its patrician attachment to classical learning, a good match for Nietzsche culturally. Moreover, for a twenty-four-year-old student (who hadn't even been looking for work) to land the job was a quite a coup. In what was an accepted practice, the University of Leipzig awarded him a doctorate on the basis of the articles he had published in a scholarly journal. To hold a comparable position at a German institution would have required a second major project: the *Habilitationsschrift*.
2. In Basel, the *Gymnasium* went by a different title: the *Pädagogium*.
3. Friedrich Ritschl was, as he put it, "willing to stake" his "whole reputation on the appointment's turning out to be a success." Cited in Lionel Gossman, *Basel in the Age of Burckhardt: A Study in Unseasonable Ideas* (Chicago, 2000), 413.
4. It was in a letter of reference, a form that lends itself to hyperbole, that Ritschl made the comment about staking his reputation on Nietzsche's success. But there is no reason to doubt that Ritschl genuinely believed that Nietzsche would flourish as an academic philologist. That Ritschl did so much to help Nietzsche along, guiding his work into print in a prestigious scholarly journal, for example, points to considerable confidence on Ritschl's part. Ritschl's other students included Jacob Bernays (1824–81), Sigmund Freud's uncle-in-law, whose scholarship exerted a great influence on Nietzsche's generation. Indeed, it's well documented that Nietzsche leans on Bernays's work in *The Birth of Tragedy*.
5. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Nietzsches Briefwechsel: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazino Montinari, 24 vols. in 4 parts (Berlin, 1975–2004), 2.1:155. Henceforth abbreviated as *Briefwechsel*.
6. The *Realschule* was the more practical, more vocational parallel track to the *Gymnasium*. Up until the late nineteenth century, the only path to university study was the *Gymnasium*, and the way through the *Gymnasium* was a nine-year course of study that included Greek, Latin, religion, physics, history, literature, mathematics, and natural history. It was also characterized by strict discipline: grades were issued for conduct. The *Gymnasium* culminated with the *Abitur*—a comprehensive examination that determined university entrance and placement.
7. Of course, the term "anti-academic" isn't meant to suggest that Nietzsche was dismissive of all academics and all academic knowledge. He continued to profess his admiration for Ritschl, and, in developing his ideas about history and human perception, for example, he drew on an array of academic works in philosophy, philology, and the sciences. Our point is simply that Nietzsche became suspicious of academic knowledge. No longer was the main problem that it was so often lifeless and boring; generally speaking, academic knowledge played a key part in creating and perpetuating the malaise of modernity. Eventually, Nietzsche would also come to see the academic value of objectivity—with its goals of attaining to a disinterested, disembodied perspective and identifying truths untainted by the contingencies of their historical contexts—as a form of nihilism, at once the destroyer of Christianity and the heir of Christian nihilism. Readers interested in the evolution of Nietzsche's critique of academic

- knowledge might, for example, consider places where his *Untimely Meditations* (1874), and especially the essay “On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life,” build upon ideas he began to develop in the Basel lectures, which offer a critique of the optimistic “historical culture” that Nietzsche debunks in greater detail in the “On the Advantage” essay.
8. James Porter, *Nietzsche and the Philology of the Future* (Stanford, 2000). See also Barbara von Reibnitz, *Ein Kommentar zu Friedrich Nietzsche, Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik* (Stuttgart, 1992).
 9. Rüdiger Safranski, *Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography*, trans. Shelley Frisch (New York, 2003).
 10. Several of Nietzsche’s proposals were in fact accepted, such as the textbook he recommended for all forms (Ernst Koch’s *Griechische Schulgrammatik*, 1869), and his suggestion that Greek be mandatory for all students. By all accounts a popular and effective teacher, Nietzsche looked back with pride on his experience at the *Gymnasium* in Basel, writing in *Ecce Homo* that he “never once had occasion to mete out a punishment; even the laziest students were industrious when they were with me”; Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, in *Nietzsche Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli andazzino Montinari, 40 vols. to date (Berlin, 1967–), 6.3:267.
 11. Nietzsche, *Briefwechsel*, 1.2:248.
 12. Safranski, *Nietzsche*, 53.
 13. Nietzsche, *Briefwechsel*, 3:321.
 14. Safranski, *Nietzsche*, 56. Nietzsche’s studies of Democritus, for example, led him to address the perhaps more broadly philosophical problem of teleology, for which, in 1868, Nietzsche even sketched an outline for a possible doctoral dissertation, “Teleology Since Kant.” Here he outlines problems related to teleology, but also to the question of natural organisms, origins, and health.
 15. Nietzsche, *Briefwechsel*, 1.2:81.
 16. It was the epistemological skepticism that Nietzsche admired in Arthur Schopenhauer’s philosophy; Schopenhauer’s metaphysical side made Nietzsche uneasy. On the complexity of Nietzsche’s relationship to Schopenhauer, see Christian J. Emden, *Nietzsche and the Politics of History* (Cambridge, 2008), 46–50.
 17. Nietzsche, *Briefwechsel*, 1.2:299. It’s one thing to find philology inadequate; it’s another to see it as a major problem. Nietzsche’s notebooks and correspondence suggest that as a student he grew dissatisfied with philology as it was practiced and wanted to see it animated by a creative spark. It was in Basel in the early 1870s, though, that certain manifestations of philology became a blight for him.
 18. Cited in Safranski, *Nietzsche*, 64.
 19. Cosima von Bülow quoted in *Briefwechsel*, 2.2:140. See Safranski, *Nietzsche*, 65.
 20. Nietzsche, *Briefwechsel*, 2.1:165–66.
 21. Quoted in George S. Williamson, *The Longing for Myth in Germany* (Chicago, 2004), 234.
 22. Nietzsche, *Briefwechsel*, 2.1:155.
 23. Following unification, the state wasted little time in asserting its authority over the schools. In May of 1872, the Prussian parliament passed legislation putting all schools under state supervision; several months later, Adalbert Falk, the Prussian minister of education, promulgated the May Laws, the effect of which was to put under state control all public aspects of Catholic life, including the training of theologians. But the schools debate was driven by many factors, including concerns about Germany’s ability to hold its position as a world power, social-political

- developments like the enfranchisement of Jews and the extension of suffrage to women, and worries about whether the school system was modern enough to facilitate Germany's rise to the status of industrial powerhouse.
24. Their conflict had roots that went beyond the hiring caper; see Emden, *Nietzsche and the Politics of History*, 24–27.
 25. Early on, Nietzsche saw Basel as a peaceful patrician refuge that provided a good vantage point from which to criticize Germany, though at times struck a very different note, disparaging the city as a cultural backwater. When *The Birth of Tragedy* was greeted with controversy, he wrote that he was distressed “because I am truly dedicated, as well as grateful, to our little University, and the last thing I would want is to cause it harm.” Later, his attitude toward the city would become more complex—and ambivalent. Cited in Gossman, *Basel in the Age of Burckhardt*, 430.
 26. Clearly, Nietzsche was not above trying to win over his listeners through flattery: in the introduction to the lectures, he praises Basel's cultural institutions more effusively than he tended to in his letters. And Nietzsche may also have tried to propitiate his listeners in more subtle ways. In the dialogue that makes up most of the lectures, the views of the main characters largely coincide with Nietzsche's; but Nietzsche sometimes has his characters utter statements that would have appealed to the intellectual sensibilities of his audience, while seeming dubiously metaphysical to him. For example, one character proposes that great works should “be a pure mirror of the eternal, unchanging essence of things.”
 27. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Anti-Education: On the Future of Our Educational Institutions*, trans. Damion Searls (New York, forthcoming). We are very grateful to Damion Searls for allowing us to cite from his forthcoming translation. All translations of the lectures refer to this text, henceforth *Anti-Education*. Page numbers not available as of publication of this essay.
 28. Nietzsche had long been on Heinrich von Treitschke's radar in 1890, when Treitschke wrote about the *Gymnasium*, and Treitschke may well have known about the Basel lectures. Not long after Nietzsche gave them and published *The Birth of Tragedy*, Treitschke reproved Nietzsche and his colleague Franz Overbeck for attacking the Second Empire, from their “sulking corner” in Basel, without really knowing what was happening in Germany. See Gossman, *Basel in the Age of Burckhardt*, 442. Nietzsche, for his part, would later attack Treitschke for being just the kind of blustering anti-Semitic agitator that he—Nietzsche—couldn't stand (in 1879, Treitschke famously scapegoated the Jews as “our misfortune”).
 29. Heinrich von Treitschke, *Die Zukunft des deutschen Gymnasiums* (Leipzig, 1890), 8.
 30. *Ibid.*, 6–7.
 31. *Ibid.*
 32. Karl Kraus, *Die Fackel* [The Torch] (December 1925): 1–28.
 33. Treitschke, *Die Zukunft*, 8.
 34. *Ibid.*, 10.
 35. Nietzsche, *Anti-Education*.
 36. *Ibid.*
 37. See Mathew Crawford, *The World Inside Your Head: On Becoming an Individual in an Age of Distraction* (New York, 2015), and Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York, 2011).
 38. Such readers, admittedly, will always be in the minority, according to Nietzsche, but that they do or can exist is heartening.

39. See Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair* (Berkeley, 1961), 71–81.
40. Suzanne L. Marchand, *Down from Olympus: Archaeology and Philhellenism in Germany, 1750–1970* (Princeton, 1996), 134.
41. One wouldn't want to read Nietzsche's lectures to get a precise sense of how things stood with German *Gymnasien*, but in fairness, the definitive history of the school essay in late nineteenth-century Germany, Otto Ludwig's *Der Schulaufsatz: Seine Geschichte in Deutschland* (Berlin, 1988), presents evidence that could be used to broadly support Nietzsche's claim about this tendency. The German *Gymnasium* essay had once been an exercise in classical rhetoric. With the rise of neohumanism in the Enlightenment era, things began to change, but they changed slowly and in fits and starts. Thus, in Nietzsche's day, the German essay remained a topic of debate, with progressive reformers asking such questions as: "How can a youth who has even a somewhat lively mind work with pleasure and passion when he is bound to pre-established forms?" (194). But generally speaking, the pedagogical goals changed in such a way that less emphasis was put on "a display of rhetorical expertise" and more on the subjective needs of the writing subject.
42. Quoted in James C. Albisetti, *Secondary School Reform in Imperial Germany* (Princeton, 1983), 174–75.
43. This isn't to suggest, of course, that the critics were right. Indeed, Nietzsche makes a lot of crude generalizations about the philological establishment, overlooking the passionate commitments of figures like Jacob Bernays, whose work he drew on in *The Birth of Tragedy*. For an illuminating account of Bernays, see Anthony Grafton, *Bring Out Your Dead: The Past as Revelation* (Cambridge, MA, 2002).
44. Marchand, *Down from Olympus*, 31.
45. See Albisetti, *Secondary School Reform*, 192–291.
46. *Ibid.*, 210–15. The demand for German school reform was clearly tied to broader attempts to nationalize the school curriculum.
47. Marchand, *Down from Olympus*, 137–38; J. Conrad, *Das Universitätsstudium in Deutschland während der letzten 50 Jahre* (Jena, 1884), 136.
48. Conrad, *Das Universitätsstudium*, 140.
49. Peter Watson, *The German Genius: Europe's Third Renaissance, the Second Scientific Revolution, and the Twentieth Century* (New York, 2010).
50. It is also worth noting that at just this time the humanistic *Gymnasium* lost its lock on providing access to the university. In 1870, a special subset of *Realschulen* started awarding a diploma that began to open a door to postsecondary education that wasn't located in the *Gymnasium*. And by 1882, these schools had become known as *Realgymnasien*. Educational purists saw this development as a blow to the integrity of the university system. Treitschke, for example, was quick to express alarm, along with his characteristic vitriol: he labeled the *Realgymnasium* an institution "as misguided as its name."
51. Lorraine Daston, "The Academies and the Unity of Knowledge: Disciplining the Disciplines," *Differences* 10, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 67–86. On the emergence of modern disciplines and the culture of specialization, which had more causes than can be listed here, see also Chad Wellmon, *Organizing Enlightenment: Information Overload and the Invention of the Modern Research University* (Baltimore, 2015).
52. J. H. Voss quoted in Anthony Grafton, "Polyhistor into *Philolog*: Notes on the Transformation of German Classical Scholarship," *History of Universities* 3 (1983): 173.
53. Theodor Mommsen, *Reden und Aufsätze* (Berlin, 1905), 197.

54. See Hermann von Helmholtz, "Über das Verhältnis der Naturwissenschaften zur Gesamtheit der Wissenschaft," in *Vorträge und Reden* (Brunswick, 1903), 1: 158–85.
55. Daston gives this figure in her article, "The Academies and the Unity of Knowledge," 74; this amount would have been roughly the equivalent of tens of millions of today's dollars.
56. Nietzsche had a complex and fascinating relationship to the natural sciences. He was critical of the culture of scientific objectivity, among other things, but he also thought that scientific experiments having to do with human perception might demonstrate the impossibility of objective thought. See Christian J. Emden, *Nietzsche's Naturalism: Philosophy and the Life Sciences in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 2014).
57. See Daston, "The Academies and the Unity of Knowledge," 74.
58. Fritz K. Ringer, *The Decline of the German Mandarins, 1890–1933* (Cambridge, MA, 1969), 13.
59. See Mark Edmundson, *Why Teach? In Defense of a Real Education* (New York, 2013); William Deresiewicz, *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life* (New York, 2014); Andrew Delbanco, *College: What It Was, What It Is, and What It Should Be* (Princeton, 2011).
60. Delbanco, *College*, 159.
61. *Ibid.*, 140.
62. "The Teaching of the Arts and Humanities at Harvard College: Mapping the Future," Harvard University, Arts and Humanities Division, Humanities Project, http://artsandhumanities.fas.harvard.edu/files/humanities/files/mapping_the_future_31_may_2013.pdf.
63. *Ibid.*, 179.
64. In fairness, neither Edmundson nor Deresiewicz nor Delbanco posits a golden age of academics that the present one has supplanted. Deresiewicz, for example, stresses the historical injustices of higher education in the United States in his compact survey of it. But they all believe that things have changed fundamentally—for the worse. The following line by Deresiewicz is typical: "College used to be understood as a time to experiment with different selves, of whatever type. Now students all seem to be converging on the same self, the successful, upper-middle-class professional they've already decided they want to become"; Deresiewicz, *Excellent Sheep*, 24.
65. Glenn W. Most, "On the Use and Abuse of Ancient Greece for Life," *Cultura tedesca* 20 (2000): 31–53.
66. Fritz Blättner's *Das Gymnasium: Aufgaben der höheren Schule in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Heidelberg, 1960) provides many evocative examples of commentators expressing discontent, in a neohumanist, nostalgia-hued vein, with the lack of interest in the Greeks on the part of the late-nineteenth-century youth. Here is a representative instance (from 1890): "Fifty years ago, there was a common basis, a shared and holy ideal among *Gymnasium* students. Today, this basis has been destroyed, and one searches for new ideals. . . . Homer and Sophocles, Xenophon and Plato came across as a earthly Bible" (170).
67. See Paul Sweet, *Wilhelm von Humboldt: A Biography* (Columbus, 1978), 1:123–35.
68. The well-developed geniuses Nietzsche wants to see emerge from the system of education will, presumably, be "disruptive" figures (in today's parlance) who swim against the current of the culture and, as such, possess a high degree of independent-mindedness, as does, for example, the old philosopher. But the treatment of freedom in the lectures contrasts notably with the status of freedom

- in Humboldt's writings, where it is consistently celebrated as an ideal. In the Basel lectures, freedom is first and foremost a problem. Like the highest values in *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), the noble-sounding ideal of "academic freedom" is a dangerous instrument of subversion; indeed, it is being used to subvert the natural hierarchy of the intellect—it helps the weakest rise to the top. Consider the following diatribe by the old philosopher: "For I repeat it, my friends! All education begins with the very opposite of what everyone so highly esteems nowadays as 'academic freedom.' It begins with obedience, with subordination, with discipline, with servitude. And just as great leaders need followers, so too must the led have a leader. A certain reciprocal predisposition prevails in the hierarchy of the spirit: yes, a kind of pre-established harmony. This eternal hierarchy, toward which all things naturally gravitate, is what the so-called culture now sitting on the throne of the present is trying to overturn and destroy"; Nietzsche, *Anti-Education*.
69. The problem with these exams isn't, of course, simply that they are strenuous or that they foster obedience—in general, Nietzsche opposes neither strenuousness nor obedience; it's that they are strenuous in a way that fosters the mindless obedience of the bureaucrat. The desideratum of a rigorous course of study that involves subordination to genius is, clearly, something quite different.
 70. Nietzsche, *Anti-Education*.
 71. *Ibid.*
 72. For an overview of the "concept of genius" in Immanuel Kant and nineteenth-century German culture, see Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* (Tübingen, 1990), 1:48–94.
 73. *Ibid.*
 74. *Ibid.*
 75. Peter Sloterdijk, *Du mußt dein Leben ändern: Über Anthropotechnik* (Frankfurt am Main, 2009), 58.
 76. Nietzsche, *Anti-Education*.
 77. Having remarked to a friend, in 1871, "I live in complete estrangement from philology," Nietzsche attempted in that same year to secure for himself a position in philosophy at the University of Basel. But he lacked formal training in the field, and his attempt to switch departments failed. Here he may be exacting a little revenge on philosophy for rejecting him. See Gossman, *Basel in the Age of Burckhardt*, 285.
 78. "Notizen zu 'Wir Philologen,'" in *Friedrich Nietzsche: Nachgelassene Fragmente, 1875–1879*, vol. 8 of *Friedrich Nietzsche: Sämtliche Werke, Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Munich, 1999), 21.
 79. *Ibid.*, 20.
 80. *Friedrich Nietzsche: Nachgelassene Fragmente, 1869–1874*, vol. 7 of *Sämtliche Werke, Kritische Studienausgabe*, 613.
 81. *Ibid.*
 82. Mommsen, *Reden und Aufsätze*, 37, 38.
 83. *Ibid.*, 38.
 84. Stefan Rebenich, *Theodor Mommsen und Adolf Harnack: Wissenschaft und Politik im Berlin des ausgehenden 19. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin, 1997), 94.
 85. Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Geschichte der Philologie* (Stuttgart, 1998), 71.
 86. Mommsen, *Reden und Aufsätze*, 38.
 87. Friedrich Nietzsche, "Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen II: Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben," in *Nietzsche Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 3.1:327.
 88. Nietzsche, "Wir Philologen," 20.

89. See, in particular, Friedrich Schlegel, *Über das Studium der griechischen Poesie* (Munich, 1985).
90. Nietzsche, "Wir Philologen," 69.
91. *Ibid.*, 80.
92. In this sense, Nietzsche's view of philology was much more in line with the *Sachphilologie*, as practiced by Friedrich August Wolf, August Böckh, and Otto Jahn, which insisted that philology required a knowledge not just of ancient languages, but of culture and history. This differed from the more narrowly focused *Wortphilologie*, as practiced by Gottfried Hermann, which emphasized attention to language above all else.
93. Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene Fragmente, 1869–1874*, 243.
94. Nietzsche, "Wir Philologen," 37.
95. Nietzsche, *Anti-Education*.
96. *Ibid.*
97. Nietzsche, "Wir Philologen," 38.
98. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, in *Sämtliche Werke, Kritische Studienausgabe*, 5:335–37.
99. Ritschl refers to the traditional goal of philology as "merely the purification and cleansing of its sources"; Friedrich Ritschl, *Opuscula philologica* (Leipzig, 1866–79), 5:23.
100. Nietzsche, "Wir Philologen," 69.
101. *Ibid.*, 77.
102. Nietzsche, "Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie," 327.
103. Nietzsche, "Wir Philologen," 97.
104. Nietzsche, "Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie," 243.
105. Robert Pippin, *Nietzsche, Psychology, and First Philosophy* (Chicago, 2010).
106. Nietzsche, "Wir Philologen," 31.
107. Quoted in Porter, *Nietzsche and the Philology of the Future*, 15.
108. *Ibid.*, 57.
109. Nietzsche, "Wir Philologen," 29.
110. Sloterdijk, *Du mußt dein Leben ändern*, 58.
111. Nietzsche, "Wir Philologen," 30.