

**DYING WITH YOUR BOOTS ON: A NIETZSCHEAN ANALYSIS OF
HIGH-RISK SKIING**

by

Kirby Amiel Tarzwell

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Abstract

The concept of ‘risk’ has become one of the main ontological, existential, and epistemological categories in the modern Western world. People are continually confronted with considerable amounts of information concerning what constitutes risks and how they are to be mediated and avoided. Along side this growing concern with risk and risk avoidance, a large segment of the population continues to seek out risk itself. Although substantial sociological research has been undertaken to try and understand *why* people engage with risk, these theories and subsequent research falls short in ontological, existential, and epistemological breadth. As a response, this thesis presents a new avenue to understanding risk-taking that is based upon Nietzschean aesthetic theory and its conceptualization of the ‘Apollonian’ and ‘Dionysian’ drives that structure human existence. The world of high-risk skiing is the focal point upon which Nietzsche’s theory is applied, with the hope of not only understanding this specific area of social life, but also to demonstrate the importance that risk can play as an ontological, existential, and epistemological emancipatory category. Chapter two provides an overview of the historical inception of the concept of risk and the popular theoretical perspectives used to understand its place within the social whole. Following this, chapter three reviews the dominant theories used within the sociology of sport to understand risk-taking within the world of sport. Finally, chapter four engages Nietzsche’s theory showing how the high-risk skiing community is analogous to pre-Socratic Greek tragedy, in that it enables adherents to properly balance both Apollonian and Dionysian drives allowing them to escape the ‘reactive nihilism’ that defines the modern Western world. It is concluded that such a perspective not only

provides researchers with new tools that are based around the social importance of art and aesthetics, but also that risk is an important ontological, existential, and epistemological category that allows risk-takers to experience a more complete level of existence based upon an understanding of life that celebrates both its positive and negative aspects.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1. *The Author.*

I can't really place the moment when I first became intrigued by going fast, flying through the air, and risking my own existence in the face of oblivion. My memory is full of childhood experiences where friends and I would push towards the edge searching again and again for that experience which made one feel as if they had discovered a secret about life, but to describe the specific moment is difficult, if not impossible. What I do remember though, is those first moments of joy I experienced when my mother taught me how to ski by holding me between her legs on a small community ski hill in northern Alberta. Skiing enabled me to experience moments of ontological and existential bliss and from that point on I was hooked.

Fast forward to early December 2003. I had returned to Fernie, British Columbia that winter to work as a lift attendant for the local ski hill. It was still the early part of the ski season, so only half of the potential terrain at the ski hill was open. Therefore, two good friends of mine, Todd and Graeme, and I decided to hike up the closed side of the hill in the hopes of making some fresh tracks in the yet untouched snow. Todd and I had hiked up the previous day and during that time I had discovered a little line¹ off the ridge separating Currie bowl from Timber bowl². This line consisted of a rollover, which steadily steepened to about a 45-degree slope that was scattered sparsely at first with trees

¹ In the context of skiing, 'line' refers to the route of descent down a slope.

² Alpine 'bowls' are large terrain characteristics created when ridges run perpendicular from a main mountain ridge. This creates large bowl like terrain that are bordered by ridges on three sides. Fernie Alpine Resort consists of five such bowls (Siberia, Timber, Currie, Lizard, and Cedar) that are situated next to each other along the Lizard Range.

and then ended in a cliff band that ranged in height between 20 to 50 feet. I spotted the perfect way through the trees which then ended in a diving board like structure of rock that was situated about 30 feet above the snowfield below. I had never skied such a high consequence line before, but something in me was highly attracted to the possibility of risking my being on that tiny plot of earth.

Todd, as a burgeoning photographer, was still learning his trade at the time, so he decided to ski into the bowl to find a good place to take a picture of the action, while Graeme, who still seemed a little oblivious of what was about to happen, and I hiked the short distance to the top of the line. At the top I packed up all my gear and stepped into my skis. All the while my mind was racing. Should I do this? What if I get hurt? There's no patrol on this side of the hill to pull me out of here if something goes wrong. Nevertheless, there was never a physical moment of hesitation. I needed to do this and I wanted to do this. With everything ready to go I waved to Todd, said 'later' to Graeme, and pushed off. The first part was easy. I just had to make a few turns down the slope until I hit the trees, all the while being mindful of a possible avalanche and not getting caught in my slough³, both of which would end in me being dragged over the rocks at the bottom. Once I reached the trees I stopped and wedged myself above a tree to inspect the final section of the line. I had to ski straight down for 30 to 40 feet at which point I would then hit the diving board like structure as planned. This is a bad place for hesitation, so I

³ 'Slough' refers to the snow that is loosened while skiing a slope. Although less substantial than an avalanche, sloughs can gather enough snow and momentum to pose serious threats to the skier. Although the threat of burial is minimum, sloughs can overtake skiers, causing them to fall. If this occurs in exposed terrain, the outcomes can be very serious.

pushed off from the tree and pointed my skis toward their target. It was at this moment that my body took over and I became a passenger simply along for the ride.

In these moments when you are intensely focused on the act of staying alive, time seems to slow down and you become much more aware of the world around you and your place in it. I melted into the surroundings and became one with the snow, the mountains, and the sky. As I hit the lip that separates the earth from space, it was literally like an explosion. 'Boom!' Time still moving slowly, I remember realizing just how high in the air I was and how far down the slope I was going to fly. Instantly my mind made all the necessary calculations and I began waving my arms to keep my weight back so that I would take the brunt of the landing impact on my hip. 'Boom!' Another explosion went off as I hit the ground bringing existence back to an expected pace. I quickly stood up, as I was scared of any following snow, and skied to the bottom with the sounds of Graeme shouting excitement from the top. Once stopped at the bottom still shaking, I felt like I was a different person than I had been only moments ago. Although I had skied dangerous terrain before, this time I had an overwhelming feeling that I had taken my being to an edge that disclosed secrets about life that contradicted the taken for granted assumptions about life found within the Western post-enlightenment world. I was hooked, and from that day forward the way I saw the world and how I wanted to exist within it changed forever. Risk-taking was no longer a domain for adrenaline junkies or the mentally unstable, but a way for people to experience a fuller being and dissolve away the ontological and existential barriers that define the modern Western world. Todd snapped a picture of that day

and I still have it framed on my desk reminding me of one of the greatest and most expansive days of my life.

2. *Ski Sauvage*.

Whether viewed as an art form, utility, or recreational pastime, skiing has had a long and varied history. Briefly, I will provide an historical time line so that we not only gain an understanding of how skiing was created, but also how it evolved into the high-risk ontological and existential stature that it occupies today.

Archaeologists and historians have traced the inception of skiing as far back as 6,000 to 8,000 years ago in Scandinavia and Siberia (Fry 2006; Weinstock 2003). These early inklings of the movement were utilitarian in nature and mainly used for winter travel, hunting, and war. As time slowly crept forward skiing spread to other locals that needed a technology that would allow for more efficient travel in winter. Although skiing has a long utilitarian history, it was not until the late nineteenth century that it turned a corner and began to be conceived as a recreational pastime. John Fry, in his book *The Story of Modern Skiing* (2006), credits nineteenth century Norwegian skier Fridtjof Nansen as the spark for this conceptual shift. For it was Nansen and his crossing of Greenland on skis in 1888 and subsequent book *The First Crossing of Greenland* (1890), which gripped the world's imagination of the potential hidden within skiing. As Fry remarks concerning Nansen:

His book *On Skis Across Greenland*, published two years afterward, excited the world's imagination about what could be done on skis, so much so that tens of thousands of people took up skiing in countries that had scarcely known of it previously...Thousands of utilitarian years of skiing as winter transportation suddenly gave way to skiing as winter diversion, a sport (Fry 2006: 4).

Skiing had met the tipping point where its utilitarian roots were surpassed by its recreational possibilities.

With the shift of skiing into a recreational outlet in the late nineteenth century, another seed was sown around this time that would eventually blossom into the use of skiing as means of encountering risk and pushing the limits of human endurance. As Fry comments:

Extreme skiers were once people who, having set out to go from point A to point B on skis, amplified the adventure by accidentally falling down an escarpment during a whiteout or getting caught in a snow slide. Mortal risk was a byproduct of going faster, reaching a higher place. But then *risk itself became the goal* – deliberately leaping off cliffs, attempting to ski in an avalanche, skiing in places where a fall meant certain death (my emphasis, Fry 2006: 205).

Fry again credits Nansen for not only illuminating the possibilities opened by skiing, but also for *creating a culture* within skiing where risk became an end and not necessarily the means. From this moment on, adventurous souls began to climb ever-larger mountains all over the world with the hopes of skiing from their peaks. With advancements in technique and equipment, the mountains skied were continually growing larger and skiers skied them faster and more daringly than ever before. In retrospect, it is amazing that what began as a humble tool, is now something that allows individuals to transcend personal limits and expand the possibilities of what humans are physically capable of achieving.

3. *Nietzsche.*

On October 15, 1844 when Friedrich Nietzsche entered the world, it would have been hard to foresee the immense influence that he would one day have on the way humans structured their ontological, existential, and epistemological existence. He was one of the first thinkers to not only challenge many of the taken for granted assumptions concerning rationality, knowledge, and morality, but he also championed the nihilism that he perceived as the basis of existence, calling for an aesthetic understanding of the world in which the ideas of good and evil are transcended and brought together in a harmonious dance. His influence can be felt from the works of classical social theorists such as Max Weber, right up into the contemporary age in those of Michel Foucault and a myriad of post-modernist thinkers.

Although commonly misunderstood as a nihilist proper, within Nietzsche's opus one finds hope for a future of humankind in which it raises itself above the ontological, existential, and epistemological trappings that have formed the modern day social sphere. For Nietzsche, we need to understand that these prevalent ideologies of the post-enlightenment Western world are simply human constructions that teeter on the edge of an abyss defined by nothingness. In this realization, Nietzsche hoped humanity would recreate an existence that strove to reach the full capabilities of the human condition. Unfortunately, his life was cut short with a mysterious breakdown on January 3, 1889, ending his productive life. He finally died August 25, 1900.

4. *The Question.*

In January of last year, my friend Todd was buried in an avalanche in the mountains of southeastern British Columbia. Although he has substantial backcountry travel knowledge, all the factors aligned that day to take him on a 300-meter ride down a relatively shallow slope. By the time he came to rest, his head was buried 2 meters underneath the snow and it took his travel mates approximately 15 minutes to dig him out. He was unconscious when uncovered but regained functions about 5 minutes after being extracted. Any longer and Todd may have left us that day. He never missed a beat though, as he was back a couple days later putting himself into the same risky situations as the one that had almost taken his life. It is for people like Todd that this thesis is being written. The intent is to try to uncover how historically situated social forces influence ontological and existential ideologies, creating a need within modern day individuals to participate in risky activities that use death as the main experiential category? Put simply, I want to know why people are drawn to risky activities that contain higher than normal probabilities of death?

The social world is full of such activities, from binge drinking to BASE-jumping; so to keep the analysis succinct I will focus on a risk-taking culture that I know personally, that of high-risk skiing. Unlike the more leisure oriented type, high-risk skiing will refer to that aspect of the sport whereby participants experience greater levels of risk through skiing progressively more difficult and faster terrain, thereby not only pushing their own limits within the sport, but ultimately the sport itself. This type of skiing contains much more risk than the leisure oriented type because participants willingly place

themselves in situations that have higher probabilities of death as an outcome. Even though high-risk skiing will be the base of my argument, it is hoped that such an analysis will not only be relevant for other types of activities where there is an awareness of an increased possibility of death, but also to show how such risks play an important ontological and existential role in allowing for individual and social growth and fulfillment.

From a broad social perspective, sociologists have tried to understand the idea of risk by situating it in either a 'realist,' 'social constructionist,' or 'ontological/existential' theoretical base (Bradbury 1989; Denney 2005; Golding 1992; Krinsky 1992; Luhmann 1993; Lupton 1999; Renn 1992; Zinn 2008). Realists deal primarily with scientific and technical aspects, conceptualizing risk as something that has an existence independent of human perception, making it open to objective measurement. Applied, the objective data obtained can then be used to avoid or interact with future cases safely. Social constructionists, on the other hand, understand risk as something that has its roots in social and cultural contexts. Here, a series of social and cultural factors lead some group members to redefine phenomena/situations as producing risks, which leads to new interpretations of how to respond to these situations which might lead to new forms of social organization, which then it turn can produce new definitions and new forms of conduct. The ontological/existential perspective finds in risk the ability to push ontological and existential boundaries, therefore opening up the possibility for individuals to create a stronger 'self' based upon a deeper understanding of the human condition. Inspired by these perspectives, sociologists of sport have produced a large body of work on risk-taking as the sporting world, by its very nature, is inundated with risk and risk assessment strategies,

making it a perfect venue for not only understanding risk broadly, but also specifically in the case of sport itself.

Although the existing work on risk, both inside and outside the sphere of sport, has produced interesting and important ideas, they still lack an ontological, existential, and epistemological soundness when trying to explain *why* some people continually seek out and interact with risk. What is needed is a new theoretical base, which delves deeper into the ontological and existential makeup of the modern Western based human to understand why risk is conceptualized as such and why some people actively engage with risk and use it to structure their life. This is what I will attempt to do, but what will theoretically structure such an answer will be an ‘aesthetic modernist’ interpretation of the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, for within such an interpretation of his philosophy we find a ‘metanarrative’ that not only answers the question of why people dance with the edge between life and death, but also why risk could be one of, if not, the quintessential ontological and existential category. I will pull mainly from Nietzsche’s earliest of publications *The Birth of Tragedy* (2005), which although somewhat different from his later works, still created a line of thinking that can be traced right up to his final publications. Methodologically, I will gather information to strengthen my argument from three interlocking areas. First, my own personal experiences as a high-risk skier; second, my experiences while existing inside the culture of high-risk skiing itself; and finally, the media that surrounds such a community, specifically ski films and magazines. Like all methodological choices, this opens up positive possibilities, but it also opens up problems concerning the generalizations that can be made from a particular study. In this case I recog-

nize that this could be linked with a certain ‘romanticism’ or non-critical view. This can arise from being part of the group under study and from the limited media data used, raising concerns revolving around proper representation and interpretation. Although I believe the empirical data gathered from such sources will prove adequate for this theoretical exploration, I nevertheless acquiesce to the problems that can arise from using such data sources and I have done my best to minimize the occurrence of such problems.

To help situate us within the arguments presented, I will begin with a literature review of the existing social theories on risk. Following this, a more thorough and critical overview will be given of the main theories used in the area of risk in sport, to show how these perspectives ultimately fail to adequately explain the risk-taking that is inherent within sporting activities. Next, I will present my interpretation of the Nietzschean argument I will be using to explain the topic under consideration. Finally, I will attempt to show how Nietzsche’s aesthetic theory is useful in explaining not only *why* people risk themselves, but also *how* this risk-taking can function as an ontological and existential emancipatory category, creating within individuals a fuller, more complete existence or being.

5. So what?

Every winter that passes, the skiing community loses friends and loved ones to the sport they cherish. The last five ski seasons have been especially devastating to the community as prominent names within the sport – such as Shane McConkey, Doug Coombs, Billy Poole and John Nicoletta – have died pushing themselves ever closer to the void. Although only four examples in an ever growing list of names of people who never re-

turned home after a day in the mountains, it is apparent that the act of risk-taking is an important concept for helping to understand society because it not only deals with the lived experiences of everyday people, but it is also something that individuals strive to experience. Now, more than ever, people are looking for a release or diversion that can be found within acts of risk-taking and as sociologists we must try to understand *why* and *how* the modern social world pushes individuals into these acts. Furthermore, it is important to understand this phenomenon because it may also hold the potential to expand people's ontological and existential selves and possibly point to a greater potential within human life. As Nietzsche states in *The Gay Science*: "For believe me: the secret for harvesting from existence the greatest fruitfulness and greatest enjoyment is – to live dangerously" (Nietzsche 1974: 228).

Chapter 2

Risk

6. *Thunder Meadows.*

It's not like I wasn't scared enough already, but when Shane asked me to hold the end of his poles while he jumped on top of a cornice to check its stability, my fear quickly jumped⁴. If the cornice broke chances were that he would have fallen onto an aspect of the mountain that did not look too inviting and, chances are, I would have fallen after him. Even if I had been able to fight the gravitational forces, we probably would have gone tumbling down the other side of the ridge, which, as a way to die, only appeared marginally more inviting. I'm getting ahead of myself though, so let us rewind to understand exactly how Shane and I had gotten into this rather odd relationship in the first place.

It was early to mid February in Fernie, British Columbia, and myself and three friends, Todd, Graeme, and Shane, had decided to make a trip into Thunder Meadows⁵ to ski and spend a night at a backcountry cabin situated high in the alpine. Todd, Graeme, and Shane all had varying levels of experience with winter backcountry travel while I was still somewhat of a rookie. I had done one tour before and was still getting the feel of reading the snow, the terrain, and, of course, my own body. Touring was a whole other game in relation to skiing within bounds at the resort. You become completely responsi-

⁴ Checking cornice stability serves two purposes. First, it allows one to measure the safety of traveling upon them, which is sometimes necessary on the top of mountain ridges. Secondly, if it is possible to break off a small piece of the cornice onto the slope below, one can get a sense of the avalanche potential contained within the slope.

⁵ 'Thunder Meadows' is an alpine meadow situated on the west side of the Lizard Range in southeastern British Columbia.

ble for your own safety and, ultimately, the safety of your travel mates. Your whole mindset changes and you begin to see the mountains in a new tone. Their beauty slips out of any aesthetic pleasure and they seemingly become more alive. You can almost see and hear them breathing in the silence of the backcountry winter.

Our original plan had us taking a system of lifts, at the ski hill, to gain altitude and then traverse a ridge into Thunder Meadows. Unfortunately, the cloud level was low so we opted for a different route, which was safer, but ultimately meant that we had to make the altitude, that the lifts were to cover in the original plan, ourselves. We hit the trailhead around 10:00am and began the arduous uphill slide. Because skinning – the technique of applying synthetic skins to the base of skis to allow forward movement while retarding backward movement – is quite meditative and the surroundings were stunningly beautiful, the trip to the cabin flew by and before I knew it we had reached our objective around 4:00pm. At this point Graeme, Shane, and I decided to ski a line down Cabin Bowl. We had to do this quickly though, as the sun was dropping fast. Graeme and I skied down the middle of the face, which started off as a 30-degree slope, but quickly steepened to about 50-degrees at which point you needed to mediate two chutes on either side of a rocky protuberance. The run was exhilarating. I remember skiing through the chute and watching my slough float around me. Its almost as if time stands still as the snow you kick up falls at about the same speed as you, creating a spectacular temporal affect. Reaching the bottom shaking, I let out a cry that echoed through the mountain walls around me. Graeme and I then watched Shane as he skied a beautiful line that was almost non-

existent in a mash of snow, rock, and trees, before we all headed back to the cabin in darkness.

The four of us awoke early the next day and were welcomed again by an early layer of low cloud that had a severe impact on visibility. Nevertheless, we journeyed out that morning and skied two more lines off the Cabin Bowl ridgeline before turning our attention to the task of getting home. Our plan was to skin up to the top of a ridge that would lead us to an eastern mountain face called Big Steep Mother, at which point we would ski down the gully to Shane's car at the bottom. It was about three quarters of the way along the ridge to Big Steep Mother that Shane made the odd proposition that is still as fresh in my mind as ever. "Hey man, hold the tips of my poles while I see how stable the cornice is." Knowing Shane had considerable backcountry knowledge, I acquiesced to his request. Holding the tips of his poles and trying to hide the trembling that had overtaken me, Shane moved on top of the cornice and quickly made a few small hops. Nothing. The cornice remained. With a bit more confidence he then made a few larger hops each time putting more force into the cornice. Nothing. The cornice remained as steadfast as ever. Finally, with one large leap Shane put everything he had into the cornice and again it didn't budge. Shrugging his shoulders, in a way that only Shane could, he stepped off the cornice and rather peacefully muttered; "I guess it ain't going anywhere". Still trembling, it took everything I had not to berate Shane with profanities. There he was, without a sign of fear in his being and me sick with it, wanting to throw him over the cornice that had gotten me into this state in the first place. Nevertheless, now was not the time and we still had ground to cover. We pushed on to our objective, geared down

and up, and finally pushed off the ridge and had a marvelous ride back to the trailhead. At the car all four of us were full of smiles and I hardly had a recollection of the fear that had overtaken me on the top of the ridge. I felt intensely alive and, in some strange way, I saw the world in a different light. I had faced risks I had never encountered before and overcame them becoming more aware of my surroundings and ultimately, myself.

It wasn't until I began to analyze the topic of risk-taking that I was able to see the sociology rampant within such an experience. In those two days, the four of us experienced the gamut of meanings sociology has applied to risk. From rationally weighting the level of risk we were willing to take, to stepping into a zone where risk differed in meaning from the social and material experiences of one person to another, and finally using risk to grow, change, and, whether for better or worse, become different people when we came out of the mountains that day. I haven't really kept in touch with Shane after leaving Fernie, but I am sure he is still there jumping on cornices to see what will happen. Looking back, I'm not sure it was the cornice he was really testing that day.

7. The Genealogy of Risk.

In the modern world, risk has become a concept that brings to mind thoughts of danger, harm, or loss in the face of actions that hold no sense of security in relation to the unfolding of said actions through temporal space (Denney 2005; Lupton 1999). Capitalists see risks in the loss of investment capital. University students see risks in the dangers of unprotected sex. Parents see risks in the harm that may come to their children if not buckled into their automotive child seat. To put it simply, the uncertainties of time now emphasize the negatives. But, like all concepts within the range of human existence, risk

holds an ontological, existential, and epistemological history that has molded and transformed it, whether purposefully or aimlessly, into the seemingly concrete concept that has strong ties to the way individuals of the social now understand their individual and social existences. Therefore, to understand and deconstruct risk we need to uncover the historical conditions that have shaped and molded the concept into the form that we encounter today.

The notion of risk has developed into such a common point of reference that it becomes difficult to conceptualize it as having a definitive entry point into human consciousness. This is not to say that during certain historical epochs humanity was not concerned with the uncertainty of future events, but rather that the use of the concept of risk is a relatively recent phenomenon in the mediation of this uncertainty. As Niklas Luhmann states in his book *Risk: A Sociological Theory*: “Older civilizations had developed quite different techniques for dealing with analogous problems, and thus had no need for a word covering what we now understand by the term risk. Mankind had naturally always been preoccupied by uncertainty about the future” (Luhmann 1993: 8). In this context, early societies tended to use ‘divinatory practices’ (i.e. sin, sacrifice, etc.) as a safeguard from the uncertainty of the forces of fate and, ultimately, to give meaning to the undesirable outcomes of the passing of time. By communicating with a deity or series of deities, early humans not only tied fate to these entities, but had also found a way of possibly mitigating against future misfortunes while enabling them to push forward into the uncertainty of time.

Luhmann argues that it is within ancient oriental maritime trade that we find what may be the seed of the concept that today we define as risk (1993). Although at times difficult to discern from divinatory practices, within this maritime trade configuration is found a burgeoning legal institution having proto-insurance functions between the suppliers of capital and the mariners used to transport said capital. This institutional function would carry on into the Middle Ages and influence much of the law on maritime trade and maritime insurance. Luhmann is not alone in this contention, as many other scholars connect the birth of risk with early maritime travel, where risk was connected to objective natural forces, such as storms or epidemics, that would block the achievement of specific goals (Denney 2005; Giddens 1999; Lupton 1999; Zinn 2008). In this sense, risk had very little to do with individual human responsibility, but was a force separate from any human counterpart and dealt primarily with spatial contingencies. All that could be done was to find and use strategies to mitigate further contact with risky events and set out strategies to help forge through them. Nevertheless, we are faced with the question of how this proto-risk developing in the maritime world, jumped ship and proliferated itself within social consciousness. As Luhmann identifies the problem: “Since the existing language has words for danger, venture, chance, luck, courage, fear, adventure (aventuyre) etc. at its disposal, we may assume that a new term comes into use to indicate a problem situation that cannot be expressed precisely enough with the vocabulary available” (Luhmann 1993: 10). In other words, why did the concept of risk emerge within a social sphere that previously had no need for such a concept?

To solve this riddle one needs to look for large-scale ontological, existential, and epistemological shifts in the way Western society understood itself and the world that encompassed its existence. Luhmann found part of this shift in Western society's "realization that certain advantages are to be gained only if something is at stake. It is not a matter of the costs, which can be calculated beforehand and traded off against the advantages. It is rather a matter of a decision that, as can be foreseen, will be subsequently regretted if a loss that one had hoped to avert occurs" (Luhmann 1993: 11). In a rather vague way, humanity began to see future contingencies as beneficial even though the prospect of loss was always a possibility. Although there were risks, sometimes the future benefits outweighed the future losses.

Along with this transition or realization, the enlightenment, and the epistemological category of 'modernity' that it had created in the late Middle Ages, played the second key role in the formation of the concept of risk (Luhmann 1993; Lupton 1999; Zinn 2008). Here, reason and observation were championed, along with the idea of human progress, which was to be obtained by objectively understanding the world through rationality and science. With this fledgling knowledge base and risk's solidification in social consciousness, eighteenth and nineteenth century European states began to gird their actions on the new sciences of probability and statistics with the hope of structuring their respective societies in such a way that would help them mitigate risks and obtain greater efficiency and passivity amongst populations who were proceeding through very large social upheavals based upon the industrial revolution and capitalism. Objective risks to the functioning of society were being discovered in all aspects of social life (i.e. medi-

... (agriculture, industry, etc.) and their probability of occurrence along with the expected losses connected with them created an atmosphere where new ways of mitigating such risks grew exponentially. As Luhmann states: “All this meant a vast expansion in the scope and pretensions of capability, and the old cosmological limitations, the constants of being and the secrets of Nature were replaced by distinctions falling within the domain of rational calculation. And this has determined the understanding of risk to this day” (Luhmann 1993: 13). God had finally left the world and was replaced by rationality and science, therefore creating a sphere where the uncertainties of the future could no longer be placed upon the shoulders of a divine form. With these two historical contingencies, namely Luhmann’s ‘realization’ and enlightenment-based modernity, risk made the necessary conceptual leap and began the movement into the form we encounter in the here and now of social reality.

Within this early conceptualization of risk, occurred the splitting of the concept between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ dimensions based strictly upon probabilistic categories (Denny 2005; Lupton 1999; Parker and Stanworth 2005). As Lupton states in her book entitled *Risk*: “From this perspective, ‘risk’ is a neutral concept, denoting the probability of something happening, combined with the magnitude of associated losses or gains. In other words, there once was such a thing as a ‘good’ risk as well as a ‘bad’ risk” (Lupton 1999: 8). Early conceptual forms of risk carried no inherent descriptive characteristic as either good or bad. It was used simply to connote possible future outcomes. If the probability of a negative outcome outweighed the positive dimensions then the action was avoided and vice versa. This conceptualization of risk was to dominate until the begin-

ning of the twentieth century at which point the positive aspects of risk began to fade away behind a veil of danger, turning risk into something that was only hazardous and in need of avoidance (Denney 2005; Lupton 1999). No longer was risk weighed in relation to both its possible positive and negative outcomes, but only its negative effects, which, as was posited earlier, has today become its main definitional term. As Lupton states: “In everyday lay people’s language, risk tends to be used to refer almost exclusively to a threat, hazard, danger or harm: we ‘risk our life savings’ by investing on the stock exchange, or ‘put our marriage at risk’ by having an affair” (Lupton 1999: 8). This is not to say that positive risk assessment still does not remain an important conceptual tool, but it has become subjugated by the current negative definition.

Interestingly enough, the concept of risk has become more popular in the last few decades of the modern Western world (Denney 2005; Lupton 1999; Zinn 2008). In fact, whether as an effect or cause, a new industry has grown around the study, analysis, and mitigation of risk. As David Denney states in his piece entitled *Risk and Society*: “The rise of an increasing societal concern with uncertainty has resulted in the development of a ‘risk community’ emanating from government, industry, trade unions, the public and their representatives” (Denney 2005: 9). A number of theoretical explanations have been put forward to explain this growth, such as the development of probability and computer technologies which have made complex risk assessment and mitigation data easier to understand (Lupton 1999); a shift in scientific thinking from monocausal relationships to those with much more complex cause and effect relationships causing more emphasis to be placed on scientific rationality (Short 1984; Douglas 1985; Skolbekken 1995); a shift

in the nature of risks themselves where they have become more global, less identifiable, and more disastrous in their effects, therefore making risks less controllable and more anxiety provoking (Beck 1992); and finally, the shift from a modern social milieu to a postmodern one where individuals question historical assumptions concerning ontology, existentialism, and epistemology creating a general uneasiness and anxiety towards dominant social institutions, traditions, and the decision making processes that will bring humanity into the future (Featherstone 1995; Giddens 1990; Kroker and Kroker 1988; Lash and Urry 1994; Massumi 1993; Smart 1993). Whatever the cause or causes may be, risk has become an important concept for modern societies and the individuals that make them up.

In structuring the broad academic discourse on risk, theorists have tended to fall into one of three camps, either realist, social constructionist, or, what I will call the ontological/existential. Along with these positions that are commonly found along disciplinary lines, risk is usually used as either a concept to denote a hazard or damage, a probability value for the accounting of unforeseen outcomes, or as a positive value in the world of risk seekers. (Bradbury 1989; Denney 2005; Golding 1992; Krinsky 1992; Luhmann 1993; Lupton 1999; Parker and Stanworth 2005; Renn 1992; Rigakos and Law 2009; Zinn 2008). Realists are those who see risks as objectively existing in nature independent of human individual and social consciousness. Social constructionists, on the other hand, view risk as a category of social life that is never static nor independent of social actors. It is highly subjective and shifts meaning and ontological structure through the course of time, from one specific social group to the next. Different from these more conservative

theoretical insights, is a view of risk that sees the phenomenon as a way of pushing ontological and existential boundaries and creating a more complete self. For example, the work by thinkers such as Georges Bataille and Martin Heidegger, both of whom have strong ties to the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, understand risk as a means of taking one to the limits of Being, at which point the self becomes more intimate with the ontological base of existence.

8. *The Realists.*

Modern western society has a debt to pay to the enlightenment, for it has become the summit in a long movement that tries to know, control, and change the world to make it fit into a specific idea of knowledge and progress. It is a world in which ‘empiricist’ or ‘positivistic’ science is highly influential and, quite appropriately, the idea of risk has not escaped this influence, as it has been conceptualized to fit within such an ontological and epistemological base. The researchers and academics that take on this view of risk are commonly referred to as ‘realists,’ in opposition to the social constructionist approaches (Bradbury 1989; Denney 2005; Frauley and Pearce 2007; Golding 1992; Krinsky 1992; Lupton 1999; Parker and Stanworth 2005; Renn 1992; Rigakos and Law 2009; Zinn 2008). For realists, risks exist independent of human perceptions, which makes them open to objective scientific study and mitigation through sensory experience and experimentation. As Jens O. Zinn states in his book *Social Theories of Risk and Uncertainty: An Introduction*: “In a first *realist perspective*, risks are primarily understood as real events or dangers which can be approached objectively without being confounded by subjective and social factors” (original emphasis, Zinn 2008: 18). This is the way the ma-

majority of lay people understand risk. There are real risks in the world that have been discovered by science, which, because of its conceptualization of risk as something to be avoided, must be controlled and made less dangerous. This perception of risk dominates in the research fields of actuarialism, toxicology/epidemiology, engineering, risk-benefit economics, and probabilistic risk assessment (Renn 1992; Zinn 2008).

Such realist-based perspectives on risk have, of course, been subject to criticism. The first and most obvious revolves around the fact that this conceptual route downplays the social forces at play within risk creation, perception, and mitigation, therefore oversimplifying what in reality is a complex problem (Bradbury 1989; Denney 2005; Frauley and Pearce 2007; Lupton 1999; Parker and Stanworth 2005; Renn 1992; Rigakos and Law 2009). By ignoring the social forces involved in the conceptualization of risk, realism is placed at a disadvantage because it cannot take into account the influence the social world has upon the ideas surrounding risk. Secondly, the realist position has been problematized for its conceptualization of humans as rational creatures that make decisions concerning risks based upon a utilitarian system which weights pros, cons, and the possibility of mitigating certain risks (Lupton 1999). This creates a very limited space for humanity to exist and takes any meaning away from actions that fall outside of this rationality. To equate humanity solely with rationality misses the point that sometimes humans do anything but act rationally, especially in those moments when they seek out risks that endanger not only their health, but ultimately their lives. Third, the realist approach has been criticized because although it champions a realist stance, within the analysis of individual responses to risk we find a subjectivist interpretation to these res-

ponses (Bradbury 1989; Denney 2005; Frauley and Pearce 2007; Lupton 1999; Parker and Stanworth 2005; Renn 1992; Rigakos and Law 2009). In other words, although risks may have an independent objective reality, it nevertheless remains in the individual to perceive these phenomena as risks. As Judith A. Bradbury states in her piece *The Policy Implications of Differing Concepts of Risk*:

Although the technical approach to risk may be entirely appropriate for purely engineering decisions, it is inappropriate when used as the basis for societal decisions. Structuring the risk management problem solely in terms of technical and economic rationality fails to recognize that societal rationality has additional dimensions. Two key dimensions omitted are (1) the political dimension – how to proceed in a democracy when there is a discrepancy between “what the experts deem most important and what the public demands from its government” (Plough and Krimsky 1987, 7) and (2) the ethical dimension – how to surface and address questions of values that inherently are embedded in the judgments of the analyst. The omission of key dimensions leads to attempts to apply inappropriate solutions, that is, attempts to solve the wrong policy problem. (Bradbury 1989: 383).

Finally, Ortwin Renn in his piece *Concepts of Risk: A Classification* (1992) finds three additional downfalls of the realist position. First, is the idea that risk mitigation institutions are prone to failure that in the end cause other risks to be manifested. In other words, through trying to mitigate certain risks, other risks are created in the process. Renn’s second criticism revolves around the relationship between consequence and probability. Technically speaking, through realism humans should be aloof to risks where there is either a low probability/high consequence or high probability/low consequence, since both end in similar outcomes. Nevertheless, research shows that people have distinct preferences for one or the other, proving that risks ontological and existential relationship to humankind is too complex for simple rationalistic calculation. Finally, Renn brings out the criticism that risk minimization implies a relationship between risk experts

and lay people. This creates a power-laden environment where risk perception and mitigation are tied to the overarching power of the elite and their risk experts. As Renn states: “[The] dominance of science in risk policy making provides too much power to an elite that is neither qualified nor politically legitimated to impose risks or risk management policies on a population” (Renn 1992: 60).

In response to many of these criticisms and as realist perspectives move away from the empiricist guided ‘hard sciences’ and into the realm of the ‘social sciences,’ we encounter an ontological, existential, and epistemological base to social research that perceives not only the real world existence of risks, but also the social forces at play that help to create and situate socially which risks are important and how they are to be properly mitigated (Frauley and Pearce 2007; Parker and Stanworth 2005; Rigakos and Law 2009). As Frauley and Pearce state concerning this perspective:

Reality exists independently of our knowledge of it, which is also to say that it exists independently of the mind of social actors. For example, the existence of systematic inequalities within the legal-political sphere does not depend on our knowing of their existence. Reality is always mediated through ‘perceptual filters,’ so it makes little sense to hold that our knowledge corresponds exactly to what exists. Rather, our categories and concepts help us to make reference to some aspect of a material referent. As our knowledge is fallible, our references will always undergo continual revision. The referent does not change, but rather our references to it and how we make those references does (Frauley and Pearce 2007: 4).

This theoretical stance is known as ‘critical realism.’ As George S. Rigakos and Alexandra Law state concerning critical realism’s relationship to risk:

Risks are real in their consequences. People die, are hurt or maimed. Volcanoes erupt, lightning strikes, chemical factories explode, mines collapse. This notion of ‘risk’ is thus eminently compatible with a critical realist project for the same reason that it is *definitionally* disregarded by empiricists and postmodernists: *risk is transparent in its constructivist tendency and endlessly influenced in an open sys-*

tem all the while nonetheless occurring with or without our apprehension. (original emphasis, Rigakos and Law 2009: 81).

Here, risks are seen as objective facts that have their own independent existence whether perceived or not. They then come into contact with the social when epistemological ideologies and their relationships to these risks form overarching conceptualizations concerning what are risks, how we know risks, and how said risks should be dealt with. As Rigakos and Law go on to argue: “[Inherent] to critical realism is a concern to see social action as situated activity, conditioned and shaped by social structure” (Rigakos and Law 2009: 91). It is not the risks per se that are questioned in relation to social perception, but rather the epistemological and social institutions and their interests in either continuing with or stopping the risk under analysis.

Ulrich Beck’s ‘risk society’ perspective is an example of critical realist research applied to the area of risk (Beck 1999; Rigakos and Law 2009). For Beck, the modern world is one that cannot be defined by either modernist or postmodernist ideologies, but one in which a new phase of social structure has been ushered in, which he refers to as ‘second modernity.’ This structure is one where a concern for risks has become the paramount social category. No longer are the concerns of the modern world based around industry, science, and technology. The main concerns are now the global risks that these aspects of society have created and continue to create with the fallout that comes from new techniques created to mitigate such risks. As Beck states: “As the bipolar world fades away, we are moving from a world of enemies to one of dangers and risks” (Beck 1999: 3).

What makes Beck's theory critical realist is the fact that he does not deny the material existence of risks, nor the influence social forces have upon their creation and maintenance. For Beck, risks have a real world existence and real world effects, but are still influenced by societies' epistemological ability to define what are risks, what are important risks, and, ultimately, how to mitigate risks. As Beck states in his book *World Risk Society* concerning his theory: "It argues that there is at the same time the immateriality of mediated and contested definitions of risk *and* the materiality of risk as manufactured by experts and industries world-wide" (original emphasis, Beck 1999: 4). Therefore, within Beck's argument we find the contention that risks exist independent of human apprehension, but nevertheless are still influenced by social forces and their ability to bring them to the forefront of human consciousness.

The critical realist position has given much to the scholarship on risk (Parker and Stanworth 2005; Rigakos and Law 2009). There is a high level of cogency in stating that risks do exist independently of human social and individual consciousness, but that social forces influence epistemologically how these risks are known. However, although the analysis that will be presented in the chapters to come will be similar to critical realist interpretations of risk, it does not supply the ontological and existential tools needed for the following analysis concerning the *why* behind risk-taking. Therefore, we must move on to discuss the theoretical perspectives that place risk squarely in the realm of social construction.

9. *The Social Constructionists.*

Standing apposed to realist interpretations of risk, is the broad theoretical base known as ‘social constructionism.’ For theorists and researchers who fall under this theoretical rubric, risks and our perception of risks are created and maintained within specific social and cultural contexts. As Lupton argues: “Those who have adopted social constructionism, regardless of the strength of their positions, tend to argue that a risk is never fully objective or knowable outside of belief systems and moral positions: what we measure, identify and manage as risks are always constituted via pre-existing knowledges and discourses” (Lupton 1999: 29). This is not to say that all social constructionist standpoints view risk strictly in terms of being socially created. Some positions are situated closer to a social relativistic stance, while others fall more towards the side of the realists; and others fall somewhere in between.

Social constructionist typologies tend to emphasize four theoretical bases. These are ‘functional structuralism,’ ‘critical structuralism,’ ‘poststructuralism,’ and ‘phenomenological’ (Denney 2005; Golding 1992; Lupton 1999; Renn 1992; Zinn 2008). Structuralist perspectives try to understand how underlying social and cultural ‘structures,’ ‘hierarchies,’ and ‘categories’ help in defining risks both theoretically as well as pragmatically. Functional structuralism, which is exemplified in the cultural research of Mary Douglas (1966; 1973), analyzes how social and cultural structures and categories of risk contribute to the maintenance of order throughout society and help to bring those back into the fold who diverge from the socially constructed norms of society. As Douglas states in her piece *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*:

Similarly the ideal order of society is guarded by dangers that threaten transgressors. These danger-beliefs are as much threats which one man uses to coerce another as dangers that he himself fears to incur by his own lapses from righteousness. At this level the laws of nature are dragged in to sanction the moral code: this kind of disease is caused by adultery, that by incest; this meteorological disaster is the effects of political disloyalty, that the effects of impiety. The whole universe is harnessed to men's attempts to force one another into good citizenship. Thus we find that certain moral values are upheld and certain social rules defined by beliefs in dangerous contagion, as when the glance or touch of an adulterer is held to bring illness to his neighbors or his children. (Douglas 1966: 13).

Later on, Douglas uses the concepts of 'grid' and 'group' indices⁶ to show how differing cultural structures either maintain society wide visions of risks, or ones that are much more individually moderated. In relation to its epistemological base, structural functionalists are situated somewhere between the 'weak constructionist' and 'strong constructionist' stance (Lupton 1999). Although they believe that there is an objective reality to risk, there still remains much that is socially created and defined.

While a popular theoretical starting point, structural functionalist interpretations of risk have been criticized from the position that such a view oversimplifies what in reality is a complex social phenomenon (Denney 2005; Lupton 1999). For example, in Douglas' work which emphasizes 'grid' and 'group' indices in understanding how risks and dangers are perceived and mitigated both in large social groups and the sub-groups within them, we find categories in place that at times cannot deal with the complexity of individual and social situations. Along with and closely related to this criticism is that such

⁶ 'Grid' refers to the nature of social roles in society wide interaction. High grid refers to interactions where social roles are constrained and discriminated against, whereas low grid refers to interactions where people can access any social role. 'Group' refers to how interdependent people are upon the groups in which they are members. High group means that there is strong solidarity within groups, whereas low group means people are not highly dependent on these groups and are much more individualistic in their social life (Denney 2005; Golding 1992; Jaeger et al 2001; Tulloch 2008).

perspectives end up creating too static of a theoretical base, that in the end cannot deal with the changes that societies experience in relation to their risk perception and mitigation (Denney 2005; Lupton 1999).

Critical structuralists, while still focused on social and cultural structures, hierarchies, and categories, tend to critique these structures in relation to the power and oppression they have over individuals, instead of understanding them as neutral forces for the maintenance of society. Critical structuralists would be epistemologically situated as ‘weak constructionists’ where although risks have an objective reality, they are still mediated through social and cultural categories and hence can be molded to help maintain existing hierarchical structures (Lupton 1999). This side of the structuralist strain is commonly connected to Marxist theory, but other well-known theorists such as Ulrich Beck (1999), whom we placed earlier under the critical realist moniker, and Anthony Giddens (1990/1999), would also fall within the category of critical structuralist with their conceptualization of the ‘risk society.’ Nevertheless, critical structuralism has been criticized for its over emphasis on risk categories (Denney 2005). By placing too much stake in the concept of risk and its modern day importance, we not only ignore the fact that risk has always been a historically important concept for the shaping and movement of society, but also the influence that social categories such as race, gender, class, sexuality, disability, etc. have in the shaping of society.

Poststructuralist perspectives on risk, which are heavily influenced by Foucauldian thought, leave behind a focus on the static underlying social and cultural structures that are the predominant theme of the structuralist positions. Instead, they are concerned

with the change and movement found within social structures and definitions. As Lupton states:

Poststructuralism emphasizes the importance of identifying the discourses that participate in the construction of notions of realities, meanings and understandings. Exponents of poststructuralism tend to focus less on what they see to be the overly rigid definitions of structures identified in structuralism. They are more interested in change and flux in social structures and meanings (Lupton 1999: 26).

Within these discourses poststructuralism looks for the ways in which power and knowledge interact to create specific social structures and individuals, because for poststructuralists all knowledge is intimately connected to specific power relationships. Therefore, no type of knowledge, including that which surrounds risk, can be considered neutral and free from power. This power is not conceptualized as emanating from one specific site, but rather from a myriad of social points of entry, such as the family, school, government, etc. For example, Foucault's 'governmentality,' which has been widely used for poststructuralist analyses on risk, focuses on the power created by governments – whom exist now only for the end of governance – through the knowledge they create surrounding risk (Foucault 1991; O'Malley 2008). This risk knowledge is then used to discipline and control the population under its watch. As Denney states: "Risk management forms an integral part of governmentality, incorporating modes of thinking through which the state claims to be working to protect the population from risk" (Denney 2005: 34). All this leads to a system where institutions and individual identities are in a constant flux trying to negotiate the power/knowledge relationship that is not only oppressive, but also productive. In this view, which would be at the 'strong constructionist' end of the spectrum, objective risks are expanded through the power/knowledge discourse and end up

being understood and mediated via the ‘truth’ concerning risk that these discourses create (Lupton 1999). Nevertheless, poststructuralist perspectives on risk tend to be criticized because of their strong constructionist starting point. It places too much emphasis upon the social conceptual meanings placed upon risk, while ignoring many of the objective factors surrounding specific risks and risk in general (Denney 2005).

Moving away from what can be called the ‘macro’ approaches of both structuralist and poststructuralist accounts of risk, we find the phenomenological or hermeneutical perspective. Here, the focus moves from the underlying structures and discourses of society to the ‘lived experience’ of individuals and how these experiences are constructed from the shared meanings and knowledges of specific social sites. As Lupton states:

Phenomenologists argue that the meanings of risk differ from locale to locale: that is, in the micro-context of risk meanings. Phenomenological accounts examine how specific actors (or subgroups) within a certain sociocultural setting construct their risk understandings as part of their interactions with others, albeit within the broader frame of social structures. Meaning is simply not drawn from the social environment, therefore: it also works the other way, with social actors influencing their environments (Lupton 1999: 27).

Instead of focusing on how social structures and their epistemologies create specific individuals with specific beliefs about risk, phenomenologists look at how individuals are not only influenced by these structures, but also by their individual experiences and the forces at play within the smaller social groups that they may be part of. For example in the work of Mick Bloor (1995), drawing on the influence of Alfred Schultz (1964), we

find the construction of ‘relevancies’⁷ that show how individuals use ‘routinized practices’ to deal with and analyze specific risk situations.

Phenomenology based perspectives tend to be situated somewhere between the ‘weak constructionist’ and ‘strong constructionist position,’ where although risks contain an objective reality, how we construct and deal with them lies at the level of the social and individual (Lupton 1999). Such outlooks have been very influential in studies analyzing why people search out risk within larger social structures that tend to label risk as something to be avoided. In analyzing such communities, falling back on underlying social structures to explain their actions will not always suffice because many of these structures are in direct opposition to such behavior. One must look deeper into the experiences of individuals and the groups that make up their social life. Nevertheless, phenomenology has been criticized because it cannot deal with the larger ontological, existential, and epistemological questions concerning risk, for it only explains individual behaviors when dealing with risk (Denney 2005). However, phenomenology would retort by stating that it is not the job of sociologists to understand what is real, but only to analyze how people interact and give meaning to the ideas that are created around the world outside of human consciousness.

While what has been presented above is only a brief overview of how risk has been theorized in relation to social constructionism, I believe it serves the purpose of situating the reader in the current theoretical perspectives. What these theories seem to

⁷ ‘Relevancies’ are a sequence of cognitive moments that lead to risk mitigation strategies. They are ‘topical relevancies,’ ‘interpretive relevancies,’ ‘motivational relevancies,’ ‘interpretation of the situation,’ ‘recipe for action,’ and finally ‘risk management’ (Bloor 1995; Denney 2005).

build upon is the idea that although there is varying levels of objectivity to risks, there still remains much that is created and/or mediated through social forces, which over time have come to emphasize the negative or destructive side of risk and the need to distance ourselves from it. Nevertheless, we are not yet finished exploring the social theoretical bases of risk, as there still remains perspectives that champion risk as a necessary ontological and existential category, important in not only creating who we are, but also who we will become.

10. *Risk and Ontology.*

In a lot of ways, the fabric of our social existence is woven with the threads of risk. We step out the door in the morning and let ourselves go to an unpredictable force that in the end may destroy us or, on the other hand, enable us to create a new self that is stronger and more resilient in relation to social and individual life. Whether we like it or not, the simple inevitability of death creates a sphere where one risks oneself at every moment of his or her existence and without this risk, it would be very interesting to ponder whether existence would be anything like the form we encounter today. Social theory and philosophy have not been blind to these ideas and, not surprisingly, theoretical structures have been put forward that seek, sometimes advertently and sometimes inadvertently, to understand and illuminate the ontological and existential importance of such a concept. For example, as Martin Heidegger states in his short piece entitled *Why Poets?*: “We, like all creatures, are beings only by being risked in the risk of being” (Heidegger 2002: 223). For thinkers like Heidegger, risk plays a necessary role in our existence, for without it the base pillar of life would be gone. Therefore, it is necessary to go

over the work of two thinkers, namely Georges Bataille and Martin Heidegger, who see the importance of risk not only for existence itself, but also for the capability of human growth into some type of greater potential. This perspective will be important not only for expanding our understanding of the research on risk, but ultimately, for structuring the argument of this paper and giving credence to tackling the question of risk from an ontological or existential philosophical perspective.

Following in the ripples of Nietzsche's philosophy, we encounter the thoughts of the early twentieth century French thinker Georges Bataille. Couched in very Nietzschean terms, Bataille searches for the causes of modern society's moral 'sickness' in the ideas of good and evil, or right and wrong, and the underlying nihilistic roots of human existence. As he states in his piece entitled *On Nietzsche*: "The basic problem tackled in this chaotic book (chaotic because it has to be) is the same one Nietzsche experienced and attempted to resolve in his work – the problem of the whole human being" (Bataille 1992: xxvi). In less mystifying language, Nietzsche had discovered what he believed to be a 'sickness' in Western culture. This sickness was the morality of the time, which had turned away from the nihilistic core of existence and created a value system that disregarded the irrational, the unknowable, and the amoral aspects of human existence. In other words, life turned against itself. As Nietzsche states in the preface of *On the Genealogy of Morality*:

The issue for me was the *value* of morality – and over this I had to struggle almost solely with my great teacher Schopenhauer, to whom that book, the passion and the secret contradiction of that book, is directed, as if to a contemporary (– for that book, too, was a 'polemic'). In particular the issue was the value of unegoistic, of the instincts of compassion, self-denial, self-sacrifice, precisely the instincts that Schopenhauer had gilded, deified, and made otherworldly until finally they

alone were left for him as the ‘values in themselves,’ on the basis of which he *said* ‘no’ to life, also to himself. But against *these* instincts there spoke from within me an ever more fundamental suspicion, an ever deeper-delving skepticism! Precisely here I saw the *great* danger to humanity, its most sublime lure and temptation – and into what? Into nothingness? – precisely here I saw the beginning of the end, the standstill, the backward-glancing tiredness, the will turning *against* life, the last sickness gently and melancholically announcing itself (original emphasis, Nietzsche 1998: 4).

Because of this, Nietzsche believes that humanity is not moving towards its highest potential. Bataille diagnoses this sickness as well, and found part of the cure in the ability to risk certain aspects of life.

To cure the moral sickness that interests both he and Nietzsche, Bataille pushes for the attainment of what he refers to as the ‘moral summit,’ which is a sphere of existence where human potential is realized. As he states: “*I now want to contrast, not good and evil, but the ‘moral summit,’ which is different from the good, and the ‘decline,’ which has nothing to do with evil and whose necessity determines, on the contrary, modalities of the good*” (original emphasis, Bataille 1992: 17). This summit is a place where good and bad, or good and evil, are brought together in a balance on the edge of nothingness, which for thinkers like Bataille and Nietzsche, is the nihilistic base of existence. This then allows individuals to create a stronger self in relation to the necessity of both good and evil and the realization that life is meaningless at its core, which therefore places no primacy on either side of the moral continuum. Popular morality cannot enable one to reach the moral summit, as it causes individuals to focus solely on the good and turn away from the nihilism that lurks behind the veil of existence. As Bataille argues:

“Another way of saying this: resistance to temptation implies abandoning the summit morality, belonging, as this resistance does, to the morality of decline” (Bataille 1992: 34).

Important for Bataille’s moral summit is the possibility of risk. As he states:

“‘Communication’ cannot proceed from one full and intact individual to another. It requires individuals whose separate existence in themselves is *risked*, placed at the limit of death and nothingness;* the moral summit is the moment of risk-taking, it is a being suspended in the beyond of oneself, at the limit of nothingness” (original emphasis, Bataille 1992: 19). When we risk ourselves, in relation both to our mortality and social and individual selves, we are opened up to experiencing the beauty found within both good and evil, and we begin to perceive and embrace the nihilism that nips at our heels. For example, in embracing death, which is something labeled as evil and turned away from in our modern morality, we uncover our ontological basis in nothingness allowing us to create values from a more complete perspective. No longer afraid of death, we see the true reality and temporal necessity of dying, which allows us to break out of our current moral sickness and create a social and individual life that can realize the full potential that is contained in human existence. As Bataille proudly asserts: “To risk is to touch life’s limit, go as far as you can, live on the edge of gaping nothingness!” (Bataille 1992: 86).

Much like Bataille, Heidegger is an early twentieth century thinker who rode the waves created by Nietzsche’s philosophy deeper, trying to uncover and find a cure for his version of the ‘sickness’ that had infected human existence. As he states in his short piece entitled *Why Poets?*:

The age is desolate not only because God is dead but also because mortals scarcely know or are capable even of their own mortality. Mortals are still not in the

possession of their essence. Death withdraws into the enigmatic. The mystery of suffering is covered over. No one is learning to love. But mortals are. They are so long as there is language. Song still lingers over their desolate land. The singer's words stay on the track of the sacred (Heidegger 2002: 204).

Concerned with and using the loss of Being⁸ as a prime theoretical grounding, which he attributed to a turn towards technological thinking created by the epistemological shift of the enlightenment, Heidegger saw his historical time as a desolate one because not only had Being been lost, but humanity had come to lose its ability to properly ask the question: 'What is Being?'. For Heidegger, within the understanding of Being is found the potential for humanity to emerge from its desolate times and begin to experience a more authentic existence based upon an underlying understanding of why there is something instead of nothing. In his earlier writings this problem of the question of Being is central to his inquiry, separate to any existential or humanistic tendencies. Nevertheless, in his later writings this questioning of Being becomes not only an ontological enquiry, but also one that moves into an existential and humanistic realm, creating a somewhat emancipatory category for human existence.

Risk plays a role in Heidegger's ontology because Being, which is understood as the grounding of existence or nature in its entirety, risks beings into existence. These beings are at risk because their existence maintains a balance between existing outside of Being or not existing and being pulled back into the center that is Being. As Heidegger argues:

It is a matter in each case of being giving beings over to the risk. Being lets beings loose into the risk. This letting-loose that casts off is the actual risking. The being

⁸ Being, with an upper case B, refers to the totality of all existing things, whereas being, with a lower case b, refers to each independent entity within the totality.

of beings is the relation of casting-off to beings. The beings that are at a particular time are what is being risked. Being is preeminently the risk. It risks us, human beings. It risks living beings. Beings are so long as they remain what is continually being risked. Beings, however, are still risked into being, that is, into a risk. That is why beings, given over to the risk, themselves run risks. Beings are by going with the risk into which they are let loose. The being of beings is the risk (Heidegger 2002: 209).

Although when we speak of beings, we speak of all existing entities, humanity is set apart in this categorization because unlike plants and animals, humanity has a level of consciousness that allows for the objectification of the world and the ability to work on the world to fit its productive needs. This ability that separates humanity from other beings is what Heidegger calls the 'will.' As he argues:

To put something before oneself in such a way that what has been put forth (and which has already been represented) determines all the modes of production in every respect is a fundamental trait of the attitude we know as the will. What is called will here is production, or rather production in the sense of the deliberate self-assertion of objectification. Plant and animal do not will since, muted in their desire, they never bring the open before themselves as an object. They cannot go with the risk as with something they had represented (Heidegger 2002: 216).

With this 'will' humanity begins to see the world as a storehouse of resources to use for its own benefit. Slowly the totality that is the relationship between the object and subject begins to fall apart and humanity in its primary position as subject begins to lose sight of Being through a technological frame of mind created to better shape and use the objective aspect of Being. Plants and animals do not set themselves apart from Being in an object and subject relationship. They remain always as part of the object.

Since humanity sets itself apart from Being and creates for itself a place to dwell in the subject, it begins to risk itself even more so, because it no longer has the shelter of Being. In other words, humanity risks itself not only by being thrown from Being, but

also when separating itself and creating the possibility of losing all sense of its relationship to and with Being. Heidegger refers to this as 'going with risk' which creates a 'defenselessness' trait to human existence, for Being no longer functions as a defense against the loss in objectivity. As he states:

We, like all creatures, are beings only by being the risk of being. Yet because we (as creatures who will) go with the risk, we are risked more and so sooner given up to the danger. So long as man is set fast in deliberate self-assertion and establishes himself by the absolute objectification in departure against the open, he himself promotes his own defenselessness (Heidegger 2002: 223).

Paradoxically, Heidegger finds hope for humanity's reconnection with Being in this defenselessness created by the turning away from Being, for in the coming awareness of defenselessness, humanity turns back into the 'open,' Being, or 'widest compass' and begins to amalgamate the subject/object relationship that had been lost in the turning away from Being, therefore creating for itself a 'safebeing.' As he states:

When we turn defenselessness as such into the open, we then reverse it in its essence (i.e., as the departure against the whole attraction) into an inclining toward the widest compass. It only remains to affirm what has been reversed in this way. Yet this affirmation does not mean turning the no into a yes, but rather to acknowledge the positive as that which already lies before us and presences (Heidegger 2002: 227).

With this occurrence, humanity is brought out of its desolate times and becomes capable again of living within the world and understanding not only the 'inwardliness' of existence but also the effects that turning away from Being and objectifying the world has had on humanity as a whole. But now the question remains, who is capable of taking defenselessness and reversing its essence, therefore turning back towards Being? For Heidegger, this capability is found in 'those who risk more' and, more importantly, as he

states: “The ones who by a breath risk more risk it with language” (Heidegger 2002: 238).

To come to grips with Heidegger’s answer to this query, we must first understand one of his most famous assertions, namely that: “Language is the precinct (*templum*), i.e., the house of being” (Heidegger 2002: 232). Heidegger believes that we come to other beings through language. For example, we experience a being like a tree not only through pure sensory experience, but also through the word tree, even if we do not utter or conceptualize the word while we interact with the being. Therefore, all our experience with beings, and ultimately Being, goes through language first. Hence, language is the house of Being. Nevertheless, this language can be distorted and objectified by the turning away from Being. What is needed is those who use language separate from any objective correlation or, in other words, without any intent to use language as simply a means to an end. In this, language will speak of Being in its entirety and allow humanity to reverse its defenselessness and embrace Being and its place within it without any reference to a subject/object relationship. Those who use language in such a way for Heidegger are poets such as Holderlin and Rilke, whom he holds in high regard as navigators back to Being. As he states: “Those who risk more are the poets, but poets whose song turns our defenselessness into the open. Because they reverse the departure against the open and inwardly remember its unwholeness [*Heil-loses*] into the integral [*heile*] whole, these poets sing the integral in disintegration [*im Unheilen das Heile*]” (original emphasis, Heidegger 2002: 239). With this, Heidegger has shown what it means to live in a desolate time and, more importantly, how humanity can pull itself out of such a tumultuous fate.

Although some of what has been presented above will be referred to again as I begin to analyze risk-taking in the world of skiing, this section's main purpose was to show that risk can, and should, be conceptualized in much deeper ontological and existential categories than what has typically been presented in the research on risk. They may prove too overtly philosophical in nature to form firm moorings for more social science based research, but they expand on the ontological and existential questions of why people are drawn to risk and the life affirming possibilities that are found within interactions with death. But, this is not to say that mainstream social science has not seen the existential pull towards risk and tried to explain this ever-growing occurrence.

11. *Conclusion.*

As we have seen, risk plays an important role in both individual and social experiences. In our everyday lives, we awake to find ourselves surrounded by objective and socially constructed risks, which, in one way or another, affect our ontological and existential selves because of the ways we socially and individually interact and mitigate these risks. Because of this, social theorists are beginning to see the importance of such a concept, and slowly risk is beginning to take its place within the pantheon of social theory on par with those of class, power/knowledge, gender, etc. Nevertheless, what so many forget in a world where risk is covered by a veil of safety and avoidance, is that by the act of living we are always risking ourselves to humanities ultimate end, namely death. Therefore, without the initial risk into existence there would be no life.

Chapter 3

Sporting Risk

12. The Biggest Risk Wins.

With the growing popularity of the freeskiing movement in the late 1980s and early 1990s, athletes began to organize competitions that brought together skiers from all over the world to showcase their talent and imagination on some of the most challenging terrain in North America, South America, and Europe⁹. These events are usually held over 2 or 3 days with each day taking place on a new venue that gets increasingly more challenging over the duration of the event. Competitors are weeded out after each day, ending in a final event with the top scoring athletes. Judges score each athlete's run based upon five categories; degree of difficulty (line difficulty), control, fluidity, form and technique, and aggressiveness (McConkey and Merriam 1999). The degree of difficulty category is the most important and structures the overall score of the run. It refers to the route chosen down a slope, where more difficulty means the possibility of a higher score. The four remaining categories are then taken into account in relation to the overall difficulty of the route. These events have become increasingly popular over the last ten years with both a North American and World tour that are slowly working their way into the realm of popular sports. As a sport created in opposition to the overly stringent rules and regulations of large governing bodies, freeskiing has come full circle and created a competitive sphere, one that is controlled by the athletes and their ideologies of fun, progression, and friendship.

⁹ 'Freeskiing' here refers to the movement in skiing where the focus changed from resort piste skiing, to skiing large uncontrolled mountains, backcountry areas, and general off-piste areas. In competition format, it is overseen by the International Freeskiers Association (IFSA).

Although there are many reasons why I became involved in freeskiing competitions, the primary one was probably my friend and coworker Ryan. Ryan was the kind of person who continually looked for the next stunt to pull on skis, mountain bikes, his feet, etc., while continually having a grin on his face from the inception of the idea right on through to the outcome of the stunt, which invariably ended within someone lying on their back, lucky not to be seriously injured. It was Ryan who goaded me to enter the freeskiing competition at Fernie even though I was very adamant that my skill level was not at a point in which I was sure I wouldn't embarrass myself in front of 50 of the best skiers in Western Canada. Nevertheless, like he did so many times before, Ryan convinced me to do something I wasn't sure about and we walked over to the resort head office after work one day and signed up to compete in the event.

The day before competitions is usually reserved for athletes to inspect the venue for the following day. Ryan and I headed to the venue in the afternoon and started trying to figure out the lines we would ski. Although Fernie is well known for its powder, it hadn't snowed in quite awhile so the conditions were less than perfect, to say the least. Nevertheless, we looked around and found an area that we both thought we could maneuver well enough to impress the judges so as to make it into the second day of the competition. It was during this time that my nerves really began to surface. Surrounded by skiers with various reputations within the community, I was beginning to question the decision I had made to enter the competition. However, there was no refund policy on the entrance fee so I was trapped in a vortex that would ultimately culminate in me having to ski.

In typical Fernie form, I awoke in the morning of the competition to find that it had snowed 30cm overnight, which meant that all the work we had done the day before finding lines was moot as the venue looked nothing like it had the previous day. With 30cm of new snow courage increases and new possibilities come to light. Before the competition starts, skiers are allowed to ski the venue one more time, so Ryan and I followed the group of competitors over to the slope right away to reconfigure our plans. We quickly cemented our new lines in our memories and decided to shake the nerves by skiing powder for a short time before the competition started. It was one of those days that skiers dream about. The sky was blue and the snow light and fluffy in typical Rocky Mountain form. For that bit of time I forgot about what was awaiting me and I reveled in the beauty of the mountains in winter. With so much energy stored in the mountains its hard not to be pulled to them.

Since Ryan had drawn a starting position near the middle of the pack, and I a bit after, we headed back to the venue to find a place to watch the skiing. Watching people ski dangerous lines in ski films is exiting, but it isn't till you see it live that you get a full understanding of how miraculous the sport of skiing really is and how talented the people are who excel at it. We watched in amazement, and horror as there were some fairly large crashes, until it came time for Ryan to head to the top for his run, while I waited to watch from the bottom. Ryan began his run beautifully. He hit the starting gate running, hit a smallish air, and then linked 4 or 5 nice turns at the top until he came to a crux which consisted of a cliff band with trees scattered on top. Ryan maneuvered the trees, found his take off point, and then pointed it over what was about a 25-foot cliff. Every-

thing was perfect, Ryan had a nice tucked up form in the air and it seemed that he was going to hit his transition. Unfortunately, Ryan's landing zone was too flat and upon impact he backslapped, got turned sideways, and began tumbling down the slope. Coming to a stop some 50 feet below the cliff Ryan got up yelling profanities that rang throughout the valley below. Because of his crash and subsequent search for a lost ski, Ryan was disqualified.

After Ryan finished, I had to get ready and head to the top for my run. Strangely enough, I had calmed down considerably from the state I had been that morning. Watching people ski great lines and watching others fall all the while getting words of encouragement from the spectators made me relax. We were there to have fun and that's all everyone seemed to care about. After a short chair lift ride and traverse to the starting gate I found myself being counted down to start. The ski patroller in charge of the start gate hit one and I pushed off with the sounds of the competitors following me shouting words of encouragement. I hit the snowfield at the top flying. I was skiing the slope faster than I ever had before, but it all seemed effortless even though the chopped up snow was almost bending my ski tips up to knees. I quickly reached the same crux that Ryan had fell on, except I was about 75 feet down the cliff ban. I stopped quickly, checked out the cliff, and then, without a moment's hesitation, I leapt into the void. While in the air, focused on my landing, I quickly came to realize that I was about to land in a large rut created by skiers skiing around and under the cliff. Not what I really wanted to see, because as I touched down the rut threw my feet out from underneath me and I began tumbling head over heels. Another amazing thing about these extreme situations is that even

though you are being thrown around like you were in a washing machine on the tumble cycle, your thoughts remain very clear. I remember thinking about how I just screwed up my chances of making it into the second day, I remember thinking about what I was going to eat for dinner that night, and I remember realizing that I lost my ski and I'm going to have to hike back up the hill for it. I finally came to a stop facing down the slope and quickly turned around expecting to see my ski way up above. Fortunately, it was sitting right behind me and before long I was back in my skis again making my way to the finish line slowly, as my head had been a bit jumbled after tumbling for so long. I wasn't disqualified, but my score was well below the cut off point for advancing into the second day.

Even though my competing time was rather short, I had one of the greatest times skiing over those 3 days. I met, skied, and partied with some great people from across Canada and the United States and also had the opportunity to watch some incredible skiing, all the while cheering everybody on. What a change this was for me coming from a background where I had left mainstream sports such as hockey and baseball because of the overtly competitive and structured nature inherent in their social formation. I had found a sport that wasn't about winning, but about participating, pushing yourself, and having a good time celebrating life. I'm not sure it's safe to say that the inherent riskiness of the sport creates a stronger bond between the competitors, but I like to think so. Risking ourselves allowed us to not only open up to others, but ultimately ourselves and learn something important about life and friendship. I still try to make to competitions when I

can, not to compete, but just to have a good time. I'm never nervous anymore. Thanks Ryan.

13. *Risk Seekers.*

As mentioned previously, in risks genealogical movement towards its modern day form, it has become a concept that is generally labeled as something which individuals and groups must avoid (Denney 2005; Lupton 1999). In fact, most of the theoretical viewpoints we have delved into thus far conceptualize risk in such a manner. As Lupton asserts:

[The] emphasis in contemporary western societies on the avoidance of risk is strongly associated with the ideal of the 'civilized' body, an increasing desire to take control over one's life, to rationalize and regulate the self and the body, to avoid vicissitudes of fate. To take unnecessary risks is commonly seen as foolhardy, careless, irresponsible, and even 'deviant,' evidence of an individual's ignorance or lack of ability to regulate the self (Lupton 1999: 25).

Nevertheless, in opposition to such perspectives, dialogues have been opened which analyze risk in relation to a non-avoidance paradigm, where risk is a way of obtaining something beneficial, whether it is material, individual, or social. Interestingly enough, at the same time as the western world is becoming highly aware of the destructive character of the objective facts within risk and creating knowledge bases to mitigate such phenomenon, so too is it becoming aware that risks are not only something that people want to avoid, but also something they may want to experience.

Much of the research that analyzes the phenomenon of risk indulgence is found within the sub-discipline of the sociology of sport. In all actuality, it is hard to think of a sporting activity that does not cause participants to risk something, whether it be losing,

injury, the self, or, ultimately, death. As Heather L. Reid states in her book *The Philosophical Athlete*:

As soon as you enter the arena of sport you risk failure, pain, injury, embarrassment, losing, even death...However, the scariest thing about sport is not facing what might be, but dealing with what is. It's not about who you think you are, but who you really are. It's not about facing death, it's about becoming aware of life. What we risk in sport is losing the illusion and finding the truth about ourselves and our lives (Reid 2002: 97).

It is not surprising then that the sociological research geared towards sport has been fascinated by risk and therefore produced a substantial amount of work that tries to understand risk in this aspect of social and individual life. Because of this and the fact that my analysis deals with what is essentially a sport, whether inside a larger sport structure or more leisure in nature, this chapter will go over the socio-theoretical underpinnings that are commonly used to understand risk-taking in sport. Some of these theories, as we will see, are situated closer to a realist position, while others sit closer to the social constructionist position, and others delve into the ontological and existential aspects of risk-taking within sport.

14. *Edgework*.

What began as a study of the culture of skydiving, is the theoretical base influenced by the musings of gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson and his concept of 'edgework' (Albert 1999; Donnelly 2004; Lupton 1999; Lyng 2005). As Stephen Lyng states in his book *Edgework: The Sociology of Risk-Taking*:

[The] edgework approach departed from the existing perspectives by conceptualizing risk taking as a form of boundary negotiation – the exploration of 'edges,' as it were. These edges can be defined in various ways: the boundary between sanity and insanity, consciousness and unconsciousness, and the most consequen-

tial one, the line separating life and death. Conceptualizing voluntary risk taking in these terms directs attention to the most analytically relevant features of the risk taking experience: the skillful practices and powerful sensations that risk takers value so highly (Lyng 2005: 4).

Constructing risk-taking in such a way of course begs the question of *why* people are drawn, without any immediate material gain, to experiencing the edges that separate certain dualities? Edgework researchers have found the answer to this in the enjoyment and ‘fun’ that participants have while working the edge, therefore begging the second question, what social structures create such a pleasurable experience for the participants of edgework? This is where the paradoxical nature of the edgework theory becomes obvious.

On one side, the theory of edgework finds the key to explaining the pleasure and enjoyment experienced while risk-taking in the need for escape from the inhibiting institutional structures of modern life. As Lyng states: “The argument that edgework is a response to the over-determined character of modern social life was first articulated in the original study (Lyng, 1990), which emphasized the institutional constraints that edgeworkers seek to transcend through the pursuit of high-risk leisure activities and in some cases, dangerous occupations” (Lyng 2005: 6). To augment the institutional dimension of this argument, edgework theorists have used Marxist ‘alienation,’ Meadian ‘oversocialization,’ Weberian ‘rationality,’ and Eliasian ‘uncivilized spaces’ to show how institutional structures hem individuals into a specific routinized and predictable social life. Edgework therefore becomes a way of escaping these bonds through an intense experience made possible by finely honed skills and one’s own self-determination.

On the opposite side of the edgework theory and its connection to escape, comes a perspective that is based upon the critical realist 'risk society' work undertaken by Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens (Beck 1992; Giddens 2000; Lyng 2005). Here, instead of finding the impetus for interacting with the edge in a need to escape from the constricting institutions of the modern social world, we find an explanation based upon the correspondence between the institutions of a risk minded society and the type of individuals that are created in such a social sphere. As Lyng argues:

Framed in terms of the risk society model, the pursuit of risk becomes more than a response to the central imperative of modern society. It is itself a key structural principle extending throughout the social system in institutional patterns of economic, political, cultural, and leisure activity. Thus, the insecurities of the risk society are reflected in almost every aspect of social life, from the dangers we confront in work and consumption to the uncertainties involved in leisure activities and the maintenance of our bodies and health (Lyng 2005: 8).

In the 'risk society,' institutions have become increasingly situated to deal with the forecasting and mitigation of risk. This change has created a 'risk-taking ethic' in Western society where the responsibility for risks has been displaced to the level of the individual. Hence, we have a macro social process that not only affects the larger structures of society but also the type of individual that is produced. The individuals created by such a macro force are now more oriented to risk-taking in both their professional and private lives, therefore creating a perfect atmosphere for the growth and incubation of highly risk-oriented leisure activities. In other words, in a society infatuated with risk, it stands that individuals will begin to champion risk-taking skills and enter into activities that can hone such abilities.

The paradoxical nature of the edgework perspective should now be quite apparent. On one side is an understanding of risk-taking as an action that serves the purpose of allowing individuals to escape the ever-tightening knot of modern institutions, which have created an increasingly routinized and predictable existence. On the other hand, edgework perspectives have also concluded the opposite, that risk-taking is an outcome of the close interaction with institutional structures that have created a risk-taking mindset within society. Nevertheless, Lyng makes a strong point when he argues:

We must at least consider the possibility that people may, on one level, seek a risk-taking experience of personal determination and transcendence in an environment of social overregulation, whereas on another level they employ the human capital created by this experience to navigate the challenges of the risk society...The paradox of people being both pushed and pulled to edgework practices by opposing institutional imperatives reflects complexities in the contemporary experience of risk that we are just beginning to appreciate. One of the most remarkable things about the academic study of voluntary risk taking is how long it has taken social researchers to begin unraveling this complexity (Lyng 2005: 10).

What at first appears to be a contradiction in the edgework perspective turns out to be one of its main strengths, for it opens the road to dialogues that can deal with the complexity of social life. It is this complexity that so many social theoretical perspectives on risk can only scratch the surface of.

Although edgework is one of the most theoretically relevant outlooks because of its ability to deal with both the push and pull of modern social life, it still falls short in giving a clear picture of the *why* in the analysis of voluntary risk-taking because it relies upon the idea of inhibiting social institutional structures that create a need for individuals to work the edges between certain dualities, either in the form of a push from these institutions or a pull towards the risk-taking ethic created by such institutions in 'late modern-

ity' (Donnelly 2004). This again places a negative value on risk-taking, thereby defining it as an irrational activity only done because of social forces and not because it offers participants something beneficial for the creation of a fulfilling and satisfying existence. Therefore, it would stand that without these social structures, by either existing outside of them or in regards to some type of utopian definition, there would be no need for the working of edges. But again, it is plausible that even without social structures that hem people into a routine life or one where risk-taking is championed, there would still be a drive within certain individuals to push their own existential and ontological limits by interacting with risk. For example, as backcountry skier Jon Johnston states in the ski film entitled *Stimulus*: "[I] Pretty much work non-stop all summer to make enough money to be up here, but even though I'm heading home for work here in a few weeks to not have a day off for the next 2 months with 50 bucks in my pocket it was completely worth it" (2004). As Johnston makes clear, his life is not separated into one of skiing and one of typical North American existence in need of escape, but rather he exists in one life that is structured completely around his need to push his skiing to places that contain very risky elements.

15. *Gender.*

Moving away from the edgework paradigm, we encounter a perspective that is based upon one of the most rallied behind categories in modern social theory and research, namely gender. Here, theoretical perspectives look at the ways in which gendered individuals perform either dominant feminine or dominant masculine stereotypes to bolster their gendered self (Albert 1999; Donnelly 2004; Lupton 1999; Pringle 2005; Whea-

ton 2004; Young and White 1995). This research shows that risky behavior that champions courage in the face of danger and violence has more often than not been socially conceptualized as masculine domains, whereas as the less risky and safe domains of life have been seen as feminine in nature. For example, in a study analyzing the discourse of children around accidents and risk-taking by Judith Green, it was discovered that there is a striking difference between the ways that girls and boys conceptualize their relationships to risky situations (1997). As Green states concerning the findings of her study:

Girls and boys accounted for their activities in these discussions in rather different ways. Whereas the boys stressed the danger and risk involved, the girls stressed their responsibility for not only themselves, but for others as well. The comments boys made about risk taking were usually told in interaction with each other, as part of dramatic stories to illustrate the nature of their peer group activity. Although girls also talked about taking risks, the style of their stories was often somewhat different. Rather than stressing just the inherent excitement of taking the risk, the girls talked about secondary benefits of risk taking (Green 1997: 468-469).

Such a study shows that at an early age, males and females are socialized to understand their relationship to risk-taking in very different ways. The girls were beginning to distance themselves from risk, whereas the boys began to champion it as a sign of being masculine.

Although in the gendered performance perspective either taking risks or not taking risks is an individual's buttressing of their gender roles, it is also the case that through risk-taking men and women are able to transcend these taken-for-granted gender placements. For men, risk-taking is not only an opportunity to showcase masculine traits revolving around courage and bodily and emotional control, but it also opens up an arena where men can let go and release the very emotions that, as men, they are socialized to

keep in check (Collison 1996). Therefore, maintaining the façade of masculinity while releasing the emotions that are held back by dominant conceptualizations of proper male behaviour. As for women, the potential contained in risk-taking in sport to challenge gender roles should be quite apparent (Gotfrit 1991; Hargreaves 1997). As Jennifer Hargreaves states in her piece *Women's Boxing and Related Activities: Introducing Images and Meanings* concerning women in the high-risk sport of boxing: "The body is the most important signifier of meanings and in the case of women and boxing and associated activities, these are constantly contested and are changing according to broader contexts of boxing discourse and gender relations of power" (Hargreaves 1997: 47). Women can transcend their gender roles through risk-taking by taking part in activities that are strongly conceptualized as masculine, such as boxing. A great example of this is the popular sporting world, as greater numbers of women are beginning to participate in traditionally coded male only sports, while at the same time creating more opportunities, both professional and amateur, to be involved in such activities.

Although many of the social conceptualizations concerning risk and gender discussed above are still in place and exerting considerable influence on how men and women choose to behave, it is nevertheless changing. As Lupton states: "While risk-taking has been most closely linked to the performance of dominant masculinities, and risk-avoidance is associated with dominant femininities, there is evidence of some shifts in these meanings" (Lupton 1999: 163). Women are now beginning to define themselves in relation to risk and taking on many of the risks that have traditionally been only the domain of men.

Not only have gender based theoretical outlooks structured research that has analyzed the gendered performative aspects of sport, others have understood the gender relations in sport as tied to larger mechanisms of masculine hegemony (Albert 1999; Lupton 1999; Pringle 2005; Wheaton 2004; Young and White 1995). Here sport reproduces the paternalistic structure of society within its core values, which helps to maintain male dominance not only within sport, but society at large. The values of violence, toughness, and risk-taking, which are highly aggressive and dominating ideologies, have been connected to the male identity structure and therefore help to maintain the male gender as dominant over the female. Through male participation in sports that value these gender-centered ideologies, men not only control the sporting sphere, but also the social gender sphere as well, perpetuating male gender dominance. As Young and White state in their piece *Sport, Physical Danger, and Injury*: “[Feminist] work on sport and gender has begun to understand male tolerance of physical risk and injury as a constituting process that may enhance a particular brand of masculinization. For some, the cultural meaning of physical danger and living with injury resonate with larger ideological issues of gender legitimacy and power” (Young and White 1995: 45). This male sport ethos is so strong in sport that Young and White (1995) discovered that women who enter into male dominated sports tend to take on these more masculine traits revolving around violence, toughness, and risk-taking.

Although gender situated analyses of risk-taking are relevant and have shown how risk-taking can be connected to larger gender ideologies, it still remains that as these gender structures weaken, more women than ever are beginning to look for and in-

teract with situations that are defined as risky (Albert 1999; Donnelly 2004; Young and White 1995). As Peter Donnelly states in his piece *Sport and Risk Culture*:

Observed differences between male and females in risk-taking behaviour have made it far too easy to propose biology or socialisation as the cause. However, there are reasons to suspect that lack of opportunity might be a more adequate explanation, and one that again returns to social context. While women have been less involved in the safety and social control occupations (e.g. firefighting, military, police), there is no evidence that women have avoided these occupations when the opportunity has been available (e.g. during wartime, or during a time of increasing gender equity). Adolescent females appear to take risks involving substance abuse as often as males, and probably take far more sexual risks than males. And, while there are fewer women than men involved in high risk and high injury sports, the number of women participants is increasing significantly as opportunities are made, or become available (Donnelly 2004: 38-39).

It is recognized that women's inability to participate in such activities has been created through the socially constructed and maintained ideologies of gender and the roles appropriate to both sexes, but with the shifting of these structures women are now allowed to express their desire to interact with risk. As big mountain skier Ingrid Backstrom states in *Steep*: "This is what you dream about skiing. I just remember skiing out the bottom and it was so fast that it was just a blur, but it was one of the most incredible feelings" (Oenhaus 2008). In this quote, we find the falling of gender ideologies in relation to risk-taking as she explains a feeling and experience that is very similar to those experienced by men. Gender undoubtedly plays a role in society and the world of high-risk skiing as well, but when asking *why* people actively search for risk while bringing down the ideologies hiding our ontological and existential selves we find the same movement towards risk, however one is defined socially.

16. *Sporting Networks.*

Howard L. Nixon II analyzes risk-taking in sport through a variant of ‘social network analysis’ where the ethos of risk-taking is created and maintained through the structure of the culture of sport itself (Albert 1999; Roderick 1998). Using the idea of a ‘sportsnet,’ which is a “web of interactions that directly or indirectly link members of social networks in a particular sport or sports-related setting” (Roderick 1998), Nixon understands the ‘culture of risk’ in sport as arising from the dominant ideology of risk-taking being supported and passed on by coaches, athletes, friends, medical staff, and the rationally structured institutional base that lies behind sports. Through this network of actors, dominant ideologies of the necessity of risk-taking are passed on and reinforced to the point where initiates believe they must engage with risk and accept the consequences that could arise, as part of sport and winning itself. As Martin Roderick states in his piece *The Sociology of Risk, Pain, Injury: A Comment on the Work of Howard L. Nixon II* concerning Nixon’s outlook: “Nixon...suggests that within sportsnets, athletes receive messages which may intentionally or unintentionally reinforce a culture of risk and rationalize pain and injury; encourage public denial of pain and injury; inflate pain thresholds; and inhibit network members from seeking medical help” (Roderick 1998: 67). Such a theoretical perspective is relevant because most sport participants, and even spectators, have been subjected to or heard many of the clichés that surround sport, such as ‘winning at all costs,’ ‘playing through the pain,’ or ‘never giving up,’ which are common ideas that run throughout the entire sportsnet and its underlying structure. Therefore, from a social network approach, risk-taking is something that is normalized and made relevant

through the individual and institutional structures that make up the world of sport. Thus, it is not the prospect of risk, but the situation in which the risk is found that normalizes and propagates the ethos of risk-taking in sport.

Looking at risk-taking in sport through a ‘social network lens’ has certainly made relevant contributions to the understanding of risk in such a sphere of social life. Anyone who has been involved in sport can relate to the rationalization of risk for the ultimate goal of winning. Nevertheless, though we may find such dialogues occurring in the high-risk skiing community, they function not to normalize risk-taking in such situations, but rather to spur individuals on to push their corporeal limits further through the already normalized risk-taking that is the means to the end of experiencing a deeper level of existence. As professional skier Kent Kreitler states in the ski movie entitled *Mind the Addiction*: “There are different things that are scary about what we do, but that’s kind of why we like to do them too” (Jones et al 2001). As we can see in this quote from Kreitler, this dialogue or sportsnet does not normalize risk, but rather helps individuals to push their ability in a world where risk does not need normalization, as it is the key to the experience high-risk skiers are seeking.

17. *Functional Sport.*

Within the sociology of sport, functionalism tends to look at the ways that sport helps to maintain social cohesion through both player and fan interactions. But, as James H. Frey posits in his piece *Social Risk and the Meaning of Sport*: “Risk could certainly be used in a functionalist analyses, that is, sport serving a compensation or safety valve function” (Frey 1991: 137). Needless to say, functionalism has put forward its own struc-

ture to understand risk-taking in sport (Albert 1999; Frey 1991; Loy and Booth 2002). Under such a framework, sport, and the risk-taking that is inherent within it, serves as an equalizer to the general stress and confinement that is created by a modern 'organic' society¹⁰. To relieve this pressure in a socially acceptable manner without disrupting the general underpinnings of a functioning social whole, sport creates a sphere of life where participants and spectators can risk their 'emotional' and 'social' selves in front of peers and audiences. For the former this is done through a direct interaction with the game itself, whereas the latter partake in this risk by fan and team association. These players and spectators can succeed, but only through the risk-taking that is inherent within the 'win at all cost' ethos that is saturated throughout the sporting world, which follows the modern liberal ideology of risk for profit, success, and progress.

Although not directly related to the edgework paradigm, where, on the one hand, risk-taking is a form of escape or release from inhibiting structures of modern society, the functionalist theory as formulated above revolves around the same escape ideology and therefore unfortunately falls prey to many of the criticisms that have been raised against similar theoretical grounds. If individuals within society were not existing within a social structure that creates a need for a sphere to let out the emotions and frustrations of everyday life, would people still look for risk?; and do people who participate in high-risk activities necessarily use it as an escape? These are important questions raised by taking such a position, and unfortunately questions that functionalism cannot answer.

¹⁰ 'Organic' is in reference to Durkheim's two modes of social solidarity. 'Mechanical solidarity' is the social situation whereby social cohesion is maintained through the similarities between people in relation to work, education, religion, etc. 'Organic solidarity' is the social situation whereby social cohesion is maintained through the 'division of labour' and the interdependencies that this creates between individuals.

Along with this, Loy and Booth (2002) find four additional criticisms against functionalist accounts of sport, and the risk-taking found within. First, because functionalism places such importance on the overarching social forces at play within human social life, it tends to ignore the subject while focusing solely on objective social forces. Therefore, failing when trying to explain an activity such as risk-taking, which exists not only within an objective social wide field, but also within the emotions and feelings it creates within the individual. Secondly, functionalism creates tautological arguments where the cause and effect become conflated and difficult to decipher. For example, sport is meant to be an escape from the overly institutionalized modern world, but much of this sport has become heavily institutionalized itself. Thirdly, the simplistic causal directions found within functionalism. For example, is it only the stress of modern life that creates the need for risk-taking or are there other factors involved as well? Finally, functionalism's tendency to focus on consensus and not conflict. Can we really assume that risk-taking is simply a way society maintains cohesion? Does conflict not play a role, as the edgework perspectives seem to believe?

18. *Sport Interactions.*

Closely connected to functionalist interpretations, is Erving Goffman's variant of 'symbolic interactionist' theory (Albert 1999; Dobson et al 2006; Frey 1991). For Goffman, the personality has become the most sacred object in modern day society, creating a sphere where ontological and existential meaning is given to life through the interactions between individuals and the larger groups of which they are members. In this way, personalities are created and social reality is defined and given structure. Within the sporting

world, which consists of ‘on stage’ – the playing field – and ‘offstage’ – the locker room – realms, we find athletes and spectators interacting with one another and creating distinct self-identities that conform to societal forces. Therefore, risk is inherently part of this process, in relation to the possibility of failing to create the specific identity desired. People within the sporting realm are willing to risk themselves to create, within the drama that is sport, the identity they are searching for. Not only are personalities created, maintained, and risked within sport, but ideas of what is and what is not a risk are also created by the interaction between adherents. Through interactions, past, present, and future contingencies are taken account of to paint a picture of what is a risky situation and what is not.

Although symbolic interactionism has shed light on aspects of risk-taking in sport, it nevertheless proves inadequate in the exploration of higher consequence risks that are actively sought out. First, it falls prey to the larger criticism against social constructionist minded analyses, for it again assumes that situations and actions are only risky when defined in such a manner. Second, symbolic interactionism cannot deal with the question of why – after a phenomenon has been defined as risky – people will still carry out the action (Dobson et al 2006). Goffman touches on biological clues to explain such risk oriented behavior, but unfortunately does not expand in this direction and falls into a type of biological determinism, that – although not necessarily a fault – is not supported with an in depth exploration.

19. *Postmodern Sport.*

Postmodern inspired research into risk-taking in sport generally revolves around two important ideas. First, is the connection of sports with aesthetics or, in other words, the conceptualization of sport as art (Midol 1993; Stranger 1999; Zuchora 1978). The importance of such an idea is that it enables researchers to leave behind the more rationally structured and meta-narrative like enlightenment-based modernist theories and analyze sport in terms of aesthetics, emotions, and individual experience. As Mark Stranger argues in his piece *The Aesthetics of Risk*:

Aesthetic reflexivity, figural regimes, and the aestheticization of everyday life, thus give primacy to sensual experience: an environment conducive to the development of significant meaning in risk-taking behavior. This meaningfulness involves a *feeling* that participation in the activity is good in itself. This also has implications for the connections among thrill-seeking, risk-taking behavior and sublime experiences (Stranger 1999: 270).

Structuring sport as art allows one to conceptualize risk as something that is not to be avoided existentially, but something that individuals strive to experience directly.

The second important aspect of postmodernist work on risk-taking in sport revolves around phenomenological ideas of the ‘sublime,’ ‘flow,’ or ‘whiz.’ In other words, the transcendent feelings towards a deeper connection with an ontological base that comes from interacting with risk itself (Midol 1993; Stranger 1999). Much like our subconscious sublime like reactions to things such as art and nature, in the experience of risk-taking there is a fragment of the sublime itself. A hidden message that holds our attention and whispers of forces that cannot be explained by rational answers. As Midol appropriately states:

Trance is experienced in a situation of mortal danger, ordinary conscience being ineffective when the body propelled at such high speed has to merge with its surroundings. The cosmic feeling is a kind of intense organic pleasure where the body seems to float on a high: that's the KICK. The subject seems to exist in its preconscious state. This can be considered as a way of abandoning the thoughts and actions of the individual or turning away from one's self image, of fusing with other beings and the environment in order to reach organic consciousness (original emphasis, Midol 1993: 27).

Postmodernism, as a theoretical starting point, is somewhat unusual to its contemporaries, because, as we have seen, it pushes the boundaries of thinking about risk-taking outside the reach of rationality and describes why individuals are drawn to risk regardless of overlying institutional or ideological structures.

In a lot of ways, what will be tackled in the chapters to come will maintain a close connection to postmodernist reinterpretations of sport and the risk-taking within it. Nevertheless, they diverge in two main respects. First, postmodernist conceptualizations only scratch the surface of the ontological and existential categorization of the ideas of the sublime, whiz, kick, or whatever we choose to call the effects felt while taking risks. This is one of the most important categories of analysis when looking into risk-taking, and theory needs to dig deeper to explain what this experience means on both an ontological and existential level. The second divergence revolves around the postmodernist rejection of meta-narratives (Eagleton 2003; Harvey 1990; Koelb 1990). There are no universal truths, universal meaning, or universal morality engendering human life for postmodernists, there is only difference and none of this 'culturally' defined difference can be labeled as right or wrong. As Terry Eagleton appropriately states in his book *After Theory* concerning the direction of postmodernist thought: "Moral values, like everything else,

are a matter of random, free-floating cultural traditions” (Eagleton 2003: 57). Although an important perspective, as we will see, risk-taking may contain the potential to permit adherents to perceive a stronger ontological and existential base to human life, therefore allowing them to achieve a greater state of being. Because of this, postmodern perspectives and their rejection of meta-narratives cannot be used.

20. *Conclusion.*

Although these theories and the research based upon them have illuminated the social aspects of risk-taking in sport, they do not dig deep enough and explain *why* people are drawn to interact with risk. Most guilty of this oversight are gender-based theories, social network analysis, functionalism and symbolic interactionist positions. They do marvelous jobs in explaining the larger hierarchies, power relations, and social forces involved in identity formation, maintenance, and the dialogues surrounding them, but they ultimately fail in accounting for the reasons why individuals are compelled to take risks in their individual lives. For example, gender-based theories cannot explain why women, without any connection to gender definitions, continually strive to have deeper contacts with risk through sport. Social network analysis again explains how a ‘culture of risk’ exists and is propagated in sport, but then fails to take into account the sensual feelings it creates within adherents.

Edgework and postmodern theories come closer to getting at the *why*, for they have an emotional or cognitive base to the human desire to risk oneself. Nevertheless, they fall short as well, mainly because these emotions lead to consequences that are difficult to deal with or simply do not elaborate clearly enough. For example, the edgework

paradigm fails by placing the wanting of risk squarely in the realm of social construction. Therefore, if we lived in a social world devoid of a need to escape or that was not structured by more risk-oriented structures, it would seem that risk-taking would not be as prevalent. As for postmodernism, it would have to concede that the sublime is an idea that has no inherent value for human existential and ontological life. Thus, it is unable to place a value upon risk.

With these insights, it becomes clear that a new approach is needed. One that, like a thought experiment, begins with what we know or don't know about ourselves ontologically and existentially, and moves forward to paint a complete picture of what it means to dance on the edge of life and death.

Chapter 4

The Reevaluation

21. *The Beginning.*

Although I have spent years searching for risk while skiing, I had never really sat down to tackle such a question academically nor had I really even formulated the question itself in my mind. To be completely honest, skiing was something that I wanted to keep separate from my scholastic endeavors because it seemed so antithetical to academic reasoning. Nevertheless, about a year ago two forces came together to generate the question that is guiding this paper. First, were the deaths of two fairly prominent names in the ski film and competition industry, namely Billy Poole and John Nicoletta. Second, was a reconnection with the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. I suppose these two forces were on a collision course since I first stepped into skis and, years later, when I first opened myself up to the world Nietzsche had envisioned.

Billy Poole was a young skier from Missoula, Montana who was beginning to make a name for himself in the ski film industry. He was especially known for the large cliffs he would jump off in and around the Utah and Wyoming backcountry. Unfortunately, on January 22, 2008, Billy died while filming for Warren Miller Entertainment, one of the oldest ski movie production companies. As Salt Lake City's *Deseret News* reported online:

Poole skied several turns down the slope and then jumped. It really wasn't what extreme skiers would call a cliff, says Wissman. "15 or 20 feet isn't a cliff, it's air." The Jump was about 70 feet in length, Landing Poole on his feet at first. "Then he tumbled in a big apron below the rocks," Wissman recalls. "On his left

side was a protruding bluff of rocks, and when he was tumbling he hit that protruding bluff, the edge of it.” After that his body looked limp (Jarvik 2008).

Friends and members of the film crew quickly reached Poole, but unfortunately he succumbed to his injuries while being flown to hospital. His death had a large impact on the high-risk skiing and ski movie communities, but nevertheless did little to dissuade anyone from partaking in similar activities.

John Nicoletta’s fate was also tied to the sport he loved, but instead of skiing for the camera, his last run occurred at the World Freeskiing Championships being held at the Alaskan ski resort Alyeska in April of 2008. John was one of the few elite skiers who had been invited to compete in the event that brought together the best Freeskiers from around the globe. Doing well here meant a huge boost to one’s skiing career. Unfortunately, as Powder magazine writer Derek Taylor describes:

Nicoletta skied in an area that had been skied by several competitors earlier in the contest. He fell for about 20 feet over an exposed, rocky area, impacting rock, then tumbled and slid several hundred feet before coming to a rest. Alyeska Ski Patrol was on the scene in minutes, and transported him down by sled to a pick up area, where a helicopter evacuated him. As an ominous reminder, his skis remained stuck in the snow near the fatal impact zone for about an hour (Taylor 2008).

Although ski patrol was quickly on scene, Nicoletta was dead by the time anyone could reach him. The competition was postponed for the day, but because the rest of the competitors felt that John would have wanted them to continue, the event resumed the following day after a memorial hike to the peak upon which Nicoletta met his ultimate end.

As an avid skier living in rather flat Southern Ontario, I spent a considerable amount of my time procrastinating on schoolwork by reading skiing websites. Needless

to say, the news of Poole's and Nicoletta's deaths traveled to me rather quickly. Along with this, my academic interests at this time had me researching Nietzsche's philosophy trying to find aspects of his thought that transferred well into the arena of social theory. I was quite intrigued by his emancipatory theory of art, the duality he set up between Apollonian and Dionysian aspects of human existence, and his fight against the nihilism he saw plaguing nineteenth century Western society. I can't pinpoint the moment exactly, but something clicked within the interaction of these two forces and I began to see not only the question, but also the answer. What will follow is the expansion of the question and more importantly, the proof of Nietzsche's answer.

22. *Nietzsche's Anti-Socratic Project.*

To get a clear picture of the lineation of Nietzsche's philosophy, we need to first understand the social forces that inspired such thought. Therefore, we need to briefly situate Nietzsche within the historical, social, and intellectual structures that sparked his overarching philosophical project. These intellectual structures were those created and popularized by the ontological, existential, and epistemological shift that occurred with the influence of Socratic philosophy and its emphasis on knowledge. This was not only the beginning of what would become science proper with the coming of enlightenment-based modernity¹¹, but also the beginning of a moral influence that would eventually evolve into the moral system championed by Christianity, both of which are highly contentious issues for Nietzsche and symptoms of the nihilistic sickness that he contributes to the emergence of Socratic philosophy. For instance, if we analyze Plato's *Republic*

¹¹ 'Enlightenment-Based Modernity' refers to the first phase of modernity that was based on the enlightenment metanarrative encompassing rationality and science.

(1930), specifically Socrates' argument concerning the question of 'justice,' we find a dialectic that not only champions rational knowledge, but also a universal moral system that advocates self-control and a turning away from the more irrational, unknowable, and amoral characteristics of human life.

To understand the concept of justice and where it can be found, Socrates¹² begins by making an analogy between the State and the individual, so that he can transfer his argument from the larger State entity to the individuals that make it up. As he says to Glaucon:

“I will tell you,” I said: “there is a justice of one man, we say, and, I suppose, also of an entire city.” “Assuredly,” said he. “Is not the city larger than the man?” “It is larger,” he said. “Then, perhaps, there would be more justice in the larger object and more easy to apprehend. If it please you, then, let us first look for its quality in states, and then only examine it also in the individual, looking for the likeness of the greater in the form of the less.” (Plato 1930: 148-149).

Socrates believes that for a State to be virtuous, or morally good, it needs to contain the qualities of 'wisdom,' 'bravery,' 'sobriety,' and 'justice.' Wisdom refers to the string of knowledge that deals with the proper maintenance of the State in regards not to individual interests, but to the State interests as a whole. For Socrates this knowledge is found within the proportionally small ruling class that he named the 'Guardians.' As he concludes concerning wisdom:

“Then it is by virtue of its smallest class and the minutest part of itself, and the wisdom that resides therein, in the part which takes the lead and rules, that a city established on principles of nature would be wise as a whole. And as it appears these are by nature the fewest, the class to which it pertains to partake of the

¹² I will here refer mainly to Socrates, as he is the main character within the *Republic*. Nevertheless, Plato was the author of this specific piece. In this discussion on 'justice' Socrates is speaking to Glaucon, Plato's elder brother.

knowledge which alone of all forms of knowledge deserves the name wisdom.” (Plato 1930: 351).

Next for Socrates is the quality of bravery. It refers to the soldier or ‘Auxiliary’ classes of the State and denotes that quality which ‘preserves’ the laws and ideologies created by the wisdom of the ruling class, which has been passed on through a lawfully designed education. As he argues:

“Bravery too, then, belongs to a city by virtue of a part of itself owing to its possession in that part of a quality that under all conditions will preserve the conviction that things to be feared are precisely those which and such as the lawgiver inculcated in their education. Is not that what you call bravery?” (Plato 1930: 353).

Defined straightforwardly, bravery maintains the wisdom emanating from the ruling class.

The next Socratic virtue is that of ‘sobriety.’ This refers to the harmony between what Socrates conceptualizes as the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ aspects of the State. The ‘good’ is in reference to the ‘naturally’ superior class, the Guardians, which contains and is guided by reason and rationality. The ‘bad’ is in reference to the aspects of the State – women, children, slaves, and freemen – which instead of being guided by reason and rationality are guided by pleasure and desire. This harmony is to be maintained, with the help of the Auxiliary, through the dominance of the ‘good’ aspects over the ‘bad’ aspects. In other words, the control of the inferior classes by the superior class based upon their possession of the virtue of wisdom. This harmony is what Socrates refers to as ‘master of itself.’ As he describes sobriety:

“And again, the mob of motley appetites and pleasures and pains one would find chiefly in children and women and slaves and in the base rabble of those who are freemen in name.” “By all means.” “But the simple and moderate appetites which

with the aid of reason and right opinion are guided by consideration you will find in few and those the best born and best educated.” “True,” he said. “And do you not find this too in your city and a domination there of the desires in the multitude and the rabble by the desires and the wisdom that dwell in minority of the better sort?” “I do,” he said. (Plato 1930: 361).

Lastly, we encounter the virtue of ‘justice.’ For Socrates, justice lies in the ability of the Guardians, Auxiliary, and freemen to see their function within the State as a whole and to stay within these functions, without trying to move up or down this continuum or altering its structure. As Socrates states:

“Again, let us put it in this way. The proper functioning of the money-making class, the helpers and the guardians, each doing its own work in the state, being the reverse of that just described, would be justice and would render the city just.” “I think the case is thus and not otherwise,” said he (Plato 1930: 373).

In other words, for a State to be just, people must focus on their own duties and not encroach upon the duties of others.

Now that Socrates has argued through his idea of justice in relation to the State, he moves his analogy along so as to discover where justice can be found within the individual. First in this process, is to illuminate what he perceives as ‘the three parts of the soul’ and to connect them to the three parts, excluding justice, found within a virtuous state. As Socrates argues:

“It is not, then,” said I, “impossible for us to avoid admitting this much, that the same forms and qualities are to be found in each one of us that are in the state? They could not get there from any other source” (Plato 1930: 380-381).

The first aspect of the soul is that which is connected to rational thought, thereby championing the primacy of knowledge. The aspect opposite to this, which as Socrates argues must be separate because a thing cannot be both what it is and what it is not, is the

side of our soul that is driven by instinct and the want for sensual pleasure. It is the aspect of the soul that is irrational and more animalistic in nature. As he argues in relation to these aspects:

“Not unreasonably,” said I, “Shall we claim that they are two and different from one another, naming that in the soul whereby it reckons and reasons the rational and that which it loves, hungers, thirsts, and feels the flutter and titillation of other desires, the irrational and appetitive – companion of various repletions and pleasures.” (Plato 1930: 398-399).

At this point we have the first two aspects of the soul. The rational, which is analogous to the Guardian class, and the irrational, which is analogous to the women, children, slaves, and freemen within the State. Nevertheless, there is still one aspect remaining, which corresponds to the idea of sobriety. This aspect of the soul is what Socrates calls the ‘spirit’ and it is related to the functions of the Auxiliary within the State. When properly educated it acts as an ally to the rational aspect of the soul, helping to maintain the rule of the rational over the irrational. As Socrates argues:

“It is then distinct from this too, or is it a form of the rational, so that there are not three but two kinds in the soul, the rational and the appetitive, or just as in the city there were three existing kinds that composed its structure, the money-makers, the helpers, the counselors, so also in the soul there exists a third kind, this principle of high spirit, which is the helper of reason by nature unless it is corrupted by evil nature?” “We have to assume it as a third,” he said. “Yes,” said I, “provided it shall have been shown to be something different from the rational, as it has shown to be other than the appetitive” (Plato 1930: 404-405).

Therefore, Socrates believes that within the human soul we find a division that is mimicked by the divisions that form the basis of a virtuous state. Nevertheless, the virtue of justice still remains.

Looking back, we saw that for Socrates justice within the State is the condition in which all three parts, the Guardians, Auxiliary, and freemen, understand their proper societal position and make it their life's goal to provide their specific function to the State. With this, and the virtues of wisdom, courage, and sobriety, a state can then be labeled just or morally virtuous. Socrates believes that the same can be said for the individual. As he argues:

“Just too, then, Glaucon, I presume we shall say a man is in the same way in which a city was just.” “That too was quite inevitable.” “But we surely cannot have forgotten this, that the state was just by reason of each of the three classes found in it fulfilling its own function.” “I don't think we have forgotten,” he said. “We must remember, then, that each of us also in whom the several parts within him perform each of their own task – he will be a just man and one who minds his own affairs (Plato 1930: 407).

Therefore, if all three parts of the soul – rational, spirit, and irrational – are allowed to practice their specific function free from interference, where the rational, with the help of the spirit, maintains dominance over the irrational, then a person can be labeled as just and morally virtuous. With this, we have not only discovered Socrates' definition of justice, but also how both the State and individual are to obtain such a definition.

Through such an example, we are able to discern the ideas created by Socrates that Nietzsche so fervently criticizes. First, is the primacy Socrates places upon rationalistic knowledge¹³. Not only do we see Socrates searching for knowledge by using logical argumentative methods, but more importantly, we find him placing a primacy on this knowledge by not only believing that the rational and knowledgeable aspects of the State

¹³ There is a contradiction in Nietzsche's argument against Socratic thought, whereby he claims that Socratic philosophy is 'untrue' to attack the primacy of 'truth.' Unfortunately, the space needed to flesh out such an argument is lacking, so, for the sake of argument, I will move on keeping this criticism in mind while trying to stay clear of any mention of truth.

should rule, but also that the analogous aspects of the soul should be dominant within the individual, thereby creating a sphere of existence which leaves no room for irrationality and the relativism of knowledge. As Nietzsche states in *The Birth of Tragedy*:

Besides this isolated insight, born of an excess of honesty if not exuberance, there is, to be sure, a profound *illusion* that first saw the light of the world in the person of Socrates: the unshakable faith that thought, using the thread of causality, can penetrate the deepest abysses of being, and that thought is capable not only of knowing being but even of *correcting* it. This sublime metaphysical illusion accompanies science as an instinct and leads science again and again to its limits at which it must turn into *art* – *which is really the aim of this mechanism* (original emphasis, Nietzsche 2000b: 95-96).

This emphasis on rationalistic knowledge remains the main epistemological tool in the modern world in the form of science. It is with such an ideological genesis that Nietzsche perceives a ‘No!’ saying to life.

With this primacy placed upon knowledge, we also find a second closely connected idea that Nietzsche opposes, namely that of a universal morality based upon the rejection of the irrational aspect of the human individual. As we saw, Socrates believes that he has discovered a universal system whereby he can judge whether one is just or morally virtuous. This is of course through the interaction of the three parts of the soul, where the rational and spirit aspects maintain dominance over the irrational. This idea would carry on through history influencing Christian morality, which teaches that for one to be moral and obtain transcendence one must temper the existential forces attached to the irrational and sensual. As Nietzsche states in *The Birth of Tragedy*:

Wherever Socratism turns its searching eyes it sees lack of insight and the power of illusion; and from this lack it infers the essential perversity and reprehensibility of what exists. Basing himself on this point, Socrates conceives it to be his duty to correct existence: all alone, with an expression of irreverence and superiority, as

the precursor of an altogether different culture, art, and morality, he enters a world, to touch whose very hem would give us the greatest happiness (Nietzsche 2000b: 87).

Nietzsche opposes this because not only did it create a belief in a definitive right and wrong or good and evil, but also because it is based upon the rejection of the aspect of human existence that for Nietzsche contains the ‘will to power’¹⁴ and the ability for humanity to rise to its greatest potential.

Although what at first glance appeared antithetical, I have shown that for Nietzsche, science and Christian morality are united by the same cause, namely the ontological, existential, and epistemological prominence Socrates places upon the conception of knowledge, which is not only to be found emanating from the superior classes within society, but also the superior aspect of the soul that guides proper moral conduct. For as Nietzsche states in *On the Genealogy of Morality*, referring to Christian morality as the ‘ascetic ideal’:

These two, science and ascetic ideal, they do, after all, stand on one and the same ground – I have already suggested that this is so –: namely on the same overestimation of truth (more correctly: on the same belief in the *inassessability*, the *uncriticizability* of truth), precisely in this they are *necessarily* confederates – so that, supposing one combats them, they can only be combated and called into question together (original emphasis, Nietzsche 1998: 111).

With this, we encounter the two main symptoms that Nietzsche, for the most part, fights against in his philosophy that tries to cure the Socratic nihilism that he conceptualizes as the root cause of the metaphorical ‘sickness’ infecting nineteenth century European so-

¹⁴ The ‘will to power’ is the Nietzschean concept that refers to the innate physiological drive within humans whereby individuals are not only driven to maintain dominance over others, but also to listen and act upon instinctual drives (Dobson et al 2006; Nietzsche 1974).

ciety. Namely, a Christian moral system that rejects life and a scientific frame of mind that turns against the more instinctual and artistic aspects of human existence, both of which culminate in nihilism. This is not the end of the story though, because for Nietzsche, nihilism is an important as well as complex concept.

23. *Nihilism.*

As we have seen, Nietzsche drew a long genealogical line between Socrates' emphasis on knowledge and the Western European nihilistic sickness that was the inspiration for much of his work. Nevertheless, within popular understandings of Nietzsche's philosophy, the nihilism he uses conceptually is usually misinterpreted in a manner whereupon existence is devoid of any great underlying meaning (Rampley 2000). Unfortunately, this misses the fact that Nietzsche has a larger conceptualization of nihilism that revolves around two interconnected ideas.

First, Nietzsche uses the concept of nihilism to refer to those human ideologies, such as Christianity and science, that have turned away from the here and now of human existence and created ideologies that cause people to believe and focus on false ideals such as truth, knowledge, and morality. He calls this 'a will to nothingness' where humanity, to deal with the underlying meaningless of existence, has had to reject this aspect of life and create meaning where none existed, thus a nihilistic action for it willed a belief in what is ultimately nothingness. As Nietzsche defines a nihilist in *The Will to Power*: "A nihilist is a man who judges of the world as it is that it ought *not* to be, and of the world as it ought to be that it does not exist. According to this view, our existence (action, suffering, willing, feeling) has no meaning: the pathos of 'in vain' is the nihilists' pathos

– at the same time, as pathos, an inconsistency on the part of the nihilists” (original emphasis, Nietzsche 1968a: 318). Although Christianity as a religion and science as an epistemological tool seem antithetical to nihilism since they both place a meaning or value upon human existence, they nevertheless fall into Nietzschean defined nihilism because they are both based upon beliefs that are ultimately false.

Second, Nietzsche sees both a creative and destructive force emanating from nihilism. As he formulates in *The Will to Power*: “Nihilism. It is *ambiguous*: A. Nihilism as a sign of increased power of the spirit: as *active* nihilism. B. Nihilism as decline and recession of the power of the spirit: as *passive* nihilism” (original emphasis, Nietzsche 1968a: 17). As author Matthew Rampley states in relation to passive nihilism, which he labels as ‘reactive’: “Reactive nihilism is the pessimism of the weak, in other words, those who cling to the *ideal* of some transcendent, unchanging truth, and who condemn all existence for not meeting that expectation” (original emphasis, Rampley 2000: 218). This is the nihilism that was defined in the preceding section and the one Nietzsche fervently opposes. Nevertheless, active nihilism is the type that seemingly infects Nietzsche himself and is the reason that he is labeled, or possibly mislabeled, a nihilist. As Rampley defines this aspect of nihilism: “Active nihilism rests on recognition of the perspectivism of interpretation, acceptance of the contingency of knowledge and the recognition that ‘knowledge’ is interpretive will to power. And of course the crucial element in this is the absence of nostalgia for anything metaphysics might regard as ‘true knowledge’” (Rampley 2000: 219). In this strain, values are understood as relative or contingent upon specific historical epochs. Active nihilists can then consciously create new values based upon

the ‘will to power,’ the fragility of knowledge, and the properly balanced rational and irrational aspects of human existence, which would allow humanity to use rational based knowledge while not forgetting the irrational and its ‘Yes!’ saying towards life. As Nietzsche states while confronting his own nihilism in *The Will to Power*: “It is only in this sense that we are pessimists; i.e., in our determination to admit this revaluation to ourselves without any reservation, and to stop telling ourselves tales – lies – the old way” (Nietzsche 1968a: 22). Nietzsche’s philosophy is, to a certain extent, nihilistic, but his nihilism is positive and does not turn away from life, but rather embraces and champions it, along with the values humans can create to structure it.

The reactive nihilism caused by the Socratic influence is what Nietzsche is attacking and trying to destroy in his philosophical output, mainly through the use of art practiced under a proper aesthetic form (Gooding-Williams 2001; Rampley 2000; Young 1992). As he states in *The Birth of Tragedy*: “[It] is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally *justified*” (original emphasis, Nietzsche 2000b: 52). For Nietzsche, art holds the potential to drag individuals out of the ontology, existentialism, and epistemology championed by Socrates, thereby showing how such structures are not absolute, but transitory. This will of course lead to nihilism, but art that takes into account all aspects of human existence will illuminate humanity’s inherent capacity and need to create new values based upon a deeper ontological domain. With this, reactive nihilism will be cured and humanity will find a new path based upon active nihilism and deeper ontological values.

24. *Apollo & Dionysus.*

To understand Nietzsche's argument in relation to the emancipatory power of art, we must go back into Greek history, for what one must keep in mind when studying Nietzsche's philosophy is that he began his academic career as a classical philologist and did not become a hard-nosed philosopher until later on in life (Gay 2000). It was with this philological training that Nietzsche became well versed in Greek literature and philosophy, which enabled him to see something special in the way pre-Socratic Greek culture structured their social and individual lives.

Like the culture of his day, Nietzsche believes that the pre-Socratic Greeks struggled not only with the drive to create values in a meaningless world, but also with what appeared to be a double edged sword in relation to existence. On one hand they perceived an aspect of life that was about rationality, knowledge, and morality, but on the other hand, there was also an irrational, unknowable, and amoral aspect to existence, which created a feeling of terror in people as they came to the realization that meaningless suffering characterizes human existence. To categorize this existential and ontological opposition, Nietzsche uses the artistic energies that emanate from the Greek gods Apollo and Dionysius (Gooding-Williams 2001; Rampley 2000; Young 1992). As Nietzsche opens

The Birth of Tragedy:

We shall have gained much for the science of aesthetics, once we perceive not merely by logical inference, but with immediate certainty of vision, that the continuous development of art is bound up with the *Apollonian* and *Dionysian* duality – just as procreation depends on the duality of the sexes, involving perpetual strife with only periodically intervening reconciliations (original emphasis, Nietzsche 2000b: 33).

It is within this duality and the specific functioning of its parts that Nietzsche believes the pre-Socratic Greeks learnt to deal with the suffering and meaninglessness that forms the basis of the human experience.

Concerning the Apollonian, Nietzsche uses this term in two senses, one artistic and the other metaphysical (Young 1992). In relation to art, it refers to the beautiful, the perfect, or that which has been raised above ordinary existence based upon the '*principium individuationis*,' which is the human tendency to break the world into discrete and knowable parts. As Julian Young argues in his book entitled *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Art*:

Used in the aesthetic sense...the object of the Apollonian consciousness is essentially beautiful: it is, not the mundane world, but rather that world raised to a state of glory; it is the 'perfection' (*BT* 1), the 'transfiguration' (*BT* 16), the 'apotheosis of the *principium individuationis*' (*BT* 4). The aesthetically Apollonian is the metaphysically Apollonian perceived as beautiful (original emphasis, Young 1992: 32-33).¹⁵

This is art that takes beauty as its primary inspiration and raises such a concept above anything that could ideally exist within the material world. It dwells in the arts of painting, sculpture, and the language oriented pursuits that do not represent reality, but rather an idealized vision of humanity and the surrounding physical settings.

Moving away from the artistic forces of the Apollonian and into its relationship to metaphysics, Nietzsche uses the Apollonian to refer to rationality, knowledge, morality, and the ontological, existential, and epistemological structures that follow. As Young argues:

¹⁵ In the quotes from Julian Young (1992), *BT* refers to *The Birth of Tragedy* and the numbers that follow refer to the sections he is referencing. These references are part of the original text.

In the metaphysical sense, Apollonian consciousness is consciousness of the world that is (Nietzsche repeatedly uses Schopenhauer's terminology) subject to the *principium individuationis* (BT 1, 2). It is, that is to say, the mundane consciousness which is the product of the limiting, delimiting, "boundary drawing" (BT 9) – as we sometimes say – "rational" faculty of mind which divides the world up into a plurality of discrete, spatio-temporal individuals (original emphasis, Young 1992: 32).

Here we find the base to the ideas surrounding the attainability and cogency of not only knowledge, but also a universal morality that can define the virtuosity of people and the acts that make up their daily existence. Through the Apollonian a false sense of meaning is given back to the world.

According to Nietzsche, with the Socratic prominence placed upon both the artistic and metaphysical aspects of the Apollonian, created is a reactive nihilistic illusion of the world and how it operates. As he states in *The Birth of Tragedy*: "This joyous necessity of the dream experience has been embodied by the Greeks in their Apollo: Apollo, the god of all plastic energies, is at the same time the soothsaying god. He, who (as the etymology of the name indicates) is the 'shining one,' the deity of light, is also ruler over the beautiful illusion of the inner world of fantasy" (Nietzsche 2000b: 35). This dream like state is created to shield humanity from the irrational, unknowable, and amoral aspects that are inherent within existence. Unfortunately, rarely is this illusion seen as such (Nietzsche 1968; Young 1992).

Turning our attention to the Dionysian, we encounter the part of Nietzsche's philosophy that represents the metaphysically irrational, unknowable, and amoral aspects of human existence. It is non-illusionary and represents the side of human existence that is

been pushed to the periphery by the Socratic championing of the Apollonian. As Young states:

If dreams stand for the Apollonian, *Rausch* – “intoxication,” “rapture,” “ecstasy,” “frenzy” – stands for the Dionysian. Dionysian consciousness is a “high,” a state of literal or metaphorical drunkenness in which we overcome the “sobriety” of ordinary (metaphysically Apollonian) consciousness that presents the *principium individuationis* as absolute reality (original emphasis, Young 1992: 33).

In relation to the arts, the Dionysian dwells within the sphere of music, because unlike the Apollonian ‘plastic arts’ Nietzsche argues: “[Music] is distinguished from all the other arts by the fact that it is not a copy of the phenomenon, or, more accurately, of the adequate objectivity of the will, but an immediate copy of the will itself, and therefore complements everything in the world and every phenomenon by representing what is metaphysical, the thing in itself” (Nietzsche 2000b: 102). It is this aspect of life that Nietzsche believes we need to reaffirm. As he states in *Twilight of the Idols*:

Affirmation of life even in its strangest and sternest problems, the will to life rejoicing in its own inexhaustibility through the *sacrifice* of its highest types – *that* is what I call Dionysian, *that* is what I recognize as the bridge to the psychology of the *tragic* poet. *Not* so as to get rid of pity and terror, not so as to purify oneself of a dangerous emotion through its vehement discharge – it was thus Aristotle understood it – : but, beyond pity and terror, *to realize in oneself* the eternal joy of becoming – that joy which also encompasses *joy in destruction...* (original emphasis, Nietzsche 1968b: 110).

Now you may be thinking what is so important about this opposition and how does it relate to the fact that Nietzsche believes art can function as a countermovement to reactive nihilism? It is through the artistic relationship between these two forces that the Apollonian aspects are shown by the Dionysian to be only illusions based in falsehoods. Human life, at its core, is irrational, unknowable, and amoral. Nevertheless, through this

interaction life is given new values that accept those aspects of life represented by the Dionysian. These new values would not be based on illusion, but Dionysian reality and a much stronger human will. However, we must realize that Nietzsche is in no way championing only one side of the duality. He gives ontological priority to the proper balancing of the two, not to one or the other, because they are both intrinsic to existence. We exist in a Dionysian chaos, but create Apollonian illusions to survive within it. As Nietzsche states: “Thus the intricate relation of the Apollonian and the Dionysian in tragedy may really be symbolized by a fraternal union of the two deities: Dionysus speaks the language of Apollo; and Apollo, finally the language of Dionysus; and so the highest goal of tragedy and of all art is attained” (Nietzsche 2000b: 130). Nietzsche mentions here something that is very important to this process, namely ‘tragedy.’

25. *Tragedy.*

Ontologically and existentially, Nietzsche perceives within human existence two separate forces, the Apollonian and Dionysian. How societies deal with these opposed forces is important, because without a mechanism to balance each side carefully, societies either fall into a life of barbarous intoxication or a life that is defined by a reactive nihilistic illusion. Unlike the western European society of his time, which dealt with this inherent opposition by blocking out the Dionysian side of existence and focusing only upon the Apollonian, Nietzsche believes that the pre-Socratic Greeks created ‘tragic drama’ not only to deal with such an opposition, but to draw strength from the balancing of the two forces. As Nietzsche proclaims in *The Birth of Tragedy* referring to the art of tragedy:

Here, when the danger to his will is greatest, *art* approaches as a saving sorceress, expert at healing. She alone knows how to turn these nauseous thoughts about the horror or absurdity of existence into notions with which one can live: these are the *sublime* as the artistic taming of the horrible, and the *comic* as the artistic discharge of the nausea of absurdity (original emphasis, Nietzsche 2000b: 60).

Through the creation and use of tragedy, pre-Socratic Greek society dealt with the duality inherent within human existence and was able to grow further ontologically and existentially because of it.

Focusing in on the emancipatory potential of pre-Socratic Greek tragedy, we begin by finding Apollonian illusions encompassing beauty, individuality, rationality, and morality set up, usually in the form of the hero. The audience is able to relate with the hero and these Apollonian illusions, but in the end find themselves not only directly confronted by the destruction of such illusions through the fall of the hero, but also the Dionysian joyousness experienced in such an act. As Nietzsche states in *The Birth of Tragedy*:

Dionysian art, too, wishes to convince us of the eternal joy of existence: only we are to seek this joy not in phenomena, but behind them. We are to recognize that all that comes into being must be ready for a sorrowful end; we are forced to look into the terrors of the individual existence – yet we are not to become rigid with fear: a metaphysical comfort tears us momentarily from the bustle of the changing figures. We are really for a brief moment primordial being itself, feeling its raging desire for existence and joy in existence; the struggle, the pain, the destruction of phenomena, now appear necessary to us, in view of the excess of countless forms of existence which force and push one another into life, in view of the exuberant fertility of the universal will. We are pierced by the maddening sting of these pains just when we have become, as it were, one with the infinite primordial joy in existence, and when we anticipate, in Dionysian ecstasy, the indestructibility and eternity of this joy. In spite of fear and pity, we are the happy living beings, not as individuals, but as the *one* living being, with whose creative joy we are reunited (original emphasis, Nietzsche 2000b: 104-105).

With this, the audience leaves the theater with a deeper understanding of existence that transcends the world of Apollonian illusions. Existence is reaffirmed from a more complete ontological, existential, and epistemological base, thereby allowing individuals to embrace a life that allows both Apollonian and Dionysian characteristics to coexist. This ability to see beyond Apollonian illusions allowed the pre-Socratic Greeks to overcome their pessimism and live a life free from reactive nihilism.

Important to this ontological and existential ideological transfer is the use of the ‘chorus’ within these Greek tragedies. The chorus usually consists of a group of people who through song give the audience the back-story of the performance and respond to the action on the stage in an idealized manner. For Nietzsche, the chorus represents the Dionysian aspect (whereas the drama or on stage setting aspect represents the Apollonian), because of its origin in music and its ability to draw the audience into the action of the play and cause them to not only take joy and revel in the downfall of the tragic hero, but also to break through the *principium individuationis* and perceive the primordial unity that encompasses all beings. As Nietzsche states in *The Birth of Tragedy*:

Similarly, I believe, the Greek man of culture felt himself nullified in the presence of the satiric chorus; and this is the most immediate effect of the Dionysian tragedy, that the state and society and, quite generally, the gulfs between man and man give way to an overwhelming feeling of unity leading back to the very heart of nature. The metaphysical comfort – with which, I am suggesting even now, every true tragedy leaves us – that life is at the bottom of things, despite all the changes of appearances, indestructibly powerful and pleasurable – this comfort appears in incarnate clarity in the chorus of satyrs, a chorus of natural beings who live ineradicably, as it were, behind all civilization and remain eternally the same, despite the changes of generations and of the history of nations (Nietzsche 2000b: 59).

With the force of the Dionysian working through the chorus, we get a unique situation within Greek tragedy where the audience is pulled into the action on stage, allowing them to relate to the hero. Nevertheless, with the hero's downfall a Dionysian joyousness is presented through the chorus, dissolving the *principium individuationis* and illuminating the unity that lies at the base of all existence. For Nietzsche, this affect allowed pre-Socratic Greek society to find its way into active nihilism. As Walter Kaufmann briefly states concerning Nietzsche's hope for tragedy: "From tragedy Nietzsche learns that one can affirm life as sublime, beautiful, and joyous in spite of all suffering and cruelty" (Kaufmann 2000: 11).

To make this aspect of Nietzsche's philosophy clear, let us take a look at a specific tragedy to get a focused picture of the ontological and existential themes present that are so important to Nietzsche's classification. For this clarification let us use the tragedy *Prometheus Bound* written by the early tragedian Aeschylus (1960). This tragedy takes place after the great Olympian revolt against their elders, the Titans. Prometheus, a Titan himself, switches over to the side of the Olympians and plays a key role, if not *the* key role, in Zeus becoming ruler of the universe. Nevertheless, Prometheus angers Zeus by befriending and giving fire to humanity against the wishes of Zeus himself. As Prometheus states:

As soon as he ascended to the throne
that was his father's, straightway he assigned
to the several Gods their several privileges
and portioned out the power, but to the unhappy
breed of mankind he gave no heed, intending
to blot the race out and create a new.
Against these plans none stood save I: I dared.
I rescued men from shattering destruction

that would have carried them to Hades' house (Aeschylus 1960: 73-74).

Angered by such disobedience, Zeus bounds Prometheus to a rock where a great eagle daily pecks and tears at his regenerating liver, which only prolongs Prometheus' torture.

Throughout the course of the play we come to understand the history of Prometheus' plight through a series of conversations he has with differing characters and the chorus. The tragic lesson hidden within the tragedy comes through when Prometheus, who once as a great Titan directly helped in the ascension of Zeus as King of Olympia, has his fate turned and becomes a somewhat fallen god. Nevertheless, he never recants his convictions to Zeus, who would then end his torture, but stays steadfast and maintains his bounded downfall.

Before he told it me I knew this message:
but there is no disgrace in suffering
at an enemy's hand, when you hate mutually.
So let the curling tendril of the fire
from the lightning bolt be sent against me: let
the air be stirred with thunderclaps, the winds
in savage blasts convulsing all the world.
Let earth to her foundations shake, yes to her root,
before the quivering storm: let it confuse
the paths of heavenly stars and the sea's waves
in a wild surging torrent: this my body
let Him raise up on high and dash it down
into black Tartarus with rigorous
compulsive eddies: death he cannot give me (Aeschylus 1960: 103-104).

In the end there is no resolution of the action and characters. Only Prometheus remains, still bound to the rock.

It is through such tragic dramas like *Prometheus Bound*, that Nietzsche believes the pre-Socratic culture learnt to deal with the Dionysian aspects of existence. Although

in the play we find the character of Prometheus being portrayed Apollonian like in relation to his status as a Titan and close ally to Zeus, in the end we see him fall to the Dionysian forces that stand opposite to the Apollonian. More importantly though, we find Prometheus not collapsing from the weight of the implications of his acts, but rather he stands steadfast in his suffering and refuses to give in. In this way the drama, and many like it, showed to the people of this historical epoch that life was never continually beautiful, rational, and moral. Rather, life had two sides and to grow and achieve some semblance of greatness, both these aspects must be acknowledged and allowed to work together to maintain Being. As Nietzsche states in *The Birth of Tragedy*: “So the dual nature of Aeschylus’ Prometheus, his nature which is at the same time Dionysian and Apollonian, might be expressed thus in a conceptual formula: ‘All that exists is just and unjust and equally justified in both’” (Nietzsche 2000b: 72).

26. *The Death of Tragedy.*

Pre-Socratic tragedy had a limited time within Greek consciousness. As Nietzsche states in *The Birth of Tragedy*: “Greek tragedy met an end different from that of her older sister-arts: she died by suicide, in consequence of an irreconcilable conflict; she died tragically, while all others passed away calmly and beautifully at a ripe old age” (Nietzsche 2000b: 76). This occurred with the coming of Socrates and the ontological, existential, and epistemological categorizations that he created, which revolved around the virtuosity of conscious rational thought devoted to the belief in knowledge. Nevertheless, Socrates was not a playwright and needed a tool to help transfer his anti-tragedy ideals into the realm of art. It was in the dramatist Euripides that Socrates found his mouthpiece, for as

Nietzsche states in *The Birth of Tragedy* concerning this alliance: “Even Euripides was, in a sense, only a mask: the deity that spoke through him was neither Dionysus nor Apollo, but an altogether newborn demon, called *Socrates*” (original emphasis, Nietzsche 2000b: 82).

Within the tragedies created by Euripides we begin to find the Socratic aesthetic notions concerning the primacy of beauty, rationality, knowledge, and morality, which therefore pushed Dionysian aspects such as the chorus and music out of the realm of tragedy. As Nietzsche explains in *The Birth of Tragedy*: “Now we should be able to come closer to the character of *aesthetic Socratism*, whose supreme law reads roughly as follows, ‘To be beautiful everything must be intelligible,’ as the counterpart to the Socratic dictum, ‘Knowledge is virtue’” (original emphasis, Nietzsche 2000b: 83-84). With this, the ontological, existential, and epistemological openness found within earlier forms of tragedy is lost. Greek society can no longer deal with the opposition inherent in life and we begin to see tragedy slowly fading into what would become the future ontological, existential, and epistemological categories created by Socrates, which eventually culminated in the reactive nihilism of science and Christian morality. To understand this Socratic influence, let us look at Euripides’ tragedy *Hippolytus* (1960) to see where this aesthetic change had taken place within the art form itself.

The title character in *Hippolytus*, Hippolytus himself, is the illegitimate son of the king of Athens, Theseus, and the Amazon Hippolyta. Hippolytus has sworn chastity and refuses to worship the Goddess of Love Aphrodite, but instead has placed his allegiance with the Goddess of the Hunt Artemis. Enraged by such an alliance, Aphrodite plans to

take revenge upon Hippolytus and, while in Athens, causes Hippolytus' stepmother, Phaedra, to fall in love with him. Following this, Phaedra falls mysteriously ill, which as she makes known to her nurse, is caused by her love for Hippolytus. Although sworn to secrecy the nurse discloses this knowledge to Hippolytus, who, while being sworn to secrecy, reacts negatively with disdain for women's seductive powers. Discovering that her secrecy has been betrayed and that Hippolytus knows of her love for him, Phaedra takes her own life, but not before making the chorus swear that they will never make known the true reasons behind her suicide. Meanwhile, Theseus returns from exile only to discover his wife's dead body, but because Phaedra has sworn the chorus to secrecy, they cannot tell Theseus the truth behind why she has killed herself. Nevertheless, on the corpse Theseus discovers a suicide note from Phaedra, which places the blame on Hippolytus by stating that he had attacked her. Believing the attack was sexual in nature, Theseus calls upon his father Poseidon, the God of the Sea, to enact vengeance upon Hippolytus, who at this point enters and protests the charges, but nonetheless cannot tell the true reasons behind Phaedra's suicide because of the vow of secrecy he had given to the nurse. With this, Theseus banishes Hippolytus from his kingdom.

As Hippolytus mounts his chariot to depart the kingdom, Poseidon sends a bull from the sea, which scares Hippolytus' horses, not only causing his chariot to be wrecked upon the rocks, but also dragging him to near death. Theseus, who is more than happy with the fate of his son, in the end is approached by Artemis, who tells him the truth of what has happened, namely that this was all the outcome of the lies told by Phaedra. Although upset by the actions of Theseus, Artemis places the blame on Aphrodite and vows

to kill any man that she holds dear. In the end Hippolytus absolves his father from any responsibility for what has happened and finally succumbs to his injuries.

Although there are definite tragic qualities found throughout *Hippolytus*, we nevertheless begin to perceive changes that speak directly to the Socratic influence. First, we see the loss of the Dionysian spirit in the way the hero Hippolytus rejects Aphrodite and chooses to live a chaste life, based upon Socratic virtuousness, while hunting and controlling nature with Artemis. As Aphrodite states:

Hippolytus, son of Theseus by the Amazon,
pupil of holy Pittheus,
alone among the folk of this land of Troezen has blasphemed me
counting me vilest of the Gods in Heaven.
He will none of the bed of love nor marriage,
but honors Artemis, Zeus's daughter,
counting her greatest of the Gods in Heaven
he is with her continually, this Maiden Goddess, in the greenwood.
They hunt with hounds and clear the land of wild things,
mortal with immortal in companionship.
I do not grudge him such privileges: why should I?
But for his sins against me
I shall punish Hippolytus this day (Euripides 1960: 233).

Here we see the distancing of Dionysian aspects, such as those found in Aphrodite, with a direct connection of Hippolytus to a more Apollonian mood found with Artemis, who symbolizes humanity's separation and control of nature.

Second, within *Hippolytus* we also see Socratic themes concerning the primacy of knowledge. Not only are the lies told and secrets kept causing the downfall of the characters, but in the end, knowledge ultimately triumphs. This is clearly shown when Hippolytus on his death bed states:

Come lift me carefully, bear me easily,

a man unlucky, cursed by my own father
in bitter error (Euripides 1960: 287).

The primacy of knowledge also plays a substantial role in *Hippolytus* when logic based arguments are employed by various characters in the play to uncover the truth lurking within the chaos of lies and secrets. Hippolytus deploys this Socratic method when he argues with his father:

Your mind and intellect are subtle, father:
here you have a subject dressed in eloquent words;
but if you lay the matter bare of words,
the matter is not eloquent. I am
no man to speak with vapid, precious skill
before a mob, although among my equals
and in a narrow circle I am held
not unaccomplished in the eloquent art.
That is as it should be. The demagogue
who charms a crowd is scorned by cultured experts.
But here in this necessity I must speak.
First I shall take the argument you first
urged as so irrefutable and deadly (Euripides 1960: 273).

In this example we see the primacy being giving to knowledge and the Socratic rational methods of obtaining such knowledge.

The last anti-Dionysian theme we find within *Hippolytus* is that at the end of the drama, the action and characters are reconciled and Hippolytus is revered for his virtue and piety. The only character to be left unresolved is Aphrodite, who not only symbolizes Dionysian sexuality, but also the 'evil' nature of all that is Dionysian. She stands opposed to the Apollonian Hippolytus and, like all good villains, takes the fall to allow the Apollonian hero to triumph. This ending only helps to keep the focus on the Apollonian

themes by stating that through knowledge all will be well in humanities ontological and existential lives. As the final dialogue between Theseus and Hippolytus shows:

Theseus

Alas, what are you doing to me, my son?

Hippolytus

I am dying. I can see the gates of death.

Theseus

And so you leave me, my hands stained with murder.

Hippolytus

No, for I free you from all guilt in this.

Theseus

You will acquit me of blood guiltiness?

Hippolytus

So help me Artemis of the conquering bow!

Theseus

Dear son, how noble you have proved to me!

Hippolytus

Yes, pray to heaven for such legitimate sons.

Theseus

Woe for your goodness, piety, and virtue.

Hippolytus

Farewell to you, too, father, a long farewell!

Theseus

Dear son, bear up. Do not forsake me.

Hippolytus

This is the end of what I have to bear.

I'm gone. Cover up my face quickly.

Theseus

Pallas Athene's famous city;

What a man you have lost! Alas for me!

Cypris, how many of your injuries

I shall remember. (Euripides 1960: 290-291).

And with this, Dionysus is lost to history and Prometheus begins to suffer in vain.

With the death of tragedy, the world sealed its fate for the next two thousand years, becoming guided only by Socratic philosophy and the Apollonian illusions that it champions. Nevertheless, tragedy and the Dionysian still whisper a secret to humanity,

trying to bring back a balancing of the two artistic forces. Nietzsche believed this, and for a time found hope in the German people and the music of Richard Wagner to create a new tragic society. Although his tenuous relationship to these two entities would change as his thought progressed, he still hoped for the return of a tragic culture. As he states in *The Birth of Tragedy*: “I will not say that the tragic worldview was everywhere completely destroyed by this intruding un-Dionysian spirit: we only know that it had to flee from art into the underworld as it were, in the degenerate form of a secret cult” (Nietzsche 2000b: 109). All that remains now is to draw a map that leads us to one of these ‘secret cults,’ where the Dionysian still lives.

27. Apollonian/Dionysian Modernist Agenda.

The first step we must accomplish in justifying the use of Nietzschean aesthetic theory in explaining the life and death structured actions found within the high-risk skiing community, is to set up the plausibility of an Apollonian/Dionysian centered existence. Nevertheless, what one must keep in mind when arguing for inherent drives such as the Apollonian and the Dionysian is that we need to have a dialogue concerning the relationship between modernism and postmodernism; and Nietzsche’s place within these two theoretical boundaries. Unfortunately, the distinction between ‘modernism’ and ‘postmodernism’ is one that is not free of confusion.

When speaking of modernism, we have to remember that it is a concept with two seemingly different, albeit interlocking aspects. The first aspect was sparked by and revolves around the enlightenment principles of progress, rationality, and knowledge, which believed in an ‘eternal and immutable’ essence of human nature that could be un-

derstood and molded to fit within the ideas of equality and freedom (Harvey 1990). As David Harvey states concerning this aspect of modernism in his book *The Condition of Postmodernity*:

Although the term ‘modern’ has a rather more ancient history, what Habermas (1983, 9) calls the *project* of modernity came into focus during the eighteenth century. That project amounted to an extraordinary intellectual effort on the part of Enlightenment thinkers ‘to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art according to their inner logic.’ The idea was to use the accumulation of knowledge generated by many individuals working freely and creatively for the pursuit of human emancipation and the enrichment of daily life (original emphasis, Harvey 1990: 13).

Nevertheless, Nietzsche and others challenged the primacy that this aspect of modernism places upon rationality and science as the true path to discovering the eternal and immutable essence of humanity. For Nietzsche, this eternal and immutable essence is not to be found within rationality and science, but rather within aesthetics and art; and their ability to help humanity reconnect with the Dionysian hiding place of the human essence. As Harvey states in relation to this aspect of modernism:

By the beginning of the twentieth century, and particularly after Nietzsche’s intervention, it was no longer possible to accord Enlightenment reason a privileged status in the definition of the eternal and immutable essence of human nature. To the degree that Nietzsche had led the way in placing aesthetics above science, rationality, and politics, so the exploration of aesthetic experience – ‘beyond good and evil’ – became a powerful means to establish a new mythology as to what the eternal and immutable might be about in the midst of all the ephemerality, fragmentation, and patent chaos of modern life. This gave a new role, and a new impetus, to cultural modernism (Harvey 1990: 18).

Although these two aspects of modernism take different routes to their understanding of human existence, they are nevertheless held to the modernist yoke by their mutual reinforcement of a ‘metanarrative,’ which as Harvey defines as “large-scale theoretical inter-

pretations purportedly of universal application” (Harvey 1990: 9). Although differing upon what this metanarrative is, both enlightenment-based and aesthetic modernists believe that there is a universal human essence that spans both time and space. Therefore, in this respect Nietzsche of course seems to be a modernist as defined above, because while questioning the epistemological boundaries of his day, he created an existential and ontological metanarrative that contained a loosely defined value system that allowed one to critically assess certain aspects of life. Nevertheless, his influence within the world of postmodernism, which was created in the aftermath of modernism, is large enough to call into question Nietzsche’s so-called metanarrative defined modernist stance.

Postmodernism, in much the same way as modernism, is a revolt against the intellectual climate that had preceded it, but this time it is against modernism itself. Modernism’s promise to usher humanity into a more prosperous age proved false and postmodern thought swooped in to create a new intellectual milieu. But, this time the revolt was different because postmodernism rejects any sort of metanarrative and embraces the relativistic and nihilistic side of human existence (Eagleton 2003; Harvey 1990; Koelb 1990; Lyotard 1984). As Jean-François Lyotard states in his piece *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*:

Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences; but that progress in turn presupposes it. To the obsolescence of the metanarrative apparatus of legitimation corresponds, most notably, the crisis of metaphysical philosophy and the university institution which in the past relied on it. The narrative function is losing its functions, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal (Lyotard 1984: xxiv).

For postmodernism, there is no longer universal truths, universal meaning, or a universally defined morality. Only difference, valuelessness, and the multi-causality of human life remain.

It should be quite apparent why postmodernism has purportedly found a father figure in Nietzsche. As Harvey states: “To the degree that it does try to legitimate itself by reference to the past, therefore, postmodernism typically harks back to that wing of thought, Nietzsche in particular, that emphasizes the deep chaos of modern life and its intractability before rational thought” (Harvey 1990: 44). Postmodernists take from Nietzsche his distrust of rationality, universal morality, and the possibility of meaningful social change. Thus, Nietzsche has usually been referred to as an early postmodern thinker. But, this is a bit of an oversight, because these arguments miss not only Nietzsche’s anti-nihilistic leanings, but also the metanarrative like plea emanating from his entire opus that spans history and social context. This plea champions two inherent universal human artistic drives that structure individual and social existence, the Apollonian and Dionysian. Although difficult to ascertain in context of many of his writings, Nietzsche saw the potential of creating meaning in a meaningless world. He never let go of a modernist like hope and continued to try and influence the way others saw existence and their place within it, never letting the world fall into the postmodern rejection of metanarratives. For example, his piece *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* reads as a symbolist plea to humanity to reach for a higher potential and to let go of the historical biases that had molded humanity up to the point of his writing. As Zarathustra states in this piece:

Truly, Zarathustra has had a handsome catch today! He caught no man,
but he did catch a corpse.

Uncanny is human existence and still without meaning: a buffoon can be fatal to it.

I want to teach men the meaning of their existence: which is the Superman, the lightening from the dark cloud man.

But I am still distant from them, and my meaning does not speak to their minds. To men, I am still a cross between a fool and a corpse.

Dark is the night, dark are Zarathustra's ways. Come, cold and stiff companion! I am going to carry you to the place where I shall bury you with my own hands (Nietzsche 2003: 49).

These are not words of a man who has given up hope in metanarratives, but rather a man who not only sees meaning to human existence, but also the plausibility of this ascension, for as he states in *Ecce Homo*: “You want a formula for such a destiny *become man*? That is to be found in my *Zarathustra*” (original emphasis, Nietzsche 2000a: 783).

Although we may never be able to prove one way or another the existence of such drives, I would like to take the modernist position, much like Nietzsche, and hold to a metanarrative so as to give meaning to existence and a starting point to which humanity can begin to enter a deeper level of existence. This starting point is of course the inherent drives that push us towards the Apollonian and Dionysian through the aesthetization of human life. Although a somewhat contentious statement, I believe that we all experience this opposition within our lives. At times we are held to the Apollonian, acting with rationality and reason, but other times the Dionysian breaks through opening us up to a world that is irrational and driven by our emotional selves, therefore creating the need in some to challenge the taken for granted assumptions of the Apollonian by risking their very own lives.

28. *Apollo, Reactive Nihilism, and the Modern World.*

Having set up the plausibility of an existence based upon the artistic drives emanating from the Apollonian and Dionysian, we must now argue for the contention that the modern Western world is one which prizes the Apollonian and suppresses the Dionysian. Therefore, leading to a reactive nihilistic mood. The first premise of this argument is found while illuminating the Socratic primacy placed upon the individualization of existence or what Nietzsche refers to as the *principium individuationis*. The *principium individuationis* is the concept that everything in the world has become compartmentalized and separated from one another, causing a loss of the primordial unity of all that exists (Young 1992). Clearly, we still live in a world where the idea of individualization is key to our experience of the world around us. We not only existentially formulate our lives around the human individual, but we define ontologically the perceptual world outside of consciousness as a series of spatially separate entities. This individualization could be the cause of many of the social ills we experience today such as classism, racism, and environmental degradation, for we have lost touch with the unity that binds everything as one. Nevertheless, it is through the embracing of the Dionysian, in harmony with the Apollonian, that enables people to break out of this compartmentalization and reconnect with other people and the natural environment on a deeper ontological and existential level. As Nietzsche argues in *The Birth of Tragedy*: “[While] by the mystical triumphant cry of Dionysus the spell of individuation is broken, and the way lies open to the Mothers of Being, to the innermost heart of things” (Nietzsche 2000b: 99-100). Although only con-

jectural, it is interesting to ponder what human to human and human to environment relationships would be like in a world freed from Apollonian compartmentalization.

Moving on to our second premise, namely science, we are immediately confronted with the fact that today science has become the main epistemological category used to define human existence. As Nietzsche states in *The Birth of Tragedy*:

Our whole modern world is entangled in the net of Alexandrian culture. It proposes as its ideal the theoretical man equipped with the greatest forces of knowledge, and laboring in the service of science, whose archetype and progenitor is Socrates. All our educational methods originally have this ideal in view: every other form of existence must struggle on laboriously beside it, as something tolerated, but not intended (Nietzsche 2000b: 110).

Although science has given humanity many positive outcomes, it has nevertheless been the basis for many of the problems of modern day society, both on an objective as well as subjective level. On the objective level for example, the scientific discovery of fossil fuels has created a large energy supply, but unfortunately this discovery also brought with it serious environmental problems. On the subjective level, thinkers such as Martin Heidegger conceptualize science and its technological brethren, as changing the way humanity structures its relationship to nature and larger ontological questions about existence, creating a mood whereby technology, through a technical frame of mind, evolves through its own logic and drive, separate from human decision making. This he refers to as ‘technological nihilism’ (Kroker 2004; Sawicki 1987). As Jana Sawicki states concerning such an ontological and existential state in her book *Heidegger and Foucault: Escaping Technological Nihilism*:

Therefore, it is not technology, or science, but rather the essence of technology as a way of revealing that constitutes the danger; for the essence of

technology is **existential**, not technological. It is a matter of how human beings are fundamentally oriented towards their world *vis a vis* their practices, skills, habits, customs, etc. Humanism contributes to this danger insofar as it fosters the illusion that technology is the result of a collective human choice and therefore subject to human control (original emphasis, Sawicki 1987: 160).

For Heidegger, this has caused humanity to lose touch with Being and the tenuous relationship between nature and humanity itself. Such evidence gives credence to the contention that the modern world is one that is structured through a primacy of the Apollonian, because our main tool for understanding the world and creating within it is through the Apollonian scientific method and its search for knowledge. As Nietzsche states in the *Gay Science*: “I do not understand this: why should man be more mistrustful and evil now? ‘Because he now has – and needs – a science’” (Nietzsche 1974: 104).

The final aspect of our Apollonian centered world revolves around the existence of a universal morality. This is highly congruent with our discussion of science, because, as we discussed earlier, Nietzsche believes that science and Christian morality had the same birthplace. For Nietzsche, it was with Socrates and his method for uncovering knowledge about the world, that we find the genesis of the idea that through the attainment of knowledge, moral truths can be discovered. No longer is morality something that is built upon the combination of both the Apollonian and Dionysian, thereby creating a stronger and more complete human that embraced the dualistic nature of existence. Morality is now based solely upon Apollonian illusions, ignoring not only the fact that morality is a human creation, but also the Dionysian aspects of human existence. With the birth of this universal moralizing a precedent was set that would lead to the belief in a

transcendent morality that placed a primacy only upon the 'good.' Although Nietzsche's post-*The Birth of Tragedy* work analyzes morality much more astutely by delving deeper into its innermost workings, the point we must keep in mind here is that with Socrates, Nietzsche perceives the point in history whereby morality became something that was directly tied to the Apollonian emphasis on knowledge and was conceptualized as something that spanned all time and space.

Although religious moral systems have waned in the face of secular pressure and become more in line with the original Socratic epistemological base, we still live in a world in which the differentiation between right and wrong or good and evil is an important ontological and existential category. Western society still champions the conceptualization that within existence there is a definite right and wrong and that this categorization is one that transcends time, space, and cultural boundaries. Not only is it something that has become universal in scope and rarely questioned as a human creation, but it still only defines right and wrong based upon the primacy placed upon those Apollonian aspects that, as we have seen numerous times, pushes to the periphery the more irrational, unknowable, and amoral tendencies within human existence. For example, if we briefly analyze the moral base surrounding a concept like 'democracy,' we discover not only its birth in the Socratic belief that right and wrong can be discovered through a rationality that champions the Apollonian and later 'slave moral'¹⁶ belief in human equality and freedom, but also the universal character of such a concept as the Western world has slowly been pushing such a moral ideal to the rest of the world as some sort of govern-

¹⁶ 'Slave morality' is the Nietzschean concept that denotes a morality that champions the characteristics of the so-called 'weak' in society instead of those of the 'strong' (Nietzsche 1974).

mental panacea. Such an example not only illuminates the Apollonian nature of modern secular morality, but also its universal characterization.

With the plausibility of an Apollonian/Dionysian based existence and the obvious importance that the individual, science, and morality play in the modern Western world, we are led to conclude that since the time of Socrates, Apollo has taken on the primary role in defining humans ontologically as well as existentially. Science has become the primary epistemological tool, the individual has become more important than ever, and Apollonian morality, however defined, remains uninhibited. But, one more step still remains in Nietzsche's project, namely the reactive nihilism that is intimately involved in the creation of the post-Socratic world.

As we encountered earlier, Nietzsche believes that with the death of tragedy through the banishing of the Dionysian, a series of events was set in motion that eventually led to a Western world that had fallen prey to a reactive nihilistic mood, causing people to turn away from life because of the underlying meaninglessness of existence and the creation of false values that followed. This then created a passivity within society that would block any further meaningful growth.

For Nietzsche this reactive nihilism means having a belief in a transcendent truth that is not really there. For example, Christians believe in the truth of God, but of course, for Nietzsche, there is no God. Similarly, science is built upon the belief that knowledge can be discovered about the world, but for Nietzsche the world cannot be completely known. Keeping with this line of thought, we can argue cogently that the here and now of social reality is still one in which Nietzschean reactive nihilism still rules. Christianity

and other forms of religious beliefs that place a false ideology at their zenith, still maintain a strong influence within society. Along with this, science has been raised to an altitude on par with religion as an ideology that places false values upon existence, therefore maintaining the reactive nihilism Nietzsche fervently fights against. Consequently, by reflecting on the social prominence played by religion, science, and the emphasis on knowledge, we must conclude that Nietzschean reactive nihilism is alive and well in the modern world.

Whatever evidence we choose to place emphasis upon, it is becoming more and more plausible that the Western world is in the depths of a reactive nihilistic prison that it is scrambling to escape from. This only gives more evidence to support the plausibility of an Apollonian/Dionysian structured existence, where the Apollonian has been given free rein and, unfortunately, lead us into reactive nihilism without the proper tools to escape. It is now time to show how high-risk skiers have possibly found their own tragic transcendence from this reactive nihilism.

29. *Skiing as Art.*

To be able to apply Nietzschean aesthetic theory to the world of high-risk skiing, we first need to make the argument that such a physical activity is a form of art. Fortunately, as I will show, this is not a difficult connection to be made as many social thinkers, and athletes themselves, have seen the link between sport and art. (Bourdieu 1978; Midol 1993; Stranger 1999; Wheaton 2004; Zuchora 1978). Mark Stranger, in his article *The Aesthetics of Risk: A Study of Surfing* (1999), connects art and sport to buttress his contention that sport risk-taking should be viewed from a non-rational aesthetic point of

view to give credence to the emotional and sensual experiences that are obtained from placing oneself at risk. Although instrumental rationalistic conceptualizations can describe, to a certain extent, this aspect of sporting life, they fail to touch upon the emotional based causes and outcomes. Deborah Wheaton (2004) identifies the aesthetic propensities of sport in similar terms. As she states: “Most lifestyle sports emphasis the creative, aesthetic and performative expressions of their activities” (Wheaton 2004: 12). Here Wheaton argues that within modern lifestyle sports that embrace risk-taking and danger, which high-risk skiing is part of, we find a large concern within participants with the creative and aesthetic aspects of the activity.

In her analysis of the cultural implications of what she terms ‘whiz’ sports, Nancy Midol (1993) connects art and sport in relation to the creation of new equipment and, more importantly, the new values that allow one to experience a greater existential ‘kick.’ As she states: “The new values were the ultimate result of the demands of the aesthetic utopia of the sixties, the beginning of the turn about when artistic values referred less to the work itself but centered on the experience” (Midol 1993: 24). With this aesthetic shift towards greater experiential concern, sport also began to make this change, stepping away from structured systems that were concerned with the entire sporting field and not simply the experience of individuals. Pierre Bourdieu (1978) makes a similar connection between changes within the artistic and sporting realms. As he argues:

The school is the site, *par excellence*, of what are called gratuitous exercises, where one acquires a distant, neutralizing disposition towards language and the social world, the very same one which is implied in the bourgeois relation to art, language and the body: gymnastics makes use of the body which, like the scholastic use of language, is an end in itself” (original emphasis, Bourdieu 1978: 823).

Bourdieu conceptualizes modern sport as being created through the economic and historical reality of the time, namely the bourgeois public educational system. Here the emotional and sensual aspects of sport are separated from the activity and a rational system is created around sport, whereby the activity becomes not about the experience, but as an end in itself, such as exercise or character develop. In much the same way, Bourdieu believes that art and artistic education have gone through the same process through bourgeois schooling. As he goes on to state:

What is acquired in and through experience of school, a sort of retreat from the world and from real practice, of which the great boarding school 'elite' represent the fully developed form, is the propensity towards activity for no purpose, a fundamental aspect of the ethos of bourgeois 'elites', who always pride themselves on disinterestedness and define themselves by an elective distance – manifested in art and sport – from material interests (Bourdieu 1978: 824).

In very Bourdieuan terms, sport became sport for sport's sake; much like art has become 'art for art's sake.'

Krzysztof Zuchora (1978) in his piece *Closer Ties Between Sport and Art*, argues for exactly that, a closer ontological relationship between sport and art. Zuchora begins by arguing that sport and art were connected from the very beginnings of the human conceptualization and practice of art. As he argues:

Outlining such an extensive field, we cannot have the slightest doubt that in such a broadly conceived approach to the conception of art is also a place for the primary motor activity of man. One could even go further in this assumption and argue, that this activity ushered in the era of man's existence, that it cleared the road for society. Because, before the taking shape of the hand occurred and the use of the simplest tools, first fundamental changes in the posture had to take place, in the way of moving about, of obtaining food and in the behaviour of those creatures which constituted the beginning of homo sapiens (Zuchora 1978: 51).

For Zuchora, before art could enter into human consciousness, physical movement had to have reached a certain pragmatic ability that would make possible the processes involved in the creation of art. Therefore, the coordinated bodily movements that are so important in sport, had to have occurred beforehand and, in a sense, was the beginning of art.

Going further, Zuchora looks at the ancient Greek sport agon and its connection to the entire Greek culture. Here Zuchora shows how within ancient Greek society there was no separation between art and the sport of the Olympic games. But, with the coming of Socratic thought, sport lost its privileged societal role and was subsequently pushed to the periphery of cultural life. This part of Zuchora's analysis is fascinating, because in a similar way Nietzsche conceptualizes the decline of tragedy as occurring around the same time and in a similar fashion. As Zuchora states: "The decline of sport agon had also its objective reasons, the main source of which was the awakening of consciousness of the people's masses. These aspirations were accompanied by the development of science, above all philosophy, pointing to new truths about man, his morality and religion" (Zuchora 1978: 56). From this point on in Western history, sport lost many of the connections it had originally had with art and these two aspects of existence began to go their separate ways.

Although social theory and its theorists have made interesting arguments concerning the relationship between art and sport, we must turn to the participants themselves to see whether the people producing such individual and social effects make these connections. Fortunately, this connection is easy to make, for not only is the high-risk skiing community united by the artistic mediums of photography and film making, but many

high-risk skiers themselves envision what they do as a type of art, where one looks at the surrounding terrain and tries to find the most aesthetic and creative line down. This not only pushes their own ability, but ultimately the level of the whole sport and the ideas and beliefs found within the community. For example, in an advertisement for ‘Helly Hansen’¹⁷ in the Canadian ski magazine entitled *Skier*, professional skier Eric Pollard is quoted as saying: “Painting and skiing are the best mediums I have found for expressing myself. Working with paint on canvas or my skis on untracked snow are two ways I express my personal outlook on life. When you put all your concentration and effort into something you love doing, it’s always a great feeling to see your ideas come to life” (Pollard 2008). Pollard is one of the most imaginative and boundary pushing skiers today. He has redefined what is possible on skis, created a new way to look at terrain in relation to the way it appears visually when skied, and been instrumental in many of the modern technological innovations in ski design. The quote above illuminates Pollard’s artistic vision in the way he skis.

Pollard is certainly not the only skier to structure his actions on skis in terms of art. In all actuality when one delves deep into the culture we find this connection between art and skiing in a myriad of places. Two other such examples come from French skier Geraldine Fasnacht and Italian skier Stefano De Benedetti. As Fasnacht muses in the ski film *Ten*: “Freeride is very aesthetic, it’s like expressing yourself in art, for me that’s freeride” (Oenhaus 2008). Fasnacht expresses the same artistic feelings discovered within Pollard, whereby interacting with the environment in specific ways, feelings and emo-

¹⁷ ‘Helly Hansen’ is a company that produces technical outerwear for outdoor recreation and work.

tions can be expressed along with a general outlook on life itself. In regards to De Benedetti, who pioneered some of the most extreme first descents in the European Alps, we also encounter another skier who visualizes his skiing as a type of expressive art. As he states in the film *Steep* concerning the first descent he made on the East face of Mont Blanc, which has not been repeated to this day: “Imagine the line. The simple pen stroke between base and summit. It makes for an unrepeatable experience. Perhaps only in these moments am I truly aware that this is my mode of expressing myself. That this is my mode of speaking to the others of freedom” (Oenhaus 2008). Although not stated directly, it is undeniable that De Benedetti visualizes his ski mountaineering as a form of art that expresses his views on life, specifically that of ‘freedom.’

To discover the potential ties between art and sport in Nietzsche’s theory directly, we need to analyze how he understands the art of music. As we saw earlier (see: section 26), Nietzsche believes that music represented the quintessential art form, because it is not a copy of a phenomenon, but rather a copy of the human will itself (Nietzsche 2000b). To help clarify such a statement we need to briefly revisit the Apollonian/Dionysian conceptualization, but this time from a much more ontologically minded viewpoint. Although not truly parallel, what we find within Nietzsche’s philosophy is something similar to a Kantian ‘noumena’ and ‘phenomena’ or ‘thing-in-itself’ and ‘appearance’ duality, that was also taken on later, although differently, by Schopenhauer (Cox 2006; Kant 1929; Schopenhauer 1969). As Nietzsche states concerning this intellectual heritage in the later produced preface to *The Birth of Tragedy* entitled *Attempt at a Self-Criticism*: “I tried laboriously to express by means of Schopenhauerian and Kantian

formulas strange and new valuations which were basically at odds with Kant's and Schopenhauer's spirit and taste!" (Nietzsche 2000b: 24). Phenomena, or appearance, refer to the perceptions of the human senses and the ontological and existential ideologies that form human consciousness. The noumena, or thing-in-itself, represent the Being that lies at the base of all phenomena. Therefore, in Nietzsche's philosophy the Apollonian is something very similar to phenomena, or appearance, while the Dionysian is connected to the noumena, or thing-in-itself. Nevertheless, in opposition to both Kant and Schopenhauer, Nietzsche holds to a nonmetaphysical or naturalist orientation in his insistence that both the Apollonian and Dionysian are intrinsic "artistic energies that burst forth from nature herself" (Nietzsche 2000b: 38). Creating a duality that is not based upon a real and unreal world or an unknowable essence and the knowable phenomena. They are both intrinsic to the world and work together to maintain the continual 'becoming' that is key for Nietzsche's ontology.

Now although Nietzsche says very little about the inner workings of the relationship between music and Dionysian Being, as stated earlier, he believes that music expressed the Dionysian or in more ontological terms, the Being that underlies all of existence. The reason for this is that pursuits such as painting, sculpture, and the language-based arts only represent phenomena or appearance. Therefore, they are copies of what already is a copy. Music on the other hand does not copy an existing copy, but comes from Being itself without an intermediary form to be based upon, thereby speaking to the listener and allowing them to experience the pre-individual totality that is the Dionysian art impulse. In a parallel fashion, sport as art exists on a similar ontological level, where

what is represented through bodily movements is not a representation of physical or ideological reality, but a representation of the will that takes over in the sought after subconscious sporting moments. Therefore, hinting at the link between Nietzsche's conceptualization of art and its possible connection to sport.

With the above insights, it is quite appropriate to consider sport as a form of art. Nietzsche himself speaks very little about sport, if any at all, but nonetheless, I think it is very possible that he would have conceived of sporting activities in much the same way. For example as he ponders in *Twilight of the Idols* concerning the psychology of art:

For art to exist, for any sort of aesthetic activity or perception to exist, a certain physiological precondition is indispensable: *intoxication*. Intoxication must first have heightened the excitability of the entire machine: no art results before that happens. All kinds of intoxication, however different their origin, have the power to do this: above all, the intoxication of sexual excitement, the oldest and most primitive form of intoxication. Likewise the intoxication which comes in the train of all great desires, all strong emotions; the intoxication of feasting, of contest, of the brave deed, of victory, of all extreme agitation; the intoxication of cruelty; intoxication in destruction; intoxication under meteorological influences, for example the intoxication of spring; or under the influence of narcotics; finally the intoxication of the will, the intoxication of an overloaded and distended will (original emphasis, Nietzsche 1968b: 71-72).

Within such a quote, we find Nietzsche hinting at the possibility of art not only residing in such acts as high-risk skiing, but also the possibility that artistic forces speak through such behavior.

30. *Skiing as Tragedy*.

With the definition of skiing as a form of artistic expression, we now need to make the quintessential leap and argue that the art produced while skiing in high-risk situations is similar to pre-Socratic Greek tragedy in both style and effect. As was outlined

earlier, it is through tragedy that the Dionysian destroys the illusions that are inherent to the Apollonian framework. With this, the audience members are able to structure their existence not solely upon Apollonian illusions, but the balancing of both Apollonian and Dionysian aspects of existence. Within the high-risk skiing community we find a sphere of life that functions in similar ontological, existential, and epistemological ways. It begins when one enters the community, which, comparable to the functions of the chorus, initiates the Dionysian destruction of the *principium individuationis*, whereby the participants feel dissolved into a community of people who are not only driven by the same passion, but rely upon each other for safety and encouragement in risk laden situations. Therefore, allowing participants to find joy in the tragic qualities of their acts. As Chamonix mountain guide Stephane Dan relates in the film *Steep*:

You know, in Chamonix, there is a lot of people...There's a lot of very good extreme skiers from everywhere in the world. And they come here for the same things. You can see if you go in the bar after 6:00, everybody was going crazy. After a powder day or something, it's...It's...You can feel the energy. They have the same spirit. So it's very special (Oenhaus 2008).

While not directly stated, we can feel the type of chorus like functions that the community serves. It dissolves one into the unity of the participants in the community and melts away ontological and existential individualistic boundaries because of the shared passions or, what Dan describes, 'spirit.' Another example comes from a comment made by professional skier Dana Flahr in the ski film *Under the Influence*: "When you have a crew that kind of thinks alike, everyone kind of pushes it in a similar direction. But, because of the people you're surrounded with I think your level is pushed a little bit further and I don't think that's really possible to do by yourself. You need other guys to like, to just up

that energy a little bit” (Jones et al 2008). Although somewhat esoteric, we can see Flahr speaking to the chorus like importance of the community and the shared energy that helps to spur participants on to higher levels within the sport while illuminating their shared goals and aspirations.

Moving away from the analogous relationship between the chorus and the high-risk skiing community, the next parallel we find revolves around the setting up of Apollonian illusions. This is required so that their destruction by the Dionysian in tragedy illuminates their basis as a human construction. In pre-Socratic tragedy we typically find these illusions in the form of the hero, but within the world of high-risk skiing these illusions are usually formed around three interconnected ideas. First, the relationship Western society has with death; second, humanity’s relationship with the natural environment that encompasses its existence; and third, the broad ontological and existential categories that structure the popular beliefs about life in the Western world.

Beginning with the illusions surrounding death, let us analyze a quote from professional skier Karina Hollekim in the ski film *The Tangerine Dream* about her experiences before dropping into ski lines: “You’re dreading it so much and your kind of thinking I’m not going to do this” (Jones et al 2005). Prior to committing to the risks, participants regularly feel fear surrounding what they are about to do. This fear emanates from Apollonian based definitions of death, which have come to value it as ‘bad’ and something to be strictly avoided because of the suffering and meaninglessness that surrounds such a concept. As Nietzsche makes this Apollonian conceptualization of death clear in *The Will to Power*: “God created man happy, idle, innocent, and immortal: our

actual life is a false, decayed, sinful existence, an existence of punishment – Suffering, struggle, work, death are considered as objections and question marks against life, as something that ought not to last; for which one requires a cure – and has a cure! – (Nietzsche 1968a: 130). To bring in another example to buttress this contention, take Tim Petrick’s statement in *Steep* concerning his emotions while heli-skiing in Alaska: “You’ve gotten out of the helicopter, and you are just afraid to even stand there because it’s just so completely intimidating” (Oenhaus 2008). With Petrick’s statement, we are again confronted with the fear experienced through the Apollonian illusions surrounding death, which arguably is something every high-risk skier experiences before the moment of risking one’s life.

In regards to the illusions that surround humanity’s ontological and existential relationship to nature, we see this occurring in the setting up of mountain environments as beautiful, peaceful, and compartmentalized places based around the *principium individuationis* and Apollonian aesthetics. Gone are any links to the Dionysian aspects of nature whereby it is not only destructive, but also indiscriminately destructive. As Nietzsche states in *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*:

At first, men imagined themselves into nature: they saw everywhere themselves and their kind, especially their evil and capricious qualities, as it were hidden among the clouds, storms, beasts of prey, trees and plants: it was then they invented ‘evil nature’. Then there came along an age when they again imagined themselves out of nature, the age of Rousseau: they were so fed up with one another they absolutely had to have a corner of the world into which man and his torments could not enter: they invented ‘good nature’. (Nietzsche 1997: 16).

As professional skier Eric Roner states in the ski film *Soul Purpose* illuminating this ontological illusion: “It’s so beautiful and so peaceful it’s hard to get jacked up knowing

what your going to do because your just like this is unreal” (Jones et al 2004). We clearly get the sense here that the mountains are separate entities that have been raised to exude a sense of beauty and power that is similar to the Apollonian hero, which is beyond anything that could ideally exist within the real world. To further this contention, let us ponder a statement made by *Powder* magazine senior correspondent Steve Casimiro in the film *Steep*, concerning the mystique that surrounds the Chamonix Valley in the French Alps:

Chamonix is the birthplace of alpinism. It’s the motherland. In the ‘70s and ‘80s, it was always kind of held up as this shining, larger than-life destination. It was like, “Oh, Cham, Chamonix.” And it was almost mythical. You would aspire someday to go ski in Chamonix. The mountains are big. They’re wild. They’re unbelievably aesthetic. There are spires everywhere. I mean, you cannot go there, whether you’re a skier or whether you’ve never seen snow, and not be inspired by the landscape. It will just blow your mind. (Oenhaus 2008).

Here we see the mountains raised, as Casimiro contends, to a mythical status. They are beautiful and they are powerful, creating a sphere whereby the Dionysian aspects of nature are veiled. Showing again the Apollonian illusions that tend to structure the way participants perceive nature.

Not only does this Apollonian characterization of nature create a sphere where it is placed above ordinary existence, but in this process it also become subject to the *principium individuationis* and the inverted human/nature relationship that follows. As Nietzsche states in *The Gay Science*: “Man has been educated by his errors. First, he always saw himself only incompletely; second, he endowed himself with fictitious attributes; third, he placed himself in a false order of rank in relation to animals and nature; fourth, he invented ever new tables of goods and always accepted them for a time as

eternal and unconditional” (Nietzsche 1974: 174). We see this clearly in a quote from self-proclaimed ‘ski mountaineer’ Andrew McLean in the film *Steep* concerning why he skis:

Ski mountaineering, I look at it as kind of between-the-cracks exploration. All these mountains, people haven’t been into them. They’ve never been skied. They’ve never been explored. You can be a modern day explorer. And it may not be as significant as going to the moon or the bottom of the ocean, but from just a common standpoint it’s a great method to get out and explore the world (Oenhaus 2008).

In McLean’s comments, which seem heavily influenced by the *principium individuationis*, we find him structuring his actions around the conceptualization that there exists a boundary between humanity and nature, where it is humanity’s goal to explore and conquer its ontological counterpart, revealing the Apollonian illusions that are commonly created around such acts. We see this also in the ski film *Mind the Addiction* when an unknown skier states: “You’re one with nature, but also you’re fighting against it at the same time, just trying to come out on top” (Jones et al 2001). Although we begin to see hints of the Dionysian destruction of such illusions, we nevertheless find a perfect example of how nature is visualized through the Apollonian lens. While being separated from humanity through the Apollonian, nature has become a sphere of existence that needs to be conquered and controlled by its human antithesis.

Lastly, we discover the all-encompassing Apollonian illusions that make up the popular way of life that is championed in the modern Western world. Although a broad category, it represents those ontological, existential, and epistemological ideologies that exert influence on how people believe they should live their lives. This way of life is

based around careers, family, wealth and, more importantly, the avoidance of risk and other Dionysian aspects of life. As Andrew McLean states in the film *Steep* concerning the pull he feels from this aspect of society: “I’d never really taken skiing that seriously. I’ve always just looked at it as like a hobby and you know I’m going to get a real job and a real career and you know get with the program” (Oenhaus 2008). As McLean makes clear, within the larger high-risk skiing community there is a strong division between the type of life experienced by these skiers and the popular way of life that is championed in the modern Apollonian world. If we look at another quote from professional skier Ingrid Backstrom, we find similar sentiments concerning the struggle participants feel towards their lives as high-risk skiers and the popular form of life that is continually on the edge of their consciousnesses. As she states in the Canadian ski Magazine *Skier*: “I think everyone gets a little bit of ‘What am I doing with my life? I should be using my brain more.’ In small ski towns, I’m seeing it a lot more right now, because it’s reevaluation time. It happens every fall and spring. Like, the season is over, now what?” (Abrams 2005: 73). From Backstrom’s comment, we are again able to discern the struggle experienced by high-risk skiers that revolves around a life that brings money, stability, and mainstream success, or one that forgoes these measures of social status, for one that is simply lived to ski.

With the preceding arguments and the statements from participants therein, we are beginning to set up the tragic stage on which high-risk skiing is played out. Participants are brought into the chorus like community of like-minded individuals and begin the Dionysian process of shattering the *principium individuationis*. Following this, we begin

to see Apollonian illusions, usually revolving around death, humanity's relationship to the natural environment, and broad ontological and existential themes structuring Western life, existing within the participants' consciousnesses. Thus, setting the stage for the tragic Dionysian force found within risk-taking to destroy them, not only allowing one to see life from a more complete point of view, but experiencing those sublime or euphoric moments when the Apollonian and Dionysian are finally reunited. The tragic element within this process is not necessarily the actual deaths and injuries that occur, but the risking of oneself to the prospect of death, which brings one to the edge of existence illuminating the tragic qualities inherent to it. Although we live, love and create, we also tragically die, hate, and destroy. It is in the risking of ourselves on the edge separating life and death that we encounter and learn to accept those tragic qualities of life that have been veiled by the Apollonian primacy of the modern age. Nevertheless, we must now understand the process by which the Apollonian illusions are destroyed

Beginning with the Apollonian illusions surrounding death, let us analyze a statement made by big-mountain skiing pioneer Doug Coombs, who died skiing in La Grave, France in 2006. As Coombs states in the ski film *Steep*:

I remember being really shocked when a friend died skiing. And then the next friend died skiing, and then next friend died skiing. And you're like, I don't know what it is, it's weird, you just become numb to it. It's still terrible, and you don't like it, but it doesn't make you stop. I hate seeing people that I know die, but I know it's going to happen. I think that it's just part of it. It's like saying you know someone who's died in a car accident. You know, what's worse, a car accident, or falling off the mountain. I don't know, I think the car accident's worse. At least when they're falling off the mountain, they love what they were doing (Oenhau 2008).

As we can see, Coombs, by risking himself in the face of death and existing within a community of like-minded individuals, has been able to bring down the Apollonian illusions surrounding death. He begins by stating that he was ‘really shocked’ when he first encountered death within the community, therefore disclosing the Apollonian illusions that at one time structured his world view. But, by risking his life and watching others do the same, he has been able to use this tragic Dionysian aspect of life to illuminate and find joy in the necessity and beauty to be found in dying while doing something that you love. Therefore, leading to the belief that trying to avoid death only creates missed opportunities to create a complete and fulfilling life.

An additional example of this Dionysian influenced destruction of the Apollonian illusions surrounding death comes from big-mountain skiing pioneer Stefano De Benedetti. As De Benedetti states in the film *Steep* concerning his first descent on the eastern face of Mont Blanc: “To live so close to the possibility of dying, you understand what is really important and what not. And this makes you a better person. It’s probably the highest moment of my life because in the perfect moment I was, or I felt to be a little superman” (Oenhaus 2008). In similar terms to what we discovered within the experiences of Coombs, we find another high-risk skier showing that through the risking of his life, he was able not only to destroy the Apollonian illusions surrounding the negative value of death, but also to do so joyously, enabling him to become a more complete person, quite possibly based upon the balancing of both the Apollonian and Dionysian. As De Benedetti goes on to state in *Steep*: “To me the mountains were the possibility to discover life and discover myself” (Oenhaus 2008).

Moving on to analyze the illusions surrounding humanity's relationship to nature, let us ponder a comment made by Nico Falquet in the ski film *Ten*, which shows that it is not solely Apollonian illusions surrounding death that are brought down through the risking of one's life, but also the *principium individuationis* and the ontological barrier it creates between humanity and nature. As he states: "Without having been caught in at least one avalanche, you don't realize its power and that we are nothing compared to its strength" (Perrini 2008). Prior to his intimate experience with an avalanche, Falquet entered the mountains under the illusion that places humanity ontologically above nature, thereby creating a sphere of existence where nature becomes something that we can control and harness. But, by following the Dionysian through risking his life in avalanche terrain, he was able to bring said Apollonian illusions down and revel joyously in the power that nature has over humanity. This experience not only allows him to break through the *principium individuationis*, but also the Apollonian knowledge created around the human nature relationship. As Falquet goes on to state: "We live some very chaotic and difficult moments, but I think we find a balance in life doing extreme things" (Perrini 2008).

Another example of the falling of Apollonian ontological, existential, and epistemological boundaries between humanity and nature through risk-taking comes again from Doug Coombs. As he states in *Steep*:

Every mountaineer and every skier realizes the mountains are a living, breathing thing... They're alive. You know, they're totally alive and they'll make you more alive. You know, or they'll make you dead, you know, if you don't read them... When you're always in that element, the vertical world, either skiing or climbing, moving through the mountains, not just being in them, but actually moving through the mountains and with the mountains, you're only a guest. And

you don't know when your time is up as a guest. I'm just a cheater. I've been out there a lot longer than most people, and I just keep doing it and doing it and doing it (Oenhaus 2008).

Through the risking of his life, Coombs has dissolved away the Apollonian illusions that placed humanity above nature. Nature now became something that is alive and can influence the ontological and existential world in ways that only Apollonian guided humanity could before. To conclude with a statement made by Emily Coombs, Doug Coombs' wife, in *Steep* concerning her late husband and giving insight into his relationship with the mountains that seem to transcend the Apollonian individual: "We never questioned our life. The other people might have, but we knew that the risk that we encountered was worth every bit of it. He knew and I knew, you're never above the mountains. Mountains have always had the last say" (Oenhaus 2008).

Finally, the life and death risks taken by skiers allow them to break down the broad Apollonian illusions surrounding the conceptualizations about the way in which life should be lived in the modern Western world. As Andrew McLean states in *Steep*: "I know it's dangerous, but if I give it up, what's the future going to be like? Is it just going to be sitting at a desk job? You know, you need to figure that what's going to take the place of that. Where are you going to get the same adventure or same excitement out of your life?" (Oenhaus 2008). Through risking his life, McLean seems to have understood that there is something greater lurking behind the illusions that structure Western modern life, where he is able to experience a deeper level of existence. Another example comes from professional skier Karina Hollekim in the film *The Tangerine Dream*: "For me it's important that I don't just sit back and live the everyday life because that's not going to

make me feel anything. Now I'm out there and I feel alive" (Jones et al 2005). This type of Apollonian illusion destruction is very popular within the skiing world, especially in regards to the social phenomenon of 'ski-bumming' where people will literally give up an Apollonian life based around wealth and social prestige, to simply ski everyday.

With these examples, along with the plausibility of defining high-risk skiing as a form of art, the tragic picture being created here has finally taken shape. In a Apollonian world where death is avoided, the individual rules, humanity stands above nature, and wealth and social prestige measure the worth of a person, we have found a realm in the high-risk skiing community where people, through the tragedy of risking their lives, have come to experience the sublime or euphoric emotions felt when Apollonian illusions fall and the Dionysian leads us back to the primordial unity that connects all of existence as one. In other words, through the risking of ones life the Dionysian confronts the Apollonian illusions and skiers embrace the world of risk because the possibility of death becomes a partner in the striving for a deeper, more rounded existence. This process is certainly not a conscious one taken on by adherents, in that they understand the specific tragic qualities and play them out. Rather it is the heightened emotions felt when the synthesis occurs between Apollo and Dionysus that keeps people going back for more. As Nietzsche proclaims in *Twilight of the Idols*: "The most spiritual human beings, assuming they are the most courageous, also experience by far the most painful tragedies: but it is precisely for this reason that they honour life, because it brings against them its most formidable weapons" (Nietzsche 1968b: 77). Tragic cultures still live on in numerous

places, and one of those is in the community of skiers who search for experiences that can lead them to the void and, more importantly, deal with such a panorama.

31. *Pulling It All Together.*

Keeping in mind what has been presented thus far, we must now take all the premises created from the previous arguments and meld them together into the overarching argument that is the driving force of this exploration. Therefore, let me begin this process.

As human beings, our existence is defined by two inherent drives. The Apollonian, which refers to the rational, knowable, and moral aspects of life, and the Dionysian, which refers to irrational, unknowable, and amoral aspects. These drives must balance one another, but unfortunately, we live in a historical epoch that is highly influenced by Socratic philosophy, which has led to an Apollonian centered existence that certainly has not produced the effects we had hoped, but left us in a reactive nihilistic void believing in values that have no reality, thereby creating a Nietzschean ‘No!’ saying relationship to life. Nevertheless, the Dionysian still speaks to many, trying to break through and reunite with the Apollonian to show humanity a complete picture of existence.

The world of high-risk skiing is one place where the Dionysian has broken out into modern society, for within such a community we find people who have discovered in risk-taking and the tragedies that are inherent within these moments, a type of life that is more complete than what is offered within the popular form emphasized by the Apollonian influence. It is something very much like the pre-Socratic Greek society, for through a form of art that is tragic at its roots, participants are drawn into a chorus like community

which enables participants to dissolve the *principium individuationis* and find joy in their own and others tragic risk-taking moments. Participants are then able to create and relate to the Apollonian illusions surrounding death, nature, and popular notions of life trajectories. But, by tragically risking their lives the Dionysian forces overcome those emanating from the Apollonian and high-risk skiers not only envision existence from the combination of both Apollonian and Dionysian forces, but experience moments of ‘sublime’ or euphoric emotions when the Dionysian and Apollonian are reunited, dissolving life into the primordial unity that is Being. With this realization members not only give up the Apollonian way of life and restructure their existence to be able to chase their passion, but they continually push themselves to experience those ‘sublime’ and euphoric moments when the Apollonian illusions melt away and the Dionysian and Apollonian are finally reunited. Of course these experiences need to contain risk, for it is risk that brings in the tragic and therefore the Dionysian lesson to be learned.

With this, we have not only discovered a possible explanation to the conundrum of why there exists a large group of people who have, in a very un-Apollonian way, defined their existence by risking themselves on the side of mountains, but also the possibility of an emancipatory culture curing Nietzschean reactive nihilism. For as he states in *On the Genealogy of Morality* concerning the human form needed to break out of the sickness pulling humanity down:

For this goal one would need a *different* kind of spirits that are probable in this of all ages: spirits strengthened by wars and victories, for whom conquering, adventure, danger, pain have even become a need; for this one would need acclimatization to sharp high air, to wintry journeys, to ice and mountain ranges in every sense; for this one would need a kind of sublime malice itself, and ultimate most self-assured mischievousness of knowledge, which belongs to great health; one

would need, in brief and gravely enough, precisely this *great health* (original emphasis, Nietzsche 1998: 66).

To hold such an understanding or interpretation of Nietzsche's theory is very plausible, because many of the thinkers who follow on with Nietzsche's project come to similar conclusions. As we saw in the earlier chapter on risk, Martin Heidegger (2002) and Georges Bataille (1992) are both early twentieth century thinkers who, like Nietzsche, diagnosed a sickness infecting humanity. Heidegger believes that this sickness was rooted in the loss of Being, while Bataille conceptualizes the sickness as rooted in our moral ideologies revolving around good and evil or right and wrong. Nevertheless, both these thinkers conceptualize risk as an emancipatory category. For Heidegger, this is done by risking ourselves as beings in Being, which will illuminate our ontological base in Being and the totality that it entails. For Bataille, the risk involved in transgressing moral ideologies contains the potential to break us out of the belief in the immutability of moral values and illuminate the nihilistic roots of human existence. All this is very similar to the interpretation of Nietzsche presented above and the potential that such a philosophy entails, because through risking their lives, high-risk skiers are taught a deeper lesson about life and are able to break out of the sickness infecting humanity, while structuring their ontological and existential selves in relation to a much deeper understanding of the intricacies of existence. Although Nietzsche himself never spoke directly of risk, there is an air in his writing that points to the possibility that he would have believed in its ontological and existential power to create a Dionysian 'Yes-saying' within individuals.

32. *Conclusion.*

We have found our answer. Through an interpretation of Nietzsche's theory we were able to see not only why there exists a community of high-risk skiers, but also the ontological and existential effects created by this risk-taking and how this changes the way people see the world and choose to interact with it. Now although the *whys* behind risk-taking and its actual potential is much more complex than what has been presented above and in need of further direct research with participants, I believe we have set a ground work for a new theoretical direction for analyzing risk-taking in sport, especially the risk-taking that takes its participants to the edge separating life and death. Unlike many other theoretical starting points, starting with the philosophy of Nietzsche not only gives us a point of departure that is imbedded within the genealogical movement of human consciousness, but more importantly, it offers us an emancipatory category that may allow people to break free from the shackles of modern Western society.

Chapter 5

The Descent

33. Summary.

To bring this paper to a close, let us begin by briefly reminding ourselves of what has been said, analyzed, and argued in the preceding pages. This will help us to understand where the analysis falls short, where the analysis can and should go in the future, and why understanding risk-taking is important not only pragmatically, since it is an aspect of social life that is important for certain individuals and communities, but also emancipatory because of its ability to create a remedy to the ontological, existential, and epistemological maladies that preoccupy much of the discipline of critical sociology.

We began this journey by trying to understand the birthplace and social evolution of the concept popularly defined as ‘risk.’ With the scholarly insights of thinkers such as Niklas Luhmann (1993) and Deborah Lupton (1999), among others, we were first introduced to a world where the concept of risk was non-existent. But, with the growing efficiency and use of maritime travel and trade, along with the emergence of new ontological, existential, and epistemological categories with the coming of the enlightenment, the concept of risk slowly crept into human social consciousness. This early conceptualization of risk had very little descriptive value placed upon it in relation to the categories of ‘good’ and ‘bad.’ Nevertheless, with the coming of the twentieth century, many of the forces were in place that allowed risk to become mainly defined by its negative aspects. In other words, risk slowly became equated solely with harm or danger and the more positive aspects of the concept were pushed to the periphery of Western social conscious-

ness. This popular conceptualization of risk still remains today, as it is mainly equated with the potential loss that it may bring. We concluded with a brief overview of the Western world's growing concern and fascination with risk, and the theories put forward to explain such a phenomenon.

Following this analysis of the historical inception and progression of the concept of risk, we discussed the theoretical structures that have been used not only to understand the material plausibility of risk, but also the social and individual responses to such an ontological, existential, and epistemological category. We began with the realist position, which understands risk as a force that is completely separate from any social constructionist moorings. In other words, risks exist independently from any social influence. Nevertheless, the social does play a role in critical realist literature, by perceptually defining which risks are important and what are the best mitigation strategies to deal with said risks. Standing apposed to the realist and critical realist stance, are the broad ranging social constructionist theories on risk. Here, risks are understood as forces that are created and maintained through social forces. Therefore, risks do not exist independent from social context, but find their ontological, existential, and epistemological definitions within specific social spheres. However, within the social constructionist moniker we find theories that to differing degrees are situated closer to either a 'weak constructionist' or 'strong constructionist' stance. Concluding this section on the theoretical perspectives on risk we looked at the theories that deal with the ontological and existential potential held within risk and risk-taking. Pulling from the works of Martin Heidegger (2002) and George Bataille (1992), we became acquainted with perspectives that find within risk the

ability to pull people into a deeper understanding of humanity's ontological and existential roles. Although these theories are much more philosophical in nature than the realist and social constructionist stances, they are important because they open up new perspectives that allow us to place risk into a sphere where it becomes a necessary ontological, existential, and epistemological category for human growth and fulfillment.

Following this conceptual and theoretical discussion on risk, we continued to focus the argument by describing and analyzing the popular theoretical underpinnings used in the research on risk-taking in sport. These theoretical paradigms were those revolving around 'edgework,' which conceptualizes risk-taking in sport as a both an escape and a reaffirmation of the 'risk society'; 'gender,' where risk-taking is connected to dominant ideologies connected to male and female roles; 'network analysis,' where the sports network creates and normalizes an ethos of risk-taking; 'functionalism,' where risk-taking in sport is understood as a type of societal safety valve, allowing individuals to release the stresses found within modern Western society; 'symbolic interactionism,' which understands risk-taking in sport in relation to the identities created through social interactions, specifically those interactions that occur in the sporting world; and finally 'post-modern' theories, which connect risk-taking in sport to aesthetics and the feeling of the 'sublime' that participants experience while risking themselves in sporting situations.

Although these theories and the research based upon them has illuminated many aspects of the social *why* in relation to risk-taking in sport, discovered were many shortcomings within each theoretical viewpoint, that either ignore important aspects of human existence or could not place their explanations into a larger understanding of social life.

Therefore, we moved on from this section to argue for a new perspective that comes from Nietzsche's aesthetic theory, the Apollonian/Dionysian duality found within, and the importance of tragedy. We began resituating risk-taking into Nietzsche's opus by first laying out, piece by piece, how Nietzsche conceptualizes the social world, pulling mainly from his early work *The Birth of Tragedy* (2000b), which although somewhat different from his later works, contained the genesis of many of his ideas that would span the entirety of his philosophical output. We discovered that by situating sport in the artistic realm and humanity within a categorization that contains both an Apollonian as well as Dionysian drive, risk-taking in sport becomes not only a way of allowing individuals to reconnect with the Dionysian and understand existence and Being at a more complete level, but also to cure the reactive nihilism that for Nietzsche was the cause of many of the social ills that have infected Western society. With this we not only have a new perspective on risk-taking in sport, but we are also able to place risk-taking within a larger social context that illuminates the progression that creates the drive towards such actions and places this drive within the forces that create and maintain the social whole. Risk-taking now becomes something that does not lie pathologically at the periphery of the social world, but something that is part and parcel with the Nietzschean forces continually molding the modern Western world.

34. *Limitations & Future Research.*

The theoretical exploration presented in the preceding chapters is only a beginning. Because of this there are limitations that affect the plausibility of such an outlook. First, is the fact that Nietzschean philosophy in its original form is difficult to mold into a

theory that can be empirically tested in the social sciences. What to do with a theory that prizes the emotional as much as the empirical? What to do with a theory that perceives existence as tied up in aesthetic or artistic forces? Such characteristics make it difficult to use Nietzsche's theory while trying to hold to sociological academic rigor. In reality, Nietzschean thought is very cautious of highly empirical or rational thought, therefore questioning the very foundation in which sociological research is undertaken. Nevertheless, such questioning of the assumptions and methods involved only helps to strengthen the knowledge concerning human existence because it allows people to look in different places to unearth new and interesting explanations for the actions that are important at both social and individual levels.

Secondly, and closely connected to the difficulty of molding Nietzschean theory into testable categories, is the fact that Nietzsche's theory is highly open to interpretation. As mentioned, Nietzsche stood opposed to many of the popular epistemological tools of his day, creating an opus of work that at times ranges from rigorous philosophical argumentation to work that is closer to literary prose and poetry. This creates a situation where his arguments can be very difficult to discern and therefore open to misinterpretation. Nevertheless, all care has been made to bring out Nietzsche's arguments and present evidence to support many of the theoretical categories that are used in the application of his thoughts. What Nietzschean scholars must do when applying his theories, is to argue for the plausibility of the interpretation being used. I have done my best to maintain this logical rigor, but also consent to many of the problems created when trying to interpret his thoughts.

Finally, is the somewhat limited data used to buttress my argument, which is gleaned mainly from ski films and magazines, opening up criticism regarding proper representation and interpretation. I acquiesce to these problems and accept the fact that I have used limited empirical resources. Nevertheless, I believe the resources used are adequate for the presentation of a possible theoretical avenue that could open the doors to understanding not only a small segment of the social world, but ultimately the social whole itself in new and interesting ways, based upon the aspects of our existence that have been glossed over in the name of modern notions of knowledge. Future research that includes in-depth content analysis of cultural symbols and meanings, as well as immersion into the culture of high-risk skiing, would only add strength to this theoretical blueprint and give us a fuller picture of why people risk their lives and how this risk can be an important existential and ontological category capable of changing not only individual lives, but the entire social sphere as well.

35. Risk's Modernist Agenda.

Since all social research needs an answer to the question 'So what?,' the ideas that have been presented thus far need to be subject to the same question. What is the importance of studying a rather small group of individuals with no bearing on the larger social world? What is the point of using a theory that itself does not really want to be an academic theory? Why is this research useful in not only understanding the social world, but also helping to mold it into its greatest potential?

In response to the first question, any social action, or even individual for that matter, is important because every bit of knowledge or simple understanding of social phe-

nomenon helps sociologists to build towards a greater understanding of the whole. To place a value on what should and should not be studied, keeps hidden aspects of our existence that not only help to understand the groups under scrutiny, but also society at large. I have tried to do this myself in the preceding work by focusing on one specific aspect of existence, finding its causes and effects, and then showing how such behavior is tied to larger social mechanisms that run throughout all of Western society. Without the illumination made possible by focusing on one aspect of human existence, the applicability of Nietzschean thought to society at large may have escaped me all together.

Although somewhat answered earlier, let me reiterate my response to the second question laid out above. Although Nietzsche's aesthetic theory is based upon his distrust of empirical and rational thought, which as we saw earlier makes it difficult for this theory to be used as a research base for sociologists, it nevertheless breaks through the possible bias erected by the rational and scientific mindset and opens up a world of new possibilities for sociologists by allowing one to bring in the irrational, unknowable, and amoral tendencies of human existence and the power they hold in not only influencing individuals, but the larger social whole itself. Allowing new theories to propagate, only allows for a fuller sociology, one that is not scared to jump out side of the lines and experiment with new outlooks and new angles, continually searching to understand social existence more completely and therefore allowing for new ways of correcting our seemingly flawed ways of life.

Finally, in response to the third question, we encounter the most important aspect of social research, namely gaining knowledge to understand and ultimately change social

existence for the better. Although not obvious, using Nietzsche's theory places us within a sphere where we not only set out the plausibility of an existence based upon the greatest human potential, but we also find a way of obtaining said potential. Through risk-taking we are taken to a place where life in its fullness is presented to the participant. They feel the inevitability of death and the importance of the emotions. They feel the ontological connection with all that surrounds us, and they can see the seeming meaningless inherent in life, enabling them to create new values based upon this realization. Because of these experiences, it is plausible to suggest that these horizons highlighted through risk-taking have helped to create the culture of high-risk skiing that tends to involve adherents who live lives antithetical to the popular one championed by the Apollonian centered Western world. Although a matter of interpretation, this world created by such a culture could be viewed as more progressive, for thrown asunder are many of the ideological baggage that only helps to hinder human growth. One can only speculate what Nietzsche envisioned the strongest ontologically, existentially, and epistemologically structured societies would look like, nevertheless within his philosophy we find a plea for the attainment of this ideal and ultimately how humanity should go about obtaining it.

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