

Dennis Schmidt, *On Germans and Other Greeks: Tragedy and Ethical Life* (Indiana University Press, 2001).

On Germans and Other Greeks: Tragedy and Ethical Life takes up the question of the relation of art, truth, and ethical sense by pursuing the idea – one that has defined the philosophical consideration of art since antiquity – that tragedy represents the summit of the possibilities of art and the highest form in which art expresses something of human self-understanding. This idea is found in Plato, but first thematized in Aristotle. From this point in Aristotle through Hegel, Schelling, Nietzsche, and Heidegger this idea becomes something of an orthodoxy. Nietzsche expresses it perhaps most clearly when he defines all art as the product of the conflicted roots of human nature that are expressed as the Dionysian and Apollonian, and when he further defines the art that expresses this conflict as its theme – tragedy – as the highest achievement of art, one that reveals our nature in ways that philosophy can never reach. This struggle between philosophy and tragedy is a struggle that concerns our self-understanding. In the end, as Plato had argued, it is a struggle about how one can live and ethical life.

On Germans and Other Greeks: Tragedy and Ethical Life investigates this struggle between philosophy and tragedy by means of a series of readings of philosophers who have taken this topic as a central theme. In particular, the importance of tragedy in the post-Kantian German tradition are considered since that tradition is profoundly shaped by its engagement with Greek tragedy. After discussions of tragedy in Plato and Aristotle and a brief discussion on the importance of Kant for this question despite the absence of any treatment of tragedy in Kant's work, close readings of the place of tragedy in the work of Hegel, Hölderlin, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. While the axis of each reading is the question of ethical life, other themes persist throughout the book and come to define its most far-reaching concerns: strangeness, language and its limits, death, and political struggle. Above all, the concern is to formulate the questions of ethical life beyond any conception of good and evil.

The largest argument of the book is that in its engagement with works of art, above all with tragic art, philosophy is pressed to open itself beyond the prejudice that what is true is able to be captured by the concept, by the idea. In taking the question of tragic art to heart, philosophy is pushed to its limits and to become different.