Nietzsche’s self-proclaimed ‘anti-political’ (EH ‘wise’ 3; cf. TI 8.4) stance is often ignored. Commentators, that is, often interpret Nietzsche’s texts as responding to familiar issues within political philosophy, and as furnishing a novel position therein. This could indeed be the appropriate hermeneutic response. Dismissing one of Nietzsche’s proclamations is, on a variety of different grounds, hermeneutically reasonable. In this particular case, given all that Nietzsche has to say about sociality and the roles of public institutions in modern life, dismissal might even seem compelling. Here, however, I wish to recuperate Nietzsche’s anti-political stance. That is, I shall argue that Nietzsche’s self-proclamation does in fact reflect his deep commitments, and thus compels a reassessment of the political interpretations of his thought.

There have been a number of strategies for assigning a distinctly political orientation to Nietzsche. Some attribute to Nietzsche an aristocratic or immoralist politics. They see
Nietzsche as endorsing certain substantive values, and further take Nietzsche as insisting that these values be somehow instituted or enacted politically; those adopting this strategy typically do so in order to criticize Nietzsche for advocating such a politics. Another strategy is to identify commitments of Nietzsche’s that, although they ran aground in Nietzsche’s person, implicitly furnish the core of an emancipatory or progressive politics. These commentators are more sympathetic to Nietzsche than the previous set, but nevertheless disagree with Nietzsche’s personal views. Accordingly they need to argue that confusions concealed his important insights; essential to this strategy is, on one hand, arguing for the force of some philosophic position, and on the other hand sifting that position out from Nietzsche’s idiosyncratic beliefs. Alternately, one could insist that Nietzsche’s antagonism to politics is in fact an agonal politics, revisionist but recognizable, once properly understood. This strategy, that is, on its own account requires only one instance of brute hermeneutic force: that of reinterpreting ‘anti-politics’ as opposition to politics in a conventional sense, not to the whole sphere of politics properly considered.

These are valuable projects, most of which are worth consideration in their particular instantiations. But what I wish to argue here is that what they hold in common, that Nietzsche had a distinctly political orientation, should be rejected. I do not claim that Nietzsche’s anti-political stance is somehow the one incontestable interpretandum in Nietzsche and thus demands a proper reckoning. Nor do I proceed by identifying all the elements of politics and then accounting for which ones did or did not find Nietzsche’s disfavor, thereby providing the data for a reckoning against politics. My procedure, instead, is to clarify the grounds of Nietzsche’s anti-political stance. I hope to show that anti-politics can function as a prism though which we can, on one hand, view fundamental features of Nietzsche’s outlook, and on the other hand, at
least consider how different Nietzsche’s position is from what we might otherwise be apt to recognize it as. The argument of the paper is that Nietzsche’s anti-political stance is rooted in his account of contingency in human identity and the appropriate orientation to this contingency. Nietzsche argues that one basic orientation to human contingency, which I refer to as ‘tragicomic,’ is superior to all others, and further that no modern form of political life could manifest this orientation. No form of sociality available to us even prospectively can both satisfy the demands of politics and respond to the human condition in a way that is productive of the meanings that sustain our agency.

I. Contingency

One of the many features of Nietzsche’s thought that generates confusion is his insistence on both of the following. One, human beings are capable of moments of spontaneous, self-expressive, thoroughly novel creativity and invention; this inventiveness extends even to the existential matter of what it means to be human. Two, human beings are, as pieces of nature (BGE 9; cf. EH CW 2, RWB 6), pieces of fatefulness (TI 6.8; cf. TI 5.6), and, more recently, pieces of culture, thoroughly determined by causes that lie outside of individual volition. This duality of human existence in Nietzsche’s thought can of course lead one to focus on one side to the exclusion of the other, or on the apparent contradiction. Nietzsche, however, not only insists on both sides of the duality, but also deems it critical to offer an account of the relation between the two. According to Nietzsche, our spontaneous powers are not only conditioned by various determinations, but they also depend on them, so much so that the possibility of these powers is contingent upon being embodied, having a claim to a history or histories, and belonging to a culture. To some extent, the reverse is also true: human nature, the course of history, and the
content of culture have been shaped by human agency, even if those determinations are no longer tractable to will. This very interdependence, furthermore, is what creates the space for our agency. We live in the ‘unstable equilibrium between beast and angel’ (GM III:2) – that is, between being entirely subject to natural causes and having only ideal motivations. This permanent ambiguity furnishes the context in which accomplishment is possible at the same time as our powers are moored by something that gives it significance.  

These interdependences are what I shall refer to as human contingency. Nietzsche’s account of human contingency has three dimensions. One concerns our deepest ideals and aspirations: that they are irredeemably unavailable to us. Particular goals can of course be realized, but contingency in our ideals implies that unmitigated success is non-accidentally impossible. This impossibility arises in two different ways. The more straightforward one is that ideals and their conditions of fulfillment are ultimately incoherent. This sometimes manifests itself in the fragility or transience of goodness: what we seek is inherently unstable, so that any fulfillment is self-undermining. Some goods that are accessible to us maintain their value only as exceptional or fleeting, or in light of commitments that exclude other values we might otherwise pursue. And all goods accessible to us diminish in marginal value, so that the accumulation of even ideal goods might be unsatisfactory. More generally, however, Nietzsche suggests that the conditions for successful fulfillment of our ideals are at best determinate only in imperfect circumstances, and that even partial fulfillment alters their ability to serve as ideals. For Nietzsche, ideals take their force by contrast with the circumstances that one confronts. In one process of ideal formation, one wishes for a greater and greater alleviation from troubles until the conditions under which goods are available is abstracted away (cf. GS 335, GM I:14). So on one hand Nietzsche identifies ideals with imagining another, ‘true’ world (EH ‘fate’ 8),
one which, because all obstacles have been removed from it, has no determinate content other than the absence of ills. And on the other hand, achieving any ideal requires a revision in ideals, since ideals take their shape by contrast with present circumstances (cf. BGE 73).

A second dimension of contingency involves agency. Here again, contingency involves the necessity of failure. Human powers of spontaneity are dependent on a situated context: embodiment, social practices of authority and accountability, standards of salience, possible resistance to one’s will, and so on. The ability to claim one’s deeds as one’s own and take responsibility for them depends on conditions that make one susceptible to ‘fate’ (GM II:2), as Nietzsche would have it. We can thus be neither purely spontaneous nor purely conditioned. The possibility of agency, rather, is conditioned by our relationships with others and our own limitations, and for Nietzsche this places the implicit presence of failure even within success.

Contingency in its third dimension extends through ideals and agency to the self. For Nietzsche, to have a human identity is to maintain a tension between ideal and actual, so that one’s immediate characteristics do not exhaust what one is. Instead, our more ultimate concerns and potentialities contribute in a way that both exalts us and renders our identities susceptible to the destruction of those concerns and potentialities. Since one’s hopes and aspirations, and the distance of these from actual circumstances, constitute part of who one is, human identity is always vulnerable.

Distinguishing these three dimensions of human contingency is worthwhile because doing so permits a consideration of the distinct ways in which human existence is unalterable and at the same time unlimited. For just this reason, however, Nietzsche deems it important to see these dimensions as a single phenomenon: contingency does not merely imply that our values are parochial or that our powers are frail, but extends, through our value and our powers, to our
very beings. From moment to moment many things make us what we are, and most of these things are arbitrary or insignificant. But through the direction of our striving some of these things can take on the significance that constitutes our identities. In Nietzsche’s picture, we make ourselves into persons by having ideal hopes and trying to work them out, even at the risk of fear, distress, frustrated desire, or failure. This presence of risk is why, on one hand, it is impossible really to know what one is before living one’s life, and why, on the other hand, the ‘law of Life’ promises doom: ‘all great things perish through their own doing, through an act of self-sublimation: thus decrees the law of Life, the law of the necessary “self-overcoming” in the essence of Life’ (GM III:27). Nietzsche recognizes no external authority with the power to give laws, but the legislating authority here is integral to agency: it comes from the reflexive character of self-overcoming activity. The ‘necessary’ character of self-overcoming implies that the indeterminacy in oneself is what allows for self-formative agency, which in the achievement of ideals ensures self-destruction. Contingency is thereby implicated in ‘Life’ itself, and for this reason repays some acknowledgement.

II. Orientation

Contingency is a feature of human existence because we play a role in shaping our identities: what we are is neither simply determined nor invented in the absence of any constraint. The productive process that makes us what we are depends on maintaining a tension between human situatedness and human aspiration. Nietzsche insists, accordingly, that how one orients oneself to human contingency expresses ‘what one is’ in such a way that renders that orientation fundamental to ethical assessment in general. Contingency, that is, allows for a dimension of ethical assessment that transcends that of particular value commitments and instead
concerns the sustainability of one’s relation to one’s values and oneself. In this section I review the basic orientations to contingency that Nietzsche identifies and his assessments of them.\textsuperscript{15} Nietzsche levels a variety of criticisms against each of the orientations, but his basic position is that the orientation that I refer to as ‘tragicomic’ is superior to the others because, by sustaining of a gap between possibility and aspiration, it best contributes to the possibility of agency and thereby to what Nietzsche calls ‘Life.’

Nietzsche classifies possible orientations to human contingency in two main categories, each of which has two component sub-categories. One main category is the Prudential. The orientations in this category share an acknowledgement of contingency and hold that the proper response to the gap between possibility and aspiration is to derive an appropriate strategy so as to further one’s ends more effectively. Contingency, in this view, imparts the lesson that one cannot have, achieve, or be everything that one might want, so one should learn how best to adjust one’s means and aspirations so as to produce the optimal result.

There are two sub-categories of the Prudential, Realism and Idealism,\textsuperscript{16} that differ according to the priority they give to adjusting means or adjusting aspirations. In Realism, one should eliminate one’s aspirations and replace them with attainable ends. The acknowledgement of contingency provokes a change in ideals. Since the aspired ideal cannot be realized, it is not worth pursuing; instead one should restrict oneself to feasible pursuits. In Idealism, by contrast, one should identify the means to overcome contingency and close the gap between possibility and aspiration. In this case, the confrontation between circumstance and ideal only leads to a search for better and better ways to approach the ideal, despite the shortcoming of any available means.
Nietzsche frequently repudiates Idealism in favor of Realism, but never explains his position or even clarifies what he means by such a repudiation. His scattered remarks show, however, both that the terms revolve around human contingency and that Nietzsche’s concern lay in arriving at an appropriate orientation to it. There is a theoretical component to Nietzsche’s objection to Idealism: Nietzsche decries its ‘cowardice before reality … untruthfulness’ (EH CW 2). Nietzsche does not complain of ignorance of reality here, but rather of a kind of delusion or concealment. Idealism turns out to involve a recognition of contingency: Nietzsche emphasizes, in particular, the limits of beauty and moral enterprises, which each arise out of the consciousness of their opposite. But with idealism this recognition is accompanied by the conviction that contingency, at least in some limited domain, can be overcome (see TL 1; GM III:8, 19, 26; EH HH 1). The basic feature of Idealism, then, is that adherence to some ideal furnishes an unequivocal solution to problems of how to live or what makes life worthwhile. Nietzsche of course treats this as a theoretical mistake, of taking nature as amenable to solutions, but this theoretical flaw becomes objectionable on account of its practical implications. There are two ways in which Idealism ‘turns against Life’ (EH BT 2). One is that it does not work: one is more likely to get a better result with Realism. The deeper problem with Idealism, however, is that it forces a kind of inauthenticity, in which one is deluded about what one is. By insisting that contingency can be overcome and problems are solvable, Idealism invites so close an identification with one’s ideals that this interferes with self-understanding and agency. When the ideal is considered to fall within the realm of the achievable, there seems to be no point – indeed, it would be immoral – in distinguishing one’s own standpoint as separate from the ideal.

Realism, then, is at least by default the superior form of the Prudential. The Prudential is itself generally defective, however. Nietzsche of course does not offer a blanket
recommendation in favor of imprudence: some measure of prudence is needed to satisfy one’s ends at all, and certain circumstances that Nietzsche identifies make prudence imperative. But prudence is a ‘cold’ virtue: it typically involves self-detachment, stepping back from one’s ends and one’s situation so that one can calculate the best means of satisfying them more objectively. And for this reason Nietzsche suggests that prudence, when it takes the form of an orientation to contingency, is, in a sense, vacuous. Prudence, by itself, should offer no substantive value; it depends for its sense on there being already in place substantive ends and commitments which give direction to prudence.

Prudence can, nevertheless, give substantive direction, and this is where it becomes deeply problematic. Substantive vacuity is a familiar phenomenon in Nietzsche’s work: the willing of nothingness and nihilism are two examples. The Prudential as an orientation to contingency, and Realism in particular, similarly have a substantive form, in which one does not merely pursue one’s ends prudently, but adjusts one’s ends according to the demands of prudence. One could take from human contingency the lessons that what counts as important is mutable and that, since it is mutable, we should arrange what we care about so that we have the best likelihood of satisfaction. And this is what Nietzsche finds objectionable: that care should be structured by vacuity, however substantive this vacuity is.

In Nietzsche’s view, the Prudential represents a genuine but confused response to contingency: it elevates making the best of a bad situation to an existential level. One can see this by distinguishing two positions that could be called ‘Realism’ in the present context. On one hand, Realism could stand for an awareness of what is the case: that contingency obtains and thus no complete realization of our ideals or powers is possible, for example. On the other hand, Realism could stand for a practical commitment, to lower one’s sights so that one only adopts
attainable ends. The confusion that Nietzsche sees is that of either conflating these two sorts of realism or taking the former to compel the latter.\textsuperscript{20} The former kind of realism, the recognition of contingency, animates all of Nietzsche’s thinking. But this kind of realism leaves open the question of how to respond: it neither includes nor entails the concession to contingency that the second Realism represents. Nothing requires prudence, and for Nietzsche the continuing availability of even impossible ideals might be essential in making sense of one’s life.

The remaining main category is the Ironic. The orientations that fall under this category both involves responses to contingency in which one takes distance from oneself and one’s ideals: “irony” here refers to a stance in which one both maintains one’s commitments and at the same time sees them as possibly accidental or alterable and thus as separate from one’s identity. This orientation thus requires holding one’s personal integrity, although just as vulnerable to contingency, as separate from one’s commitments. Contingency, in this view, thus obviates a full identification of oneself with the basic commitments and purposes of one’s life. But it does not, however, compel adopting a revised purposiveness, as the allocation of purposes remains under first-person authority rather than simply abdicated to fate.

There are two subcategories of the Ironic, Despair and Tragicomedy, that differ according to the effect self-distance has on active engagement in one’s life. In Despair, the ironic self-distance is provided by the abandonment of any hope in realizing one’s aspirations. The recognition of contingency leads to giving up any belief in the efficacy of one’s actions; the self-distance is then compelled by reflection on the ultimate futility of all that one does. In Tragicomedy, by contrast, one maintains a sense of one’s contingency and the futility of ideals and nevertheless actively sustains one’s aspirations. This orientation requires an unusual degree of self-consciousness: here human agency is seen as so powerfully ineffectual (or self-
destructive) in confrontation with ideal hopes that there is something laughable about this condition. Ironic self-distance, on this orientation, enables one to maintain one’s commitments in spite of this recognition of contingency.

The Ironic is superior to the Prudential because it accommodates the processes needed to sustain agency. Contingency does not reveal itself, for Nietzsche, as a single phenomenon, but in a number of processes that shape and structure human experience. Nietzsche identifies processes, for example, in terms of ‘the great economy of the whole’ (EH ‘destiny’ 4; cf. NCW epilogue), ‘the necessity of error’ (BT VS 5), 21 ‘the pains of betrayal’ (HH I.629), ‘the ever new appearance of the teachers of the purpose of existence’ (GS 1), and ‘the value of having enemies’ (TI 5.3). In each of these processes, commitments become contentful through opposition and resistance. What might otherwise seem to be misfortune thus turns out, when seen from an appropriate distance, to be indispensable for ideals to be meaningful. The very costliness of our ideal commitments gives them significance, and thereby imparts to our activity some measure of distinction. Our activity takes its shape, Nietzsche suggests, by facing a tension between the actual and the ideal; 22 only in this way is our activity recognizable as such. We make sense of ourselves, in turn, through our activity.

The ironic orientations accommodate the dynamics of these processes: they acknowledge the constitutive role of opposition and failure in human existence and at the same time sustain ideals as at least potential candidates for commitment. 23 The self-separation of irony enables one to go forward in the face of contingency without trying, per impossibile, to change it. The prudential orientations, by contrast, oppose or minimize contingency, and thereby attempt to circumvent the processes of our self-constitution. Their proposed collapse of the actual and the ideal deprives these processes of the dynamic that makes them productive. Prudence is
accordingly vacuous. It supplants the productive processes with ones that rely on our agency already being firmly established. As an orientation to contingency it thus either contributes nothing to life or at most makes of life something as meaningful as a joke that has already been told over and over again.

Within the Ironic, the Tragicomic orientation is superior to Despair. This, I hope, does not require a lengthy explanation, but it is worth pointing out that Despair is still superior to the Prudential orientations: it represents a meaningful engagement with life, even if a frustrated or paradoxical one. Even Despair is not a complete abdication to contingency, since it presupposes firm commitments about what is important. In Despair, one sustains the integrity of one’s own standpoint, even without the hope of effecting anything important.

The ironic orientations are superior because they carry with them impossible hopes, and we need impossible hopes to sustain our agency. These hopes are needed not because they promise any chance of fulfillment, but because without them the gap between real and ideal, in which we live, closes down. Irony promises at best only partial, conditional successes, but is meaningful in a way that prudence cannot be.

III. Politics

The preceding discussion aimed to show that, for Nietzsche, an Ironic orientation to contingency is needed to sustain agency. The argument of the present section is that politics is not congenial to the Ironic and is therefore vacuous, in that it is not independently productive of the meanings that shape human identity. Modern politics must manifest a predominantly Prudential orientation and therefore serve as useful rather than as meaningful. This is of course
at least instrumentally valuable, but becomes problematic when mistaken for something more fundamental.

In Nietzsche’s view, modern politics must have a Prudential orientation and for this reason is vacuous. It matters little to him which one whether politics is Idealist or Realist: in either case, politics acquiesces to practical imperatives. Politics is the art of the possible, and as such favors feasibility over what is true or right. These latter norms are dispensable in the functioning of social organizations, and indeed any such normative commitment seems to be tenuous within the political sphere. Politics, then elides something of interest to Nietzsche: the values and commitments that play no useful role in public life. And Nietzsche sees modern politics as a ‘movement’-based effort to bring a diversity of people into enough consistency as to minimize conflict, thereby further separating politics from the potential for being interesting.

There are at least three basic features of modern politics that thus lead it to a Prudential orientation. One is its form of discursiveness: politics speaks the language of prudence. Irony, of course, has its discourse, too. One could have a public discourse about social life that was sardonic, resigned, qualified, fanciful, enigmatic, and cautious. But political discourse is at least supposed to be transparent. Of course it does not function in this way; it might not even be able to function in this way, if its prudential function clashes with its prudential content, promising prosperity, security, strength, and so on. Political discourse is also of course liable to manipulation. But even such manipulation depends on its primary role as an undistorted medium for communication. Politics makes discourse something functional, and thereby restricts its possibilities: since it provides a forum for common deliberation, it must be exhaustively comprehensible. Its meaningfulness is thereby limited to what can serve our partial ends instead of what makes us what we are.
Another feature of modern politics is its form of competitiveness. Competition per se is of course not objectionable for Nietzsche, but its political form is empty. Here we can contrast an older model of competition in which the struggle is primarily positional: the stakes in conflict are taken as significant, so what needs to be settled is who counts as the better. The ancient Greek *agon*, for example, in part constitutes the relevant value; competition is then desirable because it gives access to a kind of worth that would not otherwise exist. In political competition by contrast, we expect ideals to be abjured as part of the competition, and the result accordingly does not reveal position with respect to something significant, but is instead part of a process of policy determination. No one ever thinks that the winner of a political contest is better for having won – at most it shows that the winner is a better candidate, or simply received more votes (and maybe not even that). The process is not constituted in a way to reveal anything about merit, but to produce an acceptable outcome and thereby to put an end to conflict. Competition in its Prudential form solves a problem rather than presents an opportunity.

The feature of modern politics that perhaps most demands a prudential orientation, however, is its connection to the administration of public institutions. Since politics is, among other things, the means by which we settle on the management of some of the more influential operations of our shared existence, it comes to seem important that politics conduct itself along prudent lines. And because, in modern life, public institutions do have such prevalent and powerful effects, they tend to concern themselves with more urgent and more general needs, rather than with ‘higher’ things. Nietzsche is not claiming that they should do otherwise; one would hardly want one’s pension plan to be administered according to a tragic sense of life, let alone the basic institutions of society. But politics is burdened by this Prudential responsibility. Playing this role limits how it can be employed.
The implication that Nietzsche draws from the Prudential character of politics is that politics is itself meaningless and thus no has further role in shaping human identity. This is not to say that politics is unimportant, or unworthy of attention. Social life might only be possible if there are individuals who do take politics as their vocation, and invest it with meaning for their own lives. But even if our common social life is held together by this private vocation, Nietzsche suggests, there is nothing exemplary or especially virtuous about that. This private vocation, that is, has little if any bearing on others’ lives. The immense usefulness of politics and even its opportunities for heroism do not thereby give it any productiveness of the meanings that shape who we are, or even any pride of place in settling the significance of our other concerns. Politics, instead, appropriately depends on those other concerns, and so giving it primary importance would, in light of its Prudential character, represent a “diminishment” of ourselves in relation to contingency (BGE 203).

To clarify what the vacuity of politics involves, it is worth reviewing three claims that Nietzsche is not making. Nietzsche is not claiming that politics has no bearing on anything important. It would be foolish to think that anyone could pursue ends in indifference to the effects of political life, and Nietzsche would readily concede that politics can have a profound effect on things that matter (see, e.g., HH 2). The arrangement of institutions obviously has a profound effect not only on how effective individual pursuits are, but also on what things are pursued and even how people think about them. If nothing else, political arrangements affect material conditions, which in turn affect the ends that are possible and desirable. What Nietzsche denies is that there is any independent significance to be taken from the institutional arrangements. The effectiveness of politics, rather, is subordinate to the significance of social life.
Nietzsche does not even deny that politics can play an indirect role in the social phenomena that do have significance (see, e.g., *BGE* 61). For example, one can imagine both that institutional arrangements play a role in the cultivation of ressentiment and other reactive sentiments, and that it would be better to have a social life free from these sentiments. In this case, politics not only produces a particular effect, but it is also involved, through social interactions, in the shaping of the human soul. Nietzsche is certainly not committed to claiming either that the prevalence of ressentiment is unimportant, or that the organization of the political world does not bear on this. But he can claim here that the psychodynamics of self are of primary importance, and that the workings of political interactions with that psychodynamics is only derivatively so.

In identifying the vacuity of politics, Nietzsche is not even denying that politics is self-expressive (see, e.g., *BGE* 202). That is, the political institutions that we have or are capable of express something about who we are. One famous example of this is Nietzsche’s claim, ‘it would not be unthinkable for a society to have such a consciousness of power as to allow itself the noblest luxury that it could have – leaving those who harm it unpunished’ (*GM* II:10). In this case, a matter of public policy reveals something deep about the character of the society, or at least the character it aspires to have. This hypothetical society would then even have reasons, supported by practical necessity, to give expression to themselves through their institutions. For them it cannot be arbitrary how they treat violators of the public order, but rather it would be a matter of living in a way that is true to their own self-understanding. But social life rather than political institutions are primary here: the policy only matters in virtue of the social identity it expresses.
There are two options for trying to recuperate the significance of politics, but neither are promising. One is to concede that politics is Prudential but to insist that this could be reconciled with the Ironic. Politics, in this approach, becomes a means of reconciling two incompatible sides to one another: on one side there is conflict, self-subversion, and open-endedness, and on the other side the rational, mutual inclusiveness that is needed for there to be social order. Some dialogical or deliberative model of intersubjective dynamics then stands as the tertium quid that reconciles, or at least mediates between, these two sides. This remains a form of the Prudential, however: it promises a way to accommodate conflict and thereby provide a solution to the difficulties of social existence.

The other option is to abandon the Prudential altogether and insist on a purely Ironic – most likely tragic – politics. Here the difficulty is not merely to imagine a politics open to self-destruction, discursively enigmatic, that seeks human identity in public offices, or that can laugh at human failings and not try to fix them. All of that is conceivable. The problem here is that placing the burdens of the Ironic on our public life limits the Ironic. It has turned out, Nietzsche suggests, that the Ironic is far less productive when it is carried out at the level of public life than when public life supports private engagements with Irony.

This is why Nietzsche came to think of politics in light of its modern form, as concerned with the administration of institutions, rather than in its classical form, as concerned with the shape of the best human life. In his early essay ‘The Greek State,’ Nietzsche suggests that it was formerly possible to have a substantive politics, one that was deeply meaningful for all its participants. Politics then could be organized around promoting conflict and competition, so as to make it possible, in general and in various specific domains, for someone to be the best. But the cost of this was ‘the unconditional sacrifice of all other interests to the service of the states-
Tragic politics, that is, required a particular kind of social unanimity: it required everyone to identify the significance of their own lives with that of the polis. This is not only permanently unavailable to us now, but also undesirable. With tragic individualism, perhaps, or tragic diversity, the vacuous discourses about managing affairs and containing conflict make it possible for there to be more private, intense, ‘spiritual’ conflict. For these reasons, public life needs a prudent discourse which does not intrinsically matter but which is necessary for ironic possibilities. So Nietzsche’s aim is not to replace our currently vacuous discourse with a more meaningful one, but to try to separate off politics from the rest of life.

Nietzsche’s ‘anti-politics’ thus involves what we might call a ‘liberalism of strength’: one that is not based on metaphysical claims about universal human dignity or rationalist claims about the possibility of adopting a fully neutral procedure for adjudicating disputes. Nietzsche’s position functions as a form of liberalism, since the role of the state is restricted for the sake of free self-development. The point of this restriction, however, is not to acknowledge inherent human worth, but to promote conflict in a manner that is productive of the meanings that sustain our senses of self. Nietzsche insists that we need a split between the Ironic and the way our shared existence is administered, so that some conflicts can be irresolvable without this being an urgent matter.

According to Nietzsche’s anti-politics, then, we need to adopt a Prudential orientation to support our Ironic possibilities. What makes this anti-political is that it refuses both to envision a return to a tragic form of social existence and, in the absence of such a tragic social existence, to seek ourselves within the political. Anti-politics insists that either operation would misplace the importance of the political and thereby interfere with more productive possibilities for human life.
WORKS CITED


1 There are of course exceptions to this: commentators who have called attention to Nietzsche’s anti-political stance. See, for example, Kaufmann 1950/1968, Hunt 1985, Bergmann 1987, and Pippin 1999.

2 See, for example, Detwiler 1990, Brinton 1941, and Appel 1998.

3 See, for example, Warren 1991 and Hatab 1995.

4 See, for example, Honig 1993, Owen 1995, and Connolly 2002. One should of course be somewhat wary of my neat compartmentalization: most of the above cited works are more complex than I can represent here, and some of the most interesting work takes on clearly hybrid strategies, such as those of Strong 1972, Ansell Pearson 1994, and Conway 1997.

5 Since writing this paper, I have come across Shaw 2007, which among its many other merits, provides a nuanced account of Nietzsche’s attitude toward politics. Her account is much more subtle than the procedure I suggest here, and thus I cannot discuss it in the present context.

6 One way of illuminating this point is by a contrast with Aristotle, for whom pure actuality is possible (albeit not for human beings). Whereas for Nietzsche all powers are contingent upon determination, for Aristotle having a power is to realize, and thus exclude, such a determination.

7 I have discussed these issues in Guay 2002 and Guay 2006a.
I use this as a term of art: there are of course other meanings given to ‘contingency,’ with reference to Nietzsche and in general. Since my present enterprise is to examine the political implications of contingency, I am not concerned to present a very fine-grained account of contingency itself here; indeed, a suitably generalized account should be better at bringing out the implications. Nevertheless, one can find different accounts of contingency in Nietzsche in Havas 1995 and Small 2004. Havas of course cites Rorty 1989, which offers a different account of contingency from the one presented here. As far as I can tell, what Rorty means by ‘contingency’ is only the latter part of my account, namely that human beings are determined by causes that lie outside of individual volition. This, by itself, Nietzsche takes as obvious and trivial.

On the notion of a ‘fragility of goodness,’ see Nussbaum 1986.

On the notion of fate in Nietzsche, see Owen and Ridley 2005.

I have discussed these issues in Guay 2006b.

I discuss this in Guay 2007.

On the impossibility of prospective self-knowledge, see EH ‘clever’ 9.

I mean to claim something minimal here: not that the acknowledgement of contingency is necessary for self-formative agency, or even useful in some way, but merely that such an acknowledgement is valuable in understanding the phenomenon of ‘Life.’ Whether or not this understanding is itself valuable I leave as an open question here.

I leave aside here the position that all contingency is false or should be ignored, which Nietzsche discusses but does not take seriously.

These terms, of course, have meanings other than the ones operative here; the present usage covers only a part of even Nietzsche’s use of the term.
On idealism see, for example, TL 1, D Preface 1, BGE 210; on realism see GM III:12, TI 9.50.

On prudence, see, for example, UM 2.5, GS 3, GS 20, BGE 34, BGE 205, GM I:2, GM I:12.

There are even types of prudence, such as ‘manly prudence’ (Z II), the ‘prudence of free spirits’ (HH 291), or even ‘the great prudence’ (EH ‘clever’ 9) that seem to be generally praiseworthy, unlike prudence as a whole.

One can find examples of this sort of conflation, or unexplained move from the theoretical observation of the impossibility or unavailability of certain ideal hopes to the practical commitment to change one’s attitude to them, in Nussbaum 1986, Williams 2005, Reginster 2006, and Nussbaum 1994.

The necessity of error, in various forms, is a common theme in Nietzsche: also see, for example, EH ‘clever’; UM 2.3; HH 16, 29; WS 12, 350; D 148, 425; GS 107, 115, 121; BGE 24.

This is, incidentally, the main point of agreement between Nietzsche and Christianity, at least in its perhaps imaginary non-Pauline form. The one great invention of Jesus was the belief in unattainable ideals, such as perfected goodness, complete reconciliation of human and divine, fulfillment of all law and prophecy, and unconditional love, the practice of which is undiminished by this impossibility (cf. GS 377). In the pagan tragic picture by contrast, one does achieve the impossible, but is afterwards or concurrently destroyed. Even if Christianity never remained faithful to Jesus’ invention, for a moment at least it promoted the possibility of agency: one can see this, for example, in GM III:28.

Cf. White 2001 on whether Life can be loved despite its untrustworthiness.

See PTAG 2, UM 1.4, UM 2.5, UM 3.3, A pref.

See HH 438, HH 482.

See TI 8.1.
27 See PTAG 6, HH 170.

28 See HH 472, GS 368, BGE 261, TI 9.40; contrast with TI 5.3.

29 See HH 450, HH 474, D 179, BGE 241, TI 8.4.

30 Nietzsche highlights the demand upon politics to provide an organized response to urgent needs: see, for example, GS 56.

31 Cf. Nietzsche’s remarks on the meaning of ostracism at KSA I:788.

32 The allusion here is of course to BT AS 1.