

# NIETZSCHE'S ATTEMPT AT A SELF-CRITICISM: ART AND MORALITY IN *THE BIRTH OF TRAGEDY*

Daniel Came

## 1. Introduction

A general consensus exists among Nietzsche's interpreters that his retrospective assessments of his first published work, *The Birth of Tragedy*, are of little interpretive value.<sup>1</sup> For these critical statements, it is argued, which appear in the preface to the second edition of BT entitled 'Attempt at a Self-Criticism' and in the section on BT in *Ecce Homo*, do not serve as genuine self-criticism; rather, they are intended to project onto this early work views Nietzsche only later developed. My broad aim in this paper is to show that this accepted orthodoxy is mistaken, and that taking seriously Nietzsche's retrospective claims sheds considerable light on his main philosophical ambitions in BT. In particular, I want to substantiate Nietzsche's claim in ASC that BT's 'aestheticism'—summed up by the work's famous dictum that the world and existence can be justified "only as an aesthetic phenomenon" (BT 5)—is in some sense embedded in a deep hostility to "morality", hostility that is usually taken

---

<sup>1</sup> Among those who defend this consensual view are: Geuss, Raymond: Introduction. In: Nietzsche, Friedrich: *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*. Transl. Ronald Speirs. Cambridge 1999, p. xvii; Havas, Randall: *Nietzsche's Genealogy: Nihilism and the Will to Knowledge*. Ithaca 1995, p. 32; Pothen, Philip: *Nietzsche and the Fate of Art*. Aldershot 2002, pp. 13-14; Soll, Ivan: *Pessimism and the Tragic View of Life: Reconsiderations of Nietzsche's Birth of Tragedy*. In: *Reading Nietzsche*. Eds. Robert Solomon and Kathleen Higgins. New York, Oxford 1988, p. 104; Young, Julian: *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Art* Cambridge 1992, pp. 28-30. I cite Nietzsche's works according to the acronyms of their standard English translations. With the exception of WP, works by Nietzsche are cited from Nietzsche, Friedrich: *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Einzelbänden*. Eds. G. Colli and M. Montinari. Berlin 1988. Citations from WP are from Nietzsche, Friedrich: *The Will to Power*. Transl. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale. New York 1967. Citations from Nietzsche's *Nachlaß* (except those fragments which appear in WP) are taken from KSA and are referenced as follows: KSA, volume number, notebook number, note number (e.g., KSA 13, 14 [89]). Except for WP, translations of Nietzsche's works are my own.

by commentators to characterize only the works from *Human, All-Too-Human* onwards. Taking up this claim, I am going to argue, broadly, that BT presents a fundamental opposition between moral and aesthetic value, and a related plea for a rejection of moral categories in favour of an evaluative framework conceived in aesthetic terms. My aim is to explicate this opposition and to examine Nietzsche's reasons in general for advocating the substitution of the aesthetic for the moral. I argue that this opposition forms the basic framework of BT and clarifies: (i) Nietzsche's rejection in BT of Schopenhauer's pessimism; (ii) his critique of Socratic rationalism; (iii) the meaning of the work's central notion of an aesthetic justification of existence; and shows that (iv) there are good reasons for believing that even as early as BT Nietzsche was seeking an alternative to morality. It follows, I conclude, that the orthodox, threefold periodization of Nietzsche's thought which separates BT from his later works is fundamentally misconceived.<sup>2</sup>

## **2. The 'Attempt at a Self-Criticism'**

As has been amply documented, with respect to certain of Nietzsche's remarks in ASC the charge of wilful falsification is undoubtedly warranted. In particular, his claim that BT's silence about Christianity is evidence that even then he was an anti-Christian, and his attempts to underplay Schopenhauer's influence on the work cannot be sustained by a close reading of the text.<sup>3</sup> However, two of Nietzsche's more far-reaching and significant claims are, I believe, worthy of serious consideration. The

---

<sup>2</sup> According to this orthodox view, Nietzsche's thought is to be divided chronologically into three distinct developmental phases: an early period (1871-1878), a 'positivistic' period (1878-1881), and a 'mature' period (1881-1889).

<sup>3</sup> For criticisms of Nietzsche's claims regarding his attitude to Christianity in BT, see: Silk, M. and Stern, J.P.: *Nietzsche on Tragedy*. Cambridge 1981, pp. 121, 213, and 287; and for a detailed account of the respects in which Nietzsche relies on Schopenhauerian ideas in BT,

first is the claim that the central philosophical issue in the book is the problematic nature of existence, or what he calls in the late preface “the great question mark over the value of existence” (ASC 1). In BT, as throughout the later works, what calls into question the value of existence are “the hard, gruesome, evil and problematic aspects of existence” (ibid.). Nietzsche takes over this notion of the problematic aspects of existence from elements of Schopenhauer’s metaphysics—elements which can be provisionally defined as facets of ultimate reality that entail the universality and necessity of human suffering. It is the central task of BT to show how these problematic aspects can be “justified.” Thus Nietzsche asserts several times in the text that the world and human life can be “justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon” (BT 5).<sup>4</sup>

The second of Nietzsche’s claims that I want to suggest is on the mark is his positing of a deep continuity between BT and his later works on account of their shared hostility to morality, or “the *moral* interpretation and significance of existence” (ASC 5). Nietzsche claims that his “instinct turned *against* morality” in BT, a work whose “essential feature [...] betrays a spirit which will one day fight at any risk whatever the *moral* interpretation and significance of existence” (ibid.). In this connection, he points to an antithetical relation between moral and aesthetic value, which he implies lies at the heart of BT’s response to the problematic nature of existence. Having marked off Christianity as “the most prodigious elaboration of the moral theme to which humanity has ever been subjected” (ibid.), he claims that “there is no greater antithesis of the purely aesthetic exegesis and justification of the world, as taught in this book, than the Christian doctrine which is, and wants to be, *only*

---

see Soll: Pessimism and the Tragic View of Life: Reconsiderations of Nietzsche’s Birth of Tragedy, loc. cit., pp. 107-112.

<sup>4</sup> See also: BT 3; ASC 5

moral.” Accordingly, as “an advocate of life”, he says, “I conceived of a fundamentally opposed doctrine and counter-evaluation of life, a purely artistic one, an *anti-Christian* [i.e., anti-moral] one” (ibid.).

Since the moral interpretation of existence for Nietzsche is of a piece with “life’s nausea and disgust with life” (ibid.), its “antithesis”, the aesthetic view, must be a fundamentally affirmative mode of engagement with life. As a first approximation, then, BT’s art-morality opposition consists primarily in contrary evaluations of life, or in the distinction Nietzsche posits in the later works between “life-enhancement” and “life-denial.” What I want to do in this paper is examine this opposition and the basis on which Nietzsche came to think in terms of it. In so doing, I will be aiming to validate his critical perspective on BT in this respect, and also in respect of his claims regarding the centrality of the problematic nature of existence in the work. Principally, I want to show that these two concerns are internally related in the dialectical structure of BT. For Nietzsche’s antipathy to morality derives chiefly from his view concerning its deleterious effects on our beliefs about the value of existence. Indeed, life is rendered problematic largely because of the particular set of beliefs and attitudes that morality has inculcated in us. Most significantly, Nietzsche thinks that the dominance of moral categories over all other values makes it impossible for us to affirm life, because “confronted with morality, life *must* continually and inevitably be in the wrong, because life *is* something essentially amoral” (ASC 5). And it is this putative incompatibility between morality and life-affirmation, I will claim, that prompts BT’s rejection of moral values in favour of an aesthetic mode of evaluation.

### 3. Theodicy and *The Birth of Tragedy*

As I have just said, Nietzsche's retrospective assessment of BT as fundamentally concerned with the problematic nature of existence is an accurate representation of the work's abiding concern with justifying life. In this section, I want to suggest that it is instructive to frame this central concern of BT's in terms of a secularized conception of the Western theological tradition of theodicy—i.e., as an attempt to vindicate the value of life in the face of its problematic aspects.<sup>5</sup>

The task of traditional theodicy, as is well known, is that of trying by rational means to resolve the alleged logical inconsistency that is generated by the following pair of propositions:

- (1) Pain and suffering exist.
- (2) An omnipotent, omniscient, wholly benevolent being exists.

Given, the atheist argues, that (1) is manifestly true, and given that a being as described in (2) could prevent all pain and suffering if He chose, and given that such a being would always choose to do so, there cannot be a being of the kind posited. The task of theodicy is to resolve the supposed inconsistency, by arguing, for example, that such a being would *not* always choose to prevent pain and suffering, since He has a 'morally sufficient' reason for permitting some such instances. It

---

<sup>5</sup> Nietzsche himself suggests this link between his concerns in BT and theodicy when he refers to art as "providing the only satisfactory theodicy" (BT 24) for the Greeks. For alternative discussions of BT's relationship to theodicy, see: Goedert, Georges: *Nietzsches Antichrist als Überwindung der moralischen Weltordnung, Perspektiven der Philosophie*, 27 (2001), pp. 197-221; Geuss, Raymond: *Art and Theodicy*. In: Raymond Geuss: *Morality, Culture, and History: Essays on German Philosophy*. Cambridge 1999, pp. 105-110; Reibnitz, Barbara von: *Ein Kommentar zu Friedrich Nietzsches 'Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik'*. Stuttgart 1992; Watt, Alan: *Nietzsche's Theodicy*. In: *New Nietzsche Studies*, 4 (2001), pp. 45-54; Willers, Ulrich: *Friedrich Nietzsches antichristliche*

might be argued, for instance, that suffering makes possible certain ‘higher-order’ goods, like compassion and courage; or that the greater good of human freedom to choose between good and evil entails God’s inaction with respect to the evils of pain and suffering.

Nietzsche’s concern in BT with the value of existence may be seen as a proto-existentialist revision of the nature of this project of theodicy. According to this revision, the fundamental task of theodicy isn’t to vindicate theism, but to satisfy our basic need to regard the world and human life as commensurate with how we think they in some sense ‘ought to be’. Now a central aspect of Nietzsche’s religious psychology is the claim that God is a projection whose main function is to impart value and transcendent purpose to life. The problematic aspects of existence pose a threat principally to the fulfilment of this existential need. Accordingly, the basic psychological inducement for theodicy is the preservation of this sense of value and transcendent purpose, rather than the vindication of theism as such. Faith in a divine being, in other words, is dispensable for human beings, whereas (belief in) value and meaning are not; that is, belief in God has instrumental value only, as a means to our real ‘target’—endowing life with value and significance. Interpreted in this way, it makes sense for Nietzsche implicitly to characterize the real purpose of theodicy in terms of this existential need, and thereby to displace it from its traditional theological foundations. For while traditional theodicy represents its central task as that of reconciling (1) and (2), it is more fundamentally concerned with satisfying our basic need for reconciliation with the world.

So the fundamental task of theodicy, understood in this existential sense, is to show that the following propositions are consistent:

---

Christologie. Ein theologische Rekonstruktion. Innsbruck, Wien 1988, pp. 324f.

- (1') Pain and suffering exist.
- (2') Life is an appropriate object of affirmation.

It is important to get clear, however, as to exactly how Nietzsche understands (2'), that is, as to what he thinks is required for us to be able to make a value judgment about the world along these lines. As he writes in an unpublished note, the aim of existential theodicy is the affirmation of “the entirety of life, not denied and halved” (KSA 13, 14 [89]). In a similar vein, he writes in EH that what is at issue in BT is “affirmation [...] of all that is strange and questionable in existence. [...] Nothing that is can be subtracted, nothing is dispensable” (EH, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 2). But because existential theodicy aims at this kind of unrestricted affirmation, it is made considerably more problematic by Schopenhauer’s pessimism, which, roughly speaking, says that the irreconcilability of humans with life is built into the very metaphysical structure of the world, and which Nietzsche later claims “counts as ‘truth’” (WP 853) in BT. For whereas the theistic framework of traditional theodicy, on the whole, suppresses or at least fails fully to acknowledge the problematic aspects of existence, Nietzsche’s starting point in BT involves the full recognition of these putatively ineliminable and universal features of the world.

But Nietzsche’s claim that pessimism is presupposed in BT obscures an important respect in which he parts company with Schopenhauer on this matter. This is brought out well by a distinction drawn by Ivan Soll between what he calls the *descriptive* and *evaluative* aspects of pessimism.<sup>6</sup> According to Soll, the descriptive

---

<sup>6</sup> Soll: *Pessimism and the Tragic View of Life: Reconsiderations of Nietzsche’s Birth of Tragedy*, loc. cit., pp. 112-114.

aspect of pessimism—for ease of reference, I shall call this DP—consists of the claim that human existence is chiefly characterized by an ineluctable and all-pervasive suffering, and that life offers no real opportunity for lasting satisfaction or happiness; whereas the evaluative aspect of pessimism—call this EP—concerns the overall, negative evaluation of life, the judgment that existence itself is undesirable and lacks positive value, which is based on or evidentially supported by DP. I want to claim that in BT Nietzsche remains under the spell of DP, whilst trying in particular to find a way to resist EP.<sup>7</sup>

Soll's distinction identifies an important feature of Schopenhauer's pessimism, one that Schopenhauer failed to draw and was only implicitly maintained by Nietzsche. It requires slight modification, however, in respect of its explication of DP solely in terms of Schopenhauer's negative hedonistic thesis. Soll claims that "the pessimistic description of existence in hedonistic terms [is] the one that Nietzsche confronts in the doctrines of Schopenhauer, the ancient Greeks, and the Buddha."<sup>8</sup> But Schopenhauer arrives at EP by means of various *additional* descriptive claims that emerge from his account of the thing-in-itself as will, and which he takes further to detract from the value of existence.

According to Schopenhauer, the will is characterized by blind striving and chaotic and ceaseless flux. These attributes, however, appear to be incompatible with Schopenhauer's Kantian strictures regarding the merely phenomenal status of time. The notions of striving and flux entail mutability, which is a concept that is clearly in some sense bound up with that of time. But time is one of the subject-imposed

---

<sup>7</sup> Young's conflation of this distinction between DP and EP is what ultimately leads him to the false conclusion that BT is a "life-denying work" that endorses "a pessimistic assessment of human life." See Young: Nietzsche's Philosophy of Art, loc. cit., p. 48.

<sup>8</sup> Soll: Pessimism and the Tragic View of Life: Reconsiderations of Nietzsche's Birth of Tragedy, loc. cit., pp. 1988, pp. 113-114.



categories that have no application at the level of the thing-in-itself. Accordingly, within the noumenal realm there is no change. It is therefore difficult to see how Schopenhauer can coherently attribute the inherently temporal properties of striving and flux to the will.

Nonetheless, from this metaphysical extravagance Schopenhauer argues that certain consequences for the nature of phenomenal reality follow, and it is these, I want to suggest, that provide the full account of DP: (i) *Life is non-teleological*. Although apparently mutually exclusive properties, the blind striving and immutability of the will mean that “at every level of its appearance, [it] dispenses entirely with an ultimate goal and object.”<sup>9</sup> That is, the will has no external point or *telos* except more willing, and so there can be no real or objective purpose in life; (ii) *Life is essentially amoral*. The directionless striving of the will also means that it is entirely indifferent to moral concerns. Since the will has no ends, it cannot have any values, and so *a fortiori* it cannot have any moral values. It follows that nature, as the phenomenal manifestation of the will, is amoral; (iii) *Life is inherently marked by suffering*. The will’s striving enters the human sphere as an incessant desiring, and to desire, according to Schopenhauer, is *ipso facto* to suffer. The reasons for this are twofold. First, as manifestations of the will, all individuals must continually strive towards ends in order to exist. But conflicts of ends, and hence suffering, will inevitably occur. Second, all desire arises necessarily from a lack or deficiency, and to experience a lack is (to some degree) to suffer. This means that desire is a sufficient condition of suffering. And to cap it all, the will’s lack of teleology means

---

<sup>9</sup> Schopenhauer, Arthur: *The World as Will and Representation*. Transl. E.F.J. Payne. New York 1969, vol. I, p. 308.

that the suffering it perpetuates cannot have any teleological justification. So human individuals don't merely suffer—they suffer pointlessly.<sup>10</sup>

A complete understanding of DP, then, shows it to be a configuration of (i) - (iii), and so from now on when I refer to DP it is this conception that I have in mind rather than Soll's hedonistic version. Mapping this onto the schema I have used before, the task of existential theodicy becomes that of showing that the following propositions are consistent:

(1'') DP is true.

(2'') Life is an appropriate object of affirmation.

Put another way, Nietzsche's aim in BT is to show how one might consistently maintain that DP is true and that EP—the inference Schopenhauer draws from DP—is nevertheless false. So despite his rather uncritical acceptance in BT of the above Schopenhauerian metaphysical framework, it seems Nietzsche recognized that DP entails nothing about the value of existence, or about what our attitudinal response to the world should be. That is, he saw correctly that a factual or descriptive account of the world is logically unconnected with its negative evaluation. Affirmation is equally compatible with DP.<sup>11</sup>

Hence in this respect too, it seems, Nietzsche's attempts in ASC to characterize himself as in some sense antipodal to Schopenhauer are justified. For his central aim in BT is indeed to refute Schopenhauer's claim that the only possible response to DP is one of despair and resignation. Later on, I am going to argue that

---

<sup>10</sup> For a full critical discussion of Schopenhauer's arguments for pessimism, see Janaway, Christopher: Schopenhauer's Pessimism. In: The Cambridge Companion to Schopenhauer.

Nietzsche's strategy in this regard depends on radically changing the normative criteria in reference to which the value of existence is assessed. More specifically, he advocates a rejection of the traditional moral value standard in which he claims EP has its roots, and it is to this connection between morality and EP that I now turn.

#### **4. Schopenhauer's Pessimism and its Moral Presuppositions**

Within the above conceptual framework of existential theodicy, it makes sense to think of Schopenhauer's pessimism—i.e., DP and EP—as a kind of negative theodicy, according to which (1") is true but (2") is false. This seems to be the way Schopenhauer himself regarded his pessimism, at one stage parodying Leibniz's theodicy by claiming on the basis of his descriptive account that the actual world is "the worst of all possible worlds."<sup>12</sup> Seen in this light, Schopenhauerian pessimism amounts to a kind of blanket rejection of the possibility of an existential theodicy. In this section, I want to consider more closely how Schopenhauer reaches this position, and in particular to show how it matches up with Nietzsche's claims in ASC regarding BT's anti-moral stance. If Nietzsche's self-criticisms in this regard are valid, then it ought to be the case that Schopenhauer's negative theodicy—which it is the main business of BT to undercut—emerges in some way from moral presuppositions. My aim in this section is to show that this is indeed the case.

How, then, does Schopenhauer derive EP from DP? Or to put it slightly differently, what criteria of value does he employ to infer from DP that life is such an unmitigated disaster? Soll claims that Schopenhauer's inference "rests upon

---

Ed. C. Janaway. Cambridge 1999, pp. 318-343.

<sup>11</sup> Strictly speaking, a neutral evaluation of life is also compatible with DP.

<sup>12</sup> Schopenhauer: *The World as Will and Representation*, loc. cit., vol. II, p. 583.

hedonistic criteria of value.”<sup>13</sup> And as we have seen, Soll sees DP as conceived and formulated in purely hedonistic terms—that is, in terms of (iii) only. It is therefore easy to see why he thinks that Schopenhauer’s subsequent evaluation of life must be based on hedonistic criteria: it is because life contains more pain than pleasure that it has no positive value. But DP is *not* formulated only in hedonistic terms; it is formulated also in terms of the non-teleological and amoral nature of things—that is, in terms of (i) and (ii).

It might be said, however, that even if it is accepted that DP comprises these additional claims, that doesn’t count against Soll’s claim that it is via hedonistic criteria that Schopenhauer arrives at EP, since (i) and (ii) could be said to diminish the value of existence just because they bring about a kind of ‘existential’ pain that contributes to the overall prevalence of suffering in life. And it is in virtue of this ‘existential’ pain, along with the suffering caused by conflicts of human ends and willing, that Schopenhauer postulates EP. So the fact that Soll doesn’t fully enumerate DP needn’t undermine his claim that it is hedonistic criteria that Schopenhauer is here working with.

However, this overlooks a number of points that should be raised about Schopenhauer’s inference. First of all, it is unclear why the absence of teleology in life should be thought of as a cause of suffering. It might seem obvious, as it apparently does to Schopenhauer, that if you understand that life is pointless you are bound to be unhappy. But there is clearly no *a priori* or conceptual link between teleology and the human good. It is therefore worth digging a little deeper to see exactly what is at the root of Schopenhauer’s objections to life’s lack of teleology.

---

<sup>13</sup> Soll: *Pessimism and the Tragic View of Life: Reconsiderations of Nietzsche’s Birth of Tragedy*, loc. cit., p. 123.

The claim that life is non-teleological, as it seems to me, amounts to the claim that life or the cosmos isn't *rationaly* progressing towards any kind of final end or goal, that its progress isn't guided by an objective. Such an objective would make up the *reason* why things exist and why events or states of affairs obtain. Now it has been claimed (e.g., by Randall Havas) that the "demand for reasons" is understood by Nietzsche in BT as an essentially moral requirement, that the attitude of submission to reason, the attitude that everything should be rationally justified, is part of the moral interpretation of existence.<sup>14</sup> And the core idea here is that the demand for reasons, like morality, is in some sense essentially life-denying. If this interpretive claim is right (as I shall claim later it is, though for different reasons to Havas), Schopenhauer's implicit claim that teleology is a necessary condition of life-affirmation, at least so far as Nietzsche is concerned, must be a kind of metaphysical application of what is essentially a moral belief. (Of this idea more later in this section.)

Second, if Schopenhauer is working with purely hedonistic criteria, it is puzzling why he considers nature's amorality objectionable *in itself*, rather than simply in virtue of the suffering it generates. Schopenhauer sometimes isolates nature's amorality from his negative hedonistic claims, and this suggests that it isn't just the suffering it entails that bothers him about it. And this implies that he is not evaluating it (only) in hedonistic terms. Now it seems clear that nature's amorality can be deemed objectionable *in itself* only if it is considered intrinsically desirable that it comply with moral requirements, and this is clearly a moral demand.

The third and more general point is that, on Nietzsche's terms, to evaluate the world hedonistically is itself an aspect of the moral interpretation of existence. For in

---

<sup>14</sup> Havas: Nietzsche's Genealogy: Nihilism and the Will to Knowledge, loc. cit., p. 28.

Nietzsche's view, it is one of the central normative components of morality that, broadly speaking, pleasure is good and suffering is bad. One reason he has for thinking this is that morality encourages the cultivation of qualities and dispositions that reduce or limit suffering. And it does so, he thinks, in the interest of establishing "a universal green-pasture happiness on earth" (WP 957). But what, one might want to ask, is wrong with that? Nietzsche's answer seems to be that making happiness an end in this way will "soon make man ridiculous and contemptible" (BGE 225). And this, it seems, is because devotion to happiness is fundamentally motivated by fear and weakness. For the kind of happiness morality values is "security, absence of danger, comfort, the easy life [...] and it takes suffering itself to be something that must absolutely be abolished" (WP 957). What this shows, Nietzsche wants us to recognize, is that the driving force of at least some of morality's evaluations is an implicit hedonism. And what makes it a particularly insidious form of hedonism is that it discourages striving and therefore human excellence. Morality associates happiness above all with contentment and the satisfaction of material desires. As such, it implicitly teaches that to be in a state of desiring or willing—which are surely preconditions of human achievement—is a bad thing. So whilst Soll's account is clearly not incorrect insofar as it claims that hedonistic criteria *feature* in Schopenhauer's inference, it doesn't go far enough. In particular, it fails to recognize that for Nietzsche hedonistic criteria of value are more fundamentally moral criteria.

In view of these considerations, it should be clear that Schopenhauer's pessimism has deep foundations in this bipolar evaluative framework which condemns desire and idealizes contentment or satisfaction. We have already seen that it is partly the impossibility of attaining lasting satisfaction in life—"the penal

servitude of willing”<sup>15</sup>—that, for Schopenhauer, robs the world of at least some of its potential value. And he even remarks that denial of the will, through which one might achieve “true will-lessness [which] silences forever the craving of the will”, may itself be the “highest good”, “which alone is world-redeeming.”<sup>16</sup> In addition, it is largely because of the brief sojourn from desire to be found in aesthetic experience that he values art so highly: “aesthetic pleasure in the beautiful consists, to a large extent, in the fact that, when we enter that state of pure contemplation, we are raised for the moment above all willing, above all desires [...] we are, so to speak, rid of ourselves.”<sup>17</sup>

Now it wouldn't have furthered Nietzsche's friendship with Richard Wagner, who bought into Schopenhauer's philosophy wholesale, to draw attention in BT to these pernicious moral foundations of Schopenhauer's pessimism. But it is abundantly clear from Nietzsche's notebooks that he saw pessimism as an essentially moral phenomenon. In a fragment written just before BT's publication, he links up “German pessimism” with what he calls “rigid moralists [...] and the categorical imperative” (KSA 7, 9[85]). In a similar vein, he says: “our moral judgments are [...] a preparation for pessimism” (KSA 12, 2 [165]). And a little less cryptically, he also writes: “the pessimistic condemnation of life in Schopenhauer's work is a moral transfer of the herd's yardsticks to the realm of metaphysics” (KSA 12, 9 [84]). To focus on this last point, it seems clear that the yardsticks in question are specific normative components of Christian morality (or its secular forms). Most important among these for our purposes is the attachment by morality of substantive value to “those qualities [...] which serve to ease the existence of those who suffer” (BGE

---

<sup>15</sup> Schopenhauer: *The World as Will and Representation*, loc. cit., vol. I, p. 390.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 362.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 390.

260). I take Nietzsche's point here to be that morality equates goodness with *harmlessness*, that it esteems those qualities which are useful to the naturally weak, in the sense that the cultivation of such qualities in themselves and others gives them less to fear, and also in the sense that it allows them to redefine their own natural inferiority as in some sense meritorious. Conversely, it enables the weak to label the strong, at whose hands they suffer, and their defining characteristics, as reprehensible, thereby achieving what Nietzsche terms an "imaginary revenge" (GM I 10).

With this conception of goodness and, admittedly highly speculative, account of its murky psychological origins in place, Nietzsche's next claim is that this concept somehow gets projected on "to the realm of metaphysics." The general idea here, I think, is that a culture's internalization of its moral norms subliminally affects or informs the beliefs and attitudes of its members with respect to the world and reality in general. He claims, for instance, that the concept of a law of nature derives from the translation to the realm of metaphysics of the "democratic instincts of the modern soul" (BGE 22). Similarly, he suggests that the idea of "being" or "thing" is "merely a reflection of the belief in the ego"—something which he takes to be a "fiction" created by morality for the purpose of having an entity, that is both the bearer of moral qualities and the cause of actions, to which to attribute guilt and blame (TI, *The Four Great Errors*, 3).<sup>18</sup>

Now it is presumably by the same sort of process of internalization and projection that the herd's concept of goodness gets applied beyond its primary sphere of application—i.e., agents and their actions or traits of character—to the world more generally. Accordingly, the equating of goodness with harmlessness comes to

---

<sup>18</sup> Elsewhere, Nietzsche claims that the concept of the "ego" or "subject" is derived from "the grammatical custom that adds a doer to every deed" (WP 484; cf., BGE 17; GM I 13)—i.e., the distinction between the grammatical subject of a sentence and its predicate.



configure our ideas about how the world ‘ought to be.’ And this, of course, means that the world must itself be benign. But DP dictates that the world is deeply at odds with this conception of goodness: the metaphysical structure of the world is such that suffering is necessary and universal. Therefore, because the world makes us suffer, we pass judgment on “the whole”, and “infect [it] with ‘punishment’ and ‘guilt’” (TI, The Four Great Errors, 7), and thereby “wreak revenge” (Z, Of Redemption, 20) on existence itself.

Nietzsche evidently infers from this, with some plausibility, that morality generates certain unrealistic demands about how the world ‘ought to be.’ Indeed, there is, Nietzsche thinks, something profoundly hostile to life in morality, for morality opposes precisely those conditions which “fundamentally and essentially, must be present in the general economy of life” (BGE 23). But does Nietzsche offer us any good reasons for accepting this rather opaque notion of the projection of moral beliefs onto the metaphysical realm? Does he, that is, have an argument for it? It seems to me that he does and that it is based on his more general view that moralities are symptomatic of what Brian Leiter has called the “psycho-physical constitution”<sup>19</sup> of those who advocate them, that moralities are expressive of the conditions of the preservation and flourishing of types of human being. This, of course, is the basis of Nietzsche’s naturalized ethics, the central claim of which is that a person’s moral beliefs are a spin-off of his psycho-physical nature. Given that this is Nietzsche’s view, it makes sense for him to claim that metaphysical beliefs, no less than moral ones, serve the interests of a particular type of human being, and that both stem from a person’s psycho-physical nature. Hence he claims that “if one would explain how the most obscure metaphysical claims of a philosopher really came about, it is always

---

<sup>19</sup> Leiter, Brian: Nietzsche on Morality. London 2002, p. 8.

well (and wise) to ask first: at what morality does all this (does he) aim?" Relatedly, he claims that a philosopher's "morality bears decided and decisive testimony to *who he is*", and how "the innermost drives of his nature stand in relation to one another" (BGE 6). So Nietzsche's claims about the transfer of the "herd's yardsticks" to the metaphysical realm can be seen to follow from his broader view about the origin of beliefs and values *in general* as residing in naturalistic facts about those who subscribe to them.

### **5. Socratism as a Moral Theodicy**

According to the interpretation of BT I have been developing, Nietzsche's retrospective claim that his project in BT should be understood as part of his broader hostility to morality is legitimate. In order to substantiate this reading, it is necessary to show in what sense Nietzsche's two main targets in BT can reasonably be said to be rooted in morality. In the last section, I tried to do this with respect to Schopenhauer's pessimism. In this section, my aim is to make sense of the idea of Socratic rationalism as a form of morality.

Nietzsche uses the term "morality" and its cognates in a very broad sense. Indeed, "morality" often seems to pick out anything that, for him, has life-denying effects. The term's extension would therefore encompass Christianity, Buddhism, Platonism, and Romanticism, as well as most of the philosophical tradition. It might, then, be reasonable to think that Nietzsche has so vastly extended the meaning of the term that it bears little or no connection with our contemporary conception of the specifically moral. In a fairly straightforward sense, however, the Socratic emphasis on rational justification could be said to be moral, or at any rate quasi-moral, to the extent that it serves as a normative criterion for the evaluation of beliefs. Thus we

speak of the ‘ethics of belief’, by which we mean something like an ethico-epistemic principle used to evaluate beliefs in ways similar to the evaluation of actions by ordinary moral norms: it is *wrong* at all times and places for anyone to believe anything without sufficient evidence. Second, such emphasis might be said to be moral in the sense that it reflects a need to subordinate one’s beliefs to some kind of external authority, and this need is part of a broader psychological structure that is in some sense essential to morality. This could be fleshed out a bit in terms of Nietzsche’s view of one aspect of the “herd mentality” as the need to privilege publicly shared norms and conventions in the interest of, among other things, divesting oneself of the burden of personal responsibility. The demand for rational justification could then be seen as a symptom of the herd mentality insofar as it expects us to think in a way that is based on publicly shared rules and evidence that is accessible to all.

Havas offers a third reason why it makes sense to think of Socratism as a form of morality. According to Havas, Nietzsche sees the Socratic demand for reasons as essentially life-denying because it seeks to understand and therefore justify life in terms of “another life that is somehow better (more stable, more worthy) than this one.”<sup>20</sup> I take Havas’s point to be that seeking to understand life in terms of another, better life is what fundamentally defines morality for Nietzsche. And it is on the basis of this essentialist account of morality that Nietzsche is able throughout his writings to construe what are ostensibly significantly different belief systems (e.g., science, Christianity, Platonism, etc.) as all just different species of morality.

This interpretive claim seems to me to be broadly correct, though one might query Havas’s supposition that the desire to posit a better life is what *essentially*

---

<sup>20</sup> Havas: Nietzsche’s Genealogy: Nihilism and the Will to Knowledge, loc. cit., p. 32.

defines Socratism as life-denying and hence as a form of morality. For Socratism is also hostile to the instincts—an attitude which for the later Nietzsche is equally pivotal to his hostility to morality. Socrates rejects tragedy because it is created “only by instinct.” And with this phrase, Nietzsche writes, “we touch upon the heart and core of the Socratic tendency” (BT 13).

But there is a much more straightforward sense in which Socratism can be seen as a form of morality, and one which bears more directly on Nietzsche’s overall project in BT. This concerns what he sees as the motivating rationale or “vocation” (*Bestimmung* [BT 15]) of Socratic moral theory: to provide an existential theodicy. At its most basic level, that is, Socratism, like art and religion attempts to meet our basic need for reconciliation with the world. And like morality, it aims to do this by “eliminating suffering” (BT 14), thereby instigating “the earthly happiness of all” (BT 18). For guided by the belief that “knowledge can heal all ills” (BT 17), the Socratic inquirer aims to “correct life” (BT 15). But it is not every kind of knowledge that has this capacity; rather, it is specifically *moral* knowledge, since there is, Socratism claims, a “necessary and visible connection between virtue and knowledge” (BT 14), and “he who is virtuous is happy” (*ibid.*). This seems to amount to an identity claim about virtue and happiness, and hence also the claim that virtue is necessary and sufficient for happiness. It follows that Socratism conceives of the good life purely in terms of the acquisition and exercise of virtue, and so it is only by being moral that suffering can be eliminated and “the eternal wound of existence” be “healed” (BT 18).

This all starts to look more overtly like a theodicy at the point at which Socratism makes the claim that the person in possession of moral knowledge cannot be harmed. If we take this extraordinary claim literally, it seems to imply that the

problematic aspects of existence can have no negative effects on the happiness or well being of the virtuous person, even to the extent that being tortured isn't bad for her (except perhaps insofar as that damages her prospects of virtuous activity). Indeed, since Socrates himself had been "liberated" by "knowledge" (BT 15), he was "without any natural fear of death" (BT 13), and so went to his execution "with the calm with which, according to Plato's description, he leaves the Symposium at dawn" (ibid.). And this, Nietzsche concludes, clearly points to "the emblem" that stands above Socratism's "entrance gate" which "reminds all of its purpose"—"to make existence appear [...] justified" (BT 15).

In addition, this truth-seeking project apparently endows the life of the Socratic inquirer with *purpose*, and this causes her to take "delight" (ibid.) in existence: "Like the artist, theoretical man takes an infinite delight in everything that exists, and, like him, he is shielded by that delight from the practical ethics of pessimism" (ibid.). So Socratism facilitates a love of life, in that it confines the inquirer within a realm of soluble problems, "from which he can cheerfully say to life: 'I want you, you are worth knowing'" (ibid.). That truth seeking endows purpose, though, isn't, of course, a claim that Socratism explicitly makes. Nor, presumably, would the Socratic inquirer accept it as an identification of the underlying motivation for his intellectualism. Socratism conceives of its activity as motivated *only* by a disinterested love of truth. The Socratic inquirer doesn't consciously reason: 'How delightful it is to seek the truth, therefore I love existence'. Socratism isn't justified on such pragmatist grounds; rather, it is justified on objectivist grounds—that is, in terms of the intrinsic value of truth. For the Socratic

inquirer, truth has, to use John Mackie's phrase, "to-be-pursuedness"<sup>21</sup> somehow built into it.

Now it is because Socratism conceives of its project in this way that Nietzsche says that when "Lessing, the most honest of theoretical men" came close to admitting that he valued the pursuit of truth more than truth itself, thereby revealing "the fundamental secret of science", he aroused the "astonishment and irritation of the scientifically minded" (BT 15). But if Socratism is concerned more with truth-seeking than with truth, it seems to follow that the Socratic theodicy is in an important sense dependent on self-deception and illusion, since in order to engage in the Socratic project and reap its life-justifying benefits, it is necessary to conceal from oneself one's basic motivation for entering into that project in the first place. And it is partly for this reason, as I shall now argue, that Nietzsche thinks Socratism fails to provide a fully satisfactory theodicy.

## **6. Why the Socratic Theodicy Fails**

The significance of the adverbial 'only' in Nietzsche's claim that existence is eternally justified "only as an *aesthetic phenomenon*" is clearly to exclude the possibility of a non-aesthetic theodicy. Because the only non-aesthetic theodicy that BT speaks of is Socratism, we should read this statement as specifically ruling out a moral justification of existence along the lines just sketched. Accordingly, the statement conceals two, inter-related claims. First, there is the positive thesis that

- (1) Existence is eternally justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon.

---

<sup>21</sup> Mackie, John: *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. London 1990, p. 40. N.B. Mackie uses this expression not in reference to truth but to describe a property he believes objective values would have if they existed.

Second, there is the negative corollary of this, of which we can distinguish two possible formulations. The weaker version is

- (2) Existence can be justified by Socratism, but only *temporarily*.

The stronger version is

- (3) Existence can *never* be justified by Socratism.

The standard interpretation of Nietzsche's position vis-à-vis Socratism allies him with (3). For example, Werner Dannhauser summarizes Nietzsche's basic position as that "all comprehensive responses to man's situation which preserve life can be called 'art'; different responses lead to different forms of existence",<sup>22</sup> which presumably are supposed to be non-life preserving. In fact, however, Nietzsche openly sanctions the possibility of a Socratic theodicy.<sup>23</sup> For whilst he thinks that Socratism's claims regarding the life-justifying effects of moral knowledge are self-evidently false, he accepts that as an intellectual project Socratism succeeds in endowing purpose. Socratic culture, he says, gives "theoretical man" the purpose of understanding the empirical world, and this causes him to take "delight" in existence—delight which protects him from the underlying truth of DP (and the suicidal implications of knowing it). Indeed, at one stage it even sounds as if Nietzsche rates the life-redeeming potential of Socratism higher than that of art: "No one who has

---

<sup>22</sup> Dannhauser, Werner: Nietzsche's View of Socrates. Ithaca 1974, p. 121.

experienced the delight of Socratic knowledge [...] will ever again find a stimulus to existence more compelling” (ibid.). This clearly suggests that in addition to thinking that

- (4) Existence can be justified as an aesthetic phenomenon.

Nietzsche holds that

- (5) Existence can be justified as a non-aesthetic phenomenon.

Accordingly, the standard interpretation is false—that is, Nietzsche fails to show that Socratism with its optimistic promises about morality cannot justify life. The only hope of salvaging (1), it seems, is to focus on the possibility of there being an *eternal* aesthetic justification that contrasts with the *temporary* Socratic one.

Socratism fails to provide an *eternal* justification for two reasons. First, its truth-seeking project ultimately fails. This is reflected in two aspects of Socrates’ life that Nietzsche identifies: Socrates’ claim that “he knew *nothing*” (BT 13) and his eventual “need for art”, which manifests itself in his desire to “*practise music*” (BT 15). I take it that these aspects of Socrates’ life are intended to symbolize how Socratism eventually undermines itself. Socratism fails (he knows nothing), but this doesn’t restrain his need for reconciliation with the world. This re-emerges in his desire for art, which signifies Socrates’ tacit recognition that art alone is capable of fully justifying existence.

---

<sup>23</sup> One exception to this prevailing critical tendency is Young who concedes that “up to a point [Socratism] has value as an antidote to pessimism” (Young: Nietzsche’s Philosophy of Art, loc. cit., p. 40).



Second, Socratism is based on what Nietzsche takes to be a “profound *illusion*” (BT 15), namely “the unshakeable belief that rational thought, guided by causality, can penetrate to the depths of being and even of correcting being” (ibid). That this claim is false has been shown, Nietzsche believes, by “the extraordinary courage and wisdom of Kant and Schopenhauer” (BT 18). But illusion is what Socratism most explicitly opposes. This means that the Socratic justification must be unreflective as regards its basic practice—that is, it must suppress its essentially illusory nature. But Socratism generates a demand for reasons. Ultimately, therefore, the Socratic inquirer will need an argument or rational explanation as to why her life is justified. Such an individual would find inadequate the idea that her life is justified unreflectively. It follows that the *ideally* Socratic individual could not accept the true account of why her life is justified. That is, the unreflective nature of the Socratic justification would be inherently unsatisfactory to her. Accordingly, the Socratic justification can only work if one doesn’t question *how* it works. But this, of course, goes against the Socratic demand for reasons and so is ultimately untenable. The nature of the Socratic tendency entails that eventually it will call into question its own mode of justification. As a theodicy, therefore, Socratism is inherently unstable and finally self-defeating: it cannot survive the realization of its true nature.

So the Socratic theodicy is temporary because it is committed to a true apprehension of the world, which means that it will ultimately uncover the falsehood of its basic presuppositions. Furthermore, far from “correcting life”, Nietzsche thinks that Socratism actually culminates in Schopenhauer’s pessimism. As Raymond Geuss observes, “the history of philosophy [...] shows a natural development from Socrates to the insight attained in [...] Schopenhauer”,<sup>24</sup> by which he means that the project of

---

<sup>24</sup> Geuss: Introduction, loc. cit., p. xxii.

rationally investigating the world exhibits a kind of quasi-teleological progression towards pessimism. And when rational thought arrives at this insight, “a new form of knowledge breaks through, *tragic knowledge*” (BT 15). But Socratism attains this knowledge without supplying any means of rendering it bearable. That is, it fails to provide any way to cope with DP. As such, Socratism leads to EP—i.e., to “tragic resignation” (BT 15) and a “Buddhistic negation of the will” (BT 7).

The unreflective Socratic justification, then, only works if one doesn’t question too deeply one’s reasons for being well disposed towards life. But given that Socratism’s professed aim is to be liberated from illusion, its theodicy is vulnerable to its own methodology. Because Socratism cannot justify life for *ideally* Socratic individuals, it doesn’t have eternal potential as a theodicy.

But the instability of Socratism doesn’t explain why it is “only as an aesthetic phenomenon” that life is “eternally justified.” In any event, the tragic theodicy seems to have been equally unstable: it fell at the hands of Socratism. And as an historical phenomenon, Socratism proved to be very stable indeed—it outlasted the tragic culture of the Greeks by more than two millennia. How, then, can Nietzsche reasonably claim that the aesthetic justification has eternal potential? To answer this question we must turn to Nietzsche’s account of tragedy and its basis in an extra-moral mode of engagement with life.

### **7. Amoralism and the Aesthetic View of Life**

I have suggested that it is fruitful to think of Nietzsche’s project in BT as an attempt to show how one might consistently endorse the following propositions:

(1”) DP is true.

(2'') Life is an appropriate object of affirmation.

And I have claimed that Schopenhauer, in effect, asserts (1'') but denies (2''), whereas Socratism denies (1'') but asserts (2''). Nietzsche holds both responses to the project of existential theodicy to issue from the general evaluative framework of morality. More to the point, any approach to existential theodicy that operates within this framework is incapable of affirming (1'') and (2''). This is because morality devalues those aspects of the world that make up DP. Confronted with these aspects, morality must either deny DP (as Socrates does) or condemn life (as Schopenhauer does). Nietzsche's implicit and apparently reasonable conclusion from this is that a successful theodicy depends on a rejection of the traditional moral perspective in favour of an alternative non-moral value standard. He claims to find such a value standard in the Greeks, and it is to them that we must turn, he thinks, in order successfully to discharge the whole project of existential theodicy.

According to Nietzsche, the culture that produced the tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles had found a way of affirming both (1'') and (2''). It was able to do this, he claims, because its dominant evaluative categories weren't moral but aesthetic. Because of this, the Greeks were able to affirm the world as they found it, even its problematic aspects. That is, they were able to affirm "without reservation [...] all that is strange and questionable in existence." This is because their art, and especially their tragedy, glorified and exalted the problematic aspects of existence. And in a passage that strikingly prefigures his later slogan "beyond good and evil", Nietzsche tells us that the Greeks were able to affirm life in this way because in their art "everything that exists has been deified, regardless of whether it is good or evil" (BT 3). Relatedly, he warns against looking "for signs of moral loftiness" in tragedy, for

“nothing here reminds us of asceticism (*Askese*), of spirituality and duty, everything here speaks only of overflowing, indeed jubilant existence” (ibid.). It seems clear, therefore, that at least part of the reason why the Greeks were able to produce a successful theodicy was that they approached existence from a non-moral perspective.

Nietzsche alludes to this amorality of the Greeks in ASC when he claims that the aesthetic theodicy put forward in BT rests on conceiving of the Schopenhauerian will as “an entirely reckless and amoral-artist god” (ASC 5). That this isn’t a case of disingenuous self-criticism is attested by two important aspects of the text: first, Nietzsche’s critique of what he calls the “moral interpretation of tragedy” (BT 22); and second, his use of the Heraclitean image of the amoral “playing Child” (BT 24) to represent the metaphysics on which the work is ostensibly based.<sup>25</sup>

In respect of the first of these aspects of the text, Nietzsche claims that aestheticians since Plato and Aristotle have interpreted the true essence of tragedy “as the triumph of a universal moral order” (BT 22). Against this, Nietzsche argues that despite dealing with “subjects of the most intense pathos” tragedy is “no more than aesthetic play” (ibid.). His point here seems to be that to apply moral predicates to art in general is to commit a kind of category mistake—for “the first demand of art must be for purity in its own realm” (BT 24). If, on the other hand, we engage with tragedy in order “to seek the kind of delight that is peculiar to [...] the purely aesthetic sphere” (ibid.), we will *not* be elevated by “the victory of good and noble principles [...] in the name of a moral view of the world” (BT 22); rather, we will see that “the moral world [...] has been overthrown” and replaced by a “higher magical circle of effects” (BT 9)—that is, the moral interpretation of existence has been supplanted by

a purely “aesthetic exegesis” of the world. (I will examine the content of this aesthetic exegesis in a moment.)

Turning now to the second of the above aspects of the text, in a note from the late 1880s, Nietzsche writes: “Schopenhauer’s interpretation of the ‘in-itself’ as will was an essential step, but he did not know how to deify this will” (KSA 12, 9[42]). In BT, Nietzsche attempts to do just this by conceiving of the will as he claims the tragic Greeks did as like “a playing Child that places stones here and there, and builds sandcastles only to destroy them again” (BT 24). The idea seems to be that the world and our individual lives are just the cycle of this process of creation and destruction. But as Nietzsche writes in 1871 in ‘Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks’, these desires are not at any significant level informed by rational or moral principles; rather, the Child’s activity is just a form of “play” (*Spiel*) which is “not to be seen as dramatic (*pathetisch*), and above all not to be taken as moral” (PTG 7). Crucially, therefore, the Child is not a moral agent; it has no understanding of or concern for moral principles: it is, to use Nietzsche’s own later phrase, “beyond good and evil.” And the inference we are to draw from this, it seems, is that the Child is profoundly ‘innocent’ and hence ‘blameless’: moral categories simply do not apply to it. The Child creates and destroys “in innocence” (PTG 7), and by conceiving of reality in this way, the Greeks had no basis on which to condemn existence. For it would make no sense to “demand” an “ethic” (*ibid.*) or moral justification from the actions of what is an essentially non-moral phenomenon.

The fact that, for Nietzsche, the Greeks saw reality in these terms adequately explains, I think, why in his account the problematic aspects of existence didn’t lead the Greeks to *condemn* life. But it doesn’t give a reason for his claim that they were

---

<sup>25</sup> Heraclitus, Fragment 52. In: *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus: An Edition of the*

able to *affirm* life. In particular, it fails to explain how the Greeks came to embrace the problematic aspects of existence. For Nietzsche's point isn't simply that the world was justified for the Greeks *in spite of* its problematic aspects; it is, rather, that they saw life as good precisely *because of* its problematic aspects. That is, far from ruling out life-affirmation for the Greeks, DP actually "ends in a theodicy, [...] but for the very reasons that formerly led one to deny [the world]" (WP 1019).

To understand this radical and *prima facie* implausible claim, we need to look at the significance of the problematic aspects of existence for the Child. Nietzsche clearly states that, from the perspective of the Child, these features of the world are analogous to "musical dissonances" (BT 24). It is "music in general", he says, that can illustrate "what is meant by the justification of the world as an aesthetic phenomenon." For the "pleasure engendered by the tragic myth comes from the same native soil as our pleasurable sensation of dissonance in music" (ibid.). So, since the problematic aspects of existence are, from the Child's viewpoint, analogous to musical dissonances, it follows that, as in music, these dissonances can be pleasurable, and hence justified.

Nietzsche's use of the notion of dissonance invites two questions: first, to what kind of pleasure does the dissonance give rise? And second, what is the object of the pleasure associated with the dissonance? As to the first question, Nietzsche conceives of the kind of pleasure at issue as having a twofold phenomenology, an affective state involving two hedonic reactions of opposite values. For tragic pleasure is an ambiguous mix of pain and pleasure, a "pleasure [one] perceives even in pain" (BT 24). Unfortunately, Nietzsche doesn't explicate this notion to any significant extent, but it seems likely that the emotion's negative component consists in

---

Fragments with Translation and Commentary. Ed. Charles Kahn. Cambridge 1979.

something like an unpleasant awareness of the threatening nature of the problematic aspects of existence, its positive component a feeling of elevation or empowerment in the ability to endure this awareness. The valorization of a more conventional kind of pleasure would entail Nietzsche's remaining entangled with a central normative component of morality, namely its putative hedonism. In that case, his proposed theodicy would obviously be inconsistent with his rejection of the moral interpretation of existence. But clearly there are significant qualitative differences between tragic pleasure and the worldly contentment valued by morality that save Nietzsche from such contradiction. In any case, Nietzsche doesn't object to pleasure as such; rather, he objects to the life-denying pleasure valued by morality, not only because it inhibits striving and therefore human excellence, but also because it can exist only at the exclusion of suffering, in the sense that the absence of suffering is constitutive of such pleasure, and to deny suffering is, given its ineliminability, effectively to deny life. By contrast, tragic pleasure is said to be the "highest state of affirmation of existence": it is a mode of affirmation that does not seek to exclude even the "highest degree of pain" (WP 853).

In respect of the second question, there are, it seems to me, two possible objects of the pleasure taken in dissonance: the pleasure could be taken in the dissonance itself, or it could be taken in something to which the dissonance is in some way related. If it is of the first kind, then the experience is pleasing in itself—that is, it is a pleasure taken *in* dissonance. On the second view, the experience isn't intrinsically pleasurable; rather, it is causally linked to an experience of something that *is*. It might be suggested, for instance, that dissonance causes the resolution that follows to sound more agreeable, in the way that sweet flavours can be more pleasurable after bitter ones.

It seems to me that Nietzsche's position is ambiguous between these two possible candidates. His reference in BT to the "pleasurable sensation *of* dissonance" (emphasis added) suggests that he thinks of the pleasure associated with dissonance along the lines of the first view. But in a contemporaneous note he seems to endorse the second view: "one thinks of the reality of dissonance in opposition to the ideality of consonance. Pain is therefore productive: it produces the related and opposed colours [*verwandte Gegenfarbe*] of beauty" (KSA 7, 7[116]). Here the ugly dissonances of life are pleasing only because they provide the contrast necessary for the existence of beauty that *is* inherently pleasing.

On balance, however, I think that there are at least three reasons for reading BT in terms of the initial view. First, the term 'dissonance' for Nietzsche refers to the aesthetic significance of the problematic aspects of existence, and these are held to be necessary and ineradicable features of existence. This means that they are dissonances which *can* receive no resolution. Second, the first view coheres, in a way that the second does not, with Nietzsche's claim that it is one of the hallmarks of Euripidean tragedy that, under the pernicious influence of Socratism, it "looked for an earthly resolution of the tragic dissonance" (BT 17). And it is for this reason (among others) that Euripidean drama, for Nietzsche, is denied final tragic status. This suggests that one of the chief merits of Aeschylean-Sophoclean tragedy is that its dissonance is left unresolved. Hence, the pleasure associated with the dissonance present in Aeschylean-Sophoclean tragedy must be of the first kind—i.e., pleasure taken in the dissonance itself, not its resolution. The third reason is that the first view is implied by BT's polemical intent of portraying Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerke* as the modern analogue of Aeschylean-Sophoclean tragedy. Wagner's musical style made much use of unresolved dissonance. Hence, for instance, the Prelude to *Tristan* is constructed



around the famous ‘Tristan chord’ that controls a suspension over an A minor tonic which lasts for more than fourteen minutes! Given Nietzsche’s interest in positing a structural symmetry between tragedy and Wagner’s music, it seems likely that he would have conceived of the dissonance of tragedy on this Wagnerian model.

According to Julian Young, this aesthetic theodicy fails because “the only being to whom the life lived by human beings is said to have any kind of value is a nonhuman, external spectator”—namely, the Child.<sup>26</sup> I take the point of the objection to be that tragedy doesn’t provide an existential theodicy because it fails to show that life is an appropriate object of affirmation *for us*. That is, if human life is justified because it is a source of pleasure only for an external spectator, then it cannot be an effective means by which *we* can be reconciled with *our* existence. For it doesn’t follow from the fact that the world presents an aesthetically pleasing spectacle to an external spectator, that *we* will find *our* lives worth living. As Young says: “there is no suggestion [in BT] that humans find or can find their life to be pleasurable or justified. To suggest otherwise would be to suggest that because a concentration camp “justifies” itself to its sadistic [...] commandant [...] so too must the inmates find it justified.”<sup>27</sup>

One possible line of defence against Young’s objection would be to say that the world might come to be justified *for us* to the extent that we can acknowledge that the Child’s *external* view of the world has greater validity than our own *internal* view. The Child represents the metaphysical reality of the world and so exists outside of the mind imposed categories of space and time. It could be said therefore that it views the world *sub specie aeternitatis*, and hence that its view is a reflection of what is *really* the case. Our finite human perspective, by contrast, is restricted to or

---

<sup>26</sup> Young: Nietzsche’s Philosophy of Art, loc. cit., p. 53.

dependent on (to varying degrees) the illusory spatio-temporal portions of reality which we inhabit. This means that the external view of the Child is epistemically privileged as the complete conception of how things actually are. It seems plausible, to the extent that I can realize it, that I will find some “metaphysical comfort” (BT 7) in the knowledge that, objectively speaking, the world has value. The Child’s evaluation of the world is based on a comprehension of the whole, and although this isn’t how things appear to me as a spatio-temporally bound, suffering human individual, my plight should be significantly lessened by the knowledge that it is based on a false view of the world, owing to the egocentric distortion of my internal perspective.

The worry remains, however, that this “metaphysical comfort” will not be enough for us to regard life as worth living. What still seems to be missing from the theodicy is an account of how we can come to appreciate that life is good from *our own human perspective*. Geuss has suggested an alternative way of reading the significance of the Child that effectively sidesteps Young’s objection.<sup>28</sup> According to Geuss, since the Child and its activity is the metaphysical reality of which we are the appearance, it should be possible for us to see the world as the Child does, to share the Child’s viewpoint and even its “self-validating” pleasure.<sup>29</sup> For the Child, everything in the world is, so to speak, ‘in order’, since every aspect of the world is the result of the Child’s carrying out decisions based on its own aesthetic predilections. And given our identity with the Child and potential to share its pleasure, it should be possible for the world to seem good to us as well. So the theodicy provided by tragedy turns on its enabling us, albeit briefly, to adopt the

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>28</sup> Geuss: Art and Theodicy, loc. cit.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 108.

Child's perspective and thereby to see *for ourselves* that the world is an aesthetically pleasing spectacle, and on this basis to adopt an attitude of affirmation towards the world and our lives.

This is clearly an improvement on Young's interpretation, since it makes room for the notion, which is surely right, that Nietzsche's main concern in BT was justification from *our* perspective. And Geuss's reasoning on this point seems sound: if we are identical with the Child, then it seems that it must at least be possible for us to partake in its psychological states. As an interpretive claim about Nietzsche, however, Geuss's account is ultimately unsustainable, since it results in attributing to Nietzsche a metaphysics that is not only highly speculative but also incoherent in two respects. The first incoherence arises in connection with the sense in which we are supposed to be "identical" with the Child. In a metaphysical sense, the Child is the underlying reality of which we are a mere appearance, and it is on the basis of this "identity" that we are able to adopt the Child's view. But in another sense, that identification is clearly illusory, since we are *not* identical with the Child, we are one of the ephemeral appearances which it creates and later wipes out. This issues in the paradoxical notion that the sense in which we are identical with the Child is both real and illusory. Second, the Child's experience is based on the Kantian-Schopenhauerian model of the experience of an individuated human subject. The Child projects a plurality of spatio-temporally bound discrete objects that subsist in reciprocal relations of causality for itself to observe. This world of appearance, and hence the Child's experiential field as well, are therefore structured by the categories that characterize our finite human intellects. But these structures supposedly apply only at the level of phenomenal reality. Nietzsche's attempt to personify the thing-in-itself

therefore makes no sense if we interpret the Child, as Geuss does, in terms of Schopenhauer's metaphysics of the will.

Now it might be the case, of course, that these are defects of Nietzsche's view rather than of Geuss's interpretation. However, it seems to me that in such instances we should invoke an interpretive 'principle of charity', and desist from attributing to Nietzsche views that are obviously false or otherwise unintelligible. Such a principle can, of course, be reasonably applied only when there is an alternative, more plausible reading that is supported by the text. Fortunately, that is the case here, or so I shall now argue.

The problems that afflict Geuss's account arise, in my view, because of an inaptly literalistic reading of the significance of the image of the Child. But I think that the general picture he supplies can be made more plausible by taking the image as a *metaphorical, non-metaphysical* account of a certain kind of aesthetic view of existence. To do so not only renders Nietzsche's view more philosophically respectable, it is also more consistent with the nature of BT in general, which is clearly a work saturated with metaphor and symbolism. In addition, it harmonizes BT with Nietzsche's essay 'On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense', written less than a year after BT, in which he claims that the metaphysical reality of the world is cognitively inaccessible. Finally, it resolves the seeming contradiction between Nietzsche's construal of the tragic effect as, on the one hand, apparently providing a means to know the world as it is in itself and, on the other, as an "illusion spread over things" (BT 18).<sup>30</sup> Read in this metaphorical way, then, Nietzsche offers us the image of the Child not as a metaphysical thesis but as a model for our own psychological attitude towards the world. He bases his account of the content of this attitude, I think,

on the psychology of the tragic artist. It follows that the transcendent perspective of the Child is a kind of poeticized presentation of the mentality that lies behind the production of (great) tragedy. This explains why Nietzsche's characterization of the Greek tragedians so clearly echoes his account of the Child's activity: the tragic artist, he says, "creates his figures" like "some abundant deity of *individuation*" (BT 22).<sup>31</sup>

In order to understand this mentality, we need to look in detail at Nietzsche's account of the psychology of the tragic artist. According to this account, the tragic artist is primarily marked out by his psychological strength, and by the fact that, in virtue of this strength, he is able to apply aesthetic predicates to those phenomena which, from the perspective of weakness, lead inexorably to a negative evaluation of life. As Nietzsche puts it in WP: "it is a question of strength [...] *whether* and *where* the judgment 'beautiful' is applied [...] The feeling of *power* applies the judgment 'beautiful' even to things and conditions that the instinct of impotence could only find *hateful* and 'ugly'" (WP 852). That Nietzsche was already thinking in terms of this relation between strength and the aestheticization of existence when he wrote BT is clearly implied by the work's general portrayal of the tragic Greeks as "strong" (BT 9) and "vigorous" (BT 24); but it is also explicitly evinced by his claim in PTG that "it takes remarkable strength" for the artist "to transform" the harsh reality of existence "into its opposite, into sublimity and the feeling of blessed astonishment" (PTG 5). Now this notion of the restructuring of existence into an object of the experience of the sublime finds clear expression also in BT: "art alone can re-direct those abhorrent thoughts about the terrible or absurd nature of existence into representations with which one can live; these representations are the *sublime*,

---

<sup>30</sup> See: Clark, Maudemarie: *Language and Deconstruction: Nietzsche, de Man, and Postmodernism*. In: *Nietzsche as Postmodernist*. Ed. C. Koelb. Albany 1990, pp. 80-81.

whereby the terrible is tamed by artistic means [...], whereby disgust at absurdity is discharged by artistic means (BT 7). Young avers that in characterizing the tragic effect in terms of the sublime Nietzsche is simply restating Schopenhauer's account of tragedy.<sup>32</sup> But it seems to me to be Kant's analysis of the dynamically sublime in the third *Critique*, which Nietzsche read in 1868, that offers the most profitable model for what he has in mind here. If this is right, reflecting on Kant's theory should give us insight into the nature of the aesthetic value that Nietzsche takes the tragic artist to confer on existence, and also into the phenomenology of the experience that is derived therefrom.

Kant, like many other theorists (most notably Burke), contrasts the category of the sublime with that of the beautiful. His analysis of the former is subdivided into the mathematically sublime and the dynamically sublime. Since the mathematically sublime does not significantly inform BT, I shall focus here only on the dynamically sublime. In nature, the object of the beautiful has to do with form, whereas the dynamically sublime is associated with chaos. And whilst the beautiful induces in us an unambiguously pleasurable sensation, the dynamically sublime is concerned with suffering, and, above all, with phenomena that excite the idea of terror. Kant distinguishes between two kinds of terror: terror *per se* and the exhilarating terror which can be derived from the contemplation of an idea of pain or danger from a position of safety. The distinction relates to actually being terrified by an object and merely considering an object terrifying. In the latter case, the mind is alternately attracted to and repelled by the object, and it is in this dual affectivity that the experience of the dynamically sublime primarily consists. From this, Kant infers that

---

<sup>31</sup> Young's "external spectator" objection is generated by a failure to appreciate the metaphorical status of the image of the Child.

<sup>32</sup> Young: Nietzsche's *Philosophy of Art*, loc. cit., p. 45.

our liking for the dynamically sublime contains not so much a positive pleasure as something more akin to awe or admiration.

In addition, natural beauty carries with it a purposiveness in its form by which the object seems predetermined to cause aesthetic pleasure. By contrast, the dynamically sublime presents itself as *counterpurposive*, in the sense that its object is incommensurate with our instinct for self-preservation and consequent desire to avoid such an object. But since the object is contemplated from a position of safety, that desire is effectively neutralized, making possible an aesthetic estimation of the object.

The pleasure occasioned by this standing fast in the face of an idea of danger matches the feeling of elevation we experience upon resisting temptation and acting instead in accordance with the moral law. When one is divided between temptation and morality, the latter is perceived as hostile and threatening. But if one chooses to uphold the law, the danger associated with it is mastered. The moral law “calls forth our strength”,<sup>33</sup> and we are made aware of our status as free, noumenal beings capable of rising above merely natural threats. For although the immensity of the forces of nature could easily destroy our physical being, we have the ability to maintain our allegiance to morality in the face of such danger. This awareness of the (potential) inviolability of our moral being reveals to us our supremacy over nature, that nature has no ultimate dominance over us, and, moreover, that our “rational vocation”<sup>34</sup> as moral beings endows us with a value that far outstrips that of nature. This means that the initial “agitation”<sup>35</sup> caused by the incommensurability of the object with our desire is ultimately judged to have a “subjective purposiveness.”<sup>36</sup> Whilst the object

---

<sup>33</sup> Kant: Critique of Judgment. Transl. Werner S. Pluhar. Indianapolis, Cambridge 1987, p. 121.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 110.

itself indicates nothing purposive, its presentation occasions a purposiveness, and hence a pleasure, that we feel within ourselves.

In essential agreement with Burke, Kant posits an intimate connection between the dynamically sublime and power (*Macht*). Burke claims that there is “nothing sublime which is not some modification of power.”<sup>37</sup> Similarly, having defined power as “an ability that is superior to great obstacles”, Kant says that nature is dynamically sublime when we consider it “as a might that has no dominance over us”<sup>38</sup> in virtue of its inferiority to our noumenal nature as moral agents. This indicates that the dynamically sublime essentially involves the aesthetic estimation of an object of great natural power. But to consider such an object as possessing any aesthetic significance at all is dependent on what Kant calls a “subreption”<sup>39</sup>—that is, the attribution of dynamic sublimity to an object depends on a falsification of the object. What Kant has in mind, I think, is the subject’s construal of sublimity as an objective, perceptible feature of its object. But whereas we may correctly predicate beauty of a great many natural objects, “we express ourselves entirely incorrectly when we call this or that *object of nature* sublime.” Instead, all we are entitled to say is that the object is suitable for “exhibiting a sublimity that can be found in the mind.”<sup>40</sup>

We have already seen that Nietzsche builds into his account of the ‘sublimification’ of existence the claim that this process is conditional on psychophysical strength. Kant makes an analogous point when he claims that, unlike the beautiful, the experience of the sublime is not universally accessible, and hence that judgments concerning it do not demand universal assent. For in order to be open to

---

<sup>37</sup> Burke, Edmund: *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*. Ed. J.T. Boulton. London, New York 1958, p. 64.

<sup>38</sup> Kant: *Critique of Judgment*, loc.cit., p. 119.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.



the sublime, “not only must our faculty of aesthetic judgment be far more cultivated, but so must the cognitive faculties on which it is based.”<sup>41</sup> Hence, it is a fact that “what is called sublime by us, having been prepared through culture, comes across as merely repellent to a person who is uncultured.”<sup>42</sup>

Now although Nietzsche doesn't explicitly refer to this Kantian picture, there is a very high degree of natural fit between its fundamental points and his conception of the tragic. To begin with, it is clear that the Schopenhauerian reality of the world as disclosed in Greek tragedy is especially suited to the dynamically sublime. Nietzsche's references to the “titanic forces of nature” (BT 3), the “indestructibly powerful” (BT 7) character of life, and the “terror and horror of existence” (BT 3)—which, for him, together form the basic subject matter of tragedy—vividly recall Kant's view of the dynamically sublime as an experience in which we are exposed to an object of power that would be terrifying if encountered outside the aesthetic milieu. In tragedy, these aspects of life and nature are represented by the suffering of the tragic protagonist; his existence is characterized by suffering that is perpetrated by a pitiless fate, the amoral and non-teleological forces of nature. And in what seems to be a rendering of Schopenhauer's claim that aesthetic experience involves the recognition of the general in the particular, Nietzsche claims that, although we understand that the events unfolding on the stage depict the fate of a single, individuated human being, we also grasp that this is the fate of all of us.<sup>43</sup> On one level, therefore, what is happening on stage is happening to a *particular* individual. But tragedy also represents the *general*, existential truth about human life in the form

---

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 124.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 124.

<sup>43</sup> Nietzsche employs Schopenhauer's view of aesthetic experience without endorsing his claim that in recognizing the general in the particular we are in fact intuiting the Platonic forms.

of this individual's fate. Since, at least on one level, these events are happening to someone else, we are able to confront this general truth from the requisite position of safety, a position from which an aesthetic estimation of that truth is possible. This gives us the distance from the tragic protagonist that enables us to view his/our fate as dynamically sublime.

Furthermore, the Nietzschean tragic, like Kant's dynamically sublime, involves a "subreption." Throughout his works, Nietzsche often claims that some degree of falsification of reality is necessary if we are to affirm life: "that lies are necessary in order to live is constitutive of the terrible and questionable nature of existence" (WP 853). It follows that if tragedy provides a means of affirming life, it must at some level involve illusion. In BT, Nietzsche refers to the lies that are necessary for life as those of "transfiguring illusion" (BT 25). And restating the link between strength and sublimity, he says that it is out of the tragic artist's "*surplus power*" that he "transfigures things and makes them fuller" (WP 821). So the sublime for Nietzsche, as for Kant, is essentially a fiction arising from the interaction of our cognitive-perceptual faculties with raw nature. The sublime is an *effect* of nature on the mind, it is not itself an *aspect* of nature. But as in the case of Kant's dynamically sublime, Nietzsche's phenomenology of the tragic is such that sublimity is experienced as an independent aesthetic property.

That the Nietzschean tragic deals in illusion in this way does not imply, as one might think, that to view nature as sublime is to deny any aspect of existence. Such an implication would render the tragic justification of existence inconsistent with Nietzsche's requirement of theodicy that it facilitates affirmation of "the entirety of life." What Nietzsche has in mind when he speaks of transfiguration is not the denial of the problematic aspects of existence, but rather their "perfection" (BT 1). Indeed,

the problematic aspects of existence are indispensable to the Nietzschean tragic. Hence, transfiguration does not, as Richard Schacht claims, “preclude any accurate reflection” of reality.<sup>44</sup> For although transfiguration is essential to the artistic character of the expression of reality in tragedy, it is clear that Nietzsche holds that the basic, existential truth about the world and human life nevertheless comes through. Thus he describes tragedy as “a general mirror of the world”, which presents us with “a copy of an eternal truth” (BT 17). To be sure, the experiential character that existence acquires through its transfiguration is not part of its fundamental, objective nature. But that does not mean that the underlying pessimistic truth about existence is not conveyed; it means only that this truth is somehow embellished, and thereby rendered more palatable.

Here we return to the important difference between tragic and Socratic culture in virtue of which Nietzsche thinks that the former provides a more stable and durable theodicy than the latter. From a Socratic or moral perspective, the tragic theodicy’s dependence on illusion would render it deeply unsatisfactory. But tragic culture doesn’t place the high value on truth that Socratic culture does. This is why it isn’t afflicted by the kind of internal instability that besets Socratism. Tragic culture finds nothing objectionable in falsehood, provided that it serves the enhancement of life. Accordingly, from the perspective of tragic culture the presence of illusion in its theodicy is entirely innocuous. On the contrary, the recognition that illusion is necessary for life is inherently constitutive of the tragic world-view. This is not to say that tragedy has no epistemic value. After all, it is tragedy, according to Nietzsche, that embodies the final truth about life and the world. But as Soll points out, this is an

---

<sup>44</sup> Schacht, Richard: *Making Life Worth Living: Nietzsche on Art in The Birth of Tragedy*. In: Nietzsche. Eds. John Richardson and Brian Leiter. Oxford 2001, p. 191.

*effect* rather than the *purpose* of tragedy.<sup>45</sup> Nietzsche does say that “the Greeks wanted truth at full strength” (BT 8), and this is clearly presented as partly why they valued tragedy. But this isn’t because they valued truth as such; rather, it is because they recognized that, provided one is sufficiently robust, confronting painful truths could have an energizing or life-enhancing effect.

We should not expect the Nietzschean tragic exactly to mirror Kant’s analysis of the dynamically sublime. There is, for instance, nothing in Nietzsche’s account corresponding to the analogy Kant draws between the experience of the sublime and moral feeling—which is, of course, precisely what one would expect, if my claims regarding BT’s anti-moral stance are correct. However, as already noted, central to Kant’s view is the idea that the experience of the dynamically sublime, like that of resisting temptation, “calls forth our strength.” This idea finds clear resonance in Nietzsche’s account, for as we have just seen, Nietzsche tells us that “the Greeks wanted truth at full strength.” Why? Anticipating his later psychological doctrine of the will to power, one possible answer is that confrontation with the repugnant character of existence provides a means of testing one’s strength and thereby attaining a heightening of the feeling of power, and this has a kind of vitalizing effect. This is clearly sharply at odds with Kant’s claims about the moral significance of the dynamically sublime. Nonetheless, at least part of Kant’s explanation of the exaltatory character of the dynamically sublime rests on the exertion of strength that it entails. To this extent, therefore, the role of power in the Nietzschean tragic can be seen as a variation on this aspect of Kant’s view.

---

<sup>45</sup> Soll, Ivan: Nietzsche on the Illusions of Everyday Experience. In: Nietzsche’s Postmoralism: Essays on Nietzsche’s Prelude to Philosophy’s Future. Ed. Richard Schacht. Cambridge 2001, pp. 15-16.

As an object of the dynamically sublime, then, existence has a kind of noble grandeur for the tragic artist which makes it an object, not of love, to be sure, but of deep reverence, respect, or admiration. For the weak, however, this significance is impossible. In them, the tragic representation of raw nature and human suffering arouses moral indignation, and ultimately leads to “nausea” and an “ascetic, will-negating mood” (BT 7). Accordingly, Nietzsche thinks that the tragic view of things is possible only for individuals of sufficient strength. Tragedy for the weak is valuable not because it exalts the terrifying and the absurd, but because they read into it their own evaluative perspective, and find, as Schopenhauer did, confirmation of the valuelessness of life and a signpost to suicidal nihilism.

## **8. Conclusion**

I have sought in this paper to illuminate Nietzsche’s main philosophical project in BT, but also to show that the consensual view regarding the interpretive status of ASC is mistaken. Contrary to the critical consensus, not only is reading BT in the light of Nietzsche’s retrospective claims informative about the nature of the earlier project, it also has important implications for how we should regard his corpus as a whole. For if what I have argued is right, there is a far greater degree of continuity between BT and Nietzsche’s later works than is commonly supposed. Nietzsche’s commentators standardly divide his thought into three distinct developmental phases. My argument here, if sound, implies that this way of thinking about Nietzsche’s work stands in need of reappraisal. For while there are, of course, distinctions to be drawn between BT’s positions and those of the later works—particularly in respect of Nietzsche’s attitude towards Christianity, reason, and science, as well as his

metaphysical and epistemological commitments—there are also substantial thematic continuities that show the standard threefold periodization to be over-simple.

The most significant of these, I think, are the two concerns of Nietzsche's that I have focussed on here: the project of existential theodicy and the related question of how moral and aesthetic modes of evaluation bear on that project and give rise to contrary valuations of life. For although Nietzsche came to reject the idea of there being a fundamental truth about the world, and hence also the whole question of the value of existence as incoherent ("value judgments, for or against, concerning life can in the end never be true" [TI, The Problem of Socrates, 2]), his later works retain BT's concern with theodicy as an existential project, as well as its aestheticist approach to that enterprise. In *The Gay Science*, for example, BT's claim that it is "only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally *justified*" is reformulated as follows: "as an aesthetic phenomenon existence is still *bearable* for us" (GS 107). As in BT, this artistic project is presented as a countermeasure to the life-denying effects of morality. But rather than speaking of the aestheticization of 'reality' or the 'in-itself' of things, it is now the "hard, recalcitrant, suffering material" (ibid.) of the individual self and human life which are to be beautified: "art furnishes us with the eye and hand and above all the good conscience to be *able* to make [an aesthetic] phenomenon of ourselves" (ibid.).

So between BT and GS, Nietzsche's advocacy of a non-moral aestheticist ideology moves from a metaphysical to a psychological focus. In the later work, for example, he insists that "*the one thing needful* is to attain satisfaction with ourselves" (GS 290); that is, we must divest ourselves of morality, and more particularly, the ascetic ideal, that have made natural human existence an object of nausea for us. His formula for this kind of self-affirmation centres around the idea that one should "give

style” to one’s character, that one should turn *oneself* into a work of art by fusing distinct characteristics into an artistic whole, that one should “examine” one’s various elements—including those that the ascetic ideal seeks to exorcize—and “fashion them into an artistic plan” (GS 290). This means, above all, reconciling seemingly opposed or contradictory aspects of character. In particular, the aestheticized self combines the passionate and forceful energy of the Dionysian of BT, with the discipline, form, and obedience to rules of the Apollonian.

What this necessarily sketchy account of Nietzsche’s doctrine of self-creation shows, I hope, is that in certain key respects it exactly mirrors, and so should be seen as an outgrowth of, BT’s art-morality distinction. In both instances, an antipodal relationship is posited between art and morality, and in both instances it is art, or at any rate artistic models, that provides the corrective to the harmful effects of morality.

There is, of course, a lot more that could be said on this matter, particularly on the way in which Nietzsche came increasingly to focus his attention on the relation between art and the good life. Nonetheless, it already seems clear that here too Nietzsche “returns to the place from which [he] set out – *the Birth of Tragedy*” (TI, What I Owe to the Ancients, 5). For as he retrospectively claims, it is BT’s cardinal thesis that, in the final analysis, it is “art – and *not* morality – that is the true metaphysical activity of man” (ASC 5).<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup> I would like to thank Alison Denham for her valuable comments on earlier versions of this paper.







This document was created with Win2PDF available at <http://www.daneprairie.com>.  
The unregistered version of Win2PDF is for evaluation or non-commercial use only.