



CHAPTER 9

THE THEMES OF AFFIRMATION AND ILLUSION IN *THE BIRTH OF TRAGEDY* AND BEYOND

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That lies are necessary in order to live is itself part of the terrifying and questionable character of existence.

Friedrich Nietzsche¹

A unifying theme in Nietzsche's early works (1870–6) is the claim that 'illusion', 'deception' and 'lies' are necessary to make tolerable one's experience of the world. The central message of Nietzsche's first published work, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), is that the affirmation of life requires 'illusion' which allows us to cope with the 'insight into the horrible truth' of our condition (*BT* 7). In a recent book (Reginster 2006), Bernard Reginster argues that Nietzsche overcame this early position in his later works. The early position, in Reginster's view, fails to underwrite a genuine affirmation of life, which requires affirming life 'as it is', in its very 'terrifying and questionable character'. In the earlier works, Reginster contends

Nietzsche has not yet developed the doctrine of will to power and has only the illusions of art to prescribe as an antidote for those who have 'looked boldly into the terrible destructiveness of so-called world history as well as the cruelty of nature, and [are] in danger of longing for a Buddhistic negation of the will,' that is to say, those who have achieved 'Dionysian wisdom' (*BT* 7). Tragic wisdom, at that early stage, thus prescribes eschewing the Dionysian depths and remaining at the Apollonian surface with its beautiful appearances—being, in other words, 'superficial—out of profundity' (*GS* Preface 4).

In his later works, by contrast, tragic wisdom ceases to be (partly) Apollonian and becomes a fully Dionysian wisdom. The affirmation of life no longer requires that we avoid what *The Birth of Tragedy* characterizes as the 'insight into the horrible truth' of our condition (*BT* 7). We are now capable of contemplating this truth without being driven to nihilistic despair by it

¹ *WP* 853.



because the revaluation made possible by the doctrine of the will to power actually enables us to welcome and affirm it (Reginster 2006: 248–9).

In Reginster's account, it is the will to power that enables us to accept and affirm the horrors which in *BT* can be tolerated only by laying over them a structure of illusions. Reginster understands the will to power as 'the will to the overcoming of resistance', which more specifically 'has the structure of a *second-order desire*: [...] a desire for the overcoming of resistance in the pursuit of some determinate first-order desire' (p. 132). The will to power is to be the new standard of valuation. By evaluating things in terms of power we are enabled to positively value those things—suffering, impermanence, loss, nature's indifference to human needs and purposes—which had previously led to a negation of life. For Nietzsche, such 'resistances', rather than providing reason to "say No" to life, are in fact necessary for us to attain what we really desire—power. We experience a growth in power in relation to phenomena over which we previously lacked power, phenomena which previously obstructed our willing. The attainment of power therefore depends on the overcoming of resistance, and so what is disagreeable to our willing is not only consistent with what we positively value, but actually constitutive of it. Thus:

if... we take power—the overcoming of resistance—to be a value, then we can see easily how it can be the principle behind a revaluation of suffering. Indeed, if we value the overcoming of resistance, then we must also value the resistance that is an ingredient of it. Since suffering is defined by resistance, we must also value suffering. (p. 177)

Reginster is right, I think, that Nietzsche finds in the will to power a way of assigning positive value to suffering and hence that the will to power plays a central role in Nietzsche's later understanding of affirmation. Moreover, a case could be made for such a position being problematically articulated in *The Birth*, where a hallmark of the psychology of the tragic Greeks is a vitality and robustness which leads them actually to seek out confrontations with the 'harsh' and 'problematic' aspects of existence as a means to test and exert their strength—the Greeks, we are told, 'wanted truth at full strength' (*BT* 8). But at the same time, Nietzsche maintains that, despite their proclivity for the Dionysian depths, there was a limit to the amount of truth that the Greeks could bear: of human beings in general, Nietzsche tells us, 'not one whit more may enter [...] consciousness [...] than can be overcome again by the power of Apollonian illusion' (*BT* 25). But in respect of Reginster's claims concerning the will to power's capacity to underwrite an affirmation of life '*as it is*', the following difficulty arises: the value that can be derived from regarding suffering as a resistance to be overcome, and hence as an occasion for power, depends on the resistance in question being something which the agent perceives as something that he *could* overcome. If a resistance is something that would be physically or psychologically utterly destructive for the agent—or is merely perceived as such by the agent—then it cannot even in principle be revalued positively in the way that Reginster outlines. Rather than be an occasion for power, any such resistance would in fact destroy the agent's potential to gain power. In short, not everything can be seen as a resistance to be overcome and anything which cannot be seen in this way *cannot* credibly be justified or affirmed in terms of the will to power.² It follows that the will to power is not sufficient to underwrite a genuine affirmation of life.

² There are important differences between 'justifying' and 'affirming' life, which I shall not address here. For a characteristically adept account, see May 2008.

Simon May (2008) agrees with Reginster that Nietzsche's later position is that genuine affirmation of life is possible. May contends, however, that there are events that can destroy one's fundamental capacity to express power, and so affirmation of life as it is cannot be achieved in the way that Reginster envisages. But May argues that such events need not preclude affirming life as it is, since to affirm one's life is not the same thing as—and nor does it require us—to find everything good or beautiful about it. As a 'Yes-sayer' one can detest certain events of world history or of one's own individual life, while not wishing history or one's own life to be free of those events and experiences. What this overlooks, however, is that to affirm the terrifying and questionable character of life, for Nietzsche, is not simply to acknowledge and endure it, indeed not even to find it conditionally valuable—it is 'to perceive not merely the necessity of those sides of existence hitherto denied, but their desirability; and not their desirability merely in relation to the sides of existence hitherto affirmed (perhaps as their complement or precondition), but for their own sake' (WP 1041; cf. EH: 'Why I Am So Clever' 10; WP 1019). Existence must be affirmed not merely *in spite* of what seems most deniable about it—its terrifying and questionable character—but (at least in part) *because* of it.³

It is here perhaps that Reginster's account of affirmation in terms of will to power is most illuminating. If we are to affirm life not in spite of its horrors but because of them, the only Nietzschean foundation for such an affirmation seems to be the revaluation of suffering made possible by the will to power—that is, in terms of the experience of power to be derived from overcoming the resistance that such horrors represent. But how plausible is the notion that we can affirm life not in spite of the gas chambers of Auschwitz but because of them, not in spite of the rape and torture of children but because of it? In the end, it seems the only psychologically plausible—and recognizably human (but not all-too-human)—account of affirmation would require either the falsification, concealment, or evasion of such events, so that they are not included in the object of affirmation at all, or their repositioning at sufficient 'distance' from us so that they recede almost completely into the background.

The argument of this essay is that, *contra* Reginster and May, both in the early and the later works illusion is a necessary condition of the affirmation of life. The position of the later Nietzsche is basically the position of *The Birth of Tragedy*: one must falsify—whether by evasion or explicit falsehood—the horrors of life *to some degree* in order to affirm it. In section 1, I set out the core thesis found in *BT vis-à-vis* the relationship between affirmation and illusion, which I am suggesting provides a template for the position of the later phase; in section 2, I examine the role of illusion in one of Nietzsche's litmus tests of affirmation found in *The Gay Science* of 1882, 'amor fati'—that is, the ability 'to see as beautiful what is necessary in things' (GS 276; cf. 107); in sections 3, 4, and 5, I turn to certain elements in Nietzsche's understanding of 'self-creation' and how, through the employment of 'distance' and 'pretence', it is intended to engender an affirmation of existence; and finally—if only very briefly—in section 6, I attempt a provisional assessment of Nietzsche's conception of affirmation as I interpret it here.

³ Cf. *TI*: "Reason" in Philosophy' 6: 'The tragic artist is not a pessimist—he says *yes* to the very things that are questionable and terrible, he is *Dionysian* . . .'

1 THREE STAGES OF ILLUSION

All of Nietzsche's published works, not just *BT* as is widely supposed, were written under the spell of Schopenhauer's pessimism—the view that suffering is an essential and therefore ineradicable feature of life (*WWR* I: 56; II: xlvi, 573). In his major work, *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer argues that honest reflection on the world and human life shows, as he puts it, that 'it would be better for us not to exist' (*WWR* II: 605). This nihilistic judgement follows, Schopenhauer argues, primarily from his account of self-conscious beings as characterized by an incessant and inherently painful willing. According to Schopenhauer, willing is a sufficient condition of suffering, because all willing arises necessarily from a want or deficiency, and to experience a want is to suffer: to live is to will; to will is to suffer; therefore to live is to suffer.

But if all men are unhappy and will remain so until death, it is puzzling why suicide is so rare. Death is the obvious choice because it removes the misery. Schopenhauer's explanation seems to be that we are 'tricked' by 'the will to live' into continuing to exist. That is, we have an innate but ultimately irrational predisposition to exist—irrational because non-existence is what is really in our interest but we *deceive* ourselves that this is not the case, that happiness and fulfilment are attainable, that the future will be better, and so on. In a contemporary idiom, our hardwired survival instinct makes life seem positively valuable, when it is not.

Nietzsche, in effect, shares Schopenhauer's view that if we saw life as it really is, we would not be able to carry on, and that we continue to exist only because of the hold that various forms of illusion have over us:

It is an eternal phenomenon: the insatiable will always finds a way to detain its creatures in life and compel them to live on, by means of an illusion [*Illusion*] spread over things. One is chained by the Socratic love of knowledge and the delusion [*Wahn*] of being able thereby to heal the eternal wound of existence; another is ensnared by art's seductive veil of beauty fluttering before his eyes; still another by the metaphysical comfort that beneath the whirl of phenomena [*Erscheinungen*] eternal life flows on indestructibly—to say nothing of the more vulgar and almost more powerful illusions which the will always has at hand. These three stages of illusion [*Illusionsstufen*] are actually designed only for the more nobly formed natures, who actually feel profoundly the weight and burden of existence, and must be deluded by exquisite stimulants into forgetfulness of their displeasure. (*BT* 18)

The first kind of affirmation depends upon the 'profound illusion' that 'thought, using the thread of causality, can penetrate the deepest abysses of being, and that thought is capable not only of knowing being but even of *correcting* it' (*BT* 15). 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.⁴

⁴ As Reginster (2013) puts it, 'It is essential to this kind of illusion that its effectiveness in producing and sustaining an affirmative stance toward existence depends on its *not* being recognized as illusion, that is to say, on its inducing (false) *belief*. I discuss this aspect of Nietzsche's critique of Socratic rationalism in detail in Came 2004.'

What drives the Socratic project is the belief that by uncovering the truth about the world and our place in it, suffering can be 'eliminated' and 'the eternal wound of existence be healed' (BT 18). Nietzsche traces this optimism to Socrates' teaching that knowledge is the cause of virtue and virtue the cause of happiness. Additionally, the Socratic truth-seeking project enables us to affirm life by endowing it with *purpose*, which causes the Socratic inquirer to take delight 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' (BT 18). That truth-seeking endows purpose, though, isn't a claim that Socratism makes or would accept: Socratism conceives of itself as motivated *only* by an interest in truth—and it is because Socratism conceives of its project in this way 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). If Socratism is actually concerned more with truth-seeking than with truth, it follows that Socratism depends on illusion. But since illusion is what Socratism most explicitly opposes, in order to engage in the Socratic project, it is necessary to conceal from oneself one's basic motivation for doing so. This means that Socratism must be unreflective as regards its essential nature. But Socratism generates a demand for reasons, so the Socratic inquirer will ultimately need an argument or rational explanation as to why he affirms life. Such an individual would find inadequate the idea that he affirms life unreflectively. It follows that the *ideally* Socratic individual could not accept the true account of why he finds life bearable. Accordingly, Socratic affirmation can work only if one doesn't question *how* it works. But this goes against the Socratic obsession with rational explanation and so is ultimately untenable. The nature of Socratism entails that eventually it will call into question its own mode of affirmation. As a means of affirming life, then, Socratism is inherently unstable and finally self-defeating: it cannot survive the realization of its true nature.

Nietzsche identifies two other kinds of illusion which in different periods of history have protected humanity from the basic truth about its condition. In the Homeric age, the Greeks were spared insight into the horror of things by their 'Apollonian drive for beauty,' which gave birth to the 'resplendent, dream-born figures of the Olympians' (BT 2) and the myths and artworks that glorified them. In Homer's depictions of the gods and heroes the Greeks saw images in which human nature and existence were transfigured. The 'Apollonian' drive is the source of the mimetic arts of painting and sculpture, as well as epic poetry, whose purpose is to provide us with beautiful, ennobling images of humanity in which the pain and suffering of our everyday lives is transfigured.⁵ The Apollonian finds its natural expression in the 'image-making' (*bildende*) activity of dreaming, through which we represent the world to ourselves with greater clarity and beauty (BT 1). The images of dream are an instance of what Nietzsche calls *Schein* ('semblance'). The satisfaction of this drive requires that 'even while this dream-reality is most alive, we nevertheless retain a pervasive sense that it is *semblance*' (BT 1). If we mistake the images for 'crude reality,' our condition becomes 'pathological' and their curative effect is lost. Dreaming heals, according to Nietzsche, because it allows us to experience even the 'grave, gloomy, sad' and 'dark' sides to life as beautiful.

⁵ See BT 16: 'here Apollo overcomes the suffering of the individual by means of the luminescent glorification of the *eternity of the phenomenon*; beauty triumphs over the suffering inherent in life; pain is, in a certain sense, deluded away from amongst the features of nature.'

The Apollonian artist has the rare ability to harness the natural power of dreams and produce objects of semblance in the external world. The representational arts of sculpture, painting, and epic poetry provide us with illusions that perfect the ugliness and confusion of everyday existence, making our own lives seem worth living.

But the triumph of the Apollonian over the horrors of life was fleeting. Adapting the plot of Euripides' *Bacchae*, Nietzsche describes how the Greeks were confronted with a new religion and a new form of art, when the cult of Dionysus first reached their shores. With their terrifyingly primitive music and wild sexual abandon, the Bacchic revellers tore apart the 'artful edifice' of Apollonian culture, and revealed that the Greeks' 'entire existence, with all its beauty and moderation, rested on a hidden ground of suffering and knowledge' (BT 4).⁶ In the throes of Dionysian ecstasy, the Greeks were exposed to the full force of nature's 'artistic violence' (*Kunstgewalt*), which 'kneads' and 'chisels' the stuff of mankind how it will (BT 1).⁷ Faced with the truth of the human condition, the Apollonian illusions could no longer suffice to protect them.

In a striking passage in section 7, Nietzsche describes the state of mind of the Apollonian Greek after a night of Dionysian *Rausch* ('intoxication'):

The ecstasy of the Dionysian state, abolishing the habitual barriers and boundaries of existence, actually contains, for its duration, a lethargic element into which all past personal experience is plunged. Thus, through this gulf of oblivion, the worlds of everyday and Dionysian reality become separated. But when one once more becomes aware of this everyday reality, it becomes repellent; this leads to a mood of asceticism, of denial of the will. This is something that Dionysian man shares with Hamlet: both have truly seen to the essence of things, they have *understood* (*erkannt*), and action repels them; for their action can change nothing in the eternal essence of things, they consider it ludicrous or shameful that they should be expected to restore order to the chaotic world. Understanding (*Erkenntnis*) kills action, action depends on a veil of illusion—this is what Hamlet teaches us [...].

The mood of Nietzsche's Greek parallels that of modern Socratic man, once the dream of enlightenment has been shattered. But the Greeks were saved from nihilistic despair by the third form of illusion—the art of tragedy, which has the power to transform 'those repulsive thoughts about the terrible or absurd nature of existence into representations with which man can live' (BT 7). The tragic represents the apex of artistic creation, largely because its foundation lies in a fusion of the Apollonian and Dionysian drives. The Dionysian seeks to release us from life's burdens through the ecstatic experience of *Rausch*. It is expressed in drunkenness and sexual frenzy and appears in more urbane forms as the arts of music and dance and in certain types of religious mysticism. The purpose of *Rausch* is to dissolve our individuality and provide a sense of oneness with the rest of existence. In a state of Dionysian ecstasy, the struggles of our ordinary lives appear to be merely a game played by nature.⁸

⁶ Cf. DW 2: 'Things in the ambit of Dionysus became audible which had lain artificially hidden in the Apollonian world: all the shimmering light of the Olympian gods paled before the wisdom of Silenus' (p. 129).

⁷ Cf. DW 2: '[*Rausch*] penetrates to the innermost thoughts of nature, it recognizes the fearful drive to exist and at the same time the perpetual death of everything that comes into existence' (p. 126).

⁸ See BT 17: 'For a brief moment we really become the primal essence itself, and feel its unbounded lust for existence and delight in existence. Now we see the struggles, the torment, the destruction of phenomena as necessary, given the constant proliferation of forms of existence forcing and pushing their way into life, the exuberant fertility of the world will.'

The important point to note for present purposes is that the tragic is a subspecies of illusion, one that presents the content of the Schopenhauerian world view in a fashion that renders it (just barely) tolerable. Tragic art incorporates illusion in its character portrayal, symbolism, and in the clarity and beauty of its dialogue; and without that illusion it could not function. For Nietzsche is very clear that pure, undiluted Dionysian insight is strictly intolerable; it would produce in us a nausea that would literally kill us. Having defined music as the Dionysian art *par excellence*, he expresses this idea in *BT* 21 when he says that one could not survive listening to the music to the third act of *Tristan* without the accompanying Apollonian words and staging. While the literal claim about the putative effects of listening to *Tristan* is obviously false, it is clear that the psychological claim which it expresses—that a direct or unmediated confrontation with the naked reality of our existential situation would be psychologically devastating—is one that Nietzsche takes very seriously. But it is equally clear that Nietzsche thinks that the tragic is much closer to the truth than the Socratic is—that the basic horror of things is at least partially transmitted by tragedy. For in tragedy, the terrible aspect of life is presented to us. Tragedy paints a picture of a world in which there is a fundamental mismatch between the way things are and our basic needs and desires. The suffering that is meted out to the tragic protagonist is *unmerited*; everything he values and cares for can be destroyed by powers utterly beyond his rational control—Necessity, Fate, or the whims of merciless gods. In watching the drama unfold, we understand that these events depict the fate of a single human being, but we also grasp that this is the fate of all of us. On one level, what is happening on stage is happening to a *particular* individual. But on another level, tragedy represents the *general* truth about human life in the form of this individual's fate. Thus Oedipus's fate is a paradigm instance of human fate, as the verses of Sophocles' chorus intimate:

Ah, generations of men, how close to nothingness I estimate your life to be! What man, what man wins more of happiness than enough to seem, and after seeming to decline? With your fate as my example, your fate, unhappy Oedipus, I say that nothing pertaining to mankind is enviable. (1186–95 [trans. Lloyd-Jones 1994])

Thus, in tragedy, Nietzsche clearly thinks, we find a significant cognitive insight as to the nature of the world and human life. But the fact remains that a veil of illusion is draped over this truth, and it is only in virtue of this illusion that the experience of tragedy is bearable at all. As Raymond Geuss succinctly puts it, 'tragedy brings us as close as it is possible to come to the basic truth of things' (1999)—but not into direct contact with the truth itself. The affirmation of life that tragedy produces, then, is not really an affirmation of life at all—the object of affirmation is not unvarnished reality—but rather an affirmation of a diluted and hence falsified image of reality.

Nevertheless, Nietzsche clearly thinks that tragic illusion facilitates a more stable and durable form of affirmation than the illusions of the Socratic or the purely Apollonian. From a Socratic perspective, tragedy's involvement with illusion renders it deeply unsatisfactory. But tragic culture doesn't place the high value on truth that Socratic culture does, and 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 affirmation of life. Accordingly, from the perspective of tragic culture, illusion is unobjectionable. On the contrary, the recognition that illusion is necessary for life is partly constitutive of the tragic world view. The purely Apollonian, on the other hand, is defined by illusion. But it is not

healthy for an individual, or for a whole society, to become entirely absorbed in the rule of either the Apollonian or the Dionysian. The healthiest foothold (both for individuals and for cultures as a whole) is in both. Nietzsche's preference for the tragic is partly motivated by the thought that through the artistic weaving together of the Dionysian and Apollonian elements of the soul the Greek spectator became healthy, through experience of the Dionysian within the protective realm of Apollonian illusion.⁹

2 AMOR FATI AND ILLUSION

Reginster maintains, as we have seen, that in the later works Nietzsche develops a conception of affirmation that no longer requires eschewing the Dionysian depths. Nietzsche's new ideal is said to be that of a tragic wisdom in which life's horrors can be confronted and endured, even welcomed and affirmed. Nietzsche's free spirits, on Reginster's interpretation, view reality as it is rather than how it appears to be. They have the ability to cope with the truth of reality without needing the 'healing balm' of the Apollonian.

In his later writings, Nietzsche does indeed seem to strive for an approach to affirmation that could move beyond all forms of illusion. He does so above all in his two litmus tests of an individual's capacity to affirm life: the 'eternal recurrence' and, especially, '*amor fati*' In these doctrines, Nietzsche envisages a kind of affirmation that involves confronting as much truth as one can about life: 'the ideal of the most high-spirited, vital, world-affirming individual, who has learned not just to accept and go along with what was and is, but who wants it again and again *just as it was and is* through all eternity' (BGE 56), or someone who does not want 'anything to be different, not forwards, not backwards, not for all eternity. Not just to tolerate necessity, still less to conceal it [. . .], but to *love* it . . .' (EH: 'Why I Am So Clever' 10). But does this attitude of *amor fati* really consist in a courageous realism about human experience, in a 'triumphant Yes' to reality 'as it is'? One reason to think that it does *not* is that it is in tension with—if not explicitly contradicted by—Nietzsche's views concerning the intimate relation between honesty and strength: 'the strength of a spirit should be measured according to how much of the "truth" one could still barely endure—or more distinctly, to what extent one would require it to be thinned down, shrouded, sweetened, blunted, falsified' (BGE 39). What this key passage suggests is that human beings *in general* 'require' the truth to be falsified to some extent—and to what extent is a function of the individual's strength. The Christian—for Nietzsche, the paradigm of weakness—requires a wholesale falsification of existence in the form of extravagant metaphysical postulates. The Greeks, by contrast—the paradigm of strength—required only a minimal 'thinning down' of the truth in the form of a veil of illusion through which the basic truth of things could still be at least partially apprehended.

Recall also that Nietzsche characterizes his project of *amor fati* as precisely demanding that one 'learn more and more to see *as beautiful* what is necessary in things' (GS 276, emphasis added). The connection with artistry is this: it is the activity best suited to present

⁹ Gemes and Sykes (2013) provide an interesting account of the role of illusion in Nietzsche's writings. What, according to Gemes and Sykes, is particular to both the early and later Nietzsche is the overt emphasis on the need for illusion in the construction of *meaning*.

‘what is necessary in things’ as beautiful. But presenting what is necessary in things as beautiful does not occur without artistic reconstruction and reinterpretation. As things are presented in nature they are chaotic and formless: ‘Nature, artistically considered, is no model. It exaggerates, it distorts, it leaves gaps. Nature is *chance*’ (TI: ‘Skirmishes of an Untimely Man’ 7). In Nietzsche’s mature work, artistic representation remains essentially tied to illusion: its role is to present reality in a transfigured and idealized form which reshapes our thoughts about it and the evaluative attitudes with which we respond to it. And given his explicit ‘anti-realism’ about value—nothing has value ‘in itself’ Nietzsche tells us—it follows that the ascription of aesthetic value to necessity must involve illusion. Nietzsche thinks ‘all claims of the form “X is valuable” are false’. No value judgements are ever true, so the role of valuing in our lives must be filled by fictions. The role of artistry suggests, à la BT, that achieving the attitude of *amor fati* still involves some kind of distortion of the less palatable aspects of experience.

3 SELF-ARTISTRY AND THE AFFIRMATION OF LIFE

As a means to achieving the attitude of *amor fati*, Nietzsche proposes, inter alia, the aim of ‘giving style’ to one’s character—an art ‘practiced by those who survey all the strengths and weakness of the nature and then fit them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and even weakness delights the eye’ (GS 290).¹⁰ That is, he proposes the existentially motivated project of cultivating one’s character into something that can be contemplated with aesthetic pleasure. Indeed, we are told that the one thing that ‘is needful’ is ‘that a human being should *attain* satisfaction with himself—be it through this or that poetry or art’ (GS 290). What this claim amounts to, I suggest, is that for the later Nietzsche self-affirmation is sufficient for life affirmation.

To say that we need to affirm ourselves if we are to affirm life is hardly radical. What is radical is the thought that to affirm oneself is also to affirm life *in general*. There are two senses in which this claim could be taken—a metaphysical and a psychological sense. May interprets the claim as metaphysical.¹¹ As a part of the whole you cannot affirm yourself in isolation. As an inextricable part of existence in general, to affirm oneself is to affirm all of existence. But if the claim is metaphysical, then it makes no difference whether the object of affirmation is oneself or any other aspect of existence. Given the essential interconnect-edness of all things, to affirm any part of the whole is also to affirm the whole. Interpreted metaphysically, then, the object of affirmation could be literally anything. But Nietzsche clearly envisages a special connection between affirmation of oneself and affirmation of life. Accordingly, it seems to me that ‘the one thing needful’ passage is best interpreted as a psychological claim.

¹⁰ See Nehamas 1985 for an exegetically questionable but philosophically interesting account of Nietzsche’s doctrine of self-creation.

¹¹ May 2011a: 188–98.

It seems clear that Nietzsche conceives the project of ‘giving style’ to one’s character as part of his guiding theme of affirmation. In its original biblical context,¹² ‘the one thing needful’ denotes attention to our salvation in Christ. In adopting this phrase, Nietzsche is provocatively suggesting that an alternative (secular) salvation is possible through the project of ‘becoming the poets of our lives’ and ‘turning ourselves into works of art’, that in conceiving of oneself as a work of art and remaking oneself in such a way one’s existence will seem justified. What Nietzsche is after is an attitude of positive self-evaluation, a curative to two millennia of the internalization of sin and absolutizing of our sense of guilty indebtedness. This internalization of sin, in Nietzsche’s account, leads to a different kind of subjectivity—and one that is inseparable from a pervasive sense of the evil of human life. Christianity has turned man ‘into a great immortal criminal’ (GS 78), and it is not only human beings that are impaired but the empirical world in general. ‘Christianity’, as Nietzsche says, ‘painted the Devil on the world’s wall’ (HAH II: 78). Hence the roots of nihilism and Schopenhauerian pessimism have now been reassigned to a human origin. It is no longer the well of pain at the heart of things that is the source of life negation but the radical masochism and self-abnegation that lie at the core of Christian morality.

For Nietzsche, the achievement of self-creation is a unified and integrated self. Most of us are a disunity, a mass of conflicting desires and impulses that lack any overarching aim or direction. The self-created individual, by contrast, is an integrated whole.¹³ On Nietzsche’s view of the person, as in the Platonic conception,¹⁴ the self or psyche is not a monadic unity, but is composed of several elements—the various instincts, drives, and passions—which may be more or less unified depending on their interrelations. These relations are determined by the relative proportions of the parts and by their conflict or harmony with one another (the degree to which the exercise or satisfaction of one frustrates the operations of another, and the affective by-products generated by such interference). Presumably, certain configurations of these elements will be simply pleasing in themselves, much as certain colours are. Furthermore, just as our tastes are gratified by certain compositional aspects of parts of the external world—a delicate musical cadence, the fine proportions of a statue—so our inner sense relates to the mind aspects of its own composition that please or displease.

The ‘beautiful’ self, like the beautiful painting, is one in which ‘opposites are tamed’, though without being suppressed or exorcized: rather, the instincts are not allowed to ‘turn against each other’, for there is, instead, ‘power over opposites; moreover, without tension’ (WP 803). The resolution of one broad ‘contradiction’ to which Nietzsche pays special attention—that between *Rausch* (‘intoxication’) and restraint—resembles the account

¹² Luke 10:42. The one thing needful evidently is that which Mary chose. Very roughly, this was to sit at Jesus’s feet and hear his word.

¹³ For particularly nuanced discussions of this theme, see Gemes 2001, 2006, and 2009.

¹⁴ See *Republic* book IV. The correct relationship between the soul’s three elements that is constitutive of justice and the other virtues is often described by Plato in terms that suggest its aesthetic appeal: ‘once he [sc. the just man] has treated the three factors as if they were literally the three defining notes of an octave—low, high and middle—and has created a harmony out of them and however many notes there may be in between; once he has bound all the factors together and made himself a perfect unity instead of a plurality, self-disciplined and internally attuned: then and then only does he act...’ (Plato 1998: 443d–e).

given in *BT* of how, in tragedy, the Dionysian and the Apollonian are reconciled. In the earlier work it was the chaotic and suffering nature of the Dionysian in-itself of things that was to be brought into a productive relation with the Apollonian drive to order, precision, and restraint. But now one is required to impose a 'form upon oneself as a hard, recalcitrant, suffering material' (*GS* 107). This means, above all, reconciling seemingly opposed or contradictory aspects of character. In particular, self-artistry combines the passionate and forceful energy of the Dionysian with the discipline, form, and obedience to rules of the Apollonian. And just as the tragic synthesis of Apollo and Dionysus represents 'the highest goal' of art, so the self is similarly enhanced when it learns to balance the instinctual passions and drives with the need for restraint. Unlike the Christian self which employs restraint only in order to inflict cruelty on itself, the 'aesthetic nature' takes a 'natural delight . . . in restraint, the enjoyment of the beauty of restraint' (*WP* 870). Thus the 'higher' type integrates his drives and impulses rather than seeking fruitlessly to extirpate them. The Christian rejects those drives which are constitutive of human nature, for instance, sexual and aggressive impulses—and this is one sense in which the Christian fails to affirm life. The 'higher' type, by contrast, fashions the constellation of drives that comprise the self into a coherent unity in which all drives and instincts receive expression, not in a wanton or anarchic manner, but in a way that is answerable to an organizing principle, a master drive, the 'law of one's own being' (*UM* III).

The achievement of self-creation, then, is fundamentally the achievement of psychological *health*. And from this perspective of health, it seems, affirmation naturally ensues. The core idea here, I think, is as follows: as self-conscious beings, each of us must endure the review of his own mind and actions just as much as that of his immediate surroundings, and the aesthetic sense is just as keen in its appraisal of the objects and relationships it finds within as it is of those in its environment. If the furniture of my house has the power to depress me then I have excellent existential reasons to change it if I can; likewise, if what I see of the furniture of my mind fills me with loathing and despair, I should require no further motivation towards reform. Freud once wrote: '[t]he moment a man questions the meaning and value of life, he is sick'¹⁵—implying that from the standpoint of psychological health questions pertaining to the meaning and value of life simply don't arise. This is strikingly close to the later Nietzsche's view, according to which the impulse to question the value of existence or search for the conditions of the affirmation of life is already to be involved in nihilism.¹⁶ For Nietzsche, the life-enhancing effects of beauty and depressing effects of ugliness are such central and universal features of human nature as to provide our chief impetus towards self-creation, as well as our strongest defence against pessimism ('Whoever is dissatisfied with himself is continually ready for revenge . . . For the sight of what is ugly makes one bad and gloomy', *GS* 290). As naturally self-reflective creatures, the aesthetic qualities brought most often and most vividly to our attention are our own, so that if an exalted pleasure is to be derived from the contemplation of what is beautiful, and a depressing effect from surveying what is ugly, each of us has excellent reason to ensure that his own life and soul are in good aesthetic shape.

¹⁵ Letter to Maria Bonaparte, 13 August 1937, in Freud 1961: 436–7.

¹⁶ Cf. May 2008 and 2011b.

4 SELF-ARTISTRY, ILLUSION, AND DISTANCE

I have argued that the project of self-creation aims primarily at an attitude of positive self-evaluation, and that Nietzsche believes that such an attitude is sufficient for being well disposed towards life in general. But what form does the project of self-creation take? In particular, does it involve fictionalizing or confronting the truth about oneself? I suggest that the answer is both, for part of what honest self-assessment consists in is recognizing that among our most fundamental needs is the ability to cultivate and value illusion, and that to do so is necessary in order to defend against ‘nausea and suicide’ (GS 107). For ‘[e]very profound spirit needs a mask: more, around every profound spirit a mask is continually growing’ (BGE 40);¹⁷ and ‘it is part of a more refined humanity to have reverence “for the mask” and not to practise psychology and inquisitiveness in the wrong place’ (BGE 270).¹⁸

As we have noted, given his explicit ‘anti-realism’ about value—nothing has value ‘in itself’ Nietzsche tells us—it follows that the ascription of aesthetic value to the self must at some level involve illusion. Nietzsche thinks ‘all claims of the form “X is valuable” are false’. No value judgments are ever true, so the role of valuing in our lives must be filled by fictions. Hence artistic illusions are just as essential for self-affirmation as honestly surveying one’s strengths and weaknesses, and the important lessons about creation come from artists, who show us not only how to make things beautiful, but also how to endorse something illusory:

What one should learn from artists.—What means do we have to make things beautiful, attractive, desirable for us when they are not? And I think that in themselves they never are. Here we have something to learn from . . . artists, who are really continually trying to bring off such inventions and feats. Moving away from things until there is much of them that one no longer sees and much that one must ‘see into’ them, in order still to see them; or seeing things around a corner and as cut out and framed; or placing them so that they partially obstruct one another and allow only perspectival glimpses through; or looking at them through coloured glass or in the light of the sunset; or giving them a surface and skin that is not fully transparent—all this we should learn from artists while being wiser than they are in other things. For with them, this subtle power usually comes to an end where art ends and life begins; but we want to be the poets of our life . . . (GS 299; cf. GS 78)

The artistic model, then, shows us not only how to ‘make things beautiful’, but also how to see beauty in things ‘when they are not’ beautiful ‘in themselves’. That is, we assimilate our attitude to that of ‘art as the good will to appearance’ (GS 107), so as to clear our conscience about endorsing illusions. The specific tactics of self-artistry described in section 299 of *The Gay Science* make plain the fictionalizing implications of Nietzsche’s position. By these means, artistic representation falsifies its object by depicting it as other than it is. But falsification is not supposed to apply only within the world of conventional artistic creativity. Hence Nietzsche emphasises that while artists may concern themselves with mere fictions and not real life, ‘we want to be the poets of our life’. Thus, the conclusion is

¹⁷ Cf. BGE 289: ‘Every philosophy also *conceals* a philosophy; every opinion is also a hiding-place; every word also a mask.’

¹⁸ Cf. Z IV: ‘The Leech’: ‘Where my honesty ceases I am blind and want to be blind.’

clear: the conception of affirmation Nietzsche identifies as the true opponent of the ascetic ideal (*GM* III: 25) is in fact a ‘counterforce’ against our honesty (*GS* 107). The role of artistry in achieving this attitude is, as it was in *BT*, to obscure or veil the less palatable aspects of our experience.

In sketching this particular strategy for affirmation, Nietzsche freely endorses evasion of the truth—or even explicit falsehood—where it is necessary in order to achieve the goal of affirmation. Hence the same basic idea first broached in *BT* still guides Nietzsche’s later thinking about the role of illusion in the affirmation of life. Compare section 78 of *The Gay Science* on artistic transfiguration:

What should win our gratitude.—Only artists . . . have given men eyes and ears to see and hear with some pleasure what each man is himself, experiences himself, desires himself; only they have taught us to esteem the hero that is concealed in everyday characters; only they have taught us the art of viewing ourselves as heroes—from a distance, and as it were, simplified and transfigured . . . Only in this way can we deal with some base details in ourselves. Without this art, we would be nothing but foreground and live entirely in the spell of that perspective which makes what is closest at hand and most vulgar appear as if it were terribly vast, and reality itself.

Part of what it means to give style to one’s character, then, is to stand back from one’s character—one’s given desires, dispositions, ambitions, values—rather as the painter stands back from his canvas. Like the artist, one uses this ‘distance’ to decide how one shall organize, arrange, and manipulate them according to an artistic vision.¹⁹ Indeed, it seems a structural feature of Nietzschean self-affirmation that one must stand back from oneself: ‘some greatness, like some goodness, wants to be beheld only from a distance’ (*GS* 15); and in a similar vein: ‘our dramatists have ‘taught us the art of viewing ourselves as heroes—from a distance and, as it were, simplified and transfigured’ (*GS* 78).

The importance of distance to the project of affirmation is clear: many things can be fully affirmed only by standing back and evading too coarse or realistic representations of the world and the human: Nietzsche thus enjoins us to ‘move away from things until there is much of them that one no longer sees’ (*GS* 299). But it is not only the horrors of life which might require concealment or distance but also the mundane, ordinary life and the mediocre—all clearly as much a feature of reality ‘as it is’. In general, however, the motif of distance connotes ‘retreat’ from reality or the placing of space between oneself and something external for defensive purposes.

5 NIETZSCHE’S PRETENCE THEORY OF THE SELF

But what is the object of self-affirmation? Nietzsche famously rejects the notion of the unified Cartesian subject or singular self as a myth. Thus we have his famous dictum from the *Genealogy* that ‘the doer is merely a fiction added to the deed’ (*GM* I: 13), and his observation

¹⁹ For a sustained discussion of the theme of ‘distance,’ see Lovibond 2013.

in *Beyond Good and Evil* that ‘our body is but a social structure composed of many souls’ (BGE 26). The notion of a unified self is thus a deception. So must the self-created individual participate in a deliberate pretence or make-believe that the self exists? Given Nietzsche’s rejection of one’s believing a proposition to be true as a necessary condition for one’s endorsing that proposition, he could coherently hold such a view. For Nietzsche, one’s believing in the truth of a given proposition is neither necessary nor sufficient for one’s endorsing that proposition—instead, what matters is whether one’s endorsement of that proposition promotes life. (‘The falseness of a judgment is for us not necessarily an objection to a judgment . . . The question is to what extent it is life-preserving, species-preserving, perhaps even species-cultivating’, BGE 4.) Consequently, Nietzsche can remain agnostic or even sceptical about the self as an ontological reality while still articulating his views in terms of apparently traditional notions of selfhood. Nietzsche could describe the self-created individual as endorsing the illusion that he is a self without claiming that he believes that he *really is* a self, in the sense that his knowledge that this belief was false would not affect the status of his belief. Such an attitude is possible on the basis of the interactions between one’s believing that one really is a self and one’s other beliefs. In particular, aesthetic beliefs seem particularly resilient, even when one holds additional beliefs which imply the falsity of that particular belief. This is true even when such additional beliefs concern matters of ontology. The classic example here is that one could convincingly believe—or at least appear to believe—that ‘Sherlock Holmes lives on Baker Street’ while also believing that ‘Sherlock Holmes does not exist’.²⁰

This explanation of how self-affirmation is possible in the absence of a self commits Nietzsche to a non-intuitive understanding of belief, which separates one’s endorsing a proposition and one’s believing that proposition to be true. This in turn results in worries about the practicality of such an approach, namely, that it seems to involve a contradiction to endorse a proposition while knowing (or believing) that proposition to be false. Usually in such cases we resort to self-deception to conceal the proposition’s falsity from ourselves. Of course, even willing self-deception is extremely difficult.²¹ Nietzsche needs to provide some convincing psychological explanation for how one can knowingly or even mistakenly endorse false beliefs, especially where such beliefs are as significant as one’s belief in one’s own selfhood.

Fortunately, Nietzsche has an ingenious solution to this worry. The reason why one’s believing a proposition to be true appears to be such a powerful condition of one’s endorsing that proposition is that it is difficult to conceive of other values which could possibly displace truth and other epistemic values. However, as Nietzsche suggests, there *are* alternatives. In particular, as we have seen, he exhorts us to look down upon ourselves from an ‘artistic distance’, that is, to approach the question of our selfhood from an aesthetic perspective (GS 107). From such an aesthetic perspective, it might be possible to endorse the illusion of one’s own selfhood while simultaneously holding beliefs which deny or imply the denial of that proposition. Moreover, not only does an aesthetic framework provide us with an alternative, but it also provides an explanation for why one who adopts such a framework *would* believe in his self. Nietzsche claims that the self, taken as an aesthetic object, is

²⁰ See Lewis 1978.

²¹ Nehamas’s discussion of the ‘problem of self-deception’ is motivated by this particular worry. Cf. Nehamas 1983.

aesthetically pleasing since it can accommodate judgements of 'style'; that is, one's self when subject to the right conditions, can appear to incorporate elements which—like the formal elements of a work of art—leave the viewer with the impression that those elements were designed and organized by the 'constraint of a single taste' (GS 290). Of course, just as in the case of a work of art, the self might not lend itself to positive aesthetic judgement. In such circumstances, it might be necessary to shape one's concept of one's self until it conforms to one's standards of beauty. It might also be the case that this approach cannot be successfully adopted by everyone—as is well known, Nietzsche holds no commitment to egalitarianism.

All of the preceding suggests a pretence theory of the self, similar to the 'make-believe' views advanced by various philosophers of art concerning our response to fictional entities.²² On this view, it might be possible to pretend that we have self-making properties or even that we are selves because of aesthetic pleasure that experiences of particularly cohesive examples of subjectivity produce. This pleasure explains why we could plausibly adopt an aesthetic approach to the self as well as why we could continue to maintain such an aesthetic approach even in the face of our belief that we lack anything like the self we appreciate.

6 CONCLUDING REMARKS

I have argued in this essay that the insight that a life without illusions is both psychologically impossible, and, as a goal, one that will lead to suicidal nihilism, is enunciated in *BT* and adhered to throughout Nietzsche's works. In Nietzsche's account, the various existential strategies humans have deployed in order to cope with the horrors of life—the religious, the Socratic, the Apollonian, and the Tragic—all to varying degrees depend upon illusion or evasion of the basic pessimistic truth about the world and human life. Nietzsche recommends a Dionysian approach to the question of affirmation because it brings us as close as it is possible to come reality. But the Dionysian too is itself inseparable from illusion.

Hence the suspicion remains that Nietzsche passes off what is in fact a further instance of life denial for life affirmation. For the Nietzschean stance still implicitly claims that the affirmation of our existence as it is cannot be achieved and must be sought, at least in part, in an illusory realm. This seems to be the charge levelled against Nietzsche by Julian Young, for whom Nietzsche's final position represents a cowardly retreat from his original ambition of life affirmation (Young 1992: 147). Specifically, Young accuses Nietzsche of abandoning the hard task of affirming existence and indulging instead in various forms of escapism. There might be something in this criticism. And indeed Nietzsche's pursuit of affirmation might in fact be self-defeating. For as May points out, the impulse to question the value of existence or search for the conditions of the affirmation of life is already to be involved in nihilism.²³ Adapting one of Nietzsche's own psychological insights ('No one talks more passionately about rights than he who in the depths of his soul doubts whether he has any', *HAH I*: 597), we might be tempted to make the following psychological claim: Nietzsche's affirmation is a mask for life-negating despair. But rather than characterizing Nietzsche as having inauthentically abandoned the project of affirmation we might equally say that he recognized

²² Cf. Walton 1990.

²³ See May 2008 and 2011b.

that illusion just is among the conditions of the affirmation of life, that ‘untruth is a condition of life’ (BGE 6). Facing up to that would then count as an insight, albeit a decidedly gloomy one, rather than cowardly retreat. The accusation of abandoning the project would have force only if illusion were not necessary for affirmation.²⁴

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²⁴ I would like to thank Ken Gemes and Philip Donor Balliet for their very helpful comments on a draft version of this essay.

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