

# Disinterestedness and Objectivity

Daniel Came

## 1.

Christopher Janaway's *Beyond Selflessness: Reading Nietzsche's 'Genealogy'*<sup>1</sup> is a valuable and important contribution to Nietzsche scholarship on several counts. It gives thematic prominence to questions about Nietzsche's method of writing and its relationship with his general aim of undermining Christian moral values, and to Nietzsche's view that our commitment to those values is primarily determined by affective not rational considerations. The book is also distinctive in its careful and illuminating discussion of the *Genealogy's* strong, but often only implicit, opposition to Schopenhauer—and it is this dimension of the book that I will try to address in this paper. In particular, I would like to examine the book's general allegiance to Nietzsche's critique of the Kantian-Schopenhauerian characterization of aesthetic experience in terms of disinterestedness. According to Janaway's interpretation of Nietzsche, the concept of disinterestedness with its purported claim to objectivity (in the Kantian sense of the universal a priori conditions of subjectivity) is an expression of the ascetic ideal or 'will to nothingness'. I argue that (1) Nietzsche's criticisms rest on a misinterpretation of the notion of disinterestedness; and that (2) although Nietzsche supplants the notion of disinterestedness with his own of *Rausch*, he derives a conception of aesthetic experience from *Rausch* that is closely related to the Kantian-Schopenhauerian notion of aesthetic experience as defined by disinterestedness.

## 2.

In the *Genealogy*, as elsewhere, Nietzsche is intent on adopting a position 'antipodal' to that of Schopenhauer. One shortcoming of recent interpretations of Nietzsche's philosophy is a tendency to lose sight of the fundamental importance of Schopenhauer in Nietzsche's philosophical project.<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche has an almost ubiquitous concern with a secularized form of the problem of theodicy, that is, with the question of how to achieve authentic reconciliation with life given that suffering and death are inexorable and omnipresent features. This is the animating question of Nietzsche's entire philosophy, and the negative theodicy he encountered in Schopenhauer's work—the thesis that it would be better if the world did not exist—comprises Nietzsche's primary philosophical target.<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche agrees with Schopenhauer's descriptive thesis that life is dominated

by suffering and death, but he rejects, or at any rate seeks to resist, Schopenhauer's consequent nihilistic depreciation of life. That is, Nietzsche regards the Schopenhauerian description of things as, in principle, (psychologically) compatible with unconditional affirmation of life. This Schopenhauerian view was, in non-discursive form, intuited by the (pre-Socratic) Greeks, who were nevertheless able to affirm life. It is the Schopenhauerian description of things in combination with certain fundamental values of our Christian moral inheritance that preclude affirmation. This is why Nietzsche ridicules Schopenhauer as 'the heir of the Christian interpretation' (TI, IX: 21)<sup>4</sup> and claims that it was on the basis of Schopenhauer's adherence to Christian values that he 'said "No" to life' (GM, P: 5).<sup>5</sup>

While recent interpretations of Nietzsche's philosophy have ignored or underestimated Schopenhauer's presence in Nietzsche's later writings, Janaway treats Schopenhauer as Nietzsche's main philosophical adversary in the *Genealogy*. Thus Janaway reads the *Genealogy* as continuous with Nietzsche's general 'struggle' with Schopenhauer, and he rightly regards the Preface as announcing the general targets of the critique. Here Nietzsche identifies what is at issue in his critique of morality as:

... the value of the 'unegoistic,' the instincts of pity, self-abnegation, self-sacrifice, which Schopenhauer had gilded, deified, and projected into a beyond for so long that at last they became for him 'value-in-itself,' on the basis of which he *said No* to life and to himself. (GM, P: 5)

According to Nietzsche, Schopenhauer's valorization of will-lessness and the abandonment of individuality is an expression of the ascetic ideal and hence a profound devaluation of and hostility towards one's own self. As expressions of the ascetic ideal, Christian moral values are based upon an axiology that is inherently nihilistic, in the specific sense that, in Janaway's words, it is 'marked by a repeated gravitation towards will-lessness'. What is nihilistic about this is that states of will-lessness are on a continuum with 'nothingness'. They instantiate a death instinct, a torturing desire no longer to exist. Nietzsche describes this metaphysic of value as symptomatic of 'a sublime lure and temptation into nothingness' (GM, P: 5), and he construes Schopenhauer's conception of the subject of aesthetic experience as a 'pure, timeless, will-less, painless *subject of knowledge*' (WWR 1: 178–9)<sup>6</sup> as derived from this axiology, and as itself an artefact of the Christian project of excluding the empirical, the sensuous, the self, and the body from the realm of value. Nietzsche's critique of disinterestedness is therefore continuous with his most abiding and important critical project, namely, the overcoming of established Christian postulates concerning the putatively evil orientation of the self, desire, the body, and so forth, and the need for purification from all material contamination (all constitutive presuppositions of the wider system of theologico-moral ends which Nietzsche regards as the Christian interpretation of existence).

## 3.

As is well known, Schopenhauer, following Kant, thinks that there is a distinction between the ideal and the real, the way the world appears to us in experience and the way the world is in itself. For any object or thing, the perceived object must be both something in itself and something for others; Schopenhauer thinks that the denial of this thesis entails that objects would be only representations and that this entails absolute idealism which, in turn, entails solipsism. He argues that there is a deep gulf between the ideal and the real, though this is one of the things of which we are not immediately aware, and thus distinguishes between two modes of existence: a subjective and an objective existence, a being-for-self and a being-for-others, consciousness of one's own self and consciousness of other things. These two are given to us in a fundamentally different way. About oneself, everyone knows directly, about everything else only very indirectly. 'We must learn to understand nature from ourselves, not ourselves from nature. What is directly known to us must give us the explanation of what is only indirectly known, not conversely' (WWR 2: 196).

Schopenhauer thinks, in effect, that phenomenology can disclose knowledge of what he calls the 'Being-in-itself' of things, that is, the ultimate or inner nature of things. Schopenhauer is doing pre-Heideggerian fundamental ontology. In the first division of *Being and Time*, Heidegger argues that the inquiry into the nature of Being has to proceed via inquiry into the nature of the being (namely, *Dasein*) that asks about the nature of Being. In a similar fashion, Schopenhauer thinks that the uniquely correct starting point for philosophy is the self and its private experiences. If ultimate knowledge exists, it must be known in a direct and immediate manner. One can investigate the nature of Being only by examining what appears to oneself in one's own subjective phenomenological field. Schopenhauer's reason for privileging the pure interiority of one's own consciousness is as follows: it is only in the case of one's own interiority that one has immediate and direct acquaintance with anything. All other forms of acquaintance are indirect and mediated by perceptual data and/or concepts. Schopenhauer's starting point thus resembles Descartes' understanding of the soul as confined within the goldfish bowl of its own experiences. 'The world is my representation,' and all that is immediately given in this representation is consciousness itself, which 'conditions' the world as it apprehends it (WWR 2: 5). In Schopenhauer's view, by taking *cogito ergo sum* as the only proposition that can be known to be certain, and provisionally regarding the existence of the external world as problematical, Descartes attained insight into the only correct starting point and secure foundation for philosophy: 'this point, indeed, is essentially and of necessity *the subjective, our own consciousness*. For this alone is and remains that which is immediate; everything else, be it what it may, is first mediated and conditioned by consciousness, and therefore dependent on it' (WWR 2: 4). Accordingly, Schopenhauer thinks that true philosophy must be essentially *idealistic*, that is, it must regard as axiomatic the thesis that the objective, material world in general exists only as representation and not as something in itself. 'For

nothing is more certain than that no one ever came out of himself in order to identify himself immediately with things different from him; but everything of which he has certain, sure, and hence immediate knowledge, lies within his consciousness. Beyond this consciousness, there can be no immediate certainty'. Therefore, while it is entirely appropriate for natural science to assume the objective world as actually existing, this is 'not appropriate to the standpoint of philosophy, which has to go back to what is primary and original' (WWR 2: 5).

On the basis of this methodology, Schopenhauer draws far-reaching and questionable metaphysical conclusions about art, ethics, and the nature of transcendent reality. I am not here concerned with the merits or demerits of this methodological approach, with the general transition in Schopenhauer from phenomenology to metaphysics; rather, I am interested in the adequacy of his views at the level of phenomenology and in Nietzsche's objections to this description.

So, putting aside the question of the truth-value of Schopenhauer's metaphysical conclusions, I want to suggest, *contra* Janaway and Nietzsche, that Schopenhauer's claims regarding aesthetic experience are, in fact, rich in phenomenological insight. That is, at the level of phenomenology he seems right to regard as the hallmark of value experience a diminished sense of self and world along with the reciprocal relations of space, time, and causality that obtain between objects in ordinary experience.

#### 4.

As we have seen, Janaway claims that 'Schopenhauer's axiology is marked by a repeated gravitation towards will-lessness' (2007: 27). This much is indubitable. Schopenhauer locates value in modes of experience which are characterized by a diminished, or totally abolished, sense of one's own individuality and a falling away of the intuitions of space and time, and the category of causality. Thus Janaway suggests that 'the key to the unity of [Schopenhauer's] thought is the thesis that *value can be retrieved to the extent that the individual embodiment of will abates*' (2007: 197). But Schopenhauer's (perhaps unconscious) motivation for locating value in disinterestedness does not in itself invalidate theories that define aesthetic experience in terms of disinterestedness, nor imply that such a condition is itself devoid of value. Schopenhauer appropriates Kant's notion of disinterestedness and accentuates the ideas of asceticism and pessimism. By making complete will-lessness a necessary condition of genuine aesthetic pleasure Schopenhauer enlists aesthetic pleasure to the cause of denigrating the self, desire, the body, and so forth. Schopenhauer values beauty 'especially as redeemer from the "focus of the will", from sexuality—in beauty he sees the procreative impulse denied'. But Nietzsche seems unjustified in interpreting disinterestedness *qua* disinterestedness as an ascetic notion. Nietzsche, in other words, was misled by the pessimistic and ascetic overtones of Schopenhauer's notion of disinterestedness.

## 5.

How plausible is disinterestedness as a phenomenological conception of aesthetic experience? Disinterestedness is the first criterion in Kant's analysis of judgments of taste: an object is beautiful if I like it without any interest. This means that I should be free from any kind of desire or purpose. Only then can my contemplation of the object be 'pure'. Schopenhauer's aesthetic theory relies upon a particularly strong version of disinterestedness in which the genuine aesthetic attitude requires the subject to lose himself completely in the aesthetic object, to be a disinterested spectator to such an extent that the perceiver's own subjectivity is transcended, at least temporarily. Schopenhauer defines disinterestedness as a state in which objects 'stand in no relation to our will'. This absolutely will-less state differs from Kant's in its demand on the subject to transcend himself. Nietzsche, at times, seems to understand this radical detachment as apathy.<sup>7</sup> But to be disinterested does *not* mean to fail to be interested. My attitude towards an object is disinterested, if and only if, in attending to it, I focus only on the object and not any relations that obtain between the object and anything apart from the object itself. Disinterestedness is therefore an attitude of reflective disengagement from all considerations of utility, which considers only what the object is 'in itself'. Hence Kant's thesis that pleasure in the beautiful is disinterested because it is not grounded in the satisfaction of desire.

Now, it is plausible, surely, that when we take pleasure in something we find beautiful, the pleasure gained is not the pleasure of having got something that we desire. In fact, it seems nearly self-evident that in aesthetic experience one's desires temporarily abate, and it is difficult to imagine a kind of aesthetic experience in which this is not the case. A work of art, as Iris Murdoch puts it, is a 'sustained experienced mental synthesis' that depends for its existence on one's ability to banish one's troubles whilst one is engaged with it (Murdoch 1992:75). But Janaway suggests that the theory of aesthetic disinterestedness 'owes its existence to a felt-need within the theorizer' (2007: 196). This claim looks too strong, for the theory is, surely, at least in part derived from the phenomenology of aesthetic experience. Or is the point that the felt need in question somehow structures or shapes the phenomenology? Well, the idea that the phenomenology of value experience is affected by the dominant theoretical understanding of that phenomenology seems plausible, since it may well be that the case that such understanding affects our actual susceptibility to pleasure and pain by shaping our expectations. But the idea that the theory fully determines the phenomenology cannot be right. On the contrary, the phenomenology of aesthetic experience as described by Schopenhauer, or something like it, seems to be common to all kinds of deep absorption or highly focussed attention. 'Forgetting' oneself, that is, is a natural concomitant of contemplation and appreciation *überhaupt*.

## 6.

Schopenhauer claims that in aesthetic experience we cease to view objects in relation to our will. This contrasts with ordinary perception in which we cannot but view objects as relating to our will. Ordinarily we apprehend objects according to the principle of sufficient reason, that is, under concepts that relate them immediately to our subjective interests. That is to say, we perceive individual objects in a particular spatial and temporal location and constituting particular links in the series of cause of effect. This way of apprehending objects is built into ordinary perceptual experience itself. The leading idea of Schopenhauer's argument is that in aesthetic experience these normal categories of perception are suspended. In ordinary empirical perception we are only interested in the relations of objects to the individual will; in aesthetic experience, by contrast, the subject focuses upon the mere perception: 'it is only when the will with its interests has forsaken consciousness and the intellect freely follows its own laws, and as pure subject mirrors the objective world, yet [...] is in the highest state of tension and activity, goaded by no willing; only then do the colour and form of things stand out in their true and full significance'. Hence in aesthetic experience we experience the object as universal, and this is a matter of experiencing that which is essential in a particular individual and subtracting that which is accidental or irrelevant to the object in its essence. Schopenhauer means that in the aesthetic state these normal categories of perception are suspended, thereby enabling us to become alive to usually unnoticed aspects of objects. Contrary to Kant, then, Schopenhauer thinks that immense cognitive value attaches to aesthetic experience. The objects of aesthetic experience are seen in a fundamentally different manner, in that, first, they are no longer apprehended according to their reciprocal relations to other objects but as what they are in themselves, and second, that the subject remains detached from the object, meaning that he does not consider the object in its relation to the will.

Schopenhauer's transcendental explanation of the disinterestedness of aesthetic response as an escape from the ordinary way of perceiving and estimating an object is, perhaps, metaphysically flawed. But, again, I think, it relies upon a veridical description of the phenomenology of aesthetic experience. Art does indeed seem to condense and clarify its objects, directing attention on particular things to the exclusion of the rest of nature. As Wittgenstein says:

The work of art is the object seen *sub specie aeternitatis*; and the good life is the world seen *sub specie aeternitatis*. This is the connection between art and ethics. The usual way of looking at things sees objects as it were from the midst of them, the view *sub specie aeternitatis* from outside. In such a way that they have the whole world as background [...] If I have been contemplating a stove, and then am told: but now all you know is the stove, my result does indeed seem trivial. For this represents the matter as if I had studied the stove as one among the many things in the world.

But if I was contemplating the stove *it* was my world, and everything else colourless by contrast with it. (Wittgenstein 1979: 83)

In a similar vein, Iris Murdoch notes that ‘the general notion of a spiritual liberation through art is accessible to common-sense as an account of our relationship to works of art when the walls of the ego fall, the noisy ego is silenced, we are freed from possessive selfish desires and anxieties and are one with what we contemplate, enjoying a unique unity with something which is itself unique [...] we see through, pass through, the busy multiplicity of particulars and contemplate, touch, become one with “the thing itself”’ (Murdoch 1992: 59). It is indeed plausible that when we take pleasure in something we find beautiful, the pleasure gained is not the pleasure of having got something that we desire. A work of art depends for its capacity to induce aesthetic states of consciousness on one’s ability to banish one’s troubles whilst one is engaged with it. So putting the question of the truth-value of Schopenhauer’s metaphysical conclusions aside, Schopenhauer’s claims regarding aesthetic experience seem phenomenologically true, or nearly true. That is, at the level of phenomenology he seems right to regard as at least partly constitutive of aesthetic experience a diminished sense of self and world along with the reciprocal relations of space, time, and causality that obtain between objects in ordinary experience. He may, of course, overstate his case. That is, one might object that even in deepest aesthetic absorption we never lose all awareness of ourselves or of space and time. But something approaching this kind of experience does seem to occur in aesthetic experience. Indeed, in absorbed contemplation *tout court* one concentrates more on the object of attention than anything else, and the deeper one’s absorption the less one is aware of self, space, time, and the relations in which the object of attention stands to other objects. Furthermore, Schopenhauer’s insistence on the absence of causal relations of the object that is contemplated in the phenomenology of aesthetic experience is also convincing. In ordinary perception the acknowledgment of the relation of the perceived object with other objects and/or with the perceiving individual is the norm. This is what defines taking an interest in an object. In aesthetic experience, by contrast, ‘the individual object’ of the aesthetic contemplation appears so vividly that the other objects to which it relates ‘withdraw into obscurity’. Pure aesthetic perception ‘plucks the object of its contemplation from the stream of the world’s course, and is isolated before it’ (WWR 2).

## 7.

As I have said, Nietzsche is intent on adopting a position ‘antipodal’ to that of Schopenhauer. But although Nietzsche replaces the concept of disinterestedness with his own intoxication or *Rausch* he derives an understanding of aesthetic pleasure from *Rausch* that is markedly similar to the theory of disinterestedness. Nietzsche adopts an affirmative stance towards disinterestedness in *The Birth of*

*Tragedy* where he endorses a distinctively Schopenhauerian conception of aesthetic experience as entailing a collapse of the distinction between subject and object: subjectivity becomes a complete forgetting of the self and 'each man feels himself not only united, reconciled, and at one with his neighbour, but one with him, as if the veil of maya had been rent and now merely fluttering in tatters before the mysterious primal Oneness' (BT, 17).<sup>8</sup> By the time of the *Genealogy*, however, he has come to conceive of disinterestedness as a merely negative state of indifference. But his own rival conception of aesthetic experience reiterates certain central features of Schopenhauer's own account. Nietzsche bases this rival aesthetic on Greek tragedy, that is, on an artwork that is in Heidegger's term, a 'happening' (*ein Geschehen*) (Heidegger 1993). The ecstasy or rapture of the participants in Greek tragedy is rather like (or perhaps is) that of participants in a religious rite, in that the distinction between artist and work, work and audience is collapsed. In Nietzsche's view, this is so because, in the experience of art, one shares in the artist's Dionysian transcendence of individual subjectivity. While the Schopenhauerian aesthetic subject attains an exceptional state of purity that allows it to discover the transcendental conditions of life, the Nietzschean aesthetic entails a complete destruction of the subject. To be sure, unlike Schopenhauer's conception of disinterestedness, Nietzsche's notion of *Rausch* does not exclude the processes of desire. It is a necessary condition of disinterestedness, for Schopenhauer, that all desire is entirely suspended. Nietzsche, by contrast, speaks of the intoxication that comes in the train of all great desires, but he quite clearly conceives of such intoxication as entailing both a dissolution of self-consciousness and a (phenomenological, if not metaphysical) falling away of spatial and temporal awareness. He says, for example, that in the throes of Dionysian ecstasy the subject is 'disposed of [. . .] whether he will or no' (WP: 798);<sup>9</sup> and he explicitly associates *Rausch* with 'the retardation of the feelings of time and space' (WP: 799; cf. WP: 800). It therefore seems that Nietzsche takes over two central strands of Schopenhauer's aesthetic theory, *viz.*, the thesis that aesthetic pleasure entails a dissolution of self-consciousness and the thesis that aesthetic pleasure entails a falling away of the intuitions of space and time. So, despite the vehemence of his attack on the notion of disinterestedness, Nietzsche's own rival conception of aesthetic experience is strikingly close to the Kantian-Schopenhauerian conception he seeks to repudiate.

## 8.

In sum: one can say, with Nietzsche, that Schopenhauer's account, unlike Kant's, is unequivocally ascetic. Schopenhauer appropriates Kant's notion of disinterestedness and accentuates the themes of asceticism and pessimism. But Nietzsche seems far less justified in interpreting Kant's conception of disinterestedness, or for that matter Schopenhauer's conception of disinterestedness *qua* disinterestedness, as an ascetic notion. Nietzsche, it seems, was misled by the pessimistic and ascetic overtones of Schopenhauer's notion of disinterestedness at the



expense of what is true in this account. So, when Janaway asks, 'why has aesthetic theory been so keen to prioritize disinterestedness at the expense of other species or conceptions of beauty?' one immediately plausible reply, to which, as I have argued, Nietzsche is *malgré lui* committed, is that disinterestedness just *is* the distinguishing characteristic of the experience of beauty. To be sure, in Schopenhauer's hands, the axiology of selflessness is appropriated in the service of his wider soteriological end of identifying the conditions of the complete and permanent abolition of self, the 'blessed peace of nothingness'. But this axiology need not be arrogated for such nihilistic or life-denying purposes. That this is the use to which Schopenhauer puts 'disinterestedness' does not entail that disinterestedness itself is ascetic or life-denying. Indeed, in Schopenhauer himself, this axiology is used as the basis for an important claim about the categories of experience. His claim is that far from denying the world, aesthetic and moral experience brings us much closer to the reality of things, to the essence of existence. 'Nothingness' indeed occupies the extreme point on the continuum of self-diminution entailed by aesthetic experience and states of knowing. But its presence on that continuum should not be taken to impugn those experiences—at least, no more than the fact that gluttony is an extreme point on a continuum should lead one to impugn the love of food.<sup>10</sup>

Daniel Came  
 Worcester College  
 University of Oxford  
 Oxford OX1 2HB  
 UK  
 daniel.came@philosophy.ox.ac.uk

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Janaway 2007
- <sup>2</sup> A notable exception to this is Reginster 2007.
- <sup>3</sup> For more on Nietzsche's reiteration of the Christian project of theodicy, see Came 2004 and Came 2005.
- <sup>4</sup> Nietzsche 1990.
- <sup>5</sup> Nietzsche 1998.
- <sup>6</sup> Schopenhauer 1969.
- <sup>7</sup> For example, in Nietzsche 1990: 'Expeditions of an Untimely Man', § 22.
- <sup>8</sup> Nietzsche 1971.
- <sup>9</sup> Nietzsche 1967.
- <sup>10</sup> I am grateful to Miss Lindsey Teather for several thought-provoking discussions of the issues addressed in this paper.

## REFERENCES

- Came, D. (2004), 'Nietzsche's Attempt at a Self-Criticism: Art and Morality in *The Birth of Tragedy*', *Nietzsche-Studien*, 33: 37–67.

- (2005), 'The Aesthetic Justification of Existence', *The Blackwell Companion to Nietzsche*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Heidegger, M. (1993), 'The Origin of the Work of Art', in Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. D. F. Krell. London: Routledge, Kegan and Paul.
- Janaway, C. (2007), *Beyond Selflessness: Reading Nietzsche's 'Genealogy'*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Murdoch, I. (1992), *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. London: Chatto & Windus Ltd.
- Nietzsche, F. (1967), *The Will to Power*, trans. W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale. New York: Vintage Books [WP throughout].
- (1971), *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. W. Kaufmann. New York: Vintage [BT throughout].
- (1990), *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books [TI throughout].
- (1998), *On the Genealogy of Morality: A Polemic*, trans. M. Clark and A. J. Swensen. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company [GM throughout].
- Reginster, B. (2007), *The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Schopenhauer, A. (1969), *The World as Will and Representation*, vols. 1 and 2, trans. E. F. J. Payne. New York: Dover [WWR throughout].
- Wittgenstein, L. (1979), *Notebooks 1914–1916*, ed. G. H. von Wright and G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell.