

The Aesthetic Justification of Existence

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1 Introduction

Nietzsche spent most of his productive life trying to identify the foundational conditions that invite love of life and protect against world-denying pessimism. During his short philosophical career, the basic attitudes that he evinced on this matter deviated little from juvenilia to mature thought. He always maintained, for example, that the dreadful aspects of the human and natural worlds call for something like a theodicy, a mode of justification that would allow the troubled soul to accept its place in them, and that a justification of existence was all but impossible if one approached life in the perspective of morality, "because life is [. . .] essentially amoral" (*BT*, preface, 5); and with the possible exception of his so-called "positivist" period associated with *Human, All Too Human* (1878), Nietzsche always approached the problem of justification in some measure in terms of art and the concept of the aesthetic.

It was primarily with the project of justification in mind that he conducted his famous re-evaluation of values, that is, his assessment of the value of our "moral" values. In *Twilight of the Idols*, he retrospectively describes his first published work, *The Birth of Tragedy* (*BT*), as his "first re-evaluation of values" (*TI*, "What I Owe to the Ancients," 5; cf. *BT*, preface, 5). What values are being re-evaluated in this text? And how does the re-evaluation in *BT* contribute to Nietzsche's overarching project of justification?

The discussion of this project in *BT* converges on the re-evaluation of the traditionally negative moral valuation of suffering. This essay offers a critical examination of this leading motif in *BT*. I interpret and assess Nietzsche's most important statement on this theme, which occurs twice in *BT* and is repeated approvingly in the "Attempt at a Self-Criticism," the brilliant preface that Nietzsche wrote for the third edition of the book in 1886: namely, the famous claim that "it is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally *justified*" (*BT* 5; cf. *BT* 25; *BT*, preface, 5). The claim refers principally to the imposition of aesthetic form on suffering that, left unmediated, would lead only to despair. Beyond this, however, the claim does not lend itself to a self-evident interpretation. How could existence be an "aesthetic phenomenon"? And who said it needed to be "justified"?

Where these questions are concerned, the interpretive process is rendered even more problematical by the rhapsodic style of *BT*, and its immersion in the concepts and

categories of Schopenhauer's metaphysics. But in what follows I attempt to cut through the suggestive imagery and questionable metaphysics to what I take to be the core propositions of the text's notion of an aesthetic justification. After initially expounding what I take to be Nietzsche's main target in *BT* – morality and its pessimistic consequences – I seek to elucidate the precise sense of the term “justification” in that work. It is my general contention that when Nietzsche speaks of the aesthetic justifying life, he does not mean that it shows us that life is *actually* justified, but rather that it educes an affectively positive attitude towards life that is *epistemically neutral*.

I then consider what I take to be the pivotal hinge of the notion of an aesthetic justification of existence, specifically, the claim that suffering is a possible object of positive aesthetic evaluation. The claim immediately raises at least two questions: first, is it psychologically possible to view suffering, especially horrendous suffering, as beautiful? And second, if it is possible, could such a vantage point feature in any recognizably human perspective on the world? I answer both questions in the affirmative but argue that an aesthetic standpoint on pain is possible only through a radical falsification and abstraction of the reality of suffering. Nevertheless, I suggest that, on the terms of his conception of justification, this does not render Nietzsche's project of affirmation a failure. That a justification of existence involves falsification matters only to those whose moral view of the world shuns all forms of illusion.

2 The Schopenhauerian Challenge

Why should existence seem to be in need of a justification? Summarily speaking, the need for a justification of existence is engendered by the pessimistic verdict on the value of existence that Nietzsche encountered in Schopenhauer's philosophy. In his major work, *The World as Will and Representation (WWR)*, Schopenhauer argues by a priori and empirical methods that a careful reflection on the world and human experience shows, as he puts it, that “it would be better for us not to exist” (Schopenhauer 1969: vol. 2, p. 605). This nihilistic judgment 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.

At times, Nietzsche seems to espouse a pessimism as dire as Schopenhauer's, if not the same. Although he does not explicitly refer to pessimism in *BT*, it is the basic premise of the book, enshrined in the “wisdom of Silenus”: “What is best of all is utterly beyond your reach: not to be born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*. But the second best for you is – to die soon” (*BT* 3). But Silenus' wisdom is not to be the last word. Nietzsche accepts 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; but he rejects, or at any rate seeks to resist, Schopenhauer's negative evaluation of life – the judgment that existence itself is undesirable and lacks positive value – which is based on or evidentially supported by the fact of the predominance of suffering in life.

Now, by accepting Schopenhauer's descriptive account of human existence but rejecting his evaluative conclusion, Nietzsche seems to have recognized that the quantity of suffering in the world logically entails nothing about the value of existence. One could hold, that is, that life is a vale of tears without being obliged by any logical consideration to add that it lacks positive value. It is, rather, only in the perspective of certain particular values that the suffering of life points to the devaluation of the world. That is, for the pessimist to experience life as valueless because it is dominated by suffering, his beliefs about how life *ought* to be must already have been armed by specific values. Nietzsche's view is that the values in question are those of traditional morality (*BT*, preface, 5; cf. *BT* 3, 22).¹ Thus he claims in a posthumously published note of the mid-1880s that "the pessimistic condemnation of life in Schopenhauer's work is a moral transfer of the herd's yardsticks to the metaphysical realm" (*WP* 379, translation mine).

Of the yardsticks in question, most salient in the present context is morality's axiological hedonism: its judgment, broadly speaking, that happiness is good and suffering is bad, which is evinced, for example, by its positive evaluation of qualities and dispositions that reduce or limit suffering. Hedonism is plainly a tacit assumption of Schopenhauer's pessimism: it is because the sum of displeasure outweighs the sum of pleasure that it would be better if the world did not exist. But far from being a self-evidently valid axiom, this assumption actually constitutes a substantive philosophical presupposition that is, at the very least, genuinely problematical.

Of course, it is normally thought to matter a great deal whether people are happy or unhappy, and whether they experience pleasure or pain. For Nietzsche, however, this way of thinking is blinkered. "Happiness," he contends in a later work, is "no argument in favour of something"; and "making unhappy" is "no counter-argument" (*BGE* 39) with respect to either truth or value. It is no argument because, first, pleasure and pain are "mere epiphenomena" (*WP* 702) of our physical and unconscious natures and hence "have no [. . .] metaphysical significance" (*WP* 789); and second, because "life" is (or should be) the sole locus of value, and its preservation, flourishing, and enhancement are ultimately decisive in the determination of value (*BGE* 4).

It is not entirely clear why the epiphenomenal nature of hedonic experience is supposed to rob it of any significance in the evaluation of life. The claim seems to be that the causal dependence of hedonic states on our physical and unconscious natures renders them, at best, of marginal significance to questions of value. But this is clearly a non sequitur: that A causes B does not entail that A is extraneous to the value of C. If Nietzsche were claiming that consciousness were eliminable from a scientific or neurological point of view, then his claim would *prima facie* be more plausible. For, presumably, the unreality of conscious states *would* preclude such states featuring legitimately in the assessment of the value of reality: the value of A is a function of A's actual properties and effects. But Nietzsche does not think that consciousness is eliminable. Conscious states, he thinks, are epiphenomena of the physical. Therefore, when Nietzsche describes something as epiphenomenal he does not mean to deny that it is real, but only to place it in a certain causal nexus in which it is an effect of some cause but has no causal role itself.

Nietzsche's second argument against hedonism is altogether more powerful. It is a basic axiom of Nietzsche's entire philosophy that what we might call the "life-value" of

a proposition or set of propositions alone is of ultimate significance to its appraisal. This has two distinct applications in his critique of hedonism. First, something might have "value for life" despite not engendering happiness, or perhaps even despite occasioning considerable unhappiness and suffering. Second, the claim that "life" is the sole locus of value entails a general subordination of all other values, including epistemic values, to that of "life." It follows that the truth-value of hedonism is strictly irrelevant to its assessment. Therefore, even if hedonism were known to be true – that is, even if there were some sound theoretical justification for evaluating life and our experience according to hedonistic standards – we should not endorse hedonism if doing so would be detrimental to life.²

Nevertheless, one might still claim that, given our ostensive natural aversion to pain, it is reasonable to suppose that a significant predominance of suffering would indeed render life intolerable. This inference may be hostile to "life," as well as deductively invalid, but it is surely based on a natural way of viewing suffering. Moreover, it is this natural way of seeing suffering to which Schopenhauer appeals in his main arguments for pessimism, which he constructs on the basis of a certain naturalistic thesis about the meanings of the terms "good" and "bad." "Good" (*Gut*) connotes "the fitness or suitability of an object to any definite effort of the will," and "bad" (*Schlecht*) "everything that is not agreeable to the striving of the will" (Schopenhauer 1969: vol. 1, sect. 65, p. 360). Suffering, Schopenhauer plausibly argues, is not agreeable to the striving of the will, and therefore by definition is bad. And since the sum of pain overbalances that of pleasure, it follows that human existence itself is bad – and what is bad "ought not to be" (1969: vol. 2, p. 576).

For Nietzsche, it seems, this argument may be valid but it is not sound, for he rejects outright Schopenhauer's definition of "good" and "bad." Far from being constitutive of badness, that which is disagreeable to an agent's willing is necessary for her to attain what her willing is in fact teleologically directed towards – namely, an increase in the experience of power. This, of course, is Nietzsche's psychological doctrine of the will to power, according to which an agent experiences a growth in power in relation to phenomena over which she previously lacked power, phenomena which previously obstructed her willing. The experience of power therefore depends on the overcoming of obstacles. It follows that what is disagreeable to our willing is not only compatible with the human good, but actually constitutive of it.

But this seems a rather tenuous way of averting Schopenhauer's pessimistic conclusion. For one thing, it appears obvious that it works only for very specific situations and forms of suffering. One can see suffering as an obstacle to be overcome if there is a real chance of overcoming it. But in cases of extreme suffering this surely cannot apply. It would be foolish to say to somebody who is terminally ill with cancer that they should welcome their suffering because it provides an opportunity for striving and exertion and thereby the experience of power. Could the 5-year-old girl of whom Ivan Karamazov speaks in Dostoyevsky's novel, hideously beaten by her parents, forced to consume excrement, weeping in dark solitude, begging "gentle Jesus" for rescue, find a trace of solace in this putative side-effect of her suffering? In such cases, Nietzsche's re-evaluation of suffering seems transparently to fail.

On the other hand, the notion that a sense of power is derivable from suffering relates quite readily to someone, like Nietzsche, who is subject to less severe suffering,

such as migraine attacks. Indeed, it might be prudent for such a person to construct a theory of value that enables him to live with his condition; to declare, as Nietzsche famously does, that "what does not kill me makes me stronger" (*TI*, "Maxims and Arrows," 8). On such a view, suffering gives one extra strength, since it shows that, in spite of one's affliction, one can in some sense prevail. And it is easy to imagine that, for a person who lives by this dictum, suffering could have a psychologically invigorating effect. Perhaps, then, the right doses of suffering can indeed be administered to good effect. But, again, it would surely be frivolous to suggest that one could embrace overwhelming suffering in the way Nietzsche prescribes. In relation to such cases, Nietzsche's pronouncements on power echo Paul's seemingly hollow words, addressed to the Romans, that "we boast of our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance" (Romans 5: 3).

Can anything be said for Nietzsche's view in the light of extreme suffering? Naturally, its plausibility depends on what we understand "power" to be. If "power" in this case means the power to escape (say) a terminal illness, then clearly there is no power available in that sense. But if "power" means something like the courage to fight the illness, to overcome one's fear and weakness, despite the impossibility of ever winning, then that might bestow some value on one's suffering, even though one's life ends.

It is possible that Nietzsche has it in mind that his doctrine of the will to power is itself a justification of existence.³ It is very likely that he saw the positive evaluative stance towards suffering made possible by the will to power as having some kind of redemptive capacity. But the value in such a case could only be consolatory, not justificatory. For in his view human beings are constitutionally unable to perceive the world in all its terrible, unfalsified reality. As he asserts throughout his writings, some degree of falsification of life is necessary for us to be functional agents capable of affirmation and self-affirmation. But if there is suffering from which redemptive power cannot be derived, then the will to power cannot be sufficient for a justification of suffering.

3 "Justification"

Before proceeding any further, we must attempt to pin down Nietzsche's intended sense of "justification." His use of this term has a self-conscious echo of the Western theological attempt to justify the ways of God to man; and it is clear that he conceives of his task of justification as a secularized version of this project of theodicy – i.e., as an attempt to vindicate the desirability of life in the face of suffering.⁴ In certain forms of Christian theology, such a justification would identify a morally sufficient reason for God's inaction with respect to evil, so that the moral economy of the world would be vindicated. Nietzsche is very clear that it would be about as sensible to attempt to give a moral justification of existence – such as that the world exhibits a perfect balance of retributive justice or a favorable balance of moral good over moral evil – as to try to square a circle (*BT*, preface, 5). But he also seems to reject the whole attempt, exemplified by the theological approach, to discharge the need for a justification by rational or conceptual methods. The old Athenians justified their world aesthetically, by finding beauty even in its most terrible depredations; but we moderns, the heirs of Socrates,

can accept only reasoned justifications, typified by the empirical generalizations of science and the universal norms of morality. But it seems that we are wrong, and they were right: rationalism in art and in ethics is doomed to fail even on its own terms.

The cult of intelligibility embodied in morals, in science, in contemporary philosophy, and in realistic art, fails to offer a justification. Hence it is central to Nietzsche's purpose in *BT* to undercut rationalism. This means that he cannot be using "justification" in that work in the scientific/philosophic sense that denotes some kind of conceptual structure, since to do so would clearly subvert his own anti-rationalist agenda. Nonetheless it is not entirely clear why conceptual methods will not work as a mode of justification. One possibility is that Nietzsche thinks that a rational or discursive justification cannot succeed because he thinks that if one reasons *correctly* about the world, one will inevitably come to Schopenhauer's conclusion that life is worthless (Geuss 1999: 107). But since, as we have seen, Nietzsche implicitly regards this conclusion as inferentially invalid, this cannot be right.

Perhaps, then, Nietzsche rejects the notion of a reason-based justification because he denies that "rational thought [. . .] can penetrate to the depths of being" (*BT* 15): if reason is not adequate to the nature of reality, then it cannot reliably assess reality's value, assuming that the value of reality is a function of reality as a whole. It follows that any attempt to justify existence rationally *must* fail, because that would be to attempt to do something that cannot be done with the means one is committed to using. This seems a more likely explanation. But if that is right, how are we to account for Nietzsche's pursuit of a justification on any level? Surely the attempt to justify existence is a hopeless undertaking if the value of existence outstrips our cognitive capacities.

This would be so only if we understood the aim of justification as that of showing that existence is *actually* justified. But if we were to allow for the possibility of a justification that involved no commitments to the ultimate truth about the justificatory status of existence, then our ignorance about whether life is actually justified would be beside the point.

For a justification in the traditional sense to be possible it must be true that:

- (a) the world is *actually* justified, and that
- (b) we can know that (a) is the case.

Nietzsche's position in *BT* with respect to (a) is unclear, but in a roughly contemporaneous notebook entry, he is explicitly skeptical about our prospects for confirming or disconfirming (a): "Neither the metaphysical, nor the ethical, nor the aesthetic significance of existence can be *proven*" (*Philosophy and Truth*, p. 32);⁵ he therefore must regard (b) as false. But our inability to verify (a) renders the project of justification futile only if we conceive of that project as operating under certain epistemological constraints. That we cannot know whether the world is justified matters only if we think that we are in some sense *required* to align our evaluative stance vis-à-vis the world with the actual value of existence. It is this supposition of the traditional approach to justification that Nietzsche rejects; not because he thinks that awareness of our true situation is incompatible with a justification of the traditional kind, but because, first, such awareness is not available to us; and second, because the whole

demand for a justification to be true is part of a wider system of life-denying, Socratic valuations that Nietzsche explicitly rejects in *BT*.

For these reasons, Nietzsche must be operating with an *epistemically neutral* conception of justification – that is, a conception of justification that involves no commitment with respect to its own truth-value. It seems that for Nietzsche this is the closest approximation to a traditional, full-blooded justification that is possible. But it is important to emphasize that the fact that a successful justification must deal in illusion is not, at least for Nietzsche, to be lamented. An epistemically neutral justification is not to be thought of as a second-rate version of a justification in the traditional sense. For, again, the presence of illusion in a justification matters only to those with a morality that shuns all forms of illusion.

But we may still want to ask how such a justification could ever be successful. How could a justification that does not purport actually to justify existence persuade us that life is an appropriate object of affirmation? That is, how could a justification that does not in fact justify existence still be a justification? Let us first note that a justification for Nietzsche is optative – it is not supposed to issue in anything like a propositional truth. Rather, it is designed to generate in us something like an affectively positive attitude towards life, or life-affirmation (*BT* 1). But to have an affectively positive attitude towards X need not entail having any beliefs about the objective value of X, or even the belief that X has an objective value. I can be positively disposed towards all kinds of things (the taste of muffins, the smell of coffee, etc.) without supposing that my attitude reflects anything about the actual value of the object of my esteem. In such cases, my approbative attitude can be unpacked in terms of a relationship between X and me, and not in terms of intrinsic properties of X or in terms of X's relationship to anybody else.

It is a feature of this kind of attitude that it stays in place when we confront the fact that it is not tied to any objective value property. We do not stop retching when we realize that there is nothing objectively disgusting about a smell of rotten vegetables. No doubt many of our evaluative attitudes are *essentially* connected to beliefs about the objective value of the thing contemplated. But even the most emotionally intense evaluative attitudes can be felt in a way that does not presuppose the existence of objective value properties. So, given that Nietzsche's justification aims to generate life-affirmation in us, and that such an attitude does not necessarily involve entertaining any explicit beliefs about the value of existence, that Nietzsche's justification does not demonstrate the positive value of existence does not militate against it.

In this connection, we should also pay heed to the fact that it is specifically an *aesthetic* justification that Nietzsche is attempting to furnish in *BT*. Both in *BT* and his later writing on aesthetics, it is clear that the value of art for Nietzsche is extrinsic. Art is not valuable per se, but rather because it "makes life possible and worth living" (*BT* 1), by turning the "eternal suffering" and "terror and horror of existence" (*BT* 3; cf. *TI*, "Expeditions of an Untimely Man," 24) "into notions with which one can live" (*BT* 7). It is also clear that Nietzsche is an anti-realist about beauty. In *BT*, for instance, beauty is identified with the act of projecting pleasing Apollonian "semblance" or "illusion" onto the object of aesthetic representation (*BT* 3). Nevertheless, the capacity of aesthetic experience to render its subject-matter affirmable is evidently not weakened for Nietzsche by the mind-dependence of beauty.

This, arguably, is because aesthetic qualities do not admit of an appearance/reality distinction. It is constitutive of aesthetic pleasure that the subject is not interested in the objective existence of the object of her attention, but is concerned only with the phenomenology of the experience; and the phenomenology is sufficient for the aesthetic pleasure. Aesthetic pleasure in an object consists in the positive hedonic experience which we connect with the representation of the object. Hence aesthetic pleasure does not take into consideration the objective properties of the object, but only the mere presentation of the object. Our aesthetic interest in an object is purely phenomenological, and whether the phenomenology belongs to external or objective properties of the object is extraneous to the aesthetic attitude. Another way of putting this is to say that a subject's aesthetic pleasure towards an object is a first-order attitude, while her beliefs about the ontological status of the object's aesthetic qualities are constitutive of a logically independent, second-order attitude.

Now although Nietzsche does not explicitly state this view of aesthetic experience, something along these Kantian lines does seem to be implied by his claim that aesthetic representation in general is inherently falsifying: if beauty is illusory, then aesthetic experience *qua* aesthetic experience must be purely phenomenological. And from this it follows that the capacity of art to foster life-affirmation and thereby to justify existence is not destabilized by its inseparability from illusion.

4 The Extension of "Aesthetic Phenomenon"

The next thing to get clear about is the reference of the phrase "aesthetic phenomenon" in Nietzsche's claim that the world is justified "only as an *aesthetic phenomenon*" (BT 5). The claim is ambiguous. It could mean:

- (a) it is when the world is depicted in certain works of art that it appears justified, or
- (b) it is when we view the world itself as an aesthetic phenomenon – that is, as if it were *itself* a work of art or bearer of aesthetic value – that it appears justified.

These propositions are not inconsistent; hence there is a third reading yielded from their conjunction:

- (c) it is only when the world is depicted in certain works of art *or* when it is itself viewed as a work of art or bearer of aesthetic value that it appears justified.

At first sight, Nietzsche certainly seems to endorse (a), but for reasons that straddle two distinct conceptions of the nature of tragic pleasure. Firstly, Attic tragedy is said to depict the necessity of cruelty, suffering, catastrophe, and death – its "Dionysian" content – over which it casts a veil of "Apollonian" beauty, primarily in the form of beautiful speeches and the artistry of the production. The Apollonian elements of the drama offset and dilute the impact of the painful subject-matter, making it tolerable to humans. In tragedy, suffering and beauty coexist, and suffering is "redeemed" by the beauty of its representation, thereby "seducing" the spectator to affirm life. The justificatory effect of tragedy, then, consists, first, in its revealing to us the inherent

pain of life and, second, in its capacity to compensate for this pain by casting over it a layer of transfiguring Apollonian beauty.

But this seems to be simply a restatement of the Humean solution to the paradox of tragedy, albeit couched in poetic language and intended to serve an existential rather than theoretical end, and with the happy exclusion of Hume's improbable thesis that in the concurrent experience of two emotions of opposing and unequal hedonic values, the stronger emotion will capture and reverse the strength of the weaker emotion (Hume 1985). Hume maintains that the spectator who responds with painful emotions to the suffering of the tragic protagonist undergoes a painful experience, but that the overall experience includes counterbalancing pleasures, derived from the artistic spectacle, that are concurrent with the painful emotions. Similarly, Nietzsche claims that the experience of tragedy has a dual phenomenology, an affective state involving a positive and a negative hedonic reaction.

However, Nietzsche also claims, more interestingly, that the negative hedonic state is deflected by a second-order positive hedonic state that is not *essentially* related to the Apollonian. Whereas the pleasure associated with the Apollonian is merely concurrent with the negative emotions of the Dionysian, this second pleasure is essentially related to them – indeed it is a pleasure *in* experiencing them. The Apollonian delight is a first-order pleasure in the medium of presentation of the calamity. The second pleasure, by contrast, is essentially related to the painful emotions, it is pleasure in the pain – it is an instance of “the phenomenon that pain begets joy” (*BT* 2). Tragedy, Nietzsche writes at the very end of *BT*, “play[s] with the sting of displeasure [. . .] and by means of this play [. . .] justifi[es] the existence of even the ‘worst world’ ” (*BT* 25).

This is one of Nietzsche's more interesting ideas and it is a shame that he does not give it more explanatory work to do in *BT*. But the idea is proleptic of Nietzsche's more thorough discussion of “the painful voluptuousness of tragedy.” Nietzsche came to conceive of what is agreeable in the tragic experience as “the spiritualization of cruelty,” that is, the enjoyment in making *oneself* suffer at the sight of the suffering of others (*BGE* 229; cf. *WP* 852).⁶ To the extent that this view is present in *BT*, it strikingly prefigures the later will to power doctrine. The “over-abundant enjoyment,” the “sweetness,” the “voluptuousness” of the experience of tragedy are supervenient upon the cruelty that informs the drama and which cause us to suffer. And the pleasure attendant upon this suffering is the feeling of power that accompanies the recognition that we can expose ourselves to these harsh truths and live with them.

But just as the will to power fails to justify or redeem all instances of suffering, so the prototypical use to which it is put in *BT* does not seem able to do the work required. For as Nietzsche says, the masochistic pleasure derived from the elements of cruelty that inform the drama is itself in some sense dependent upon the Apollonian elements of the drama – even if it is not a pleasure that is taken in those elements. This is implied by his remark that, “not one whit more may enter the consciousness of the human individual than can be overcome again by [the] Apollonian power of transfiguration” (*BT* 25). It follows that there is a maximum value on the suffering that can be rendered Apollonian. Hence, on Nietzsche's own account, tragedy seems constitutively unable to justify suffering in general.

All in all, then, tragedy does not seem to provide a very effective justification of existence. For one thing, it is not real suffering that we affirm when watching tragedy

but a disembodied and aesthetically enhanced, and hence falsified, representation of suffering. Second, tragedy appears to justify existence only temporarily, while we are watching the tragedy – and this exhibits a clear tension with Nietzsche's claim that existence is "eternally" justified as an aesthetic phenomenon.

But Nietzsche evidently thinks that tragedy in *some* sense provides a justification. Perhaps, though, what he has in mind is not that tragedy *itself* justifies existence, but rather that the tragic perspective on suffering – the evaluative attitude to suffering elicited in us by tragedy – can serve as a template for our attitude towards real suffering. In other words, it is by seeing the world itself – and hence suffering – through the lens of tragedy that existence and the world seem justified. If this is right, Nietzsche's understanding of the extension of "aesthetic phenomenon" strictly aligns him with (b) above.

But here too Nietzsche runs into serious problems. For what renders the suffering represented in tragedy affirmable is the veil of Apollonian beauty that is spread over it. It is only in the presence of Apollonian artistry that we are able to affirm suffering. One possibility is that Nietzsche thinks that the value derived from the tragic experience outweighs the disvalue of the suffering of ordinary life. Prima facie this seems implausible, but in a culture (such as that of the tragic Greeks) whose dominant values were aesthetic, the fact that tragedy, as a mimetic art form, depends for its subject-matter on real suffering would mean that real suffering were justified indirectly because it makes tragedy possible. If all values are subordinate to art, then that which makes the greatest art possible would have instrumental value at the very least.

Furthermore, it may not be true that the justificatory effects of tragedy are transitory, since that presupposes too sharp a distinction between our experience of art and ordinary life. We do not value works of art only for the experiences they induce in us while we are in direct contact with them. Rather, we value art in some measure because we are able to take something of the aesthetic mindset embodied in the work into our lives. In this way, art is capable of placing our existence in a new and different light. Aristotle, for instance, accepts the possibility that part of the value of tragedy is educative, in the sense that it enables us to feel pity and fear in the right way and towards the right objects, thereby leaving us better disposed towards virtue. Perhaps Nietzsche has in mind something analogous to the Aristotelian view. That is, tragedy might inculcate an aesthetic attitude to suffering that, as it were, one takes from the theatre and into everyday life and applies to real suffering, supplying one's own Apollonian illusion and/or deriving the masochistic pleasure that is derivable from suffering.

It is far from clear, however, what applying our own Apollonian illusion to real suffering would amount to. In tragedy, the justificatory capacity of the Apollonian consists in the beautiful speeches and the artistry of the production that are rarely features of our experience of real suffering. Perhaps, however, a solution is provided by Nietzsche's claim that we enjoy making ourselves suffer at the sight of the suffering of others. But, as we have seen, he holds that not all of life's horrors are tolerable for humans (*BT* 25). Accordingly, the masochistic pleasure derived from real suffering is not sufficient for the affirmation of all suffering. Moreover, if Nietzsche's justification rested solely on the "voluptuousness" of cruelty, it would be unclear why he chooses to characterize it as an *aesthetic* justification.

Can Nietzsche be rescued from these problems? One line of defence against the objection that Apollonian illusions do not attend instances of real suffering depends upon again treating Nietzsche's stance in *BT* as proleptic – that is, as needing to be unpacked using later ideas which are in some sense prefigured by remarks in *BT*. Nietzsche holds, both in *BT* and later on, that artistic creativity occurs in states of intoxication or *Rausch*: "For art to exist [. . .] a certain physiological precondition is indispensable: *intoxication*. [. . .] The essence of intoxication is the feeling of plenitude and increased energy. From out of this feeling one gives to things [. . .] one calls this procedure *idealizing*" (*TI*, "Expeditions of an Untimely Man," 8). Nietzsche also seems to hold that conducive to this condition is the infliction of cruelty upon oneself. The condition of intoxication is characterized by an increase in the feeling of power. And the pleasure of cruelty against ourselves is derived from "the feeling of power over ourselves" (*WP* 802). Hence cruelty against ourselves is a stimulus to intoxication (*TI*, "Expeditions of an Untimely Man," 8). And the condition of intoxication "release[s] artistic powers in us" (*WP* 798), which enable us to "infuse a transfiguration and fullness into things" (*WP* 801).

This notion of transfiguration recurs repeatedly throughout *BT* and features centrally in its conception of the Apollonian. Nietzsche speaks of Apollo as "the transfiguring genius" (*BT* 16), of "the Apollonian power of transfiguration," and describes Apollonian aesthetic qualities as "transfiguring semblance" (*BT* 25). In addition, he understands the Apollonian in general to apply not just to works of art conceived as objects of aesthetic experience, but also to the subject's own psychological identity. Indeed, there is for Nietzsche a significant sense in which all experience is to be considered illusory and hence the product of the Apollonian, since our experience in general may not be supposed to correspond even approximately to the actual nature of reality. Thus understood, it may well be the case that Nietzsche's conception of the Apollonian is sufficiently broad to provide him with the resources to claim that real suffering too is amenable to Apollonian aestheticization.

There still remains, however, the difficulty that not all instances of suffering are amenable to Apollonian aestheticization. But perhaps on the terms of what I have called Nietzsche's epistemically neutral conception of justification, it is not necessary that all suffering is amenable to Apollonian aestheticization. Perhaps, that is, life-affirmation, an attitude that does not necessarily involve the explicit entertaining of beliefs about the objective justificatory status of the world, can be induced in a subject merely by the aestheticization of *some* instances of suffering. It is plausible to think that we might indeed derive "comfort" (*BT* 7) from knowing that at least a large quantity of our suffering has positive aesthetic value. And this comfort might itself be sufficient for life-affirmation and hence a justification. Not all suffering can be transformed and its harshness eradicated by the Apollonian, but to the extent that aestheticized suffering admits of correlation with suffering that is beyond the scope of the Apollonian, our attitude towards the latter profits from this correlation, as our enjoyment in this imagery transfers into our general stance toward anything similar to it.

One may have qualms about the psychological validity of these assertions, but let us now move on and address the contentious issue of whether we actually can see real suffering as beautiful. It is one thing to claim that there can be beautiful artistic

representations of suffering; it is quite another thing to claim that real suffering can be beautiful.

5 The Aestheticization of Suffering

The justification of existence that Nietzsche presents in *BT* converges on the identification of tragedy as an agent which re-evaluates pain and suffering in human existence. As such, it is appropriate to position *BT* alongside Nietzsche's later works in which he more explicitly embarks upon re-evaluating that which traditional morality has taught us unthinkingly to assign a negative role in life.

The success of *BT*'s re-evaluative project turns on the credibility (and admissibility) of the ascription of positive aesthetic value to suffering, which seems to be entailed by Nietzsche's claim that the world is to be seen as an "aesthetic phenomenon." The potential for the aestheticization of suffering is decisive in the assessment of Nietzsche's justification. But it is also highly problematic. I want to raise two main questions about this claim: first, is it psychologically possible to see suffering, especially intense suffering, as beautiful? And if it is, could such a vantage point feature in any recognizably human perspective on the world? The two questions are whether we can, and whether we ever should, see suffering as beautiful. I address the first of these in this section and the second in section 6.

In order to determine the plausibility of Nietzsche's claim that real suffering can be beautiful, we need first of all to determine the extension of "suffering" in the context of Nietzsche's justification. What constitutes suffering? Let us first note a distinction between the first- and third-person perspectives on suffering. The distinction relates to the difference between the inner and outer experience of suffering, the interiority of painful experience and the perception of another person's pain. According to this distinction, there is a significant difference between, on the one hand, suffering itself *qua* suffering being beautiful and, on the other, the suffering person being beautiful. In the latter case, the suffering is merely a means to a beautiful end. Clearly this is not sufficient for Nietzsche's idea of suffering itself being beautiful. Surely if we are to grant Nietzsche this claim, we would have to say that it was the intrinsic phenomenology of suffering that is beautiful. If it is suffering viewed from the third-person perspective that is to be beautified, then this would not seem to amount to finding suffering itself beautiful. Such a conception of suffering tends towards the abstract and thus becomes necessarily disembodied. Human suffering, on the other hand, is always the suffering of a particular person at a particular moment in time. So the aestheticization of third-person suffering alone would leave out something quite crucial; what is objectionable about suffering is what it is like from the first-person perspective.

But, having said that, suffering might be a state that presupposes a subject; in other words, it might not make sense to talk about suffering without talking about a subject who suffers. If suffering is essentially tied to a subject who suffers, then, although it may not be logically impossible to specify properties of suffering independently of the subject, it might be phenomenologically difficult. To take a Christian example: the suffering of Christ on the Cross *qua* suffering is not beautiful, but many Christians seem to think that Christ suffering on the Cross *qua* suffering Christ is beautiful. Suffering is

necessarily subjective or presupposes a subject; and such a conception of suffering leaves room to blur the distinction between the beauty of the sufferer and the beauty of the suffering, since the suffering *qua* suffering is intrinsically related to a sufferer. The claim is not that a token event of suffering would not be that token event unless it were that token event undergone by that subject; rather the claim is the stronger one that the suffering is made qualitatively what it is, or partly constituted as the suffering that it is, by being the suffering of Christ as opposed to (say) the suffering of Oedipus or the suffering of St. Sebastian. It is partly because these are the sufferings of distinct sufferers that they are qualitatively distinct suffering. If this is right, to find suffering from the third-person perspective beautiful might be sufficient for Nietzsche's claim that we can find suffering itself beautiful.

In any event, the general tenor of his descriptions of suffering in *BT* suggests that it is the pain of others, rather than one's own pain, that is most problematic. It is not the question of how to cope with pain as viewed from the first-person perspective but the question of how to cope with the pain of others that *BT* primarily seeks to answer (*BT* 21; cf. *GS* 338). It is the fact of the predominance of suffering in human life *in general* that stands in need of justification; and this predominance obviously relates most closely to the suffering of others rather than to the suffering of a single human individual.

The ascription of positive aesthetic value to suffering viewed from the third-person perspective is subject to three interpretations:

- (a) Suffering itself is beautiful.
- (b) Suffering itself is not beautiful, but it is a necessary constituent of the overall aesthetic unity of the world.
- (c) Suffering itself is construable as beautiful.

Intuition suggests that (a) is always false: suffering itself is never beautiful. Where beauty and real suffering coexist, we might say, is in the heroic stance in the face of suffering. There is something magnificent in seeing people suffer in a heroic way; even if the sufferer succumbs in the end, as long as he retains his dignity in the face of his suffering it somehow stimulates aesthetic pleasure in us. That (a) is intuitively false does not mean that it *is* false. But to find something beautiful is to take pleasure in that thing. It would be very odd for a person to claim to find a painting beautiful and yet deny that they derive pleasure from it. Suffering is intrinsically painful. Therefore, a person who found suffering itself beautiful would be taking pleasure in pain. Hence there seems to be something slightly paradoxical about the idea of finding suffering itself beautiful.

But perhaps this objection holds on to an old-fashioned notion of beauty. A central part of Nietzsche's enterprise in *BT* seems to be to enrich our notion of the aesthetic, to extend it in such a way that it embraces both pleasure and pain. In any case, even if (a) is really false, this does not mean that Nietzsche does not subscribe to it in *BT*. But since Nietzsche is an anti-realist about beauty, he could not (on pain of inconsistency) subscribe to (a). If beauty is not an objective property, then suffering cannot be objectively beautiful.

One way to make sense of (b) is to say that the world constitutes an aesthetic unity; each feature of the world is a necessary constituent of this aesthetic unity; therefore,

each element (even suffering) is justified. The world as a whole exhibits aesthetic order and is all for the best. This fact about the world is not obvious from the viewpoint of an individual human, but this is because we cannot easily overcome our limited human perspective. To see suffering as having positive aesthetic significance consists in seeing the greater whole and transcending the point of view of my own suffering, and appreciating the part that this plays in the "large-scale economy" (WP 852; cf. BGE 23). To adopt the point of view of the universe is to remove myself from my own concerns and take an impartial and abstracted view of things. From this standpoint, I am a part of a greater, cosmic whole; hence I should think of myself as only a part of a larger whole. I should distance and detach myself from my own point of view, and see my situation as merely part of a whole in which my point of view is unimportant.

Even if we could make sense of how we are supposed to attain perception of the whole, we would still find the unhappy situation that we have a peculiarly unsuitable foundation for a justification of existence. The form of Nietzsche's conception of justification is structured around life-affirmation, and the need for a justification is discharged by producing life-affirmation *in us*. But the appeal to the point of view of the universe cannot achieve this. For suppose I did come to have a definite conception of the world as an aesthetic phenomenon from the point of view of the universe; this would still not be relevant to the problem of how to cope with suffering, until it were endorsed through perception from the relevant point of view. But that point of view is my point of view. The point of view of the universe is useless for me unless it is endorsed as part of my outlook on the universe. The criterion of justification is life-affirmation and hence is not objective but relative to individuals.

On the other hand, it might be argued that if the point of view of the universe displays to us an aesthetic structure or pattern, when I come to appreciate it, I will be moved to conform my own perspective to it. Unfortunately, this too fails to give satisfaction. Suppose for the sake of argument that horrendous suffering is partially constitutive of some aesthetically valuable world order. But would knowledge of such a fact in any way undermine the prima-facie reason for supposing that it would have been better if the infant who is cannibalized by her own parents had never been born?

Another way of construing (b) would be to regard suffering as a kind of aesthetic imperfection that enhances the beauty of the whole. It might be thought that, just as an imperfect nose might add to the beauty of a face, so suffering enhances the beauty of the world. However, for an aesthetic imperfection to contribute to the aesthetic value of the whole, the imperfection's negative aesthetic value must be significantly outweighed by the positively valuable aesthetic features of the whole. The imperfection of a nose can only increase the beauty of the face if the rest of the face is beautiful. But suffering seems not only to cancel out but to engulf what ostensibly has positive aesthetic value in the world. Suffering is not like the ugliness of a small patch of color in a painting that is defeated or canceled out by the positive aesthetic value of the whole.

But does Nietzsche himself subscribe to (b)? A strong reason for thinking that he does not is that in an important passage he explicitly states that seeing suffering as beautiful consists in construing instances of suffering as analogous to "musical dissonance" (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" (*BT* 24). Now since suffering is analogous to musical dissonance, it follows that, as in music, these dissonances can be pleasurable, and hence justified. What is crucial here is the fact the Nietzsche elucidates the conception of pleasure he has in mind as a mixture of pain and pleasure, or what he sometimes refers to as "Dionysian joy." This is clearly redolent of the kind of masochistic pleasure he claims elsewhere is attendant upon the perception of suffering *itself*. If this is right, it follows that Nietzsche thinks that suffering is construable as beautiful. Suffering is construable as beautiful, rather than itself beautiful, as in (a), because, as we have seen, Nietzsche's anti-realism about beauty precludes him from subscribing to (a). The pleasure is taken in the dissonance itself, it is not taken in something to which the dissonance is in some way related, as would be the case if Nietzsche subscribed to (b).

That the means of aestheticizing suffering results not in its *objective* aestheticization but rather a falsification of suffering through the very process of its aestheticization cannot be an objection to Nietzsche's justification if we are to assess it on its own terms. For, as we have seen, Nietzsche holds that the presence of falsity is not an objection once one has as it were gone beyond the moral valuation of truth which requires us to align our conception of and value judgments about the world with its objective constitution.

6 Concluding Remarks: The Ethics of Aesthetic Justification

To close, I want to consider briefly the objection, leveled against Nietzsche by (among others) Michael Tanner, that not to try to alleviate suffering, but rather to "attempt to see it as beautiful" seems a "monstrous solution" (Tanner 1993: xxiii) to the problem of how to make life bearable. We might augment this with the point that if we find suffering beautiful, should we not only not seek to alleviate it, but rather welcome and perhaps even inflict it?

This latter question is in fact an empirical one, since there is no conceptual connection between finding suffering beautiful and hence affirming it, and the desire to increase the amount of suffering that the world contains. One could find suffering aesthetically valuable, that is, without being obliged by any logical consideration to go out and inflict it. Moreover, in *BT*, Nietzsche does not make any explicit claims about what one should or should not do in the presence of suffering. To view with aesthetic pleasure some instance of suffering does not preclude a more engaged and active response to its ethical import.

But what are the ethical implications of seeing suffering as beautiful? Let us assume that a necessary condition for finding something immoral is that a person feels a certain emotional repugnance towards it. If you think that a child should not be tortured, part of your view being an *ethical* view is that you find it emotionally repugnant. This is not to say with Ayer and Stephenson that the feeling of emotion is sufficient for the moral judgment. But it does seem that they pinpointed a necessary condition for a judgment being moral.

This certainly seems to be in conflict with the pleasure taken in suffering that is entailed by the experience being aesthetic. If the suffering is found to be beautiful, then

there is an aesthetic pleasure taken in it. What one would then have to decide in order to determine the ethical significance of finding suffering beautiful is whether those two emotions are mutually exclusive on the psychological level. For them not to be mutually exclusive, it would have to be possible on one level to find the suffering distasteful and yet to take aesthetic pleasure in it. This doesn't seem much more paradoxical than finding the suffering aesthetically pleasurable in the first place. And it is a feature of our response to tragedy that on the one hand we are repelled by the horrors depicted and on the other pleasurably exhilarated. The ambivalence of emotional response, the antithetical pairing of positive and negative emotions, is found in our response to tragedy, and hence presumably could also figure in the response to real suffering.

We might also inquire as to the moral implications of tragedy itself in order to determine the ethics of Nietzsche's position. In tragedy, suffering is not presented as something valuable, as a goal to be pursued, or as a project to be realized. The thought is more that one can cope better with the suffering with which the world is riddled if one adopts a certain sort of stance in relation to it. But that stance does not call on one to go around inflicting suffering on people. Tragedy teaches us that suffering will be central to life whether we inflict it or not. And that is part of Nietzsche's point. The world makes humans suffer necessarily and inevitably as a function of its nature and our nature as finite creatures.

For Nietzsche, the question of whether it is immoral to aestheticize suffering is subordinate to the question of its life-value. Nietzsche's view is a fiercely pragmatic one. Everyone needs to cope with the issue of not being submerged in misery at the amount of suffering in the world. But unless one believes that God is alive and well and expects "eternal beatitude" in the life to come as compensation for earthly suffering, it is unclear how a sensitive spirit could cope with the horrors of life – at least if "cope" here means something like the ability to endure those horrors rather than simply to evade them by (for example) getting drunk or taking various drugs. If, as Nietzsche claims, unmediated experience of suffering is psychologically incompatible with life-affirmation, then perhaps that would obviate the ethical objections to adopting an aesthetic attitude towards suffering. Perhaps to attempt to see suffering as beautiful is the best that can be hoped for in the circumstances. One would therefore reject Nietzsche's proposal at the price of despair.

See also 9 "The Naturalisms of *Beyond Good and Evil*"; 13 "The Incorporation of Truth: Towards the Overhuman"; 16 "Phenomenology and Science in Nietzsche"; 17 "Naturalism and Nietzsche's Moral Psychology"; 21 "Nietzsche and Ethics"; 27 "Nietzsche, Dionysus, and the Ontology Of Music"

Notes

This essay has benefited greatly from input from Tommy Karshan, Stephen Mulhall, Stephen Priest, Vicky Roupá, and Severin Schroeder.

- 1 For a full discussion of Nietzsche's anti-moral stance in *BT* see Came 2004.
- 2 Of course, Nietzsche must persuade us that something's life-value is always more important than its truth-value. Nietzsche must independently demonstrate the authority of his

evaluative criterion before he can make claims that we ought to reject something because it fails to meet this criterion. The demonstration is part of the project of the Third Treatise of *On the Genealogy of Morality*, in which Nietzsche argues that to subordinate considerations pertaining to life to epistemological concerns is constitutive of a Christian, ascetic will to truth and hence motivated by a mistaken world-view.

- 3 Ivan Soll seems to take this view: see Soll 1998: 100–2.
- 4 I discuss the role of theodicy in *BT* in detail in Came 2004.
- 5 Cf. Nietzsche's later claim that "the value of life cannot be *estimated*" (*TI*, "The Problem of Socrates," 2). Note the skeptical import of this remark: it is not that life does not have a value, but rather that its value cannot be "estimated." Geuss is therefore wrong to cite this passage as evidence that Nietzsche came to regard the ascription of value to the world as a kind of category error (Geuss 1999: 109).
- 6 This explanation of why we find pleasure in tragic art effectively resolves the seeming paradox of tragedy. For as Amy Price notes, as "an expression of the attitude of the sufferer to *his* pain," rather than to the tragedy itself, tragic pleasure "does not exhibit the properties of a philosophical paradox" (Price 1998: 386).

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