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## **The Socratic Justification of Existence: Nietzsche on *Wissenschaft* and Existential Meaning**

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### **1. Introduction**

In his first published work, *The Birth of Tragedy (BT)*,<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche famously introduces the concept of an ‘aesthetic justification’ (*ästhetische Rechtfertigung*): ‘our highest dignity lies in the meaning of works of art—for it is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally *justified*’ (*BT*, 5).<sup>2</sup> The notion of an aesthetic justification of existence has received considerable scholarly attention. As *BT* is standardly read, it represents Nietzsche’s attempt to elucidate and endorse certain art-based solutions to the existential problem posed by Schopenhauer’s pessimism—the thesis that ‘it would be better for us not to exist’ (*WWR*, II, 605). Art, on what I shall call the ‘standard reading,’ is *uniquely* capable of facilitating a justification of existence and thereby repudiating Schopenhauer’s disheartening account of the character of

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<sup>1</sup> Quotations from, and references to, Nietzsche’s works make use of the following acronyms: ‘BT’ for *The Birth of Tragedy*, ‘UM’ for *Untimely Meditations*, ‘GS’ for *The Gay Science*, ‘BGE’ for *Beyond Good and Evil*, ‘GM’ for *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ‘WP’ for *The Will to Power*, ‘KSA’ for *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe*. Quotations from, and references to, Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Representation* make use of ‘WWR’. Full bibliographic references for these works and other texts mentioned below are given at the end of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> ‘...wohl aber dürfen wir von uns selbst annehmen, dass wir für den wahren Schöpfer derselben schon Bilder und künstlerische Projectionen sind und in der Bedeutung von Kunstwerken unsre höchste Würde haben – denn nur als *ästhetisches Phänomen* ist das Dasein und die Welt ewig *gerechtfertigt*.’

human experience and its objects.<sup>3</sup> Sebastian Gardner, for example, maintains that *BT* contains the ‘boldest statement’ of an outlook that ‘reappears throughout Nietzsche’s writings,’ namely, that ‘justification can only be aesthetic.’<sup>4</sup> In a similar vein, Bernard Reginster attributes to Nietzsche the claim that seeing the world as justified ‘is essentially an aesthetic or artistic stance’ and says that Nietzsche ‘dismisses’ the possibility of a non-aesthetic justification.<sup>5</sup> And Werner Dannhauser summarizes Nietzsche’s basic position as that ‘all comprehensive responses to man’s situation which preserve life can be called art; different responses lead to different forms of existence,’ which presumably are supposed to be non-life preserving.<sup>6</sup> In this paper, I want to argue that Nietzsche’s view is more complex than the standard reading suggests, which too narrowly circumscribes *BT*’s position in respect of the range of existential options open to man in the face of Schopenhauer’s pessimistic verdict on the value of existence. For, in addition to an aesthetic justification of existence, Nietzsche explicitly countenances the possibility of a *non-aesthetic* justification

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<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche uses the terms ‘Dasein’ (existence) and ‘Welt’ (world) to refer to that which is putatively justified aesthetically. As with their English translations, ‘Dasein’ and ‘Welt’ have multiple senses and can refer, *inter alia*, to existence or being in general, or, more narrowly, to human existence or the human world. In its most extreme formulation Schopenhauer’s pessimism is a thesis about being in general: he asserts that the metaphysical ‘will’ (Schopenhauer’s term for the Kantian *ding-an-sich*) ‘ought’ not to exist. In view of this, and given that Nietzsche’s implicit aim in *BT* is to repudiate Schopenhauer’s pessimism, one might be inclined to ascribe the widest possible ontological scope to ‘Dasein’ and ‘Welt,’ and interpret Nietzsche’s project as the justification of being in general. However, I think this would render the notion of an *aesthetic* justification of existence virtually unintelligible, since art is clearly not usually concerned with the depiction of being in general but rather only with particular aspects of the earthly or human realms. Furthermore, although Schopenhauer claims that the will itself is ‘evil’ and that it would therefore be better if nothing at all existed, the whole identification of the *ding-an-sich* as ‘will’ is motivated by a need to find a metaphysical explanation of *human suffering*; it is for this reason that Schopenhauer’s pessimism is most often formulated in empirical terms—in terms, for example, of ‘the unspeakable sufferings of mankind’ (*WWR*, I, 326) and the ‘sorrowful’ nature of ‘our condition’ (*WWR*, II 170). Accordingly, I shall take Nietzsche to be using the terms ‘Dasein’ and ‘Welt’ in their narrower senses; he is not, that is, concerned to show that the existence of (say) asteroids is justified, but only that human existence is justified. By ‘existence,’ Nietzsche means ‘our’ existence.

<sup>4</sup> Gardner 2014: 600.

<sup>5</sup> Reginster 2014: 14-16.

<sup>6</sup> Dannhauser 1974: 121.

provided by *Wissenschaft* (or ‘Socratism’ as he calls it).<sup>7</sup> Nietzsche does indeed, in the final analysis, regard art as a uniquely potent agent for reconfiguring our evaluative stance towards the world and thus providing a justification of existence. But the standard reading is false in its central contention that a justification of existence can *only* be aesthetic.<sup>8</sup>

My project in the first instance is the exegetical task of understanding exactly what Nietzsche is claiming in respect of Socratism’s distinctive capacity to provide a justification of existence. What is Socratism, and how does it justify existence? I shall argue that, in Nietzsche’s understanding, art and Socratism, though distinct phenomena, share an essential existential function—they both seek to justify existence in their own ways by endowing life with *meaning*. Socratism discharges this task, I shall argue, by ascribing to its truth-seeking project the capacity to ameliorate, even eradicate, the suffering of worldly existence. I shall then provide an account of why, in the final instance, Nietzsche regards art—specifically tragedy—as providing the most durable and effective justification of existence. My argument will be that it is Nietzsche’s view in *BT* that any justification of existence must be underwritten by illusion—in the absence of illusion life *cannot* be justified. The Socratic justification *must* therefore involve illusion. But it is essential to the kind of illusion on which Socratism depends that its capacity to produce and sustain a justification depends on its *not* being recognized as illusion. Socratism’s ‘will to truth’—its shunning of all

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<sup>7</sup> ‘*Wissenschaft*’, of course, is a German language term that denotes the systematic pursuit of knowledge. It includes natural science but it does not necessarily imply empirical research.

<sup>8</sup> The standard reading is also defended by: Roger Scruton, who maintains in respect of the aesthetic justification of existence that, for Nietzsche, ‘no other justification is possible’ (2014: 241); Raymond Geuss, who claims that Nietzsche’s view in *BT* is that ‘none of the traditional ways of justifying existence by reference to formal rationality [...] works’ (1999: xxiii); and Randall Havas, who asserts that ‘Nietzsche denies that a Socratic justification of [life] is forthcoming’ (1998: 93).

forms of illusion and falsehood—means that it contains within itself the seeds of its own demise. It cannot survive the realization of its true nature. Art, by contrast, involves no such doxastic commitments. Rather, art purveys illusions with a ‘good conscience’ (*GM*, III, 25). I shall begin by laying out some of the background assumptions Nietzsche is operating with: what would it be to justify existence? And why does existence stand in need of justification at all?

## 2. Nietzsche’s Project in *The Birth of Tragedy*

From his earliest work to his last, Nietzsche was always primarily concerned with a problem that was bequeathed to him by his mentor and later *bête noir*, Arthur Schopenhauer—the problem of the value of existence, or how to affirm life in the face of its pain and absurdity. In Books II and IV of his major work, *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer had argued that honest reflection on the character of human experience shows that our existence is something we should deplore. This nihilistic judgement follows, Schopenhauer argued, primarily from his account of the metaphysical ‘will’: a seething, noumenal chaos devoid of any *telos*, significance or intelligible form. It is this essential nature of the world that explains the ceaseless struggle of all organic things to exist and persist: ‘The inner antagonism of the will,’ wrote Schopenhauer, ‘...shows itself in the never-ending war of extermination of the *individuals* of those species, and in the constant struggle of the *phenomena* of those natural forces with one another...’ (*WWR*, I, 163).

Like all other phenomenal, spatio-temporal particulars, each individual human being is a mere manifestation of this chaotic will, destined to manifest its pointless striving to no purpose and with no end. The will enters the sphere of self-conscious

beings in the form of an incessant and inherently painful willing. 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. Our existence is a relentless cycle of desires punctuated by momentary gratification, which in any case is merely a negation of the suffering engendered by willing, and boredom, which inevitably ensues when willing is absent. 'Nothing else can be stated as the aim of our existence except the knowledge that it would be better for us not to exist' (*WWR*, II, 605).

At times, Nietzsche seems to espouse a pessimism as dire as Schopenhauer's, if not the same. Although he does not use the term 'pessimism' in *BT*, it is the basic assumption 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's wisdom is not to be the last word. Nietzsche accepts that human existence is chiefly characterized by ineluctable suffering and loss, 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 judgement that existence itself is undesirable and lacks (positive) value—which supposedly follows from the fact of the predominance of suffering in life. Nietzsche's project in *BT* can be understood as the attempt to show that despite the ubiquity and necessity of suffering, life is nonetheless an appropriate object of affirmation. A justification of existence would be something that shows or makes visible or represents to us that this is the case.

In a certain sense, however, as Brian Leiter points out, Nietzsche's talk of 'justification' here is a misnomer, 'for what is really at stake for Nietzsche is that life

should be *experienced* as worth living, not that a rational or cognitive warrant exists for continuing to live.<sup>9</sup> This is an important point. Nietzsche is not—at least not primarily—interested in the question of whether or not the world is *actually* justified. His project is thus to be sharply distinguished from the more traditional attempt to demonstrate that the world is a worthy object of affirmation, that our expectations about how the world ‘ought’ to be are *actually* met. This is basically the project of Christian theodicy, which is concerned to demonstrate by rational means that the world is (morally) good in the eyes of a holy judge. Similarly for Hegel, who inherits a less explicitly theological version of the Christian project, the task is to show that the world is basically rational, comprehensible, and commensurate with the realization of our deepest interests, and that consequently there exists a cognitive warrant for a judgement about the world of the form ‘it is good.’<sup>10</sup> For a justification of existence in this traditional sense to be possible, then, it must be true that (a) the world is *actually* justified, and that (b) we can know that (a) is the case. Nietzsche’s conception of justification, by contrast, is not encumbered by such epistemic constraints. This is fortunate, since his view seems to be that (a) is false—the world is *not* justified. One must falsify—whether by evasion or explicit falsehood—the Schopenhauerian horrors of life in order to affirm it.<sup>11</sup> Hence in order for life to be ‘*experienced* as worth living’

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<sup>9</sup> Leiter 2017.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Hegel’s *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* (*Werke*, 20:455) or his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (*Werke*, 12:28). See also Raymond Geuss’s highly illuminating essay, ‘Art and Theodicy’, in his *Morality, Culture, and History: Essays on German Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>11</sup> That illusion is necessary for ‘life’ is a theme that runs throughout Nietzsche’s writings. The thought appears in *BT*, 7 where Nietzsche writes, ‘it is true knowledge, insight into the terrible truth, which outweighs every motive for action [...] Once truth has been seen [...] man grasps the wisdom of the wood-God Silenus: he feels revulsion.’ It is also prominent in *The Gay Science* (e.g., section 107) and in Book 1 of *Beyond Good and Evil* (e.g., section 4), as well as numerous unpublished notes (e.g., *WP*, 853). There is an interpretive question here as to whether, when Nietzsche asserts that illusion is necessary for life, he is making the particularly strong claim that there are certain existentially pertinent truths

we must have recourse to some form of illusion;<sup>12</sup> that is, to something which induces in us a certain kind of deceptive phenomenology.<sup>13</sup>

There are two senses in which this phenomenology might be deceptive. First, it might be deceptive in that it *incorrectly* exhibits the world as good and ‘persuades’ us that this is the way the world actually is—that is, it induces in us the false belief that the world *is* justified. Or, second, the phenomenology might be deceptive in the epistemically innocent sense that we are presented with a representation of the world which persuades us in a purely affective manner that involves no commitments to the truth of the representation in question. In other words, coming to experience life as justified could be cognitive or non-cognitive. It could involve us coming to believe falsely that life is worth living or it could involve us merely coming to *feel* that life is worth living. In general, Nietzsche is less interested in whether or not we have good reasons for being positively disposed towards life than whether there might be some agent that could produce a positive reconfiguration of our basic affective orientation towards life.

As I have noted, a traditional justification is possible only if the world is actually justified. The pessimism attributed to the Nietzsche of *BT* by (among others)

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humans just cannot know if they are to survive, or whether (as is sometimes the case) he is using ‘life’ in a normative sense to refer to something like ‘human flourishing,’ and hence making the weaker claim that there are certain truths that one must falsify or evade in order to flourish. Unfortunately, I cannot pursue this important issue here.

<sup>12</sup> There are two ways of understanding this point: (i) life is unjustified, so we need illusions; (ii) life is neither justified nor unjustified, so we need illusions. In the second case, one might think that the need for illusions is less pressing. Indeed, as Nietzsche sometimes suggests later on, the realization that ‘value judgements concerning life, for or against, can ultimately never be true’ may even be sufficient to underwrite an affirmation of existence. As he puts the point in the *Nachlass*: ‘becoming must appear justified at every moment (or incapable of being evaluated; which amounts to the same thing)’ (*WP*, 708). I discuss this intriguing idea in greater detail in Came 2017.

<sup>13</sup> This central Nietzschean theme is explored extensively in Came 2013.

Julian Young lies in its repudiation of the possibility of such a justification.<sup>14</sup> The enterprise of offering an epistemically warranted justification for existence is unfeasible. However, for Nietzsche, there is a distinction to be drawn between an epistemically warranted justification and the kind of pragmatic, illusion-based justification that he endorses. The deliberate or conscious use of illusion can only be part of a pragmatic, not epistemically warranted, justification. Hence whether or not a justification is possible will depend in part on our normative attitude towards illusion, and in particular on whether or not our epistemic values are outstripped by other non-epistemic values—values which permit us to embrace the prudential deployment of life-justifying illusions. I shall return to this point in the next section, and also in section 6 when I turn to the issue of Nietzsche’s final preference for an aesthetic justification.

### **3. Socratism as an Existential Strategy**

What is Socratism? Before addressing this question directly, I would like to make some general remarks about the antecedent psychological structures from which, as I shall claim, Socratism emerges. In particular, I would like to suggest that Nietzsche advances the following psychological thesis in respect of our interest in a justification: The need for justification is a non-accidental feature of the human psyche that demands satisfaction. That is to say, human beings have a fundamental need to see the world as (in some sense) good and their lives as (in some sense) inherently worth living. This need is ‘fundamental’ in that it must be satisfied for ‘life’ to be possible or, as Nietzsche was later to put it, to protect us from ‘suicidal nihilism’ (*GM*, III, 28). It is

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<sup>14</sup> Young 1992: 48. Cf. Geuss 1999: xxii.



non-accidental in the sense that it is a need that we must have and cannot lack, and it can be discerned as roughly the same throughout human history.<sup>15</sup>

He gives expression to this idea in section 18 of *BT*: ‘It is an eternal phenomenon: by means of an illusion spread over things, the greedy will always find some way of detaining its creatures in life and forcing them to carry on living.’ Furthermore, it is the inherent teleological goal of ‘everything we call culture’ to provide us with ‘exquisite stimulants’ (*Reizmittel*) that will ‘trick’ us into ignoring the ‘profound aversion’ (*tieferer Unlust*) to life that is the likely effect of an unmediated confrontation with the truth about our condition. Hence both in the ancient world and in the modern world we can see people trying to satisfy their fundamental need to regard the world as justified. This means in all cases trying to see the world and our lives as appropriate objects of affirmation. But the means by which we seek to discharge this task will differ in important ways that will depend on a variety of contingent factors, some having to do with environmental or cultural conditions and some with the psychological constitution of the individuals involved in constructing the putative justification. For example, if a culture’s axiology is hedonistic, then attempts to justify existence will be constrained by this axiology—that is to say, a successful justification will have to show or demonstrate that despite appearances the world is not set up so to thwart our hedonic interests (for instance, by postulating a

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<sup>15</sup> If I am right that Nietzsche posits an essential, and therefore transhistorical, need for justification, then, given the centrality of his interest in the project of justification, this would count against those readings of Nietzsche that seek to portray him, as Ken Gemes puts it, as ‘always a local rather than a global thinker’ (2006: 197)—that is, as addressing concerns that are specific to modernity. To be sure, Nietzsche is primarily interested in addressing the problem of justification in the historically specific terms in which it presents itself to modernity, since the range of justificatory options open to modernity is circumscribed by contingent historical and cultural factors (for example, in the modern, post-enlightenment era, a religious justification is not available). But Nietzsche understands the basic problem of justification as ahistorical—albeit a problem whose articulation and solution are subject to historically variable conditions.

post-mortem existence in which earthly suffering is adequately compensated). Such constraints naturally would not apply in (say) a warrior culture or, for that matter, in any culture which did not regard normative questions as being settled primarily in terms of considerations pertaining to pleasure and pain.

Of course, any culture which is wedded to particularly strong epistemic norms will not be able consciously or deliberately to avail itself of anything other than what I called above an epistemically warranted justification. Such a culture would either self-deludingly persuade itself that an epistemically warranted justification were available – that is, it would deploy life-justifying illusions of one kind or another without admitting or recognizing that they are illusions; or it would align its evaluative stance towards the world with the evaluative fact-of-the-matter that the world is *not* justified. The former, as we shall see, is essentially the strategy of Socratic culture, while the latter is the ‘Buddhistic’ stance adopted by Schopenhauer, who advocates ‘resignation’ and ‘negation of the will’ as the only appropriate responses to the world.

The claim that the need for a justification of existence is fundamental to human nature is contingent on a particularly pessimistic understanding of our primordial encounter with empirical reality. Prefiguring Freud, Nietzsche thinks that we first experience the world as a hostile place that fails to satisfy most of our desires. This renders us vulnerable to profound alienation from the world, to the extent that we are in danger of resenting our lives and even fatally rejecting them. In the broadest terms, the response to this existential problem is to erect cultural constructions, the implicit aim or *telos* of which is to shield ourselves from the threatening tide of meaningless suffering. In essence, culture is to be understood as a series of attempts to cope with and ultimately neutralize the ‘terror and horror of existence.’ Religion does this by

delivering to human beings certain reassuring truths about the character of the world and our existence. Art, as Nietzsche envisions it in *BT*, performs the same basic function through the artistic veiling of life's horrors. The intimate connection between the underlying purposes of art and religion, as Nietzsche understands them in *BT*, is at its most pronounced in his account of tragedy, where, under the manifest influence of Wagner, Nietzsche presents an account of the nature of tragedy as a form of religious ritual that provides not a vindication of life but a redemption from it.<sup>16</sup>

This is not, it should be added, a claim about what individual artists and religious figures in general are consciously or reflectively aiming to do. Nor is Nietzsche meaning to imply that the inhabitants of past cultures would have understood or been able conceptually to articulate exactly what was the primary function of their culture. It is, rather, a reconstruction of the largely unconscious motives that Nietzsche takes to underpin human cultural endeavour *überhaupt*. That religion is essentially a means by which humans reassure themselves about the order and goodness of the world is a fairly widespread claim in nineteenth-century German thought.<sup>17</sup> And the idea that art can fill the gap left by religion is common to a central strand of German romantic theorizing about the supreme cognitive and existential import of art.<sup>18</sup> More contentiously, however, Nietzsche also wants to claim that science, and indeed the whole project of rationally investigating the world, are inflections of the same basic impulse: *scientific endeavour has an existential grounding and the same underlying function as art and religion, namely, to shield us from the*

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<sup>16</sup> This is the theme of Wagner's powerful essay, 'Art and Religion': *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 10.

<sup>17</sup> Versions of this view regarding the psychological origins of religious belief can also be found in Hume, Feuerbach, Darwin, and Freud.

<sup>18</sup> This tradition is exemplified by Hölderlin and Novalis, who maintain that the arts offer us mystical insights into the nature of metaphysical reality.

*unpalatable truth about our condition.* Now, it is perhaps easy to see how religion and at least certain artworks (e.g., those with an explicitly religious content) might operate in the way Nietzsche outlines. In explicitly representing various religious doctrines, they deliver certain reassuring truths about the order and goodness of the world. But how is the project of scientific inquiry supposed to fit into Nietzsche's conception of the *telos* of culture in general? To answer this, let us consider Nietzsche's conception of science and rational inquiry in more detail.

In *BT*, Nietzsche uses the term 'Socratism' to refer to the general project of the rational investigation of the world and its properties. Socrates is the archetype of theoretical man, and although, of course, it is not scientific knowledge that Socrates sought, Nietzsche thinks that there is a historically continuous line of development from the Socratic quest for truth to the modern scientific project of rationally investigating the world. Moreover, Nietzsche holds that 'modern' culture is appropriately labelled 'Socratic' in the sense of being centrally concerned with the pursuit and application of theoretical knowledge. Socratism thus incorporates, but goes beyond, science to all types of human engagement with reality that employ reason and are guided by the belief that the world is rationally comprehensible. More generally, Socratism encompasses a commitment to certain substantive ideals of progress and human happiness, and to the view that the accumulation of knowledge, and associated industrial and technological developments, will advance these ideals. Socratism, Nietzsche claims, is teleologically directed toward giving a justification of existence; it is inherently committed to fostering a certain kind of 'optimism' and life-affirmation.

The optimism of Socratic culture has two principal inflections: moral and

metaphysical. In terms of morality, theoretical man is optimistic in that he believes that ‘virtue is knowledge; and the virtuous man is the happy man’<sup>19</sup> (*BT*, 14). The result is a conception of the human existential situation on which happiness is not subject to the vicissitudes of fortune, since whether or not we choose to be good is, in principle, under our volitional control. It declares that the virtuous life is the only justifiable one, but that it is humanly available.

In the metaphysical or theoretical domain, optimism is equally significant. The Greek tragedians gave expression to the Schopenhauerian thought that the terror and horror of existence are metaphysically necessary—and therefore incorrigible—features of the world. Theoretical man, by contrast, believes that he is capable not only of comprehending existence but of *correcting* it. For the Socratic inquirer believes (i) that life’s ills are merely contingent, and (ii) that the power of science is ‘limitless.’ Jointly, these beliefs constitute the core of Socratic theoretical optimism: reason can not only grasp the uttermost depths of being, it can enable us to ‘eliminate suffering’ and thereby ‘heal the eternal wound of existence’ (*BT*, 15). As Nietzsche was to put the point in *Human, All-Too-Human*: ‘modern science has as its goal as little pain as possible, as long as life is possible—thus a kind of eternal bliss’ (*HH*, I,128). Whereas art and religion seek to justify life by reinterpreting the ills into goods, science endeavours to eradicate the ills altogether.

*Prima facie* this is not a very plausible account of the underlying motivation for scientific enquiry. Although it can undoubtedly be turned to human purposes—the elimination of suffering, for instance—science is methodologically *not* committed to the priority of the human. How, for example, might a systematic interest in the life-

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<sup>19</sup> Plato, *Protagoras* 357e.

habits of the dung fly or the sexual behaviour of ducks be explicable in terms of our putative need for a justification? One could raise a similar objection regarding the supposed function of art, for it is not true that the sole purpose of art is to ameliorate the problem of human suffering. Art, rather, it may be said, has a plurality of functions and purposes—expressive, cognitive, decorative, commemorative, and so on. Perhaps, with respect to art, Nietzsche’s claim is simply that this is what art does when, in Hegel’s memorable phrase, it fulfils its ‘*highest vocation.*’ Such a claim would have some *prima facie* plausibility, since it is arguably the mark of at least a certain kind of artistic or literary genius to take as materials the fearful aspects of experience that threaten to alienate us from the world and to refashion them into a thing of grandeur and beauty. But such an interpretation takes us a long way from Nietzsche’s original claim that *everything* we call culture has the implicit aim of seducing us to continue to exist. One wonders, for example, whether Nietzsche would want to ascribe such exalted existential import to Beyoncé, Cradle of Filth, or EDM.

Perhaps the domain of scientific inquiry extends beyond the human precisely because the best way to acquire knowledge that will benefit humans is to pursue truth indiscriminately and not prioritize the human.<sup>20</sup> Of course, the very idea that science has an essential aim, and one of such existential significance, will strike many as wrong-headed. But I think that it is worth noting in Nietzsche’s defense that many scientists have explicitly conceived of the ultimate purpose of the scientific project in broadly utilitarian terms. Others, such as Francis Bacon, have been explicit in their identification of the definitive aim of science as to ‘conquer and subdue nature,’ the

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<sup>20</sup> This, of course, is the assumption behind so-called ‘blue skies’ research. Proponents claim that unanticipated scientific breakthroughs are sometimes more practically valuable than the outcomes of agenda-driven research, citing advances in genetics and stem cell biology as examples of unforeseen benefits of research that was originally seen as purely theoretical in scope.

implication being that it is nature that in some sense threatens our interests. And Socrates himself ascribes an explicitly redemptive significance to his theoretical pursuits when he attaches to moral knowledge the capacity to protect the agent from all harm ('no evil can befall the good man'<sup>21</sup>). The existential, quasi-soteriological function of science is even more pronounced in contemporary transhumanists and other technological utopianists, whose ideologies are predicated on the idea that advances in science and technology will enable us to fulfill one or another utopian ideal through the abolition of suffering and the conquering of death. In any case, my concern here is not to defend Nietzsche's account of the purpose of science, but to explicate it. Given the framework of such an ambitious task for the scientific project, an interpretive question arises as to Nietzsche's position *vis-à-vis* the prospects for a specifically Socratic justification of existence, and it is to this question that I would now like to turn.

#### 4. The Socratic Justification of Existence

According to what I am calling the standard reading, the significance of the adverbial 'only' in Nietzsche's claim that 'existence is eternally justified only as an *aesthetic phenomenon*' is to exclude the possibility of a non-aesthetic justification. Because the only non-aesthetic justification that *BT* speaks of is Socratism, the standard reading maintains that we should read this statement as specifically ruling out a Socratic justification of existence. However, the statement conceals two, inter-related claims. First, there is the positive thesis that:

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<sup>21</sup> Plato, *The Apology* 41d.

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

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

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

The stronger version is:

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

The standard reading, as we have seen, aligns Nietzsche with (3). In fact, however, Nietzsche openly sanctions the possibility of a Socratic justification. Socratic culture, he says, gives 'theoretical man' the *purpose* of understanding the empirical world, and this causes him to take delight in existence, delight which protects him from the underlying truth of pessimism (and the suicidal implications of knowing it). Indeed, at one stage it even sounds as though Nietzsche rates the life-justifying potential of Socratism higher than that of art: 'No one who has experienced the delight of Socratic knowledge [...] will ever again find a stimulus to existence more compelling' (*BT*, 15). This clearly suggests that in addition to thinking that:

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

Nietzsche holds that:



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

Therefore, the standard interpretation is false; Nietzsche does not assert that Socratism cannot justify life.

In the last section, I outlined a conception of Socratism as an existential strategy that seeks to protect us from the insight of Schopenhauer's pessimism by embarking upon a project of inquiry, the ultimate goal of which is 'earthly happiness for all' (BT, 18). Understood in these terms, one might think that Socratism does not justify existence but only aspires or 'promises' to do so through the eventual elimination of suffering. However, Nietzsche is very clear that Socratism fosters a 'blissful affirmation of existence' (BT, 15) How, *before* the achievement of the Socratic goal of eliminating suffering, is this possible?

For Schopenhauer, the problem of justification arises primarily in relation to the predominance of suffering in human existence. It is the predominance of suffering that leads Schopenhauer to condemn life, and so, for Schopenhauer, for life to merit our approval presumably would require *per impossibile* a substantial reduction in the sum total of suffering in the world, or a demonstration that suffering is in fact not of negative value. The fact that Nietzsche holds that the Socratic project issues in 'blissful affirmation' – that a justification is available despite the continued predominance of suffering – means that he does not accept Schopenhauer's view that it is suffering *per se* that is the problem. Rather, as I now want to suggest, the fundamental problem for

Nietzsche is the problem of *meaning*.<sup>22</sup>

Nietzsche holds that it is the pursuit of truth rather than truth itself that matters most to the Socratic inquirer. Although the teleological goal of the Socratic truth-seeking project is the elimination of suffering, the Socratic justification works by endowing life with meaning. This sense of purpose, to be sure, derives from the attachment of value to pleasure or happiness. But what engenders the *experience* of life as worth living is the sense of meaningfulness that attaches to the Socratic project. That is to say, the 'blissful affirmation' is experienced in the process of seeking those truths that will result in the elimination of suffering, not through the acquisition of those truths themselves.

The Socratic justification is therefore not dependent on the realization of its goal. It is constituted not by the elimination of suffering but by the project of striving to achieve that goal. It is not the goal but the *goal-directedness* of the Socratic project that fosters life-affirmation. This means that, for Nietzsche, *contra* Schopenhauer, suffering per se is not the fundamental objection to life; rather, it is the lack of any pertinent existential meaning that is the real problem for human beings. To be sure, the goal-directedness of the Socratic project would not have the ability to endow life with meaning unless the Socratic agent had antecedently ascribed *positive value* to the goal itself. In addition, the goal's ability to endow meaning also depends on the Socratic agent's estimation of the *realizability* of the goal. The goal loses its ability to endow meaning if one or both of these conditions is not met. The Socratic mode of justification therefore loses its ability to endow life with meaning for an agent if (i) the goal of the elimination of suffering is devalued, or (ii) the agent comes to believe that

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<sup>22</sup> Here I agree with Gemes and Sykes (2014).

the goal is not realizable.<sup>23</sup> But, paradoxically, it also loses its ability to justify life if (iii) it *achieves* its goals. Not only is the Socratic justification not dependent on the realization of its goal, it is dependent on *not* realizing its goal.

That truth-seeking endows life with meaning and that it is *this* fact about truth-seeking that motivates the Socratic inquirer are not claims that Socratism explicitly makes or would accept: Socratism conceives of itself as motivated *only* by an interest in truth. It is because Socratism conceives of its project in this way that Nietzsche says that when Lessing, ‘the most honest of theoretical men came close to admitting that he valued the pursuit of truth more than truth itself, thereby revealing the fundamental secret of science, he aroused the astonishment and irritation of the scientifically minded’ (*BT*, 15). But if the Socratic inquirer is more concerned with truth-seeking than with truth, it follows that the Socratic justification is in an important sense dependent on self-deception and illusion. For in order to engage in the Socratic project and reap its life-justifying benefits, it is necessary to conceal from oneself one’s basic motivation for entering into that project in the first place. And it is partly for this reason, as I shall now argue, that Nietzsche thinks that Socratism must fail to provide an *eternal* justification of existence.

### **5. Why the Socratic Justification of Existence is Temporary**

I suggest that Socratism fails to provide an eternal justification for two reasons. First, its truth-seeking project ultimately fails. This is reflected in two aspects of Socrates’ life that Nietzsche identifies: (1) Socrates’ claim that he knew *nothing* (*BT*, 13); and (2) his

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. The discussion of nihilism in Reginster 2006.

eventual need for art, which manifests itself in his desire to *practise music* (BT, 15). I take it that these aspects of Socrates' life are intended to symbolize how Socratism eventually undermines itself. Socratism fails (Socrates knows nothing), but this doesn't restrain his need for a justification, which re-emerges in his desire for art. This desire for art may be seen as Socrates' tacit recognition that art alone is capable of eternally justifying existence.

Second, Socratism is based on what Nietzsche takes to be a 'profound *illusion*' (BT, 15), namely, 'the unshakeable belief that rational thought, guided by causality, can penetrate to the depths of being and even of correcting being' (ibid). That this claim is false has been demonstrated, Nietzsche believes, by the 'extraordinary courage and wisdom of Kant and Schopenhauer' (BT, 18). But illusion is what Socratism most explicitly opposes; indeed, theoretical man 'sees error as the embodiment of evil' (BT, 15). As Nietzsche puts it in an early note: 'the complete annihilation of illusion is the drive of the sciences: it would be followed by quietism—were it not for art' (WEN, 22). This means that the Socratic justification must be *unreflective* as regards its basic practice; that is, it must suppress its false presuppositions. But Socratism generates a demand for reasons. Ultimately, therefore, the Socratic inquirer will need an argument or rational explanation as to why his life is justified. Such an individual would find inadequate the idea that his life is justified unreflectively. It follows that the *ideally* Socratic individual could not accept the true account of why his life is justified. The unreflective nature of the Socratic justification would be inherently unsatisfactory to him. Accordingly, the Socratic justification can only work if one doesn't question *how* it works. But this, of course, goes against the Socratic demand for reasons and so is ultimately untenable. The indiscriminate nature of the Socratic commitment to

knowledge entails that eventually it will call into question its own mode of justification. As a justification of existence, Socratism is inherently unstable and finally self-defeating: it cannot survive the realization of its true nature.

The unreflective Socratic justification, then, only works if one doesn't question too deeply one's reasons for being positively disposed towards life. But given that Socratism's avowed purpose is to be liberated from illusion, its justification is vulnerable to its own most valued edicts. Because Socratism cannot justify life for *ideally* Socratic individuals, it lacks eternal potential as a justification. But the instability of Socratism doesn't explain why it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that life is *eternally* justified. Furthermore, the aesthetic justification seems to have been equally unstable: it fell at the hands of Socratism. And as an historical phenomenon, Socratism proved to be very stable; indeed, it outlasted the tragic culture of the Greeks by more than two millennia. How, then, can Nietzsche reasonably claim that the aesthetic justification has eternal potential?

## **6. The Aesthetic Justification of Existence**

According to Nietzsche, the (pre-Socratic) Greeks were saved from nihilistic despair by aesthetic illusion—specifically, 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 an illusory 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.<sup>24</sup>

The important point to note for present purposes is that the tragic is a sub-species of illusion, one that presents the content of the Schopenhauerian worldview in a fashion that renders it (just barely) tolerable. Tragic art incorporates Apollonian 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 kill us. Having defined music as the Dionysian art *par excellence*, he expresses this idea in section 21 of *BT* 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

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<sup>24</sup> See *BT*, 17: ‘For a brief moment we really become the primal essence itself, and feel its unbounded lust for existence and delight and 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.’

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 [tr. Lloyd-Jones])

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'—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 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. 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.

## **7. Concluding Remarks**

Whether one thinks (as Young 1992 does) that the dependence of *BT*'s modes of justification on illusion renders its central project a failure depends on whether one thinks that a fully satisfactory justification of existence must be epistemically warranted. For Nietzsche, to reject a justification of existence by virtue of its involvement in illusion is to wield the Socratic bias that cognitive error is always to be avoided, and that evaluative judgements depend for their legitimacy on their truth or well-groundedness – that is, on their corresponding to some evaluative fact-of-the-matter. We may wish to reject any justification on such epistemic grounds but it must be pointed out that to do so would be contrary to Nietzsche's general position that beliefs and evaluative judgements are none the worse because they do not correspond to genuine values. To suppose otherwise is nothing more than a moralistic prejudice.



This means that any objection to Nietzsche that is based on epistemic considerations misses its target unless one has already shown Nietzsche's reasons for subordinating such concerns to prudential-existential matters to be inadequate. Having said that, one might accept the normative claim that cognitive error and the issue of whether or not a justification is accurate to the evaluative fact-of-the-matter are relatively unimportant but still reject the idea of a prudential justification on psychological grounds. For we are still left with the difficult and important question of how a justification that we believe to be false is supposed to have the sought after psychological effect and avoid being just another kind of failure. I leave further consideration of this issue to another occasion.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> I am grateful to Nick Zangwill for helpful comments on a draft version of this paper.

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