SMPLCTY

Ecological Civilisation and the Will to Art

SAMUEL ALEXANDER

Essays on the Aesthetics of Existence

An Aesthetic Justification of Existence: The Redemptive Function of Art

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‘We possess *art* lest we *perish of the truth*.’

– ***Friedrich Nietzsche***

An Aesthetic Justification of Existence: The Redemptive Function of Art

Samuel Alexander

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, published in 1872, Friedrich Nietzsche made his intriguing but ambiguous claim that it is only as an 'aesthetic phenomenon' that existence and the world could be justified.[1] Given that the Will to Art can be understood as a perspective offering such an aesthetic justification, in this essay I offer a close reading of Nietzsche's strange pronouncement. Indeed, several of these collected essays can be understood as an attempt to grapple, directly or indirectly, with Nietzsche's aestheticism, even though I will end up traversing territories where Nietzsche himself never roamed and often drawing conclusions with which he would not have agreed.

A number of perplexing issues immediately present themselves. What does it mean to interpret life as an 'aesthetic phenomenon'? As opposed to what? Who said that existence and the world needed to be justified? And what might 'justification' in this context mean?[2] The short answer is simply that Nietzsche would turn to art and aesthetics as a strategy for resolving the problems of personal existence – but that raises more questions than answers. The first task is to understand *what is meant* by an aesthetic justification, after which this justificatory approach can be assessed.

I begin with the question of justification itself – which will also serve as a brief review of the previous essay. Nietzsche, like so many before him and since, felt that the world was in need of justification because, overall, existence is horrible and the 'truth is terrible'.[3] Writing at this stage under the heavy influence of the 'great pessimist', Arthur Schopenhauer, Nietzsche saw that suffering lay at the molten core of the human condition and that our species had no prospect of obtaining lasting happiness. Our desires are insatiable, leaving us forever dissatisfied and blindly striving, and all around us we see creatures living in conditions of pain and anxiety, engaged in a violent struggle for existence. The pessimist wonders whether it would be better if the world did not exist at all.

Schopenhauer's philosophical response to the human situation was to turn away from life, to try to deny the desiring Will in every way possible and live a life of extreme asceticism (a strategy Schopenhauer was never able to practice successfully). Contra Schopenhauer, Nietzsche was not willing to negate life in world-denying resignation. Instead, he spent his intellectual energies pursuing strategies of life affirmation,[4] which drew him toward art and the aesthetic. 'Truth is ugly,' he admitted in a famous unpublished note of 1888. 'We possess *art* lest we *perish of the truth*.'[5] This is a perspective that rewards close examination.

Religious justification of existence

To suffer without understanding why renders life cruel and absurd. It demands an explanation. Historically, the most prominent way of answering these existential questions

involved turning to religion – what could be called the *religious justification* of existence. From this perspective, God created the universe and all that is in it, including human beings, and so our purpose on Earth is to live our lives in glorification of our benevolent Creator. But here we are still faced with the so-called 'problem of evil'.[6] Human existence is full of tragic elements, often caused by deliberate human action, and the question arises why an omnipotent and benevolent God would create such a universe and allow such horrible things to happen, often to seemingly innocent beings.

This has led to various 'theodicies' that seek to justify the existence of evil and suffering in a world allegedly created by a loving God. Either God could have created a different world, but did not, in which case he is not good; or else God was unable to create a better universe, in which case he is not omnipotent. To resolve these tensions, some theologians argue that the gift of 'free will' implies that humans must have the *freedom to be evil* (otherwise we would not be truly free). In other words, God must have determined in his infinite wisdom that the full range of freedoms was worth the suffering that such unconstrained freedom of the will could produce. Some might respond, blasphemously, that this infinitely wise reasoning is contestable – couldn't God have made us *mostly free* but incapable of extreme evil? But assuming for argument's sake that the justification of evil on the grounds of free will is sound, it still does not explain or justify why evils exist that are *not* a result of free and deliberate human action (e.g., why some children are born with cancer or why natural disasters occur that are beyond human cause or responsibility).

Some theologians deal with these issues simply by asserting that God has a divine plan, and that he works in mysterious ways. Seemingly inexplicable evils could be understood as God 'testing' human beings in ways that build moral character, even if we may not fully understand or appreciate the subtle benefits of this spiritual process. We are called to have faith. What we perceive as evil, is not really evil. Seventeenth-century philosopher Gottfried Leibniz offered one of the most famous examples of this line of reasoning when he argued that 'God would not permit evil unless he could procure a greater good from evil',[7] concluding that the world that exists must be the best of all possible worlds, because God made it. '[A]ll the imperfections we think we find in the world only originate from our ignorance.'[8]

Another argument in the same vein maintains that earthly suffering is justifiable because, in the end, the good and the chaste will enjoy eternal peace and happiness in the blissful Kingdom of God. This would render our finite, worldly suffering negligible in the grand scheme of things. Without going further into the intricacies of religious apologetics, the basic nature of a religious justification of existence is clear enough. The justification is God – and God is good. For believers, at least, this view can offer some existential consolation.

Of course, the rather significant problem with this line of reasoning, according to Nietzsche, is that 'God is dead'.[9] The existential implications of this will be explored in the next essay. For now, I simply note that, in an increasingly secular age, many people will not find the religious justification of existence plausible – and even theists might doubt specific arguments given in response to the problem of evil. Inexplicable and seemingly meaningless suffering exists in a world without God, and those people who are philosophically inclined are left trying to determine whether there are any good reasons why this might be so. In the absence of such

reasons, one might be tempted to despair, concluding that there is no justification for existence.

Rational justification of existence

Religion, however, does not exhaust our options. Another approach is to seek a justification grounded in *human reason*. From this perspective, we may not be God's creatures, but we do seem to be rational animals, and it is conceivable that we might be able to deduce a rational or metaphysical justification of existence, even in the absence of God. This could be called the *rational justification* of existence.

Although there are various forms of this philosophical endeavour, the analytical approach is based on the assumption that humans ordinarily live in an ever-changing world of 'appearance', but if we apply our rational faculties correctly, we can discern an underlying metaphysical 'reality'. The paradigmatic example is given by Plato in his Myth of the Cave.[10] In this allegory, prisoners are in a cave, chained up with their backs to the light, such that they can only see shadows dancing on the wall in front of them. To these prisoners, the shadows constitute their entire experienced reality, but little do they know it is all an illusion. They are deceived, merely living in a world of appearance. Fortunately, so the argument goes, sound philosophical reasoning can break us free from the chains of such illusions, whereupon we can leave the cave and begin to see the world as it *really is*.

According to Plato, the true metaphysical reality that underlies appearances is composed of 'Ideas' (or 'Forms') that are eternal and unchanging. For example, all worldly examples of horses are mere imperfect representations of the Platonic Idea of a Horse. Or a rose might provide a particular example of beauty, but this is an imperfect and transitory example of Beauty itself. Through careful philosophical analysis humans can come to know this reality, and thereby commune, in a sense, with the eternal world. Not only that, understanding the metaphysical structure of reality can provide insight into moral questions about how we ought to live our lives. In doing so we might discover that life has meaning and purpose, despite the suffering it entails. Through the mouthpiece of Socrates – the 'prototype of the theoretical optimist'[11] – we are advised that no one *willingly* does wrong, given that wrongdoing only hurts the soul of the perpetrator, and only people living in ignorance would willingly hurt themselves. It could be said, then, that before the Christian had 'sin', the rationalist had 'error'. On that basis, the injunction to 'know thyself' could guide human beings toward a meaningful life of truth, goodness, and beauty. Similarly, the Stoics declared that nothing can hurt the soul of the wise person, for it is the interpretation of events that cause harm, not the events themselves. The purpose of life is to live virtuously, and this can be done even in harsh conditions. This led many ancient philosophers to conclude that existence is justified on rational grounds.

Around two thousand years later the attempt to grasp ultimate reality can be found in most of the Enlightenment philosophers too, who variously professed to have discovered 'first principles' or 'philosophical foundations' upon which the edifice of human knowledge could be based. Like Plato, these rationalistic philosophers attempted to offer worldly insight, consolation, and orientation by grounding an understanding of existence in human

reason. Immanuel Kant, for instance, claimed that he had rationally derived the 'moral law', putting forth his 'categorical imperative' as the guiding principle of ethical action. He assumed this principle would be accepted by all human beings who correctly exercised their rational faculties.[12] It is no coincidence, perhaps, that Kant's categorical imperative functions in a remarkably similar way to Christianity's 'golden rule' (love thy neighbour as thyself). This suggests that both religious and Enlightenment thinkers were searching for guidance of some form – or at least some metaphysical comfort.[13]

It is scarcely necessary to point out that Nietzsche was as scornful of the metaphysicians as he was of the theologians. In his inimitable way, he sought to undermine the confidence that Plato and the Enlightenment philosophers had in reason, by exposing the ways their rationalistic hopes and metaphysical aspirations had fallen short. Not only had they failed historically, but Nietzsche would assert that the nature of the human condition is such that we will forever be denied access to eternal or objectively verifiable truths – and it is sheer hubris to think otherwise. Truth is but a 'mobile army of metaphors,'[14] by which he meant that our outlooks or perspectives on the world are always partial, value-laden, and inevitably shaped by contestable and unstable assumptions. Even the meanings of the words used to philosophise are inclined to shift and change over time, making the notion of static, objective, and eternal 'truths' highly problematic from an epistemological perspective.

I will not rehearse Nietzsche's complex epistemological or moral critiques, other than to note that he sparked a crisis of confidence in the Western philosophic tradition which endures to this day. Contemporary philosophical literatures on deconstruction, neo-pragmatism, anti-realism, social constructionism, literary theory, and post-structuralism, among others, point to the profound influence that he has had over the last century in intellectual and cultural domains well beyond philosophy departments. Pejoratively dismissed as 'postmodernism' by those who don't like the conclusions, metaphysicians today are a dying species and hopes for objective foundations for knowledge seem to be fading. Although there are, and always have been, counter-Nietzscheans who are desperate to avoid his unsettling conclusions, in my view there does not seem to be any antidote to his critique of rationalistic metaphysics. I will be proceeding on that basis.

Aesthetic justification of existence

So where does all this leave us? For post-Nietzscheans, we are left without either religious or rational-metaphysical justifications for suffering. It is on this basis that Nietzsche offered his *aesthetic justification* of existence. This gives rise to questions about what it could mean to describe existence as an aesthetic phenomenon and in what sense this could be said to 'justify' an existence that is full of suffering.

At once it should be clear that an aesthetic justification of existence could not be objectively demonstrable by way of reason or founded upon 'first principles', for that is precisely the rationalistic or metaphysical strategy that Nietzsche forcefully rejected as implausible. He was not claiming to have uncovered eternal truths about an underlying metaphysical or religious reality, for he did not believe reason could penetrate to the depths of being in that way. Instead, we can assume he was offering a justification in a different sense – but what sense was that?

The best way to understand Nietzsche here is to see that he was not offering a rationalistic justification but a psychological or existential one. That is, he was trying to describe or engage existence and the world in ways that might *induce a positive evaluation towards life* – an affective attachment – despite the prevalence of suffering.[15] In this sense, an aesthetic justification is not a proposition of truth or a cognitive evaluation but is instead, as philosopher Daniel Came argues, 'epistemologically neutral'.[16] The success or failure of an aesthetic justification does not depend on whether it can be shown to be based on objective philosophical foundations. Rather, it depends on whether it can induce a subjective affirmation of life in ways that religious and metaphysical justifications, which are no longer credible for post-Nietzscheans, cannot. After all, having a positive affective attitude toward something (e.g., life) does not necessitate being able to cognitively demonstrate that it has *objectively demonstrable value*.[17] It just needs to work psychologically or existentially – which is to say, it needs to induce life affirmation, *in fact*.

As noted above, Nietzsche's defining strategy here is to hold up art and the aesthetic dimensions of existence as the means for affirming life in a godless world, despite the suffering life inevitably entails. He does not suggest, however, that art has objective value. Art has value because it 'makes life possible and worth living,'[18] through its capacity to transform the 'eternal suffering'[19] and 'horror and absurdity of existence'[20] into 'notions with which one can live.'[21] Indeed, Nietzsche seems to suggest that, in the absence of other forms of justification, the contemplation or creation of art, and the imposition of aesthetic form on one's life, are the best means available for keeping despair or resignation at bay. Rejecting an aesthetic justification risks inviting despair, for one could find oneself in a world of suffering but without tools for negotiating or managing such an absurd existence.

Nietzsche-scholars have interpreted the meaning of this strategy in various ways. An aesthetic justification could involve arguing that art offers *therapeutic* consolation or catharsis that makes life bearable. In this light, suffering is mitigated or dissolved as we lose ourselves in aesthetic experience.[22] Furthermore, just as 'roses burst from thorny bushes,'[23] art can provide something of a middle world between human beings and the terrors of existence, transfiguring the original chaos of nature into something humanly digestible. That chaos can be rendered tolerable, more comprehensible, meaningful, perhaps even beautiful. Through the drive for beauty – or what I am calling the Will to Art – Nietzsche claimed human beings are able to 'develop uniquely from within, to transform and assimilate the past and the alien, to recover completely from wounds, to redeem loses, and to refashion broken forms.'[24] From this perspective, art is a uniquely powerful form of existential medicine.[25]

Moreover, art promises to be somehow redemptive and healing, driven by a 'primordial desire for *Schein,*'[26] (i.e., for illusion, dreaming, veiling, etc.), even if Nietzsche stated that any aesthetic redemption through *Schein* must be a continuous process rather than a final destination. Philosopher Aaron Ridley interprets Nietzsche as suggesting that 'art can present us with truth in such a manner that we do not perish of it,'[27] a position that Nietzsche developed in his theory of tragic art (to be considered in the next section). Schopenhauer also presented a version of this aesthetic response to suffering, but concluded that, at best, aesthetic experience could provide temporary relief from the onslaught of life and could not, in the end, provide any sort of justification. Nietzsche's approach to aesthetic experience was

not so fleeting or transitory in its significance. He argued that art can actually have permanent effects on how we see the world and live within it. As Daniel Came writes:

> We do not value works of art only for the experience they induce 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.[28]

God may be dead for many people today and objective truths may be inaccessible to creatures like ourselves, but for some people the spiritual needs to which religion and metaphysics catered might remain. Is it only a matter of time before we abandon such needs as the out-dated relic of an untenable worldview? Or are those spiritual needs somehow reflective of our condition as self-creating agents who are in search of meaning in an ambiguous and absurd universe? Artistic creation and aesthetic experience, Nietzsche suggested, may offer the only form of redemption available.

This approach, however, has not been without its critics. T.S. Eliot, for example, rejected as a mere conjuring trick any attempt to find a substitute for religious faith in art: '[N]othing in this world or the next is a substitute for anything else; and if you find that you must do without something, such as religious faith or philosophic belief, then you must just do without it.'[29] Similarly, Gordon Graham writes that 'the abandonment of religion, it seems, must mean the permanent disenchantment of the world, and any ambition on the part of art to remedy this is doomed to failure.'[30] In his book *Culture and the Death of God* (2015), Terry Eagleton reviews the various historical attempts to find a substitute for God in art and culture and finds them all, in various ways, inadequate.[31]

But Nietzsche demonstrated through his own life and outlook that an aesthetic remedy was not doomed to failure, and others since Nietzsche have discovered the same existential possibility. In the words of celebrated American poet Wallace Stevens: 'After one has abandoned a belief in God, poetry is the essence which takes its place as life's redemption.'[32] And even if art is not a perfect or exact substitute, one might be inclined to agree with philosopher Andrew Huddleston that '[a]n art without God may be better than a conventional religion with a dead God.'[33] The early theorist of aestheticism, Walter Pater, described human beings as 'under the sentence of death but with a sort of indefinite reprieve':

> Some spend this interval in listlessness, some in high passions, the wisest, at least among 'the children of this world', in art and song. For our one chance lies in expanding that interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time… For art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moment's sake.[34]

Beyond consolation or therapy, Nietzsche also recognised that great art could induce an *energising* or *intoxicating* affect, one that could inspire an affirmation of life by giving us courage, motivation, or determination to persevere – despite everything. Like Schopenhauer, Nietzsche gave special pride of place to music in the hierarchy of the arts: 'Has it been noticed that music liberates the spirit? gives wing to thought? That one becomes more a philosopher the more one becomes a musician?'[35] There is a dual aspect to this type of aesthetic affect: it

can justify the struggle of existence through its energising, intoxicating effects, but it can also inspire the artist to be creative, thus potentially creating more art objects that can justify existence. 'For art to exist…' Nietzsche wrote, 'a certain physiological precondition is indispensable: *intoxication*… The essence of intoxication is the feeling of plenitude and increased energy.'[36] In a later essay it will be seen that poet-philosopher Fredrich Schiller posited two categories of beauty – 'melting beauty' and 'energising beauty' – which can be understood as reflecting different ways art can impact on our condition and for different purposes.[37]

Elsewhere Nietzsche asserted that the condition of aesthetic intoxication 'release[s] artistic powers in us',[38] which enables us to 'infuse a transfiguration and fullness into things.'[39] Walter Pater would celebrate aesthetic experience with similar zeal, maintaining that '[t]o burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life.'[40] This language clearly reflects a spiritual or even mystical orientation toward aesthetic experience. But again, even if art cannot provide an exact substitute for religion, which is true, perhaps it is nevertheless fair to draw a strong analogy here between art and religion, especially if, as Nietzsche himself would say, 'a "thing" is the sum of its effects, synthetically united by a concept.'[41] In other words, if the intoxicating or consolatory effects of art and religion can be similar, then the analogy is not entirely misplaced.

Nietzsche believed that art can even make us aware of, or shape, our deepest values and interests in life,[42] placing a heavy responsibility both on artists and on those who wish to engage art authentically. The intoxicating effects of aesthetic experience, as well as being rapturous and exhilarating, can also be threatening and terrifying. This is because art can bring us in touch with what Nietzsche would call the primordial oneness or *Ur-Eine*, which is the foundational principle of the *Artisten-Metaphysik* presented in *The Birth of Tragedy*.[43] The *Ur-Eine* can be understood as Nietzsche's aesthetic restatement of Schopenhauer's concept of the Will. But being in touch with this underlying cosmic force through art can be a painful and contradictory experience. Because of this possibility – 'which could destroy us' or lead to a 'state of mystical self-abnegation and oneness'[44] – the consolatory and redemptive requirement for *Schein* remains a necessary part of aesthetic justification. Any mystical insight that is attained, however, cannot be described or communicated through words, concepts, or the plastic and representational arts. At best, it can be conveyed through the non-representational medium of music, a point to which we will return when discussing Nietzsche's theory of tragedy.[45]

The therapeutic and energising approaches to aesthetic experience can also be interpreted from either the spectator view (contemplating art can justify existence) or from a creator-artist perspective (creating works of art can justify existence). Philosopher Bernard Reginster argues that, for Nietzsche, the significance of art lies 'less in its *products* than in the *creative activity* by which they are produced.'[46] Through art and creative activity, Nietzsche suggests we have the tools with which human beings can find meaning in our suffering, rendering life, if not rationally justifiable, then at least bearable, perhaps even fulfilling. Another interpretation of the aesthetic justification has been offered by Nietzsche-scholar Jeffery Church, who contends that Nietzsche was calling on us to reverentially hold up great artists as exemplars. This reverence is deserved, Church proposes, on the grounds that the beauty of their creative lives

can inspire us to embrace the challenge of living creatively, provoking us to consider whether we, ourselves, might have unfilled creative potentials still to be realised.[47]

The underlying feature in all these approaches involves viewing the world, ourselves included, as aesthetic phenomena – as artworks. From this perspective, we have the capacity and perhaps responsibility to give style or form to the content of our lives and to interpret existence according to certain aesthetic (as opposed to religious or rational) criteria. Nietzsche is inviting us to see if, in doing so, we can affirm life, and I contend his invitation is worth accepting. This would justify art not for the sake of art, but for the sake of life.

The various approaches to aesthetic justification outlined above are not mutually exclusive and indeed can be seen as mutually supportive. If what matters is 'what works' (i.e., what induces a love of life) then it may be that one strategy is effective for one person and a different strategy for another. In this sense, Nietzsche's aesthetic living strategy need not be judged in terms of right or wrong but simply in terms of effectiveness or ineffectiveness. In any case, I am not seeking to defend a *particular interpretation* of Nietzsche, but instead to draw on Nietzsche's work to explore the question of whether life can or cannot be justified in aesthetic terms. It will also be clear that I have not yet attempted to *evaluate* the aesthetic justifications outlined above. Rather, I have simply attempted to *define* what type of justification I am talking about.

Apollo vs. Dionysus: Nietzsche's theory of tragic art

According to Nietzsche, an aesthetic justification of existence, if successful, can affirm existence and thereby the world, thus avoiding Schopenhauer's pessimistic negation of life. But what is the *process* by which this affirmation might present itself to us as a live option? How can we actually live in a world of suffering without degenerating into pessimistic resignation and withdrawal? Not, I have suggested, by looking to religion or relying on pure reason. But even from a post-religious and post-metaphysical standpoint, the suffering and absurdity of life still needs a response or justification. Nietzsche felt that the ancient Greeks had found such a solution in art and the aesthetic interpretation of life – especially in and through the works of the great tragedians. Let us consider this view in more detail.

The Birth of Tragedy celebrated Greek tragedy as the highest and most important art form. In ways to be discussed below, Nietzsche held that tragic art offered a supreme synthesis of the two fundamental, yet opposed, aesthetic forces or art-drives in the world – the Apollonian and the Dionysian. After making (or rather asserting) that case as an historical thesis, he turned his attention to Europe of the nineteenth century. His contemporary thesis was to suggest that, in the cultural abyss created by a dying Christianity, and given the loss of faith in Enlightenment rationalism, the modern age, like ancient Greece, could only hope to find redemption in the aesthetic realm. At this stage, writing in 1872, Nietzsche looked to the operas of Richard Wagner as promising the 'rebirth of tragedy' – as being on the cusp of provoking a regeneration of German culture. The last third of *The Birth of Tragedy* is essentially a gushing celebration of Wagner's music, a celebration, it should be noted, that Nietzsche would eventually regret as he came to see Wagner as being unable to fulfill Germany's hopes.[48]

But even as his infatuation with Wagner waned and soured, Nietzsche remained of the view that tragedy, and great art more generally, ought to be judged according to the extent to which it helped affirm life and regenerate culture. This was a position that Nietzsche held throughout his life, except for an ambiguous, temporary departure in his 'positivistic' book, *Human, All-Too-Human* (1878), in which he tended toward seeing any hope for humanity residing in science. But he returned to his aestheticism thereafter. In an unpublished note that neatly captures his perspective, Nietzsche writes: 'There is no such thing as pessimistic art – Art affirms.'[49]

A key question that has troubled many philosophers of art is why human beings would voluntarily sit through the dark and catastrophic narratives of tragic theatre. More perplexing still is how we could possibly *enjoy* a tragedy that depicts such profound pain and suffering. Tragedies almost always involve a protagonist becoming embroiled in ghastly and violent circumstances, often without any moral culpability, and usually leading to death or at least demise. Real life is grim enough, so why choose to be a spectator on life's harsh realities via tragic theatre? Wouldn't that just invite a debilitating gloom if not despair? On the contrary, far from inducing despair, resignation, or withdrawal, Nietzsche saw tragic art as offering a mixture of therapy, consolation, education, and, at its best, it even an intoxicating energy for life. Tragic art has value, as noted earlier, because it 'makes life possible and worth living,'[50] through its capacity to transform the 'eternal suffering'[51] and the 'horror and absurdity of existence'[52] into 'notions with which one can live.'[53]

How can it achieve this? Nietzsche worried that if we looked at life too *directly,* we would see that suffering was so pervasive that we would risk being destroyed by the ugliness and horror of the truth; by the terrors of existence and the primordial pain that lies at the base of reality. We would be tempted, as Schopenhauer was, to degenerate into a 'longing for a Buddhist negation of the will'[54] or even contemplate suicide as a practical escape.[55] Seeking to avoid precisely those conclusions, and indeed searching for a way to affirm life, Nietzsche explored how art and aesthetic devices and techniques could somehow shield us from the full impact and harshness of reality, somehow blunting the sharp the edge of the truth. In a phrase already quoted, Nietzsche held: 'We possess *art* lest we *perish of the truth*.'[56]

Does this reduce art merely to palliative fantasies, distractions, and illusions? There might be room for a purely *therapeutic* role for art in some contexts – e.g., distracting ourselves with beauty in the darkest of moods just to get through the day. Generally, however, Nietzsche did not justify tragic art merely on palliative grounds and we should beware of the risks of such escapist aestheticism.[57] In his boldest moods, Nietzsche insisted that we should be able to look at the truth, face to face. In his very rare critiques of art, he even suggested that art might be something human beings might need to grow out of as we better learn to manage the full and nasty realities of the human situation. There was some risk, he felt, that arts merely 'soothe and heal' and this 'only provisionally, only for a moment; they even hinder [people] from working for a real improvement in their conditions by suspending and discharging in a palliative way the very passion which impels the discontented to action.'[58] However, Nietzsche did not maintain that critical position for long. His prevailing view was that the profound suffering inherent to the human condition could not be avoided and instead had to be managed. While the unavoidability of suffering reflects a view many Christians and Buddhists,

for example, would also accept, Nietzsche believed the only way from 'no' to 'yes' was via the aesthetic. Art and beauty were the only means sufficient to the task.

Thus, Nietzsche found in Greek tragedy the energising power of affirmation, an aesthetic justification for existence. To understand the intricacies of his reasoning here we need to return to the figures of Apollo and Dionysus – the Greek gods that Nietzsche used throughout his work to symbolise two aspects of reality as well as two distinct categories of art.[59] He sometimes used these signifiers loosely, and not always clearly or consistently. Apollo is variously used to signify illusion, appearance, dreaming, beauty, individuation, order, and reason. Apollonian art is exemplified by sculpture, which seeks to represent the world by shaping materials into significant form. On the other hand, Dionysus is variously used to signify underlying or primordial reality, desire, the sublime, unity, intoxication, and chaos. Dionysian art is exemplified by music, which is a medium through which the inner world or fundamental reality can be expressed and experienced most directly, in ways the 'plastic arts' cannot achieve through representation.

Although there is some risk of misrepresentation, it is tempting to roughly translate Apollo into Schopenhauer's notion of 'representation' (the phenomenal world) and Dionysus into Schopenhauer's 'Will' (the primal reality underlying appearances). In the end, however, Nietzsche offered us an original theory, and so *The Birth of Tragedy* should be read on its own terms and not merely as a restatement of Schopenhauer. Most importantly, these two thinkers can be distinguished by noting that the first principle of Nietzsche's *Artisten-Metaphysics* – the 'primordial oneness' or the *Ur-Eine* – is an aesthetic principle, whereas Schopenhauer's 'Will' is a non-aesthetic foundation.[60] This is of some importance because Nietzsche's aesthetic justification of existence can only be derived from an aesthetic foundation – a foundation that permits an affective transition from a 'no' to 'yes' in life. In contrast, one might argue that an aesthetic justification cannot be derived from Schopenhauer's non-aesthetic grounding.

Nietzsche held that Apollonian art belonged to the Homeric period of Greek culture, through which the Greeks overcame or at any rate greatly 'veiled'[61] the horrors of life. Their myths and stories were used as a 'prophylactic'[62] medium through which the agonal character of life could be 'transfigured'[63] in such a way that seduced the Greeks to embrace life: 'existence under the bright light of such gods is regarded as desirable in itself.'[64] He often referred to this form of art – 'the Apollonian impulse to beauty'[65] – as embodying 'illusion' or even a 'lie', and linked it thematically to the symbolism of Apollo as dreaming, sooth-saying, and wish-fulfillment. Dream images presented through art offer 'the aesthetically sensitive [person]... an interpretation of life, and by reflecting on those processes [we] train ourselves for life.'[66] Indeed, 'art saves [us], and through art – life'.[67]

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to interpret Nietzsche here as suggesting that the Greeks overcame pessimism through sentimental fantasy or by merely *looking away* from the harsh side of life. Instead, he spoke of Apollonian art as 'transform[ing] the most terrible things by the joy in mere appearance and in redemption through mere appearance.'[68] Art is able to do this by giving 'significant form' to suffering in ways that can render it, if not beautiful, then at least tolerable. As philosopher Julian Young writes in his book on Nietzsche's aesthetics, 'we may say that beauty lies not in *what* is represented but the *way* it is represented,'[69] which

reflects Nietzsche's statement that art is able to move us because it can induce 'delight in beautiful forms.'[70] Young goes on to explain that it is in this way that beauty can co-exist with the terrible, since the content of art can be transfigured by its form.

This aesthetic redemption, then, is not about looking away, which would be a merely cosmetic, escapist, or cowardly 'solution' – that is, no solution at all. Instead, Apollonian art involves looking at the harsh side of life, albeit through the mitigating lens of art. This casts something of an illusory veil over suffering in order to make it digestible and stop us from being paralysed by it. Thus, we are able to learn from and live with the truth, without perishing from it. Nietzsche insisted that in Apollonian art, 'beauty triumphs over the suffering inherent in life.'[71]

In this context, Young believes that the appropriate way to transition from the analysis of art to that of life is to infer, in the shadow of pessimism, that Nietzsche reinterpreted life through an Apollonian lens as something that is terrible but magnificent. 'Such an outlook,' Young adds, 'while not flinching from acknowledging that Hector suffered a terrible fate at the hands of Achilles, nonetheless focuses upon the beauty of its heroes, their powerfulness, courage, the sheen of their armour, their "style."'[72] We might each have our own books, poems, songs, or films that have given noble form to bleak content, and yet, despite the bleakness, we somehow come away from such artistic depictions edified, humbled, more compassionate, and perhaps with a new energy or courage to meet one's own challenges in life. '[E]ven misery,' Nietzsche proclaimed, 'could become a source of enjoyment solely through art.'[73] But the only way this aesthetic process can work is if we are sufficiently distanced from the inner reality of the suffering being depicted. Without the Apollonian veil, we might be at risk of perishing from the truth.

Although this form of art did not look away from the terrible side of life, it did, as we have seen, place a veil over it. For this reason Nietzsche was inclined to describe it as a form of 'lying.'[74] On the one hand, the content required aesthetic stylisation or falsification – a degree of self-deception – in order to render it existentially digestible. On the other hand, the Greeks *knew* that they were not being presented with direct access to the full truth of things, such that an element of self-deception lay at the heart of the Apollonian solution to pessimism. Only through this illusory or fictional veil could we ever enjoy tragic theatre, because this veil is what gives us the necessary distance to view the tragic narrative and events in aesthetic terms. Indeed, Nietzsche worried that the Greeks were 'so plagued by a delight in telling stories that it was hard for them to desist from lies and deception in the course of everyday life – just as all poetical people take delight in lying, a delight that is moreover quiet innocent.'[75]

Young is surely right to see that the Apollonian 'veiling' of the horrors of life as a rather fragile prophylactic against pessimism: 'Though it may seduce one into a general valuing of life, it's "superficiality" appears to leave one unprotected against suffering that thrusts itself upon one in a personal and unavoidable way.'[76] Furthermore, if the necessary element in the Apollonian is transfiguration of the truth in some way, this doesn't seem to deal with the problem of Schopenhauerian pessimism – which holds that the truth of existence is so horrible that it requires life negation. From a purely Apollonian perspective, therefore, it would seem that, in truth, life is not worth living and the only way of making it bearable is through aesthetic or artistic 'lies'.

On this basis, Nietzsche turned to the Dionysian element, as presented in Greek tragedy. If we return to the loose parallels here between Schopenhauerian representation and Will, we can say that Apollonian art re-presents the world of phenomena in a stylised way, whereas the Dionysian form seeks to get at what lies behind phenomena – the Will – giving rise to the 'tragic effect', the sublime – 'the artistic taming of the horrible…'[77] Nietzsche argued that, in tragic theatre, we feel most connected to the chorus – the music that accompanied the acting on stage. And recall from the previous essay that, in Schopenhauerian terms, music was a 'copy of the Will itself',[78] a view with which Nietzsche was broadly sympathetic. We somehow derive pleasure out of voluntarily subjecting ourselves to the ghastly nature of things through tragedy. So, whereas the Apollonian disguised the truth, the Dionysian gives more direct access, but we find it tolerable partly due to the tragic effect of the sublime.

If the Dionysian process brings the audience closer to reality, why didn't the Greeks degenerate into unmanageable psychic gloom or perish from being exposed to the tragic truths of existence? Nietzsche's response was that the Dionysian elements of tragic art deliver us from individuation, as we lose ourselves in the intoxicated state of aesthetic experience and find ourselves communing with the 'primordial oneness' or the *Ur-Eine*. 'We really are for a brief moment primordial being itself, feeling its raging desire for existence and joy in existence'[79] He adds: 'In spite of fear and pity, we are the happy living beings, not as individuals, but as the *one* living being, with whose creative joy we are united.'[80] And again, it is music – the chorus – that Nietzsche argues brings us most effectively into that rapturous or exuberant condition. Through this Dionysian element in tragic art, we are exposed to a higher state of existence, and find that life is not only bearable but enlivening, even intoxicating. Through deep, ecstatic if also unsettling aesthetic experiences, we can be given the energy and courage to go on living. In short: 'Life without music would be a mistake.'[81]

Nevertheless, we must then call on the soothsaying Apollo to provide the veil, or else we might be destroyed by our communion with the suffering inherent in primordial reality. '[H]ere the *Apollonian* power erupts to restore the almost shattered individual with the healing balm of blissful illusion.'[82] Although Nietzsche clearly identifies with the Dionysian, he ultimately accepts that human beings need both the Dionysian and the Apollonian elements in art, in a form of unstable synthesis, in order to find existence and the world 'justifiable'.

The redemptive function of art

This analysis has attempted to explain why the Apollonian can help transfigure suffering by giving 'significant form' the content of life, beautifying it to make it bearable. Further, the Dionysian can intoxicate in ways that can lead us to 'lose ourselves', such that the egotistical perspective which seems to privilege our personal suffering gets transcended as we identify with the *Ur-Eine*. Nietzsche's aesthetic justification of existence, however, is not merely about addressing the problem of suffering through the contemplation of art. As noted earlier, his other perspective on the problem, and probably his most fundamental perspective, is to consider the prospects of an aesthetic justification not as a spectator but as an active creator – and a creator not so much of a work of art, but as a creator or producer of *oneself*. In an important passage, Nietzsche wrote:

> Art is above and before all supposed to *beautify* life, thus make *us* ourselves endurable, if possible pleasing to others… Then, art is supposed to *conceal* or *reinterpret* everything ugly, those painful, dreadful, disgusting things which, all efforts notwithstanding, in accord with the origin of human nature again and again insist on breaking forth… After this great, indeed immense task of art, what is usually termed art, *that of the work of art*, is merely an *appendage*. A man who feels within himself an excess of such beautifying, concealing and reinterpreting powers will in the end seek to discharge this excess in works of art as well; so, under the right circumstances, will an entire people. – Now, however, we usually start with art where we should end with it, cling hold of it by its tail and believe that the art of the work of art is the true art out of which life is to be improved and transformed – fools that we are![83]

What Nietzsche is saying here is that the real project of the artist is not a physical or external work of art (e.g., a painting, a sculpture, an opera, etc) but the shaping and reshaping of oneself, with the raw materials of one's life. The external work of art can emerge out of this, but the primary and preceding project is, or ought to be, the work of artists on their own subjectivities. Nietzsche noted with disapproval that 'the ceaseless desire to create on the part of the artist, together with his ceaseless observation of the world outside of himself, prevent him from becoming better and more beautiful as a person, that is to say from creating *himself*.'[84] And the most important element in self-fashioning is the revaluation of suffering, which is needed for the affirmation of life.

For these reasons, Nietzsche concluded that it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world can be justified. The passage from *The Birth of Tragedy* where this statement is found is worth quoting in full:

> Insofar as the subject is the artist, however, he has already been released from his individual will, and has become, as it were, the medium through which the one truly existent subject celebrates his release in appearance. For to our humiliation and exaltation, one thing above all must be clear to us. The entire comedy of art is neither performed for our betterment or education nor are we the true authors of this art world. On the contrary, we may assume that we are merely images and artistic projections for the true author, and that we have our highest dignity in our significance as works of art – for it is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally *justified* – while of course our consciousness of our own significance hardly differs from that which the soldiers painted on canvas have of the battle represented on it. Thus all our knowledge of art is basically quite illusory, because as knowing beings we are not one and identical with that being which, as the sole author and spectator of this comedy of art, prepares a perpetual entertainment for itself.[85]

We see, then, that Nietzsche's defining position on the human condition was that art and the aesthetic present us with a revitalising antidote to the life-negating implications of Schopenhauer's pessimism, but only by leaving us with the terrifying but exhilarating burden of self-creation.

[1] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967), p. 22, p. 143.
[2] Further examinations of these questions include, Daniel Came, 'The Aesthetic Justification of Existence' in K. Ansell-Pearson (ed.) *A Companion to Nietzsche* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 41-57; Jeffery Church, 'The Aesthetic Justification of Existence: Nietzsche on the Beauty of Exemplary Lives' *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* (2015) 46(3): pp. 289-307; Brian Leiter, 'Truth is Terrible' (2018) *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 49(2): pp. 151-173; Stephen Halliwell, 'Justifying the World as an Aesthetic Phenomenon' (2018) *The Cambridge Classical Journal* 64: pp. 91-112. Book length treatments exploring Nietzsche's aesthetics and aestheticism, include Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985); Bernard Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Aaron Ridley, *Nietzsche on Art and Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Julian Young, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Daniel Came (ed.), *Nietzsche on Art and Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
[3] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, edited by Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) p. 144 (emphasis removed). See also, Leiter, note 2. The terribleness of truth was both a philosophical problem for Nietzsche and a very personal one, since from a young age he suffered regular and acute migraines that plagued him throughout his life. That said, the distinction between a philosophical problem and a problem of lived existence was, for Nietzsche, a distinction he sought to undermine.
[4] Reginster, *Affirmation*, note 2.
[5] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (New York: Vintage, 1968), p. 435.
[6] See Marilyn McCord Adams and Robert Merrihew Adams (eds) *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).
[7] Cited in Robert Weninger, *Sublime Conclusions: Last Man Narratives from Apocalypse to the Death of God* (Cambridge: Legenda, 2017), p. 11.
[8] Ibid. Voltaire famously mocked this line of reasoning in his novelette, *Candide*.
[9] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974). p. 108
[10] Plato, *The Republic* (London: Penguin, 1955), Book VII.
[11] Nietzsche, *Birth*, note 1, Sect. 15.
[12] Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
[13] It should be noted that many Enlightenment thinkers also identified as Christian, using reason not to reject religion but to challenge how it was traditionally understood. Often the goal was more about limiting the role of religion in politics than rejecting it in culture. See Terry Eagleton, *Culture and the Death of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).
[14] Friedrich Nietzsche, 'On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense' in Walter Kaufmann (ed), *The Portable Nietzsche* (London: Penguin, 1988) p. 46.
[15] See Came, 'The Aesthetic Justification', note 2.
[16] Came, note 2, p. 42 (emphasis removed).
[17] Ibid, p. 47.
[18] Nietzsche, *Birth*, note 1, Sect. 1.
[19] Ibid, Sect. 9.
[20] Ibid, Sect. 7.
[21] Ibid.
[22] As Freud wrote: 'This life imposed on us is too hard for us to bear: it brings too much pain, too many disappointments, too many insoluble problems. If we are to ensure it, we cannot do without palliative measures… Of such measures there are perhaps three kinds: powerful distractions, which can cause us to make light of our misery, substitutive satisfactions, which diminish it, and intoxicants, which anesthetize us to it. Something of this sort is indispensable.' Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (London: Penguin, 2004), pp. 14-15. Freud added that 'Voltaire has distractions in mind when he ends *Candide* with the advice that one should cultivate one's garden; another such distraction is scholarly activity.' Ibid, *Civilization*, p. 15. With respect to the present discussion of art, Freud made the following relevant remark: 'Substitutive satisfactions, such as art affords, are illusions that contrast with reality, but they are not, for this reason, any less effective psychically, thanks to the tole that the imagination has assumed in mental life.' Ibid, *Civilization,* p.15.
[23] Nietzsche, *Birth*, note 1, Sect. 3.
[24] Ibid, pp. 79-80. See also, Alain de Botton and John Armstrong, *Art as Therapy* (London: Phaidon, 2016).

[25] See Shaun McNiff, *Art as Medicine: Creating a Therapy of the Imagination* (Boulder: Shambhala, 1992).
[26] Quoted in John Fredrick Humphrey, 'Friedrich Nietzsche's *Artisten-Metaphysik* (Doctoral thesis, Graduate Faculty of Political and Social Science, New School for Social Research, 1992) p. 10**.**
[27]Aaron Ridley, 'Perishing of the Truth: Nietzsche's Aesthetic Prophylactics' *British Journal of Aesthetics* 50(4): p. 427.
[28] Came, The Aesthetic Justification', note 2, p. 50
[29] T.S. Eliot, 'Arnold and Pater' in T.S Eliot, *Selected* Essays (Faber and Faber, 1932).
[30] Gordon Graham, *The Re-Enchantment of the World: Art versus Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) p. 186.
[31] See Eagleton, *Culture and the Death of God*, note 13, p.13.
[32] Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous* (Vintage, 1990 [1957]).
[33] Andrew Huddleston, 'Introduction' to Andrew Huddleston, *Art's Highest Calling: The Religion of Art in a Secular Age* (forthcoming). I am also indebted to Huddleston for the quotes from Eliot and Stevens above.
[34] Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 153.
[35] Friedrich Nietzsche, 'The Case of Wagner' in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche* (edited by Walter Kaufmann) (New York: Modern Library, 2000), p.614.
[36] Fredrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), Sect. 8.
[37] See Friedrich Schiller, *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, in Friedrich Shiller, *Essays*, eds. Walter Hinderer and Daniel Dahlstrom (New York: Continuum, 2005), p. 133.
[38] Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, note 5, p. 420.
[39] Ibid, p. 421.
[40] In Huddleston, ch2 p17
[41] Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, note 5, p. 296.
[42] See Raymond Guess, 'Art and Theodicy' in Raymond Guess, *Morality, Culture, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 199) p. 87.
[43] See Humphrey, 'Friedrich Nietzsche's *Artisten-Metaphysik*', note 26.
[44] Nietzsche, *Birth*, note 1, Sect. 5.
[45] Nietzsche described Schopenhauer's distinction between the plastic arts and the musical arts as 'the most important insight of aesthetics'. See Humphrey, 'Fredrich Nietzsche', note 26, p. 235.
[46] Bernard Reginster, 'Art and Affirmation' in Came (ed.), *Nietzsche on Art and Life*, note 2, p. 25.
[47] See Church, 'The Aesthetic Justification', note 2.
[48] See the new preface to the *Birth of Tragedy*, called 'An Attempt at Self-Criticism', which Nietzsche wrote in 1886. See Nietzsche, note 1.
[49] Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, note 5, p. 435.
[50] See note 18.
[51] See note 19.
[52] See note 20.
[53] See note 21.
[54] Nietzsche, *Birth*, note 1, p. 59.
[55] Ibid, Sect. 15.
[56] Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, note 5.
[57] See, e.g., Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature* (London: Penguin, 2022). See my essay, 'Making Art While the World Weeps: Political Reflections on Aesthetics' in this collection of essays. The full set will be posted here: http://samuelalexander.info/s-m-p-l-c-t-y-ecological-civilisation-and-the-will-to-art/ (accessed 10 May 2023).
[58] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All-Too-Human* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), I.148.
[59] The following discussion is indebted to the illuminating analyses offered in the literature referenced in note 2, especially Young, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Art*; Ridley, *Nietzsche on Art and Literature*; and Came (ed), *Nietzsche on Art and Life*.
[60] See Humphrey, 'Fredrich Nietzsche', note 26.
[61] Nietzsche, *Birth*, note 1, Sect. 3
[62] Ibid, Sect. 21.
[63] Ibid, Sect. 22.
[64] Ibid, Sect. 3.
[65] Ibid, Sect. 4.
[66] Ibid, Sect. 1.
[67] Ibid, Sect. 7.
[68] Ibid, Sect. 4.

[69] Young, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Art*, note 2, p. 43.
[70] Nietzsche, *Birth*, note 1, Sect. 16.
[71] Young, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Art*, note 2, p. 43.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Nietzsche, *Human*, note 44, I: 154.
[74] Nietzsche, *Birth*, note 1, Sect. 16.
[75] Nietzsche, *Human*, note 44, I: 154.
[76] Young, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Art*, note 2, p. 45.
[77] Nietzsche, *Birth*, note 1, Sect. 7
[78] Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation: Vol. I* (New York: Dover, 1969), p. 257.
[79] Nietzsche, *Birth*, note 1, Sect. 17.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Twilight of the Idols' in Walter Kaufmann (ed), *The Portable Nietzsche* (London: Penguin, 1988) p. 471. I've amended the translation to accord with the most common one. Kaufmann's translation reads: 'Without music, life would be an error.'
[82] Nietzsche, *Birth*, note 1, Sect. 21.
[83] Nietzsche, *Human*, note 44, I: 174.
[84] Ibid, II: 102.
[85] Nietzsche, *Birth*, note 1, Sect. 6.