

SMPLECTY

Ecological Civilisation and the Will to Art



SAMUEL ALEXANDER

Essays on the Aesthetics of Existence

Introduction: The Aesthetic Dimension

S M P L C T Y: Ecological Civilisation and the Will to Art
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* This is a provisional Table of Contents. The essays are being published individually as they are completed, meaning that this project is a work-in-progress which may evolve.

‘Rising, tram, four hours in the office or factory, meal, tram, four hours of work, meal, sleep and Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday, according to the same rhythm – this path is easily followed most of the time. But one day the “why” arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement.’

– *Albert Camus*

Introduction

The Aesthetic Dimension

Samuel Alexander

This collection of essays presents an aesthetics of existence which I call the ‘Will to Art’. Readers will be invited to consider the possibility that the universe is fundamentally an aesthetic phenomenon, understood as a process of creative evolution that is moving, albeit agonistically, towards ever-increasing opportunities for artistic expression and aesthetic experience. Art will be defined broadly and openly as the meaningful and pleasurable expression of creative labour, and human experience can be considered ‘aesthetic’ if it flows from the sensuous engagement with art or nature. To speak of the Will to Art is to interpret the world as having an underlying tendency toward artistic and aesthetic flourishing, even though the outcome of this evolutionary process, due to its indeterminate nature, is unknowable in advance.

From this perspective, the cosmos itself is a sensuous and artful reality that is unfolding in order to *experience itself* through the genesis and diversity of conscious and creative life. This aesthetic universe is not a singular, conscious being, but it attains consciousness through the development of diverse experiential nodes in the fabric of existence. In the case of human beings, these nodes have become reflective, visionary, poetic, and self-aware. Our bodies are composed of elements from dead stars, and now, on starry nights, we can look up at ourselves in wonder. We are the vibrating strings of a strange and sublime cosmological symphony – a collaborative project that we must try to compose, perform, and conduct, together.¹

The telos or goal of this universe is beauty. This guiding ideal is defined not as mere cosmetic ornamentation, but as the pleasurable experience of art and nature, the meaningful interaction with self, other, and world, and the undertaking and contemplation of aesthetic activity. If we interpret art to include all creative work through which order, form, and meaning are given to existence, then we can say that art is life’s highest calling – the truest expression of freedom. Thus all human beings can conceive of themselves as aesthetic agents in an aesthetic universe – as *homo aestheticus* – the art-created art creators.

At the base of this worldview there is a creative force or impulse – the Will to Art – which gives energy, substance, and vitality to all phenomena. This unconscious motive permeates the universe, striving to produce conditions in which art and aesthetic experience can blossom with infinite diversity. But this primordial impulse will remain dissatisfied and restless, in search of harmony, until its energy achieves the free and creative expression it seeks. The Will to Art is experienced in human consciousness as the insatiable drive of desire – a reckless and amoral yearning for beauty, pleasure, freedom, and meaning. It is represented through our sensory apparatus as material or phenomenological reality.

Accordingly, the world we experience is both will and representation – to borrow terminology from German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer.² As I will be using these terms, will and representation are dual aspects of an underlying cosmological art-force manifesting in

alternative but mutually dependent ways. In other words, the Will to Art has both internal and external dimensions, even though it is the inner dimension of this reality that we know most directly and intimately, through our own willing natures. Despite being thrown into an existence we never asked for, our capacity to experience beauty shows that human beings have a place in this world, at least potentially, and our capacity to create beauty provides us with a noble, orientating purpose.

Arising out of aesthetic metaphors rather than being grounded in metaphysics, the Will to Art can be understood as a mythopoetic origin story. As such, it is the cause of the cosmological instability which led to the spectacular explosion at the beginning of time, resulting in the universe itself and the perpetual creative drives working in and through all phenomena. It is the internal spark of life, giving consciousness to matter and materiality to consciousness, and the cause of literally unpredictable moments in what French philosopher Henri Bergson called 'creative evolution'.³ And it is the poetic madness that gives rise to that mysterious feeling or mood which inspires, even compels, the artist to sit down to compose *something out of nothing*. Therein – by creating something out of nothing – humanity is able to commune with the Dionysian impulse from which existence itself has emerged. As philosopher Abraham Kanovitch wrote of essentially this experience:

They who have not felt it cannot believe it, but once felt, it is marvellous to know that the universe holds such depths of feeling within itself – it is more than words can tell. It satisfies the longing of the heart; all external commotion pales before it. It justifies the existence of the universe.⁴

The history of political society can be interpreted through this lens, as a dialectical process of evolution through which human beings struggle, often unconsciously and indirectly, toward the ideal of beauty. Political progress toward this latent aesthetic ideal need not be linear and its attainment may be forever elusive. Indeed, a true Democracy of Art, in which all people can find meaning and pleasure in creative labour, is still a very distant beacon in the dark of night. Nevertheless, the Will to Art is a passion, a yearning for beauty that seeks its own actualisation through art and aesthetic experience. It is an existential dissonance in search of harmony, through which beauty tends to beget beauty, if only from the perspective of deep time.

Given that the arc of this cosmology bends slowly and inconsistently towards beauty, it follows that sometime in the future – perhaps only in the deep future – an ecological civilisation of artisan-artists could emerge. I state 'could' emerge because nothing is preordained in an aesthetic universe. The dissonance of the world will not necessarily resolve into harmony, but there is a chance, a tendency. Should humanity struggle successfully in the pursuit of beauty, I believe the result would be a society composed of free spirits who have enabled themselves to explore their aesthetic capacities and sensibilities, while living simply in harmony with nature and each other. Such an idealised social order would be defined, not by relations of master and slave, or worker and capitalist, but by the revolving and reciprocal relations of artist and art-lover, a process driven onwards by the Will to Art.

In developing this vision, my two guiding premises are, first, that material sufficiency is all that is *needed* for human beings to live rich, meaningful, and artful lives; and second, that material sufficiency is all that is *possible*, over the long term, on a finite planet in an age of

environmental limits. Based on those premises, I will propose and defend a conception of ecological civilisation which I call SMPLCTY. This is not a utopian prediction about what I think is a likely future for our species. Rather, it is an *orientating vision*, one in which individuals and communities thrive in humble conditions of material sufficiency but cultural richness, meaningfully engaged in pleasurable and creative labour in collaboration with others. According to this vision, life itself would become an aesthetic project, a never-ending process of creative activity, sensuous experience, aesthetic engagement, and spiritual exploration. Such a society would be structured with the aim of sustainably providing opportunities for all people to find meaning and pleasure through creative labour and aesthetic experience.

Of course, the concept of art has no stable or determinate ‘essence’, so it is a category that is, and ought to be, contested, challenging, and evolving.⁵ As stated above, my working definition – inspired by nineteenth-century artist and philosopher William Morris – is to assume that art broadly refers to the meaningful and pleasurable expression of creative labour.⁶ This definition encompasses both the ‘fine arts’ (music, poetry, painting, sculpture, and architecture) and the so-called ‘lesser arts’ of handcraft (carpentry, sewing, pottery, glassware, carving, etc). Building upon Morris, I will defend a societal vision in which art, as defined, becomes integrated into the necessary labours, rituals, and experiences of everyday life. This intentionally blurs the distinction between artist and artisan. I have described such society in my work of fiction, *Entropia: Life Beyond Industrial Civilisation* (2013), and my four volumes of collected academic essays provide evidential foundations as well as social, political, and economic theories of sufficiency.⁷ The present collection of essays seeks to provide philosophical and mythopoetic foundations for the same basic vision, but through the lens of aesthetics, which I now realise is fundamental.

By removing the ‘i’ from the conventional spelling, the neologism SMPLCTY is intended to evoke a ‘less is more’ philosophy – or rather, a philosophy of ‘just enough is plenty’. This reflects the ethos of sufficiency underpinning the aestheticised form of ecological civilisation that I am inviting readers to consider. The removal of the ‘i’ is also meant to imply the achievement of a diminished egoism (or increased communitarianism) compared to the possessive individualism that has come to define globalised industrial capitalism. Paradoxically, it will be seen that this diminished egoism actually increases opportunities for individual self-creation. In essence, I will employ SMPLCTY to signify an anarcho-socialist form of life in which human beings minimise material and energetic demands for reasons of social and ecological justice, while creatively exploring the good life in non-materialistic sources of meaning and happiness, especially through art and aesthetic experience. This is supported by an interpretation of the universe as embodying a primordial energy called the Will to Art, which seeks to experience itself through the aesthetic flourishing that would be cultivated in such an ecological civilisation.

This is no degeneration into naïve romanticism. Despite the telos of this universe being beauty, the harsh struggle for existence that is evident in our early phase of creative evolution easily disguises the Will to Art as a violent and oppressive Will to Power – not in the Nietzschean sense of power over oneself, but in the sense of an insecure grasping for dominance over the external world. This distortion of the universe’s primal striving leads willing, desiring, and

sensuous creatures to pursue their aesthetic destinies in confused, inefficient, and often counterproductive ways. This is because people who are deprived of the power of aesthetic expression can end up expressing themselves in a drive for power.⁸ Unnecessary and meaningless suffering is the result. One only needs to contemplate the profound ugliness of human societies and the many twisted faces that comprise them to see that our collective journey toward beauty and aesthetic freedom is still in its infancy. As I see things, we are creatures that are currently alienated from our inherent nature as an artful species, seeking some form of aesthetic redemption, and my position is that this is the only kind of redemption available to humanity given the death of God and the absence of any alternative metaphysical comforts. As Friedrich Nietzsche declared: it is only as aesthetic phenomena that existence and the world can be justified.⁹



The Will to Art, as I have introduced it here, is a grand narrative of our universe and humanity's place in it. Given my sympathies with Nietzschean perspectivism, however, I do not present this vision or cosmodycy as if it were, in any sense, a neutral or objective reading of the world.¹⁰ I believe it to be true, and indeed I experience its truthfulness, but there may be other true theories of existence also – true in the pragmatic sense of being useful for living. Mine is but one interpretation of an infinitely complex cosmological phenomenon, and because reality is infinitely complex, the human situation is liable to various and competing, even contradictory, interpretations.

To be clear, my goal in presenting this collection of essays is certainly not to persuade everyone to think exactly as I do – that would be a grossly authoritarian imposition. Rather, my goal is to tell a plausible, coherent, and engaging story of our place in the universe, in the hope that it may serve the aesthetic values of creativity, freedom, and beauty that my story seeks to describe, evaluate, and uphold. Thus my reasoning is circular, as all reasoning ultimately is – based on premises and values which rest only on themselves. It follows that the Will to Art signifies what American philosopher Richard Rorty called a 'final vocabulary'¹¹ – the bedrock of one's justificatory project, beneath which one has no further argumentative recourse. But it is a final vocabulary that I will attempt to present in a persuasive way, while acknowledging that this aesthetics of existence does not, and cannot, rest on metaphysical foundations.

To admit that I am engaged in the art of storytelling, however, should not in any way imply that this project resides in the realm of 'mere fantasy' or lacks a critical relationship to reality. Every individual and every society are enactments of a story people tell themselves about the nature and purpose of their existence and of the world they live in. The myths and stories we tell ourselves situate us in space and time, shape our perceptions of the present, and guide us as we move into the future, influencing our interpretations of what is possible, proper, and important. Even though we typically embody cultural myths unconsciously, these shared narratives are influential not only in how we *think* about social and political life but, perhaps more importantly, how we *feel* about it – and thus how we act. This implies that there is a politics of storytelling – and a politics of art and aesthetics more generally. To acknowledge the political function of story is the first step in exposing the blurry distinction between art, life, and politics, suggesting that there is an inherent aesthetic dimension to life and politics,

just as there is a political or even revolutionary potential inherent to certain forms of art or aesthetic practice. These are central themes to be explored.

If I am justified in describing human beings as storytelling creatures, then this project can be seen to reflect our creative essence. But it is an offering that also demands a creative interpretation by the reader, not merely a passive absorption. There are certainly gaps in my story, sometimes deliberately so, which I leave for artful and imaginative readers to fill in according to their own political or spiritual disposition. My invitation is simply for you to take the view of existence outlined here seriously, to see what happens to your spirit should you come to look at the world and your life through the aesthetic lens being presented. If you finish this volume identifying as an artist and seeing the world as a canvas we must paint together in mutual support and engagement, then we can be sure that our spirits burn with the same fire – the Will to Art.

The essays to follow defend this mythopoetic perspective and explore what might be the proper modes of social, economic, and political organisation for an aesthetic creature such as ours, in a universe such as this. This orientation does not deny or downplay the gruesome violence, humiliating poverty, ecological devastation, and widespread oppression that shapes the contemporary world in so many ways. On the contrary, I am trying to approach such issues from a new angle, in the hope of shedding light on opportunities for social, political, and ecological progress that currently lie in the shadows of dominant modes of thinking.

At once the spectre of ‘aestheticism’ is raised: Will taking an aesthetic perspective on politics lead to what critical theorist Walter Benjamin called an aestheticisation of politics (fascism) or the politicisation of aesthetics (Soviet communism)?¹² The question is fair, but ultimately misdirected. I unconditionally place every member of our species, *homo aestheticus*, on an equal and egalitarian footing – each having the same right to fashion their life according to their unique creative capacities and sensibilities. Freedom implies constraint, however, both socially and ecologically, which is the never-ending task of politics to manage. It follows that any concerns that I am at risk of presenting an elitist, fascist, or aestheticised aristocracy (concerns sometimes directed toward Nietzsche) can be dissolved before they arise. For if, as Jacques Rancière asserts, ‘politics is aesthetic in principle’¹³ – a statement to which we will have to return – then it is no objection to a political vision that it is, at base, aesthetic. Mine is simply self-conscious of this inevitability, and I see no reason to try to disguise this fact. The critical issues to be addressed, then, are how politics is aesthetic, to what ends, and for whose benefit. Before anticipating my answers to these questions, I will attempt to clarify the philosophical context of this project.

The aesthetic dimensions of existence

I wish to speak a word for aestheticism, for aesthetic freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom that is metaphysically constrained. I wish to conceive of the human being as an aesthetic agent in an aesthetic universe, or part and parcel of a work of art that demands creative interpretation and participation, as opposed to a predefined being in a predetermined cosmos. I will make an extreme statement, so that I can make an emphatic one, for there are

enough champions of metaphysics who will deny or downplay the aesthetic dimensions of life.¹⁴

And what might those dimensions be? Aesthetics can be understood as having two primary meanings. The first pertains to the philosophy of art and beauty – exploring issues such as the meaning of art, the nature of beauty, judgements of taste, and the role of the artist in society. The second domain of aesthetic inquiry pertains to the senses – exploring issues related to bodily experience, sensuality, pleasure, perception, feelings, passions, and emotions. The word ‘aesthetic’ derives from the ancient Greek term *aisthētikós* (meaning ‘perceptive, sensitive, pertaining to sensory perception’) which in turn derives from *aisthánomai* (meaning ‘I perceive, sense, learn’). Accordingly, this second field of aesthetic inquiry addresses matters that extend beyond what would conventionally be called ‘art objects’ or ‘perceptions of beauty’ and engages questions related to sensuous human experience in its manifold dimensions. Being in the presence of great art is an aesthetic experience, but so is plunging into the ocean or sauntering through a rainforest.

The aesthetic dimensions of existence are discernible, most fundamentally, at the cosmological level. I have already proposed that the universe itself can be coherently understood as being fundamentally aesthetic – artistic and sensuous to the core. This involves elevating our cosmos to the dignity of a work of art through a bold act of interpretation, and this calls for an aesthetic orientation toward existence. The Big Bang, for example, can be understood as a primordial creative explosion – the Original Aesthetic Event – and throughout this collection of essays I will present both the unfolding of the universe, as well as the historical emergence of the human species, through this aesthetico-evolutionary lens.¹⁵

The physical matter of the universe evolved, over billions of years, to become conscious. How this occurred, and the relationship between matter and mind, remains one of life’s great unsolved mysteries – what scientists and philosophers call the ‘hard problem’ of consciousness. In the human species, matter has even become self-aware, reflective, and capable of directing its own creative evolution, as opposed to merely being the determinate *product* of physical laws and biological processes and instincts. What if the freedom to seek meaning and pleasure through creativity is the mysterious *purpose* of the universe? What if the outcome of this process is inclined towards beauty, a process through which the universe gets to experience itself through the phenomenon of consciousness? What would a politics of beauty involve? These are some of the guiding questions posed by a cosmology based on the Will to Art. It will be seen in a forthcoming essay that art and aesthetic practices have been central to human evolution throughout our species’ history, such that our aesthetic faculties, capacities, and potentials are fundamental components of our malleable nature. It should come as no surprise, then, that art has been universally present in human societies, so much so that it is unclear whether humans created the arts or whether the arts gave birth to humanity.

This conception of humanity has social, ethical, and political implications, to which I will be giving due attention. Evolutionary theorist Ellen Dissanayake contends that ‘social systems that disdain or discount beauty, form, mystery, meaning, value, and quality – whether in art or in life – are depriving their members of human requirements as fundamental as those for

food, warmth, and shelter.¹⁶ In line with this basic reasoning, I am inviting readers to consider a normative view of the cosmos as something that embodies an evolutionary purpose – a telos that is moving slowly and unevenly toward forms of life in which self-reflective beings are empowered to shape their own lives as an aesthetic project. Just as the acorn has an oak tree built into its nature, the cosmological narrative I will present holds that the universe itself has ‘art’ built into its nature, and our goal as creature-creators is to facilitate this aesthetic blossoming through personal, social, and political action. Whereas utilitarianism aims to maximise happiness and liberalism aims to promote freedom, a political economy of art would seek to foster creative engagements with questions of meaning and beauty in ecologically sustainable ways. Such engagements might depend on freedom, and are likely to advance human happiness, but ultimately the Will to Art aims to foster something more fundamental and substantive: beauty.

The normatively orientating end state of this evolutionary process would be a society, not of artists, as such, but of creative self-fashioners who are free to author their own stories and perhaps even sing their own songs – to be the poets of their own lives – in honour of the art-force that drives creative evolution onwards. Given that self-creation never takes place in a vacuum, however, it is inevitably a shared endeavour with the entire community of life. This means, paradoxically, that the art of self-creation has necessary social, political, and ecological dimensions which must be acknowledged. Specifically, in the contemporary context, where humanity is evidently making unsustainable demands on the life-support system called Earth, any resolution to this dire ecological predicament must involve a radical downscaling of our collective energy and resource demands. This raises questions about what material or energetic foundations are needed to fulfill our aesthetic natures as self-creators, and how such a political economy of art might be structured and organised. I have addressed some of those material and energetic questions in my other publications on degrowth, permaculture, energy descent futures, low-tech living, and voluntary simplicity.¹⁷ In this work I will focus on the aesthetic dimensions.

Beyond the creative forces underlying the evolution of life, the human condition has an inherently aesthetic dimension, insofar as lived experience is always shaped and mediated by language. Our linguistic concepts and categories give order and form to our experience of the world and even to our conception(s) of self. This feature of existence can be understood aesthetically in the sense that human beings have had to *create* those concepts and categories, and infuse them with meaning, for neither our concepts nor their meanings were given to us in advance. Indeed, the invention of language is one of humanity’s earliest and arguably our most significant creative acts. Our concepts and their meanings could have been otherwise, have been otherwise, will be otherwise, and in fact are always and everywhere changing due to the inherent instability of language and the ever-changing contexts in which it is used and interpreted. This makes the ontological nature of ourselves and our universe inherently unstable. Thus, a close reading of our existential condition reminds us that we are freer than we think we are. The very concept of ‘humanity’ is always and everywhere becoming, forever shifting beneath our feet. We never step into the same river twice, for neither ourselves nor our contexts endure in any static ontological or metaphysical sense.

From this perspective, there is no way for human beings to step outside the mediation of our linguistic apparatus and somehow perceive the world in an unmediated, pre-linguistic form; no way for us to shed our conceptual schemes through which we experience the world and see the world *as it really is*. Instead, reality is experienced through or with the lens of language, and the immediate point is that humans *created* that lens. This is essentially all that is meant when philosophers talk of the linguistic or social ‘construction of reality’, even if explanations are usually dressed up in impenetrable jargon. Language thus shapes what we *see* and how we *think*, but given language also shapes our experience of reality, it also shapes what and how we *feel*. In other words, the task of creating language through which we experience reality comes to influence the sensory experience of the reality that language has constructed.

There are various levels to this creative process of constructing reality through our linguistic practices. As children we are all educated into a ‘language game’ that we did not create ourselves. Our education begins upon someone’s knee, then is continued through lessons ratified by wider society. But this immersion into a language game is not a purely passive process. Humans both shape and are shaped by language, and this dialectical relationship is an ongoing process of co-creation and co-production. We don’t just speak language. In a very real sense, language speaks us.¹⁸

By inventing new concepts or vocabularies in response to a changing world, or creatively redefining the meanings given to existing concepts and vocabularies, human beings can literally reshape not just their *experience* of reality, but more fundamentally, the *reality* that they experience. This can expand the horizons of what can be thought, said, seen, and even felt. But our words, to function *as words*, have to be able to reoccur in different contexts. This is what Jacques Derrida referred to as ‘iterability’.¹⁹ The meaning of a word can never be fully present in one context given that it may need to be applied or interpreted in a different context where the meanings can shift, sometimes without notice or intention. As we attempt to ‘read’ reality, the text of existence does not announce its meaning to us, from which it follows that interpretation is the only game in town. There is no pre-existing or *literal* truth to the textual reality we inhabit, so no interpretation of it can ever be final. Existence, at base, is indeterminate. It must be given form – which is an aesthetic challenge.

I proceed on this post-metaphysical basis, but it is not the purpose of these essays to present a philosophical critique of metaphysics or a defence of the ‘linguistic turn’ in philosophy. Rather, my post-metaphysical stance is simply an assumption I begin from, based on the critical literatures variously labelled neo-pragmatism, deconstruction, and social constructionism. I limit my affiliation with these literatures mainly in relation to the indeterminacy and contingency of language, as just outlined, which is the basis of my aestheticist reading of the world.

Life as literature: are we all aesthetes now?

The capacity to shape and reshape reality with the tool of language can be understood most clearly perhaps through the narratives and myths we tell ourselves about the world and our place in it. The universe, our histories, our relationships, and our lived experience all defy full and complete accounting by virtue of their infinite complexity. There is no way to tell the *whole*

story, so to speak, for there is always more that could be said; other perspectives not yet considered; new events and situations that call into question previous interpretations or categorisations of the world, and so forth. We are inherently creatures of perspective. There is no ‘view from nowhere’ that offers a neutral perspective on reality devoid of values or assumptions. Thus, the very distinction between ‘fact’ and ‘value’ collapses, given that our value-laden purposes, goals, interests, and desires inevitably shape how we experience the factual world ‘out there’.

Accordingly, when we find ourselves trying to make sense of the world, we are inevitably faced with the creative challenge of selecting which aspects of life to focus on and how to interpret or describe those limited aspects with an imperfect tool (i.e., language). In thus describing the world or our experience, we are effectively giving a *narrative account* of the world and our own lives – we are giving form to content – and in this sense we find ourselves in a position not dissimilar to the author tasked with telling a story.

In his seminal text *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*,²⁰ philosopher Alexander Nehamas offers an astute reading of Nietzsche’s oeuvre which develops this literary interpretation of existence. Nietzsche is shown to engage the world (and indeed his own subjectivity) as if it were an artwork – a literary text, in particular – in need of composition, stylisation, and creative interpretation. Nehamas writes:

To engage in any activity, and in particular in any inquiry, we must inevitably be selective. We must bring some things into the foreground and distance others into the background. We must assign a greater relative importance to some things than we do to others, and still others we must completely ignore. We do not, and cannot, begin (or end) with ‘all the data’. This is an incoherent desire and an impossible goal. ‘To grasp everything’ would be to do away with all perspective relations, it would mean to grasp nothing, to misapprehend the nature of knowledge. If we are ever to begin a practice or an inquiry we must, and must want to, leave unasked indefinitely many questions about the world.²¹

Nehamas later elaborates on this theme by shifting his metaphor from literature to painting:

There is no sense in which painters, even if we limit our examples to realistic depictions of one’s visual field, can ever paint ‘everything’ that they see. What they ‘leave out’ is in itself quite indeterminate, and can be specified, if at all, only through other paintings, each of which will be similarly ‘partial’. Analogously, Nietzsche believes, there can be no total or final theory or understanding of the world. On his artistic model, the understanding of everything would be like a painting that incorporates all styles or that is painted in no style at all – a true chimera, both impossible and monstrous.²²

Both quotes suggest that not only does life make editorial demands on us but also that there is no neutral or objective way to undertake that process. As editors of our individual existence, we are burdened with writing the rules and making decisions; or, as the existential slogan states: we are ‘condemned to be free.’²³ In due course I will develop Nietzsche’s literary model of existence in more detail, including a closer examination of his curious injunction that we should be ‘the poets of our life.’²⁴ I will also consider the nature and responsibilities of ‘self-creation’, drawing on Michel Foucault’s conception of ethics as an ‘aesthetics of existence’²⁵

and Richard Rorty's vision of a 'poeticised culture'.²⁶ These post-metaphysical philosophers are sometimes categorised as 'aestheticist' (usually in a pejorative sense), on the grounds that they deny, as I do, that there is a metaphysical reality that is stable, knowable, and given to us in advance. They all argue that existence is somehow inescapably aesthetic, in the sense that the answers to many of life's most important questions – questions about the meaning of life, what the good life consists in, how societies should be organised and structured, etc. – can never be *discovered*, as such. They must be *invented*, and if we do not produce answers ourselves, we can be sure the powers-that-be will produce them for us.

If the meaning of life does not announce itself to us or lie 'out there' in external metaphysical reality waiting to be discovered, it follows that *we must create as an aesthetic project the meaning of our own lives*. Not only that, we must also collectively shape as an aesthetic project the societies in which we live, just as that society inevitably shapes us. This aesthetic imperative orients us toward the world and our own lives in a way that resembles the relationship between artists and their raw materials; between sculptors and their clay. Herein lies a source of hope. No matter how ugly our species may have become as a violent, consumptive, and ecologically brutal force, nothing about our past preordains the future. As Jean-Paul Sartre maintained: 'We can always make something out of what we have been made into,'²⁷ which is to say that human beings are both creatures and creators of our mysterious situation and condition. Let us be like the poets, then, and make things new.

These are some of the aesthetic dimensions of existence to be explored in this collection of essays. As the arguments unfold, I will consider various social, political, and ecological implications of adopting an orientation to life that is uncompromisingly – and unashamedly – aestheticist. Based on the philosophical position outlined above, I am of the view that we are all aesthetes now, whether we like it or not, and the challenge we face involves determining what this means in an age such as our own, which is one way to frame the central undertaking of this project. I believe human beings have a deep existential need both for meaning and beauty in life – a need that resembles the biophysical hunger for food – even if these aesthetic impulses are not always articulated in such grand-sounding terms. Meaning and beauty are more like subconscious, inarticulate yearnings than clearly stated goals. But the more these yearnings for creative expression and aesthetic experience are repressed and denied, the stronger the Will to Art is experienced in our lives, like floodwaters building up behind a dam that is destined to burst. As Marxist philosopher Georg Lukács wrote: 'The bleaker and emptier life becomes under capitalism, the more intense is the yearning after beauty.'²⁸

SMPLCTY: The political economy of art

I can now elaborate on some the main conclusions of this project, alluded to earlier in my proposal for a political economy of art. As noted, my two key premises are first, that material sufficiency is all that is *needed* for human beings to live rich, meaningful, and artful lives; and second, that material sufficiency is all that is *possible* on finite planet in an age of environmental limits. As I am using the phrase, a political economy of art refers to a form of ecological civilisation in which the two stated premises guide social, economic, and political action, organisation, and cooperation.

The goal of a political economy of art is to structure and support a society that I have labelled SMPLCTY. Again, this is neither a utopian statement nor a prediction. It is an orienting vision designed to guide prefigurative action in the here and now. After all, in order to know in what direction to move, some understanding is needed regarding the desired destination, even if it turns out that the destination is dauntingly distant. My goal in these collected essays is not to provide details on the specifics of daily living in this type of ecological civilisation, nor will I provide a set of policies or institutions – issues addressed elsewhere.²⁹ Rather, in the following pages I set out to present a case for SMPLCTY through the lens of aesthetics, specifically in relation to what I am calling the Will to Art. In later essays I will also outline a theory of change, based on what poet-philosopher Fredrich Schiller called ‘aesthetic education’ and what critical theorist Herbert Marcuse called ‘aesthetic revolution’.

According to this vision of ecological civilisation, the good life would be achieved primarily through aesthetic experience, both creatively (making art) and responsively (appreciating art and nature). This is an endless and dialectical process of infinite diversity and stimulation. My central thesis is that art and aesthetic experience – including the making of useful and beautiful things – are promising and available means of ‘living more with less’ – of flourishing in simplicity. So far as this is true, it would follow that opportunities for low-impact aesthetic practice and experience ought to be expanded as humanity contracts its material and energy demands for reasons of justice, sustainability, and wellbeing. I believe this vision of SMPLCTY is a coherent and perhaps necessary one to embrace if humanity (as a whole) and affluent societies (in particular) are to move toward an equitable form of life that not only avoids ecosystemic collapse but also ensures the flourishing of all life on Earth within environmental limits. This process of prosperous descent could also be framed as an ‘aesthetics of degrowth’,³⁰ and in a later essay I attempt to explore how such a process could be facilitated by what I will cautiously call an aesthetic state, shaped by an anarcho-socialist theory of governance.

Although the energy and resource flows are constrained within this envisioned form of life, the exploration of the good life remains unlimited, in the same way that a pianist is not limited by the 88 keys of a piano. There will never be a time when all the beautiful sonatas have been written, just as there will never be a time when all possible manifestations of beautiful lives have been lived. Upon sufficient and sustainable material foundations – that is, in a political economy that ensures enough, for everyone, forever – human beings are left to explore the aesthetics of their own existence in imaginative ways. Thus we are burdened with the task of applying our own aesthetic values to the spiritual practice of self-fashioning. This is the bounded infinity of human flourishing in an aesthetic universe. Within biophysical limits, and upon sufficient material foundations, we are limited only by our imaginations.

In the social order of SMPLCTY I am proposing, aesthetic citizens would seek to live simply in a material and energetic sense, while contributing to necessary economic production and community governance in non-alienated and non-hierarchical conditions. Beyond that, people would be free to explore the good life, and manage the tragic elements of the human condition, through creative activity and aesthetic experience. There will of course be artistic ‘geniuses’ whose work captures and impresses the social imagination more than others, but the aesthetic citizen, who I will characterise as the poet-farmer, is an ordinary creative soul

who revels in their aesthetic practices without need or expectation of social recognition. This mode of ecological civilisation seeks to democratise the poet, blurring the distinction between artist and artisan.

Art would not replace religion in this society, but it would answer the same (and perhaps some new) spiritual needs, such that the artist comes to replace the priest as spiritual advisor and existential provocateur. These simple living communities will be bound together by aesthetic rituals and practices that bring art and culture into the realm of everyday living. As the ideal of this ecological civilisation is approached, beauty will beget beauty, and an aesthetic singularity will everywhere threaten to explode in a chain reaction of unfathomable spectacles of creativity and sensuous experience. The nature of this singularity is unknowable in advance, but it should be acknowledged as a possibility, even if we must then pass over it in silence, like all mystical phenomena.

At some distant point – perhaps in hundreds of millions of years – Earth will be swallowed by a black hole, destroyed by a comet, or become uninhabitable due to the heat-death of the sun. Accordingly, the human story is, ultimately, finite. Our cosmological contribution will be our art – our human stories – all of which will one day be dust, blowing in the winds of a dark, cold, silent universe, bereft of music. After an indeterminate duration of cosmological expansion, the universe may implode into the singularity from which it emerged or begin to expand at the speed of light, and the mysterious cosmological process might begin again, repeating this aesthetic cycle an infinite number of times, in eternal recurrence. This mystery needs and allows for no primal explanation. That the Will to Art exists at all is the marvel of all marvels.

To paraphrase T.S. Eliot: we are the music, while the music lasts.³¹



Given that this is a large project, composed of essays designed to stand alone as well as form a coherent whole, I will close this introduction by providing an overview of what lies ahead. This should allow readers to jump around the collection of essays as interest and inclination dictate, while also giving some insight into how the argumentation hangs together in the broadest sense. Alternatively, if the suggestive essay titles in the table of contents provide sufficient information, one may of course skip the following overviews and proceed straight to the essays themselves. Essays in Part One are dedicated mainly to excavating the aesthetic foundations of this project. Part Two focuses mainly on detailing the social and political implications. Nevertheless, at the end of the volume many questions will remain unanswered, which just means that this project is incomplete – or rather, ongoing. Indeed, given that I am publishing these essays as I finish them, the content of what follows may still evolve before taking final form as a book.

1. In the opening essay, *‘The Cosmos as a “Readymade”’: Dignifying the Aesthetic Universe’* I engage the French artist, Marcel Duchamp. Duchamp’s provocative innovation was to select ordinary, mundane items – something ‘readymade’, as he would call these manufactured objects – and declare them art. His

most famous readymade piece is *Fountain* (1917), which was merely an ordinary, mass-produced urinal. To develop the foundations of my aesthetic position, I wish to extend Duchamp's infamous gesture in two ways. First, by exploring the possibility of adopting his inclusive aesthetic disposition, not merely when presented with an art object, but as a form of life. My project is based upon this thorough-going aestheticism, which, in later essays, I will argue has ethical, political, even spiritual implications. My second extension of Duchamp is to expand the category of the 'readymade' to include the cosmos itself. After all, if Duchamp was able to dignify a urinal by aestheticising it, then I intend to claim the same dignity for the universe as a whole.

2. Having clarified and developed my aesthetic orientation, I then provide more detail on my mythopoetic cosmology in '***Creative Evolution and the Will to Art***'. Contrasting the metaphor of 'universe-as-machine' with the metaphor 'universe-as-artist', I present a case for the latter, developing the preliminary overview of the Will to Art stated at the beginning of this introduction. This transfiguration of the cosmos doesn't involve changing any of the physical characters of the object under consideration but rather changing its ontological character through redescription in ways that call on individuals to engage with the object differently. The *experience* of art, I will argue, is less about an objective encounter with a physical entity and more about poetic engagement with the possibilities of meaning that surround the entity under aesthetic contemplation – in this case, the universe itself.
3. In the next two essays I acknowledge my debts to Schopenhauer and Nietzsche – a task which also allows me to highlight areas where my own position can be distinguished from theirs. In '***Pessimism without Despair: Suffering, Desire, and the Affirmation of Life***', I examine Schopenhauer's quasi-Buddhist metaphysics, an extremely gloomy but necessary undertaking. Schopenhauer maintained, not without some plausibility, that suffering lies at the core of existence. He believed suffering was the result of a blind and purposeless 'Will to Live' that is experienced in human consciousness as insatiable and painful desire. After describing this pessimistic worldview – summarised in his grim conclusion that 'life must be some sort of mistake'³² – I will consider how he responded with an ethic of compassion; I will also summarise his views on art and aesthetics; and I will outline his ultimate orientation toward life, which involves 'denying the will' through ascetic practices of self-renunciation. This philosophy of resignation provides the groundwork for assessing Nietzsche's critical engagement with Schopenhauer; in particular, I will examine how Nietzsche 'revalues the value of suffering' in search of a way to transcend Schopenhauerian pessimism and affirm life, despite the prevalence of suffering.
4. In '***An Aesthetic Justification of Existence: The Redemptive Function of Art***', I continue my assessment of Nietzschean philosophy by analysing his famous pronouncement, found in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), that it is only as an 'aesthetic phenomenon' that existence and the world can be justified.³³ This examination involves distinguishing his notion of an aesthetic justification from religious or rational justifications, which will help to clarify what it might mean to say that existence could be justified as an aesthetic phenomenon. This draws us into Nietzsche's views on art –

tragic art in particular – and I will consider whether or how art can provide a redemptive function in a world replete with suffering and where it seems no other religious or metaphysical comforts exist to offer existential consolation.

5. Even if one were to accept Nietzsche's response to the problem of suffering, human beings would still find themselves facing the problem of nihilism or meaninglessness. Confronting this challenge, in '**Camus on Art and Revolt: Overcoming Nihilism in an Absurd Universe**', I turn to the work of philosopher and novelist Albert Camus, exploring the ways in which he articulated the problem of meaning and how he developed an aesthetic response to it. Rather than resign himself to nihilism – the view that nothing matters in a world without God or objective meaning – Camus would develop an aesthetics of revolt. This view of the human condition burdens us all with the task of creating our own values, which is not a project of rational discovery but rather an aesthetic project of invention and commitment. Given that human beings all suffer the same 'absurd' condition, Camus maintained we can also find in this tragic reality a ground for human solidarity. We will see that Camus argues that art justifies itself not for its own sake but as something that can present a vision of human dignity in a world full of suffering and oppression. Art thus 'rejects the world on account of what it lacks... in the name of what it sometimes is.'³⁴
6. The term 'aestheticism', which I am embracing, has acquired a bad name today. It is employed primarily as a pejorative, directed most often toward people or movements associated with Dandyism. The dandy character attempts to make life a work of art through such things as eccentric dress, attention-seeking behaviour, and the hedonistic pursuit of sensory pleasures. If I am to succeed in reclaiming this dubious term – to make it a plausible centre piece of the current project – then further attention must be given to how aestheticism has acquired its contemporary meaning, what that meaning is, and how I intend to employ the term quite differently. Those are my tasks in '**Rescuing Aestheticism from the Dandies: Critical Distinctions**'. Dandyism is a form of aestheticism, albeit a rather crude one, but I will show that aestheticism is far from exhausted by Dandyism. If I can clarify this distinction, I should have advanced the cause of rehabilitating aestheticism in helpful and important ways.
7. Having surveyed, in the previous essays, some philosophical territory on the human condition, I turn to questions concerning aesthetics from an evolutionary perspective in '**Homo Aestheticus, the Artful Species: An Evolutionary Perspective**'. Here I examine what role art and aesthetics may have played in evolutionary history. It is easy enough to acknowledge that art could not have existed without the humans who produced it. Few consider the possibility, however, that humans could not have appeared without our arts. In that spirit, I consider the idea that every human being, on account of evolutionary inheritances, can and should be described as part of an 'artful species' – *homo aestheticus*.³⁵ When looking to the past it will become clear that the arts have helped our species survive, develop, and flourish in often hostile, uncertain, and changing environments. Looking forward, then, it seems plausible that the wise use of the arts may also be central to our own survival in an age of

environmental limits, where our aesthetic capacities and sensibilities are currently being dangerously distorted and repressed, resulting in what I will call an aesthetic deficit disorder

8. One of the philosophical problems I am exploring in this collection of essays concerns the apparent conflict between biology and philosophy when it comes to understanding human beings. On the one hand, there is the view widely held amongst evolutionary biologists and psychologists that humans have a ‘common nature’ by virtue of our long, shared species’ history; on the other hand, there is a philosophical view, widely held by post-Nietzscheans of various schools, that humans have no ‘given’ nature but are everyday tasked with creating it. In short, the first position holds that there is a common human nature; the second holds that human nature, as such, does not exist. In ***‘Giving Birth to Oneself: Ethics as an “Aesthetics of Existence”***, I develop a synthesis of these apparently conflicting literatures, a possibility which was opened up to me by a reading of evolutionary biology through the lens of art and aesthetics. Specifically, I explore a range of philosophical arguments that support the conception of human beings as ‘self-creators’, drawing primarily on Michel Foucault and Richard Rorty, both of whom have Nietzsche as a prominent influence. I will also begin considering some of the social and political implications of self-creation through a critical examination of Rorty’s vision of a ‘poeticised culture’.
9. In ***‘The Politics of Beauty: Schiller on Freedom and Aesthetic Education’*** I review some critical perspectives on modernity and the Enlightenment project through the lens of Friedrich Schiller’s theory of aesthetic education. Despite always remaining a champion of reason, Schiller was also one of its severest critics, and in a decisive and original move he argued that ‘the way to the head must lie through the heart.’³⁶ This is not an anti-intellectual point, however. He was offering the profound and subtle insight that through beauty – through the works of poets, painters, musicians, and storytellers – we are best able to engage the intellect *having first affected the emotions*. Moreover, he believed that moral, ethical, and political reasoning *must* engage the heart to be effective, for reason and rationality will fail to motivate or transform behaviour without emotional appeal. I engage these ideas through a close reading of Schiller’s *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794).
10. At this stage in the project I need to acknowledge a significant problem regarding my conceptualisation of human beings as *homo aestheticus*. It is a problem that is evident as soon as one turns from theory to the world as it is: if we are an artful species, one that is creative and self-constituting, why is it that the world is so full of oppression, servitude, anxiety, and ugliness? If we are evolutionarily shaped to be aesthetic agents in an aesthetic universe, why do we see cultures – I’m thinking of the ‘advanced’ affluent cultures in particular – seemingly content to distract themselves with the trinkets and baubles offered by consumer capitalism? In ***‘Bad Faith and the Fear of Freedom: Can Art Shake Us Awake?’***, I attempt to illuminate aspects of this problematic by drawing on Jean-Paul Sartre’s notion of ‘bad faith’ and Erich Fromm’s idea of the ‘fear of freedom’. These two ideas help explain the dire state of human

freedom and aesthetic activity today, while also showing why this problem is within our power to resolve.

- 11.** In my earlier essay on Schiller I looked at aesthetic education primarily from a philosophical perspective. In *'Banish the Poets! The Power and Politics of Aesthetic Education'* I attempt to ground the analysis more firmly in the socio-political domain. This involves considering aesthetic education from three angles. First, I compare and contrast an 'education for profit' with an 'aesthetic education'. Second, I consider the so-called 'information deficit model' of change. This theory assumes that human beings are fundamentally rational, evidence-based thinkers and, on that basis, the theory implies that the primary means of societal progress is more evidence and better arguments. I will argue that this is at best a partial and often misleading theory of change, one that marginalises the role of the arts and aesthetic education in social and political transformation. Third, I diagnose an imaginative sterility in contemporary culture, which has left many citizens largely unable to envision forms of life beyond consumer capitalism. Political and cultural theorist Mark Fisher called this enclosing of the imagination 'capitalist realism',³⁷ often defined as the view that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. The purpose of this tripartite analysis is to explore to what extent a reinvigorated aesthetic education might be needed to resolve these obstacles and drive societal transformation.
- 12.** Defending the social and political import of the arts, as I have been doing, can invite the rejoinder that art, in fact, is useless; that artists have no political impact; and that aesthetics is either apolitical or politically dangerous. In *'Making Art While the World Weeps: Political Reflections on Aesthetics'* I address these types of objections. I set out to deconstruct any simplistic dismissal of aesthetics by examining the blurry distinction between art, life, and politics, in order to show that there is in fact an inherent aesthetic dimension to life and politics, just as there is a political or even revolutionary potential inherent to certain forms of art or aesthetic practice. In doing so, my analysis is shaped by the emerging 'aesthetic turn'³⁸ in politics and by various political interpretations of art and aesthetics. To be clear, my position is not that we *should* or *should not* infuse politics with aesthetic considerations, but rather, as Jacques Rancière states, that 'politics is aesthetic in principle.'³⁹
- 13.** Having raised questions about the political significance of aesthetics, in *'Art Against Empire: Marcuse on the Aesthetics of Revolt'* I turn to examine the writings of critical theorist Herbert Marcuse. After reviewing his central theses on the potentially transformative role of art in society, I develop the analysis by proposing a categorisation that helps clarify art's diverse political functions. The four categories are: i) aesthetic indictment, which involves using art to help expose the injustices and violence that can be hidden in the political system or dominant cultural values; ii) aesthetic imagination, which involves using art to help expand the imagination so that alternative futures can be envisioned, as well as help expand ethical sympathies so that people previously deemed 'other' can be come to fall within the circle of care and concern; iii) aesthetic revision of 'needs', which involves exploring the ways in which

art can help reshape human needs, drives, and hopes in ways that lay the cultural foundations for political change; and finally, iv) aesthetic enchantment, which involves the ways in which art, beauty, and aesthetic value more broadly can give emotional energy to people in ways that have political effects.

14. In *'Answering Estragon: Art, Godot, and Utopia'*, I continue my aesthetic inquiries by considering whether art can not merely be a *means* to creating a good society but also shape our understanding of the *end* of social and political struggle. In other words, I set out to understand to what extent art and aesthetics can provide ultimate values that could inform not just how to transition to a more humane and liberated society but also shape what that society looks like or ought to look like. I take my point of departure from a line in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953), where Estragon asks his fellow tramp, Vladimir: 'What do we do now, now that we are happy?' In response I argue for a politics of meaning – to be distinguished from utilitarianism and conventional liberalism – where political struggle is understood as seeking to maximise opportunities for oneself and others to live a meaningful life in harmony with nature. My thesis is that this search for meaning in life is best achieved through art, a living strategy that has the significant benefit of not requiring high levels of material provision.

15. The Grand Narrative of industrial civilisation is a story of progress within which societies advance by way of continuous economic growth, rising affluence, and technological innovation. In *'Industrial Aesthetics: A Critique of Taste'* I focus on the aesthetics of industrialisation and consumerism, examining various aesthetic dimensions of consumption practices in the affluent capitalist societies. The purpose is to show that transcending consumerism and the growth economy may well depend on first overcoming various aesthetic obstacles, practices, and tastes. These obstacles include the stories and myths we tell about ourselves and societies; the ways we shape our identities and communicate through consumption; the disaffection and alienation that evidently is widely experienced in consumer societies, even by those who have achieved high consumption lifestyles; and the way dominant conceptions of taste and social legitimation regarding material living standards entrench materialistic conceptions of the good life. We may all have internalised these cultural narratives to some extent, often unconsciously. It follows that ethical and political activity today may require us to engage the self by the self for the purpose of *refusing who we are* – insofar as we are uncritical consumers – and creating new, post-consumerist forms of subjectivity.

16. To this point I have presented a worldview that conceives of the universe as an aesthetic phenomenon and human beings as an artful species. Art and the aesthetic dimensions of life were upheld as being of ultimate value in such a world, and I have also drawn on various intellectual traditions to explain why art is central to the transformative process of bringing about such an aestheticised society of self-creators through aesthetic education and artful interventions in culture and politics. In *'Artful Descent: A Cosmody of SMPLCTY'* this vision is developed further, through the lens of energy. I focus on the work of anthropologist and historian, Joseph Tainter,

especially his seminal text, *The Collapse of Complex Societies* (1988). Although largely sympathetic with Tainter's theory, I critically engage it in ways that leads me to conclusions he would reject. In doing so I present a defence of 'voluntary simplification' – essentially Tainter's term for degrowth. This term denotes a dynamic process of radical societal evolution which seeks to solve the most essential problems of life while minimising energy and resource demands. I maintain that voluntary simplification may be the *only* means of avoiding the civilisational process of complexity-to-collapse. My main argument is that art and aesthetic experience are promising and available means of 'living more with less' – of flourishing in simplicity. To the extent this is true, it would follow that opportunities for low-impact aesthetic practice and experience ought to be expanded as our material and energy demands contract for reasons of justice, sustainability, and wellbeing.

17. If it is the case, as argued in the previous essay, that civilisational stability depends on forms of societal organisation that reflect voluntary simplification, then questions arise about what such a way of life might look like, and feel like, in terms of daily practice. In ***Poet-Farmer: A Thoreauvian Aesthetics***, I turn to the life and philosophy of American philosopher and pioneering environmentalist Henry David Thoreau to highlight the perspective of 'voluntary simplicity' which lies at the heart of SMPLCTY. As a transitional strategy, I will argue that voluntary simplification or degrowth will depend on an aesthetic transformation of *tastes* in relation to material culture. One of the central theses in this volume of essays is that the aesthetic capacities and sensibilities of humankind can be fully explored in rich and satisfying ways, while living 'simply' in a material and energetic sense. On that basis, I am proposing that expanding opportunities for artistic expression and aesthetic experience are among the best ways of moving toward a civilisation that is environmentally sustainable, socially just, and personally fulfilling. In that light I have employed the term SMPLCTY to refer to an ecological civilisation of simple living 'poet-farmers'. Following Thoreau's lead, these citizens would live aesthetically stimulating and diverse lives while mindfully constraining material and energy requirements.

18. The previous essay set out to convey a material culture of sufficiency mainly from Thoreau's individualist perspective. In ***Democratising the Poet: William Morris on the Art of Everyday Life***, some of the social implications are explored in relation to the aesthetic philosophy of William Morris. I have already acknowledged how my broad definition of art (as the pleasurable and meaningful expression of creative labour) is indebted to Morris, and in this essay, I explore how he developed his aesthetic perspectives into a socio-political vision which he called a Democracy of Art. I begin by discussing his definition of art in more detail, before reviewing how this took social form in his eco-utopian novel, *News from Nowhere* (1890). After that I examine some of the theoretical foundations of that vision, focussing in particular on the relationship between material needs and labour. It will be seen that Morris celebrated the role of self-governed creative activity in everyday life, through which humans skilfully produced things by hand that were necessary for a good life. I conclude by exploring the political significance of Morris's aesthetic views, which will allow me to bring together some of the societal implications of the preceding essays.

19. In the penultimate essay I address some more of the political implications of my arguments, in *'The Aesthetic State'*. This concept was touched on in the essay on Schiller, who wrote that 'the most perfect'⁴⁰ of all works of art is the 'construction of true political freedom.'⁴¹ It was seen, however, that he never developed his comments on the aesthetic state into a formal theory. I will attempt to build on this preliminary work, developing some of Schiller's ideas in relation to the arguments and perspectives offered in this collection of essays.

20. I will close this collection by engaging Herman Hesse's novel *The Glass Bead Game*. This book tells the story of a community of artist-monks who live simple yet aesthetically rich lives in a province called Castalia. I focus on the theme of social and political 'engagement', central to Hesse's book, which provides a fitting capstone to this (ongoing) project.

¹ The comment about dead stars is paraphrasing astrophysicist Michelle Thaller. The idea of the universe being a cosmological symphony of vibrating strings comes 'string theory' physicists, Brian Green and Michio Kaku. See Brian Greene, *The Elegant Universe: Superstrings, Hidden Dimensions, and the Search for the Ultimate Theory* (London: Vintage, 2000), Part III; and Michio Kaku, 'The Universe is a Symphony of Vibrating Strings' *YouTube* (1 June 2011).

² See Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation: Vol. I* (New York: Dover, 1969). See also, John Fredrick Humphrey, 'Friedrich Nietzsche's *Artisten-Metaphysik*' (Doctoral thesis, Graduate Faculty of Political and Social Science, New School for Social Research, 1992).

³ Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution* (New York: Dover, 1998).

⁴ Abraham Kanovitch, *The Will to Beauty: Being a Continuation of the Philosophies of Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche* (New York: Gold Rose Printing, 1922), p. 147.

⁵ See Morris Weitz, 'The Role of Theory in Aesthetics' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (1956) 15(1): pp. 27-35; George Dickie, 'Defining Art' *American Philosophical Quarterly* (1969) 6: pp. 253-256; Walter Gallie, 'Essentially Contested Concepts' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* (1955) 56: 167-198.

⁶ See generally, William Morris, *News from Nowhere and Other Writings* (London, Penguin, 2004). Influenced by John Ruskin, Morris defined art as 'the expression of man's pleasure in labour.' *Ibid*, p. 367. I have paraphrased that definition and added 'meaning' to it, given that art need not always be pleasurable. Even when no pleasure flows from producing or contemplating art, it can still be of profound aesthetic value if it is *meaningful*. Of course, art can often be both pleasurable and meaningful.

⁷ My publications are listed, and mostly freely available, at my website: <https://samuelalexander.info/> (accessed 20 April 2023).

⁸ Here I am paraphrasing Jose Arguelles. See Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing* (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 2000), p. 188.

⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967), p. 22, p. 143.

¹⁰ See Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985).

¹¹ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

¹² Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (London: Penguin, 2008).

¹³ Jacques Rancière, *Dis-Agreement* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p. 58.

¹⁴ In this paragraph I'm playing with the opening lines of Thoreau's essay 'Walking'. See Henry Thoreau, 'Walking', in Carl Bode (ed.) *The Portable Thoreau* (New York: Penguin, 1982), p. 592.

¹⁵ See especially, my essays 'Creative Evolution and the Will to Art' and 'Homo Aestheticus, the Artful Species: An Evolutionary Perspective' in the present collection. Available at: <https://samuelalexander.info/> (accessed 10 April 2023).

¹⁶ Ellen Dissanayake, *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes from and Why* (Seattle: Washington Press, 1995), pp. xx.

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- ¹⁷ See note 7.
- ¹⁸ See Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, note 11, p. 50
- ¹⁹ See generally, Frank Farrell, 'Iterability and Meaning: The Searle-Derrida Debate' (1988) *Metaphilosophy* 19(1): pp. 53-64.
- ²⁰ Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, note 10.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 49.
- ²² *Ibid.*, pp. 50-51.
- ²³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism* (London: Methuen and Co, 1970), p. 34.
- ²⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974). p. 240.
- ²⁵ See Michel Foucault, 'An Aesthetics of Existence' in Lawrence Kritzman (ed.) *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984* (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 47-53.
- ²⁶ See Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, note 11.
- ²⁷ See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Situations* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), p. 101.
- ²⁸ Georg Lukacs, *Writer and Critic: And Other Essays* (New York: Universal Library, 1971), p. 89.
- ²⁹ See note 7.
- ³⁰ See Samuel Alexander, *Art Against Empire: Toward an Aesthetics of Degrowth* (Melbourne: Simplicity Institute, 2017).
- ³¹ See T.S. Eliot, 'The Dry Salvages' from *Four Quartets* (1941). Available here: <http://www.davidgorman.com/4quartets/3-salvages.htm> (accessed 2 January 2023).
- ³² Arthur Schopenhauer, *Essays and Aphorisms* (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 53.
- ³³ See note 9.
- ³⁴ Albert Camus, *The Rebel* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 219.
- ³⁵ On this topic, see Robert Joyce, *The Esthetic Animal: Man, the Art-Created Art Creator* (New York: Exposition Press, 1975); Ellen Dissanayake, *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes from and Why* (Seattle: Washington Press, 1995); Dennis Dutton, *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010); Stephen Davies, *The Artful Species* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Anjan Chatterjee, *The Aesthetic Brain: How We Evolved to Desire Beauty and Enjoy Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).
- ³⁶ Friedrich Schiller, *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, ed. Reginald Snell (New York: Dover, 2004), p. 50.
- ³⁷ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009).
- ³⁸ See generally, Nikolas Kompridis (ed.) *The Aesthetic Turn in Political Thought* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014).
- ³⁹ See note 13.
- ⁴⁰ Friedrich Schiller, *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, in Friedrich Schiller, *Essays*, eds. Walter Hinderer and Daniel Dahlstrom (New York: Continuum, 2005), p. 88.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*