

# SMPLECTY

**Ecological Civilisation and the Will to Art**



**SAMUEL ALEXANDER**

**Essays on the Aesthetics of Existence**

*Pessimism without Despair: Suffering, Desire, and the Affirmation of Life*



S M P L C T Y: Ecological Civilisation and the Will to Art

Copyright 2023 © Samuel Alexander (Creative Commons Non-Commercial)

Published by the Simplicity Institute 2023

Working Paper Series: Essays on the Aesthetics of Existence

Cover design by Andrew Doodson, Copyright © 2023

Cover image by Agim Sulaj, Copyright © 2023 <https://www.agimsulaj.com/index.shtml>

Acknowledgements: Heartfelt thanks to Professor Brendan Gleeson and Jacob Garrett for critically reviewing this essay. Countless improvements, both substantive and stylistic, were made in response to their feedback. Remaining errors and infelicities are my own. Thanks also to Agim Sulaj for generously giving permission to use his image on the cover, and to Andrew Doodson for his design of the cover.

# **CONTENTS\***

Preface: The Apocalyptic Sublime

## **BOOK ONE – THE WILL TO ART**

Introduction: The Aesthetic Dimension

The Cosmos as a ‘Readymade’: Dignifying the Aesthetic Universe

Creative Evolution and the Will to Art

Pessimism without Despair: Suffering, Desire, and the Affirmation of Life

An Aesthetic Justification of Existence: The Redemptive Function of Art

Camus on Art and Revolt: Overcoming Nihilism in an Absurd Universe

Rescuing Aestheticism from the Dandies: Critical Distinctions

Homo Aestheticus, the Artful Species: An Evolutionary Perspective

Giving Birth to Oneself: Ethics as an ‘Aesthetics of Existence’

The Politics of Beauty: Schiller on Freedom and Aesthetic Education

## **BOOK TWO – THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF ART**

Bad Faith and the Fear of Freedom: Can Art Shake Us Awake?

Banish the Poets! The Power and Politics of Aesthetic Education

Making Art While the World Weeps: Political Reflections on Aesthetics

Art Against Empire: Marcuse on the Aesthetics of Revolt

Answering Estragon: Art, Godot, and Utopia

Industrial Aesthetics: A Critique of Taste

Artful Descent: A Cosmodicy of SMPLCTY

Poet-Farmer: A Thoreauvian Aesthetics

Democratising the Poet: William Morris and the Art of Everyday Life

The Aesthetic State

Conclusion: Revisiting *The Glass Bead Game*

---

\* 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.

‘Life without music would be a mistake.’

– ***Friedrich Nietzsche***

# ***Pessimism without Despair: Suffering, Desire, and the Affirmation of Life***

Samuel Alexander

In the opening essays I offered an interpretation of the universe as an aesthetic phenomenon. By privileging artistic metaphors over machinic metaphors, I proposed a reading of existence based on what I called the Will to Art. This can be understood a process of creative evolution that is moving, albeit agonistically, toward ever-increasing opportunities for artistic expression and aesthetic experience. From this neo-Duchampian perspective, the cosmos is elevated to the dignity of a work of art, one that is unfolding in order to *experience itself* through the genesis and diversity of conscious and creative life. The telos of this universe is beauty, and we are its aesthetic agents – nodes of dissonance in search of harmony. My overarching thesis, developed later in this collection of essays, is that the Will to Art is most likely to realise itself in an ecological civilisation of artisan-artists who privilege ‘being’ over ‘having’.<sup>1</sup> In such a society, which I have labelled SMPLCTY, human communities would live simply but sufficiently in harmony with nature, finding meaning and pleasure through self-directed creative labour and aesthetic experience.

In presenting this vision, however, I cautioned against an overly romantic interpretation. In the introduction it was acknowledged that the Will to Art, in this early phase of creative evolution, often manifests in ways that appear more like a violent and ugly Will to Power, producing unnecessary suffering in the world. Indeed, so vast and pervasive is the reality of suffering that an entire tradition of ‘philosophical pessimism’ has arisen which concludes that the world, as such, ought not to exist.<sup>2</sup> The reality of suffering cannot be denied or downplayed, and any aesthetic justification of existence, such that I am offering, must give this problem due regard, which is the philosophical task of this essay and the next.

For this undertaking I turn to the work of one of pessimism’s most extreme adherents – Arthur Schopenhauer. If a plausible response can be formulated to the ‘great pessimist’ himself, it may be the problem of suffering can be dealt with in less extreme versions also. Schopenhauer would likely have agreed with the Socratic and Aristotelian dictum that philosophy begins in ‘wonder’. But rather than wonder denoting some exhilarating emotion evoked by the mysteries of life, Schopenhauer’s philosophical motivation could more accurately be described as ‘astonishment’ – astonishment at the horror of existence.<sup>3</sup> Can one digest such a pessimistic outlook without degenerating into despair? Might there be living strategies available that could somehow allow for the affirmation of life – a ‘pessimism of strength,’<sup>4</sup> as Friedrich Nietzsche would call it – despite the prevalence of suffering in the world? These are the questions to be considered presently.

After briefly outlining the metaphysical structure of Schopenhauer’s bleak and atheistic worldview, I will examine the place of suffering in it and how he responded to this perennial problem. It will be seen that Schopenhauer’s worldview has profound similarities to Eastern philosophy – the Buddhist views on suffering and desire, in particular – even though he

developed his philosophy independently and in original ways. This engagement with Schopenhauer's thought will require an analysis of his ethics of compassion, his views on art and aesthetics, as well as his case for 'denying the will' through ascetic practices, all articulated in his magnum opus, *The World as Will and Representation* (1818).<sup>5</sup> On that basis I will assess why and in what ways Nietzsche developed, and in many ways reacted against, Schopenhauerian pessimism.

In closing the essay I will link the discussion back to the Will to Art, which can be understood in part as a metaphorical restatement and revision of aspects of Schopenhauer's quasi-Buddhist metaphysics, influenced by Nietzsche's perspective on the aesthetic justification of existence.<sup>6</sup> While I do not want to overstate the influence Buddhism has had on the development of the worldview being presented – I am more Nietzschean than Buddhist, and came to Buddhism through Schopenhauer – the term 'aesthetic Buddhism' will be introduced to help clarify aspects of the cosmology implicit to the Will to Art. This alchemy of philosophies will also allow me to highlight places where both Nietzsche and Schopenhauer misinterpreted aspects of Buddhism and the ascetic practices this tradition may (or may not) imply. While no prior knowledge of Buddhism will be assumed, readers who already have some grasp of this ancient Indian wisdom tradition are well-placed to hear what I have to say about the Will to Art.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Schopenhauer's metaphysics***

Any review of Schopenhauer's metaphysics must begin by acknowledging his philosophical debt to Immanuel Kant. Schopenhauer was deeply influenced by Kant's systematic philosophy (often called 'transcendental idealism'), although he claimed to have advanced Kant's view in critically important ways. Schopenhauer began on the Kantian foundations that the world-in-itself – the 'noumenal world', as Kant called it – is unknowable to us. We can only experience and have knowledge of the phenomenal world, given to us through our senses, as sense data. Kant's most significant contribution to philosophy was to explain that this sense data was not raw or unmediated, like earlier empiricists had argued. Instead, the very possibility of experience was dependent on phenomena being *constructed* by our consciousness.

In this view, our experience of reality is shaped by the categories of time, space, and causality, these being some of the categories of the understanding which Kant argued provide the very conditions of thought itself. Our consciousness is like the 'lens' on a pair of spectacles, forever and necessarily colouring or mediating our view of reality. On that basis, Kant concluded that we can never have knowledge of metaphysical reality (the world-in-itself or the thing-in-itself). Rather, the noumenal world is *represented* to us, via our sensory apparatus, as the phenomenal world. Contrary to the view of earlier rationalists, Kant argued that direct access to the underlying metaphysical reality is simply not accessible to creatures such as ourselves. In these ways he was able to merge and at the same time transcend the two major schools of philosophy: rationalism and empiricism.

In Schopenhauer's book *World as Will and Representation*, he developed this view by arguing that Kant, in most regards, accurately delineated the limits of human knowledge, but that he missed one critical element in the philosophical picture. He felt Kant's insistence that we can

never know the noumenal world was in one regard a premature defeat. Schopenhauer's definitive theoretical innovation was to argue that we do, in fact, have direct experience of the underlying reality, the thing-in-itself, through what he called the Will (sometimes the 'will-to-live').<sup>8</sup> Granted, we cannot experience the underlying reality of the *external world* represented to us via our senses, given that such experience was necessarily constructed by our sensory apparatus. Agreeing with Kant on this, Schopenhauer wrote: 'In consequence of all this, on the path to *objective knowledge*, thus starting from *representation*, we shall never get beyond the representation, i.e., the phenomenon. We shall therefore remain at the outside of things; we shall never be able to penetrate into their inner nature, and investigate what they are in themselves, in other words, what they may be by themselves.'<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, by looking inward rather than outward, Schopenhauer argued that we have direct access to the 'blindly urging force'<sup>10</sup> and 'endless striving'<sup>11</sup> of the Will. Schopenhauer argued that this Will is the thing-in-itself, unmediated, therefore giving us access to the underlying nature of reality. This was not 'representational' knowledge of the external world, hence his distinction (highlighted in his book title) between the world as Will, and the world as Representation. We can experience our body by touching it, through which we gain representational knowledge of ourselves in the world. But we also have direct, non-representational access to the Will, which he declared was 'the most intimate fact of self-consciousness'.<sup>12</sup>

Schopenhauer argued that this gives us access to reality's 'innermost being, its kernel'.<sup>13</sup> This experience of ourselves as a willing creature was categorically different from touching our own arm, for example, or perceiving an object in nature. 'We must learn to understand nature from ourselves, not ourselves from nature.'<sup>14</sup> For 'we too have absolutely no knowledge of the things-in-themselves... I admit this of everything, but not of the knowledge everyone has of his own *willing*'.<sup>15</sup> Thus, distinguishing his position from Kant's, Schopenhauer said that 'a way *from within* stands open to us to that real inner nature of things... It is, so to speak, a subterranean passage, a secret alliance'<sup>16</sup> between subject and object. Knowledge of the will is not a subject *knowing* the object – it is the subject *as* object, which is to say, a collapsing of that distinction.

At once it must be acknowledged that Schopenhauer employs the term Will in a very unusual sense that can easily mislead. Normally, the term 'will' is associated with a *conscious being*, one that 'wills' or 'desires' something (e.g., the child wilfully jumped into the puddle). Schopenhauer, however, was using it in a far broader sense, referring to the relentless impersonal driving force inherent in *all nature*, of which human consciousness was only a particular, higher-order manifestation. Schopenhauer would argue that the Will is objectified in nature to varying grades – a hierarchy of objectification. At its crudest and most basic level, the hierarchy begins with the forces of nature, such as gravity, then manifests in inanimate objects, like stones and water, moving up through plant life to animal life, and culminating in human consciousness where the Will has become self-aware. This hierarchy also implies increasing degrees of creativity and freedom. Gravity is a constant that does not change. Rocks do not have any agency but change and degrade over time. Plants, as basic life forms, struggle for survival and seek out propitious conditions for life, but lack consciousness. Non-human animals are conscious but seem to act purely on instinct. Then there are self-aware humans,

at the top of this hierarchy, who are able to reflect on their situation, show forethought, and act creatively with what is experienced as free will.<sup>17</sup>

In this expanded sense of the Will, a sunflower that follows the sun over the course of the day or pushes its roots deeper into the soil is change brought about by the manifestation of Will – the will-to-live – even though this plant is not conscious. Our own sense of personal experience, our desiring ego or self, is just another, higher-order manifestation of the same underlying, undifferentiated Will. As philosopher Sophia Vasalou writes: ‘Willing is not something we do, but something we are, for our embodied condition leaves us no choice as to whether to will or not...’<sup>18</sup> According to Schopenhauer, the Will is the inner nature of reality and everything we experience in nature is a manifestation of its objectification – the Will becoming phenomena.

Schopenhauer’s conception of Will, admittedly, seems to strain ordinary language. To place the force of gravity, inanimate objects, life-seeking plants, instinctual animals, and self-conscious human action under the same term seems to gloss over what are the clear differences between these entities. Furthermore, the notion of willing, which is normally associated with a mind or consciousness, implies (or necessitates) no such thing in Schopenhauer’s worldview. This jarring usage, however, was no accident. It was intended to unsettle the received understanding of ourselves and the world. The Will is what gives everything in the universe its blind force of energy, striving without purpose: ‘Every individual act has a purpose or end; [but] willing as a whole has no end in view.’<sup>19</sup> Schopenhauer warns his readers that ‘anyone who is incapable of carrying out the required extension of the concept will remain involved in a permanent misunderstanding.’<sup>20</sup>

### ***Schopenhauerian pessimism: Life is a mistake***

The metaphysical system just outlined is the foundation for Schopenhauer’s pessimistic outlook, which we can now explore further. Apologies to the reader, things are about to get grim. As individuals, we humans are fundamentally the embodiment of this underlying and insatiable force, the Will. A moment’s reflection confirms that we are indeed full of desires – desires which we did not choose to have – and desires that have no end. For as soon as one desire is satisfied, another is there waiting. And unfilled desire implies a state of dissatisfaction, pain, or suffering – for when we desire, presumably something is lacking in our life. As Schopenhauer maintained: ‘All willing springs from lack, from deficiency and thus from suffering.’<sup>21</sup>

Any happiness attained by fulfilling a desire is always temporary and fleeting, never lasting. Even when desire seems temporarily satisfied, we nevertheless hope that our satisfied state continues, so we haven’t really escaped desire at all. And if such pathological desire is ever tempered for too long, boredom arises, inducing a new form of malaise, as we experience the ‘utter bleakness and emptiness of existence.’<sup>22</sup> From a Schopenhauerian perspective, happiness is better understood as the absence of pain rather than anything positive – a passing condition that inevitably returns to the default state of painful lack.<sup>23</sup> ‘Thus,’ he wrote, ‘the subject of willing is constantly lying on the revolving wheel of Ixion, is always drawing water in the sieve of the Danaids and is the eternal thirsting Tantalus.’<sup>24</sup>



Schopenhauer argued that this endless state of discontent lies at the core of the human condition and of existence more generally. 'Every attained end is at the same time the beginning of a new course, and so on *ad infinitum*.'<sup>25</sup> As tormented and agonised beings, we are condemned by nature to suffer. What is more, the balance of pain and pleasure in life is decidedly weighted toward pain: 'Life is a business whose returns are far from covering the cost.'<sup>26</sup> Wanting to ensure people grasped the full bleakness of his conclusions, Schopenhauer elaborated:

...for one wish that is fulfilled there remain at least ten that are denied. Further, desiring lasts a long time, demands and requests go on to infinity; fulfilment is short and meted out sparingly. But even the final satisfaction itself is only apparent; the wish fulfilled at once makes way for a new one; the former is a known delusion, the latter a delusion not as yet. No attained object of willing can give a satisfaction that lasts and no longer declines, but it is always like the alms thrown to a beggar, which reprieves him today so that his misery may be prolonged til tomorrow. Therefore, so long as our consciousness is filled by our will... so long as we are the subject of willing, we never obtain lasting happiness or peace.<sup>27</sup>

Readers will be justified in noting the striking resemblance here with the spiritual worldviews of some Eastern philosophies – Hinduism and Buddhism, in particular. These perspectives also posit 'desire' as lying at the root of human existence, through 'tanha', which literally means 'thirst' but is usually translated as 'craving' or 'desire'. Schopenhauer had read the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavat-Gita*, although he seems to have developed his worldview independently.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, he was an avid reader of Eastern philosophy throughout his life, including Buddhist texts. He even had a statue of Buddha on his desk, and is often credited with being the first Western philosopher to have shown the insight to take Eastern philosophy seriously. Like the Buddha's First Noble Truth, Schopenhauer diagnosed existence with piercing simplicity: Life is suffering.<sup>29</sup>

Although Schopenhauer would develop pessimism in unique ways, his perspective shares very similar premises with Eastern philosophy. This overlap with such revered spiritual traditions arguably adds weight to Schopenhauer's position, even if aspects of his metaphysical framing are questionable. It is a defining feature of the human condition that we desire, we suffer because we desire, and since we are forever desiring, we suffer relentlessly, in ways ranging from the modest to the agonal. Desire for food, sex, sleep, warmth, the sensuous pleasures, material possessions, or even desires for personal development or social achievement, will keep on emerging. Any satisfactions of such are, at best, only temporary. We should have no hope or expectation of happiness or satisfaction. '[E]verything in life,' Schopenhauer suggested gloomily, 'is certainly calculated to bring us back from that original error [of expecting happiness], and to convince us that the purpose of our existence is not to be happy.'<sup>30</sup> The desiring Will, at base, is the underlying cause of misery and dissatisfaction in human existence. (Some decades later, Sigmund Freud would present a similarly grim vision of the human condition, albeit framed by psychoanalytic theory.)

This fundamental insight about the insatiable nature of human desire is the first step in Schopenhauer's pessimism – but by no means is it the last. The second step, anticipated above, flows from his position that the Will is blind and purposeless: 'the absence of all aim, of all limits, belongs to the essential nature of the will in itself, which is an endless striving.'<sup>31</sup> We

spend our lives chasing vain goals that ultimately lack any objective meaning, made all the worse by the fact that the process of pursuing those goals fills our lives with pain, disappointment, loss, failure, and an underlying sense of futility. Our deepest loves will one day die; our hope for finding meaning in life through fame or wealth is a vain joke; we will all get sick, as will our loved ones, often without personal fault; freak accidents and meaningless violence occur to torment us, and if they don't happen to us personally, the mere possibility that they will colours existence with an underlying sense of anxiety and fear. This occurs no matter how privileged a person may be. Lying on one's deathbed, all the wealth in the world will not matter much, as one proceeds, inevitably, toward the endless sleep of death, often in pain. Reading Schopenhauer, to be sure, can be rather depressing. This is especially so, as Marxist philosopher and literary critic Terry Eagleton acknowledges, given that the 'appalling vision is accurate in many of its essentials.'<sup>32</sup> Eagleton adds that it 'is remarkable how formally coherent utter futility can be made to appear.'<sup>33</sup>

There are also social injustices that seem to permeate any moral evaluation of the world. The distribution of suffering in the world certainly doesn't seem to be based on merit or fairness. Schopenhauer would also remind us that we are often more selfish than we should be, privileging our own desires over the more pressing needs of others. Some people seem positively cruel and sadistic. Looking around the world, we see great multitudes in humiliating destitution, despite living in a world of unprecedented affluence and capacity. In most if not all societies people are oppressed arbitrarily in one way or another by cultural, religious, or racial prejudices, often in contexts ravaged by war, disease, famine, natural disasters, or ecological degradation. Beyond human societies lies a natural world, red in tooth and claw, where the principle of life is kill or be killed. Schopenhauer's view is that everything in nature 'possesses only what it has wrested from another',<sup>34</sup> such that a 'constant struggle is carried on between life and death.'<sup>35</sup>

Even more troublesome, Schopenhauer continued, is that we live meaningless, painful lives with foreknowledge that we will inevitably die – and die in a universe without God or any metaphysical comfort (raising the issue of nihilism which will be considered in more detail in a forthcoming essay).<sup>36</sup> This is a 'spiritual pain'<sup>37</sup> that washes over the incessant physical suffering, a dread unique to humans who can imagine and contemplate their own demise. Death lies waiting for us, an abyss of nothingness without any higher purpose, reminding us every moment that our lives are finite and forgettable, even as we spend most of our lives trying to forget this gloomy reality. One day our existence will be extinguished, permanently so. But do not take any solace in the finite suffering of our individual lives, because we can be sure the suffering will continue after we are gone, as our illusory egos dissolve back into the relentless striving of the Will upon death. So even suicide is an option that for Schopenhauer 'affords no escape'.<sup>38</sup>

Perhaps a few geniuses – the likes of Plato, Newton, Shakespeare, Bach, Beethoven, and so forth – might be culturally remembered across centuries or in very rare cases millennia; perhaps, for more ordinary folks, our family members might remember us for a generation or two, at most. But ultimately, we will all end up as rotting corpses and be forgotten, at which point, if not before, our vain worldly strivings and achievements will not seem like much. As

David Holbrook writes: 'In the end, even the creative achievements of Shakespeare and Bach must be eradicated by death and nothingness, when the earth is burnt up in the sun.'<sup>39</sup>

In summary, Schopenhauer maintained that 'we have not to be pleased but rather sorry about the existence of the world; that its non-existence would be preferable to its existence; that it is something which at bottom ought not to be...'<sup>40</sup> Or, more starkly still, the great pessimist concluded: 'life must be some sort of mistake.'<sup>41</sup>

### ***Schopenhauer's response to suffering: Compassion, aesthetics, and asceticism***

Schopenhauer thus concluded that existence cannot be justified. The prospect of an aesthetic justification of existence will be touched on below (and developed in the next essay), where I examine Nietzsche's attempt to grapple with Schopenhauer's pessimism. Before getting to Nietzsche, however, I wish to review how Schopenhauer responded to his own pessimistic conclusions. There are three main themes to address here, related to his views on compassion, aesthetic experience, and asceticism, which will now be considered in turn.

#### *Compassion*

If one were to accept the basics of Schopenhauer's worldview, what might the ethical implications be? With a logic similar to Buddhist thought, Schopenhauer made a coherent case for an ethic of compassion. His key premise is that our existence as individuals is just an objectification of an underlying Will that is undifferentiated in its fundamental nature. That is, our sense of 'ego' is really just an illusion and that, at base, all human beings, and indeed, all phenomena of nature, are essentially manifestations of one and the same blind Will.

Two things arguably follow from this. First, Schopenhauer calls on us to recognise the vanity of our personal hopes and ambitions. We experience such things as important in our lives, but according to the grand metaphysical scheme he outlined, they are not. Our strivings are ultimately meaningless in any objective sense, there is no God to judge us or heaven awaiting us – and hell is already here! Everything, including our personal experience, is transitory and ultimately will be extinguished. If the ego can be transcended in this way – by seeing our individuality as illusory – some of our own suffering might be reduced, given that we would come to see our goals as meaningless and, in the greater scheme of things, trivial. Should such a perspective be adopted, we might become less selfish and egotistical, leaving more room for compassion.

Furthermore, Schopenhauer tells us that the suffering we experience as individuals, horrible though it can be, is actually only a partial, limited sense of the full extent of suffering. After all, if, from a metaphysical perspective, we are all the same insatiable Will, then it would follow that our individualities dissolve. It would mean that the suffering of all human beings and everything throughout nature is, in fact, the suffering of the very same Will that constitutes our inner essence – the essence of reality itself.

Upon that basis, Schopenhauer developed an ethic of compassion. Not only does he invite us to put ourselves in the position of other people and infer their suffering from our own, but

more fundamentally, when it is grasped that we are all the same underlying Will, the suffering of others can be seen as our own, and our suffering, theirs. In order to motivate our compassion, we somehow need to understand the object of compassion, and this can be achieved by a proper understanding of the indivisibility of the Will, for ‘to a certain extent I have identified myself with the other person.’<sup>42</sup> This approach to ethics is grounded to some extent in ‘affect’ rather than reason. Schopenhauer was acknowledging that, as moral agents, we cannot merely *know* what the right thing to do is. We must also feel some *impetus to act* on that basis. When the self identifies with the whole world, one sees that love of others is self-love, and self-love is at once love of others.

Paradoxically, there is a risk that the compassionate person might actually increase overall suffering in the world, given that their own anguish might deepen as they come to see the pain in the world as their own. This could lead to an increase in the overall economy of unhappiness in the world.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, that increase in suffering could well be balanced out or outweighed by compassionate acts that reduce pain in the world, and presumably that was Schopenhauer’s view.

In this way Schopenhauer developed a morality based on alleviating the suffering of life: ‘Injure no-one; rather help all as far as you can.’<sup>44</sup> Again, it is remarkable how close this worldview is to Indian philosophy, notably the Buddhist notion that the ‘self’ is really just an illusion and that ultimately, we are all One. The self (Atman) and the Absolute Reality (Brahman) are identical at base, in the sense that the self dissolves into that reality upon Enlightenment. This perspective overcomes one of the primary obstacles to ethical practice – that is, the self-interested question: what is in it for me? Buddhist perspectives, as with Schopenhauer’s, insist that there is no ‘me’, and to the extent there is an ego in lived experience, the ‘I’ is not distinct from the ‘other’. The self thereby vanishes into insignificance, making room for compassion as the self-interested ego dissolves.

It is sometimes said that there are two main threads to Buddhism – wisdom and compassion. Wisdom involves seeing the world as it is; compassion involves minimising suffering in that world. This grounds Buddhist ethics of compassion according to a logic similar to Schopenhauer’s. Interestingly, Schopenhauer was an early defender of animal rights, and he commended the British for being ahead of Germany in terms of decent treatment of animals. He saw suffering as suffering, and he hoped and advocated for its reduction in all its diverse manifestations. On this issue, at least, he was practising what he preached. In other regards, however, Schopenhauer may not have walked the talk of his ethics so consistently. By all accounts he was not a very nice man. For instance, in a most un-Buddhist act, it is said that he once pushed an old lady down a set of stairs for chatting too loudly outside his door. She was injured and Schopenhauer had to pay compensation until her death, which he deeply resented. Nevertheless, the logic of his ethics of compassion is not undermined just because he was not always able to live up to its demands.

Schopenhauer did not believe that compassion could ever eliminate suffering. Instead, he suggested that approaching life in the spirit of compassion could make a terrible existence slightly less terrible – and that is a respite worth taking, even if it provides little by way of consolation. What is clear, however, is that this provides no ‘justification’ for existence – it

arguably makes the extent of suffering even more profound than it already was, as a consequence of sympathy and empathy. At most, an ethic of compassion offers guidance on how a 'self' that does not exist could live in a world that ought not exist.

### *Aesthetic contemplation*

The second strategy Schopenhauer employed to manage life in a world based on suffering was to turn to art. In fact, his defence of art and aesthetic experience is so powerfully and eloquently presented that he is often referred to as "the artists' philosopher" and, indeed, he has arguably had more influence on the arts than any other philosopher (with Nietzsche or Marx probably being his only competitors). Schopenhauer does not believe art or aesthetic contemplation provides a *justification* for existence, or even any permanent or long-term relief. But he does suggest aesthetic experience leads to a psychological or existential state where, in some sense, we 'lose ourselves' in art and thereby, if only momentarily, transcend the world of suffering. In this way art offers a certain spiritual therapy, a temporary redemption, where we are freed from the service to the Will and attain 'that peace that is higher than reason; that ocean-like calmness of the spirit, that deep tranquillity, that unshakeable confidence and serenity'.<sup>45</sup>

Linking his analysis to some of the language of Kantian aesthetics, Schopenhauer believed that aesthetic experience induces a state of 'disinterestedness' where we contemplate things without any reflection on our own personal desires or attachments. As we experience a work of art, we can find ourselves somehow suspended, as if in another world or dimension, where our sense of self fades into the background of experience; sometimes the self completely disappears, if only for a short time. This brings peace and serenity, since it is the self, with its incessant will, that is the source of all our sorrows and sufferings. He explained: 'we are no longer able to separate the perceiver from the perception, but the two have become one, since the entire consciousness is filled and occupied by a single image of perception.'<sup>46</sup>

Through aesthetic experience, Schopenhauer argued, we are left to experience beauty in quiet, will-less contemplation. We can become so deeply absorbed in art or the aesthetic appreciation of nature that the painful character of existence disappears. We 'no longer consider the where, the when, the why, and the whither of things, but simply and solely the *what*.'<sup>47</sup> Elaborating on this position, he asserted that 'the person who is involved in this perception is no longer an individual, for in such perception the individual has lost himself; he is now a *pure* will-less, painless, timeless *subject of knowledge*.'<sup>48</sup> It's a temporary state of tranquillity, undisturbed by the relentless strivings and impulses of the blind will:

[A]ll at once the peace, always sought but always escaping us on that first path of willing, comes to us of its own accord, and all is well with us... [F]or that moment we are delivered from the miserable pressure of the will. We celebrate the Sabbath of the penal servitude of willing; the wheel of Ixion stands still.<sup>49</sup>

There is a second element to Schopenhauer's discussion of aesthetic experience which I will note briefly, referring not so much to the therapeutic value of art but rather its cognitive value. Schopenhauer develops his analysis of aesthetic experience by arguing that, when the Will is transcended through art, in such a state our perception of the world is *least distorted*.



Schopenhauer argued, on that basis, that the artist can depict representational reality as accurately as possible, by evoking a state where we are able to have access to it. True art is created *in* this aesthetic state, for the purpose of *inducing* that state.

Here Schopenhauer used Platonic terminology, contending that during aesthetic experience we have access to the Platonic Ideas that represent timeless reality. He is careful, however, not to contradict his earlier position, outlined above. We saw that he adopted from Kant the view that phenomena of the world can never be known ‘in themselves’. But he did argue that aesthetic experience can offer us an ‘adequate objectivity’<sup>50</sup> – that is, the closest thing we will get to knowing the reality underlying representations.<sup>51</sup> If we drop some of the philosophical terminology, it might simply be said that there are truths about reality that are best represented through art and best received in a state of aesthetic experience. Indeed, art might be able to express truths that cannot be expressed or paraphrased through conceptual language.<sup>52</sup>

What is somewhat strange about this presentation however is that it seems to privilege the cognitive aspects of aesthetic experience and diminish, or even remove, the emotional content. This is because a state of disinterestedness would presumably exclude the propriety of an emotional response to art. To the extent emotions are part of genuine aesthetic experience, Schopenhauer suggested that it was not personal emotions being experienced (e.g., sorrow about this or that specific loss) but sorrow *in general*, or rather, Sorrow as a Platonic Idea.

A further word is also due on Schopenhauer’s view on the hierarchy of the arts, since this links to his broader worldview. (This cursory review will also clarify Nietzsche’s position on tragic art, to be discussed in the next essay, mainly with respect to the privileged role given to music). We have seen that the varying grades of the Will’s objectification in the world proceeds from the lower forms of natural forces and inanimate objects, through plants, to animal life and culminating in humanity. So too does Schopenhauer create a hierarchy of the arts that mirrors this. In his view, architecture is the lowest of the arts, since it deals with hard matter (gravity, rigidity, hardness, weight) and has a utilitarian or practical use in a way that a certain conception of ‘pure art’ is assumed to lack. He then maintains that next in the hierarchy of the arts is horticulture and landscaping, which is akin to the plant life in the world.

Painting and sculpture come next, followed up by poetry and tragedy, reflecting the place of animal life in the Will’s objectification. To offer a brief note on tragedy, Schopenhauer argued that the best tragedies are those where something catastrophic happens to a protagonist who did little or nothing wrong. In a rather morbid defence of this genre, he felt tragic narratives were important because they show us ‘those powers that destroy happiness and life, and in such a way that the path to them is at any moment open even to us... Then, shuddering, we feel ourselves already in the midst of hell.’<sup>53</sup> Drawing on the notion of the sublime, Schopenhauer argued that tragedy can evoke a strange pleasure as we contemplate something threatening or destructive from a position of safety and distance. ‘What gives to everything tragic... the characteristic tendency to the sublime, is the dawning of the knowledge that the world and life can afford us no true satisfaction, and are therefore not worth our attachment to them.’<sup>54</sup>

But Schopenhauer held up music as the highest of the arts, because it is not a representation of anything but is instead a 'copy of the Will itself.'<sup>55</sup> Music, therefore, can draw us closer to the nature of reality more effectively than any of the plastic or representational arts. By doing so, it tends to have the most powerful and universal effect on human beings, calibrating our souls and cultivating our emotions in unique ways. Schopenhauer believed that in music, 'the deepest recesses of our nature find expression.'<sup>56</sup> He particularly admired what he called 'absolute music' (i.e., music without words), because he believed words tend to bring the listener back into conceptual thought, whereas absolute music 'is an unconscious exercise in metaphysics in which the mind does not know it is philosophizing.'<sup>57</sup>

Contemporary philosopher of music Roger Scruton makes a similar point when he states: 'In some way [a great musical work] is setting an example of the higher life, inviting you to live and feel in a purer way, to free yourself from everyday pretenses. That is why it seems to speak with such authority: it is inviting you into another and higher world, a world in which life finds its fulfillment and its goals.'<sup>58</sup> Going further than Schopenhauer did, Scruton adds: 'We single out great works of art generally, and great works of music in particular, because they make a difference to our lives. They grant us an intimation of the depth and worthwhileness of things. Great works of art are the remedy for our metaphysical loneliness.'<sup>59</sup>

Even though Schopenhauer's hierarchy of the arts is rather strange, if not plainly dubious, he nevertheless provided an eloquent and sophisticated defence for the existential importance of art. As noted above, this is certainly no 'aesthetic justification' for existence. For him, art is, at best, a short-term palliative that eases the pains of life, and is vitally important for that reason as well as for the cognitive insights art can provide. But he never held up art as a solution to the problem of pessimism or a cure for the anguish of existence.

### *Asceticism*

Schopenhauer's ethic of compassion, we have seen, doesn't offer much consolation (and can even result in an expanded sense of life's suffering); and aesthetic experience, while always welcome, is only ever fleeting. It follows that the problem of suffering remains the dominant problem of life with nothing so far suggesting that it could be overcome. On these grounds, Schopenhauer offered his defining response to the problem of suffering, which was, to embrace a life of resignation and renunciation. He asserted that the best thing we can do in a world that ought not exist is to negate life as far as possible, through ascetic practices. This is the only path, he claimed, 'if salvation is to be attained from an existence like ours.'<sup>60</sup>

What's more, through aesthetic experience we can gain some glimpse into what this overcoming might feel like if we were successful (i.e., a state without suffering). Like certain interpretations of Indian philosophy, Schopenhauer's fundamental response to the problem of suffering is *denial of the will*, that is, an attempt to overcome desire through renunciation and resignation – a turning away from bodily pleasures and material cravings. 'Thus [the ascetic] resorts to fasting, and even to self-castigation and self-torture, in order that, by constant privation and suffering, he may more and more break down and *kill the will* that he recognises and abhors as the source of his own suffering existence and of the world's'.<sup>61</sup> This hardly sounds uplifting, but in Schopenhauer's poetic way, he describes the spiritual state of

the ascetic in terms that invite comparison (perhaps intentionally) to the state of nirvana achieved by the Buddha:

we can infer how blessed must be the life of a man whose will is silenced for a few moments, as in the enjoyment of the beautiful, but for ever, indeed completely extinguished, except for the last glimmering spark that maintains the body and is extinguished with it. Such a man who, after many bitter struggles with his own nature, has at last completely conquered, is then left only as pure knowing being, as the undimmed mirror of the world. Nothing can distress or alarm him anymore; nothing can any longer move him; for he has cut all the thousand threads of willing which hold us bound to the world, and which as craving, fear, envy, and anger drag us here and there in constant pain.

Then, instead of the restless pressure and effort; instead of the constant transition from desire to apprehension and from joy to sorrow; instead of the never-satisfied and never-dying hope that constitutes the life-dream of the man who wills, we see that peace that is higher than all reason, that ocean-like calmness of the spirit, that deep tranquillity, that unshakable confidence and serenity, whose mere reflection in the countenance, as depicted by Raphael and Correggio, is a complete and certain gospel. Only knowledge remains; the will has vanished.<sup>62</sup>

Schopenhauer's ethics of compassion highlights how the suffering of all is one's own suffering, and this provides an incentive to turn away from the world, since no mortal could possibly endure that insight. By negating life, one arrives at the only redemption. This helps propel the 'transition from virtue to asceticism'.<sup>63</sup> Born out of ethical outrage, one is left only to deny the Will and negate life. The agonal nature of existence must be overcome through asceticism. That is, one ought to abolish desire as a way of life.

Schopenhauer is correct to acknowledge that ascetic practices are evidently very hard to endure and only manageable, it seems, by unusually determined saints, mystics, and monks. Schopenhauer could not manage it himself (e.g., he liked to dine out most nights), nor did he live a particularly compassionate life, as noted earlier. He did, however, spend a lot of his time indulging in the arts, so it could be said that he conceded in practice what he could not grant in theory: an aesthetic justification for life.<sup>64</sup> Still, as if undertaking a pre-emptive attack on any charge of moral hypocrisy, he wrote:

It is just as little necessary for the saint to be a philosopher as for the philosopher to be a saint; just as it is not necessary for a perfectly beautiful person to be a great sculptor, or for a great sculptor to be himself a beautiful person. In general, it is a strange demand on a moralist that he should commend no other virtue than that which he himself possesses.<sup>65</sup>

This concludes the outline of Schopenhauer's case for pessimism and his main responses to it. He felt that the best we can do in this world that ought not to exist is to negate life as far as possible: by denying the Will. However, he felt that almost everyone is too weak to do this. And so, we go on striving and suffering for what can never bring us happiness, trying to be compassionate, and otherwise simply enduring a life without value, punctuated with rare moments of aesthetic experience.

## ***Can life be affirmed? Nietzsche on revaluing the value of suffering***

The purpose of reviewing the full bleakness of Schopenhauer's thoroughgoing pessimism, as well as his main responses, was to gain a foothold for understanding Nietzsche's attempt to seek an 'affirmation of life'. Nietzsche's perspective builds upon Schopenhauer's position while reacting against it in important ways. In fact, it is no overstatement to say that Nietzsche's life project was to find a way of living with Schopenhauer's pessimistic diagnosis of life and the reality of unavoidable suffering. This was not merely a philosophical problem for Nietzsche. Ever since childhood, he was burdened with a range of health problems, including regular, severe migraines. His life was painful and difficult, he eventually went insane, and yet giving in to pessimism did not seem to be an option for him. Somehow, he wanted to find a way to embrace life, to be what he called a 'yea-sayer'.

To be clear, Nietzsche more or less accepted Schopenhauer's existential diagnosis and bleak portrait of the world, even though he would come to reject its metaphysics. He felt that pessimism was an unflinchingly honest and largely accurate perspective on existence. He acknowledged that 'the truth is terrible'<sup>66</sup> and that we are condemned to live in 'this horrible constellation of things'<sup>67</sup> which threatens to induce a 'nausea'<sup>68</sup> – a view starkly presented in his first book *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872).<sup>69</sup> He took seriously, and sat on the brink of accepting, the 'Wisdom of Silenus' – that 'What is best of all is... not to be born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*. But the second best... is – die soon.'<sup>70</sup> Nietzsche first read *World as Will and Representation* as a young man and deeply sympathised with its scathing indictment of life, seeing in Schopenhauer's book a 'mirror'<sup>71</sup> which reflected his own temperament in 'dreadful magnificence.'<sup>72</sup>

But, anticipating his critical stance, Nietzsche would assert that '[o]ne repays a teacher badly if one always remains nothing but a pupil.'<sup>73</sup> He ultimately refused to accept Schopenhauer's life-negating or life-denying conclusions, which Nietzsche would later characterise as a kind of nihilism – as the evaluation of the world as unworthy of being lived in. A note written in 1887 shows how he conceived of life-negating pessimism: 'A nihilist is a man who judges of the world as it is that it ought *not* to be, and of the world as it ought to be, that it does not exist. According to this view, existence (action, suffering, willing, feeling) has no meaning...'<sup>74</sup> This is precisely the view of nihilism that Nietzsche would reject.

If Nietzsche sometimes still retained the language of pessimism in his work, he would insist on 'a pessimism of strength.'<sup>75</sup> In short, he set out to explore whether, or to what extent, he could arrive at an alternative, *affirmative* prescription to Schopenhauer's pessimistic diagnosis. Nietzsche's central philosophical problem, which consumed him throughout his life, was whether life could be affirmed.<sup>76</sup> And Nietzsche did find a way for him to do this in what he called his aesthetic justification of existence. But how was he able to affirm a life, and a world, so full of suffering?

The clearest introduction to Nietzsche's philosophical strategy here is to ask a question: is suffering necessarily an evil? In characteristically provocative ways, he would come to answer this question in the negative, in surprising yet highly illuminating ways. Nietzsche had uncovered an unstated normative assumption in Schopenhauer's work, namely, that suffering

was always and everywhere to be valued negatively. By seeing suffering everywhere, Schopenhauer inferred that existence itself was of negative value.

But Nietzsche did not grant Schopenhauer his premise, which meant the conclusions were now in question. When later in his life Nietzsche would come to speak of his philosophical project as being a ‘revaluation of all values’,<sup>77</sup> a prime focus of this revaluation was the place of suffering in life. Whereas it was convention, then and now, to treat suffering as necessarily of negative value, Nietzsche would invert this received assessment. If life was to be affirmed – if he was to somehow transcend Schopenhauer’s world-negating conclusions – Nietzsche would need to find a new way of living with suffering.

Philosopher Bernard Reginster describes Nietzsche’s approach to life in terms of ‘overcoming resistance.’<sup>78</sup> If we define suffering as something that presents ‘resistance’ in our life – an impediment that makes us struggle for our highest values or an obstacle that must be overcome – then we can understand how Nietzsche came to place a positive value on suffering. Whereas Schopenhauer had posited a ‘will to live’ as the basis of existence, Nietzsche came to posit a ‘will to power’,<sup>79</sup> which should be understood as the will to overcome resistance on the path to achieving one’s highest values. Nietzsche does not tell us *what* to value in our lives – other than proposing this second-order value of overcoming resistance. As Reginster explains:

The doctrine of the will to power radically alters our conception of the role and significance of suffering in human existence. If, in particular, we take power – the overcoming of resistance – to be of value, then we can see easily how it can be the principle behind a revaluation of suffering. Indeed, if we value the overcoming of resistance, we must also value that resistance that is an ingredient of it. Since suffering is defined as resistance, we must also value suffering.<sup>80</sup>

This position should not be interpreted as merely the result of clever wordsmithing or sophistic philosophising by Nietzsche. It should be understood, in part, with reference to one of his most famous aphorisms: ‘what does not kill me, makes me stronger’<sup>81</sup> – or in common parlance, ‘no pain, no gain.’ But Nietzsche’s point goes deeper than this and reevaluates suffering in a way that makes it a necessary and unavoidable part of the good. It can even be part of the beautiful, insofar as beauty implies giving form to the content of one’s life through self-conscious stylisation of existence.

Nietzsche, therefore, seems to be undercutting Schopenhauer at the root. The latter’s assumption was that desire – which is insatiable – is always and necessarily a ‘lack’, something regrettable, painful, an absence. It follows that the fulfillment of desire is always only temporarily satisfying. But are there other ways to frame our condition? Can there be an *affirmative* conception of desire? Nietzsche seems to be suggesting that, at least sometimes, desire should not be seen to imply a painful absence but rather a never-ending process of becoming.

The desire to make excellent music, for example, could be defined, from one perspective, as a painful lack, or, from another perspective, as the unfolding of life’s meaning itself. Desire may not even desire the satisfaction of this type of longing, since being fully content with one’s musical compositions might quench the thirst, kill the muse, dissolve the meaning and purpose in one’s life. Perhaps the artist *should* remain dissatisfied as a part of being an artist.



Or the lovers who ache in the chest at being apart – is that not the sweet stuff of life, such that it would be a category mistake to include such desires alongside the painful hunger of someone starving? The desire of a lover can be a pleasure so intense the body aches. Should we consider this a pain that always ought to be avoided? Might there be other desires that do not fit Schopenhauer's framework and thereby undercut his all-embracing pessimism?

Note that Nietzsche's perspective is a distinctly non-utilitarian one. He openly despised the British utilitarians (although, to be fair, he was contemptuous of most people and most schools of thought).<sup>82</sup> In *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883) the protagonist declares: 'Of what worth is happiness?... I ceased long since to strive for happiness'.<sup>83</sup> And in *Twilight of the Idols* (1889) he is even more explicit: 'Man does *not* strive for pleasure; only the Englishman does that.'<sup>84</sup> Nevertheless, in only an apparent contradiction he also noted that 'What is happiness? – The feeling that power *increases* – that a resistance is being overcome.'<sup>85</sup> I interpret this last comment in terms of 'meaning' rather than 'happiness'. Nietzsche was not really interested in organising life around the pursuit of happiness in terms of pleasure – perhaps because he felt happiness was so rarely achieved, and if so, only fleetingly. Instead, he wanted to live a passionate and meaningful life, and he argued that that involved creatively interpreting the struggles and sufferings of life in meaningful, even beautiful ways. In one of Nietzsche's most celebrated aphorisms, he declared: 'If we have our own *why* of life, we shall get along with almost any *how*.'<sup>86</sup> Meaningless suffering is the worst thing. But meaningful suffering – that, according to Nietzsche, is a large part of what the good life is composed of. Again, this does not imply a life of happiness. 'What do we long for at the sight of beauty?' Nietzsche asked. 'To be beautiful ourselves: we imagine we would be very happy if we were beautiful. – But that is an error.'<sup>87</sup>

Given that suffering cannot be avoided, there will always be resistances that must be overcome, so Nietzsche came to regard the affirmation of life in terms of *becoming*. Since the Will is insatiable (as per Schopenhauer's diagnosis), the correlative will to power knows no endpoint or consummation either, meaning that life is and ought to be a constant, ongoing process of valuation and revaluation in response to the diverse and ever-new resistances life throws in our way. On this point, the reasons why Nietzsche admired Heraclitus become evident – he who famously declared that 'all is flux.' Indeed, it is the constant overcoming of resistance in which life's meaning resides – and through that process of overcoming one can even *overcome oneself*, which encapsulates Nietzsche's idea of the *Übermensch*.

This line of reasoning ultimately led Nietzsche to develop a concept that neatly summarises his sought-after affirmation of life – the concept of *amor fati*. This is typically translated as 'love thy fate'.<sup>88</sup> Through the love of fate and by embracing rather than regretting the hardships of life, Nietzsche was able to announce a resounding 'yes' to life that abstained from all negation. 'Amor fati: Let that be my love henceforth. I do not want to wage war against what is ugly. I do not want to accuse;... someday I wish to be only a Yes-sayer!'<sup>89</sup> This attitude to life, he maintained, is the 'highest state that a philosopher can attain',<sup>90</sup> and represents the overcoming of life-negating pessimism. 'My formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati*: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, nor backward, not in all eternity. Not merely to bear what is necessary, still less conceal it... but *love it*.'<sup>91</sup>

Nietzsche, it seems, was calling on us to live without regrets (or, to use the term he employed, without *ressentiment*). What has happened has happened; what is, is. We should not let what cannot be avoided diminish our lives, for there is no 'after world' where we get a second chance at life. This is certainly not a recommendation to accept everything in life as it is, for some things, many things, can and should be changed. It is only what is *necessary* that ought to be embraced. We only have this one life to live, and there will necessarily be suffering, hard times, setbacks, disappointments, loss, pain, and eventually death. That is the human condition. We should learn how to say yes to life, warts and all, so to speak, which may require practice.<sup>92</sup> It may involve developing a new 'art of living' (a topic explored in later essays).<sup>93</sup>

Suppose, for example, you were wanting to go outside for a walk, but discover it is pouring with rain. Nietzsche would insist: do not waste your life regretting this unchangeable fact. Show the imagination to do something even better, overcome this obstacle – or alternatively, go for your walk despite the rain and embrace the exhilarating experience of the wild elements on your face and body. Love your fate, he implored. Creatively interpret and arrange the events of your life according to your chosen style – both in the smallest and most significant aspects of life. He reflected on his own situation: 'I want to learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things; then I shall be one of those who makes things beautiful.'<sup>94</sup> This can give rise to a process, as philosopher Guy Elgat argues, 'whereby the two arcs – loving the beautiful and beautifying out of love – converge and reinforce each other, generating an ever deepening circle of learning and beautification.'<sup>95</sup>

Nietzsche would come to argue that we should embrace life *as if* we must live it eternally, over and over again, *in exactly the same way*. This is the meaning of Nietzsche's doctrine of the 'eternal recurrence' which was central to his worldview, dating from *Thus Spake Zarathustra*.<sup>96</sup> This is not, to be clear, a metaphysical doctrine – he didn't think we are *actually* going to live our lives over and over again. Rather it was a thought experiment designed to ensure we value life – our *only* life – even in its humble moments, and shape something good out of the suffering and resistances we inevitably face. We should seek to become powerful, Nietzsche maintained, not in the sense of leading armies, conquering territories, or accumulating material riches. He was urging us to become creators – artists of life who show the courage to give form or style to our suffering in our own, unique ways. This, in sum, is Nietzsche's fundamental existential-philosophical orientation, his 'pessimism of strength.' It is his main strategy for overcoming Schopenhauerian pessimism, thereby being able to affirm life and, perhaps, even see it as beautiful, by giving it a form of one's own.

### ***Towards an aesthetic Buddhism? Life without music would be a mistake***

To close this essay I wish to resituate the discussion in the context of the Will to Art. In doing so I will highlight a few places where there might be a nuanced and fruitful 'middle way' between some of the perspectives offered by Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Buddhism. I will introduce the term 'aesthetic Buddhism' to try to explain some of the intricacies of the position that I am developing in relation to the Will to Art. Whereas Schopenhauer summarised his life-negating pessimism with the assertion that 'life must be some form of mistake', the position I am offering is closer to Nietzsche's 'pessimism of strength' – exemplified by his poetic refinement of Schopenhauer: 'Life without music would be a mistake.'<sup>97</sup>

The Will to Art is an outlook that shares significant premises with Schopenhauer and Buddhism. At base, suffering lies at the heart of existence. Indeed, suffering is everywhere, internally and externally. On that basis, dealing with the problem of suffering is a primary task of living in the world. Furthermore, both Schopenhauer and Buddhism present a coherent defence of an ethics of compassion that derives from this view of suffering and desire. Buddhism is attractive to many people because it posits no ‘creator being’, no deity that demands worship, and instead it calls on individuals to critically explore their own spiritual condition with the tools of philosophical thought and critical inquiry. The same could be said of Schopenhauer.

But whereas Schopenhauer posited a will-to-live as the most fundamental aspect to nature – a blindly driving force without purpose or direction – I am exploring an interpretation that sees the underlying cosmological energy as *having* a purpose or telos. The Will to Art, as I have defined it, seeks beauty. This guiding ideal should be understood broadly, 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. Suffering is a consequence of the latent ideal of beauty struggling to realise itself through the Will to Art. According to this view, the universe is unfolding according to an aesthetic process of creative evolution, where matter becomes conscious and creative so that the cosmos is able to experience itself through art and aesthetic experience. In these early essays I am attempting to describe and defend this worldview. In later essays I will explore what implications might flow from it, in terms of personal existence as well as social, economic, and political organisation.<sup>98</sup>

I use the term ‘aesthetic’ in relation to this Buddhist-influenced outlook to make it clear that the Will to Art is not a metaphysical thesis in the spirit of Schopenhauer and Buddhism. I do not believe there is any *single* right way to view the cosmos and our place in it. Rather, there are only perspectives and interpretations that can both reveal and conceal certain insights about our complex situation and condition. This makes discourse and humility key features in philosophical and spiritual exploration – such that any answers to life’s deepest mysteries lie only in the questioning itself. As I have noted before, I am offering the Will to Art as a grand narrative, but I acknowledge its narrativity – its roots in story. My motivation is not to arrive at a final truth of things. Instead, I am attempting a redescription of aspects of existence in ways that I hope reveal insights or provide useful tools for living.

One area where Schopenhauer ought to be challenged is in relation to his understanding of the ascetic negation of life. First of all, he misinterprets the spirit and practice of Buddhism here, and because Nietzsche seems to uncritically adopt Schopenhauer’s view of Eastern philosophy, Nietzsche makes the same mistake. Schopenhauer defended extreme practices of self-denial, even self-torture, as means of breaking or denying the will. While there is certainly a place for practices of self-discipline in Buddhism, it is a mistake to treat such practices as life-negating. Without even turning to philosophy, one need only ‘look and see’ (as Wittgenstein would recommend) to discover that Buddhists seem to be some of the happiest and contented people around: warm, loving, compassionate, and thoroughly life affirming. So, Schopenhauer was wrong to move from the premise, ‘existence is suffering’, to the conclusion, ‘life must be denied’.

Furthermore, the Buddhist philosophy of the ‘middle way’ suggests that asceticism need not imply any extreme or tortuous renunciation of all things good in the world, but instead calls for a practice of mindfulness. This is the delicate art of finding balance between too little of something and too much. Again, given that Nietzsche just adopted the Schopenhauerian view of asceticism, Nietzsche sometimes failed to see how practices of self-discipline and mindfulness, far from being life-negating, are in fact the most direct path to flourishing. I will undertake a critical examination of Nietzsche’s view of asceticism in later essays, as well as his very limited embrace (if not outright denial) of any ethics of compassion.

Nevertheless, where Nietzsche clearly made an advance on Schopenhauer, and perhaps even on Buddhism, was in relation to desire. Whereas Schopenhauer treated desire as an inherently negative feature of life – the primary cause of suffering in the world – Nietzsche viewed desire as a necessary part of living a life of value and meaning. Desire is a form of resistance in our life, and overcoming resistance is positive if it is part of moving toward our highest values. Thus, Nietzsche was able to affirm life, even in a world where desire – the Will – is a cause of suffering. Acknowledging that there is such a thing as meaningful suffering is an important aspect of the Nietzschean affirmation of life. There are lessons here for us all.

This last point also draws us back into the realm of the aesthetic, in two central ways. First, Nietzsche looked at life as a sort of aesthetic project, something fundamentally indeterminate and malleable and therefore in need of shaping and stylisation. Through this aesthetic process we are called on to ‘make the best’ of our individual circumstances through conscious and deliberate endeavour. We should love our fate (*amor fati*), which means living creatively and without regrets. Indeed, Nietzsche urged us all to ‘be the poet of our life’<sup>99</sup> – a perspective on self-creation to be explored further in due course. Secondly, Nietzsche held that art and aesthetic experience were amongst the most important ways of justifying existence and the world as aesthetic phenomena. This approach to life is not just about seeking temporary consolation through the nirvana of aesthetic contemplation, as Schopenhauer contended. It also involves the pursuit of a deeper and more enduring means of embracing life, even affirming life, in the face of everything. It is to such an aesthetic justification of existence that I will now turn for closer examination.

---

<sup>1</sup> On ‘being’ over ‘having’, see Erich Fromm, *To Have or to Be?* (New York: Continuum, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> For an excellent survey of pessimism, see Joshua Foa Dienstag, *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> See Sophia Vasalou, *Schopenhauer and the Aesthetic Standpoint: Philosophy as a Practice of the Sublime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) pp.1-2.

<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967), p. 17 (emphasis removed).

<sup>5</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation: Vol. I* (New York: Dover, 1969).

<sup>6</sup> See Samuel Alexander, ‘Creative Evolution and the “Will to Art”’, 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).

- 
- <sup>7</sup> Here I am paraphrasing what Schopenhauer said about interpreting his own work. See Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, note 5, p. xv.
- <sup>8</sup> I have chosen to capitalise ‘Will’ to emphasise the Schopenhauerian reading of this term and clarify any distinction, when necessary, between ‘willing’ in the conventional sense.
- <sup>9</sup> Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, note 5, p. 195.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p. 117.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p. 164.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p. 183.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, p. 31.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, p. 196.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p. 195.
- <sup>17</sup> Schopenhauer’s understanding of the Will’s objectification in nature can be interpreted as an early version of what today is called panpsychism.
- <sup>18</sup> Vasalou, *Schopenhauer*, note 3, p. 16.
- <sup>19</sup> Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, note 5, p. 165.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, p. 111.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p. 196 (emphasis removed).
- <sup>22</sup> Quoted in Eike Brock, ‘Life is Suffering: On Schopenhauer’s and Nietzsche’s Philosophical Engagement with Suffering’ in Katia Hay and Leonel Ribeiro dos Santos (eds) *Nietzsche, German Idealism, and its Critics* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), p. 196.
- <sup>23</sup> Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, note 5, p. 319.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, p. 196.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, p. 164.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p. 353
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p. 196.
- <sup>28</sup> See generally, Stephen Cross, *Schopenhauer’s Encounter with Indian Thought: Representation and Will and Their Indian Parallels* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2013). With respect to the *Upanishads*, Schopenhauer noted ‘it is the most profitable and sublime reading that is possible in the world; it has been the consolation of my life and will be that of my death.’ Cross, *Schopenhauer’s Encounter*, note 28, p. 2.
- <sup>29</sup> Although Schopenhauer and Nietzsche were no fans of Christianity, it is worth pointing out that the central image of the Christian religion is the crucifix – an image of suffering that is arguably unrivalled.
- <sup>30</sup> Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, note 5, p. 635.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, p. 164.
- <sup>32</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 158.
- <sup>33</sup> See Terry Eagleton, *Culture and the Death of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), p. 154.
- <sup>34</sup> Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, note 5, p. 309.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>36</sup> See Samuel Alexander, ‘Camus on Art and Revolt: Overcoming Nihilism in an Absurd Universe’, in this collection of essays. See link in note 6.
- <sup>37</sup> Quoted in Brock, ‘Life is Suffering’, note 22, p. 196.
- <sup>38</sup> Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, note 5, p. 366.
- <sup>39</sup> David Holbrook, *Gustav Mahler and the Courage to Be* (Plymouth: Clarke, Doble, and Brendon, 1975), p. 29.
- <sup>40</sup> Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, note 5, p. 576.
- <sup>41</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *Essays and Aphorisms* (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 53.
- <sup>42</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *On the Basis of Morality* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), p. 166.
- <sup>43</sup> See Brock, ‘Life is Suffering’, note 22, p. 200.
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, p. 197.
- <sup>45</sup> Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, note 5, p. 411.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, p. 178-9.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, p. 178.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, p. 179.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, p. 198.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, p. 364.
- <sup>51</sup> Note that this deconstructs and inverts Plato’s critique of art. Plato had argued that art was dangerous because it was illusory, mere representation of a representation, and could lead people to erroneous thinking. Here, on the other hand, Schopenhauer argues that this was ‘one of the best known errors of that great man’.



---

Art does not lead to falsity but gives us the clearest and most direct access to the true reality. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, note 5, p. 212.

<sup>52</sup> See Samuel Alexander, 'Art Against Empire: Marcuse on the Aesthetics of Revolt' in this collection of essays. See link in note 6.

<sup>53</sup> Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, note 5, p. 255.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 433-4.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, p. 257.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, p. 256.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, p. 264.

<sup>58</sup> Roger Scruton, *The Soul of the World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), p 167.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, p. 173.

<sup>60</sup> Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, note 5, p. 405.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, p. 382 (my emphasis).

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, p. 411.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, p. 380 (emphasis removed).

<sup>64</sup> See Brock, 'Life is Suffering', note 22, p. 201.

<sup>65</sup> Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, note 5, p. 383.

<sup>66</sup> 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, Brian Leiter, 'Truth is Terrible' (2018) *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 49(2): pp. 151-173.

<sup>67</sup> See Brock, 'Life is Suffering', note 22, p. 198.

<sup>68</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, note 4, p. 60.

<sup>69</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, note 4.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, p. 42.

<sup>71</sup> See Brock, 'Life is Suffering', note 22, p. 190.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>73</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche* (edited by Walter Kaufmann) (New York: Modern Library, 2000), p. 676. See also, Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (New York: Vintage, 1968), p. 521, where Nietzsche wrote: 'I grasped that my instinct went in the opposite direction from Schopenhauer's: toward a *justification of life*' (emphasis in original).

<sup>74</sup> Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, note 73, p. 318.

<sup>75</sup> See Nietzsche, *Birth*, note 4, p. 17.

<sup>76</sup> Bernard Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

<sup>77</sup> Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, note 73.

<sup>78</sup> Reginster, *Affirmation of Life*, note 76, p. 132.

<sup>79</sup> Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, note 73.

<sup>80</sup> Reginster, *Affirmation of Life*, note 76, p. 177.

<sup>81</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Why I Am So Wise* (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 73.

<sup>82</sup> See generally, Jonny Anomaly 'Nietzsche's Critique of Utilitarianism' *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* (2005) 29: pp. 1-15.

<sup>83</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (Herron Books, undated edition), p. 209.

<sup>84</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Twilight of the Idols', in Walter Kaufmann (ed), *The Portable Nietzsche* (London: Penguin, 1988) p. 468.

<sup>85</sup> Quoted in Reginster, *Affirmation*, note 76, p. 195.

<sup>86</sup> Nietzsche, 'Twilight', note 84, p. 468.

<sup>87</sup> Quoted in Aaron Ridley, *Nietzsche on Art and Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2007) p. 58.

<sup>88</sup> See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974). p. 223.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>90</sup> See Brock, 'Life is Suffering', note 22, pp. 205-6.

<sup>91</sup> Nietzsche, 'Ecce Homo', in *Basic Writing*, note 73, p. 714.

<sup>92</sup> See Guy Elgat, 'Amor Fati as Practice: How to Love Fate' *Southern Journal of Philosophy* (2016) 54(2): pp. 174-188.

<sup>93</sup> See Samuel Alexander, 'Giving Birth to Oneself: Ethics as an "Aesthetics of Existence"', in this collection of essays. See link in note 6.

<sup>94</sup> Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, note 88, p. 223.

<sup>95</sup> See Elgat, *Amor Fati*, note 92, p. 187.

---

<sup>96</sup> For a discussion, see Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), Ch.5.

<sup>97</sup> Nietzsche, *Why I Am So Wise*, note 81, p. 76.

<sup>98</sup> While my arguments hereafter make most sense in relation to the grounding concept of the Will to Art, I should also note that the essays do not stand or fall on that basis. That is, one could reject the grand narrative of the aesthetic universe I am presenting and still accept the specific aesthetic arguments of each essay.

<sup>99</sup> Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, note 88, p. 240.