

# NIETZSCHE CONTRA SCHOPENHAUER ON ART AND TRUTH

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## ABSTRACT

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Part of Plato's complaint about the cognitive status of art cites the pollution of aesthetic cognition by the affective side of our natures. Schopenhauer, by contrast, takes aesthetic cognition to transcend (some of) the limitations of everyday cognition precisely because in it agents become the "pure, will-less subject of cognition" (WWR I 219). On the orthodox reading of his later philosophy, Nietzsche scorns Plato and Schopenhauer's association of the value of art with its truthfulness. I challenge the orthodox reading and argue that one strand of art's value is its penetrative cognitive power. In contrast to Schopenhauer, Nietzsche understands this cognitive power to result from the embracing and exploitation of the affects in the artistic process rather than their extirpation.

## INTRODUCTION

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The later Nietzsche uses the terms 'deception' (*Täuschung*) (GM III 25), 'lies' (*Lüge*) (ibid.) and 'semblance' (*Schein*) (TI *Reason* 6; GS 107) in connection with art. Most commentators hold some version of the orthodox view that 'Nietzsche locates art's distinctive value in precisely that feature which drew Plato's censure: art is valuable ... not merely in spite of, but because of the fact that it is false' (Stoll, 2019, p. 331; see also Heidegger, 1961; Young, 1992; Ridley, 2007, 2010; Came, 2013; Huddleston, 2020). Orthodox approaches to Nietzsche's aesthetics often fail to do justice to the fact that Nietzsche also associates art with the confrontation of truth (GS 78, TI *Skirmishes* 7-8, 10, 24, *Reason* 6, EH, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 2, WP 821). The artists Nietzsche admires 'represent terrible and questionable things' (WP 821). They express a 'high-spirited yes to life' that is combined with the 'highest insight [...] the most profound, the most rigorously confirmed and supported by truth and study' (EH, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 2). They also correct the 'false optic' that otherwise prevails (TI *Skirmishes* 7) and 'force out the main features of the subject matters they take up (TI *Skirmishes* 8). Without them we would 'live entirely in the spell of that perspective which makes the nearest and most vulgar appear tremendously big and as reality itself' (GS 78). In this paper I focus on the passages where Nietzsche positively relates art and truth and aim to capture a strand in Nietzsche's aesthetics that associates art with the

confrontation of “terrible” truths about existence. On the interpretation I argue for, Nietzsche’s philosophy of art shares a structural similarity with Schopenhauer’s. Art is associated with a form of cognition that penetrates beyond the cognitive limitations of everyday consciousness.

For Schopenhauer, art’s cognitive value consists in its power to penetrate to the metaphysical layers of reality obscured by everyday consciousness – the Platonic Ideas and the world as will. Art’s cognitive power is a consequence of the fact that in aesthetic experience perception and cognition are liberated from their subservience to the will. The aesthetic perception of beautiful art, for example, involves the transcendence of the influence of the will on cognition and the achievement of ‘purely objective intuition’ (WWR I 230-235) that puts us in touch with Platonic ideas. Every day will-bound cognition, by contrast, represents objects in terms of their relations to us. It routinely involves the affective side of our natures and ‘every affect or passion obscures and falsifies knowledge’ (WWR II 373).

Nietzsche, by contrast, associates art’s cognitive power with the confrontation of a subset of “terrible” truths about life and existence that metaphysical projects like Christianity obscure. Art’s power to confront such truths stems, contra Schopenhauer, precisely from the fact that art and artists (or, at least, those artists whom Nietzsche admires) embrace and exploit the fact that cognition, interpretation and representation are will-bound activities.<sup>1</sup>

In sections one and two I introduce Schopenhauer’s account of art’s cognitive power and sketch Nietzsche’s critique of it. My treatment of Schopenhauer’s aesthetics will be brief and my primary aim will be to drive out Schopenhauer’s commitments in this area as Nietzsche understands these to be. In section three I offer a reading of the sections in *Twilight of the Idols* where Nietzsche associates art with the confrontation of truth. I explore how Nietzsche contrasts the artistic approach he favours with ‘Parisian novelists’ (TI *Skirmishes* 7) and, more generally, with ‘petty aesthetic creeds such as French naturalism’ (GS 347). These approaches are guided by a conception of ‘objectivity’ that mirrors Schopenhauer’s and that similarly devalues affect and interpretation. Nietzsche’s favoured artistic approach instead embraces and exploits the role of affect in the artistic process, as I argue in section four. Nietzsche favours this approach because it is in line with his conception of how inquiry is most successfully undertaken (GM III 12). It is also, in contrast to the approach of French naturalism, well suited to transcend the particular limitations and falsifications of everyday consciousness. In section five I close by exploring how art facilitates the transcendence of even the most stubborn of these forms of falsification: the Christian-moral falsification of the ultimate character of life and existence.

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<sup>1</sup> My claim is that art’s cognitive power is its efficacy in facilitating the confrontation of truths, in particular large-scale existential truths, that are routinely concealed or obscured. I do not claim that art is the only means of confronting such truths, nor that these truths were originally revealed in the artistic domain. Nor do I claim that art constitutes a special body of knowledge or a special means of expressing truth (as on a Hegelian picture). Thanks to the editors of this journal for helping me to clarify this point.

## 1. SCHOPENHAUER ON ART AND TRUTH

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Schopenhauer's account of the relation between art and truth can be understood as a response to Plato's. Plato banishes the poets in *The Republic* (and is ambivalent to poetry elsewhere) because of its compromised relation to truth. The problem with poetry is not just its mimetic nature but also that it stimulates bodily reactions and has the power to corrupt agents by stirring their emotions. Poetry, 'with a few rare exceptions, [...] is able to corrupt even decent people', (Plato, 2004, 605c; cf. 395d1-3). This strand of his critique of poetry connects with a broader suspicion of the role of the bodily in cognition. Schopenhauer inherits this suspicion from Plato. As recounted by Bart Vandenabeele, Plato describes how

the body "fills up with lusts and desires, with fears and fantasies of every kind, and with any amount of trash", and pure knowledge of the eternal Forms is only possible, once one has purified the soul and freed oneself from "its contamination by the body!" (Phaedo 66 a-b). (Vandenabeele, 2008, p. 196)

Schopenhauer accepts that everyday cognition is plagued by the deleterious influence of an individual's will (see e.g. WWR I,177; WWR II, 215-217 & 372-373). 'Cognition in general, rational as well as merely intuitive', he asserts, 'proceeds originally from the will itself [...] [it is] a mere mechanism, a means for the preservation of the individual and the species' (WWR I, 177). Thus 'the intellect is bound to do violence to its own nature, which is aimed at truth, since it is compelled, contrary to its own laws, to regard as truth things that are neither true nor probable [...] merely in order to pacify, soothe, and send to sleep for a while the restless and unmanageable *will*. We clearly see here who is master and who is servant' (WWR II, 216-217).

The fact that cognition serves the will means that obfuscation, bias and falsification plague our everyday cognition of the world. Suppressing the will is the means of escaping its negative effects on cognition.

[A]pprehension of things is possible only when we consider them without any personal participation in them, and thus under the complete silence of the will, let us picture to ourselves how much every affect or passion obscures and falsifies knowledge, in fact how every inclination or aversion twists, colours, and distorts not merely the judgement, but even the original perception of things. (WWR II, 373)

Schopenhauer also inherits from Plato the metaphysical view that the world of representation as we experience it in everyday cognition is, in one sense, a veil lain over a more fundamental layer of reality that is populated by the Platonic Ideas. Another limitation of everyday will-grounded cognition, then, is that it fails to reveal this more fundamental layer of reality. One reason for this limitation is that

in everyday cognition ‘we consider things as a rule merely in their relations’ to us as individual willing subjects (WWR II, 372). This means that in everyday perception and cognition (in contrast to aesthetic perception and cognition) we consider ‘the where, the when, the why, and the whither in things’ and fail to intuit ‘simply and solely the *what*’ (WWR I, 178). This kind of consideration of things fails to reveal the Platonic Ideas. A different point of view is required for the revelation of the Platonic Ideas, a point of view that does not consider things in their relations but as what they are more essentially.

If Schopenhauer accepted Plato’s charge that *aesthetic* perception and cognition are subject to the deleterious effects of the will and the bodily, then he would no doubt acquiesce in Plato’s negative evaluation of the arts. Schopenhauer diverges from Plato on this point, however. The aesthetic perception and cognition of beautiful art, for example is characterized by the fact that in it ‘we no longer consider the where, the when, the why, and the whither in things, but simply and solely the *what*’ (WWR I, 178). Instead of considering things in their relations to us as individual willing subjects, an objective intuition of them is achieved. Beautiful Dutch still life paintings, for example, are the product of a form of perception and cognition in which there is ‘a preponderance of cognition over willing’ (WWR I 230-235). They also induce this form of cognition in appreciators. These paintings render their subject matter – arrangements of pieces of fruit – not in relation to our appetite for them, but instead for what they are more fundamentally. Any such appetitive influence of the will is transcended and a ‘purely objective intuition’ is achieved that has the potential to penetrate to the level of the Platonic Ideas (WWR I 230-235; see also WWR I 185-186, WWR II 217).

Aesthetic perception and cognition are able to transcend (some of) the limitations of everyday will-grounded cognition, then, by stilling the will and blocking its influence on cognition. In aesthetic experience the subject becomes the ‘*pure, will-less subject of cognition*’ (WWR I 219). Artists who have the capacity to make beautiful art have the capacity to adopt this state. Through it they achieve ‘cognition of the essential aspect of things lying outside of all relations’ and through making beautiful art they ‘lend this gift to us’ (WWR I 219). Artists achieve ‘objectivity’ in this process (WWR I 221).

The fact that this form of objectivity stands at the centre of Schopenhauer’s aesthetics, and that it is held by him to represent the transcendence of the limitations of everyday cognition, will be crucial when later turning to Nietzsche’s opposing view of how art and artists are able to transcend the limitations of everyday cognition. Nietzsche’s claim, as I will understand it, is that the ability of artists to harness the affective side of their natures and to form affective interpretations is in fact precisely what enables them to transcend the limitations of everyday cognition. The opposition between Nietzsche and Schopenhauer here is a local occurrence of the opposition Nietzsche highlights in GM III 12. In this passages Nietzsche asserts that the capacity to harness affects and to shift them, and the interpretations and perspectives associated with them, in and out is the most efficacious means of cognizing the world. Schopenhauer, by contrast, champions the point of view of the will-less subject of cognition and asserts that

‘the active and interpretative powers are to be suppressed’ in inquiry because this is conducive to it (GM III 12). I will return to this topic later. To complete our summary of the pertinent aspects of Schopenhauer’s aesthetics in this section, we should note one further thing. The creation and contemplation of beautiful art is not the only place where the deleterious influence of the will on cognition is transcended, on Schopenhauer’s view.

Tragic art also unlocks a truer cognition of the subject matter it takes up and reveals truths that the will typically obscures or otherwise prevents awareness of. The truths that tragic art reveals are directly existential in nature, in contrast to those revealed by beautiful art.

Tragedy offers a ‘significant intimation as to the nature of the world and of existence’ via ‘the portrayal of the terrible aspect of life’ (WWR I 298). In tragedy ‘the unspeakable pain, the misery of humanity, the triumph of wickedness, the scornful domination of change, and the hopeless fall of the righteous and the innocent are brought before us’ (WWR I 298). Tragedy presents, for example, ‘the conflict of the will with itself’ as involving ‘one and the same will’ that manifests itself in individuals that ‘battle amongst themselves and tear themselves apart’ (WWR I 298-299)<sup>2</sup>; see Vandenabeele 2008 for discussion). Although tragedy’s insight is officially limited – it is officially an insight about the nature of the will ‘at the highest level of objecthood’ (WWR I 298) – it nonetheless seems to intimate much about the character of existence and the will at the most fundamental level of reality.<sup>3</sup> The will to live routinely blocks awareness of the fundamental character of reality because such awareness can prompt the denial of the will. Schopenhauer values tragic art because, through intimating the terrible character of existence, it can have precisely this effect of prompting the denial of the will.

For Schopenhauer then, both beautiful art and tragic art are valuable because they have the potential to reveal truths that everyday cognition routinely obscures or conceals. Beautiful and tragic art have this cognitive power because they involve forms of cognition that are not subject to the deleterious influence of the will. Beautiful art discloses Platonic Ideas. Tragic art unveils truths of an existential nature and transcends existential falsification. That is, the falsification, concealment or obfuscation of the true underlying nature of life and existence.

## 2. BEYOND THE ORTHODOX READING OF NIETZSCHE ON ART AND TRUTH

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Orthodox interpreters of the later Nietzsche’s philosophy of art assert that Nietzsche values art, contra Plato, precisely because it distorts and deceives. I aim to show that one of the reasons Nietzsche values art is in fact because it has the capacity to transcend distortion and deception that plague everyday consciousness.

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<sup>2</sup> See Vandenabeele (2008) for further discussion.

<sup>3</sup> Music, of course, involves a more direct revelation of the nature of existence. I do not discuss Schopenhauer or Nietzsche’s philosophy of music in this paper.

In this section, I make two points that open the door to an anti-orthodox reading of this nature. The first is that Nietzsche regularly associates tragic art and the confrontation of the terrible truth about life and existence in the later works. The second is that there is good reason for doubting whether Nietzsche's association of art with 'illusion' (*Täuschung*) (GM III 25) and 'semblance' (*Schein*) (TI *Reason* 6; GS 107) provides support for the orthodox view that Nietzsche values art because it distorts or deceives. After having made these points I turn my attention to crucial passages in the later works where Nietzsche describes art as a medium for presenting the truth and attempt to do justice to them.

## 2.1 TRAGIC ARTISTS AND THE TERRIBLE TRUTH

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The 'strength of a spirit' can be measured, Nietzsche asserts, in relation to 'how much "truth" it could take, more clearly, to what extent it needed it attenuated, veiled, sweetened, blunted, and falsified' (BGE 39). Nietzsche champions the confrontation of a set of truths about the character of life and existence. These "existential" truths include the following (see Leiter, 2018 for a more complete exposition). That our life, the lives of our loved ones and the existence of human beings and the world more generally will, in a relatively short space of time, be unceremoniously wiped out without trace. That this occurrence, and every other occurrence that brings us suffering within life and existence, happens for no justifying or consoling reason and in line with no overriding purpose. That life is amoral and, indeed, continuously manifests itself in ways that offend the most prevalent tables of values. That we are not touched by the divine, nor perfectly rational, but are instead worldly creatures in the thrall of drives that can push and pull us in directions that we may not reflectively endorse.

The success of Christian-moral perspective (and the ascetic ideal more generally) results from its effective distortion and falsification of these truths about life and existence. It thereby makes life and existence something that agents can tolerate by giving meaning to the suffering it entails (GM III 28). The Christian-moral perspective and ascetic ideal trade in various metaphysical, doctrinal and ethical falsifications of the existential truth. Christianity, for example, posits a realm separate from the world we inhabit and associates value and salvation with this realm (BGE 230, GS 107, GM III 11). In exchange for meekness in this world and for denying all that is worldly, agents are promised salvation there. Agents who participate in a Christian-moral perspective and accept it as true thus stand in a dishonest relation to reality. This dishonest relation to reality provides them compensation by making life bearable for them. They are weak spirits unable to confront the truth and who need it 'attenuated, veiled, sweetened, blunted, and falsified' (BGE 39).

Tragic artists display courage in confronting the existential truths that the Christian-moral interpretation distorts. The 'tragic artist is *not* a pessimist, – he says *yes* to the very things that are questionable and terrible, he is Dionysian' (TI *Reason* 6). The difference between tragic artists and weaker spirits is not merely a

difference in courage, nor merely a difference in their valuation of the underlying character of life and existence. Tragic artists are also more honest in facing reality and better attuned to it. They celebrate the character of life and existence and this 'high-spirited yes to life' is combined with the 'highest insight' and 'the most profound, the most rigorously confirmed and supported by truth and study' (EH *The Birth of Tragedy* 2; see also NCW, *We Antipodes*).

Nietzsche defines the tragic artist's stance to reality in relation to the Christian-moral worldviews and to other ascetic perspectives in at least three ways. First, the tragic artist faces and celebrates the truth about life and existence where ascetic perspectives falsify it. Second, tragic artists emerging out of our time and out of our culture achieve their clear-sighted view of the truth by throwing off the veiling metaphysical and ethical falsifications that are dominant in our time and in our culture. This is no trivial task given the dominance and deep-rootedness of Christianity and ascetic perspectives and their metaphysical and ethical doctrines.

The third and final way that Nietzsche contrasts tragic artists with ascetic perspectives is through their juxtaposing attitude to 'appearance'. Nietzsche introduces this contrast in *Twilight of the Idols*. Ascetic perspectives like those developed by Plato, Christianity, and Kant posit a 'true world' underlying the realm we inhabit. They consider our world 'illusory' or merely apparent in relation to this true world (II, *HTTWBAF*). Ascetics 'fabricate a world "other" than this one' due to their 'powerful instinct for libeling, belittling, and casting suspicion on life' (II *Reason* 6). Nietzsche implies that they also service their 'hatred of the very idea of becoming' (II *Reason* 1) and their need to posit stable "being" underlying appearance through this posit (II *Reason* 5). This other realm also holds out the prospect of salvation from this world. Artists, by contrast, 'have valued appearance more highly than reality' (II *Reason* 6).

This third contrast is significant. It may seem at first that Nietzsche's association of artists with appearance provides support for the orthodox view. This seeming is false, however. Nietzsche is clear that the positing of a true world is an error. The intent of his rehearsal of the history of this error is precisely to challenge the idea that the realm disclosed by our senses is apparent or illusory (scheinbare) in the sense of veiling some more fundamental layer of reality (see also GS 54). The idea that the 'actual world' is 'an illusory world' is 'just a *moral-optical* illusion [Täuschung]' (II *Reason* 6). The fact that artists value appearance and even the fact that they value appearance 'more highly than reality' does not suggest that they trade in deception or distortion, then. The opposition between the world as it appears to us and a separate realm of true being is bogus. The 'appearance' that artists value, Nietzsche is explicit, is 'reality *once* again, only selected, strengthened, corrected' (II *Reason* 6). The business of the tragic artist is reworking how things appear. This does not signal any lack of seriousness nor any intent to distort. The tragic artist's selection, strengthening, and correction of how things appear is not a falsifying flight from reality, then. It is the ascetics who have taken such a flight. The tragic artist instead confronts 'the very things that are questionable and terrible' (II *Reason* 6).

The association of art with appearance in *Twilight* does not lend support for the orthodox reading that Nietzsche values art because it distorts reality, then. Timothy Stoll has persuasively argued that we should be suspicious about the orthodox reading of the passages where art is associated with appearance and illusion more generally. For one thing, the terms often translated as appearance and illusion are ‘Schein’ and ‘Täuschung’. Neither of these terms necessarily carry the sense of the English term ‘deception’ (Stoll 2019, 344, n. 11). For another, Nietzsche does not tend to talk of art as straightforwardly deceptive, or associate it straightforwardly with deception. In art the ‘will to illusion [*Wille zur Täuschung*] has the good conscience on its side’, Nietzsche asserts in GM III 25. Art is the ‘good will to appearance [*Schein*]’ in GS 107, a will that allows us the ‘good conscience’ to make an aesthetic phenomenon of ourselves. Art’s good conscience in trading in appearance, semblance and illusion implies an awareness that this is precisely what it is trading in (Stoll, 2019, pp. 337–339).<sup>4</sup> Art does not distort in virtue of trading in appearance, semblance and illusion so long as this awareness is maintained.

Stoll makes a further point that is of interest. He reads Nietzsche as being interested in vindicating art from the specific Platonic charge that art trades in imitation, the charge that it is mimetically false. That is to say, the charge that it offers semblances of objects and states of affairs rather than the real things (Stoll, 2019, pp. 332–333). Nietzsche does this, Stoll asserts, by adopting (and attempting to justify) a positive evaluation of the fact that art trades in, and positively values, semblance.

Stoll distinguishes his reading of Nietzsche’s aesthetics from the orthodox view. Nietzsche values art because it trades in and positively values semblance but this is not the same thing as valuing art because it distorts and deceives. Distortion and deception are forms of representational falsehood. They are the representation of objects and states of affairs as other than they really are. The fact that artists trade in semblance and imitation does not entail that they falsify objects or states of affairs in how they represent them. A portrait, for example, is an imitation, a semblance, of its subject. It is mimetically “false”, in this limited sense. It is not necessarily representationally false simply for this reason, however. It may succeed in capturing many things about its subject and perhaps even in offering an insight into their character that has not been appreciated before.

Stoll does not go so far as to claim that Nietzsche values art because it has the potential to be representationally true in some interesting way either. Stoll argues that Nietzsche values the appreciation of art because it involves us taking explicit pleasure in semblance that we are aware is semblance (Stoll, 2019, p. 338). This in

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<sup>4</sup> As Stoll (2019, p. 337) remarks, it is natural to link the ‘good conscience’ to appearance and illusion with an awareness that one is trading with appearance and illusion. Nietzsche regularly links conscience with consciousness (GM II 2; cf. TI *Errors* 6). It is also natural to link talk of conscience to the intellectual conscience, especially in *The Gay Science* where this is a key theme.



turn ‘effects an evaluative reorientation whereby we come to view semblance as something good’ (Stoll, 2019, p. 338). This is valuable, Stoll argues, because Nietzsche thinks that semblance is an essential part of life and thinks that a truly affirmative spirit should be honest in facing up to this fact and positively oriented towards it (GS 107). This is one aspect of the terrible truth that honesty demands the confrontation of (NF 1887: 11[415]). Art serves as a theatre where this valuation can be nurtured but where, as semblance is engaged in with ‘good conscience’, it is not accompanied by a positive valuation of distortion and deception.

Schopenhauer, as we have seen, tries to vindicate art by showing, against Plato, that art is uniquely well suited to transcending the limitations of everyday consciousness and confronting truths that are otherwise often concealed or obscured. I will now make the case that Nietzsche values art for the same reason by turning to a closer reading of the passages where he positively associates art and truth.

### 3. NIETZSCHE ON ART AND TRUTH

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It is uncontroversial that Nietzsche holds that art can confront truth (e.g. EH *The Birth of Tragedy* 2-3, TI *Skirmishes* 24, TI *Reason* 6). Tragic art, for example, ‘presents a lot that is ugly, harsh, questionable in life’ (TI *Skirmishes* 24). Nietzsche’s persistent association of tragic art with insight, and with the courageous affirmation of the terrible truth, suggests that there is a distinctive reason why art is well suited to confronting the truth. This is what I will argue, anyhow. I will argue, more specifically, that art is well suited to this task because artists embrace and exploit their affects in the creative process and have the disposition and skill to employ techniques that open new interpretations and perspectives on reality. These traits are vital to Nietzsche, I will further argue, because in their everyday cognitive interactions with the world agents are typically enclosed within dominant perspectives that are limited and tend toward falsification.

One further refinement of this claim is necessary. Nietzsche does not hold that all artistic representation, and all aesthetic dispositions, deliver insight and transcend the limitations of everyday consciousness. He is careful to distinguish the aesthetic disposition that he champions in this regard with a rival aesthetic creed in *Twilight*. We can understand Nietzsche’s favoured aesthetic disposition through understanding the nature and limitations of its opposite.

#### 3.1 THE PETTY AESTHETIC CREED OF FRENCH NATURALISM

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The aesthetic disposition Nietzsche favours is contrasted with the aesthetic creed of French naturalism (TI *Skirmishes* 7-8, EH *Beyond Good and Evil* 2, GS 347, WP 422, 455). Members of this creed consciously attempt to embody a form of

objectivity. They 'observe for the sake of *observing*' and attempt to completely refrain from engaging their affects and from imposing themselves in any way on what they observe and set out to study (II *Skirmishes* 7). In *Twilight* Nietzsche associates this tendency with Parisian novelists and, in particular, with the Goncourt brothers (II *Skirmishes* 7).<sup>5</sup> Nietzsche is disdainful of this aesthetic creed because in refraining from imposing form on their subject matter they display 'subjugation, weakness, fatalism' and reduce themselves to 'lying in the dirt in front of *petits faits* [little facts]'. This is 'unworthy of an artist' (II *Skirmishes* 7).

Nietzsche is also disdainful of the French aesthetic creed because the disposition to passively observe nature results, at best, in an artwork that is a 'mosaic', 'a collection of blots' and that fails to drive out anything significant about its subject matter (II *Skirmishes* 7). This is because '[a]rtistically appraised, nature is no model. It exaggerates, it distorts, it leaves holes' (II *Skirmishes* 7). The passive recording of it delivers only a record of nature as it appears to us in this fragmentary way. Nietzsche's critique stretches still further than this, however. He claims that this disposition in fact 'gives you a false optic' (II *Skirmishes* 7). It not only produces a disorganized collection of data, but also in some way tends towards falsification. This claim is significant for our purposes and I will follow it up shortly.

The aesthetic disposition Nietzsche favours displays the opposite tendencies. In observing and imposing form on his subject matter, Nietzsche's 'born painter' 'leaves it to his instinct, his *camera obscura*, to shift through and express the "matter at hand", "nature", the object of the "experience"' (II *Skirmishes* 7). The 'born painter's' intent is, like the French naturalist's, to express something about nature, about the matter at hand. It is his method of doing this that is distinct. He does not restrict himself to passively and slavishly recording every detail, every "little fact" (*petit fait*), as it initially appears and before he has processed it. He instead allows his instincts to come into play and allows himself to impose form on the subject matter.

Nietzsche's artist also embarks on a specific task, as is made explicit in the next section: the task of idealizing (II *Skirmishes* 8). Here and elsewhere in the later works, it is clear that the artist's task is in part to celebrate existence and to communicate their own 'fearlessness in the face of the fearful and the questionable' (II *Skirmishes* 24). Nietzsche explicitly defines his vision of the tragic artist in contradistinction to Schopenhauer's vision on this point (II *Skirmishes* 24). Again, though affirmation and celebration are imperative, so is truthfulness. Tragic art 'presents a lot that is ugly, harsh, questionable in life' but does so in a way that communicates an instinctively affirmative stance towards what is ugly, harsh and questionable (II *Skirmishes* 24). For the strong spirits Nietzsche admires, and the tragic artist in particular, idealization is not undertaken to beautify by falsifying but instead from 'an enormous drive to *force out* the main features' of the matter at hand (II *Skirmishes* 8).

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<sup>5</sup> The Goncourt brothers seem to be an appropriate target. They formulated a kind of naturalism in 1864 and asserted that the novel has 'assumed the studies and the duties [...] and frankness of science' (Boyd, 2013). 'The novel of today is composed from documents, received by word of mouth or taken direct from nature' (Boyd, 2013).

To grasp exactly how artists of Nietzsche's favoured aesthetic disposition are well suited to driving out truths that would otherwise remain obscured or concealed, it is necessary to first understand why the French aesthetic creed is ill suited to this task.

It is not immediately obvious why they would be. Nietzsche claims that the French aesthetic creed work with a 'false optic' because they 'observe for the sake of *observing*', focus on the "petit faits", and refrain from allowing the affective side of their natures to impact how they see and how they represent their subject matters. These traits are characteristic of a notion of objectivity that is commonly viewed as maximally conducive to uncovering the truth. Nietzsche holds an opposing conception of objectivity, however, and an opposing conception of what is maximally conducive to uncovering the truth (GM III 12). The first key to understanding Nietzsche's critique of French naturalism is locating it in the context of his perspectival conception of knowledge and inquiry. In this context we can see why French naturalism is ill suited to revealing the truth. The second key to understanding Nietzsche's critique of French naturalism is appreciating the particular ways that he takes our everyday cognitive interactions with the world to conceal and obscure various aspects of it. This explains why French naturalism can be positively falsifying. I take these two points in turn.

### 3.2 PERSPECTIVISM CONTRA MODERN OBJECTIVITY

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In GM III 12 Nietzsche critiques a conception of "modern" objectivity that many, including Schopenhauer, identify as the best means for uncovering the truth. This conception is targeted in various notes. It is tied to modernity (EH, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 2), to the tendency to prostrate oneself 'before *petit faits*' (EH *Beyond Good and Evil* 2, GM III 24, WP 422, see also Twilight *Skirmishes* 7) and to French artists and the 'petty aesthetic creed of French naturalism' more generally (GS 347, WP 422, 455). Nietzsche couches his critique of this notion of objectivity in GM III 12 partly in aesthetic terms. He links it to the notion of disinterestedness, 'contemplation without interest' (GM III 12), and to the 'pure, will-less, painless, timeless, subject of knowledge' that Schopenhauer associates with aesthetic cognition. Nietzsche's most fundamental complaint against this notion is that the very idea of a form of cognition severed from the will is bogus. Cognition is always in the service of the will and always guided by some particular affect, Nietzsche asserts. The idea of "contemplation without interest" is 'a non-concept and an absurdity' (GM III 12).

Nietzsche has a second complaint against modern objectivity too. It would be an inert mode of inquiry if it were possible. If we were, as the modern objectivist implores, somehow able (*per impossible*) to successfully 'eliminate the will completely and turn off all the emotions without exception, assuming we could' this would not further our epistemic endeavours but would instead be to 'castrate the intellect' (GM III 12). French aesthetic creeds aspire to do precisely this. To

still their will and their instincts and to passively observe and make studies of nature from these observations.

Nietzsche introduces a rival conception of how inquiry should proceed and can succeed in GM III 12. The features he identifies with successful inquiry coincide with the dispositions he later attributes to the ‘born painter’ in *Twilight*. They give us a first glimpse of Nietzsche’s account of the special cognitive power of art. In inquiry we should embrace ‘affective interpretations’. ‘[A]ctive and interpretative powers’ should not be suppressed but should instead brought to bear on the subject of one’s study (GM III 12). We should have the capacity to ‘see differently, and to *want* to see differently’. This capacity involves ‘*having in our power* the ability to engage and disengage our “pros” and “cons”’ and using ‘the difference in perspectives and affective interpretations for knowledge’ (GM III 12).

French aesthetic creeds and their artistic output are ill suited to revealing truth, then, because their adherence to modern objectivity frustrates their inquiry. Understanding the further charge that French naturalism provides a false optic will require that we first recognize that modern objectivity is an essentially moral (that is, ascetic) doctrine and that it serves Christian-moral and ascetic goal of denying and suppressing all that is worldly, bodily and characteristic of life.

### 3.3 THE MYTH OF PRESUPPOSITIONLESS INQUIRY

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Members of the French aesthetic creed aspire to expunge the influence of their will on their observational and creative activity. They seek to eradicate any trace of prejudice or partiality, to begin their cognitive and representational endeavours from a completely neutral standpoint, to ‘observe for the sake of observing’. This aspiration is destined to be unfulfilled, Nietzsche asserts. Cognition always involves the will, for one thing, and it thereby also always involves a certain partiality or, at least, has a perspectival character. Nietzsche also asserts that there is ‘absolutely no science without “presuppositions”’ (GS 344, see also GM III 24). A “faith” always has to be there first’ (GM III 24). The faith that Nietzsche identifies with the ascetic and unconditional will to truth in the third essay of *The Genealogy*, and elsewhere, is a faith in the ‘*metaphysical* value’ of truth (GM III 24). The ascetic scientists and “free spirits” of the third essay combine this faith with modern objectivist conception of inquiry.

In the third essay of *The Genealogy* Nietzsche makes clear what is implicit in the passages cited earlier from *Twilight*. Namely that the doctrine of modern objectivity is itself moral and ascetic in its essence. It is a ‘philosopher’s abstinence’ and ‘stoicism of the intellect’ that is linked with ‘that fatalism of “*petits faits*”’ (GM III 24). In championing it, and in championing the ‘renunciation of any interpretation’ in inquiry (GM III 24), ‘French scholarship now seeks a kind of moral superiority’ over German scholarship. This moral superiority, and the renunciation of interpretation, ‘expresses the asceticism of virtue just as well as any denial of sensuality (it is basically just a *modus* of this denial)’ (GM III 24). Modern

objectivity, then, is not a neutral standpoint freed of prejudice or presupposition and independent from a particular perspective and particular goals. It is ascetic, as are the ‘pale atheists, anti-Christians’ who believe themselves to oppose the ascetic ideal but who are in fact ‘themselves its most spiritual outgrowth’ (GM III 24). It serves the ascetic ideal by demanding the extirpation of the affective and creative aspects of the inquirer (and artist) in their cognitive pursuits, the extirpation, that is, of central conditions of life. The conditions of life, Nietzsche tells us in the previous essay, centrally involve ‘the essential pre-eminence of the spontaneous, attacking, infringing, reinterpreting, reordering, and formative forces’ (GM II 12).<sup>6</sup>

### 3.4 MODERN OBJECTIVITY AND THE FALSE OPTIC OF FRENCH NATURALISM

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Modern objectivity also serves the ascetic ideal and other dominant perspectives by proscribing the activities and modes of inquiry that could lead to the development of other, rival, perspectives. When a dominant perspective largely shapes the cognitive orientation of an individual and when this control seriously limits or falsifies the individual’s understanding of the world, the proscribing of these modes of inquiry not only consigns the individual to remain enclosed within the perspective, but in fact furthers its dominance.

To see this, consider how the doctrine of modern objectivity entrenches the ‘herd perspective’ (GS 354) that Nietzsche seems to associate French naturalism with. (The ‘petty aesthetic creed of French naturalism ([...] enhances and exposes only the part of nature that simultaneously disgusts and amazes [...]) (GS 347) just as in the herd perspective the world is ‘debased to its lowest common denominator’ (GS 354).) The herd perspective is, in short, the perspective maximally suited to serve the survival needs of the species (GS 354). Individuals born into a community are born into the herd perspective. It consists of a language and schema of concepts originally developed in relation to the most basic and most general needs of the herd. Under the herd perspective our understanding of ourselves ‘is finely developed only in relation to its usefulness to community or herd’ (GS 354). Thus ‘each of us, even with the best will in the world to understand ourselves as individually as possible [...] will always bring to consciousness precisely that in ourselves which is “non-individual”, that which is “average”’ (GS 354). This is because our conscious thoughts are couched in the language and concepts of the herd perspective and are thus ‘continually as it were *outvoted* and translated back into the herd perspective’ (GS 354, see also BGE 268). They are

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<sup>6</sup> In WP 455 Nietzsche states that ‘Frenchmen like Taine’ (who is credited with establishing the theoretical underpinnings of French naturalism) ‘inquire, or think they inquire, without being already in possession of a standard of values’. But states that ‘Prostration before “facts,” is ‘a kind of cult’ and insists that those who believe themselves to inquire without being already in possession of a standard of values in fact ‘study under the direction of given values (their hatred of appearance, the body, etc.’. This attack on Taine natural fits with the discussion here, in 3.3 and also links with the earlier discussion of (tragic) artists positive valuation of appearance (in contrast to moralizing artists like Taine).

translated, that is, back into the language and concepts prevalent in the herd which foreground what is general and base. The world as presented by the herd perspective is ‘a world turned into generalities and thereby debased to its lowest common denominator’ (GS 354). This generalizing tendency, Nietzsche asserts, does not merely dull and make imprecise our understanding of our environment. It is, further, responsible for ‘a vast and thorough corruption, falsification, superficialization’ of thought (GS 354).<sup>7 8</sup>

The modern objectivist imploration to dull one’s instincts and renounce active and interpretative forces in observation and representation forecloses the possibility that different perspectives might be developed. French naturalism is a ‘false optic’ in a fuller sense than this, however. Just as there is no presuppositionless science or inquiry, there is also no completely neutral or basic observation or mode of representation. French naturalists may aspire to undertake such observation and representation, but they cannot succeed in this task, according to Nietzsche. The attempt to do so not only stifles the development of new perspectives, then – perspectives that it would require concerted effort, the engagement of different affects, and the development of new concepts to form – but, inevitably, also leads one to lean back on the most basic set of linguistic and conceptual tools that one has to hand. The tools, that is, of the herd perspective. In reading out the data of patient observation and trying to express it, the French naturalist will inevitably employ the representational tools of the herd perspective and be consigned to presenting the world once again in the way that this perspective renders it. If one lies ‘in the dirt in front of *petit faits*’ (II *Skirmishes* 7), Nietzsche’s contention is, then one will stay in the dirt, as it were – one will remain caught in the herd perspective. That is to say, one will ‘live entirely in the spell of that perspective which makes the nearest and most vulgar appear tremendously big and as reality itself’ (GS 78).

#### 4. ARTISTS AND THE TRUTH

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<sup>7</sup> Nietzsche seems to make these points about consciousness in general in GS 354. This leads some readers to think that all conscious thought is necessarily falsifying and to assert that Nietzsche still holds some version of the ‘falsification thesis’ in this works (Anderson, 2002; Green, 2002; Hussain, 2004; Katsafanas, 2005; Riccardi, 2013). I will not discuss the falsification thesis or the claim that consciousness is necessarily falsifying. What is crucial to my purposes is that Nietzsche holds that certain artistic techniques, and certain artworks (e.g. tragic art), are able to help us transcend the limitations to cognition that the ascetic, herd and Christian perspectives impose.

<sup>8</sup> Nietzsche paints a picture of the everyday consciousness of individuals as routinely epistemically straightjacketed in this way in relation to the herd perspective, but also other dominant perspectives (e.g., A 54; GS 1, 347, 354, 355; BGE 228-230, 268, WP 481). The drives underlying these perspectives seek to dominate the cognitive activity of agents because by doing so they dominate the agent and move it towards their goals. ‘Every drive is a kind of lust to rule’, Nietzsche states, ‘each one has its perspective that it would like to compel all the other drives to accept as a norm’ (WP 481, see also GS 333). The herd perspective foregrounds the needs and goals of the herd and through dominating the cognitive orientation of individuals promotes these needs and goals.

'*What should we be grateful for*', Nietzsche asks in GS 78, '[o]nly artists' is his answer. We should be grateful to them because they have 'given men eyes and ears to see and hear with some pleasure what each himself is, himself experiences, himself wants' (GS 78). They have done this through a process that approximates idealization. Artists have 'taught the art of regarding oneself as a hero, from a distance as it were simplified and transfigured' (GS 78). Just as in *Twilight*, the idealization mentioned here is not (or not necessarily) falsifying. It is, rather, the a method of representation that provides the antidote to the influence of the herd perspective and, in this particular example, its corruption of one's consciousness of oneself. Only through employing the techniques and the distance that artists employ 'can we get over certain lowly details about ourselves' (GS 78). 'Without this art we would be nothing but foreground and would live entirely under the spell of that perspective which makes the nearest and most vulgar appear tremendously big and as reality itself', that is, the herd perspective (GS 78).

The 'born painter' of *TI Skirmishes 7* employs similar tools with similar results. He leaves it to 'his instinct, his *camera obscura*, to sift through and express the "matter at hand"'. By engaging instincts that have not been domesticated by dominant perspectives, the born painter reserves the possibility that his observation and what he expresses will transcend the limitations that standard forms of everyday consciousness, subjugated to dominant perspectives as they are, are subject to.

Art, and artists, are well suited to undertaking this task quite generally because they are experts in attending to how things appear. They value appearance and seek to select, strengthen, and correct how things appear to them, and how things appear in their art, until they reflect the truth (*TI Reason 6*). They seek to do this even though this process leads them to express 'the very things that are questionable and terrible (*TI Skirmishes 24, Reason 6*).

Art, and artists, are also well suited to undertaking this task because the techniques of artists are precisely the techniques that individuals need to employ if they are to work their way out of limiting and falsifying perspectives, like the herd perspective, and to establish a different point of view. '*What one should learn from artists*', Nietzsche states, is precisely to master these techniques.

To remove oneself from things until there is much in them that one no longer sees and much that the eye must add in order to see them at all, or to see things around a corner and as if they were cut out and extracted from their context, or to place them so that each partially distorts the view one has of the others and allows only perspectival glimpses, or to look at them through coloured glass or in the light of the sunset, or to give them a surface and skin that is not fully transparent. (GS 299)

These techniques can also, to be sure, be used to beautify and falsify one's picture of oneself and of life and existence. It is an open question whether Nietzsche champions their use to this end in *The Gay Science*.<sup>9</sup> That they can be put to this use

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<sup>9</sup> Commentators debate whether Nietzsche primarily or solely champions the employment of these techniques to distort the truth in *The Gay Science* or whether he champions their use to reveal, or even establish, truths about oneself (Young, 1992;

does not count against the view that they are well suited to the task of forming new and truth confronting perspectives, nor to the view that Nietzsche values them in precisely this connection.<sup>10 11</sup>

## 5. INTOXICATION AND EXISTENTIAL FALSIFICATION

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The technical skill to manipulate how things appear and the disposition to engage in such activity are not the only, nor the most substantial, traits of artists. Where Schopenhauer associates art's cognitive power with the silencing of the will, Nietzsche's most emphatic celebration of art and the artistic disposition is related to the state of physiological and psychological intoxication. Nietzsche's emphasis on the heightened states of emotion that he associates with the tragic artist may, at first blush, seem inconsistent with the reading I am giving. A reading on which Nietzsche values art because it enables us to transcend the cognitive limitations of everyday consciousness and confront truth.

The worry here can be neutralized by noting three things. The first is that Nietzsche's ideal of perspectivism is presaged on the idea that affects (multiple affects) must be employed for the sake of driving out new perspectives. The second is that many of the passages that refer to the state of intoxication also explicitly associate art with the presentation of what is terrible and questionable in life. These terrible and questionable aspects of life being those which the dominant Christian-moral and ascetic perspectives typically conceal from everyday consciousness and prevent agents from confronting. TI *Skirmishes* 21 is where art is said to 'present a lot that is ugly, harsh, questionable in life', for example, and in this passage the tragic artist is said to be 'a genius of communication' rather than

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Ridley, 2007, 2010; Janaway, 2014). I side with the later view, though I won't defend it here. What matters for my purposes is establishing that art, and the techniques of artists, provide the tools for transcending the limitations of everyday consciousness. The truth of this claim is, strictly speaking, consistent with Nietzsche also, in other contexts, championing art and artistry as a means by which agents – presumably “weak” spirits – can furnish themselves with a beautified but falsified picture of themselves and of existence.

<sup>10</sup> Christopher Janaway (2014, p. 55) similarly notes that the techniques of artists that Nietzsche lists in *The Gay Science* are broadly coincident with the techniques necessary to open up new perspectives on reality.

<sup>11</sup> I claim here and throughout that the cognitive power of art is the power to break the hold of pre-existing perspectives on us. I also talk of art forming new and different perspectives. Nietzsche sometimes talks as if art and artists only appraise and glorify things and states that have already been uncovered (GS 85) and as if they need the support of a 'previously established authority' (GM III 5). These passages may seem to sit uneasily with my claims. Nietzsche does not make claims of this nature in relation to the tragic artists of *Twilight* on whom I have been primarily focused, however. His complaints against art in these passages also seem to be made in a very specific context. Although he claims that artists '*always* need a bulwark, a support, a previously established authority' in GM III 5 (my emphasis), for example, he is in the process of discussing what 'ascetic ideals mean' in the 'case of an artist' and in the process of setting up an attack on Wagner. It is again seems unlikely that Nietzsche would carry over the claims he makes here to tragic artists of his preferred kind. Thanks to the editors of this journal for raising this point.



a wild and inchoate brute. In *TI Skirmishes* 8, intoxication is associated with idealization and this is in turn associated with the cognitive goal ‘to *force out* the main features’ of things, rather than to revel with wild abandon and in a dishonest or falsifying manner. In *TI Skirmishes* 10, intoxication is described as a state where ‘the entire system of affects is excited and intensified: so that it discharges all its modes of expression at once’. The capacity to enter into such a heightened state enables the grasping aspects of the world, and the occupation of perspectives, that have been neglected or concealed previously. Nietzsche’s language in this connection deliberately connotes GM III 12. In intoxication the artist ‘possesses the art of communication to the highest degree. He enters into any skin, into any affect’ (*TI Skirmishes* 10).

The third point to note is that the emotional charge of the state Nietzsche associates with the creation of tragic art is acutely heightened and particularly strong as this is what is necessary in order for the tragic artist to transcend the pervasive and near all-encompassing power of the Christian-moral perspective and its falsification of the terrible truth. The case of Schopenhauer is indicative in this regard. It demonstrates the difficulty of transcending Christianity’s existential falsifications. Schopenhauer was, Nietzsche asserts, ‘the first admitted and compromising atheist among us Germans’ (GS 357). Nietzsche also asserts, however, that Schopenhauer fails to tear himself free from the wider trappings of the Christian perspective. This is manifest throughout his work, but particularly in his view of tragedy. Schopenhauer is the ‘heir to the Christian interpretation’ because he associates tragedy with the negation and denial of the ‘will to live’ and the denial of all that is worldly (*TI Skirmishes* 21). These are essentially ascetic and Christian values, as Nietzsche understands things. In spite of Schopenhauer’s courage and dedication in opposing Christianity in myriad ways, the force of Christian falsification is such that he remains essentially detained within an ascetic perspective. He also fails to free himself from the Christian tendency to posit realms other than this world, nor from the tendency to associate salvation with the flight from this world.

Nietzsche similarly laments the fact that the ‘pale atheists, anti-Christians’ discussed in the third essay of *The Genealogy* remain attached to Christian morality and remain caught in the ascetic ideal. These spirits ‘believe themselves to be as detached as possible from the ascetic ideal’ but are in fact ‘themselves its most spiritual outgrowth’ (GM III 24). Though they have thrown off ‘Christianity as dogma’ (GM III 27) they retain the ‘unconditional will to truth’ and the ‘faith in a *metaphysical* value’ of truth (GM III 24). This faith and metaphysical valuation are themselves a falsification of the existential truth. These ascetic scientists also impute an overriding purpose to life – the pursuit of truth – and thereby further falsify the ultimate character of life and existence.

The stubbornness of the Christian-moral interpretation of existence is such Nietzsche decrees that the elevated state of intoxication is needed in order to transcend it, then. There is every indication that the state of intoxication he has in mind is not merely one of wild celebration, but is instead one in which the tragic

artist can present what is ugly, terrible and questionable in life and fully confront and honestly affirm life on these terms.

## CONCLUSION

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I have argued that Nietzsche values art, at least in part, because it is well suited to transcend the limitations that plague everyday consciousness and, more specifically, to confront the terrible truths about life and existence that Christianity conceals and obscures. This reading of Nietzsche's aesthetics runs counter to the orthodox view that Nietzsche values art because it distorts and deceives. It is natural that Nietzsche would seek to vindicate art by presenting it as a means of confronting truths that are routinely obscured. This is exactly the vindication for art that Schopenhauer pursues. Though Nietzsche takes up the essentially Schopenhauerian task of vindicating art in this way, his method of vindication is the polar opposite of Schopenhauer's. It is not the influence of the will on cognition that is responsible for the limitations and falsifications of everyday cognition. Nor is it the consideration of things from a neutral and passive viewpoint that enables us to transcend these cognitive limitations. It is, instead, in the embracing and exploitation of the affective and creative sides of our natures that art's cognitive power resides.<sup>12</sup>

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