Organic Unity and the Heroic: Nietzsche's Aestheticization of Suffering

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*1. Introduction*

It is uncontroversial that Nietzsche endorsed the broad claim that suffering is in some way related to the realization of certain perfectionist values, namely: great achievement and creative excellence. Perhaps most indicative of this endorsement is the following:

The discipline of suffering, of *great* suffering—do you not know that only this discipline has created all enhancements of man so far? That tension of the soul in unhappiness which cultivates its strength, its shudders face to face with great ruin, its inventiveness and courage in enduring, persevering, interpreting, and exploiting suffering, and whatever has been granted to it of profundity, secret, mask, spirit, cunning, greatness—was it not granted to it through suffering, through the discipline of great suffering?

 (*BGE,* 225)

However, once an attempt is made to explicate this claim, a number of controversial components emerge. One such controversy that will be the concern of this chapter is what *kind* of value relation obtains between suffering and great achievement. Brian Leiter has argued that for Nietzsche, this relation is ‘only extrinsic,’ and qualifies this as what has ‘value only as a means to something else’ (Leiter, 2002:129). For example, we might say that Van Gogh’s suffering was valuable to him in so far as it inspired his paintings.

Bernard Reginster has argued that this instrumentalist view is unrepresentative of Nietzsche’s position for the following reason: if suffering’s value is only instrumental, then this would allow one to ‘coherently deplore’ (Reginster, 2007: 44) one's suffering while simultaneously recognizing it is a necessary means to great achievement. Yet this is incompatible, Reginster argues, with Nietzsche's broader commitment to a ‘*radical* revaluation of the role and significance of suffering in human existence’ (ibid.). After all, the instrumentalist interpretation is something that Christians may concede—that suffering is a means, though regrettable, to a further good in some capacity. However, Nietzsche repeatedly claims that Christianity, and it’s secular manifestations, foster an ethical climate inimical to great achievement, at least partly because it explicitly *fails* to appropriately value suffering.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In light of this objection, Reginster offers a competing interpretation. According to Reginster, creative achievement *consists in* overcoming suffering, and therefore, suffering is an essential *ingredient* of, rather than a means to, creative achievement. What we value in Van Gogh's paintings, for example, is not just the product, but at least partly the *process* of his striving to create it. Because suffering forms an essential part of a valuable whole in this way, Reginster argues that we must in turn value suffering ‘for its own sake’ (ibid.).

I agree with Reginster that suffering having value-as-a-part is more representative of Nietzsche's position. Nevertheless, the phrase 'part of a valuable whole' is notoriously ambiguous, and how this part-whole relationship is interpreted has significant implications for Nietzsche's positive ethics. In this chapter I seek to demonstrate that Reginster's position, as it stands, is open to an objection that has not yet been adequately addressed: from the mere fact that suffering is an essential constituent of a valuable whole, it does not follow that suffering is itself valuable. Rather, by taking advantage of the principle of organic unities, it would have to form an essential part of a valuable whole *in a particular way*. I consider two ways the principle might be attributed to Nietzsche's views on suffering: either as an enabling condition, in which the presence of suffering allows for a whole that outweighs its disvalue (X enables Y, which has value); or as a contributor, in which suffering positively contributes value to the whole (X contributes value to Y).

In my attempt to provide an interpretation of Nietzsche's evaluation of suffering which builds upon Reginster's position and in turn provides a defence to this objection, I explore how Nietzsche's ethics turns out to be crucially informed by this conceptual distinction, juxtaposing it with ‘morality.’ I shall argue that Nietzsche views suffering as a contributor on account of his distinctive brand of aestheticism: understood broadly (for now) as the attempt to prioritise aesthetic values over moral values in typically ethical domains. Centring on the tragic hero, suffering can itself be affirmed as good/beautiful in certain contexts, and not (as typically characterized by ‘morality’) merely as an invariably regrettable component of a (sometimes) greater whole.

 In defending this interpretation, I focus upon *The Gay Science*, where Nietzsche’s aestheticism is most explicit. Moreover, Nietzsche's hostility towards moral values is generally considered to be present from *Human, All-Too-Human* onwards, yet, I argue that a tension between moral and aesthetic value is proposed by Nietzsche as early as *The Birth of Tragedy*, hence many resources for his aestheticist view can be drawn from a wider margin of texts.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Before I proceed, two claims restrict the scope of this debate. Firstly, while Nietzsche may use the term 'suffering' to refer to different phenomena, like Reginster, I shall only focus upon Nietzsche's attention to suffering as the experience of frustration in striving [*streben*] to achieve one's goals, or 'resistance' [*Widerstand*] to one's desires.[[3]](#footnote-3) Leiter does not specify whether his interpretation pertains only to this form of suffering or possible others. This is significant, for suffering might have instrumental value in one form, but not plausibly in another. With this ambiguity in mind, I reject Leiter's instrumentalist view *only* in as far as he intends it to encompass the phenomenon of suffering as striving to satisfy a lack.[[4]](#footnote-4) The second claim I shall grant here is that suffering of this form is something Nietzsche believes to be valuable for only a small number of exceptional individuals: those capable of great achievement. Nietzsche often eschews the idea that one value or set of values is appropriate for all, and here I assume this to apply to the value of suffering. I shall now begin by presenting Reginster's view and our points of agreement, before identifying the objection I wish to focus upon.

*2. Reginster on the value of suffering*

Reginster explores one form of suffering Nietzsche is interested in through an interpretation of the doctrine of the will to power. Will to power, according to Reginster, is to be understood as ‘a desire for the overcoming of resistance in the pursuit of some determinate first-order desire’ (Reginster, 2006: 132). We can elucidate this claim with the following example. Imagine an Olympic athlete that desires to win a particular event. This athlete, like many, not only wants to win, but wants to win *in a particular way*: by skilfully triumphing over worthy opponents. Worthiness, on this view, would be determined by how much 'resistance' they generate. In other words, the will to power is a desire for a *challenge*: overcoming obstacles, and the feeling of power [*Machtgefühl*] or growth in experiencing our self-efficacy.

As a descriptive thesis concerning human motivation,[[5]](#footnote-5) this interpretation of the will to power is compatible with the pursuit of a vast range of first-order ends. Yet, it will not be satisfied unless three conditions are met: (1) there is some first-order desire for a determinate end; (2) there is resistance to the realization of this end (the form of which will vary depending the end); (3) this resistance is overcome in a competently caused way (i.e. not due to *pure* luck).

Of particular relevance for my purposes here is how Reginster interprets ‘resistance’ to be a form of suffering in Nietzsche’s view. The reasoning behind this claim is as follows. In order for the concept of 'resistance' to be comprehensible, the first order determinate end must be something the agent actually desires and at least intends to pursue (Reginster, 2006: 136-137). When the agent experiences obstacles to the realization of these goals, there is a feeling of frustration in one’s striving to satisfy a perceived lack [*Mangel*]. This frustration, Reginster argues, is inherently painful, hence he claims that ‘suffering is defined by resistance’ (Reginster 2006: 177).[[6]](#footnote-6)

This claim linking resistance and suffering is identified by other commentators. Ivan Soll, for example, claims that ‘it is only in overcoming difficulty, pain, and suffering, in successfully struggling and striving, that one experiences power’ (Soll, 1988: 124). Christopher Janaway and Ken Gemes similarly write that ‘resistances are experienced as suffering, so in willing power we are willing suffering, or at least willing something that necessarily involves suffering’ (Janaway and Gemes, 2012: 297). Most recently, Katsafanas claims that ‘in willing power we will a certain kind of displeasure or suffering’ (Katsafanas, 2013: 193). As Reginster recognizes, this structure appears somewhat paradoxical in at least one sense: it would have us be motivated to bring about our own dissatisfaction; we would *desire* suffering. Nevertheless, Reginster affirms it as representative of Nietzsche’s position:

The will to power, insofar as it is a will to the overcoming of resistance, must necessarily also will the resistance to overcome. Since suffering is defined in terms of resistance, then the will to power indeed ‘desires displeasure.’ (Reginster, 2006: 133)

As Reginster demonstrates, this view sits well with Nietzsche’s claims—particularly from his later period—that, driven by their will to power, human beings ‘seek resistance, they need something that opposes it—Displeasure, as an obstacle to their will to power, is therefore a normal fact...human beings do not avoid it, they are rather in continual need of it…’ (*WP,* 702 [1888]).

However, we may be justifiably sceptical about the claim that ‘suffering is defined by resistance,’ depending on how it is to be interpreted. If the suggestion is that Nietzsche *equates* resistance and suffering, as opposed to holding that resistance can *sometimes* be described as suffering, then he may be vulnerable to the standard objections of equivocation traditionally levelled at Schopenhauer. Completing a crossword or puzzle may generate great resistance, but if this experience is to be described as ‘suffering,’ then the term may be being used in a highly stipulative sense. The same may be said of many artistic projects typical of Nietzschean ‘higher types’—musical composition, poetry, painting, and so forth. These activities certainly involve overcoming great *difficulty*, but if this difficulty is the same as *suffering*, then the view is less convincing.

I won’t address the plausibility of these descriptive claims about agency and motivation here. My current concerns only require accepting the weaker thesis that *at least some* forms of resistance are instances of suffering. I shall grant this claim here. My focus is instead upon further claims Reginster makes concerning the *evaluative* dimension of the will to power, and particularly suffering.

Reginster claims the will to power is intended to serve not only as an accurate account of human motivation, but as ‘the principle of revaluation’ in Nietzsche’s wider ethical project (Reginster, 2006, p. 150). This has implications for the value of suffering. These implications, according to Reginster, are precisely what distinguishes a Nietzschean ethics of creativity from ‘morality’:

It is precisely insofar as it implies a radical revaluation of suffering that Nietzsche’s ethics of creativity underwrites his famed attack on morality. As Nietzsche understands it, morality, paradigmatically the ‘morality of compassion,’ is predicated upon a wholesale condemnation of suffering. As such, it fosters an ethical climate that is essentially inimical to creativity. (Reginster, 2007: 45)

While a Christian, for example, may consistently deplore their suffering while recognizing it as *necessary means* to a compensating good (Reginster, 2007: 44), the doctrine of the will to power, Reginster continues, entails a radically different evaluation of suffering. Namely, one which is ‘grounded in the claim that the difficulty of an achievement, or the fact that it requires overcoming of resistance, is an essential part of what makes it a great achievement’ (Reginster, 2007: 45). Reginster draws this distinction in the following way:

Suffering, in contemporary parlance, has *contributory* value. Contributory value is typically distinguished from instrumental value through the observation that activities can have contributory value when they are part of an intrinsically valuable life, and contribute to its value, even though they are not a means to it...Suffering has only contributory value, however, insofar as it does not suffice to make a life valuable.

(Reginster, 2006: 297)

I agree with Reginster that contributory value is distinct from instrumental value. Standard definitions of instrumental value usually begin by contrasting it with *final value*: what is valuable for its own sake or as an end. Objects, activities, states of affairs, or whatever, have instrumental value if they are a *means* to something that is either of further instrumental value, or valued for its own sake or *as an end*. Money, tools, chores, are standard examples. What is crucial to this understanding is that if these things are valuable *only* as a means, then it yields no loss in value all things considered if the end was achieved via a different means. Furthermore, on this view it might be *better* if a particular end was achieved without enduring the process of achieving it.

Contributory value, by contrast, is understood to mean the value something has in virtue of being part of a finally valuable whole.[[7]](#footnote-7) Concerning the concept of valuable ‘parts,’ Robert Nozick claimed that it is ‘not merely that value can be produced via them, but that they be necessary for that production: the slack of their absence would not be taken up by other factors so that the same value got produced anyway’ (Nozick, 1981: 313). What has contributory value are those things which can make a ‘value difference’ in this way. Consider a beautiful mosaic comprised of many different stones. Each stone is not a means to the mosaic, but is constitutive of it. In so far as the mosaic is valuable, each stone is necessary for the production of that value, not instrumentally, but as a part.

Reginster emphasizes that suffering ‘is not valued *by itself*,’ but rather ‘only as an ingredient of the good’ (Reginster, 2006: 234). But more needs to be said about what this commits one to. Precisely *how* suffering acts as an 'ingredient,’ or 'contributes value,’ requires explanation.

*2. The objection: parts, wholes, and organic unity*

This brings me to the particular concern of this chapter. Reginster understands suffering to contribute value in the following way:

If we value the overcoming of resistance, then we must also value the resistance that is an ingredient of it. Since suffering is defined by resistance, we must also value suffering.

(Reginster, 2006: 177)

From the standpoint of the ethics of power, suffering cannot be coherently deplored...because it is an essential constituent of the good.

(Reginster, 2006: 233)

These passages are crucial, because they seem to depend on the assumption that *the value of the whole must be a function of the value of its parts.* However, this is precisely the view which is called into question by the principle of organic unities.

We commonly understand there to be cases in which otherwise valueless parts can be considered valuable when they are related within a whole in some way. Think again of the beautiful mosaic: it may have great value, yet when the stones which form it are jumbled or removed and placed in an unorganized heap, they have little or no value. Implicit in this kind of understanding is the 'principle of organic unities,’ which G.E. Moore stated as the claim that ‘the value of a whole must not be assumed to be the same as the sum of the values of its parts’ (Moore, 1993: 18). The principle holds that if two or more states or objects enter into the relations that constitute a given whole, the resulting value may be either more or less than those states had when apart. According to Moore, one can't assess the goodness of a particular state of affairs by simply assigning a value to each part and adding them together. Rather, the total value of any state of affairs often involves the *relations* between its parts.

Reginster does not directly engage with the principle or its implications. This omission potentially leaves his position vulnerable to the following objection. One may grant that suffering is an 'essential ingredient' of great achievement, and following from this, one may also grant that ‘he who wants to be creative must welcome resistance, and therefore suffering’ (Reginster, 2007: 45). But from the claim that suffering is an essential ingredient of the good, to then claim that ‘Suffering is no longer a necessary evil to which the creative individual must somehow accommodate himself’ (Reginster, 2007: 45) would be too quick. Taking advantage of the principle of organic unities, we might ask why it is the case that someone couldn’t hold that suffering is always bad, always regrettable, even when it is recognized as an essential part of a good whole? In other words, there seems to be nothing incoherent about supposing that there are wholes containing something deplorable, which are, nevertheless, of great positive value all things considered.

One (un-Nietzschean) example might be that of compassion. Exercising compassion necessarily requires a subject to suffer or experience pain. The goodness of compassion is thought to come from the concern of the observer and their desire to alleviate that suffering. Although the subject's suffering is an essential component of compassion, this does not therefore make that suffering *good*. Rather, the goodness of compassion comes from the recognition of suffering as something essentially bad, and this recognition (sometimes) outweighs that badness.

We can apply this line of thought to reflect Reginster’s concerns. The manifestation of power through a particular determinate end, say the composing of a great symphony, might be of tremendous value. However, if we endorse the principle of organic unity, the suffering the composer may have felt in completing their task may still be coherently deplored, even if they recognize it as an essential part of their achievement. This is at odds with Reginster's interpretation of a Nietzschean *radical* revaluation in which suffering ‘cannot coherently be deplored’ (Reginster, 2006: 177).[[8]](#footnote-8)

The implication here is that Nietzsche’s project of revaluation is not as radical as he proposes, for viewing suffering as an essential feature of a valuable whole is also compatible with Christian morality.[[9]](#footnote-9) However, I think Reginster is right to hold that for Nietzsche, one’s achievement must be affirmed not in spite of suffering, but in virtue of it. My proposition is that, as it stands, Reginster does not provide the tools to deflect this objection. Nevertheless, I suggest one might respond and in turn defend his position by making a distinction between two interpretations of the principle of organic unities.

The distinction at work here is between two different ways a 'part' can be valuable in virtue of its relation to a whole. The first is as an *enabling condition*, and the second is as a *contributor*.[[10]](#footnote-10) An enabling condition retains its badness wherever its intrinsic properties remain constant, but in certain contexts allows for a whole of greater value to outweigh it (such that X enables Y, which has value). On this interpretation of organic unity, a whole’s value is a combination of the parts’ invariable value *plus* the relations generated between them. For example, inflicting pain may always be a bad thing, but in the context of punishment, where the subject is *deserving* of such pain, the badness of inflicting pain is (sometimes) outweighed.

In contrast, a contributor changes its value depending on the context. A particular thing, X, may be of negative value in one context, but upon forming a whole in another context can increase or decrease in value (such that X contributes value to Y). In this case, the value of punishment would be explained differently: inflicting pain is *itself* good on the condition that the subject is deserving of it. In both cases, the value of punishment as a whole is identical, but dependent on two very different interpretations of its constitutive parts.

Applying this distinction to the issue at hand: is it that suffering is invariably regrettable, yet in the context of creative striving enables a compensating whole? Or is it that in this particular context, suffering itself *becomes* a good which contributes value to the whole? If, as Reginster claims, suffering is an essential ingredient of the good and *therefore* cannot be coherently deplored, then suffering must act as a part of valuable whole in a particular way, namely in the latter sense: as a *contributor* whose value may vary across context.

In order to defend his interpretation, I shall in the next section advance two claims: (1) Nietzsche endorses the principle of organic unities; (2) Nietzsche considers valuable constitutive parts to function as contributors, at least with regard to suffering in striving. I explore a defence of both claims through Nietzsche's aestheticism, which, if properly understood, is one means by which Nietzsche juxtaposes the 'moral' evaluation of suffering with his own ‘heroic’ evaluation. Furthermore, the conceptual distinction between enabling conditions and contributors is therefore crucial to understanding Nietzsche’s rejection of the ‘morality of compassion.’[[11]](#footnote-11)

*3. Nietzsche’s aestheticism*

There is disagreement about the commitments and extent of Nietzsche's aestheticism. One influential account has been developed by Alexander Nehamas. Nehamas claims that Nietzsche:

...looks at [the world] as if it were a literary text. And he arrives at many of his views of human beings by generalizing to them ideas and principles that apply almost intuitively to the literary situation, to the creation and interpretation of literary texts and characters.

(Nehamas, 1985: 3)[[12]](#footnote-12)

Nehamas' view that Nietzsche takes literary text to be the ‘overarching metaphor’ (Nehamas, 1985: 164) for life might be contrasted with a broader conception recently defended by Daniel Came. Came argues that Nietzsche's aestheticism consists in an attempt to seek a ‘rapprochement’ between the two evaluative modes of aesthetics and ethics in a particular direction, that is, to temper the margin of the aesthetic/ethical terrain in a such a way that gives preference to the former.[[13]](#footnote-13) In Came's words, Nietzsche intends in his project of revaluation:

...to extend the structure of aesthetic judgment into the ethical domain, and, indeed, to effect the substitution of aesthetic for moral concepts when dealing with such typically ethical domains as action, motivation and character, and their adoption as the predominant terms in practical reasoning.

 (Came, 2014: 127)

Came’s claim is more abstract that Nehamas' in the sense that it needn’t make strict analogies to literary texts. Rather, Came draws attention to a broader issue of how aesthetic values can or do comparably function. It is this sense of 'aestheticism'—the view that aesthetic values can guide and inform one's behaviour as much as typically moral values can, and should—that is relevant to my current concerns.[[14]](#footnote-14) As I shall argue in this section, aestheticism partly motivates Nietzsche’s claim that preference for higher and lower modes of life ‘is at bottom a question of taste and of *aesthetics’* (*WP,* 353, [1887]; emphasis mine).

Aestheticism, as a matter of coherence, requires it to be true that aesthetic values are conceptually distinct from moral values. While an aestheticist view *may* temper the margin between aesthetic and moral values in favour of the moral,[[15]](#footnote-15) Nietzsche does the opposite: he holds that something can be beautiful if it is (a) morally neutral, or even (b) morally vicious. Early on, Nietzsche is eager to affirm this point. Concerning the Greek myths, he writes that those ‘seeking elevated morals...charity and benevolence, will quickly be...discouraged and disappointed’ (*BT,* 3). Instead of ‘asceticism, spirituality or duty,’ everything about these myths ‘speaks of a rich and triumphant existence, in which everything is defied, whether it be good or evil’ (*BT,* 3). Nietzsche makes this conceptual distinction explicit later in *Daybreak*:

... hitherto we have been permitted to seek beauty only in the *morally good* - a fact which sufficiently accounts for our having found so little of it and having had to seek about for imaginary beauties without backbone! - As surely as the wicked enjoy a hundred kinds of happiness of which the virtuous have no inkling, so too they possess a hundred kinds of beauty; and many of them have not yet been discovered.

(*D*, 468; cf. *D*, 499)

 Nietzsche also holds that aesthetic value has no necessary relation to epistemic value. That is to say: aesthetic concepts need not tell us any truth about the world.[[16]](#footnote-16) On the contrary, Nietzsche's consistent view is that aesthetic concepts typically do the opposite: they provide a ‘healing balm of illusion [*Illusion*]’ (*BT,* 19) that masks the terrible existential truths of the human predicament, thus making life bearable (see *BT,* 3, 7, 18; *GS,* 107; *GM,* III, 25). The *way* in which they 'mask' these terrible truths will prove to be crucial.

Although Nietzsche never used the formal approach or terminology familiar from Moore and contemporary value theory, the principle of organic unity is implicit in a number of areas of his philosophy. Nehamas, for example, writes that for Nietzsche: ‘traits of character and actions can only be evaluated in light of their contribution to a complete person, a complete life, or...a complete work’ (Nehamas, 1985: 229). I agree with this claim. One example of Nietzsche's engagement with the principle—perhaps most indicative of his aestheticism—concerns his treatment of character in aesthetic terms of 'style.’

Nietzsche's higher men have diverse character traits, some of which may be undesirable when considered in isolation, yet as a conscious part of one's nature or disposition are ‘reinterpreted and made sublime’ (*GS,* 290). To have unity-in-diversity is what it means to ‘give style to one's character’ according to Nietzsche. He calls this:

...a great and rare art! It is practiced by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and then fit them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye.

 (*GS,* 290; cf. *GM,* II, 17)

Think of Achilles: brave and strong, yet also deeply stubborn and arrogant. Being stubborn or arrogant considered by themselves may have either negative value or no value at all. However, we admire Achilles' character *not in spite* of his stubbornness and arrogance, but *in virtue of* them as part of his unified character. Nietzsche makes this point explicit: he speaks of he who is ‘more attractive by virtue of his imperfections’ (*GS,* 79). In this way, we might value Achilles' character as a whole greater than that of the sum of his traits considered apart.[[17]](#footnote-17)

That Nietzsche finds some *aesthetic* value in at least some instances of organic unity has important implications for how he understands the value of parts and wholes to work.[[18]](#footnote-18) I will now consider how aestheticism is relevant to Nietzsche's project with respect to suffering in the pursuit of one's goals—a phenomenon which Nietzsche expresses through the concept of the ‘heroic.’

*4. Heroic striving*

Nietzsche's claims concerning heroism [*Heroismus*] and its value occur as early as *The Birth of Tragedy*, but reach their pinnacle in *The Gay Science*. I shall draw heavily, but not exclusively, upon this text in elucidating the concept.

Nietzsche defines heroes in terms of striving, suffering, and sacrifice, and tempts his readers into considering their value which, he further claims, has been disregarded and discouraged since the triumph of Christian morality. Nietzsche clearly presents himself as a defender of this kind of value; as one who will ‘welcome all signs that a more virile, warlike age is about to begin, which will restore honour to courage [*Tapferkeit*] above all!’ (*GS,* 283).

For Nietzsche, heroes are those who suffer greatly in relentlessly striving for noble goals. Moreover, heroism is construed at least partly by one's joyfully facing great and potentially fatal challenges. He states plainly: ‘*What makes one heroic?*—Going out to meet at the same time one's highest suffering and one's highest hope’ (*GS,* 268). In Reginster's terms, heroes are those who exercise their will to power to an exceptional degree, to the extent that their striving involves great risk and sacrifice.

Nietzschean heroes thus thrive in situations where turmoil and danger are present. He writes of the ‘heroic type [*heroischen Menschen*]’ that their expression is ‘never prouder, more warlike, and happier than it is when a storm is comes up; indeed, pain itself gives them their greatest moments’ (*GS,* 318). Though Nietzsche presents this point in provocative terms, it is by no means new, or indeed that radical. The idea of heroic deeds requiring risk and sacrifice is (unsurprisingly) embedded in Homer. To take one illustrative example, the Lycian hero Sarpedon answers his friend Glaucus concerning the question of why they are honoured back in Lycia with ‘the best of everything’ by saying:

All this now obliges us to take our places in the front ranks of the Lycians and fling ourselves into the flames of battle. Only then will our Lycian men-at-arms say of us: ‘Well! These are no dishonourable lords of Lycia that rule over us and eat fat sheep and drink the best sweet wine: they are indomitable and fight in the forefront of the Lycians.’

(Homer, 2003: 211, 12.316-330)

Sarpedon claims that in the front lines lies the greatest risk to their mortality, and *therefore* ‘where men win glory’ (Homer, 2003: 211, 12.325). Christa Acampora locates similar sentiments in Nietzsche’s work as early as *Homer's Wettkampf* in 1872. She argues that Nietzsche considers the value of Homeric protagonists as ‘potentially surpassing that of the gods—the gods cannot achieve the status of the heroes because they cannot risk their lives’ (Acampora, 2013: 43). The idea being that the greatest achievements are *perilous*; hence agonistic struggle is unavailable to the gods.[[19]](#footnote-19) In opposition to a passive existence of ‘smug ease’ and ‘comfortableness,’ these rare heroes are ‘the great pain-bringers [*Schmerzbringer*] of mankind’ (*GS,* 318; cf. *GS,* 377; 338; *BGE,* 225).

The important point for my purposes is that Nietzsche considers heroism to be at least partly an aesthetic concept. Like *The Iliad*—which offers frequent evaluative observations with aesthetic connotations[[20]](#footnote-20)—Nietzsche also deliberately draws upon terms with aesthetic overtones. A clear instance of this is the parallel between power and ‘magnificence’ or ‘splendour’ [*Pracht*] (*GM,* Preface, 6) in great individuals.[[21]](#footnote-21) Indeed, this practice is a defining feature of Nietzsche's conception of the good: the ‘genuine antagonism’ between Homer and Plato: ‘the greatest enemy of art Europe has yet produced’ (*GM,* III, 25).

Nietzsche's veneration of the heroic, together with his aestheticism, has significant consequences for the value of suffering, which heroic activity is in part constituted by. I shall now consider how this may help Reginster defend his view from the objection raised.

*5. Suffering as a contributor: juxtaposing the heroic and the moral*

The aesthetic value in heroic struggle culminates in tragedy, whereby the protagonist is led to annihilation because of their ambition to achieve their goals. Thus, when Achilles is overcome with rage at the death of Patroclus, the grandeur of his vengeful rampage that ends with his death is aesthetically pleasing. Nietzsche praises Macbeth in similar terms in a passage from *Daybreak* titled ‘on the morality of the stage,’ arguing that to think the actions of Macbeth are presented with ‘a moral effect’ as evil and to be shunned would be a mistake. Rather, ‘if the hero perishes by his passion this precisely is the sharpest spice in the hot draught of this joy’ (*D*, 240). It is exactly this element of tragic heroes which exercises ‘‘demonic’ attraction’ (*D*, 240) in Nietzsche's view. This attraction—which can ‘excite similar natures to emulation’ (*D*, 240)—we are told, is lost in the modern ‘moral’ man: he is no longer ‘the centre and tragic hero of life in general’ (*WP,* 18 [1886]).

But while Nietzsche finds beauty in striving, whether this means that all constitutive features of that striving are themselves beautiful in such a context remains unclear. There is perhaps an intuition that witnessing heroes suffer in epic struggles can be glorious, but that suffering itself can be anything other than negative will be horrifying to many. Nietzsche is aware of this clash of intuitions, and in *The Birth of Tragedy* asks: ‘How can ugliness and discord, the content of the tragic myth, produce aesthetic pleasure?’ (*BT,* 24). He continues:

The content of the tragic myth at first seems to be an epic event that glorifies the struggling hero. But what is the origin of that mysterious feature whereby the hero's suffering, the most painful victories, the most agonising oppositions of motives—in short, the exemplification of the wisdom of Silenus, or to put it in aesthetic terms, ugly and discordant elements—are repeatedly portrayed with such love and in such countless forms, precisely in the most voluptuous and youthful era of people, unless a higher pleasure was perceived in it?

 (*BT,* 24)

There are two ways we might understand the relation between suffering and beautiful wholes that Nietzsche is concerned with in this passage. Both of these make use of the principle of organic unities, but each in the different ways that I presented earlier.

The first way one might understanding suffering's relation to beauty would be to regard suffering as an aesthetic defect or imperfection that nevertheless increases the value of a whole. To give an analogy, it might be that just as a small mole or birth mark may add beauty to a face, suffering is necessary for the greater beauty of heroic striving. On this view, suffering is an enabling condition for a valuable whole that outweighs its badness.

Came rejects this view as unrepresentative of Nietzsche's position. I agree, but for different reasons. Came writes that in order for an aesthetic imperfection to act as an enabling condition for a valuable aesthetic whole, the value of that whole must significantly outweigh the ugliness of the imperfection. However, suffering seems to ‘top trump’ anything it appears with. Came argues:

...suffering seems not only to cancel out but to engulf what ostensibly has positive aesthetic value in the world. Suffering is not like the ugliness of a small patch of colour in a painting that is defeated or cancelled out by the positive aesthetic value of the whole.

 (Came, 2006: 54)

However, this point loses much of its force when the two restrictions I made above are taken into account: my focus is on (1) a *particular* *kind* of suffering: resistance to the will in striving; (2) what Nietzsche takes to be valuable for *particular types* of people: exceptional and potentially 'great' individuals. In the context of heroic struggle, it is less obvious that suffering must ‘engulf’ the value in great achievements.

Nevertheless, I agree with Came that suffering as an enabling condition is not representative of Nietzsche's view. Before defending the alternative, let us gather what has been discussed so far. I have, up to this point, attributed three major claims to Nietzsche:

(a) the endorsement of the principle of organic unities.

(b) the aestheticization of ethics.

(c) the veneration of the heroic over the moral.

But what are the logical relations between them? Nietzsche's ‘moral’ opponents implicitly accept (a) when they hold that compassion is a virtue, which (logically) presupposes suffering, since compassion simply *is* the disposition to want to alleviate suffering. They might also endorse (b).[[22]](#footnote-22) However, neither they nor the Christian would endorse (c). The reason for this is that they do not think suffering is made into a 'good' thing by the compassion. Rather, the suffering is a regrettable enabling condition of a good (the compassion) that is (sometimes) greater than the suffering. This indicates that it is Nietzsche's conception of (b), rather than (a), that is crucial to his endorsement of (c). While defenders of ‘morality’ may temper the margin of the ethical/aesthetic domain in favour the ethical (or 'moral'), Nietzsche does the opposite.

Nietzsche strongly indicates that he understands suffering to be beautiful in this second, more radical, way. On this view, suffering itself is construable as beautiful in certain contexts: when suffering in pursuit of one's noble goal, the extra value to be found in heroic striving comes from suffering *increasing* in value upon entering the whole.

In the same passage from *The Birth of Tragedy* quoted above, Nietzsche draws a revealing analogy between suffering and ‘musical dissonance’ (*BT,* 24) to elucidate this concept. He writes that ‘the pleasure produced by the tragic myth has the same origin as the pleasurable perception of dissonance in music’ (*BT,* 24).[[23]](#footnote-23) In other words, just as we find dissonance in chords and harmonies to be aesthetically pleasing, not as enabling conditions but as contributors, the same is true, Nietzsche thinks, of suffering in the case of the tragic hero. This relationship between pleasure and suffering, Nietzsche later writes, is ‘the great pantheistic sharing of joy and sorrow that sanctifies *and calls good* even the most terrible and questionable qualities of life’ (*WP,* 1050, [1888]; emphasis mine). Similarly: ‘It is the *heroic* spirits who say Yes to themselves in tragic cruelty: they are hard enough to experience suffering as a *pleasure*’ (*WP,* 852, [1887]).

These comments reflect Nietzsche's broader views about the nature of value, for example:

It might even be possible that *what* constitutes the value of those good and honoured things resides precisely in their being artfully related, knotted and crocheted to these wicked, apparently antithetical things, perhaps even in their being essentially identical with them.

 (*BGE,* 2)

This passage is telling. That something can be ‘good and honoured’ and ‘essentially identical’ with negative values suggests Nietzsche rejects invariability about value, instead endorsing the view that something’s values may change across contexts.[[24]](#footnote-24) This lends support to the view that when Nietzsche claims that ‘only the particular is loathsome…all is redeemed and affirmed in the whole’ (*TI,* 'Expeditions,’ 49), bad/ugly parts are ‘redeemed’ in virtue of being *contributors* and not enabling conditions.

It will be useful to compare these important remarks to an aphorism from *The Gay Science*, where Nietzsche again asks how 'ugly' things can be considered beautiful:

*What one should Learn from Artists*—How can we make things beautiful, attractive, and desirable, for us when they are not? And I rather think that in themselves they never are. Here we could learn something from physicians, when for example they dilute what is bitter or add wine and sugar to a mixture—but even more from artists, who are really continually trying to bring off such inventions and feats. Moving away from things until there is a good deal that one no longer sees and there is much that our eye has to add if we are still to see them at all; or seeing things around a corner and as cut out and framed; or to place them so that they partially conceal each other and grant us only glimpses of architectural perspectives; or looking at them through tinted glass or in the light of the sunset; or giving them a surface or skin that is not fully transparent—all this we should learn all from artists, while being wiser than they are in other matters. For with them this subtle power usually comes to an end where art ends and life begins; but we want to be the poets of our life—first of all in the smallest, most everyday matters.

(*GS,* 299; cf. *D*, 210)

There are a number of independent points being made in this passage; three are relevant here:

(1) Things are never beautiful ‘in-themselves’; wholly due to their intrinsic properties.

(2) Rather, they *become so* when considered in relation to other things.

(3) This principle of art should be applied to the ethical domain (aestheticism).

Point (2) is especially pertinent, particularly in light of the earlier analogy Nietzsche gives between the beauty of suffering and musical dissonance. He implies that one ought to ‘withdraw from things’ of negative value in order to see them through a variety of diluting ‘perspective views’ that ‘disguise’ their nature as ugly. Nietzsche's strategy for viewing suffering as beautiful when a part of a valuable whole appears to depend upon a form of illusion or falsification of the phenomena. In other words, suffering's value is altered by giving it a certain perspective in a narrative—that of heroic struggle—that makes it an object of aesthetic pleasure.

A distinction must be drawn at this point between first person suffering—the suffering one *experiences* in one's heroic striving—on the one hand, and third person suffering—the suffering one *perceives* in *others'* heroic striving—on the other. Nietzsche is ambiguous about which form he is concerned with.

Came holds that ‘the general tenor of his descriptions of suffering,’ at least in *The Birth of Tragedy*, ‘suggests that it is the pain of others, rather than one's own pain, that is most problematic’ (Came, 2006: 53). This may be the case, but I wish to remain open to whether Nietzsche's claims concerning the beauty of suffering can be applied to oneself for two reasons. Firstly, while the suffering of others in general *may* be ‘most problematic,’ it is unlikely that Nietzsche—one all too familiar with suffering—thought first person suffering isn't problematic *at all*.

Secondly, Nietzsche does attempt to draw an explicit connection between the perception and experience of heroic activity as beautiful. In a telling passage, he writes:

Only artists, and especially those of the theatre, have given men eyes and ears to see and hear with some pleasure what each man *is* himself, experiences himself, desires himself; only they have taught us to esteem the hero that is concealed in everyday characters; only they have taught us the art of viewing ourselves as heroes—from a distance and, as it were, simplified and transfigured—the art of staging and watching ourselves.

 (*GS,* 78)

Nietzsche here claims that art has the capacity to act as a heuristic device in that it is the means to a narrative from which one can view one’s life ‘from a distance.’[[25]](#footnote-25) By ‘putting ourselves on the stage,’ we treat the way we live as a kind of performance. Because we perceive the beauty of the hero's suffering, we can apply that experience to our own striving to some degree: ‘art furnishes us with eyes and hands and above all the good conscience to be *able* to turn ourselves into such a [aesthetic] phenomenon (*GS,* 107). A similar claim is made earlier in *BT* with respect to creators of art, where Nietzsche writes that the “genius”, in an act of artistic creation, can become a creature that “can turn its eyes around and look at itself” and become “at once subject and object, at once poet, actor and audience” (*BT*, 107).

This, to put it modestly, is an ambitious expectation for someone to achieve. But again, Nietzsche does not expect *just* *anyone* to be able to do so; only those rare and exceptional individuals of ‘strength’:

It is a question of *strength*…*whether* and *where* the judgement ‘beautiful’ is applied…the feeling of power applies the judgement ‘beautiful’ even to things and conditions that the instinct of impotence could only find *hateful* and ‘ugly.’ The nose for what we could still barely deal with if it confronted us in the flesh—as danger, problem, temptation—this determines even our aesthetic Yes.

 (*WP,* 852 [1887])

*6. Conclusion*

I began by claiming that the mere fact that suffering is an essential part of a valuable whole is not sufficient for a radical revaluation of Judeo-Christian values. This is because there are two ways of interpreting the function of parts in valuable wholes: as enabling conditions where value remains constant across contexts, or as contributors where value varies across contexts. I have argued that this distinction is crucial in so far as it juxtaposes a ‘moral’ understanding of the value of suffering with Nietzsche’s. An enabling condition, although an essential part of a compensating good, still allows one to deplore it. Nietzsche, I suggest, instead considers suffering to *contribute* value to a whole, and explicates this view through an aestheticist lens that focuses on an affirmative narrative of heroic striving.

My arguments for this latter claim are limited in important ways. First of all, I have drawn heavily upon claims from the period up to and including *The Gay Science* to support my interpretation. While I see no reason to suggest Nietzsche changed his view, the strongest evidence for the claims I have made reside in this work and preceding works. Secondly, Nietzsche's aestheticism is radical, and when considered broadly as claiming *all* suffering contributes beauty to an agonistic spectacle of greatness, it is implausible. However, whether Nietzsche is actually committed to such a view is controversial, and far from what I have attempted to interpret him as defending here. Rather, his aestheticism considered more narrowly pertaining to a *certain* kind of activity by *certain* people, while still radical, deserves careful consideration.

I remain open as to whether the aestheticism I have outlined can be employed to explain the value of other—non-agonistic and atelic—forms of suffering.[[26]](#footnote-26) If organic unity can be employed here, then a great virtue of the view defended would be its widening of the scope of affirmation: not only could suffering in noble striving be affirmed, but so too could suffering which cannot be identified as a kind of ‘resistance’ in Reginster’s framework. This is significant, since Reginster takes will to power as the overcoming of resistance to be the focal point for avoiding nihilism. This task is beyond the reach of this chapter to pursue, but at the very least, I have explored one way in which Nietzsche is tempting his readers into casting doubt upon the tacit assumption of modernity that suffering is *always* something regrettable.

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1. For a sample of evidence for this claim, see *D*, 174, *GS,* 338; *BGE,* 44; *WP,* 957, [1885]). These claims are more frequent in Nietzsche from 1881 onwards, at least partly due to his amplified hostility towards what he understands as the ‘morality of compassion.’ I shall refer to this family of normative views broadly as ‘morality.’

Instrumentalists may sensibly object here that Nietzsche’s complaint concerns what Christianity values suffering as a means *to*, and not necessarily that suffering has *instrumental* *value*. I agree that Nietzsche’s and Christianity’s ends differ, yet, as I will focus upon on in the first section, Nietzsche rejects the instrumental interpretation as the sole explanation of suffering’s value for different reasons (namely that it cannot account for the value of struggle and overcoming for its own sake). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. On this point I agree with Daniel Came (Came, 2004: 38). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. To complicate matters, Nietzsche often uses ‘suffering’ [Leiden], ‘pain’ [Schmerz], and ‘displeasure’ [Unlust / Unmut] interchangeably. Reginster helpfully distinguishes each term (Reginster, 2006: 113-114). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Leiter does acknowledge numerous forms of suffering Nietzsche mentions, however, explicitly refers to ‘endlessly striving’ (Leiter, 2002: 257) as one of them. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. To retain focus, I am avoiding controversies surrounding whether the will to power motivates *all* human action or whether all *sentient* beings have a will to power. I only have to accept the minimal thesis that *some* human actions follow this model. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. A great virtue of Reginster’s view is his identification of Nietzsche’s extensive debt to Schopenhauer, particularly on this issue. See Reginster, 2006: 133-138. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Debates concerning wholes and parts are a terminological minefield. Some have reserved the term 'contributory value' for a particular way in which something forms a part of a valuable whole. I shall come on to the distinction later, but here I shall continue to use this phrase to avoid confusion. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. It may appear that much of my objection turns upon Reginster’s use of the strong term ‘deplorable’, when perhaps the weaker ‘regrettable’ or ‘lamentable’ could more plausibly be squared with Nietzsche’s radical aims. Nevertheless, these terms still interpret suffering to be something invariably bad, acting at best as an enabling condition. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For a similar line of argument concerning affirmation of wholes rather than constitutive parts, see Simon May (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. I adopt this terminology from Dancy (2003: 629-650). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Janaway has similarly argued that, for Nietzsche, ‘suffering as such has no invariant value across contexts’ (Janaway, 2017). Hence, we agree that suffering acts as a contributor when part of a valuable whole (though he does not use these terms). However, Janaway does not go down the aestheticist route which I explore here. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For a detailed critique of Nehamas' view, see Leiter (1992). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Peter Poellner similarly claims that Nietzsche’s aestheticism ‘is not a doctrine of substantive value, but a view about the grounds of such comparative value judgements, a view according to which these grounds, in both ethical and what are conventionally labelled ‘aesthetic’ contexts, are ultimately located in experiences which are aesthetic’ (Poellner, 2012: 62). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Of course, aestheticism need not be so polarising. There may be middle grounds which seek to simply *strengthen*—not replace—aesthetic concepts in typically ethical domains. Nietzsche endorses the stronger view in as far as he attempts to confront broader existential concerns, which I cannot address here. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. This is arguably Plato’s view. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Nietzsche broadly attributes the opposing view to the Socratic-Platonic conception of the function of aesthetics: what he calls ‘aesthetic Socratism’ (*BT,* 12, cf. *GM,* III, 25). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Similar claims indicative of Nietzsche’s endorsement of the principle can be found in his understanding of the strength, number, and unity of *drives* [*Trieben*] in great individuals (see *BGE,* 200; 230; *TI,* ‘Expeditions,’ 49; *WP,* 966, [1884]). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. ‘Beauty’ and ‘aesthetic experience’ are used broadly here. Briefly, I understand Nietzsche’s account of aesthetic experience to sharply contrast with the Kantian-Schopenhauerian account in two ways: (1) Nietzsche considers it to include an ‘arousal of the will’ (*GM,* III, 6), or ‘intoxication [Rausch]’ (*TI,* ‘Expeditions’ 8), as opposed to ‘disinterested’ contemplation; (2) it has no epistemic value. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. I agree with Acampora that this is partially why Nietzsche takes Homer's worldview to be a life-affirming one: it places value in *this* world and not in one beyond it. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Following from the extract above, an example is ‘glory’ [*kleos*] and its antithesis ‘shame’ or ‘disgrace’ [*aischros*], which also means ‘ugly.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Compare this with Nietzsche’s later ‘aristocratic value equation’: ‘good = noble = powerful = *beautiful* = fortunate = beloved of god’ (*GM,* I, 7; emphasis mine). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Hutcheson, and arguably Hume, may be interpreted as making this move. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. This perhaps isn’t surprising given Nietzsche's views about human tendencies to feel pleasure in another's suffering, be that through (1) cruelty (where that pleasure comes from *inflicting* suffering, either upon another agent, or in the case of the ascetic, upon oneself), (2) schadenfreude (where that pleasure comes from *perceiving* suffering in another). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Nietzsche is suspicious of unconditional value, calling it ‘the worst of tastes’ (*BGE,* 31; cf. 154). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Nietzsche offers the analogy of a mountain and its surrounding landscape to elucidate the importance of this ‘distance.’ The mountain ‘makes the landscape it dominates charming and significant,’ but ‘we climb the mountain and are disappointed’; both ‘have lost their magic’ (*GS,* 15). A potential question here concerns the extent that one can reconcile this distance with such an intimate experience as suffering. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. I have in mind suffering and pain (e.g. the loss of a loved one) which nonetheless may play a functional role in the narrative of that person’s life considered as a whole. It seems plausible that at least some instances of suffering in this way can be endowed with aesthetic value through organic unity. The crucial component would be the agent’s *response* to the suffering. This is perhaps why Nietzsche sometimes refers to the fashioning of one’s character—especially in the face of suffering—as a “discipline [*Zucht*]” (e.g. *BGE*, 225; *TI*, ‘Expeditions’, 49). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)