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## Nietzsche's physiology of aesthetics, and the aesthetics of physiology

### Abstract

*Nietzsche announces his intentions to publish a "physiology of aesthetics", namely a naturalistic explanation for how aesthetic judgements are grounded in the physiology of both the one experiencing the work, and the creator of it. But as well as the physiological reduction of aesthetic judgements, Nietzsche in many places across his oeuvre frames the apparatus of physiology, especially the prescriptive dimension of self-cultivation, in terms amenable to being treated as 'aesthetic'. The first section will mount a (re-) defense of the use of aestheticized language for discussing Nietzschean self-cultivation. The second section demonstrates an aesthetic evaluation of capacities that make possible the acquisition and removal of instinctual components, ultimately arguing for Nietzsche's qualified indeterminism regarding the capacity for self-cultivation. The third section will assess the presence of another aesthetic measure, this time in terms of envisaging one's psychophysiology by reference to an external spectacle. The final section discusses metaethical questions stemming from Nietzsche's prescriptive language regarding the aestheticization of our physiology.*

### Keywords

*Nietzsche, Aesthetics, Physiology*

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## Introduction

At Section 8 in the Third Treatise of *On the genealogy of morality*, Nietzsche announces his future intentions to publish work on what he calls a “physiology of aesthetics”<sup>1</sup>. Not averse to left-field references throughout his works, he offers this comment at the end of what seems like a strange, ill-fitting set of detouring discussions about aesthetics, apparently tangential to the topics that eventually occupy the overwhelming thrust of this Third Treatise; namely, the will to truth and its relation to the ascetic ideal.

Nietzsche presumably means by this phrase in this stage of his works a form of naturalistic explanation for the behavior and sentiments that pertain to aesthetic experiences. This would also involve explaining how judgements are grounded in the physiology of both the one experiencing (or ‘interpreting’) the work, and the intention of its creator<sup>2</sup>. In this, there is an interesting parallel between aesthetic judgements, and how Nietzsche conceives of the status of evaluative judgements. The holding of a judgement shows how that judgement is derived from the kind or type of human you are. One’s inner motivational apparatus is that which causally disposes individuals to value in a certain sort of way. So too with aesthetic

<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche repeatedly alludes to a projected “physiology of art” in the notes he makes in his last two productive years (e.g. KGW VIII 3/305, VIII 3/312, VIII 3/27). However, Moore (2002) claims, in an otherwise wonderfully sophisticated exercise in intellectual history, that Nietzsche’s earlier notes also speak of the possibility of a ‘physiology of aesthetics’ in a note written around the period of the *Birth of tragedy*. I have checked the *Kritische Gesamtausgabe* and I have not been able to find this reference, either following the specific citation offered by Moore (2002: 115 cites KGW III 5/1; cf. the same note as NF-1870 5[1] in the *Nachlass* Fragments on the *Nietzsche Source’s* online version of the eKGWB). Nor have I been able to locate it in the notes of this period, more widely. In 1871 however, Nietzsche writes, “Aesthetics only has a meaning in natural science: like the Apollonian and Dionysian” (NF-1871 16[6]). A year or so later he writes, “the higher physiology will freely understand the artistic forces in our development, indeed not only in that of man but in the animal: it will say that the artistic also begins in the organic” (NF-1872, 19[50]). Then there is a notable absence of such talk for some 15 or 16 years. Indeed, there is a considerable gap of *any* talk of ‘physiology’ by Nietzsche between 1873 and 1885 (with some small, minor exceptions, including two in *Dawn*).

<sup>2</sup> Again, as Moore (2002: 111-3) helpfully outlines, Nietzsche here draws degrees of inspiration from Hippolyte Taine’s *Philosophie de l’art* (1865), Ernst Haeckel, and (absent the Kantian baggage) Schiller. Cf. Rampley 1993 for an early article on how Nietzsche’s notion of art as applied physiology is used to counter Kantian formalism in aesthetics.

judgements: you feel this way about some aesthetic property (or lack thereof) because of your constitution<sup>3</sup>.

But the relationship between physiology and aesthetics is not just a one-way street. As well as the physiological reduction of aesthetic judgements, Nietzsche in many places across his oeuvre frames the apparatus of physiology, especially the prescriptive dimension of (what in the scholarship is commonly referred to as the practice of) self-cultivation, in terms amenable to being treated as 'aesthetic'. So, the two-way street I am proposing would work like this. Aesthetic judgements, which Nietzsche thinks are deeply rooted in psycho-physiology, are best described in terms of the apparatus of the individual's constitution (physiology of aesthetics); *just as* dispositions towards valuing, which Nietzsche thinks are also deeply rooted in the individual's psycho-physiology (or 'character'), are always or often best described in terms of aesthetic properties or qualities (an aesthetics of physiology)<sup>4</sup>.

In this paper I will discuss the latter of these two. The first section will mount a (re-)defense of the reading that there is merit in thinking of Nietzschean self-cultivation in decidedly aestheticized language. The paper will go on in the second section to discuss some important texts of Nietzsche's which have been no strangers to prior analyses, but which have tended to receive less attention for the aesthetic tropes that are employed in them, or in proximity to them. This section aims to demonstrate an aesthetic evaluation of capacities that Nietzsche thinks make possible the acquisition and removal of instinctual components, ultimately arguing for Nietzsche's qualified indeterminism regarding the capacity for self-cultivation. The third section will assess the presence of another aesthetic measure in the mature Nietzsche, this time in terms of envisaging one's psycho-physiology by reference to an external spectacle, with particular reference to *GM II*, and important passages from *Beyond good and evil*. The final section briefly discusses some metaethical

<sup>3</sup> I leave aside the question here of how one might self-deceptively extol a value, while latently possessing contrary evaluative commitments, for another paper.

<sup>4</sup> I find it strange that Constâncio (2019: 199), discussing the 'aesthetic' character of affective dispositions, claims that "they are anything but scientific truths", given that Nietzsche frames affects as embodied, ergo amenable to physiological study. Constâncio (2019: 119-203) is much better when discussing the link between affects and perspectivism, however.

questions that stem from Nietzsche's claims about the aestheticization of our physiology.

Others have sophisticatedly commented on the language of health and sickness, weakness and strength as evaluative criteria for Nietzsche's prescriptive project (strong examples include Huddleston 2017; Lambert 2023; Neuhouser 2014). Here I wish to shed similar light on the language of aestheticization. This topic has hitherto largely been conducted in the context of Nietzsche's earlier work on cultural rejuvenation. In this paper here, I will comment on that work in part, but the overwhelming focus of the paper is more to do with the dynamics of psycho-physiology in the mature period from *GS* onwards.

### 1. *(Re-)Defending a Nietzschean aesthetics of character*

As soon as one acknowledges both the overlap, and the structural similarity between aesthetic dispositions and evaluative dispositions, it seems fair game to view the project of self-cultivation at least partly through an aesthetic prism, as having explanatory power. Some have however questioned the merit of thinking of cultivating a set of ideals in the Nietzschean sense as a particularly aesthetic project. Edward Harcourt is the most succinct of these:

We do not need the term 'aesthetic' in order to label a set of ideals simply insofar as they do not belong to morality: if the 'aesthetic' label is to justify itself, it needs to do more work than that [...] tempting as it is to reach for the phrase 'aesthetic' in connection with Nietzsche, it is poorly motivated as a description of what is distinctive about his ideals of character. (Harcourt 2011: 265)

This cuts against all of Nietzsche's own explicit attempts to offer his own distinctive usage of such labels in just these terms. So, we must treat the criticism closely. Now, it would be beneficial to illustrate that there are two ways of thinking of the Nietzschean project as being an 'aesthetic' one: one is to think of character as possible to be construed 'aesthetically'; the other is to thinking of *valuing*, or certain categories of values, as being best thought of as aesthetic. While these often run in tandem for Nietzsche, they are separable. Nietzsche's talk of attempting to be "poets of our lives" seems a kind of prerequisite for being attuned in the right

sort (or at least a *better* sort) of way, in a manner which seems to possess some aesthetic quality<sup>5</sup>.

It is in this vein that Harcourt mistakenly interprets the Nietzschean positive ideal in question, which he takes to be unfruitfully deemed an 'aesthetic' ideal, by drawing on the famous passage at *GS* § 290, and claiming the individuality and self-love under discussion there to be one of self-satisfaction. He criticizes Janaway for describing *GS* § 290 as "aesthetic or quasi-aesthetic" (Janaway 2007: 254; cited on Harcourt 2011: 277). But Harcourt misinterprets this passage, by conflating the shaping into a work of art, *with* the self-satisfaction. That self-satisfaction is *not the deeper ideal* in discussion in that passage. The point Nietzsche makes there is that the one thing needful to all people is to attain self-satisfaction. All *need* self-satisfaction<sup>6</sup>. But *giving style to one's character* is explicitly designated as the rarer capacity, and the one that Nietzsche takes it as appropriate to construe as an 'art', in that passage.

There remains the question of, though, of whether 'character' is appropriate to be discussed in terms of its aesthetic qualities, or potential. As an aside, it is notable to mention that an entire sub-category of aesthetics, the aesthetics of everydayness, has sprung as a viable enterprise of looking past the traditional relations of spectatorship of beautiful things, to encapsulate far broader a scope of objects in the world that merit descriptions or evaluations in aestheticized terminology<sup>7</sup>. But the key point here is that for Nietzsche, 'aesthetic' experience is precisely that which originates in the physiological constitution of the individual. Objects we can envisage being disposed towards are at least often evaluated by means of an aesthetically loaded phenomenology.

This is not the same as, say, the relativistic hubris of proclaiming that what counts as art is "what I say it is". Rather, Nietzsche is documenting an exercise in working out the objects which we are inclined to view as appropriate objects of aesthetic experience. And for him, when discussing certain types of individual, to speak of their character in such ways is appropriate. The word 'appropriate' relies on a certain standard by which

<sup>5</sup> This is partly what's going on in Nietzsche's injunction that we ought to think differently in order to later on feel differently, at *D* 103.

<sup>6</sup> This echoes the claims made in *GM* III about the willing to nothingness as a necessary provision of meaning, in contrast with the prospect of not willing at all.

<sup>7</sup> Here it is notable that Arthur Danto is as an important figure in influencing the aesthetics of the everyday as he was in the early days of Nietzsche scholarship.

we can judge the experience of such objects. While I will return to this very shortly below, it would do well to discuss another facet of Harcourt's critique, in talking about character as an aesthetic phenomenon. He criticizes how having a certain form of aesthetic ideal of character would be a character defect (Harcourt 2011: 272-6). Using character examples of Austen's *Emma*, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, and Cervantes' *Don Quixote* as candidates, the point here is that there is something deeply problematic with trying to act or conduct oneself in the business of living in the world in such a way as to emulate some literary or aesthetic model. It is curious that Harcourt in one breath recognizes that the kind of emulation present in such candidates is not the only way to think of an aesthetics of character, then in the next breath uses just this kind as evidence against Nietzsche in such a way that seems to exclude the earlier caveat. The charge being made is that to 'mold by fiction' one's character is a defective endeavour – likely in terms of its morality, its evaluative outlook, and its practical utility.

In reply to this point it is very easy to simply say that given Nietzsche's works being replete with the commitment to truth and honesty about one's internal constitution, the kind of 'aesthetic' ideal of character criticized by Harcourt here is simply not Nietzsche's. The kind of self-deception that his candidate literary examples are engaged in are the kind that Nietzsche excludes and often explicitly opposes in his own model. Now, Nietzsche doesn't himself mention *Emma*, or Conrad's *Lord Jim* (the latter is Harcourt's own most discussed example). But he does discuss 'Bovarysme', and *Don Quixote* – and he does so in support of the claim here that he rejects *this* kind of (self-deceived) emulation of the literary or aesthetic. He writes of the former, in the context of critiquing Wagner:

Would you believe that as soon as you strip them of her heroic skin, every single Wagnerian heroine becomes pretty much indistinguishable from *Madame Bovary*! (*The case of Wagner* § 9)

Nietzsche identifies this likeness as a symptom of the modern decadence he accuses Wagner of being a strong example of. In *Human all-too-human*, in an aphorism prefiguring his opposition to Paul Rée as established through his own conception of the practice of genealogy in *GM* II 12, Nietzsche writes:

The Christian who compares his nature to God is like *Don Quixote*, who underestimates his own bravery because he is preoccupied with the miraculous deeds of

heroes out of chivalric novels; in both cases, the standard of measure being used belongs to the realm of fable. (*HH* § 133)

It is clear that the notion of the aesthetic disposition Nietzsche is working with, in offering his positive ideal that would employ or embody it, has room for rejecting the kinds of models that Harcourt considers defective. In other words, Nietzsche escapes the charge that his notion of 'aesthetic' character makes implausible appeals to the fancies of fiction, within this disposition. Harcourt's conflation between the two is an unfair one, as regards Nietzsche.

This essay is not the place to offer any systematic interpretation of the role of Nietzsche's much-fraught conception of perspectivism. However, there are reasons to think that the kind of shifting through perspectives, which Nietzsche gives the injunction for in *BGE* § 210-1, gives the would-be 'experimenter' different reasons, or affectively derived motives, for becoming attuned to the right or at least 'better' sort of reevaluation. This would mean that Nietzsche's purported aestheticization of character needn't rely on the kind of fictional models which Harcourt thinks "on the whole militate against realistic self-assessment" (Harcourt 2011: 274). Nor need it rely on any notion of "beautiful soul" of the kind Nietzsche himself scoffs at in *Ecce Homo* ('Why I am a Destiny' §4). Indeed, there, Nietzsche accuses such attempts to foster and encourage such pseudo-'beautiful souls' for "robbing existence of its *great* character", which we have reason to read in a similarly aestheticized way, and for that reading to be evaluatively meaningful. Harcourt goes on to just *assert* that aestheticist readings of Nietzschean self-creation, from Nehamas onwards, which proffer some capacity to shape our characters, are guilty of bovarysme, and of employing "false ideals" (Harcourt 2011: 276). Now, there is an important interpretive question of what it would be that *does* the shaping: whether it be an act of self-consciousness, some kind of 'master' drive, drives qua holistic structure, or some emergent soul<sup>8</sup>. But this is a question best left for another day. All that needs to be said is that it seems weird to think with Harcourt that enacting the 'shaping' of any pre-existing psychological economy of any kind, that might amount to a

<sup>8</sup> As examples, see, respectively, Gardner 2009; Gemes 2008, 2019; Elliott 2021; Clark, Dudrick 2012, 2015. A largely excellent paper by Parmer (2017: 416-7), seems to support the Gemes line that it is a drive assuming the function of 'master drive' doing the legwork of a form of sublimation, here However, towards the end of the paper, Parmer (2017: 426) situates this drive (and the ones it is shaping) within "the same consciousness", which creates an ambiguity.

prescriptive redirection, is somehow a 'false ideal', rather than something aspirational. Nietzsche himself places concrete limitations on the scope of any such redirecting exercise (*BGE* §231). This is a prescriptive project grounded in realism and actually, with respect to most people, is rather modest in its scope (pace Nietzsche's elitism)<sup>9</sup>. And once we concede that not all that 'delights the eye' need to so morally, and while we also admit that we need some evaluative framework to assess and potentially establish an apparatus around such cases, it is difficult to think of a better candidate than one of an aesthetic nature.

## 2. Nietzsche's aestheticization of self-cultivation

Emphasis on self-cultivation, and the evaluative terms of description being aesthetic ones, is particularly pronounced in Book Four of *The gay science*. These texts are familiar to those acquainted with Nietzsche scholarship, to be sure: some of them have already been discussed in the previous section. But they have received less attention for the aesthetic tropes that are employed in them, or that are related to their message, in Nietzsche's descriptions of self-cultivation<sup>10</sup>.

Opening Book Four is an aphorism titled the *Sanctus Januarius*, the New Year proclaiming Nietzsche's wish for the justification of (his own) life. The justificatory terms offered are as much aesthetic judgements as they are epistemic ones: Nietzsche speaks of "reason, warranty and sweetness".

The remainder of the aphorism is as follows:

I want to learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things; then I shall be one of those who make things beautiful. *Amor fati*: let that be my love henceforth! I do not want to wage war against what is ugly. I do not want to

<sup>9</sup> Harcourt (2011: 278) does refine this above view of his somewhat, by taking Ridley and Nehamas to be wrong about the dynamics of self-cultivation. But there is no reason that is so from the passage he cites, namely *BGE* § 200, with its discussion of inner conflict as being possible to be viewed as a stimulant and goad to life, which can't equally be viewed as an aesthetic one. Some conception of harmony might be reconcilable with Nietzsche's claims about the powerful conflicts between competing, life-stimulating drives, provided we locate it in this harmony being in the 'stimulant' to life: like a sense of joy in the chaos. Notable is that Harcourt says that conflicting drives should not be disowned or denied. See Elliott (2020) for an important caveat on this wider issue in Nietzsche's self-creation.

<sup>10</sup> Two exceptions to this are the magisterial Nehamas 1985, and Ridley 1998.



accuse; I do not even want to accuse those who accuse. *Looking away* shall be my only negation. And all in all and on the whole: some day I wish to be only a Yes-sayer. (*GS* § 276)

Nietzsche's injunction for beauty in necessity in this passage is offered up such that *amor fati* is framed as a kind of aestheticized acceptance. From this it leads to be able to beautify things oneself, as a means of affirming their totality. The other prong of this aesthetic acceptance, however, is what might be read as either a kind of toleration, or a kind of ignorance, of that which 'uglifies' life. But given the urge to see what is necessary as beautiful, the passage *prima facie* leads us to think that that which remains ugly and possesses these 'uglifying' qualities are either those things which are not necessary (they are contingent), or that we remain unable to see such necessary things as beautiful. The following suggestion Nietzsche makes to himself as the 'only negation' of 'looking away' does not initially help the issue, since the ambiguity here could be again that of toleration of the ugly, or ignorance of it in the aim of dissolving or overcoming it. The suggestion implicit in the latter is that one day, after enough looking away as the negation, one could eventually have said 'Yes' to all things. But does this meaning all things that remain, after such negations? Or is it a process of long-term practice to become more susceptible to the beauty in what is necessary? Or is it a bit of both? I will ultimately argue it is a bit of both. We will hopefully see this position take form in the course of this paper.

Some further context of what this 'looking away' might amount to is provided a few aphorisms later in Book Four. As we have seen in Section 1, *GS* § 290 offers a contrast of, on the one hand, a "great and rare art" of "giv[ing] style to one's character", and on the other the attainment of a certain kind of self-satisfaction as "the one thing needful" to all humans, including those 'weaker' types who are unable for the former task. Two elements are central to the content of this passage. *The first element* is the aesthetic descriptions of the process of this style-giving. It is identified as a practical exercise, that is available to those who possess enough introspective capacity as to be able to "survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature". From this capacity comes the possibility of the exercises of 'fitting' these strengths and weaknesses "into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye". Note here, as in *GS* § 276, the use of an aesthetic justification alongside an epistemic or rational justification.

Nietzsche continues:

In the end [...] it becomes evident how the constraint of a single taste governed and formed everything large and small. Whether this taste was good or bad is less important than one might suppose, if only it was a single taste!

There are further metaethical questions to ask about the status and justification of this notion of a single taste, but what is important here is the emphasis on the ability of such characters who are able to redirect nature into being stylized, namely as those natural aspects that have been “conquered” and put to service.

This leads to the *second element* central to this passage, namely the often-overlooked discussion of acquisition and removal as the tools necessary for changing one's character. Nietzsche scholarship broadly has rightfully placed emphasis on the rhetoric of incorporation and refinement in his philosophical psychology, and any self-cultivatory promise it might possess in practice. But *GS* § 290 is instructive in why we shouldn't make this rhetoric too exclusive. Integral to Nietzsche's description of this practice is the relationship between terms with a deep philosophical lineage of their own, namely first and second natures. Nietzsche writes, “Here a large mass of second nature has been added; there a piece of first nature has been removed – both times through long practice and daily work at it...”. The “first nature” here is referring to the endowment of instinctual characteristics that an individual possesses, as part of their psycho-physiological make-up. Part of this make up is no doubt deeply determined, and likely impossible to get rid of – this is the thrust of the “spiritual granite” that Nietzsche speaks of as being at the bedrock of each human, in the later text of *BGE* § 231 (discussed in Section 1 of this paper). But the suggestion that some of this can be removed is indicative that not all of this first nature is of this same deep and ineradicable quality. Indeed, though part of human instinctual life would likely be impossible to remove, Nietzsche sets a precedent in an earlier text for assuming that these tropes of first and second nature refer to the instincts. In *On the uses and disadvantages of history for life*, he speaks of combatting “our inborn heritage” with “a new habit, a new instinct, a second nature, so that our first nature withers away” (*HL* § 3). In other words, just as one can remove facets of instinctual life, those with the strong enough predisposition for this “great and rare art” (*GS* § 290) can acquire and habituate new aspects of that instinctual life. This can occur to such an extent, that this second nature instinctual disposition can become “victorious” and therefore come to reside as a part of one's first nature, as he says several lines later in *HL* § 3. This second nature replaces or supplants the

removed first nature, to constitute part of the next “natural endowment”, as how one is primally disposed to orient themselves and act accordingly<sup>11</sup>.

The technique identified as that “style-giving” one here is habituation, as referenced in the “long practice and daily work” required to make this technique successful. It is because of this that, though there is no reason to argue against what Riccardi has recently called “an astounding convergence among Nietzsche scholars towards the claim that Nietzschean drives are some sort of behavioural dispositions”, we should exercise some caveats in his defining Nietzschean drives as “stable elements of one’s psychological make-up” (Riccardi 2021: 22). This is related to Riccardi’s acceptance of a definition of drives as possessing the feature of being “an organic motivation rather than something environmental” (Riccardi 2021: 28). However, rather than operate with a strict dichotomy between organic and environmental, Nietzsche’s texts as cited above give us reason to think there is an active interplay, between psycho-physiology and a kind of feedback loop relationship with the environment. This could occur by modes of socialization, and the ways humans internalize responses to the imposition of moral commitments<sup>12</sup>. Or it can be done as in *GS* § 290, with the potential to reconfigure one’s arrangement of drives in response to the external demands of the circumstances one finds themselves in.

This dimension of Nietzsche’s philosophical psychology is reminiscent of an insight from Aristotle, a figure curiously absent from discussion in the mature Nietzsche’s works. Aristotle’s psychological model of internal and external principles attempts to explain how the acquisition of certain externalities can be meaningfully internalized in relation to the cultivation of personal virtue. This explanation maps surprisingly well onto how Nietzsche thinks of the use of habit for the removal of some instinctual dispositions, and the acquisition and refinement of others. The ability to discern one’s strengths and weaknesses, and what would count as fitting them into an imposed ‘artistic’ plan for one’s character, itself bears on whether we might come to concretize a particular evaluative orientation, by acting in accordance with it. We might debate whether this capacity in Nietzsche is similar to the kind of rationality towards deliberation that’s involved in the *phronesis* at the heart of Aristotle’s model. But whatever

<sup>11</sup> I am here adding another dimension to claims made in Elliott 2020, esp. pp. 68-70. Cf. also *D* § 109, § 119, and § 560.

<sup>12</sup> See Section 3 below.

the outcome of that debate, Nietzsche's texts seem to have room for habituation's capacity to changes one's psycho-physiological (thereby evaluative) orientation<sup>13</sup>.

This has a precedent in the aesthetic appraisal of character-formation in *GS* § 290. Nietzsche mixes his referents when he refers to those capable of this technique as possessing "strong and domineering natures". He writes, "even when they have to build palaces and sovereign gardens they demur at giving nature freedom" (*GS* § 290). In other words, natural psychological endowments are unlikely to have free rein, and the shaping of the nature that possesses those endowments is that exercise which Nietzsche considers 'style-providing'. All this is done while, ironically, acknowledging the inherent constraints of such style; otherwise *there wouldn't be anything to style*. It is no paradox to acknowledge necessity in places, but also speak of the capacity for freedom to rein in what were (first-) natural inclinations, in others. In calling this a constraint of style, it is not the necessity of our natural endowments which are the constraint. The development of one's "single taste" is to engage in these practical techniques of refinement and incorporation; but also, where appropriate, enact the concealment, acquisition and removal of aspects of our instinctual life.

Nietzsche reaffirms the aestheticization of our psycho-physiology in *GS* § 299. Titled *What one should learn from artists*, the aphorism opens with the problem of how we might "make things beautiful, attractive, and desirable for us when they are not?", suggesting that the techniques we employ are not the work of art as such, but rather viewing life accordingly – the injunction is to become "poets of our life". Those who are "the poet[s] who kee[p] creating" their lives, Nietzsche describes two aphorisms later as being capable of both contemplation and of creativity (*GS* § 301). Identifying with this type himself, Nietzsche claims that he and they can "continually fashion" the "eternally growing world of valuations, colors, accents, perspectives, scales, affirmations, and negations" (*GS* § 301). The deliberate mixing of familiar (what we might call 'existential') tropes of valuation, perspective, affirmation and negation, with aesthetic devices (colors, accents, scales) again illustrates the proximity of these devices for the project under discussion in these passages.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *GS* § 295, where Nietzsche speaks of habits and the life devoid of habits, and why brief habits are better, since the perpetuation of "long habits" mean that a second nature for it has not been successfully acquired.

### 3. *The aestheticization of self-cruelty, with reference to external spectacle*

Although the previous section puts its own interpretive mint on an important issue in Nietzsche's works, it does so on well-trodden ground. Nietzsche and the capacity for self-cultivation has duly received a lot of scholarly attention. There is however, another facet of a potential "aesthetics of physiology", far less discussed, which does not in the first instance amount to some process of internal reconfiguration. Rather, it involves a case of external evaluation of a particular aesthetic kind, as a form of *response*, to an internal reconfiguration. And it is one which we must project in order to make sense of a current predicament.

The best illustrative case of this phenomenon with reference to psycho-physiology is replete in passages across *GM II*. The structure of the Second Treatise is commonly taken to offer a genealogical description of the inception and eventual psychological predominance of internalized guilt, or moralized "bad conscience". This I take to be correct. However, one conclusion usually drawn from this is that by providing this exercise in genealogy, Nietzsche gives certain of his readers the prescriptive tools for casting off, or doing away with all forms of guilt. The common claim held by practically nearly every other Nietzsche scholar writing on this issue is that Nietzsche views guilt as being a contingent reactive attitude<sup>14</sup>. As such, it is concluded that for Nietzsche, guilt can be dispensed with (possible), and that it should be dispensed with (desirable). It is my contention that this conclusion is erroneous. A close reading of the Second Essay of *GM*, particularly its final sections which discuss the ramifications of bad conscience, shows why this is the case. This is not only because Nietzsche views the disposition to experience guilt-involving feelings as being to some extent psycho-physiologically indelible, resulting from the mnemonic internalization of the demands of Christian morality upon individuals. He also speculatively offers positive claims about the possibility and desirability of a transfigured kind of personal guilt.

The consequences of this genealogical exercise in *GM II*, and any future promise it holds, is something I cannot cover in the detail it deserves here. What is relevant for the purposes of the aesthetics of physiology is how Nietzsche ties this process to the need for "a divine audience [...] to appreciate the spectacle" (*GM II* § 16). The internalization process here

<sup>14</sup> The two exceptions that I know of are Zamoscz (2011) and Snelson (2023), but for very different reasons to my own. I do not have the space to elucidate these reasons as they are too tangential to the themes of this paper.

has led to the 'evolution' of what "will later be called [man's] soul" (*GM II § 16*). The emergence of this in one's psycho-physiology provides the potential to lead to a "great promise", by means of the kind of outcomes that were engendered through the entire process. Nietzsche finishes this important aphorism with the claim that this spectacle requires such witnesses, namely the imagining of a regulative, somewhat numinous aesthetic perspective, for any kind of sense to be made of the two millennia-long process of reconfiguration, which *GM II* has been attempting to document.

The passages from *GM II § 19* to *§ 25* demonstrate that something of the moralization involved in bad conscience has become a necessary one. This, Nietzsche's rhetoric suggests, is enough to drive us to despair, given the seeming impasse of the inability to freely exercise our economy of drives and affects. But the requisite strength for a "counter-ideal" is alluded to in the penultimate section of *GM II*. In *§ 24*, despite the necessity of moralized bad conscience, Nietzsche claims that there is a kind of contingency available, regarding the objects to which that bad conscience is inclined, if differently utilized. These objects are the ones which Nietzsche claims are the products of those "unnatural inclinations", from which bad conscience in social and moralized forms first arose – an ironic turning against on them the very weapon they engendered, namely, the meta-affective apparatus which guilt, responsibility, and self-cruelty to the point of self-mastery are constituents of. Nietzsche is thoroughly speculative about this promise, owing to the strength he claims will be needed to enact it (*GM II § 24*). He also locates the ends to which it might lead as being squarely in the future (*GM II § 16, § 24, § 25*).

But, why is such an imagining of a divine audience needed, as witness to this spectacle? Because Nietzsche, rejecting all teleology, is in the business of exposing the ironies that manifest consequently from various processes, when scrutinized through genealogical practice. The aesthetic projection that Nietzsche recommends we engage in is so as to think of our own contribution to human instinctual life in terms of those longer-term, instrumentally beneficial outcomes, that likely will arise from those very things which presently contribute to our instinctual malaise – such as moralized bad conscience. But Nietzsche is not advocating wishful thinking in these passages. They (speculatively) recommend what we ought to be aiming towards, in order to concretely overcome the

“unnatural” inclinations which our moralized bad conscience presently remains wedded to<sup>15</sup>.

Now, reading all this, about a kind of aesthetic evaluation we must *project* in order to make sense of a current predicament in another context, it seems *prima facie* plausible to view it as alike to the kind of story that, for example, the adherents to Christian theodicy, such as the slaves of *GM I*, could tell themselves. But what separates Nietzsche's use of such aesthetic tropes in a positive manner are two key points. The first is that when used positively, Nietzsche takes such tropes to be built upon truth and honesty, rather than on delusion or wish-thinking. The second is that Nietzsche takes the process underlying such tropes to be grounds for genuine empowerment, rather than the *faux*-empowerment that is felt (but not ultimately secured by individuals) when employing coping mechanisms of the sort present in the ‘slave revolt in morals’ in *GM I*<sup>16</sup>.

But what of the apparent “divinity” of the spectacle, that Nietzsche encourages us to envisage? I think Nietzsche is just using an example, like ice and high mountains, with a numinous quality, that aims to enforce some sense of critical detachment from our everyday standpoint. As I read back the draft of this paper, I sit on the seventh floor of the Senate House Library in the heart of Central London. If I turn my head, I have a majestic view, overlooking the architecture and verdant parks and gardens of Bloomsbury. This view is peppered with individuals trudging to offices, coffee shops, seminar rooms, and hotels. Twenty minutes ago, I was one of those trudging, and would have been seen from this view. So, I have occupied both standpoints, without any kind of contradiction in the perspectives they've respectively offered. However, with the view from the seventh floor, I have a *surveyable perspective* of a wider phenomenon, to paraphrase a trope from the later Wittgenstein. This perspective is one that both lifts oneself partly outside, temporarily transcendent, without being at the expense of the immanent.

Nietzsche proffers a regulative ideal in quite this way, as a tool with practical utility, to actualize the overcoming of the Judeo-Christian apparatus which he contends we remain mired with. This overcoming, Nietzsche contends, is made possible through the very structural effects of that apparatus which has been imposed on us. Nietzsche's speculations

<sup>15</sup> Cf. also *TI*, ‘Morality’ § 3, where Nietzsche discusses the spiritualization of enmity, including the value of applying this to “the enemy within”.

<sup>16</sup> These two points both reinforce, again, why Harcourt's reading of the aesthetics of character in Nietzsche as being tied to a mast of fictional ideals is a misguided one.

in *GM* II § 24 also concern the acquisition of virtue, as in the passages from *GS* discussed above in Section 2. Here it does so by means of our affective dispositions picking out better, that is to say, more appropriate, targets.

This externalizing does not violate the fundamental claims made regarding the physiological foundation of aesthetics made in the Introduction and Section 1 of this paper. On the contrary, it is with reference to the irrevocable effects on our physiology that such an aestheticized form of regulative ideal can be meaningfully envisaged. This, plus the deeper claim that it is only a condition of possibility for us to be able to envisage such an ideal in this way at all, that gives a further element to Nietzsche's claims that all aesthetic judgements are fundamentally physiological. This second form of an aesthetics of physiology, one which makes the demand on us to think of an external form of aesthetic valuation wherein we envisage a spectacle of a process, has its roots in talk in *The birth of tragedy* of justifying life as if it were an aesthetic phenomenon. What gives Nietzsche's prescriptive speculations of this kind special weight where they appear in the Second Treatise of the *Genealogy*, however, is the aestheticization of self-cruelty and suffering<sup>17</sup>. It is this sense of aestheticization which distinguishes it from the kind that, for example, identifies with the beauty of a noble character as its being attractive to its possessor. These passages in *GM* II ask us to envisage being aesthetically stimulated by a spectacle of something which is presently *unpleasant* or *unattractive* to us.

In short, Nietzsche sees great existential value in certain forms of self-cruelty. By way of contrast, Nietzsche's critique of Christianity isn't on the grounds of how it makes life harder for all people. Indeed, we could more plausibly argue that Christianity makes life much easier, despite the instinctual sacrifices it demands of some of us, with differing intensity. There's a lot of evidence to suggest that the project Nietzsche would encourage some to undertake would be in an important sense much harder than the demands put upon them by the constraints of Christian morality. As seen above in the discussion of *GS* § 290, self-satisfaction is viewed by him as common coin. Nietzsche, in line with the heritage from Baumgarten, is positing a means through which something in itself ugly can be represented so as to possess a kind of aesthetic potency. Spectacle, then, is a means of an external form of aestheticization, which ensures that one

<sup>17</sup> Cf. also *BGE* § 218 for the claim that the instincts and the dissection of the self would be a spectacle fit for "divine malice".



can endure what would be the ugliness of such cruelty, were it viewed in isolation. In other words, envisaging the spectacle, something that doesn't have an internal or individual pleasantness for us, can be viewed in such a way that justifies the self-cruelty. Nietzsche is speculative as to what those pay-offs of this self-cruelty ultimately amount to<sup>18</sup>.

There are two sides of the coin to self-cruelty. Nietzsche's blistering analysis at *BGE* § 55 documents what he calls the three main stages of "religious cruelty", wherein the final act of self-cruelty is the sacrifice of God Himself for "the sake of nothingness". A lot of *GM* II, especially § 20 and § 21, offer further text on this apparent defeatist tone. But there are also important ways in which the passages of *GM* II demonstrate the other, more promising side of that coin. Self-cruelty can facilitate spectacular consequences, even under the same (presently nihilistic) conditions of possibility for valuation. The regulative ideal of the spectacle is to imagine looking at the physiological emergence or advent of the "new philosophers" or (I would argue) "sovereign individuals", that Nietzsche himself claims to see coming. All this, even though, to use metaphors present early on in *GM* II, this be a 'late' fruit's arrival, on a hitherto deeply *un-ripe* and inhospitable tree.

#### 4. *The metaethics of aestheticization*

There remains two important metaethical questions stemming from the analysis provided here. The first is about the desirability about the single taste of *GS* § 290, as discussed in Section 1. Is the valuable quality located in diverse types, and type-tastes? Or is it the *kind* of taste, that the single taste amounts to? Even with the helpful qualification of giving style to one's character on one hand, and seeking self-satisfaction on the other, it remains unclear what the 'style' in question really amounts to in terms of what Nietzsche finds valuable in it. To use a case-study: is the reaction-formation monomania of Socratic reason an instance of a 'single taste'? Or is it an example of lacking in Nietzschean taste, altogether<sup>19</sup>?

The second metaethical question concerns from where the value of the self-cruelty is derived. Nietzsche certainly intimates at a criterion of value that such imposed hardship is put in service of. At some points, he also seems

<sup>18</sup> I can't discuss the substance to be gleaned from these speculations in detail here, but I will in a further, future paper. See Elliott (forthcoming).

<sup>19</sup> A strong anti-realist reading of Nietzsche on taste is Drapela (2020).

to allude to overarching social, historical, or cultural frameworks for understanding the reasons for why someone should be cruel to oneself, in a way that might make it genuinely valuable for that person. But the question remains of whether from the metaethical standpoint, this self-cruelty would be valuable for e.g. me, or whether it could possess any genuinely grounded sense of value. *GM II* seems to suggest that the use of the spectacle is to demonstrate self-cruelty in the service of something greater than oneself. Even if this just amounts to an interpersonal, phenomenological sense of value without any metaphysical objectivity beyond that, it would still mean that the idiosyncrasy of an individual cannot be the exclusive measure of the value, in play.

What I think gives the interpretive edge, with regards to the second metaethical question, is from *Beyond good and evil*. Nietzsche, with his historian's cap on, makes the claim at *BGE* § 229 that all great cultural achievements are inflected with cruelty. At one stage he puts 'high culture' in scare quotes, which we should pay attention to, in case it demonstrates a sceptical distance between Nietzsche and the assessment. But later in the same passage he identifies deepness, thoroughness, and knowledge in less sceptical tones as deriving from this instinct for cruelty<sup>20</sup>. When Nietzsche puts his genealogist's cap on a year later in *GM II*, he discusses the spectacular consequences of a particular form of self-cruelty, and the promises it may offer should it be developed, in line with applying this historical truth going forward.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper has offered two senses to which an aesthetic disposition towards character can be interpretively meaningful, and from which Nietzsche thinks one can derive value: the internal delights and a "proud consciousness" of certain kinds of achieving "internal shape and style"; also, the third-personal spectacle envisaged to aesthetically justify self-cruelty, in the service of life-affirming 'experiments' that might be worthy of the spectacle. It is in this latter vein that Nietzsche identifies the so-called intellectual conscience as being a strong example of (*BGE* §§ 229-30). While one sense might be operative

<sup>20</sup> Further evidence of this from *BGE* § 225: "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 [...]". Cf. Parmer (2017: 413).

at the expense of the other in certain cases, it is not that the two are necessarily exclusive of each other. Indeed, there is some evidence to think that Nietzsche's ideal standard would be for both to be present in equal measure. This might look, especially to us moderns, like a framework or form of life where meaning-giving is possible and diverse in its outlook and intent. It could be that strong individuals are able to provide themselves with their own "delightful" meaning through self-cultivation.

We less appropriate candidates for the lofty expectations of Nietzschean superlative individuality, meanwhile, might find our own more modest versions of a 'meaning' to our lives. Even in such more modest cases, I see no reason to think that my enjoying a pleasant book and some well-kept dark ales, in a warm and inviting pub on a cold night, is any less appropriate for some form of 'aesthetic' appraisal than the ice and high mountains for those more proximate to the Nietzschean ideal, even though it be a less worthy candidate, in Nietzschean eyes. But Nietzsche writes for the few. His qualified indeterminism about the capacity for self-cultivation assumes the requisite strength in an individual to adopt the dual role of garden and gardener, artist and artwork, sculptor and marble<sup>21</sup>. The marble gets chipped away, aspects of the garden are clipped back while others flourish, and the brown patch of the canvas can be brought to delight the eye of that same person in their role as observer of the full 'portrait'. In establishing the rarity of such exceptional individuals, Nietzsche at *GS* § 289 identifies the "one thing needful" for them as being that they not be pitied, in this task of cultivation<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. a premature version of something like this, with resonances of *GM* II, in *D* § 113: "The triumph of the ascetic over himself, his glance turned inwards which beholds man split asunder into a sufferer and a spectator [...]". Cf. Janaway (2007: 126).

<sup>22</sup> The pub I have in mind in this section is the King Charles The First, near the bottom of Caledonian Road, North London, a strong candidate for the best pub in the world, where many of the ideas in this paper were gestated and first scribbled down. I thank all comrades in imbibement and the staff, there. Whatever merit this article may possess is dedicated to the memory of Jack Pointer Mackenzie, an excellent student who I miss in our seminars together.

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