

## Abhandlung

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# Hegel and Nietzsche on Self-Judgment, Self-Mastery, and the Right to One's Life

**Abstract:** Nietzsche's views regarding suicide are usually interpreted as a response to Christian, Kantian, and Schopenhauerian ethics. Here, they are defended on the basis of his notion of life as an aesthetic phenomenon in order to provide extramoral responses to such challenges as the following: a) whether the self can deliver the right kind of judgment regarding her life, b) how suicide can be considered an empowerment of the will, and c) whether suicide can be considered an exercise of freedom by the subject who thereby cancels the very grounds and means for will and action. Reconstructed as a response to Hegel's argument against suicide on the grounds that one is not the master of oneself and that one therefore lacks the proper means to judge one's life, Nietzsche's position provides the epistemic footing to ground an alternate notion of self-mastery as well as the necessary insight regarding one's life. It is shown that this reading of Nietzsche's argument is in alignment with his non-dualism and expressivist views regarding agency. Finally, a response is formulated to the socially-grounded arguments prohibiting suicide on the basis of this reading of Nietzsche's position.

**Keywords:** Hegel, Suicide, Ethics, Self-mastery, Expressivism

What is necessary here above all, in spite of all cowardly prejudice, is to establish the correct, that is, the physiological evaluation of so-called natural death – which ultimately is just another “unnatural” death, a suicide. One never perishes at the hand of anyone but oneself. Natural death is just death under the most contemptible conditions, an unfree death, a death at the wrong time, the death of a coward. Out of love for life, one should want a different death: free, conscious, without accidents, without surprises ... (TI, Raids 36).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper I use the following editions and translations of Nietzsche's writings: *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Judith Norman, Cambridge 2002; *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Ronald Speirs, Cambridge 2017; *Ecce Homo*, trans. Duncan Large, Oxford 2007; *The Gay Science*, trans. Bernard Williams, Cambridge 2007; *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Douglas Smith, Oxford 1996; *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Adrian Del Caro, Cambridge 2006; and *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. Richard Polt, Indianapolis, IN 1997.

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## 1 Introduction

Nietzsche's contrarian position regarding the permissibility of suicide has been interpreted as a response to arguments prohibiting suicide across Christian, Kantian and, perhaps most notably, Schopenhauerian ethics.<sup>2</sup> The prohibition of suicide in Christianity marks, according to Nietzsche, yet another feat of a weak-willed worldview that seeks to exchange the individual plight of value-creation for a mediocre earthly life that promises an afterlife instead.<sup>3</sup> The Kantian emphasis on rational self-determination, on the other hand, treats life as a contingency opposed to the unchanging morality of the rational subject. Thus conceived, any thought of self-destruction can only be produced by contingent matters that the subject ought to resist out of duty to herself. To Nietzsche, however, a life that creates its own values cannot be undermined by an alien morality and its arbitrary dictates on the subject, even regarding fundamental issues such as the value of her life.<sup>4</sup> In a more immediate response to Schopenhauer's asceticism and his rejection of the assertive use of the will in the matter of one's own death, Nietzsche defends a notion of voluntary death that exposes its opposite, namely, involuntary death to be an unnatural way of ending one's life. Recently, Rebecca Bamford has argued that Nietzsche's defense of suicide in the above encounters should be understood as an implication of his vitalist ethics, that life and its augmentation are one's native yardstick

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2 Georg Simmel's analysis in *Schopenhauer and Nietzsche*, trans. Helmut Loiskandl, Deena Weinstein and Michael Weinstein, Urbana, IL 1991, which focuses on Schopenhauer's argument for the impermissibility of suicide contra Nietzsche's critique of ascetic ideals has been a landmark source of contemporary debates. Simmel's verdict that Schopenhauer remained fixated on a redundant "calculus of pleasure and pain" even if "he lived aesthetic enjoyment and ethical value more truly and deeply in his real thought and instinct than he could formulate them in his system" (133) points us to aestheticist valuations of life and virtue that Nietzsche is known for, including any ethical assessment of the act of suicide. Karl Jaspers recognizes that Nietzsche distinguishes the type of suicide that is justified on the basis of sickness or old age from the suicide that is "consummatory" of life itself (Karl Jaspers, *Nietzsche: An Introduction to the Understanding of His Philosophical Activity*, trans. Charles F. Wallraff and Frederick J. Schmitz, Baltimore, MD 1997, 323–5). More recently, Paolo Stellino, *Philosophical Perspectives on Suicide: Kant, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein*, Cham 2020, provides an in-depth analysis of Nietzsche's account from a historical perspective concerning the development of philosophical attitudes towards suicide in the German tradition.

3 Margaret Battin, *Ending Life: Ethics and the Way We Die*, Oxford 2005, 6, argues that much of the debate concerning the permissibility of suicide rests on a disagreement regarding the implication of one's willed activity in the matter of one's death and thus compares the disagreement between Nietzsche, Kant, and Schopenhauer to the various tensions in the divide between Stoic and Christian ethics.

4 For an account of Nietzsche's views regarding suicide as a possible response to the Kantian prohibition, see Paolo Stellino, "Kant and Nietzsche on Suicide," *Philosophical Inquiry* 39/2 (2015), 79–104. For an account reconstructing Nietzsche's notion of freedom on non-Kantian grounds, see R. Lanier Anderson, "Nietzsche on Autonomy," in John Richardson / Ken Gemes (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche*, Oxford 2013, 432–60, and Robert B. Pippin, *Nietzsche, Psychology, and First Philosophy*, Chicago, IL 2010, 105–20.

to distinguish good from bad.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, death is not a negation of life, but rather its consummation or even “coronation.”<sup>6</sup> For all empathetic interventions on behalf of Nietzsche’s argument, it remains puzzling as to 1) what extent the subject stands in a capacity to deliver the right kind of judgment regarding one’s life such as qualifying the kind of conditions under which one should feel empowered to end it, 2) how suicide can be considered an augmentation of one’s vitality or an empowerment of the will, 3) and whether suicide can be considered an exercise of freedom on the part of the subject who thereby cancels the very grounds and means for will and action.<sup>7</sup>

In this essay, I suggest an alternate defense of Nietzsche’s position to provide compelling responses to the three problems posed above. To do so, I appeal to Nietzsche’s notion of life as an aesthetic phenomenon throughout *The Gay Science* (1882–87) and argue that thus conceived, one is in a position 1) to stand both within and above one’s own artistic creation, enabling a unique perspective from which to view one’s life including all of the social dependencies involved, 2) to determine the time and manner of one’s death as an aesthetically pleasant component of one’s life as opposed to determining one’s self-destruction, and 3) to exercise this act freely, as an expression of the will, without having one’s decision in the matter attributed to extrinsic causes, pathology, or other forms of interference into one’s agency. Only such an act expresses a creative distinction willed by the doer from the rest of nature, which otherwise prosecutes all life to a slow death in which all is consumed into non-distinction. Accordingly, this reading treats Nietzsche’s concept of suicide not as a lesser evil one might be led to under certain circumstances to spare a remaining degree of dignity or vitality for oneself, but as the practice of a poetic license upon one’s life. Such a poetic license, everyone possesses – but only a few know how to act on it and live aesthetically and, thereby, die aesthetically. So instead, Nietzsche contends, most of us inadvertently die slowly, accidentally, or even violently at the hands of alien forces our will was never awakened to counteract in a creative manner. Nietzsche’s position does not strictly promote suicide in its own right, but rather, is raised as a criticism of convictions that rule out the possibility of an authentic suicidal act. There is a remarkable difference between condoning suicide in its own right and recognizing how suicide might be enacted out of an authentic dimension of self-relation. Hence, we can distinguish two claims, one minimal, and one more strict, against prohibitions of suicide. Nietzsche asserts the minimal claim that we are not licensed to disqualify suicide as a mere response to one’s dissatisfaction with life. The stronger claim, on the other hand, is rooted in Nietzsche’s expressivist theory of action according to which death cannot be abandoned to the whims of causal laws, that one’s life and its consummation ought to be the subject’s (artistic) property.

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5 Rebecca Bamford, “Moraline-Free Virtue: The Case of Free Death,” *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 49/3 (2015), 437–51.

6 Stellino, *Philosophical Perspectives on Suicide*, 132.

7 I would like to thank Paul Fleming, Sofi Jovanovska, Michelle Kosch, and the reviewers for their help in improving this project.

To set up the above problem, I proceed by considering a novel opponent of Nietzsche's contrarian answer to the problem. I first present Hegel's ethical prohibition of suicide in his *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (*Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, 1820) and then position Nietzsche's account as a response to it. This is not warranted by any profound contact on Nietzsche's part with Hegel's ethics, but rather by the fact that both figures treat the concept of life as self-possession and reach radically different conclusions about the permissibility of its willed alienation from the subject. Certainly, Hegel is not new in conceiving of life as a property relation, as both Locke and Kant appear as two prominent figures who have assessed the permissibility of suicide on similar grounds.<sup>8</sup> However, Hegel is unique in predicating his answer to the question on a special form of knowledge and judgment concerning the implication of one's living activity, labor, and social availability in the lives of others and the constitution of the ethical community. In turn, I suggest that we can read Nietzsche's argument for the permissibility of suicide as a response to this epistemic challenge, namely, that such a judgment can be delivered on the basis of an aesthetic insight regarding one's life. In the meantime, I clarify how Nietzsche's argument that we are justified in ending our lives in a manner pleasurable and, thus, appropriate to ourselves is consistent with his non-dualism, aversion to substance-metaphysics, and his expressivist views concerning agency.<sup>9</sup> The ability to treat one's life as an aesthetic phenomenon, I argue, is at stake in achieving this distinction from Hegel's otherwise similar notion of life as self-possession. Finally, I respond to the socially-grounded prohibitions of suicide, of the kind Hegel espoused, from a Nietzschean standpoint.

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<sup>8</sup> Regarding Locke's conception of life, property and suicide, see George Windstrup, "Locke on Suicide," *Political Theory* 8/2 (1980), 169–182: 176–7. For Kant's discussion of the same, see Michael Cholbi, "Kant and the Irrationality of Suicide," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 17/2 (2000), 159–176: 160–2. It would be apt to characterize Hegel's argument against the permissibility of suicide on epistemic grounds as a secularized version of the relevant arguments offered by Locke and Kant. It would be *divine* knowledge to understand one's life and its implication in the social totality of the ethical community. Hegel does not tell us that this knowledge belongs to God and his purposes for our lives, but he does contend that this knowledge is beyond our intellect to attain. Hegel's epistemic boundary stipulates that if one were truly able to cultivate knowledge of this kind, one could also deliver a judgment regarding the appropriateness of ending one's life.

<sup>9</sup> Although I will reproduce what is at stake of Nietzsche's attitude regarding substance-metaphysics in his defense of the act of suicide, for an in-depth account of Nietzsche's "metaphysics," see Galen Strawson, "Nietzsche's Metaphysics?," in Manuel Dries (ed.), *Nietzsche on Mind and Nature*, Oxford 2015, 10–36. Most relevant are the central claims concerning the lack of a unitary and persistent self and the non-distinction between objects or substances and processes (10–1). For our purposes, these claims translate to the crafting of oneself as an aesthetic phenomenon since one would otherwise not exist in a cohesive manner, as well as the non-distinction between the subject's life and her dying.

## 2 Hegel on Life as Inalienable Property

But the main question is: have I a right to commit suicide? The answer will be that, as this individual, I am not master of my life, for the comprehensive totality of activity, i.e. life, is not something external to personality, which is itself immediately this. Thus, it is a contradiction to speak of a person's right over his life, for this would mean that a person had a right over himself. But he has no such right, for he does not stand above himself and cannot pass judgement on himself. When Hercules burned himself to death or Brutus fell on his sword, this was a hero's behaviour in relation to his own personality; but if it is a question of a simple right to kill oneself, such a right may be denied even to heroes (*Philosophy of Right*, § 70).<sup>10</sup>

Hegel's argument against the permissibility of suicide has two components. The ontological premise that the subject does not stand over and above her life leads to the epistemic one, according to which she therefore has no adequate knowledge regarding her life and cannot deliver an appropriate judgment about its value. A notion of self-mastery is at stake here: were the subject able to stand outside of her life, she would potentially be its master (*Herr*), recognizing all the social dependencies the totality of her life is implicated in. It is after all, these social dependencies that both create her in the family and sustain her in civil society, as well as actualize her freedom in the State (PR § 33). Participation in these social spheres is not extrinsic to her individuality; this is in fact what Hegel thinks substantiates her ethically. Since her vitality, her immediate organic life is already integrated into these social spheres, a decision regarding suicide would require insight about the totality of her life throughout these layers of ethical life. With an unlikely insight of this sort, she would possess her life in a way she possesses other forms of property and would be justified in reaching a decision about potentially alienating it on her own will.

While Hegel recognizes a so-called "right of heroes," which entitles extraordinary subjects to engage in revolutionary actions against unethical political formations, even such figures do not stand over and above their individual lives to reach a decision to potentially end it.<sup>11</sup> Of likely crimes against a political formation, Hegel says: "Either an ethical existence has already been posited in the family or state, in which case the natural condition referred to above is an act of violence against it, or there is nothing other than a state of nature, a state governed entirely by force, in which case the Idea sets up a right of heroes against it" (PR § 93). It remains unclear whether heroes have a revolutionary right against unethical political formations because they are able to stand above them and recognize the wrong in them, or because the Idea cunningly works its way through their often violent actions in the interest of the foundation of an

<sup>10</sup> I shall henceforth use the abbreviation PR in reference to Hegel's *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood, trans. Hugh Barr Nisbet, Cambridge 1991.

<sup>11</sup> Other extraordinary rights of heroes include a right to revenge in the absence of rational institutions of law (PR § 102) and a right to coercion and violence in the interest of the formation of a state (PR § 350).

ethical state.<sup>12</sup> Since there is no textual evidence regarding the possibility of a self-conscious hero who decides to transgress in order to establish the ethical state, it is difficult to argue that Hegel should have conceded that heroes do stand over and above their lives and are able to judge them.<sup>13</sup> This means that there is no place for martyrdom through suicide in Hegel's system, even in a clearly unethical world. Not even the hero is a master of his life and can judge it adequately.

Hegel argues that the subject and her life are bound in an inalienable property relation and defines this relation in substance-metaphysical terms. The will has an objective reality for others to respect only when it is asserted into matter. The plight for recognition starts with one's taking possession of one's organic unity, the body, by asserting one's will into it, by regulating and maintaining it "*in so far as I so will it*" (PR § 47). Once the organic unity of the body is willed by the subject, and the body thus transformed into a property of the subject, the subject is empowered to appropriate matter external to the body to her use and ownership. This is possible because the subject is able to wield her body to assert her will into matter and seize it into her ownership (PR § 47n). It appears to Hegel that animals do not take possession of themselves in this manner and that they therefore cannot bring harm to their vitality in the same way humans can, that is, by consciously undermining this property relation: "I have these limbs and my life only in so far as I so will it; the animal cannot mutilate or destroy itself, but the human being can" (PR § 47). In addition to not being able to renounce it, the absence of a *willed* property relation to one's life ostensibly disqualifies animals from a right to their life or what renders them the target of the justified violence for the ownership, use, and consumption by another: "Animals are indeed in possession of themselves: their soul is in possession of their body. But they have no right to their life, because they do not will it" (PR § 47, Addition). Humans are not merely given a life and are instinctually determined to maintain it. Rather, they actively take possession of themselves, shape

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12 For a more detailed account of Hegel's notion of revolutionary right and especially the distinction between so-called heroes and world-historical subjects, see Mark Alznauer, "Ethics and History in Hegel's Practical Philosophy," *The Review of Metaphysics* 65/3 (2012), 581–611. The former only inhabit an age where Reason is not instituted as objective Spirit and thus are entitled to disruptive actions in the interest of a better world. World-historical subjects inhabit a time where Reason is somewhat instituted and impart its spirit in their actions.

13 In addition, Hegel argues that the so-called heroic consciousness is only very primitive and cannot distinguish deed from action (PR § 118). While deed (*Tat*) refers to the subject's causal implication in a present state of affairs by way of her activities, the concept of action (*Handlung*) refers to the subject's behavior on the basis of a consciousness of the cultural, social and legal standpoints with which she anticipates a wider range of consequences. The heroic consciousness, because it cannot tell the two apart, accepts a higher degree of responsibility than it needs to. It is unlikely that Hegel would contend that such a consciousness could stand over and above the subject's life and make a judgment about it. For a more detailed account of Hegel's theory of action as it relates to his theory of tragedy, see Constantine Sandis, "The Man Who Mistook His *Handlung* for a *Tat*: Hegel on Oedipus and Other Tragic Thebans," *Bulletin of the Hegel Society of Great Britain* 31/2 (2010), 35–60.

this most fundamental property of theirs, refine it spiritually, and distinguish it not only from nature's unconscious forces, but also from the possible grasp of other members of the social whole:

The human being, in his *immediate existence* in himself, is a natural entity, external to his concept; it is only through the *development* of his own body and spirit, *essentially* by means of his *self-consciousness comprehending itself as free*, that he takes possession of himself and becomes his own property as distinct from that of others. [...] By this means, what one is in concept is posited for the first time as one's own, and also an object distinct from simple self-consciousness, and it thereby becomes capable of taking on the *form of the thing* (PR § 57).

Giving shape to one's life, consciously taking possession of one's being, and transforming oneself into an ethical actuality that others have to recognize are challenges the subject of Hegel's civil society has to face. What is more, this subject, under her so-called right of appropriation, imparts purposefulness to external matter when she takes possession of it as her will substantiates it with rationality, utility, need, and pleasure (PR § 44, § 61). The necessary determinations which underlie the subject's encounter that imparts this purposefulness onto the world are both inalienable and imprescriptible (PR § 66). Since right is the existence of freedom in activities of self-possession, production, accumulation, and contractual exchanges of property with others (PR § 40), it follows that the act of suicide is a crime against the very concept of right. We can thus formulate Hegel's argument for the impermissibility of suicide on the basis of two premises:

- 1) A version of the "not in the same subject argument" according to which one has no right "to destroy that which allows one to be a bearer of rights in the first place"<sup>14</sup>: the organic unity of the body allows the subject to participate in civil society and be recognized as a subject of rights, so we cannot conceive of a right to destroy the very foundation of this rectitude.
- 2) A version of socially-grounded arguments of the kind Michael Cholbi calls "the social goods," "reciprocity" and "role responsibilities" argument.<sup>15</sup> These proceed from the premises that the subject is the product of a social whole, that she stands in reciprocal relations of benefit and dependence with members of that whole, and that she has an obligation to continue those relationships which in part determine other people's lives. Similarly, Hegel takes that the totality of our lives is not ours to judge, that we exist in part for other people, and that our ethical substance is the community with whom we maintain these relationships. It follows that we cannot deliver an adequate judgment about how the totality of our living activity is implicated in the lives of others, let alone reach a decision about completely withdrawing it from that set of relations.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Quante, *Hegel's Concept of Action*, Cambridge 2004, 27n.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Cholbi, *Suicide: The Philosophical Dimensions*, Peterborough 2011, 58–64.

Considered in the terms of Hegel's substance-metaphysical thinking, both formulations express this identical problem. Hegel insists that the subject's ethical substance is the social whole (PR § 33, § 156, § 349) and her participation in it is what enables her to take possession of her organic unity willingly, shape, refine, and maintain her being in a way appropriate to her. So, an attack on one's organic unity contradicts the social whole that makes the production and maintenance of that organic unity possible.

Consider also that Hegel allows the reverse case that the social whole can demand one's life as the consequence of one's crimes, in a demonstration of mastery over the individual: "It is certainly the case that the individual person is a subordinate entity who must dedicate himself to the ethical whole. Consequently, if the state demands his life, the individual must surrender it" (PR § 70, Addition). The ethical whole and its institutions can deliver judgments about their lives since they are subordinated to the whole and can be scrutinized in terms of their participation in it. But the same perspective, Hegel contends, individuals do not possess over themselves: they are not subordinated to themselves to attain the necessary perspective to judge their own lives.

This above exposition of Hegel's argument brings us to a capacity to interpret Nietzsche's defense of the permissibility of suicide from a novel angle. In the following section, I will show that considering the subject onto her life as an artist onto her artwork gives us a compelling viewpoint to reevaluate the stakes of the subject's participation in the ethical whole, even in the act of suicide. In addition, this consideration provides us with an alternate notion of self-possession and self-mastery, according to which suicide is not inevitably self-destructive, but rather the mark of a creative individual who styles her death to be distinct from mere dissolution into nature. The kind of insight Hegel denies the subject regarding her life because she does not stand over and above it, is available in the artistic distance from which the subject can at once craft and appreciate her artwork.

### 3 Nietzsche on Living (and Dying) in Style

Since Nietzsche infamously contends that one never lives through another's cause, will, or desires, it follows for him that one also never dies through another's interference: "One never perishes at the hand of anyone but oneself" (TI, Raids 36). At stake here is Nietzsche's non-causal theory of action, or what has since been called his "expressivism" especially with regard to his pronouncements in GM I 13. According to the view, the subject's volitional capacity cannot be characterized without reference to its expression and realization in action, as if it were a causal substrate leading to external consequences.<sup>16</sup> A relevant implication of this position that we encounter in *Twilight of the*

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<sup>16</sup> On Nietzsche's "expressivism," see Pippin, *Nietzsche, Psychology, and First Philosophy*, 75–82, and "Doer and Deed: Responses to Acampora and Anderson," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 44/2 (2013), 181–95, and for a more recent overview of the history of the concept and the relevant debates, see Aaron Rid-



*Idols* (1889) is the view that even death is a venue in which the subject and her will are expressed. Death is not something that happens to the subject, it is rather the subject in her capacity to will that dies a certain death. It is an act in which her will disappears, and yet it has to have appeared in order to make its disappearance. Who the subject is as a person is expressed in her dying. Accordingly, the onus is on her will to craft who she has become in her dying. It is also evident that Nietzsche considers dying another activity of *becoming*. Against the rigidly delineated conceptions of philosophy that are idolized as self-subsistent entities, Nietzsche contends that death is not an objection to life, its destruction as a form of property, or unwarranted alienation as a social good:

They kill and stuff whatever they worship, these gentlemen who idolize concepts – they endanger the life of whatever they worship. For them, death, change, and age, like reproduction and growth, are objections – refutations, even. Whatever is does not *become*; whatever becomes is not ... (TI, "Reason" 1).

Since death is a state in which one becomes and therefore *is* as opposed to *is not*, death finds itself in the list of matters that are a measure of the subject's agency. By contrast, a life invested in the ideals and workings of a collective, in which the living activity of the organism slowly stagnates into death, amounts to, for Nietzsche, a slow death for the collective or even, a suicide pact with the collective:

Indeed, a dying for the many was invented here, one that touts itself as living; truly, a hearty service to all preachers of death! State I call it, where all are drinkers of poison, the good and the bad; state, where all lose themselves, the good and the bad; state, where the slow suicide of everyone is called – "life" (Z I, Idol).

The difference is not more than one of pace, whether one dies following a willed act of self-harm, or whether one dies a long-winded death devoted to the collective. In both instances, according to Nietzsche, one's own will was implicated in living one's life to its end as well as the kind of person one was in one's dying.

Nietzsche's Spinozistic critique of anthropomorphized metaphysics poses a problem for this aestheticist account of suicide. His remarks in GS 109 that we must "beware of saying that death is opposed to life. The living is only a form of what is dead,

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ley, *The Deed is Everything: Nietzsche on Will and Action*, Oxford 2018, 9–57. Both authors characterize Hegel's theory of action as expressivist. As Quante argues in *Hegel's Concept of Action*, for Hegel, the self-relationship of individual agents is undergirded by the "ontological self-relationships of the absolute substance" (24). The agent's will individuates the absolute substance, that is, the historical totality of human (and non-human) activity in her conduct as a particular embodiment of normativity. For Nietzsche, then, this agent's self-expression is undergirded by an authority that transcends her, the "morality of custom" as he disavows it in GM II 2. For a reading of Hegel's theory of action that attempts to rescue Hegel from a critique in this direction, see Dean Moyer, "Hegel and Agent-Relative Reasons," in Arto Laitinen / Constantine Sandis (eds.), *Hegel on Action*, Basingstoke 2010, 260–80.

and a very rare form” forbids any strict distinction to be drawn between the dead and the living. The suggestion that the living is a type of matter subsumed under the dead makes any aestheticist characterization of suicide very difficult, since no manner of dying should be distinguished from another in this routine event of transition between two taxonomic ranks. Aestheticizing death could then be characterized as another illegitimate effort to anthropomorphize an event that can be explained in purely causal and physical terms. However, shaping one’s life into an aesthetic unity that is finalized in one’s manner of dying, so that it is not shaped by the arbitrary workings of social forces, is different from imposing a learned meaning onto one’s life per Christianity, morality, or other customs. For it is in the same passage that Nietzsche asserts: “There are only necessities: there is no one who commands, no one who obeys, no one who transgresses,” which, as Lawrence J. Hatab suggests, are different from the forms of logical, teleological or causal necessity that Christianity, morality, or any form of ideology will have to wield.<sup>17</sup> Since artistic self-creation is a form of necessity among others in flux across time and space, the subjective endeavors of self-creation and self-interpretation are compatible with the larger picture of existence, both organic and inorganic, as an expression of the will to power.<sup>18</sup> As Hatab goes on to argue, necessity for Nietzsche simply describes the immediate conditions under which temporal becoming ensues, where what one becomes is not dictated by some teleological vision beyond here and now, but by those immediate conditions that the subject transforms into her artistic norms for becoming who she is. Since, for Nietzsche, as we have seen, both the series of events that unfold in a finite lifetime and the moment of dying are states of becoming, it follows that the subject is permeated with the necessity to enhance her experience across these events. Only, Nietzsche warns that she should not do so by defaulting to an available system of evaluation. This is where art and life as an aesthetic phenomenon emerge as viable alternatives. Since one’s aesthetic mastery of one’s life is in turn an expression of the will-to-power, creating and interpreting all aspects of one’s lifetime, including one’s death, is more than another aesthetic anthropomorphism. Becoming who I am is not the teleological dictate of some transcendental authority

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17 Lawrence J. Hatab, “Shocking Time: Reading Eternal Recurrence Literally,” in Manuel Dries (ed.), *Nietzsche on Time and History*, Berlin 2008, 149–62: 152–3.

18 Note for instance Nietzsche’s talk of artistic agency that is characterized by its own necessity to express itself, in the meantime creating the norms by which the artist interprets herself in BGE 188. I agree with Tsarina Doyle’s suggestion in *Nietzsche’s Metaphysics of the Will to Power: The Possibility of Value*, Cambridge 2018, 97–100, that Nietzsche’s remarks in GS 109 do not commit him to reducing the sphere of values to the causal sphere of the natural world in the form of a reductive realism (just as much as the general applicability of the will-to-power as an explanation of the causal sphere of the natural world does not commit him to a reductive idealism). I would venture to say that the sphere of values is not merely “metaphysically continuous,” as Doyle puts it, with the sphere of causes because this characterization evokes a separation still, but rather that they are co-extensive. It is because the artist’s self-creating necessity extends across space and time and is available to us in the form of a causality that we can observe and appreciate, even if we do not experience her necessity as such.

that especially addresses me in my uniquely “human” capacity to transcend my physical reality. Rather, expressing myself in my necessity to become who I am is one of the many processes by virtue of which the will to power articulates itself in space and time.

It is evident that Nietzsche's notion of life as an aesthetic phenomenon persisted well beyond *The Gay Science*. For instance, in the later *Twilight of the Idols*, the same idea recurs, especially in his pronouncements against philosophy and its “fictionalization” of human experience as meaningless (TI, Raids 23–4). Against the judgment that art falsifies a fundamentally vacuous life, Nietzsche suggests that the artist in fact crafts “reality *once again*, but in the form of a selection, an emphasis, a correction” (TI, “Reason” 6). When artistic intervention thus correctively modifies its object, Nietzsche suggests that the artist engages in an activity of “*idealizing*,” which does not, as it has been thought, proceed by eliminating the accidental features of an object until it reaches an unchanging essence, but rather by bringing out “the principal traits” of the object in question, “so that the others disappear in the process” (TI, Raids 8). This transformative activity is not exhausted “until [the objects] are mirrors of your own power – until they reflect your perfection.” The artist does not bring an a priori truth into finite shape in her lifework. Rather, truth only emerges in the artist's engagement, when the artist has forced “a second nature out of nature,” including her own.<sup>19</sup> In a move that foreshadows his contention against Schopenhauer's attitude towards the act of suicide, Nietzsche suggests that Schopenhauer was wrong to think that art helps us in our “liberation from the will” (TI, Raids 24). Art should bring us to a more vivid confrontation with the will and the vitality we craft with it.

“You should become who you are,” Nietzsche asserts (GS 270). In appearance, this assertion seems to contradict Nietzsche's argument that the will is wholly expressed in action and that volition cannot be characterized without reference to its expression. If who I am is not already evident in my actions here and now and I can instead become who I am through future action, does this not contradict the fact that I have always been myself? Asked differently, if there is no will independent of action, underlying action as a substratum ready to cause it into one determinate form or another, how can it be expected of me that I become at all? Rather than a transcendental subject who stands beyond her empirical self in order to unite it into action, or a self crafted in relations of property and labor to other members of the ethical whole as in Hegel's account, Nietzsche suggests we should be standing completely above ourselves, hovering, moving, floating and more importantly, *playing* with ourselves in complete embrace of the contingencies such an observation might bring to us:

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<sup>19</sup> Jill Marsden, *After Nietzsche: Notes Towards a Philosophy of Ecstasy*, Basingstoke 2002, 91. Prior to the artist's appropriation, for Nietzsche, even the organic substrate that constitutes her body is alien to the artist.

At times we need to have a rest from ourselves by looking at and down at ourselves and, from an artistic distance [...]. We have to discover the hero no less than the fool in our passion for knowledge; we must now and then be pleased about our folly in order to be able to stay pleased about our wisdom! [...] We have also to *be able* to stand *above* morality. – And not just to stand with the anxious stiffness of someone who is afraid of slipping and falling at any moment, but also to float and play above it! (GS 107)

An artistic distance to her life enables the subject to draw pleasure from seeing herself for who she is without subjecting her to static notions of right and wrong, good and bad, beautiful and ugly. This does not require her to detach herself from her empirical self, or to become a disinterested observer of routine matters of fact about herself. The unity of human experience has no transcendental source, nor is its possibility undergirded by a social context of property relations. The artist masters her life by uniting it according to “an artistic plan” under which all aspects of her experience “delight the eye” (GS 290). As Alexander Nehamas puts it, the unity of the self is not a given but “something achieved, not a beginning but a goal,” so the task is one that continually renews itself until the moment of death, with each moment introducing new contingencies awaiting interpretation and integration by the subject.<sup>20</sup> While it is not posited as an a priori fact of human existence, such aesthetic unity allows the subject to see her life as a cohesive whole, and access it from a normative standpoint that assesses the harmonization of the drives and affects.<sup>21</sup> As I suggest in the next section of this essay, these are the premises for Nietzsche’s reformulation of the problem of self-mastery and self-ownership, issues which Hegel took to justify his prohibition of suicide.

### 3.1 Life as the Artist’s Property

As we saw, Hegel harnessed one’s life as a substantial property relation from which the subject had no right to absolve herself. As such, Hegel’s subject was unable to see herself beyond the constraints of the social whole, so long as the social whole did not prompt this

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<sup>20</sup> Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, Cambridge, MA 1985.

<sup>21</sup> On Nietzsche’s conception of autonomy as the task of the ever-greater harmonization of the drives and affects, see R. Lanier Anderson, “What is a Nietzschean Self?” in Christopher Janaway / Simon Robertson (eds.), *Nietzsche, Naturalism, and Normativity*, Oxford 2012, 202–35. Anderson further shows that this ideal of a unified, normative self is not subject to the critique of moral excess, since it is, after all, “a structure of drives and affects; it is just a more unified, more harmoniously ordered, more internally disciplined” form of self that is able to relate to herself without having to transcend herself in the process. I would suggest that this non-transcendental capacity to “stand back” from oneself, as Anderson attempts to define it, is the function of aesthetic unity and artistic distance. This characterization of life’s unity would then also be aligned with Nietzsche’s notion of art as a process of idealization that emphasizes the domineering features of its object. The artist unifies her life as an aesthetic phenomenon precisely by harmonizing her drives and affects as she sees them play out in the course of her living activity.

sentiment by being unbearably unjust. And even then, the heroes who rebel against the social whole on behalf of the right are not necessarily conscious of the teleological trajectory they are in service of, for they do not stand above themselves and beyond time. Even as they push history to break with a certain epoch, the so-called heroes are not able to interpret their actions beyond the normative space they are the product of. So different is the “expressivism” attributed to Hegel. As commentators following Charles Taylor have noted, Hegel too, understands actions and intentions in an intrinsic expressive relation rather than one causing the other from without.<sup>22</sup> But as much as our actions express our self-interpretive models of ourselves into a social context, this ability to self-interpret, for Hegel, is always predicated on an ability to “assume a position in a kind of normative space, which, so it will turn out, is a kind of social and historical space.”<sup>23</sup> Because individual conduct is substantiated by the ethical order that transcends the subject, expressing its principles constitutes a fundamental purpose, “a shared or collective end” for individuals, where individuality only emerges in the articulation of this normativity across different socio-economic roles.<sup>24</sup> And so long as what the subject expresses of herself is substantiated by norms she inherits rather than creates on her own, to Nietzsche, she does not aesthetically qualify. From a Nietzschean standpoint, Hegel simply reproduces the problematic commitment to transcendental authorities of self-justification.

Nietzsche shows us how self-relation above the social whole is required for us to function inside the social whole at all. Someone who does not conceive of themselves in this way cannot excel in routine challenges imposed by the collective. As Nietzsche puts it, there is “no other way of dealing with great tasks than *by playing*” (EH, Clever 10). Our engagement with work, responsibilities, and social scripts cannot be initiated without our playful engagement, the excitement that one’s will is about to be expressed and the anticipation of a novel experience of the self as evident in play. Only in play are the rules and routines of an alien sphere of activity transformed into a “play-world” for oneself.<sup>25</sup> Outside of play, activity follows extant routine and satisfies extrinsic standards, and agency can hardly be attributed to the doer. In play, activity expresses the subject’s own impulse to express herself, regardless of the social setting, rules of the game, or the productive intention of the activity, embodying the “ideal of a spirit who play naively, in other words without deliberation and from an overflowing plenitude and powerfulness” (EH, Z 2). The individual’s conduct is led by her own necessity and motivated by the value she finds in that necessity. In such a self-relation, this seemingly average subject is her own hero (GS 78). The subject thus comes to possess herself, her life as both organic substrate and practical activity, not as vulnerable assets underneath her, but rather, as raw material hers to transform.

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22 Charles Taylor, “Hegel and the Philosophy of Action,” in Laitinen / Sandis (eds.), *Hegel on Action*, 22–41: 33–6.

23 Terry Pinkard, *Hegel’s Naturalism: Mind, Nature, and the Final Ends of Life*, Oxford 2012, 7.

24 Allen W. Wood, *Hegel’s Ethical Thought*, Cambridge 1990, 199–200.

25 Alan D. Schrift, *Nietzsche and the Question of Interpretation*, New York 2014, 72.

For the artist, too, we can think of the raw material, her life, as mere property beneath her. She is in her right to sell it, rent it out, exchange it, or get rid of it altogether without ever playing with it. But if the artist lives up to her name, then her impulse is to transform that raw material and as such, the raw material is not beneath her as inert asset. For the raw material imposes its own necessity, the artist must confront herself and her agency as counter-necessity in order to truly possess the raw material. An entirely new dimension of self-relation launches, as the artist now sees herself as more than the custodian of assets. She is to discover what is to become of the raw material – in a novel viewing distance she attains over herself qua living activity. The insight that the subject's conduct is her own playful creation impassions her in an exhilarating encounter with her will. In this self-referential insight, the subject realizes that she is the activity creating the object of observation. At this point, she “is no longer an artist, [she] has become a work of art: all nature's artistic power reveals itself here, amidst shivers of intoxication, to the highest, most blissful satisfaction of the primordial unity” (BT 1). In the overwhelmingly Schopenhauerian categories of *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), the subject overcomes her phenomenal self as it is scattered amidst property relations between debtors and creditors across the social whole. In her aesthetic unity, she becomes a conscious embodiment of the primordial ground of existence whose eternally unresolved contradictions make it otherwise unamenable to representation.<sup>26</sup>

Notably, Paolo Stellino comes close to associating Nietzsche's conception of suicide with this aesthetic insight, but he is quick to reduce artistic interventions to “falsifying reality.”<sup>27</sup> However, the most art still does, according to him, is to “sanctify the lie” by stimulating the subject to self-appreciation.<sup>28</sup> But this reading is inconsistent with Nietzsche's expressivist views, according to which the only *truth* regarding the subject would be crafted by her will in action. For Nietzsche, self-styling is not the production of some artificial sight, but the creation of the only possible truth to be expressed by the subject in her lifetime. One could call it a lie insofar as it is crafted against the alien truths espoused by philosophy, morality, and the customs of the collective. And if so, according to Nietzsche, it is the most truthful lie ever told. Accordingly, a self-styled death is not a deceptive way to avoid, beautify, or falsify one's finitude. Aaron Ridley suggests that Nietzsche uses the notion of falsification in relation to art in the restricted sense of form-giving, shaping, and unifying contents as well as in the more menacing sense

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26 Richard Schacht, “Nietzsche: After the Death of God,” in Steven Crowell (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Existentialism*, Cambridge 2012, 111–36: 126–9, argues that while Nietzsche abandons the meta-physical components of his earlier aestheticism, the implications of his commitment to art as the reconfiguration of the given persist in his later conception of value-creation. The social is thus added to the list of matters that art is able to transform, and along with it, the self and its ethical orientation in the social whole become problems that the subject will determine aesthetically.

27 Stellino, *Philosophical Perspectives on Suicide*, 169.

28 Stellino, *Philosophical Perspectives on Suicide*, 171.

of deceiving or lying about the contents altogether.<sup>29</sup> Not all artistic unity is sincere, sometimes experiences are unified in ways that only deceive the spectator, with Nietzsche's prime example being the priest's art, his religious narrative that paints human experience in the binary between mitzvah and sin.<sup>30</sup> I believe Nietzsche's remarks in GS 78 are particularly enlightening in that they emphasize the modest extent of artistic falsification. The subject is able to move past "the spell of that perspective which makes the nearest and most vulgar appear tremendously big and as reality itself" by creating herself anew from an artistic distance. Experience is not more truthful when we interpret it on the basis of its immediate appeal. Overcoming the spell of immediacy requires that we distort the perspective under which we had been receptive to the world of causes. But a truth that belongs to us in particular comes into being when we unify ourselves according to norms that emerge in our experience, guiding our actions to enhance our vitality and power, factors which we, in turn, continually interpret in our unified artwork. Distortion belongs to the artistic procedure. Therefore, following the minimal version of Nietzsche's argument against prohibition, we cannot simply disqualify suicide as a distorted and falsified way of dying.

Certain readings of Nietzsche's position emphasize the instrumentality of suicide for the pessimists. For instance, Paul Loeb argues that suicide enhances life only by being carried out by those who, driven by ascetic ideals, position themselves as an objection to life itself.<sup>31</sup> Reading Nietzsche's views on suicide contra Schopenhauer (and by extension, Camus), Loeb suggests that "the hitherto reigning life-denying ideal gave suicidal humankind an illegitimate reason to live, the new life-affirming counter-ideal must give it a legitimate reason to die."<sup>32</sup> Loeb situates the rise of this counter-ideal in his model of Nietzsche's historiography as a moment in which humanity splits into two on a vertical dimension, where those, driven by a lower will-to-life affirm life by destroying themselves and those driven by a higher will-to-life finally self-emancipate.<sup>33</sup> Although this passage in *Raids of Untimely Man* in *Twilight of the Idols* emerges in the midst of a polemic against asceticism and the medical responsibility to absolve life when that particular way of life seems to oppose the will to life, Nietzsche is also clear that death is an intrinsic component of one's capacity to live, that one only perishes at one's own hands (TI, Raids 36). Nietzsche only then goes on to say, cynically, that this genuine insight finally supplies the pessimists, in their self-negating way of life, with the justification to

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29 Aaron Ridley, "Nietzsche and the Arts of Life," in Richardson / Gemes (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche*, 415–31: 421–3.

30 Consider also Paul Franco's notion of an inauthentic aesthetic unity that preserves itself by construing an evil-other and drawing pleasure from attacks on this self-crafted enemy in Paul Franco, "Becoming Who You Are: Nietzsche on Self-Creation," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 49 (2018), 52–77: 69–70.

31 Paul S. Loeb, "Suicide, Meaning, and Redemption," in Dries (ed.), *Nietzsche on Time and History*, 163–90: 168–74.

32 Loeb, "Suicide, Meaning, and Redemption," 171.

33 Loeb, "Suicide, Meaning, and Redemption," 184.

suicide they have been longing for. As such, this passage does not warrant a reduction of Nietzsche's conception of suicide to an instrument for the pessimists to decisively realize their death-wish.

We must still position Nietzsche's defense of suicide against possible challenges emphasizing the pressing circumstances under which a decision of this kind might be reached. Was the subject's death still voluntary if she willed it following indignation, victimization, or an experience of violence? Is life still her artwork if it has been drastically altered by illness, trauma, and pain? It is a problem that we cannot determine whether the subject has discovered this playful dimension of her agency, or whether those indignifying circumstances allowed her to cultivate this self-relation at all.<sup>34</sup> In other words, we are unable to determine whether her suicide proceeds in the Hegelian or in the Nietzschean manner in any simple way, whether the subject is absolving an unpleasant property relation, or crafting her death in an effort to possess her life to its consummation. The fact that the first, and for us, the most crucial question we ask of the subject is whether she possessed herself in the right state of mind, is the sign that *we* are only willing to understand the subject in a property relation to her life. Our immediate impulse is to ask of the subject if her life was her property to rightfully alienate. In our servile attachment to the social whole, the answer we find is always negative, since the subject's life is only borrowed from the social whole, and she is only a transient custodian assigned to her life. While we mean so well, because we subscribe to this notion of life, we credit imagined or actual offenders instead of the subject herself with further say on the subject's life. Rightful or not, our standpoint attributes the ownership of the subject's life to outside sources. If emboldened, we seek a recompense to be extracted from an offender in an attempt to legitimate their unrightful appropriation of the subject's property. We are dogmatically certain that the offense amounted to the subject's self-mastery.

Our standpoint, because it anchors life as a property relation, is focused on the offense rather than the agency of the subject. Nietzsche argues that modern morality has "abused the weakness of the dying for the sake of conscience-rape" (TI, Raids 36) and has in turn weaponized the value judgment generated in this assault to bind bystanders to itself. As we participate in it, we contend that suicide could only be somebody else's activity being exercised through the victim.

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34 Although I disagree with its ultimate implications, Udo Benzenhöfer, *Der gute Tod? Geschichte der Euthanasie und Sterbehilfe*, Göttingen 2009, 78–80, provides a compelling reading that positions Nietzsche's views regarding suicide in the genealogy of eugenic thinking. In this interpretation, Nietzsche is taken to promote suicide along with the elimination of all sickness, weakness, and life that is "unworthy of life" from the sphere of the living. However, this reading does not capture what is essential to Nietzsche regarding a subject who wills their own life. Such a subject never dies through extrinsic causes but rather, through their own will to live and consummate a life of their own. Nietzsche's characterization of suicide as free-death is concerned with the subject's ability to determine the totality of their life and thus cannot be justified by external evaluations of medical fit.



Enacted out of the subject's commitment to shaping her life in its attachment to and *detachment* from existing conditions, voluntary death is an act of self-affirmation. Nietzsche contends that artists proceed by laws native to their experience and that a necessity emanates from them in their observation of themselves, only thanks to an environment shaped by "capricious laws" continually challenging them (BGE 180). Ridley argues that artistic agency is not overwhelmed or antagonized by external necessity, that instead her will can only be expressed in the midst of competing, or even harmful forces.<sup>35</sup> The artist can only self-identify in the insight that she is the singular product of her will and its articulation under *these* circumstances. The constraints around action delineate the space for artistic intervention. As Ridley argues elsewhere, it is in the course of this performance constrained by the world that the artist's standards emerge.<sup>36</sup> In an unconstrained world, the subject would not be alerted to the fact of her agency or her ability to create herself anew. This is another articulation of the minimal version of Nietzsche's argument: we simply cannot reduce suicide to the exclusive function of the external necessity the subject faced around her living activity.

Such is the way the artist relates to the artwork: the raw materials bear their own necessity on the artist and they alert her to take a hold of them, create them anew, and express her own being in the shape she gives to them. Their necessity is her calling to become herself. One's finitude, too, can impose itself as an alien stricture against the will unless the will exercises its poetic license upon this limitation. Voluntary death marks not an effort to absolve oneself from what one has become, a property relation one would no longer like to maintain, but an effort to identify oneself with one's own living activity, creation, and necessity. Only then, even death is conquered as one's property, a craft of the will to consummate life in one final stroke of the brush, a final venue for the expression of who she is:

To die proudly when it is not possible to live proudly anymore. Death, chosen of one's own free will, death at the right time, with brightness and cheer, done in the midst of children and witnesses, so that it is still really possible to take one's leave, when the one taking leave is still there, with a real assessment of what one has achieved and willed, a summation of life – all the opposite of the pitiful and appalling comedy that Christianity has made of the hour of death (TI, Raids 36).

These remarks in *Twilight of the Idols* recall Zarathustra's pronouncements concerning voluntary death, that one ought to know to "[d]ie at the right time" (Z I, Death). Leaving aside for the moment the more concrete reasons that make a point in time "right" for dying, Nietzsche emphasizes the consummatory function of free-death, that "dying your spirit and your virtue should still glow, like a sunset around the earth; or else your dying has failed you" (Z I, Death). According to Nietzsche, when life is mastered as one's own

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<sup>35</sup> Ridley, *The Deed is Everything*, 102–3.

<sup>36</sup> Aaron Ridley, "Nietzsche on Art and Freedom," *European Journal of Philosophy* 15/2 (2007), 204–24: 213–4.

craft, then one's life glows onto others in one's dying. We shall now address the social dimensions of Nietzsche's position, that is, whether the observers are able to recognize the subject's aesthetic unity in her dying, and what responsibility the subject and the observers bear towards each other at this moment of life's consummation.

### 3.2 Absolving Life as a Social Good

We have seen that, for Nietzsche, a life that is ununified by the subject is abandoned in the foreground of human experience (GS 78). There, life is a property of the social whole, shaped arbitrarily under social circumstances. For the subject who has not united herself aesthetically, suicide could only be a reaction to one's life discovered under those circumstances. This is the only notion of suicide Hegel recognizes and responds to. Lived as a reaction to others, one's life could only be absolved in a reactive manner. Nietzsche condemns the type of death that thereby embodies "a slander against mankind and earth," and suggests that even death should affirm life (Z I, Death). Hegel would be right to disavow a suicide of this kind, but Nietzsche maintains he should not stop there. A life unwilled must be disavowed altogether. Thus considered, an unwilled death would be the mark of an abandoned life and suicide an act of self-destruction. So, it makes little difference whether the subject of an unwilled life dies by way of suicide either, sickness, or any other natural cause. Nietzsche does at points characterize death on the basis of an economic decision that takes sickness and the remainder of vitality into account, but this is to be distinguished from "the difficult art of leaving – at the right time" (Z I, Death).<sup>37</sup> All dying that is not based on an artistic unity the subject has mastered over her life is unnatural and inhuman, socially constituted, reactive, and lacking in aesthetic insight.<sup>38</sup> By contrast, we are to understand that all willed life is concluded under the artistic agency of the subject, and this subject therefore dies through herself, her native aesthetic unity. So, it matters little whether this subject actually commits suicide either, since her death could not have been an undesigned, unexpected, alien event. This is then, the strong version of Nietzsche's endorsement of voluntary death,

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<sup>37</sup> But the act cannot be reduced, as Marta Faustino and Paolo Stellino suggest, to a rational decision of the Stoic kind, since one's aesthetic unity cannot be expected to reliably make immediate sense to any observer. It is true that for Nietzsche, hanging onto life when one is no longer able to affirm it is irrational, but this does not in turn justify suicide as a rational way of acting. The art of dying when it is time is decided on the basis of one's art of living, when such a life is to be made cohesive in one's dying. See Marta Faustino / Paolo Stellino, "Leaving Life at the Right Time: The Stoics and Nietzsche on Voluntary Death," *Epoché. A Journal for the History of Philosophy* 26/1 (2021), 89–107: 94.

<sup>38</sup> Paolo Stellino, "Nietzsche on Suicide," *Nietzsche-Studien* 42 (2013), 151–77, argues that Nietzsche's affirmation of suicide mainly applies to "the old man who, having lived his life and reached his goal, refuses to hang like a coward on the branches of the tree of life" (175). The problem with this reading is that it still reduces suicide to a reaction to one's finitude, physiological conditions, or in Hegelian terms, property relations that have simply become unpalatable.

which might take on the form of actual suicide. Both the artistic and the non-artistic subjects die a death brought about by the life they lived. While suicide as an act, for Nietzsche, remains the artist's prerogative, it is not her imperative. We can thus see that even the stronger version of Nietzsche's claim does not require or promote the act of suicide. Isabelle Wienand and others are right to suggest that Nietzsche did not strictly "plead for a legitimization of suicide," but this is only because the artist is already going to die a voluntary death by living her life to its willed consummation.<sup>39</sup>

When life is absolved as an asset that is accessed through the relations, duties, and commitments to others in the social whole, the decision is based on a reaction to others, or to the social-historical totality of human activity that transcends the subject. In vengeance, the subject withdraws her vitality from the equation. Nietzsche inverts the order of consideration by arguing that life is primarily the subject's self-creation and only after this fact a resource others might depend on, benefit from, or contribute to. If the subject's life is willingly crafted, then the ways in which others come to interact with it are an expression of her will. While she creates this availability for others, it is an expression of their will how much their lives are determined by this matter of fact. A life unappropriated by the will, on the other hand, is of no benefit to anyone, certainly not to the subject herself, let alone the social whole.

The social implications of the act obfuscate the clear lines Nietzsche draws around the artistic subject. It is challenging to realize that 1) people outside of the subject cannot maintain that same artistic distance to the subject's life as herself in order to appreciate the aesthetic unity in it following such a radical act, 2) there is no self-overcoming subject remaining to take responsibility for her will, and that 3) other members of the social whole contributed to the aesthetic insight the subject was able to enjoy over her life. The simple defense from these challenges is that according to Nietzsche, these considerations do not qualify her will as right or wrong. However, Nietzsche himself asserts: "For what is freedom? Having the will to responsibility for oneself. Maintaining the distance that separates us" (TI, Raids 38). How is it that, then, we could take any form of responsibility for intellectualizing, empathizing with, or even approving of someone's death as a marker of their life? The following passage offers some clues:

Whoever has a goal and an heir wants death at the right time for his goal and heir: And out of reverence for his goal and heir he will no longer hang withered wreaths in the sanctuary of life [...]. Thus I myself want to die, so that you my friends love the earth more for my sake; and I want to become earth again, so that I may have peace in the one who bore me (Z I, Death).

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39 Isabelle Wienand / Milenko Rakic / Sophie Haesen / Bernice Elger, "How Should One Die? Nietzsche's Contribution to the Issue of Suicide in Medical Ethics," in Emilian Mihailov / Tenzin Wangmo / Victoria Federiuc / Bernice Elger (eds.), *Contemporary Debates in Bioethics: European Perspectives*, Berlin 2018, 160–8: 161.

It would seem that while the artist's aesthetic unity is not phenomenologically available to the observers, it is available to them in the form of a goal for a unified life. That is, we do not experience another's necessity for a unified life. Rather, this unity is available to us in the sphere of causality that enables us to interpret the subject's life from a second-person perspective, where she appears to us as the cause behind a disjunctive set of deeds. It is here that we can become *heirs*, as opposed to immediate bearers, of another's goals.

At this juncture, two possible defenses for Nietzsche's argument appear: 1) like Zarathustra did, prior to the act, the subject's responsibility to herself requires that those related to her must be brought to an appreciation of the subject's aesthetic unity and its consummation, or 2) like we can assume of Zarathustra's readers, it falls onto those related to the subject who must bear this loss to appreciate the subject's life as well as her departure. Indeed, the communicability of one's life and willed death rests on an aesthetic insight outside observers cannot easily attain over the subject. Zarathustra goes on to plead: "Truly, Zarathustra had a goal, he threw his ball. Now you my friends are the heirs of my goal, to you I throw the golden ball. More than anything I like to see you, my friends, throwing the golden ball! And so I linger yet a bit on earth: forgive me that!" (Z I, Death) In the interpretive space shared between the artist and her observers, meaning is always in the air. We cannot expect the observers to be synchronized with the subject's unifying labor; they have to first catch the golden ball while it hovers in the space between. In addition, this is only possible after Zarathustra passes, after the totality of his life has been finalized in his death. Zarathustra wants his life to be understood not as an orderly epistemic object, but appreciated as an experience of play whose rules can be passed on, thrown around, and played with. As Bamford notes, one would "already have to have lived exactly as [the subject]" in order to understand the death she died.<sup>40</sup> It cannot be the routine function of recognition that makes the observers appreciate the unity of the subject's life. It is impossible to standardize this insight under universal determinations so that we could assess the freeness of a stranger's death. This act of interpretation can only be driven by those who are doing the interpreting for the sake of their *own* life's unity. Only those determined by the subject's presence in their life could cultivate this insight for themselves, and become the subject's heirs, and only if they took it upon themselves to catch the golden ball and play with it. Such interpretive play reintegrates the other, her life, living deeds, and death into the unity of the heir's life.

On behalf of Nietzsche, we can appeal to the self-responsibility of those related to the subject that they might pursue ease in the terms of their native aesthetic unity, rather than immediately condemning the suicidal subject. One venue lies in the possible compensation for the distance lost with the late subject in the artistic distance they must continue to maintain in their lives. If one truly depended on the subject for kinship, work, or material resources, then one had to have taken it upon oneself

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<sup>40</sup> Bamford, "Moraline-Free Virtue," 448.

to appreciate the kind of life that the subject willingly appropriated to herself.<sup>41</sup> This would be one's responsibility not to the subject, but to oneself, given that one's life is in part determined by the subject and the pleasure that subject took in her own life. To the extent that the outsider depended on the subject in the way they did, only they could grow to appreciate the subject in the way they would. Therefore, this insight regarding the other's life is produced only within the terms of one's *own* life. It is the result of this confusion that we experience sadness and frustration following the loss of a suicidal other. We expect another's experience to produce coherence in our artwork. We expect it to make sense like an orderly epistemic object and take up a non-intrusive corner on the canvas. But, we in fact do not realize that the canvas is ours and that we owe it to ourselves to give meaning to the way others interact with our lives, including a radical act of self-withdrawal as evident in the act of suicide.

## 4 Conclusion

In this essay, I have offered an aestheticist reading of Nietzsche's apparent endorsement of voluntary death. I have done so in response to a prohibitive argument that is not usually associated with Nietzsche in the literature. Hegel's argument, according to which one's life is at once one's property to shape and at the same time not one's property absolve, hinged on an epistemic stricture that the subject is not in a capacity to appreciate the implication of her living activity in the lives of others. Only this totality-objectifying perspective would enable her to possess herself in the full sense, that is, in the sense that allows her to absolve her life if she wanted to. In response, I have shown that Nietzsche's argument harnesses different notions of self-mastery and self-possession that precisely grant the subject this impossible judgment over her life. Drawing on his notion of life as an aesthetic phenomenon, I have argued that Nietzsche's endorsement of voluntary death follows the necessity of artistic unity, that the shaping of life is not to be left to the whims of natural or social forces. According to his expressivist account of action, death qualifies as a venue where the subject is still expressed into an interpretive space shared with others. From an artistic distance, then, Nietzsche argues, the subject is able to unify herself, deliver judgments on the totality of her living activity, and even make decisions of the kind that Hegel prohibited. Unless this is the case, what is assigned to the subject by the social order as her property, might very well not be *of her* in a fundamental sense. Most people die deaths that are alien to them.

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<sup>41</sup> For instance, Loeb suggests that Zarathustra's own death which he locates at the end of Part III, instantiates the right time to take one's leave (Paul S. Loeb, *The Death of Nietzsche's Zarathustra*, Cambridge 2010, 135–6). In the case of Zarathustra, the right time comes when his goal has been realized and the insight of his life has been communicated as the ideal of the self-overcoming human.

However, this is not to be understood as a straightforward promotion of suicide. The minimal claim Nietzsche at points offers is that we, the bystanders, are in no capacity to condemn another's suicide as an inauthentic response to their life. The stronger claim, on the other hand, is aligned with his expressivism and suggests that all death is an intrinsic component of life, and those who assert the necessity of their artistic unity into the world do not die deaths that are arbitrary or alien to them. Suicide would then be simply one form that the voluntary consummation of life takes on. Neither versions of the argument promote suicide in its own right. Nietzsche's response to social premises prohibiting suicide consists in an appeal to the necessity by which the others are to shape their own lives under their artistic unity. This is Zarathustra's wish for those who knew him: that they extract his life-affirming activities from the sphere of causality and interpret it for themselves, that they appreciate the aptness of his living activity for his self-assigned ideals, and that they carry this pursuit over into their own artistic trajectory.

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