

**Designing Meaning:**

**An Aesthetic Theory of Value**

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## Introduction

Friedrich Nietzsche once remarked, “Only aesthetically can the world be justified.”<sup>1</sup> This claim of Nietzsche’s is by no means self evident, but it falls in line with a recurring and deep fascination that he had with art and aesthetic philosophy. He was so fascinated by the topic that his first published book was dedicated to it, a book that he would refer back to throughout the rest of his career. This line of thinking is somewhat peculiar coming from the thinker who is now most readily remembered as a philosopher of nihilism.

Albert Camus similarly dedicated large portions of his two famous philosophic essays (*The Myth of Sisyphus*, and *The Rebel*) to the topic of artistic creation. Again, a strange juxtaposition arises from the fact that Camus’s purpose in writing those essays was to investigate the philosophy of suicide and absurdity.

Finally the notorious philosophic pessimist Emil Cioran, who has written short essays with titles such as “On Not Wanting to Live,” and “Nothing Matters”, writes frequently of art as if it is only redeeming feature of life.

Each of these three thinkers was enamored by these two seemingly disconnected ideas, art and nihilism. My thesis investigates this relationship, especially in relation to the individual. In what way do nihilism and aesthetic philosophy intersect, and how can we make sense of Nietzsche’s grand claim that life is only justified aesthetically?

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<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche, *Late Notebooks*, 80.

Beginning with an investigation into nihilism, I will provide a brief history that charts the evolution of the philosophic concept. I will define what nihilism is, how it comes about, and whether the problem of nihilism is still relevant today. Next I will proceed to define “art”, “the artist”, and the motivation for artistic creation. I will also develop an aesthetic theory that will address the question of how art can provide an answer to nihilism.

Finally I will look into the role that narrative structures and acting play in the creation of an artistic life, including what constitutes a tragic narrative and what constitutes a comedic one. Finally I will discuss the importance of acting, and its role in translating an artistic image of the world into a realized lived-experience.

## **Section 1: Is Life Meaningless?**

### **1.1. Meaning, Belief, and Objectivity**

What does it mean for something to have “meaning”? The concept of meaning is used so often, in such a variety of ways, that trying to provide a precise definition is quite difficult. Fundamentally, meaning is tied to belief. Something can be meaningful only insofar as that meaning arises from a belief. Beliefs themselves can be separated roughly into two different kinds. The first kind pertains to how the world works. These can be loosely equated to empirical or scientific knowledge (i.e. “facts”). The second kind of belief is concerned more with how we should act. These

kinds of questions are usually discussed in the context of morality, but a more exhaustive term would be “values”. Both of these kinds of belief are importantly related to the individual who holds them. Beliefs are what shape a person’s experience of the world, as well as offering direction and motivation; however, this is the case only insofar as a belief is held to be true. What then, can be said of the two kinds of beliefs described above? To begin with, are “facts” true, and if so, in what sense?

As an example, take the seemingly self-evident belief that I am sitting at my computer while I am writing this sentence. Numerous philosophic thought experiments (e.g. Descartes demon, brain in the vat, Bostrom’s simulation argument, etc.) can be invoked to seed doubt in my belief. Though there is no way to determine the likelihood of any of these scenarios, any possibility no matter how small, is enough to undermine the *absolute* certainty that I am sitting in front of my computer. Even beliefs as axiomatic as “ $2+2=4$ ” have trouble if enough scrutiny is placed upon them.

These examples should serve to illustrate that it is reasonable to doubt the absolute truth of any given belief, or to take an even more conservative conclusion, that it is reasonable to assume we will never have the epistemic capacity to discover whether such absolute truths exist. The implication of either conclusion is unsettling, because in either case the belief holder is left without any absolute ground to hold a belief. Emil Cioran summarized this problem nicely when he said; “We have convictions only if we have studied nothing thoroughly.” (Trouble with

Being Born 134) The harder one searches for absolute truth, it seems the more one is left in a state of skepticism.

Nevertheless, individuals and society at large operate as if scientific knowledge is true, but why is that? There are many philosophical theories that attempt to explain how knowledge is ultimately justified, but in view of human cognitive limitations, pragmatism is best able to account for our epistemic projects. Of course, pragmatism is a deep and rich area of philosophic investigation, but a rough definition should be adequate for the topic of this discussion.

Scientific inquiry, then, does not depend on absolute certainty as much as it does on reliability, so beliefs are held as true, or factual, only as long they reliably and accurately make predictions in their respective fields. Additionally, scientific knowledge seems to transcend the subjectivity of individuals. An experiment carried out in Canada will have the same results as one carried out in Sweden, regardless of the individual who carried it out. In this sense, while scientific knowledge cannot be verified as absolutely true, it can be called objectively true. This knowledge is “factual” and “objective” insofar as it continues to work. Given this, it may be more accurate to say that the goal of science is to produce knowledge that is, at this moment not false, as opposed to knowledge that is true. The difference is important because the former claim leaves the door of fallibility open, whereas the latter does not.

Another way to think about the kind of truth we are defining here is truth that is operative instead of absolute. A theory is deemed “true” so long as it tends to operate in a way that produces successful results. Now it could be argued that

“success” is a somewhat vague term, and is open to interpretation. Since we are talking about knowledge at the individual level, an intuitive definition of success would be whatever the individual utilizing the knowledge is hoping to achieve by doing so. In that sense, a good way to understand scientific facts is as tools. Just as a hammer is a successful tool if it is able to drive a nail into a board, a piece of knowledge is true so long as it assists a person in a given task. For example, physics and mathematics are true because they allow people to build bridges that don’t fall down, and chemistry and medical science is true so long as their application produces medicine that fights against diseases.

What then of the other realm of knowledge (i.e. of how we should act)? Unfortunately our epistemic limitations are not so easily cast aside here. There is no analogous method of inquiry that will reliably produce value systems that can guide us through moral quandaries. Moreover, any value theories that do exist do not transcend individual subjectivity in a way scientific knowledge does. For example, the death of a loved one is an event that may have to be approached differently by me and someone in Sweden and we are not guaranteed to come to the same resolution. Whether or not this sort of knowledge needs to transcend subjectivity is something that will be discussed later on, but for now it is a salient difference between the two kinds of knowledge that is worth pointing out. Finally, values cannot be verified as “successful” in the way scientific knowledge is. The latter can be verified relatively quickly by doing something like building a bridge, but the former is a kind of knowledge that needs to be acted on for many years, perhaps

even a lifetime, before its usefulness makes itself clear, and even then a revelation or affirmation is not guaranteed.

These value questions also are arguably more central to our lives than the scientific questions. The latter course of inquiry, in fact, would not even be pursued if there were no associated value judgment that made it a worthy pursuit, and this is also true of human activity in general. In any period of turmoil or extreme distress, individuals routinely turn to existing value structures to help navigate them through the often-overwhelming experiences. Without such conceptual scaffolding in place, regular yet tragic occurrences in our lives would be nearly impossible to deal with.

This conclusion effects practitioners of the religious life most, particularly those faiths that espouse objectively valid ideals and values. The Abrahamic religions (i.e. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) are of particular note here, because each of their doctrines claims supremacy in terms of truth. These doctrines also provide strict laws that govern everything from morality to diet, dress, and sexual conduct, so adherents of these faiths would be left particularly disillusioned should the objectivity of their beliefs be eroded. The dilemma for these kinds of thinkers can proceed in two ways. If there are no objectively valid truths in the world, the idea of God is quite ineffectual, and conversely, if there is no God, objective truths are on loose footing. This would have to be the ultimate conclusion given the logical framework of these religions. God and objectivity are intertwined, so the destruction of one would necessarily entail the destruction of the other.

Normally such states of affairs are described as “nihilistic”, and can extend into territories such as metaphysics, ethics, and politics. Indeed, the assertion of one

usually entails the assertion of the others.<sup>2</sup> All thinkers who write on the topic of nihilism will unequivocally attack some institution or idea that is thought to have objective value; thereby illustrating that objective ideals have no foundation. God is usually a prime target. Nietzsche, Camus, and Cioran all have more than a little to say on the topic of religion, albeit with slightly different approaches. In *The Rebel*, Camus charts a useful and insightful history of nihilism worth recounting here. He focuses on iconic figures that have rebelled against God and morality, and qualifies these events as metaphysical rebellions.

## 1.2 A Brief History of Nihilism

With the Marquis de Sade, we have what Camus calls “the first coherent offensive.”<sup>3</sup> Camus provides a portrait of a thinker in chains whose rebellion is against a very literal kind of oppression, that of his physical imprisonment. Camus writes, “The idea of God which Sade conceives for himself is, therefore, of a criminal divinity who oppresses and denies mankind.”<sup>4</sup> Sade manifests this same attitude in his writings, but he stands opposed to the God who sanctioned his imprisonment. In this spirit Sade becomes the champion of what is most antithetical to an orthodox conception of God, i.e., nature and sex. Camus’s analysis of Sade leads to the conclusion that the latter’s philosophy advocates a kind of absolute negation. In

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<sup>2</sup> With no divine lawmaker, universal moral laws have no foundation, which in turn has repercussions on the political sphere. The reverse is also true in that if our political discourse is not based on an objective value system, it is likely because such a system does not exist ethically or metaphysically.

<sup>3</sup> Camus, *The Rebel*, 36.

<sup>4</sup> Camus, *The Rebel*, 37.



rebellious against a God whom he views as criminal, Sade allows himself the same freedoms that are attributed to God, though in pursuit of different ends. Sex as an analogue of nature becomes the ideal metaphor for Sade's philosophy of dominance.

Given the actual limitations placed on Sade during his life (in the form of censorship and imprisonment), it should not be surprising that he came to have such vehement views. Destruction (particularly of the institutional structures that kept him imprisoned) would have resulted in liberty. But Sade did not think past this point. For him the abolition of the institutional powers that had imprisoned him was the endgame. Sade's revolt was in this sense negative, as it sought only to tear down, not to build up.

The next figure in Camus' short history is the fictional character Ivan Karamazov in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. Ivan's tension lies in the impossibility of reconciling the truth of God's existence with any conception of divine justice. How, he asks, can God allow so much suffering to persist? And if such suffering is part of a divine plan, then Ivan rejects the plan on the grounds that "All the knowledge in the world is not worth a child's tears."<sup>5</sup> By pitting God's will against justice Ivan vilifies God to the point at which he would reject the deity regardless of any divine explanations. Camus describes Ivan's predicament as follows: "Ivan is the incarnation of the refusal to be the only one saved. He throws his lot in with the damned and, for their sake, rejects eternity. [...] There is no possible salvation for the man who feels real compassion."<sup>6</sup> The tension in Ivan's position is his inability to affirm existence. Whereas Sade was content to negate and

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 56.

<sup>6</sup> Camus, *The Rebel*, 57.

subvert, Ivan is compelled to find a reason to live. The paradox arises because the same conception of justice that Ivan would prosecute God with is completely unsubstantiated without him. All Ivan can conclude with certainty on his own is that “Everything is permitted”, and this Camus calls the real beginning of contemporary nihilism.<sup>7</sup>

Ivan’s desire to live in accordance with higher principles but without a logical justification for them is at the heart of my discussion. Ivan’s story is unhopeful in its conclusions, as the contradiction between god and justice leads him to madness. But the question posed by the life of Ivan Karamazov is what Camus finds vitally important, namely, “can one live and stand one’s ground in a state of rebellion?”<sup>8</sup> To answer this question Camus turns to Nietzsche.

“God is dead.” The single phrase is synonymous with Nietzsche’s thought. It is difficult to imagine that three words can have such profound depth and importance, but it is not an overstatement to say that they do. Primarily we can take these words to be a continuation of the line of thought discussed up to this point, but unlike Sade and Ivan Karamazov, Nietzsche’s aim is not to oppose the deity or provide proofs for his demise. As Camus points out, Nietzsche takes the death of god as a starting point, “[Nietzsche] was the first to understand the immense importance of the event and to decide that this rebellion on the part of men could not lead to a renaissance unless it was controlled and directed.”<sup>9</sup> He sets forth to counteract the nihilism that

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 57.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 58.

<sup>9</sup> Camus, *The Rebel*, 68.

inevitably follows from the death of God. Nietzsche's understanding of this problem is quite sophisticated so it is worth going into.

Since Plato, truth had become so important a concept in metaphysical philosophy that Christianity eventually adopted it and made it synonymous with God.<sup>10</sup> This is no doubt why Sade and Ivan take aim at God. They did not agree that he represented a truth worth worshipping. With the natural sciences and the scientific method gaining prominence, the concept of truth remained as important as ever but the foundation from which it sprung was shaken. Like a snake eating its own tail, the scientists attempting to use "objective" methods of inquiry to disprove God's omnipotence were actually destroying the one thing that validated their projects in the first place, namely the single idol of objectivity that had persisted throughout history. Nietzsche hypothesized that destroying the Christian philosophy would bring on aimlessness, a value vacuum that would not easily be filled.

In his late notebooks, Nietzsche writes, "Nihilism is standing at the gate: From where does this uncanniest of guests come to us?" and promptly answers

The collapse of Christianity – brought about by its morality (indissoluble from it), which turns against the Christian God (the sense of truthfulness, highly developed by Christianity, is *disgusted* at the falseness and mendacity of the whole Christian interpretation of world and history. A backlash from 'God is truth' into the fanatical belief 'Everything is false'.)

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<sup>10</sup> Actually in many ways Plato's philosophy is a precursor to Christian doctrine with the equation of the "true" with the "good".

<sup>11</sup> Nietzsche, *Late Notebooks*, 83.

This final sentence encapsulates the inherent contradiction contained in the Christian world-view. By positing an afterlife and claiming it as a truth, Christianity logically denies the here-and-now as fully real. In other words, primacy is given to the ideal, whereas our lived existence becomes secondary. In his analysis of Nietzsche, Camus writes, "A nihilist is not one who believes in nothing, but one who does not believe in what exists."<sup>12</sup> To Nietzsche, this certainly includes the devout Christian, but the criticism can be levied against any dogmatic system of belief. Socialism can be seen under the same light, as it "substitutes ideal ends for real ends, and contributes to enervating both the will and the imagination."<sup>13</sup>

Many doctrines attempted to fill the void left behind with the death of God, but Nietzsche warned against subscribing to these as well. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, he accuses all philosophy of being derived from "prejudices." He contends that the true origin of any thought is not from an objective process of reason, but something subjective. He describes this self-deceit of philosophers as follows: "what happens at bottom is that a prejudice, a notion, an 'inspiration', generally a desire of the heart sifted and made abstract, is defended by them with reasons sought after the fact."<sup>14</sup> Nietzsche asks us not to put the cart before of the horse, but rather, in a manner of speaking, to begin from the beginning. We must begin from nothing, destroy all systems of thought, disregard all preconceived notions of truth or objectivity, and only then can we honestly address our situation. He writes, "The opposition is dawning between the world we revere and the world in which we live, which we –

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<sup>12</sup> Camus, *The Rebel*, 69.

<sup>13</sup> Camus, *The Rebel*, 69.

<sup>14</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Sect. 5.

are. It remains for us to abolish either our reverence or ourselves. The latter is nihilism.”<sup>15</sup> The choice of self-annihilation seems extreme, but it indicates how seriously Nietzsche views this dilemma. His ultimate prescription is to abolish our reverence in the illusory world of objective ideals.

Camus was certainly interested in this question himself, as he dedicated much of his philosophic career to investigating the question of suicide. In his own words, “Judging whether or not life is worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.”<sup>16</sup> In pursuing an answer to this question Camus investigates the reasons why people decide to commit suicide, and though he admits that there is no single answer to this question, there is a common feeling that accompanies the desire to end one’s life; the feeling of absurdity. This feeling can be roughly be understood as a loss of meaning, but Camus’ description more adequately captures the nuance of his idea, “A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. [...] This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity.”<sup>17</sup>

Camus builds on Nietzsche’s understanding of a world without meaning by investigating the individual’s relationship to such a world. In particular, is it reasonable for a person to continue living once they have glimpsed the absurdity of their situation? Camus’ analysis is unique and fascinating because he attempts to understand what arouses a feeling of absurdity in people. He does not do this by

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<sup>15</sup> Nietzsche, *Late Notebooks*, 84.

<sup>16</sup> Camus, *Sisyphus*, 3.

<sup>17</sup> Camus, *Sisyphus*, 6.

means of esoteric abstractions (though these have their place as well), but instead by outlining how the “daily grind” leads to weariness, which inevitably provokes the conscious mind to question “Why?” or “What’s the point?”

“Anxiety”, says Camus, is the first feeling one is overcome with when faced with the absurd.<sup>18</sup> It is not difficult to see why this is the case, for if the value structure that was acting as the scaffolding for a person’s life were dismantled, it would undoubtedly be a jarring experience. The process by which one comes to the absurd is similar to the thought experiments mentioned in section one. When one truly investigates the underpinnings for any deeply held belief there are always logical contradictions or conceptual anomalies that the mind is simply unable to square. Commonsense insights into the concept of time are particularly relevant here. Camus rightly points out that human psychology is fixated on “tomorrow”. “We live for the future,” he says, but this forward-facing attitude rarely if ever looks towards the end. If you do look far enough into your future, you will be faced with the contradiction that as you pursue your dreams and desires, and as you live out the life you envisage for yourself, you are ultimately only creeping closer and closer to death. Once again the question arises, “What’s the point?” Notice too that this realization is universal. Absent any grand illusions or metaphysical rabbits-in-hats, every person faces this contradiction on a fundamental level. We must all grapple with this single, unalienable, axiomatic fact of existence: we are all born to die.

The dilemma posed by Nietzsche was also an object of great interest for Emil Cioran. Though there are many thinkers who make relevant and valuable

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 13.

contributions to this discussion, Cioran is unique in that he presents a kind of culmination point for this line of thought. We see this in two ways: on the one hand because he adheres to the same themes and arguments of those already discussed (he has in fact been dubbed “the last worthy disciple of Nietzsche”), and on the other because he extrapolated these themes and arguments to their logical end. As an avid student of Nietzsche, we find in Cioran’s work a scathing criticism of religion and dogma, but also a somber understanding of its benefits, “So long as man is protected by madness, he functions and flourishes; but when he frees himself from the fruitful tyranny of fixed ideas, he is lost, ruined.”<sup>19</sup>

Cioran echoes many of the sentiments expressed by Camus. Consider the following description on the passage of time: “The moments follow each other, nothing lends them the illusion of a content or the appearance of a meaning; they pass; their course is not ours; we contemplate that passage, prisoners of a stupid perception.”<sup>20</sup> The mark of Cioran’s writing, and what differentiates him from others in this field is precisely this “stupid perception.” Cioran’s investigation differs in that he is thoroughly introspective in a way Camus and Nietzsche are not, and in a discussion revolving around an individual’s sense of meaning (or lack thereof) this kind of thinking should not be undervalued.

There are other unique hallmarks of Cioran’s writing as well. His ruminations on history, for example, state that it is best understood relativistically, and civilization is nothing more than an accumulation of popular opinion and moral disposition at any given time. In a particularly foreboding passage we are invited to

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<sup>19</sup> Cioran, *History of Decay*, 62.

<sup>20</sup> Cioran, *History of Decay*, 13.

imagine what the world would become if we embrace an attitude of nihilism, that is, absolute meaninglessness. In this day, “when a sonnet ceases to be a temptation for our tears, and when in the middle of a sonata our yawns win out over our emotion, then the graveyard will have nothing more to do with us.”<sup>21</sup> This, no doubt, is the world that our prophets of nihilism are warning against.

There are numerous passages in which Cioran beautifully and passionately describes such states of doom and gloom, but in his descriptions themselves we find a hopeful escape from his nihilism. In his first work, *On the Heights of Despair*, he sets out a series of short essays, part philosophic analysis and part personal reflection, that seek to understand how an individual can live in a meaningless world. One such essay, entitled “The Passion for the Absurd”, is worth quoting at length as it relates to the idea we are after.

There are no arguments. Can anyone who has reached the limits bother with arguments, causes, effects, moral considerations, and so forth? Of course not. For such a person there are only unmotivated motives for living. On the heights of despair, the passion for the absurd is the only thing that can still throw a demonic light on chaos. When all the current reasons— moral, esthetic, religious, social, and so on— no longer guide one’s life, how can one sustain life without succumbing to nothingness? Only by a connection with the absurd, by love of absolute uselessness, loving something which does not have substance but which simulates an illusion of life.<sup>22</sup>

Despite his extraordinary pessimism, in this passage Cioran still admits that something may have a redemptive quality, and this is an idea that we can trace back through every philosophy we have looked at to this point. Sade, Dostoyevsky,

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 62.

<sup>22</sup> Cioran, *Heights of Despair*, 10.



Nietzsche, Camus, and Cioran all encounter this problem of nihilism, and clearly it was of such importance to them all that it became a central focus of their work.

An important thing to notice in this history is that it is more than just a series of consecutive thinkers. As each builds on the last, this history is also an evolution of nihilistic thinking. With Sade, the whole idea was centered on destruction. It is a rudimentary form of nihilism in which the aim is to destroy the idealistic conceptual structures that are believed to be objective. In his case, this was the authority of the church and state. Dostoyevsky carried on this theme with Ivan, but it is clear that Ivan is not content with mere destruction. He yearns for some positive ideal to replace what is destroyed. And finally Nietzsche's noble project is to discover how one succeeds in Ivan's forlorn task.

Before moving on to investigate the solution to these problems, a few points of clarification and closure are necessary. First, it is worthwhile to note that though these philosophers all thought deeply and seriously about the problem of nihilism, none are themselves nihilists. Recall that Camus describes the nihilist as "not one who believes in nothing, but one who does not believe in what exists."<sup>23</sup> The nihilist surely is not one who believes in nothing, for that in itself is a logical impossibility. Cioran details quite nicely the "unconscious dogmas" that are present simply by virtue of being alive. Even if one were devoted to the idea of "nothingness" however conceived, it must still be admitted that it is an idea that the individual is harboring, "and if someone dies for an idea, it is because it is *his* idea, and his idea is *his life*."<sup>24</sup> However, I would have to disagree with Camus slightly in that, the nihilist is not

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<sup>23</sup> Camus, *The Rebel*, 69.

<sup>24</sup> Cioran, *History of Decay*, 58.

merely “one who does not believe in what exists”, but rather one who is irreverent towards what exists. “Nothing matters,” the nihilist dictum, is a call to inaction if it is anything. Cioran writes of ennui, “It makes us find time long, too long—unsuited to show us an end... we destroy ourselves in slow motion, since the future has stopped offering us a *raison d’etre*.”<sup>25</sup>

On the individual level nihilism manifests itself as boredom. Boredom taken far enough can easily breed resentment toward existence, the desire to destroy existence. What Nietzsche so incisively demonstrated was the effects such a disposition would have on a societal scale. Nihilism at its roots is a stultification and stagnation of movement and creation. On a macro scale such boredom takes the form of “equality”, more specifically, uniformity. Mass stagnation is the only way to ensure equality because the moment one begins to move one makes oneself unequal to others. The Christian worldview stipulated such equality in the afterlife, but since “god is dead”, this nihilistic policy has moved into the political realm in the form of socialist doctrine. So what bearing does this analysis have on the current state of affairs? Do we still have to worry today about what these men worried about decades and centuries ago?

### **1.3 Contemporary Nihilism and the Way Forward**

It may not be an overstatement to say that nihilistic sentiments and attitudes are more prevalent today than in all of human history. It seems that the project

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 14.

carried out by the aforementioned thinkers to dismantle objective value systems has been largely successful, not only in the religious sphere but also in the political and cultural. The tremendous leaps forward made in information and communications technologies have all but forced a transparency on government affairs, which has revealed, unsurprisingly, many cases of misuse of power and outright corruption across the globe. As a small example, studies have shown a mass disillusionment in the great institutional powers that govern the U.S., with less than 20 percent of people expressing any trust in the government. This is down from over 70 percent less than 50 years ago.<sup>26</sup> This undoubtedly has a causal connection to the low voter turn out highlighted in each election cycle.

Culturally the western world seems more lost than ever. Multiculturalism has given us exposure to the different lives and inclinations of peoples across the world, but with a growing sense of moral and cultural relativism we are unable to sort the good from the bad. One is reminded of Ted Bundy's appeal for ethical subjectivism, which echoes all too closely the destructive revolt of Sade.<sup>27</sup> As a substitute for the traditional values that were the bedrock of the average western family (values derived mostly from Judeo-Christian doctrines), people turn frantically towards reality television and consumerism as a means to escape the meaninglessness of their own lives. This, perhaps, is reminiscent of Ivan's mad search for meaning, or

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<sup>26</sup> Fingerhut, Hannah. "1. Trust in Government: 1958-2015." Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. N.p., 22 Nov. 2015. Web. 03 Apr. 2017. <http://www.people-press.org/2015/11/23/1-trust-in-government-1958-2015/>

<sup>27</sup> Consider this quote from a taped confession by Bundy to one of his victims, "I discovered that to become truly free, truly unfettered, I had to become truly uninhibited. And I quickly discovered that the greatest obstacle to my freedom, the greatest block and limitation to it consists in the insupportable "value judgment" that I was bound to respect the rights of others."

his unsheltered disdain for his sensualist father who pursues pleasure only in the materialistic elements of life.

Moreover the jeremiahs and doomsayers have never had more to preach about, with problems such as climate change, peak oil, potential nuclear war, and water and food crises haunting us everyday. For the first time in history these apocalyptic visions are supported by all of the findings of the natural and social sciences, instead of being unsubstantiated metaphysical claims. Hence the ruminations of Camus' imagined ordinary man become even more sinister. Instead of asking simply "why should I do anything if I am bound to die?" the question becomes, "why should I do anything if everyone is bound to die?"

Beneath all of this is the creeping influence of post-modern thought, which in addition to dismantling objective theories of the world has lent confidence to social reformers and revolutionaries who would replace what has been rightly dismantled with new, equally pernicious dogmas, such as those espoused by neo-Marxism, feminism, and other radical ideologies. These theories are generally concerned with propagating a socialist or egalitarian worldview, and all commit the fallacious imposition of a worldview that relies on unquestionable assumptions (namely that people are all equally, and inherently valuable regardless differences in capabilities). As stated before, these theories all "substitute ideal ends for real ends [...] enervating both the will and the imagination." Nietzsche was particularly vocal in warning against socialist systems of thought, which seek to smuggle Christian (slave) morality into secular societies.

Furthermore, these grand schemes to understand and codify the world clumsily and hastily gloss over the individual. In Marxists doctrine for example, the social class that the individual falls into is given primacy in analysis over the individual themselves. Feminist doctrine achieves a similar end by ignoring the complexities of individuals and instead beginning its analysis from a simplified understanding of gender. In both cases, the analysis of human beings happens at a sociological level where each person is defined as part of a homogenous group, and the focus concentrates on methods to equalize differences between groups. Treating each person as somehow fundamentally equivalent is a gross oversimplification of an infinitely complex organism. A similar argument was made by Nietzsche himself in *Human, All Too Human* when he writes: "The state is a prudent institution for the protection of individuals against one another: if it is completed and perfect too far it will in the end enfeeble the individual and, indeed, dissolve him."<sup>28</sup> To those who find comfort in subscribing to dogmas, these kinds of socialist theories are a welcome substitute to the collapse of Christianity, but the free thinker is left still wandering the desert surrounded by crumbling castles of sand.

The problem today is that of a dilemma, which asks us either to indoctrinate ourselves into a rigid ideological belief system to find meaning, or else fall into irreverent boredom with all of existence. For how can an individual develop a meaningful existence without a value system to operate under and be motivated by, and how can a value system be developed and utilized effectively without it being objectively true? Viewed in this way, the problem seems unsolvable, but of course,

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<sup>28</sup> Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, Sect. 235.

this is the wrong way to view the problem. Faced with these alternatives the individual needs to reject the idea of adopting or adhering to values that purportedly grant meaning to life. To do this, the individual must first reject the idea of “truth” altogether. Values must be conceived on an entirely different paradigm, one that mirrors the methods and practices of a pragmatic science, and not the rigid orthodoxy of religion. Finally the individual needs to move away from the comforting belief that an answer to the question of the meaning of life can be found objectively, and move towards the idea that value can be created at the individual level.

## **Section 2: What is Art?**

### **2.1 The Process**

Nihilism, broadly construed, is the individual’s struggle to find meaning in a world without values. The discussion in the previous chapter charted a history of nihilism, detailing how the traditional values of history were undermined and destroyed, as well as the current state of affairs that that has led to. Our solution to this problem, then, must be to create new values, without replicating all of the metaphysical foibles associated with traditional religious models, most notably, the idea that the value system is (or needs to be) objectively true. In this section I will argue that it is within the artistic realm that the construction of these sorts of value systems is best possible.

To understand the significance of art in its ability to address the problems laid out in the previous chapter, it is first necessary to have an understanding of Nietzsche's aesthetic philosophy. This is important because Nietzsche lays the groundwork that influences Camus and Cioran, but also because Nietzsche's definition of art describes the way in which it is developed. In his seminal work on aesthetics, Nietzsche writes,

We will have achieved much for a science of aesthetics when we come, not merely to a logical understanding, but also to the certain and immediate apprehension of the fact that the further development of art is bound up with the duality of the Apollonian and the Dionysian.<sup>29</sup>

*The Birth of Tragedy* (BT) is an attempt to understand the Ancient Greek development of the dramatic form called tragedy. Its "birth" is the result of a synthesis of what Nietzsche identifies as the two artistic forces in ancient Greek culture, namely, the Dionysian and the Apollonian. These two forces represent opposite impulses or drives, with the former signifying the world of intoxication and the latter the world of dreams. Intoxication should not be taken to mean merely drunkenness, but more the psychological experience of being entirely "in the moment".<sup>30</sup> Of course, inebriation is one route to this state of mind, but other drugs can also induce such an experience. There are also routes that require no drugs at all, for example dance. The mind also enters the Dionysian in times of absolute immersion in an activity, like orgasm during sex, or entering a flow state during a competitive sport. Likewise, the dream state of the Apollonian is not simply what

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<sup>29</sup> Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, Sect. 1.

<sup>30</sup> Nietzsche's own terminology describes the Dionysian state as a "primordial unity" but due to the metaphysical problems that will be discussed later on, I feel my description is more apt.

happens when you sleep, but any activity that requires you to abstract and form “plastic” images representative of concrete particulars.

The Apollonian and Dionysian are very elastic concepts and have been stretched and molded by many thinkers towards many ends. Camille Paglia for example, takes the Dionysian/Apollonian divide to represent the duality of the sexes, with Apollo standing for masculine creative energy, and Dionysus, feminine daemonic nature. Here too though, it is by synthesis that these two forces are used for productive ends, not only in art but also the in creation of civilization. Perhaps the broadest and simplest way to understand the dichotomy is in terms of “order” on the Apollonian side and “chaos” on the Dionysian.<sup>31</sup> Another salient feature of the dichotomy is that these two forces are not in conflict so much as occupying the opposite ends of a spectrum. The more you move in one direction, the less you have of the other, and vice versa. Though Nietzsche does not explicitly endorse this gradient perspective on the dichotomy, it seems to be a plausible interpretation, and a useful one for the account we are developing here.

Much of the rest of the BT expands on this basic dichotomy and how it is applied to particular forms of art, but the idea has received its share of criticism, none so scathing as from Nietzsche himself. In his “Attempt at Self-Criticism” written as a preface to the second edition of the work, Nietzsche looks back at what he sees ultimately as a failed work. Mostly this is due to an injection of Schopenhauerian and Kantian metaphysics into his analysis, which he saw as not only antithetical to the aims of his own project, but also to the philosophies of the

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<sup>31</sup> Nussbaum presents this formulation of the dichotomy.



two great thinkers themselves.<sup>32</sup> A significant portion of his self-criticism also pointed to the fact that he was making what he later came to see as unwarranted analogies between Ancient Greek culture and the German culture of his day.<sup>33</sup> What are we to make of Nietzsche's "regret"? Does this invalidate the arguments put forth in the work? I think not.

Nietzsche calls the question addressed in the *Birth of Tragedy* as one of "the upmost importance."<sup>34</sup> A point made evident by the fact that his criticisms are concerned with the manner in which he addressed the problem, not the problem itself. In the same essay there is evidence that the concepts presented in BT are not entirely without merit. In section 5 we are given an explanation of the motivation that drove Nietzsche to write the work as well as the intended goal. He first describes the Christian moral view of the world, and proceeds to say the following about it:

Behind such a way of thinking and evaluating, which must be hostile to art, so long as it is in any way consistent, I always perceived also a hostility to life, the wrathful, vengeful aversion to life itself. For all life rests on appearance, art, illusion, optics, the need for perspective and for error.

Having described the conflict he hoped to address, Nietzsche then moves on to discuss the product of his labours:

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<sup>32</sup> Nietzsche, *Self-Criticism*, Sect. 6.

<sup>33</sup> He does not say so explicitly in the self-criticism but this is undoubtedly a reference to his tumultuous relationship with Richard Wagner (to whom the book was in part dedicated), who in Nietzsche's esteem, went from something of a modern day hero, to an absolute traitor of higher ideals.

<sup>34</sup> Nietzsche, *Self-Criticism*, Sect. 1.

And so, my instinct at that time turned itself against morality in this questionable book, as an instinctual affirmation of life, and a fundamentally different doctrine, a totally opposite way of evaluating life, was invented, something purely artistic and anti-Christian. What should it be called? As a philologist and man of words, I baptized it, taking some liberties (for who knew the correct name for the Antichrist?), after the name of a Greek god: I called it the Dionysian.<sup>35</sup>

The implicit point is that the Christian worldview is one that ignores the Dionysian element. Christian teachings tend to preach reservation and denial of the kinds of bodily sensations that characterize the Dionysian, which Nietzsche believed to be of great value in the life of an individual. Unfortunately, the metaphysical blunder he committed in BT led him to condemn the book, and to some degree, abandon the problem all together. But what if Nietzsche's Apollonian/Dionysian dichotomy could be reinterpreted to exclude the metaphysics he later criticized? This is a project that two contemporary thinkers have taken on, and their conclusions may lend us some insight into this question.

Martha Nussbaum offers a highly detailed exposition of Schopenhauer's metaphysics and its influence on BT. She points out the contradictions mentioned above in great detail, but more importantly, by looking at Nietzsche's writings about art in his later works, she is able to formulate an interesting view of his aesthetic philosophy. Primarily, she removes the Apollonian and Dionysian from the bog of metaphysics and plants them instead in the realm of psychology. These two are no longer analogues of Schopenhauer's "representation and will" respectively, but instead are seen as two distinct forms of cognitive activity, each fulfilling a practical human need of the individual. The Apollonian denotes the cognitive ability to

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<sup>35</sup> Nietzsche, *Self-Criticism*, Sect. 5

generalize and abstract as a way to survive in the world (e.g. being able to generalize that predators are distinct from food sources.) The Dionysian is the cognitive state of being charmed or enchanted, which Nussbaum translates to mean a “heightened awareness of freedom, harmony, and unity.”<sup>36</sup>

Beatrice Han-Pile approaches the question in a different manner. She contends that there is evidence in BT of an “artist’s metaphysics” which is distinct from the more obvious Schopenhaurian elements. Her attempt to salvage BT stems from an attempt to flesh out the former metaphysics. This account is less compelling than Nussbaum’s because it largely ignores Nietzsche’s own self-criticism in which he openly admits to mistakenly combining Schopenhauer’s philosophy with his own. Seeing as it aligns more closely with Nietzsche’s self-criticism, Nussbaum’s psychological account is preferable. Framing the dichotomy as one of two differing mental states also has the merit that it addresses the problem of nihilism directly, because that problem is, first and foremost, one of psychology at the individual level.<sup>37</sup>

That said, there is an important element of Han-Pile’s account that is worth salvaging. She writes,

I would thus suggest that Nietzsche intended the metaphysics, not as an explanatory device nor as a literal representation of the real state of affairs in the world, but as a symbolisation of the meaning of life, belief in which is pragmatically justified by its potentially positive effects on us.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Nussbaum, 95.

<sup>37</sup> In fact there is evidence in Nietzsche’s later writings that show he was at least interested in the question of art from a psychological perspective, specifically in the *Twilight of the Idols* (Skirmishes of an untimely man Section 8).

<sup>38</sup> Han-Pile, 395.

The key point to draw out of the above passage is the idea of pragmatism. As I briefly argued in the previous chapter (1.1) science derives its authority from pragmatism. So long as scientific discourse continues to reliably produce technology, and to make predictions about the physical universe, then we have good reason to keep pursuing science. What Han-Pile is suggesting about BT is that it was Nietzsche's attempt to construct a pragmatic science of aesthetics. This is a compelling idea, one that will be developed more in the next section, which deals with the relationship between the individual and his psychology.

## **2.2 The Artist**

From the preceding discussion it should be clear that it is quite a difficult task to disentangle the parts of BT that Nietzsche endorsed from those he later critiqued. My attempt here is not to reconcile BT with Nietzsche's later works, but rather to form an aesthetic theory that might be able to validate Nietzsche's claim that art is the antidote to the suffering in life. By beginning with Nussbaum's psychological interpretation of the Apollonian/ Dionysian divide we can construct a new account of how these two mental states interact. The terms Apollonian and Dionysian will be used because they nicely capture the duality of cognitive states we are talking about, but they should not be associated too closely in the manner in which Nietzsche utilized them in BT, except very generally as "order" on the one hand and "disorder" or "chaos" on the other.

If the Apollonian and Dionysian are to be reinterpreted as cognitive activities of particular individuals, and the interplay of the two activities defines “art” proper, it raises the questions of what sorts of cognitive states these denote, as well as what an “artist” is exactly. The first question was answered briefly in the previous section, with the Apollonian being the ability to abstract or generalize, and the Dionysian being a heightened sense of awareness, or the sensation of living “in the moment.” In terms of mental states however these general descriptions need to be filled out to better understand the correlation. Nietzsche provides some guidance here in his unpublished late notebooks in which he returns to the idea of the Apollonian and Dionysian.

Fundamental psychological experiences: the name ‘Apollonian’ designates the enraptured lingering before a fabricated, dreamed-up world, before the world of *beautiful illusion* as a redemption from becoming. Dionysos, on the other hand, stands namesake for a becoming which is actively grasped, subjectively experienced, as a raging voluptuousness of the creative man who also knows the wrath of the destroyer.<sup>39</sup>

A good example of an Apollonian cognitive mind state is the one Nietzsche opposes in his self-criticism, namely Christianity. Now, this is not to say that Nietzsche himself believed that religions (Christianity in particular) were artistic representations, but by assuming Nussbaum’s psychological dichotomy we can interpret them in this way. And indeed, the way in which Nietzsche describes the Apollonian psychology lends credence to this claim. He writes, “the [Apollonian] wants appearance to be eternal, and before it man becomes quiet, free of wishes,

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<sup>39</sup> Nietzsche, *Late Notebooks*, 81.

smooth as a still sea, healed, in agreement with himself and all existence.”<sup>40</sup>

Christianity, or any religion for that matter, is a kind of abstract cognitive framework that individuals can apply to experiences to impose a kind of order on them. But this is only so if the religion is adhered to in a way that is absolute, so the prescriptions are taken as law. Of course, in practice religious adherence is more nuanced, but we are investigating the extreme side of this cognitive mental state so the simplified conception of religion is necessary. Nietzsche’s description of the Apollonian cognitive state could be applied to a religious practitioner who is deep in prayer, ruminating on the forms and images of his or her religion. The important thing to note is that it is not the religion itself that can be called Apollonian, rather it is the religious value structure that the adherent is following in his or her mind.

Ideologies work the same way, in that they are a rigid, internally coherent, catchall solution to make sense of the world. By contrast, the Dionysian is a mental state that, in essence, submerges individuals in a chaotic experience so that they do not have the ability to apply any kind of conceptual framework to their experience. These sorts of cognitive states are experienced entirely in the moment, and the previously listed examples of dance and orgasm illustrate what Nietzsche is trying to describe. From this analysis it is also evident how, if the Apollonian conceptual framework one views the world through is undermined, then it can lead to a loss of meaning and nihilistic sentiments. In this case, the individual is left trying to navigate the confusion of endless and novel experiences with no map or compass. But the Dionysian is not simply a place of nihilism; it is also the ground of creation.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid. 81.

Of the Dionysian psychology Nietzsche writes, “the [Dionysian] desire urges men towards becoming, towards the voluptuousness of making things become, i.e., of creating and annihilating.”<sup>41</sup> In this state of flux and chaos the artist thrives.

This brings us to the second question, what is an artist? The answer is, precisely the individual who can create his or her own map and compass. Consider the following passage by Nietzsche:

*Fourth Proposition.* Any distinction between a “true” and an “apparent” world—whether in the Christian manner or in the manner of Kant (in the end, an underhanded Christian)—is only a suggestion of decadence, a symptom of the *decline of life*. That the artist esteems appearance higher than reality is no objection to this proposition. For “appearance” in this case means reality *once more*, only by way of selection, reinforcement, and correction. The tragic artist is no pessimist: he is precisely the one who says Yes to everything questionable, even to the terrible—he is *Dionysian*.<sup>42</sup>

The Christian (or any ideologue) ascribes to a narrow and limiting conceptual framework, one that is considered “true” and superimposed onto the “apparent” world. If that framework is dismantled, it leaves the adherent directionless and lost. By contrast, the artist begins from the chaotic standpoint of no guiding framework, (i.e., “in the moment”), and constructs a framework “by way of selection, reinforcement, and correction.” Note, however, that this activity requires a certain incorporation of Apollonian psychology. Selection, reinforcement, and correction are precisely the kind of activities that emerge from the part of our minds that seek order. The difference between the two types of people, i.e., the Christian and the artist, is that the latter does not feel obliged to adhere rigidly to any framework

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<sup>41</sup> Nietzsche, *Late Notebooks*, 81.

<sup>42</sup> Kaufmann, *Portable Nietzsche*, 484.

constructed for a particular experience, whereas the former struggles to have all his experiences conform to a single framework. For example, in the case of an unexpected death of a loved one (e.g. a child with cancer), the Christian ideologue may struggle to incorporate the meaning of such an event into a value structure that cannot explain it adequately or coherently. The artist, by contrast, is able to take stock of the sensations being aroused, and to interpret them in such a way that makes the event more bearable. The question of how exactly this is done will be explored in greater depth in the next chapter.

The artist, then, can be seen as someone who occupies the cognitive space between the two psychological extremes, Apollonian and Dionysian. But if religious fanatics and ideologues are manifestations of the Apollonian extreme, then what sort of individual is a manifestation of the Dionysian extreme? Nietzsche does not provide a clear answer to this question, but Cioran gives fascinating insight here.

Though he never uses the term “Dionysian” to describe the recurring themes he tackles, many of the vivid descriptions that Cioran weaves are clear representations of psychological states. In one aphoristic essay in particular he describes the dangers of becoming too inclined towards a Dionysian psychological state: “A man eliminates himself from the rank of his kind by the monastery or some other artifice – by morphine, masturbation, or rum, whereas some form of expression might have saved him.”<sup>43</sup> The monastery is a reference to the Apollonian religious life, for which both Nietzsche and Cioran have little regard, but notice what exists at the other end of the spectrum. “Morphine, masturbation, and rum” are

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<sup>43</sup> Cioran, *History of Decay*, 51.



intoxicants that are able to catalyze the individual into a Dionysian mental state. The salient feature of the Dionysian experience is that it in some respects resembles death. The effects of drugs, alcohol, and sexual release all lead to a psychological state where the awareness of self is eroded, and one is more imbedded in a state of chaos than order.

Trying to exist exclusively on the Dionysian side of the psychological spectrum shares many of the same problems as the Apollonian. Prima facie we can see at least the possibility of a distinction being drawn between a “true” and an “apparent” world, where the high, the orgasm, or the rush are all seen by the addict as “truer,” or more “real”. Additionally, too much preoccupation with this end of the spectrum has the same stultifying and stagnating consequences as an adherence to a rigid ideology. Where in the Apollonian psychology all Dionysian elements are subsumed and explained under the conceptual framework at play, under the Dionysian psychology, all frameworks or Apollonian elements are treated with irreverence, or at the very least are subverted and exploited merely to feel “in the moment”.<sup>44</sup>

Having established the extremes, we are now in a position to understand what the conjunction of the two psychological states amounts to; namely it is where artists derive their motivation. What compels an artist to want to create? Cioran asks just this question when he writes:

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<sup>44</sup> An argument could be made that the absolute termination point for the Dionysian extreme is suicide (hence Cioran’s obsession with the topic), and the absolute termination point for the Apollonian extreme is murder (an attempt to have the world conform to your conceptual understanding of it).

Why can't we stay closed up in ourselves? Why do we chase after expression and form, trying to deliver ourselves of our precious contents or "meanings," desperately attempting to organize what is after all a rebellious and chaotic process?<sup>45</sup>

The question asked here is why the Dionysian needs to be met with the Apollonian at all. What motivates the artist to attempt to represent one by means of the other? Nietzsche provides a solution to this question in a somewhat unlikely discussion of causation. In the *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche explains the "error of imaginary causes" by using the example of a cannon shot heard in a dream. He contends that what happens first is that the individual has a sensation of hearing the noise; the ascription of "cannon shot" as a descriptive meaning, is something that occurs after the sensation. He extends this analogy to all of conscious life, concluding that the way we experience the world is through sensation, and "meanings" are designed after the fact. The idea of "causation" is derived from sensation, not the other way around. Experiencing the world is thus a Dionysian process, and making sense of it is an Apollonian one. The Apollonian psychology comes in to create an interpretable structure that can guide us through raw sensation (e.g. causation). Nietzsche provides a psychological explanation of this habitual mental process. "To derive something unknown from something familiar relieves, comforts, and satisfies, besides giving a feeling of power."<sup>46</sup> The Dionysian unknown, i.e., unfiltered sensation (a feeling of chaos) is unsettling and the mind rushes to build a conceptual framework that provides an Apollonian answer.

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<sup>45</sup> Cioran, *Heights of Despair*, 3.

<sup>46</sup> Kaufmann, *Portable Nietzsche*, 497.

But this response does not capture the artist's motivation as much as it simply illustrates a reflexive feature of the mind. On the one hand, this account explains why some adhere to rigid Apollonian frameworks in order to explain their world. It details the tendency for individuals to take complex and chaotic internal sensations and pigeonhole them in their existing conceptual frameworks. Artists, however, proceed differently in that they attempt to construct the conceptual framework that will produce the best results (i.e. pragmatic outcome) in the particular situation they are facing. And further, artists are compelled to create an analogue of their newly constructed conceptual framework in a physical form.

Why is this final step necessary? Why do artists need to create a physical manifestation of their internal psychological state? Cioran again provides insight here. First, recall the artists' starting point. They do not begin from a pre-established Apollonian framework, but rather the chaos of the Dionysian state. In this state experience is intense and unfiltered, so much so that it is unbearable for any length of time. Cioran poetically describes the sensation:

I feel I must burst because of all that life has to offer me and because of the prospect of death. I feel I am dying of solitude, of love, of despair, of hatred, of all that this world offers me. With every experience I expand like a balloon blown up beyond its capacity.<sup>47</sup>

These experiences can be tamed and managed through "objectification". In multiple passages Cioran writes about the diminishing effect creative expression has on these extreme Dionysian states.

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<sup>47</sup> Cioran, *Heights of Despair*, 8.

Only those who live outside of art draw the ultimate consequences. Suicide, sanctity, vice—so many forms of lack of talent. Direct or disguised, confession by word, sound, or color halts the agglomeration of inner forces and weakens them by projecting them back toward the world outside. It is a salutary diminution which makes every act of creation into a coefficient of escape. <sup>48</sup>

This process is not easily achieved, however. The extreme states, Apollonian and Dionysian, are easier for the mind to adopt because they take little or no creative energy to maintain. Creation is difficult precisely because it is an experiment, and in combining the Dionysian and Apollonian the artist has no guarantee that he will be rewarded with anything worthwhile. That said, resorting to Apollonian ideologies is less preferable, and worse still is attempting to keep the Dionysian repressed and internalized. Cioran writes, “Only a few can endure such experiences to the end. There is always a serious danger in repressing something which requires objectification... Salvation lies in confessing them.”<sup>49</sup> It is only by recognizing and addressing this state of inner turmoil that something new can emerge, and what that is exactly is where we turn our attention to next.

### **2.3. The Product**

The question of what emerges from the artistic process is a broad one, and so to begin our discussion of the artistic product we will need a broad definition of it. Camus supplies one by defining what the product of artistic endeavor amounts to, in his words, the culmination point of the act of rebellion itself: “In every rebellion is to

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<sup>48</sup> Cioran, *History of Decay*, 51.

<sup>49</sup> Cioran, *Heights of Despair*, 3-4.

be found the metaphysical demand for unity, the impossibility for capturing it, and the construction of a substitute universe... This tendency is common to all the arts. The artist reconstructs the world to his plan.”<sup>50</sup> What artists create is, in essence, a self-contained universe in which the artist defines the limits. By doing so, the desire to rebel and the search for meaning are imposed upon the work of art, so the rebel spirit becomes satisfied. “In these sealed worlds, man can reign and have knowledge at last.”<sup>51</sup>

We should not be confused by the changing terminology. Notice, first of all, that this picture of the product of the artistic process is completely coherent with our psychological account of artistic creation. The need for “metaphysical unity” is primarily a psychological need. There are many parallels that can be drawn between Camus’ rebel and the artist; in fact, the latter is a derivation of a particular form of the former. Camus speaks of “rebellion” in many different ways but is not very careful about drawing clear distinctions among them. Prima facie, all forms of rebellion are a reaction to absurdity, and “absurdity” as defined by Camus clearly overlaps with the chaotic Dionysian state. Recall Camus’ claim that when one first encounters the absurd, one is overcome by anxiety. This correlates quite nicely with everything we’ve established in the previous two sections because primarily, the absurd is what one becomes aware of when the Apollonian cognitive structures are dismantled. The arousal of anxiety is what’s left when those cognitive structures are no longer available or sufficient to fulfill their purpose, which Nietzsche contended was to relieve, comfort, and satisfy.

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<sup>50</sup> Camus, *The Rebel*, 255.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* 255.

To integrate Camus' philosophy into the argument we developed in the previous section we can divide the concept of "rebellion" into two rough kinds, historical and artistic. Of rebels of the first kind Camus writes, "they have all tried to construct a purely terrestrial kingdom where their chosen principles will hold sway."<sup>52</sup> This can be interpreted as a rebellion that attempts to impose an Apollonian framework on the universe, and in that sense its most common instantiation is in the form of a political system. This is not the kind of rebellion we are interested in, for it commits all of the errors of the Christian worldview, merely translating them into a political doctrine.<sup>53</sup> By contrast, artistic rebels move to create their own universes in which they can "reign and have knowledge at last." These sorts of rebels are that of the artist, whose aim is to create an artistic cognitive structure to represent the Dionysian experience. Two things, however, are required to create these universes; one is a canvas, and the other is the psychological experience that the artist is trying to conceptualize, mitigate, and extract for objectification.

Beginning with the first, we can understand "canvas" to mean a well-defined set of constraints. This of course is quite a broad definition, but in conjunction with the other aspects of this theory we can start to understand the limitations of what counts as "art." Canvases also exist on a spectrum similar to that of the psychological one outlined in the previous chapter. Nietzsche provides a useful starting point with his discussion of sculpture and music. He describes the two, roughly, as analogues of

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<sup>52</sup> Camus, *The Rebel*, 100.

<sup>53</sup> Historical rebellion has been occurring long before the formulation of the Christian religion; Camus' own analysis begins with Spartacus. The relevant feature of this kind of rebellion is the rigid adherence to, and propagation of, an Apollonian conceptual framework.

Apollo and Dionysus. This is a useful analogy in that sculpture adequately captures the clarity, rigidity, and permanence of Apollonian frameworks, whereas music encapsulates the fluidity and rapture of the Dionysian. Another description Nietzsche provides is of music as a non-visual art, and sculpture as a visual art.<sup>54</sup> This is a mistake. If we are to understand canvases as extensions of the psychological dichotomy outlined in the previous section, what we are actually speaking about are static vs. fluid arts. Order is best maintained in a static environment, and chaos is characterized as randomized movement. Sculpture is Apollonian not because it is visual, but because it is static. That static art is best represented in the visual field is also true, however. By contrast the Dionysian refers to art that is represented through movement, and this is better represented by the fluid state of music.

Interestingly, Camus refers to sculpture as “the greatest and most ambitious of all the arts.”<sup>55</sup> His reason for making this assertion is supported by this insightful passage:

Sculpture does not reject resemblance, of which, indeed, it has need. But resemblance is not its first aim. What it is looking for, in its periods of greatness, is the gesture, the expression, or the empty stare which will sum up all the gestures and all the stares in the world. Its purpose is not to imitate, but to stylize and to imprison in one significant expression the fleeting ecstasy of the body or the infinite variety of human attitudes.<sup>56</sup>

A few things can be said of Camus’ justification. First it is clear that this description is of a sculpture like Michelangelo’s *David*. One can view that work of art and

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<sup>54</sup> Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, Sect. 1.

<sup>55</sup> Camus, *The Rebel*, 256.

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

contemplate endlessly the determination displayed so subtly on David's face.<sup>57</sup> How would we interpret *David* on the psychological account? First, it is evident that it is a work that utilizes an Apollonian canvas to capture a Dionysian experience, what Camus describes as "the fleeting ecstasy of the body or the infinite variety of human attitudes." One could consider certain forms of photography as a modern example of the same artistic motivation. There is, however, a dimension of analysis missing from Camus, which is the result of utilizing a static canvas to embody an Apollonian concept rather than a Dionysian one. The result in this case is a product constructed for a particular practical purpose, for example, a carpenter who makes chairs or tables, or a bricklayer who builds houses. In these cases, the individual responsible for the creation might better be referred to as a "craftsman" rather than artist. Whether the former is a derived form of the latter is a question open to speculation, but I am tempted to answer in the affirmative for the simple reason that I do not think there is a clear distinction between the two. This will become clearer when we analyze the opposite end of the canvas spectrum, which is sound.

Nietzsche, Camus, and Cioran all speak of music as a clearly defined, distinct form of art. Perhaps this is more a sign of their times than an oversight on their parts, but with the scope of music diversity there is today, it would make little sense to speak of it all as if it were the same thing. Consider two contemporary musical artists, Ludovico Einaudi and Eminem, both masters of their craft, yet nothing alike. Einaudi represents more closely the music that the analysis of our thinkers

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<sup>57</sup> Interpretations will vary about what expression Michelangelo was aiming for. This may serve as some kind of evidence that "primordial unity" is not the factor at play when one views art work, but rather some psychological determinant.



addresses. His music uses sound to embody indescribable Dionysian experiences, and he does so with minimal use of structure.<sup>58</sup> This raises the question of what a fluid canvas like sound would be like if it were entirely structured, and the answer, of course, is language.

Now, given our definition of “canvas”, we see a very interesting feature in this theory of art emerge. Because a canvas is defined as any set of well-defined constraints, language itself can become a canvas for artistic expression, and it serves as a sphere of operation for a plethora of different kinds of artists. An example of an artist who uses the structure of language to the same ends as Ludovico Einaudi (i.e. attempting to represent a Dionysian psychological state) would be a poet. On the other hand, hip-hop artists like Eminem, uniquely blend these two canvases, language and music. The result is what constitutes much of contemporary music, something we might call “musical poetry.” Of course, here too we see variation, ranging from hip-hop artists and rappers like Eminem, to contemporary pop singer, rock artists, and even opera singers.

The canvas chosen by the artists will also determine the extent of the universe they are trying to create. Consider a simple example, a painter’s canvas ends where the fabric on his easel ends. The constraints the painter is subject to are determined by the physical space on the blank fabric, as well as the available tools he has to work with. Between the extremes of music and sculpture we find all sorts of media ranging from painting, to dramatic plays, to novels. And in contemporary society each of these has morphed into new and exciting platforms for expression;

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<sup>58</sup> His music progresses according to a pattern and certain structural norms otherwise it would not be recognized as meaningful by human psychology.

film, graphic design, graffiti and other street art, etc., all occupy a place on this spectrum. Importantly though, each will necessarily contain some element of both the Dionysian and the Apollonian, and each must necessarily combine the two in a unique way.

One canvas in particular, namely science, is worth looking at in some detail because it is uniquely distinct from the others. Considered under our definition of canvas, “science,” or more specifically scientific methods and their accompanying body of knowledge, are a clear and well-defined set of constraints. But the differentiating factor in this case is that the product that comes about from scientific endeavors has objective applicability. That is to say, the product can be used by anyone for the same end. The same is not true for something like music, which is appreciated more subjectively than objectively. For example, sounds can be broken down into their constituent parts (e.g. pitch, frequency, amplitude) and analyzed individually as a topic of scientific inquiry, and so it becomes incorporated into the body of constraints that the scientific artist operates under. With an understanding of the characteristics of sound the scientist may be able to produce a pair of headphones that provides clearer audio quality. This sort of creation is unique in that anyone can benefit from it.

Moreover the consequences and product of engaging in “scientific artistry” are not so much the “construction of substitute universes” but rather a molding of the one we inhabit. Because of this it must be pointed out that, though science is a kind of canvas, it is not merely that. Developing a full account of what scientific knowledge amounts to would require a lengthy analysis, but we can proceed

generally with the pragmatic definition laid out in section 1.1. The scientist is an artist so long as he adheres to this pragmatic outlook. The moment he adopts a view that asserts the absolute metaphysical reality of some claims he becomes what Nietzsche called a “man of science”.<sup>59</sup> We can understand “the man of science” to be a kind of variation on the religious zealot, at least in principle or at the motivational level if not the same in practice. In any case, the ideal relation an individual should have to science is that of the artist to his canvas, or of the workman to his toolset.

A few things should be said by way of clarification. First, an interesting question to consider is how, and to what extent, this formulation of art deviates from Nietzsche’s own formulation in BT. The first thing worth pointing out is that Nietzsche seemed to be concerned particularly with the origins of Attic tragedy and its relation to the German cultural zeitgeist of his day. My attempt is to extend his analogy of Apollo and Dionysus to all forms and styles of art. Moreover, Nietzsche never bothered to draw a distinction between a psychological understanding of the dichotomy and a physical manifestation. This is most likely due to him thinking of the problem as a metaphysical one.

Second, the line between what is a “canvas” and what is “creative expression” is not entirely clear. It is in the nature of artistic pursuits to be somewhat opaque. For example, graffiti artists often see canvases where others do not, and once they have completed their artwork, the product is not universally considered as art (many people view this form of artistic creation as vandalism.) This theory of art is proceeding from the perspective of the artist and not the viewer of art. Ultimately, a

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<sup>59</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Sect. 211.

canvas will be defined by the mind of an artist who believes artistic expression is capable through it. However, that a canvas requires a well-defined set of constraints seems a plausible definition, and so the determination of what counts as art may be to some degree *ad hoc* and subjective.

Finally, it may also be said that this definition of art is too extensive, and it captures activities that we would not normally refer to as art. To this, the only reply can be that it is more reasonable to extend the definition of art to include anything that *could* potentially be considered a work of art, than to restrict it and risk leaving something out that might have been included. This is not to say everything that is defined as art is actually worthwhile art. On the contrary, most forms of creative expression would never be given the title of art in a colloquial sense, but because of the process by which such things form they should be included in the definition of art. Furthermore, the theory I am developing here originates in the Nietzschean idea that all of life should be viewed as art, and only then does it have redeeming qualities. This is a view that is advanced by Nussbaum, which she communicates elegantly:

Life is made worth living, made joyful and made human, only by art - that is to say, in the largest sense, by the human being's power to create an order in the midst of disorder, to make up a meaning where nature herself does not supply one... And if we can learn to value that activity, and find our own meaning in it, rather than looking for an external meaning in god or in nature, we can then love ourselves, and love life. Art is thus the great anti pessimistic form of life, the great alternative to denial and resignation.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Nussbaum, 99.

What remains to be investigated is the question of whether it is possible to view existence itself as a canvas for creation? Can life itself be conceptualized as a work of art? This is the topic of the third and final chapter.

### **Section 3: Life as Art**

#### **3.1. Narrative**

In the opening of his book, *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative*, writer Thomas King recounts and compares two creation mythologies; the Christian story of Adam and Eve and the native creation story of a woman named Charm. The former tells how God creates the earth and places the first two humans in the paradise of the Garden of Eden. Through their own folly, the two are ejected from paradise and forced to struggle to survive in the harsh and unforgiving landscape outside of the garden. The native story on the other hand tells of how a woman named Charm falls from the sky onto a barely habitable land. Through cooperation with the animals around her she is able to construct a paradise that suits the needs of all who contributed to its formation.

King does not explicitly conclude that these two worldviews informed the trajectory of their respective cultures, but it is implicit in his writing that he at least sees the stories as informed by the attitudes of the cultures that told them. That is to say, the Christian worldview was propagated by a culture that was fundamentally competitive and outward bound, and the native worldview represented a society

that was relatively communistic and insular. The analysis of these two stories (and many others) leads to King's ultimate insight, "The truth about stories is that's all we are."<sup>61</sup>

I am not suggesting that King is proposing that the entire cultural analysis of these two societies is reducible to the creation myths that accompany them. Rather he seems to include them in his analysis in more a rhetorical fashion than an analytic one, but I do think that King's thesis (the truth about stories is that's all we are) is one that holds true on the individual level, which is to say that our lives are ultimately justified by the stories we choose to tell ourselves. The rest of his book expounds on this this very point, as he recounts and interprets anecdotal stories from his life in an attempt to fashion some coherent narrative out of them. Camus writes about this same kind of cognitive impulse:

To think is first of all to create a world (or to limit ones own world, which comes to the same thing). It is starting out from the basic disagreement that separates man from his experience in order to find a common ground according to ones nostalgia, a universe hedged with reasons or lighted up with analogies but which, in any case, gives opportunity to rescind the unbearable divorce. The philosopher, even if he is Kant, is a creator. He has his characters, his symbols, and his secret action. He has his plot endings.<sup>62</sup>

One of the recurring plot threads that King weaves through his narrative is that of his struggle to come to grips with the absence of his father from his life. This fact seems to have motivated King to move down multiple roads in his life. He thought about the absence of his father, and by doing so he was able to design a world (a narrative structure) which allowed him to, as Camus so eloquently put it, "rescind

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<sup>61</sup> King, *Truth About Stories*, 2.

<sup>62</sup> Camus, *Sisyphus*, 99-100.

the unbearable divorce” between himself and his experience. Notice as well how this process of designing a world falls in line with Camus conception of rebellion. In the previous chapter we saw how the artist creates a self-contained world in order to satisfy a demand for metaphysical unity. King’s project is no different. What he is actually doing is acting out the artistic impulse by designing an image of the world that allows him to navigate it.

Another interesting aspect of King’s narrative is his analysis of the “Indian”, which he claims has been stereotyped as the caricature of the dying noble savage. He contrasts this with the historical development of the political treatment of native people, which largely has them treated as a nuisance. “The Indian of fact” as King refers to them, were not dying in the literal sense of the word.<sup>63</sup> They were being moved off of their lands and written out of existence by political documents (i.e. the 1830 Removal Act written by Andrew Jackson).<sup>64</sup> How then did this stereotypical notion of the “noble savage” come to be?

In the 1900’s a photographer named Edward Sheriff Curtis set out to capture some historical record of what he believed to be the remnants of a dying culture. King describes this period in history as the “American Romantic period”, a time in which the idea of what constituted an “Indian” was already informed by popular opinion. “The Romantics imagined their Indian as dying. But in that dying, in that passing away, in that disappearing from the stage of human progress, there was also

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<sup>63</sup> Many native people were killed during the western colonization of North America through disease and warfare, but according to King, “the vast majority of the tribes were a comfortable distance from the grave” (King, *Truth About Stories*, 34)

<sup>64</sup> King, *Truth About Stories*, 34.

a sense of nobility.”<sup>65</sup> This being the case, Curtis set out on his journey with a preconceived image of what he was looking, “and to make sure that he would find what he wanted to find, he took along boxes of “Indian’ paraphernalia – wigs, blankets, painted backdrops, clothing – in case he ran into Indians who did not look as the Indian was supposed to look.”<sup>66</sup>

King goes on to explain how this romanticized image of the “Indian” has followed him throughout his life. In one particularly salient story, he recounts being on a native panel, dressed in a formal suit and tie. At the end of the event he was approached and chastised by a vitriolic young man who claimed that he wasn’t dressed “Indian” enough, that he had no right speaking for “real Indians”, and that this amounted to a kind of selling out to western cultural norms.<sup>67</sup> How does this story relate to an aesthetic theory of value? Thomas King’s novel and his analysis of the “noble savage” is a perfect representation of the construction of a tragic dramatic narrative. Consider the following passage from BT,

For we need to be clear on this point, above everything else, to our humiliation and ennoblement: the entire comedy of art does not present itself for us in order to make us, for example, better or to educate us, even less because we are the actual creators of that art world. We are, however, entitled to assume this about ourselves: for the true creator of that world we are already pictures and artistic projections and in the meaning of works of art we have our highest dignity — for only as an aesthetic phenomena are existence and the world eternally justified — while, of course, our consciousness of this significance of ours is scarcely any different from the consciousness which soldiers painted on canvas have of the battle portrayed there.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. 34.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. 67.

<sup>68</sup> Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, Sect. 5.



King's tells his story in part to shed light on the falsified image of native people, yet in his analysis he still recognizes the merit of Curtis's project. That there is an image and memory of the "Indian" at all is better than if there hadn't been one. And all things considered, the story behind the "noble savage" is a compelling one. One need only look at the pictures that Curtis took to see the beauty and tragedy of the lone figures traversing sublime landscapes to realize this.

The "Noble savage" also exemplifies a union of the Apollonian and Dionysian. In his late notebooks Nietzsche provides a concise definition of tragedy. "Tragic art, rich in both experiences, is described as a reconciliation of Apollo and Dionysos: appearance is given the most profound significance, through Dionysos; and yet this appearance is negated, and negated with *pleasure*."<sup>69</sup> The idea of noble savage is a fabrication created from the lived experience of a dying culture, yet despite this, there is a pleasure aroused from the contemplation of it. This is the hallmark of tragedy, to present the beautiful illusion of a dream world, which redeems us from our chaotic, ever-changing lived experience by allowing us to contemplate something eternal, while simultaneously reminding us that nothing can be eternal. The image of the "noble savage" is tragic also because it portrays what is ultimately a doomed figure. Cioran writes of the "conditions of tragedy" saying, "nothing is more alien to tragedy than the notion of redemption, of salvation and immortality." And of the tragic hero in particular he continues to say, "he remains *distinct* in men's memory as a *spectacle* of suffering."<sup>70</sup> The paradox of tragedy is that through

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<sup>69</sup> Nietzsche, *Late Notebooks*, 81.

<sup>70</sup> Cioran, *History of Decay*, 83.

contemplation of this immortalized suffering, one may be compelled to make the most of one's own lived experience.

This story also brings us back to a question that went unanswered in section 1.1, namely, whether something needs to be objectively true in order for it to be valuable. I think both Nietzsche and King would be hesitant to call either side of this story objectively true, and that is perfectly acceptable. The idea of the noble savage, the literary Indian, is true in that it ennobles and eternalized the highest attributes of mistreated culture. This sort of narrative has pragmatic value, and it would be a disservice to the history of native people to call it a lie. On the flip side, King's personal history is equally true in that it allows us to "become conscious of the canvas we are painted on". That is to say, King's story points out the fact that the "Indian" is a conceptual construction, and that it must only be recognized as such.

It is through this second style of story telling that King is able to illustrate the two grand narrative structures that govern the artist's mind. The first narrative form is tragedy, characterized by the construction of the "noble savage" in King's story. The second is comedy, which is seen through King's own critique and dismantlement of the conceptual figure of the "Indian". It is to the latter that we turn our attention to next.

### **3.2. Comedy**

In section 1.2, a brief history of nihilism was recounted and it was established that this history also constituted a kind of evolution of thought. The

question left unanswered at the end of that section was how it is possible for individuals to create meaning in their life. In chapter 2, an aesthetic theory was developed in order to answer that question. Art, in the form of conceptual frameworks, as well as physical analogs of those frameworks, allows an individual to create structures that work pragmatically to instill meaning into lived experiences. If these structures are able to mix the Apollonian and Dionysian psychologies correctly, the result is a tragic framework. This amounts to creating Apollonian representations of the Dionysian elements of lived experience.

The problem with this method is the danger of these artistic conceptual frameworks being taken as fact. For example, in King's "noble savage" we see how a tragic concept can come to have negative repercussions for an entire community if taken as fact. The experiences of King elucidate how confusion about what it means to be an "Indian" has resulted in anger, resentment, and nihilism in him as well as other native people. This is a problem for the simple reason that this route takes us directly back to where we began. If a framework becomes the kind of thing that is taken as absolute fact, and then that belief is inevitably eroded, the individual who subscribed to it is left disillusioned and possibly nihilistic. To counteract this problem, comedy is necessary.

A comedic narrative accomplishes the exact opposite of the tragic. Where the latter builds up concepts in to order navigate lived-experience by injecting meaning into it, the former guards us from becoming too entrenched in or reliant on these constructs by showing us their fallibility. In the history of nihilistic thought we have an example of a thinker who does just this, namely Sade. Camus refers to Sade not as

an artist but a “clandestine writer.”<sup>71</sup> True, Sade is not an artist in the tragic sense, but this is because Sade is most definitely an artist of the comedic sort, that is, a denier and ridiculer of the accepted (normative) possibilities for life. In his works, Sade subverts the accepted sexual practices of his day. In *Philosophy in the Bedroom* Sade’s comedic drive is illustrated quite clearly. He begins with an open message to “voluptuaries” urging young people to emulate the character Eugenie, “be as quick as she is to destroy, to spurn all those ridiculous precepts inculcated in you by idiot parents.”<sup>72</sup> This is an open declaration to destroy the normative value system operative in eighteenth century France, and this sentiment plays itself out in the plot of the story as well. When the character Madame de Mistival comes to rescue her daughter from the libertines, she is brutally tortured, raped, and sent home a tattered mess. This character is an obvious metaphor for the stringent, prudish social norms Sade so openly despised. Her humiliation is comical because it is a subversion and destruction of what she clearly represents.

We see an analogy of Sade’s treatment of Madame de Mistival in the now cliché vaudeville bit of established high-class socialites having a pie thrown in their face. Such an act would not have the same comedic force if the target of the pie were someone of lower class, because what evokes laughter is the particular value associated with the representation of the target. The humiliation of having a pie thrown at this sort of person is antithetical to what the stereotype of a high-class person usually signifies (i.e., dignity and poise). The same is true of Madame Mistival. Her treatment at the hands of the libertines would have no force at all if she

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<sup>71</sup> Camus, *The Rebel*, 253.

<sup>72</sup> Sade, *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, Introduction.

welcomed it, or if her principles were not opposite to theirs. The comedic act is born from the subversion or dismantlement of the representation of the conceptual structure that houses it.

There is, however, an interesting caveat to consider in this analysis of Sade. It concerns how the thinker envisioned himself. Sade believed himself to be creating a guiding moral philosophy, one that would instill meaning in the lives of the people who followed his prescriptions, and by all standards he seems to have succeeded in his task, for we now have an entire philosophic school named after the man. Sadism is the result of Sade not simply acting to destroy the value structures of his day, but also endorsing the specific method by which he did it. Coincidentally, the method by which Sade went about dismantling 18<sup>th</sup> century value structures was precisely antithetical to the structures themselves, and so Sade's art is best understood as comedic. But because he positively endorsed sexual libertinism as a new value system to replace the old, Sade himself is not a comic in the pure sense.

Diogenes of Sinop is another prominent example of a comic in action. Cioran writes about some of Diogenes' exploits, which fall nicely in line with the examples we have been speaking about so far. "One day a man invited him into a richly furnished home, saying 'be careful not to spit on the floor.' Diogenes, who needed to spit, spat in his face, exclaiming that is was the only dirty place he could find where spitting was permitted."<sup>73</sup> This is but one example in a litany of stunts that can be credited to Diogenes, which makes it safe to say that he could be considered the first recorded comedian in history. Diogenes is also quite notorious for having ridiculed

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<sup>73</sup> Cioran, *History of Decay*, 63.

Plato and his teachings. In this relationship we can see both aspects of our theory in play. Plato, attempting to build philosophies and narratives that would make sense of the world and the persons place in it,<sup>74</sup> and Diogenes, poking holes in those theories and mocking the attempts to do so.

Fast-forwarding to today, and we can see the comedic narrative alive and well. Brett Easton Ellis, in his controversial cult novel *American Psycho* recreates Sade's mission in a contemporary setting. However, where Sade's writing sought to destroy the orthodoxy of the time and restrictive attitudes about sexual practices, Ellis launches a vicious assault on the hyper-consumerism and sensualism of the modern world. Patrick Bateman is Sade for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. What is interesting, however, is that Ellis utilizes the same sort of pornographic themes in his novel as Sade. This, I think, is indicative of the idea that pornography is best described as a form or analog of comedy. The structure of a pornographic work of art accomplishes the same as a comedic one in that they both transport the individual engaged with the art into a Dionysian mental state. With comedy, this is laughter, and with pornography it is orgasm.

*Don Quixote* (another seminal work of comedy), takes a different comedic approach than the one described above. Sade, Ellis, and even Diogenes were all very overt with their comedic criticisms. Their utterances were directed against specific targets and the comedic narrative they utilized was consequently very narrow. What we see in *Don Quixote* is more subtle and profound. The story serves as a parable that warns against becoming too enamored of any particular belief system.

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<sup>74</sup> Of course, these were not tragic frameworks, but they can still be considered works of art as they attempt to design a representation of the world that provides metaphysical unity.

Don Quixote, having designed an elaborate cognitive structure that he attempts to act out in the world is constantly confronted by a world that resists its application. Sancho Panza is swept into Don Quixote's world by greed, but his practical reason for subscribing to the life of chivalry doesn't guard him from the same hurdles that Don Quixote himself faces.

The true genius of the novel, however, lies in the narrative style that the reader experiences the story through. Miguel de Cervantes tells the tale from the perspective of a fictional biographer who catalogues the exploits of Don Quixote. The narrator, much like the reader, is well aware that Don Quixote is mad, and from this perspective the story illustrates our thesis quite clearly. First, the story shows how designing a narrative structure in your life is necessary for you to act out in it. Second, it shows how it is necessary for that narrative structure to be pragmatic, to work in the favor of the individual who holds it. Finally, it shows that regardless of how successful the narrative structure is in guiding the individual through life, it is always important to be cognizant that it is ultimately illusory.

This realization that Don Quixote has on his deathbed (i.e. that he was suffering from some form of madness) is of vital importance. If the story were written with Don Quixote never coming to realize that he had been taken in on a wild delusion, then the story would have ended as a bitter tragedy. This realization moves the story into the realm of darkly comical. We see an analogy in King's realization, which came when he was chastised by the angry native youth for not being "Indian" enough. King had navigated his life with the goal in mind to be as authentic an Indian as he could manage, but whatever version of the idea of an

“Indian” he tried to emulate, he found himself faced with a challenge. If he wore his native garb and spoke passionately about native issue, he would not be paid by the organizers of the events he spoke at, but if he donned more professional clothing and spoke with reasoned arguments, he was called a sell-out. What King realized then, was that the “Indian” was nothing more than an idea or a story. What Don Quixote was so masterfully able to do, was to balance both sides of Nietzsche’s description of art. Cervantes painted a portrait of soldiers on a canvas and simultaneously allowed them to become aware of that fact that that was ultimately all they were.

Today the comedic instinct has evolved to channel the spirit of Diogenes in a theatrical setting. The stand-up comic is as pure an instantiation of comedy as is possible. The medium’s popularization came with Lenny Bruce and his biting social commentary. The stand-up comic has since become a voice that throws a cynical and destructive light on societies accepted conceptual norms. The tremendous popularity of comics like Lenny Bruce, Richard Pryor, George Carlin, Bill Hicks, and others, points to the fact that there is a hunger for the kind of honest, brute criticism that comes from the stand- up comedian. Cioran, in the same passage in which he discussed Diogenes’s exploits, describes how he sees the ancient Greek cynic, “The thinker who reflects without illusion upon human reality, if he wants to remain within the world, and if he eliminates mysticism as an escape hatch, ends up with a vision in which are mingled wisdom, bitterness, and farce”<sup>75</sup> This description fits equally well any of the comedic masterminds listed above.

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<sup>75</sup> Cioran, *History of Decay*, 64.



It is also quite apparent that this evolved form of comedy (stand-up) aligns with Camus's description of the "absurd art". On expounding on the idea of absurd thoughts, Camus asks, "is an absurd work of art possible?"<sup>76</sup> The origin of this inquiry comes from how Camus conceptualizes absurd creation, "Describing—that is the last ambition of an absurd thought."<sup>77</sup> The stand-up comic approaches his art from precisely this point, nothing more than description occurs in a stand-up act, but it is a description that is arranged to collapse or distort a normative conceptual structure. Consider, for example the comedy of Mitch Hedberg. "I wear a necklace, cause I wanna know when I'm upside down."<sup>78</sup> A stunningly simple sentence that is able to evoke laughter with its contortion of two normative concepts. First, the purpose of wearing jewelry, and second, the method by which one ascertains that they are not right side up.

This brings us to Camus' most well-known proposition. In the closing pages of the *Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus recounts the tale of Sisyphus, a Greek man who having angered the Gods, is sentenced for eternity to push a boulder to the top of a hill only to watch it roll back down. The metaphor is clear; the effort of living is meaningless and futile. Camus questions what Sisyphus is thinking the moment the boulder rolls down to the bottom of the hill. The conclusion he arrives at is that it is possible that Sisyphus could find joy in his task, and that, "One must imagine Sisyphus happy."<sup>79</sup> I think this conclusion misses the mark slightly. As Sisyphus pushes his boulder up the hill, he is participating in a tragic narrative. He knows that

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<sup>76</sup> Camus, *Sisyphus*, 96.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. 94-95.

<sup>78</sup> Hedberg, Mitch. *Just For Laughs: On the Edge*. 2002.

<sup>79</sup> Camus, *Sisyphus*, 123.

he is engaged in a fruitless task, yet he must necessarily tell himself something motivating to be able to push the boulder, and to inject meaning into his fruitless task. That might be the hope of one day escaping the underworld, or perhaps seeing his wife again, but what is tragic about Sisyphus in this moment is that his fate is ultimately sealed. The moment he reaches the top, however, and the boulder begins to tip back Sisyphus is in a comedy. The boulder falling back is like Don Quixote coming back to his senses. It is the punch line of the joke, a brute description of the reality of Sisyphus's predicament. Sisyphus should not feel only happiness in that moment, but humor as well. The difference between happiness and laughter is important to understand because laughter does not necessarily entail happiness. Joyous laughter is a kind of laughter, but it is not the only kind. We can imagine Sisyphus laughing cynically or spitefully, but that does not detract from the comedy of his situation. We can, as Camus suggests, imagine Sisyphus happy, but more importantly, we must imagine Sisyphus laughing.

### **3.3. The Role of Acting**

In a now infamous interview conducted by Dick Cavett, Marlon Brando speaks briefly of his views on acting. He says acting is not a "profession" but a survival mechanism. Dick Cavett, presses him on this point, and Brando explains how each day people in all walks of life act out certain roles in order to get through their days. According to Brando, Cavett is acting out a role of an interviewer that Brando himself thinks he is incapable of emulating. Brando continues to say that

among the 9 million things going through Cavetts mind at any given time, he is able to edit out a demeanor of “levity, lightness, amusement, and zest”, all while trying to react to what Brando himself is saying and doing.<sup>80</sup> Brando’s point is that Cavett, or anyone for that matter, filters their moment-to-moment experience to fulfill the role that is required of them at a given time. Cioran asks what the state of man would be were he not capable of this sort of selective expression.

What would happen if a man’s face could adequately express his inner suffering, if his entire inner agony were objectified in his facial expression? Could we still communicate? Wouldn’t we then cover our faces with our hands while talking? Life would really be impossible if the infinitude of feelings we harbor within ourselves were fully expressed in the lines of our faces.<sup>81</sup>

Brando is correct in his conceptualization of acting. It is not an art form in the sense that we have defined it because there is no creation of a substitute universe that comes from acting. Rather, the actor plays out the conceptual structure that was designed by the artist, and in this sense, the canvas for the actor is the artist’s conceptual structure. Acting is how individuals bring their conceptual narrative structure to life, so to speak. In Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s novel *Crime and Punishment*, we can see how this relation works in more detail. The main character, Raskolnikov, spends a great deal of time formulating a philosophy that would justify a murder he will eventually commit. He envisions Napoleon Bonaparte as a kind of super-human, a man who carves his own path through life in pursuit of higher principles, irrespective of the opinions of others. Raskolnikov pictures Napoleon as an ideal,

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<sup>80</sup> The Dick Cavett Show. 12 June 1972. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F6Lm-plgObg>

<sup>81</sup> Cioran, *Heights of Despair*, 11-12.

then he imagines himself to be the same sort of man. At this point in the story, all Raskalnikov has done is construct a conceptual framework in his mind, but the moment he decides to act out this representation in the form of a murder it becomes a lived artistic experience. The translation from ideation to reality happens only through acting. Raskalnikov assumes the *role* of Napoleon in order to *act* in the world.

Of course, in Raskalnikov's case, his artistic ideation was not something he was capable of acting out in the world. The simplest explanation for this is because he felt guilty for having murdered the old moneylender, but a more sophisticated analysis reveals that Raskalnikov's guilt stems at least in part from his inability to square his artistic conceptual structure with his actions in the world. This brings us back to the Camus's conception of "unity" briefly outlined in section 2.3.

There is not one human being who, above a certain elementary level of consciousness, does not exhaust himself in trying to find formulas or attitudes that will give his existence the unity it lacks. Appearance and action, the dandy and the revolutionary, all demand a unity in order to exist, and in order to exist on this earth.<sup>82</sup>

In section 2.3, the "demand for metaphysical unity" was cited as one of the motives that cause the artist to create works of art (self-contained universes). This demand plays itself out first conceptually. In the case of Raskalnikov, this is his construction of a Napoleonic ideal. But creating a conceptual structure is only one half of the demand for unity. The conceptual structure must be acted out otherwise what would be the point of it? Camus writes this passage in relation to the novel and how

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<sup>82</sup> Camus, *The Rebel*, 262.

the world in novels is not different from ours in any substantive way. On the contrary these fictional worlds must retain a similar atmosphere to ours if they are to grab our attention and keep it. The only thing that the novel offers that life does not is characters who “pursue their destinies to the bitter end” and “indulge their passions to the fullest.” But if we demand this kind of unity from novels then it must be doubly true that we demand this unity in our own lives, and that is what compels us to act.

This psychological desire holds true for even the most mundane kinds of cognitive structures. A man who wishes to be a good father will act in a manner that he believes will realize that ideal. Likewise, a doctor will act with the mannerisms she is expected to in order to fulfill the role of doctor. Dick Cavett acts in the manner of an amicable talk show host and Marlon Brando, the esoteric and mysterious movie star. There is however a distinction that needs to be drawn between those people who know they are playing a role and those who have subconsciously assumed it as a reality. The latter are the vast majority, who when they engage in Camus’s absurd logic will find the rafters of their world fall down around them. These are the people who are in danger of becoming nihilistic if their conceptual structures are rattled, because the upshot of that happening is that they will no longer be capable of *acting* out in the world.

The former are the artists. These are the people who take Raskalnikov’s lead in designing an ideal that they believe is worth acting out in the world. But unlike Raskalnikov, the artist who seeks redemption from life’s suffering will design a conceptual ideal that he is happy to play out in the world. Like Sisyphus, he will

think of the things that will make pushing the boulder up the hill as easy as possible, and then, when the boulder inevitably falls, he will not despair, but laugh at the absurdity of the whole procession and begin again. Thus, the role that acting plays in this theory of art is that it is the mechanism by which individuals are able to transform their life into a work of art. Shakespeare's oft-quoted phrase is particularly relevant here, "All the worlds a stage, and all the men and women merely players." Artists are the ones who become conscious of the fact that they are in control of the stage design, and that they are capable of designing any structure they wish to act out.

### **Conclusion**

The question posed at the outset of My Thesis is how it is possible to view life as a work of art. That question is by no means a simple one to answer. I have taken a psychological approach to answering this question. I have argued that life can be made a work of art through a process of psychological conceptual construction, which allows an individual to design a value structure that can be translated into a physical work of art, or acted out in day-to-day lived experience. This construction process arises from the combination of two opposing psychological states of mind, the Apollonian, which roughly signifies order, and the Dionysian, denoting chaos. Perhaps a simpler way to say the same thing is that to make life into a work of art, the individual must first transform himself into an artist. What I mean by this is that a person who wishes to see life as an artistic creation ought to approach every

aspect of life as if they are creating something new. The only way to do this is, of course, psychologically.

Nietzsche, Camus, and Cioran all believed that the threat of nihilism was real and imminent, but they all also believed that art could act as an antidote to the kind of suffering that comes from a nihilistic disposition. But implementing this antidote is not a simple task. Doing so requires us first to abandon deeply held notions and intuitions. Most notably, "truth" howsoever conceived is not an absolute value. Rather it is subject to our prejudices, inclinations, and drives. What is fundamental is how the individual justifies his or her life, and this is a question of perspective. Nihilism arises when a deeply held perspective is undermined, and the individual is left with no guiding structure for action.

What the artist is capable of doing is designing new perspectives, conceptual structures, which allow him to move through life and bear the burdens of it. These may be tragic narratives, which impart a sense a beauty into the grim reality of our existence, or, they may be comedic narratives, which dismantle and destroy any guiding framework that we hold as absolute, doing so to the sound of raucous laughter.

My conclusion, then, is not that this formulation is how the world actually works. It is not important or relevant whether any metaphysical reality is true or not. What is important is the stance that an individual has towards the beliefs he holds. If he thinks they are absolute, he will be in danger of falling into nihilistic sentiments. If he thinks they are all meaningless, he will not be motivated to act in the world. If, however, he is able to view beliefs as artistic representations he may

well be able to avoid both of those undesirable alternatives. Ultimately, my conclusion should be viewed in that light. This is a perspective born out of an artistic inclination, which has helped at least one person navigate life and the burdens therein.



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