ART AND IRRATIONALITY: THE BACKGROUND OF THE ABSURD

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The association of art with irrationality is ancient. Plato's characterization of artistic inspiration as a form of madness, and his rejection of most artworks as impediments to reason are a familar example in the long tradition that sees some fundamental internal connection between art and the irrational. In the following paper, I will argue that the connection is real, but in a way different from Plato or more recent advocates of the connection between art and the irrational have generally recognized.

Why is it so difficult to arrive at a generally acceptable definition of art? The usual answer is that what qualifies as art is a matter of personal taste, and that tastes differ in ways that cannot be explained, or for reasons that are psychological and therefore artistically uninteresting. Granted that opinions differ, and that everyone is entitled to his or her own opinion, still there are many areas in which we would all agree that some opinions are better than others, in law or medicine, in engineering, or history. Why then not in art? Can we not defer to those who have studied the problem, and whose opinions we can justly regard as informed? After all, we do have generally agreed upon criteria for "informed opinion." An informed opinion is one which has considered all available relevant information and which is based on careful reasoning. The difficulty is, of course, that those people who have studied the problem of art, and whose opinions are informed in this sense, have come to widely different conclusions concerning the essential nature of art. This is, perhaps, the most elementary connection between art and irrationality.

What I would like to do in the time allowed here is to sketch briefly a view that is implicitly developed by Nietzsche in his *Birth of Tragedy* and more explicitly elsewhere.[1] The view is called "perspectivism." I will argue that Nietzsche anticipates in several interesting ways a number of the conditions that exist presently in philosophy and aesthetics, and that recent developments in philosophy tend to justify at least some of his assertions.

Arthur Danto, a scholar familiar with the analytic tendencies in contemporary philosophy, finds that Nietzsche's "anti-metaphysical, proscientific, therapeutic view of philosophy has a decidedly contemporary ring of it."[2] Danto finds that Nietzsche rejects the view that is sometimes categorized as epistemological realism in favor of a position that has sometimes been called "nihilism," but which I would rather characterize as "nomenalism" or using a term employed by both Kaufman

(*Encyclopedia of Philosophy* edited by Edwards) and Danto, "perspectivism." When this view is first described to laymen it seems extreme, or in the jargon of philosophers, "counter-intuitive," and it is. However, I wish to maintain here that perspectivism is becoming an increasingly acceptable position in the light of developments in both philosophy and science since Nietzsche's time. Danto describes Nietzsche's view in the following way:

> Philosophers and plain men alike are inclined to believe that there is an objective order in the world, which is antecedent to any theories we might have about the world; and that these theories are true or false strictly according to whether they represent this order correctly. The conception of an independent and objective world structure, and the conception of truth which states that truth consists in the satisfaction of a relationship of correspondence between sentence and fact, are views which Nietzsche rejects.[3]

Part of the issue here is what philosophy students have come to call the subject-object dichotomy, a dichotomy which Nietzsche rejects. Common sense would say that there are objects, the objects which make or are the world we live in, and there are also our perceptions of those objects. Truth is what we call a perception or a statement about that perception that accurately matches the object. This is a version of the "correspondence" theory of truth. An idea or a statement is said to be true when it corresponds with the independently existing object or state of affairs in the world.

Since Hume's day the correspondence theory has been suspect. Kant sought to meet the criticisms raised by Hume. He did so, but only by acknowledging that the object, the thing-in-itself, must remain unknowable, if, by knowledge, we mean an idea, concept, or description which somehow duplicates or corresponds with the object without any modification or interference by the observer.

The difficulties with a correspondence theory were serious enough to divide all later thinkers. Hegel solved the problem by abandoning the thing-in-itself and working out an explanation that we now call "absolute idealism." Others sought to develop the implications of Kant's contention that knowledge is the result of an inextricable interaction between the object that is known and the knower. Among these neo-Kantians are Ernst Cassirer and Susanne Langer.

In his major work, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Form*, Cassirer argues that we generate the categories of our reality by a metaphorical process. We create the symbolic forms by which we represent "reality" to ourselves. In her influential work, *Philosophy in a New Way*, Langer argues that the distinction between art and science is the consequence of a difference in the forms in which we interpret our experience to ourselves. Scientific experience is rendered in "discursive" form and artistic experience in "presentational" form. But neither form can claim to be "truer" than the other, according to Langer.

The issue underlying Langer's work, and to some extent Cassirer's is the claim by some scientists and some philosophers of science that the methods of science are the only reliable ways of obtaining knowledge of the world. Literature, art, poetry, and the branch of philosophy known as metaphysics, according to non-Kantian and non-Hegelian thinkers are simply expressions of feeling, devoid of any interesting information. The advocates of this view, which we can call "positivism," saw the arts as of secondary value to the sciences. The sciences alone are concerned with truth and offer a method for securing it. The arts, on the other hand, are simply expressions of feeling which may, sometimes, strike a universal chord of recognition, and perhaps of understanding, but which in the long run serve no useful purpose.

By showing that all our dealings with experience involve the creation of symbolic forms, Cassirer and Langer contributed the weight of their reasoning to the vision that informs most of Nietzsche's work: that apart from our interpretation of the world--the world is meaningless.

Not all post-Kantians were idealists or neo-Kantians. An almost exact contemporary of Nietzsche was the American philosopher, C. S. Peirce. Peirce was the founder of pragmatism. In the development of pragmatic theory we find such notable contemporary philosophers as Nelson Goodman and W. V. O. Quine. Quine has not been especially interested in aesthetics, but in one of his best known essays, "On What There Is," he has argued that "to be is to be the value of a bound variable." Paraphrased in ordinary terms, Quine is persuaded that we decide, at least socially, conventionally, or historically, what kinds of things we are going to accept as actually existing and what kinds of things not. It is largely a matter of how we talk about them, or how we respond to talk about them. Because the Greeks spoke of the gods as existent, we must conclude that for the Greeks, the gods did exist. We speak of atoms and quarks in a way that admits of existential quantification, hence we must include atoms and quarks among the furniture of our world. According to Quine:

> Our acceptance of an ontology is, I think, similar in principle to our acceptance of a scientific theory, say a system of physics: we adopt, at least insofar as we are reasonable, the simplest conceptual scheme into which the disordered fragments of raw experience can be fitted and arranged... To whatever extent the adoption of any system of scientific theory may be said to be a matter of language, the same but not more--may be said of the adoption of an ontology...Physical objects are postualted entities which round out and simplify our account of the flux of experience...[4]

Nelson Goodman, like Quine, finds that the correspondence theory of truth is inappropriate, because it is we who make the world the way it is. Goodman advocates a carefully worked out view that appears very similar in its conclusions to Nietzsche's perspectivism.

> The overwhelming case against perception without conception, the pure given, absolute immediacy, the innocent eye, substance as substratum, has been so fully and frequently set forth--by Berkeley, Kant, Cassirer, Gombrich, Bruner, and many others--as to need no restatement here. Talk of unstructured content or an unconceptualized given or a substratum without properties is self-defeating for the talk imposes structure, conceptualizes, ascribes properties. Although conception without perception is merely *empty*, perception without conception is *blind* (totally inoperative). Predicates, pictures, other lables, schemata, survive want of application, but content vanishes without form. We can have words without a world but no world without symbols...
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> With false hope of a firm foundation gone, with the world displaced by worlds that are but versions, with substance dissolved into function, and with the given acknowledged as taken, we face the questions how worlds are made, tested and known.[5]
>
> Willingness to accept countless alternative true or right world--versions does not mean that everything goes... that truths are no longer distinguished from falsehoods, but only that truth must be otherwise conceived than as correspondence with a ready-made world.[6]

Both Quine and Goodman are first-rate logicians. Each has done significant work in the most rigorous area of philosophy. They are both pragmatists who hold science and scientific methods in high regard. Their roots are much more in the analytic positivist anglo-American tradition than in the European phenomenological school. But their rigor and tough-mindedness lead them to conclusions very much like the views put forth more intuitively by Nietzsche.

The view that there is no independent, external reality to which we may appeal our claim of truth is found also in the philosophy of science. So far, its leading advocate has been Paul Feyerabend, who is regarded as something of a naughty boy by his colleagues. In an essay on Kuhn, "Consolation for the Specialist," Feyerabend argues that the rational methods advocated by Kuhn, Popper, and others do not accomplish what is claimed for them:

> What remains are aesthetic judgments, judgments of taste, and our subjective wishes. Does this mean that science has become arbitrary, that it has become one element of the general relativism which Popper wants to attack? Let us see...
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> The sciences, after all, are our own creation, including all the severe standards they seem to impose upon us.... It is good to be constantly reminded of the fact that science as we know it today is not inescapable and that we may construct a world in which it plays no role whatever.... What better reminder is there than the realization that the coice between theories which are sufficiently general to provide us with a comprehensive world view and which are empirically disconnected may become a matter of taste? That the choice of our basic cosmology may become a matter of taste?
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> Such a development...changes science from a stern and demanding mistress into an attractive and yielding courtesan who tries to anticipate every wish of her lover. Of course, it is up to us to choose either a dragon or

> a pussy cat for our company. I do not think I need to explain my own preferences.[7]

Let me emphasize once again just what is being claimed in all these cases--that the familiar world--this present world that confronts us here and now, is to an extent our construct, and that we could construct it differently. It is not necessarily so that this is a piece of paper that I have before me, or that the marks on it are writing. No, I don't think that it is a giraffe or that it will suddenly vanish or become something else. Our world is too well constructed for that. The position being described here is radical, but it is much subtler than the giraffe-style objections would allow.

On this view "there are no facts but only interpretations" (Danto, p. 37). In more recent terminology all the things we regard as facts are said to be theory laden. That is they are recognized as facts only in terms of some pre-existing assumptions about the nature of reality, and these assumptions are not themselves "given" but are rather constructed or invented. Whatever we see as fact we see from some perspective, and what the facts may be apart from any perspective no one can say. Nor can we say of any perspective that it is truer or more accurate than another, although there may be reasonable or pragmatic grounds for preferring one perspective to another. This is the view that Nietzsche calls "Perspectivism."

As Danto points out:

> Nietzsche proclaims time and again that everything is false. He means that there is no order in the world of things to correspond to; there is nothing in terms of the correspondence theory of truth, to which statements can stand in the required relationship in order to be true. In this regard, common sense is false and so is any other set of propositions false. But should that other set conflict with common sense then it is false in another regard, having to do with the conditions of existence which we have worked out for ourselves over a long period of time. Any other system is inimical to life and to us, and must be combatted.[8]

Recently, there has been a spate of books interpreting the findings of particle physics in terms of Eastern religions.[9]

Eastern religions no less than western religions, often ask us to reflect the world of appearances as illusory and seek understanding of a higher reality which lies beyond. Indeed, this is not an unusual theme in religion and metaphysics. Plato's appeal to the realm of Forms is an obvious example. Nietzsche rejected any such move.

> Our perspective, which is common sense, has grown up over time and is not to be lightly set aside "for our whole humanity depends upon it." (HAH 16). Ours, if a fiction, is a useful and necessary one. One apparently can oppose it only with other fictions which would be superfluous or malignant. Still, there remains the possibility--a dangerous one--that if we were differently constituted, a different perspective might be ours. Philosophers had heretofore turned away from common sense, but in a spirit abnegative toward life. Would it be possible--and this was the main question in

Nietzsche's philosophy--to turn away from common sense and the perspective of the herd though in the name of life? Can we, having once seen all perspectives as false, including any we ourselves might impose still go on inquiring?[10]

There is still another area of contemporary philosophic thought where Nietzsche's vision finds acceptance as a plausible description of the way things are given a present perspective arrived at by methods independent of Nietzsche's. Writing in *Philosophy Today* (Spring 1983), George J. Stack finds that Nietzsche's views anticipates many of the ideas of Structuralism developed by Claude Levi-Strauss, Michel Foucault, and Saussure.

His thinking commits Nietzsche to the view that man has lived in many *worlds*, still lives in different worlds and will continue to live under the sway of emergent cultural, intellectual, and linguistic systems. There is for him, no absolutely "true" world interpretation. Each dominant world interpretation is pervaded by postulates, values, ways of thinking, perceiving, judging that are preserved by a typically unconscious acceptance of symbolic, cultural, cognitive-linguistic world-orientation. Most individuals in a socio-cultural, system more or less accept the values, meanings and interpretations current in their cultural system. So far Nietzsche's views are consonant with those of the structuralists...

Nietzsche's self-consciousness about language, especially the languages of the sciences, led him to see that there is no simple interpretation of an event or a phenomenon; rather there is a "plurality of interpretations." The implications of this insight is that there is really not one viable "system of signs" (or as Wittgenstein might say "language game"), but a number of concurrent "means of expression." The selection of one conceptual linguistic scheme could not be made the basis of "truth" or the basis of functionality (for each sign system has its proper function), but solely on the basis of what underlies each world-interpretation or world-orientation: value. It is at this point that Nietzsche leaves his "structural analysis" behind and parts company with the structuralists.[12]

In the *Birth of Tragedy* it is the Dionysiac man who glimpses the artificiality of perspectives.

"The Dionysiac man might be said to resemble Hamlet: both have looked deeply into the true nature of things; they have *understood* and now are loath to act. They realize that no action of theirs can work any change in the eternal condition of things, and they regard the imputation as ludicrous or debasing that they should set right the time which is out of joint. Understanding kills action, for in order to act we require the veil of illusion...Now no comfort any longer avails, desire reaches beyond the transcendental world, beyond the gods themselves and an immortal beyond, is denied. The truth once seen, man is aware everywhere of the ghostly absurdity of existence, comprehends the symbolism of Ophelia's fate and the wisdom of wood sprite Silenus: nausea invades him."

"Then in this supreme jeopardy of the will, art, that sorceress expert in healing, approaches him; only she can turn his fits of nausea into imaginations with which it is possible to live. There are in the one hand the spirit of the ***sublime*** which subjugates terror by the means of art; on the other hand the *comic* spirit which releases us, through art, from the tedium of absurdity.[13]

The preceding passages attempt to show that the view that Nietzsche called

perspectivism has since Nietzsche's day gained acceptance among a diverse group of thinkers following more or less independent lines of reasoning. Neo-Kantians such as Cassirer and Langer, analytical pragmatists such as Quine and Goodman, structuralists and, of course, existentialist, all seemingly are led to similar conclusions about the nature of reality and truth. As in so many other cases, Nietzsche anticipated this development too. The pursuit of reasoned explanations, of rational accounts of the real, on the assumption that some sort of correspondence theory is correct, will in the end, reveal the conditions that perspectivism has all along recognized. "When the inquirer, having pushed to the circumference, realizes how logic in that place curls about itself and bites its own tail, he is struck with a new kind of perception: a tragic perception, which requires, to make it tolerable, the remedy of art."[14]

Is there a paradox in this account? Can we reason ourselves to the conclusion that the universe is ultimately an irrational place? Surprised by this conclusion, nauseated, terrified, must we then take refuge in illusion? Nietzsche certainly thought that ordinary people would be unable to handle the revelation, and he seems to have been unsure of his own ability to cope with the insight. It must, he thought, lead to a failure of the will. Better an honest advocacy of pessimism he thought, than a wishy-washy acquiescence to scepticism.

When a philosopher nowadays makes known that he is not sceptic...people all hear it impatiently, they regard him on that account with some apprehension...he is henceforth said to be dangerous. With his repudiation of scepticism, it seems to them as if they heard some evil-threatening sound in the distance, as if a new kind of explosive were being tried somewhere, a dynamite of the spirit... That, however, which is most diseased and degenerated in such nondescripts is the *will*; they are no longer familiar with independence of decision, or the courageous feeling of the pleasure in willing-- they are doubtful of "freedom of the will" even in their dreams.

There are the finest gala dresses and disguises for this disease; and that, for instance, most of what places itself nowadays in the showcases as "objectiveness," "the scientific spirit," "l'art pour l'art," and "pure voluntary knowledge," is only decked-out scepticism and paralysis of will.[15]

No one, I think, would accuse Nietzsche of terseness in style, nor of an unwillingness to dramatize his themes. Scepticism is one of the oldest philosophic traditions, and in view of the preceding remarks, one of the better ones.

How can we judge a theory better or worse, if there is no fixed reality to which it may be compared? Easily, some theories are more reasonable than others, given the information/experience we presently have to go on. Some are better suited to our purposes.

On the view we are proposing here there is no sharp difference between the literary and artistic criticism and the techniques we employ in evaluating scientific theories. It should be emphasized, however, that these techniques are enormously and fundamentally important, since they represent the deliberate, conscious, and

formal effort to state and clearly apply the values -- the conditions -- which we wish to create against our background of absurdity.

Scepticism must be one of the preferable perspectives according to the values which must be endorsed by anyone who subscribes to the kind of "perspectivism" which has been described here. No doubt Hume's view of the Dionysiac vision was every bit as clear as Nietzsche's, but rather than melodramatic fits of existential angst, Hume simply chucked his books aside, and went out to play a little backgammon and drink some wine with his cronies.

Perspectivism is, after all, only a version of scepticism. What Nietzsche dismisses as disease and paralysis of the will is not the hard-nosed, tough-minded scepticism of Carneades/or Hume, or the scientific scepticism that is the motivating force behind the inquiries of people such as Quine, Goodman, Feyerabend, and indeed the whole of modern empiricism.

It should be clear by now that we take the connection between art and the irrational to be exactly what Nietzsche claims it to be in *The Birth of Tradedy*. The task of art is to make sense out of the absurdity of our existance. But we would maintain that it must share this task with science, and there is no reason to suppose that Nietzche would not have granted science equal footing as well, once it is understood that the values which underlie any activity or inquiry should be life enhancing. According to Richard Schact, Nietzsche in his desire to carry through a re-evaluation of values, made at least one exception to a rigorous perspectivism. He endorses a value:

> This value is one which he regards as objective and absolute, being grounded in the very nature of things. It is held not to be the value of some particular individual or group of men, but rather that "preached by life itself to all that has life" (WF 125). It does not "express conditions of preservation and growth" of some individual or group, but rather pertains to the general *desirability* of "preservation and growth," i.e., of the quantitative and qualitative enhancement of life, and in particular of "the type *'man'* conceived in terms of the emergence of a union of the greatest physical well-being and strength with the greatest possible spiritual development."[16]

This is a vague sentiment, but certainly one that would receive wide support. Given Nietzsche's aristocratic sympathies and his unfavorable views of democracy and socialism, we might wish for further explanation of the phrase "greatest possible spiritual development" before agreeing whole-heartedly with his position, but there does not seem to be any reason to dissent form the principles.

Granted that the nominalistic-perspectivist-sceptical position is essentially correct, art is catapulated from a mere expression of cultural values to the role of a co-determiner with science of what society will become. To some extent we take science seriously. Most of us are aware of the technological consequences of science and the problems that have arisen there. (There is a vast difference between science and technology. It is the latter that has given us the bomb and dioxin, freeways and

an energy crisis. We should be much more careful in distinguishing *technologists* from scientists. But of course where science gives rise to a technology that is beneficial -- even scientists want to ignore the distinction and take credit for the "progress.") To repeat, most of us take science/technology seriously. But relatively few people take art seriously -- seriously in the sense we have been trying to sketch in all the preceding talk -- that is, to take art seriously as a force, no less than science, which shapes the reality in which we live.

What kind of reality, what kind of world, do we want for ourselves and for our successors? Where are we now? Does our art show us where we are, and does it bring into being those values, that reality, those kinds of beings that we would wish realized -- that *should be* realized?

But of course, as soon as we use the words "should be" we are introducing questions of morality, and it is by no means clear that aesthetic standards and ethical standards are connected, or if they are connected, that the denial of that connection will not be aesthetically beneficial.

Let me retreat from these questions which really are the clumsy results of a non-perspectival tradition. It is not open season; every opinion, or picture, or poem is not as good as every other.

> Life for Nietzsche is not something the value of which can be judged or determined by reference to any independent criteria. Rather, it is, so to speak, a game, which exists because the world as "will to power" of necessity gives birth to it; in which all of us, however well or poorly we can and do play, are by our very natures engaged; which has rules not set by us, nor by mere chance, but by the essential features of the "will to power" that is constitutive of reality generally; and the very nature of which indicates an ideal that both constitutes the ultimate value and determines the standard of value for everything falling within its compass. When Nietzsche's assertion that "the value of life cannot be estimated" is viewed in this light, it seems to me quite evident that it is not to be construed as a profession of axiological nihilism.[17]

Well, yes, let us agree that life is the primary value -- but even here some instant qualification is necessary -- living well is the ultimate value; everyone living well: a surplus of physical strength and spiritual well being. Of each action we can ask will this improve life quantitatively and qualitatively? Applied to art, the question is not one of which works should be permitted -- no work should be forbidden -- but rather which should be encouraged.

If the above account is correct, it follows that the Dionysiac is not irrational. His is an entirely rational reaction to the recognition that the universe as it is in itself is devoid of meaning, that things are only what they seem to be. If on a large ship one were to wander below decks and to discover somewhere in the depths of the ship that water is rushing in, that the ship is doomed, and rescue impossible, and then learn that the officers are deliberately concealing the truth in order to avoid panic, it is not an unreasonable response to thumb one's nose at the Captain and kick in the

doors to the liquor cabinet. It is not the only reasonable response. We might prefer another one. We might say with Conrad's Capt. McWhirr that we don't care if the ship is sinking as long as it goes down in good order. But McWhirr is an Appollonian only by virtue of lack of imagination.

Science and art are both ways of creating. They are the two most rational ways we have yet discovered. But even at its best rationality is a frail barrier against the enormous emptiness of the universe. There can be no short cuts to rationality. Revelation, mystical insight, a sacred text, the authority of a master, or the ineffable workings of a universal subconscious cannot be substituted for rationality. If Nietzsche is correct, they are all, or must become in the long run, life-denying, not life affirming. And of course this is the ultimate Nietzschean paradox: our only hope is a healthy pessimism.

NOTES

1. *Human, All Too Human*, 1878. See also Arthur Danto, "Nietzsche's Perspectivism" in *Nietzsche: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Robert S. Solomon, New York, Doubleday Anchor, 1973.
2. Solomon, p. 31.
3. Danto in Solomon, p. 33.
4. W. V. Quine, From *A Logical Point of View*, New York, Harper Torchbook, 1963 (first published, 1953), pp. 17-18.
5. Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, Indianapolis, Hackett, 1978, pp. 6-7.
6. *Ibid* p. 94.
7. Paul Feyerabend, *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, ed. Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave, Cambridge, University Press, 1970, pp. 228-229.
8. Danto in Solomon, p. 35.
9. Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics*, Gary Zukav, *The Dancing Wu Li Masters*.
10. Danto, pp. 38-39.
11. George J. Stack, *Philosophy Today* (Spring) 1983.
12. pp. 44-45.
13. Friedrick Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy & Geneology of Morals*, Doubleday Anchor, 1956, pp. 51-52.
14. Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy* p. 95.
15. Geoffrey Clive, ed., *The Philosophy of Nietzsche*, New York, Mentor Books, 1965, pp. 576-578, from *Beyond Good and Evil*, Sec. 208.
16. R.C. Solomon, ed., Nietesche: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 79.
17. Schacht, in Solomon, p. 81.