

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-65155-4 - Nietzsche, Aesthetics and Modernity

Matthew Rampley

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

“Beauty” is for the artist something outside all orders of rank, because in beauty opposites are tamed; the highest sign of power, namely power over opposites.

(*WP* §803)

This book is concerned with the place of art in the thought of Nietzsche and with the place of Nietzsche’s philosophy of art in the aesthetic tradition. It is not the first such study; as early as 1900 Julius Zeitler devoted a monograph entirely to Nietzsche’s aesthetics, and there have been several other studies since.¹ However, it differs from those studies in that it discusses Nietzsche’s writing on art within the context of the problem of modern culture. It therefore draws out the relation between Nietzsche’s own interpretation of art and modernity, and the aesthetic inflection of the debate concerning the meaning of modernity both in Nietzsche’s predecessors such as Hegel, the Schlegel brothers or August Schelling and in his successors, in particular, Theodor Adorno. There is a tension in the work of Nietzsche, one with which he is constantly occupied and that, it might be argued, is a lasting legacy of his work. It emerges from his general critique of metaphysics and could be characterised as the problem of reconciling radical epistemological scepticism with continued belief in the possibility of normative discourse. In short, Nietzsche is concerned with the question of how the radical sceptic can avoid becoming a nihilist, and how the radical sceptic might combine acknowledgement of the contingency of all values with a continuing commitment to their necessity. Thus a recurring issue for Nietzsche is that of living with contradiction, and it surfaces in vari-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-65155-4 - Nietzsche, Aesthetics and Modernity

Matthew Rampley

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

ous ways, such as the combining of belief with irony, a sense of history with amnesia, affirmation with negation, Apollonian order with Dionysian chaos.

Nietzsche's work confronts an issue central to the larger question of modernity itself. As Jürgen Habermas has stated, modernity 'can and will not borrow the criteria by which it takes its orientation from the model supplied by another epoch, *it has to create its normativity out of itself*.'² For Nietzsche modernity represents a decisive moment in the history of western culture, when its values are revealed to be hollow illusions and thereby lose all legitimacy. The consequent crisis is constantly threatened with a lapse into a decadent nihilism, a state of absolute passive unbelief, in which no values are legitimate, least of all those of the discredited western tradition. In this respect Nietzsche was only one amongst a large number of nineteenth-century commentators who believed they were witnessing a decisive phase in the development of European culture. Yet whereas writers such as Karl Marx, Georg Simmel, Max Weber or Charles Baudelaire located this process in changes in the material conditions of contemporary urban society, Nietzsche consistently held to the view that the crisis of modernity was largely one of values, one moreover generated by the internal logic of western cultural values, in particular its persistent belief in metaphysical certitude. Much of his thought is consequently devoted to the question of establishing a grounding for cultural values in an age in which the notion of any certitude seems highly problematic. This problem, I argue, is crucial to an understanding of Nietzsche's aesthetic thinking; it is only through the adoption of a certain aesthetic practice that the problem of modernity finds some form of resolution.

Before developing this point further it is important to forestall criticisms that might be made of this initial position. It is widely accepted that alongside Adorno, who was himself profoundly influenced by the earlier thinker, Nietzsche is the quintessential philosopher of non-identity. In keeping with this reading it might be argued that the idea of a *resolution* of the contradictions of modernity is completely alien to Nietzsche. This appears doubly so given the numerous criticisms Nietzsche made of the system building of Hegel, in which all contradictions were resolved in the consummation of Absolute Knowledge. Since the

INTRODUCTION

seminal interpretation of his thought by Gilles Deleuze in 1962 it has become widely accepted that the work of Nietzsche represents the supreme moment in counter-Hegelian thought, in which difference, non-identity and contradiction become central.³ In the light of such considerations, it is necessary to introduce a conceptual distinction between 'contradiction' and 'inconsistency.'

The notions of contradiction and difference figure prominently in Nietzsche's writing and function as axes around which much of his thought is organised. This last word is crucial, though, for while it eschews the relentless system building of Hegel, Nietzsche's thought is nevertheless *organised*, and this organisation, for all the variations in its texture, displays a certain consistency. It is this assumption of consistency that allows the commentator, even Deleuze, to write a coherent account of Nietzsche's text. In one sense I am partially endorsing the interpretation of Nietzsche by Karl Jaspers, in which 'contradiction' becomes a master concept.⁴ Thus attention to the question of art enables Nietzsche to hold to both a radical counter-metaphysics and an insistence on the positing of post-metaphysical normative values, without lapsing into incoherence. Besides, the construction of even the most rigorous anti-foundationalism relies on the lack of foundations as a founding value.⁵

Nietzsche's discourse thereby raises the familiar problem of reflexivity and, rather than skirting around it, confronts it through examination of the question of art. While Jaspers offers an elegant solution to a pressing concern in Nietzsche, his reading also requires a degree of qualification. Nietzsche is not Adorno, for whom dialectical contradiction most definitely was a master concept. The limited scope of my study also needs to be recognised; it is intended to explore the range of Nietzsche's writings on art and to outline the role of Nietzschean aesthetics in his wider oeuvre. Hence contradiction becomes an organising principle in a determinate area of Nietzsche's thought, and I shall be arguing that his formulation of the question of art is linked with his attempt to think through the problem of contradiction consistently.

Most current commentators on Nietzsche, broadly following Deleuze's reading, see him as the essential thinker of difference. This interpretation explicitly opposes the totalising tendency of the dialectic,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-65155-4 - Nietzsche, Aesthetics and Modernity

Matthew Rampley

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

which will always seek to negate, to reduce the other, and in which the process of *Aufhebung* or sublation only preserves the other by simultaneously cancelling it out.⁶ In the hands of Deleuze, even will to power becomes a means to the affirmation of difference, of plurality, despite the many passages where Nietzsche writes of will to power as a process of overcoming or negation. In addition to Nietzsche's explicit expressions of mistrust with regard to the system building of Hegel, subsequent commentators have understood the anti-Hegelianism of Nietzsche's thought to inhabit his writing at a more fundamental level. Tracy Strong, for example, sees Nietzsche's use of genealogy as being specifically shaped to undermine the structure of dialectic. Rather than gathering up, genealogy seeks to take apart, to lay bare the working of signs and their history, in order to dismantle the cultural constructs of contemporary society.⁷

Notwithstanding the importance of such interpretations, I shall suggest that Nietzsche's relation to Hegel is considerably more complex than one of mere negation or overcoming. The tension between Hegel and Nietzsche, and that between contradiction and its opposite, are inscribed everywhere within the corpus of Nietzsche's work, and I shall work through these tensions as they appear with the aim of analysing the manner in which art becomes the means to release them, to effect a provisional reconciliation. I add the word 'provisional' to articulate the difference between what I read as occurring in the text of Nietzsche and what I perceive to be the specific operation of Hegel's dialectic, where each successive *Aufhebung* points towards that final moment of absolute determination. A central question is the meaning of the term 'dialectics.' For Nietzsche the term was intimately linked with Hegel and Plato, both of whom stood as exemplars of the supreme moment of metaphysical thinking, in which systematic dialectical thinking leads to absolute knowledge. As critical as he was of metaphysics, Nietzsche did not abandon dialectical thinking *tout court*. A central part of my argument is centred around the idea that Nietzsche retains dialectical thinking as an essential part of his post-metaphysical project. This strand in Nietzsche's thinking was taken up by Georges Bataille, who, in the tradition of Alexandre Kojève, emphasises the elements of disruption and

INTRODUCTION

violence in the Hegelian dialectic, and then works through those same elements in Nietzsche himself.⁸

To speak of a Nietzschean dialectic is of course provocative. It is quite removed from Hegel's notion of an immanent and *systematic* unfolding of consciousness. However, Nietzsche shares with Hegel recognition of the mediated and partial nature of cognitive claims and, most importantly, of the productive function of the negative. Curiously, it is through a process of historical deferral that the proximity of Nietzsche and Hegel can be followed, for the mediating point was only provided subsequently in the form of Adorno. In spite of his difference of temperament, Adorno comes closest to the path Nietzsche begins moving along. More significantly, while drawing its thrust from Hegel, Adorno's dialectic refuses the final moment of consummation, remaining instead entangled within the web of contradiction. Adorno notes that 'dialectics is no longer reconcilable with Hegel. Its motion does not tend to the identity in the difference between each object and its concept; instead it is suspicious of all identity. Its logic is one of disintegration.'⁹ Like Nietzsche, Adorno is concerned with articulating and thinking through the contradiction between the necessity of retaining discursive logic while denying its metaphysical foundation. In Adorno the moment of absolute knowledge is infinitely deferred: 'The non-identical is not to be obtained directly, as something positive on its part, nor is it obtainable by a negation of the negative. This negation is not an affirmation itself, as it is to Hegel.'¹⁰ The significance of the negative in Adorno's conception of the dialectic derives from his stress on the constitutive gap between concept and experience, coupled with the recognition of the impossibility of overcoming that difference. This is the tragedy of philosophy, for Adorno: 'in philosophy we literally seek to immerse ourselves in things that are heterogeneous to it,'¹¹ an immersion that must be perpetually deferred, since the immanence of the dialectic can only be overcome by means of the dialectic itself. A crucial distinction between Nietzsche and Adorno remains, of course, for while Adorno cannot and will not see beyond the infinitely negative dialectic, Nietzsche is always looking for what might come after. This constitutes the dialectical nature of his own transvaluation of all values, in which

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-65155-4 - Nietzsche, Aesthetics and Modernity

Matthew Rampley

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

‘knowledge’ and the ‘human’ subject are negated and transformed into ‘interpretation’ and the ‘Übermensch.’

Nietzsche’s thought represents in many senses the first deconstruction of the philosophical tradition. By this I mean that his work contains both a sceptical de-struction of metaphysics and a post-metaphysical con-structive moment. The sceptical moment is familiar to his readers, and it is his polemics against contemporary society, his relentless tirades against Christianity and Plato, and his ridicule of Kant, the ‘great Chinaman of Königsberg,’ which constitute his identity in the eyes of most. I am arguing, however, that this scepticism is itself a strategic moment of negation that is posited in order to be superseded once more. Nietzsche’s construction of a post-metaphysical thinking is not executed by a complete departure from the tradition, but is rather undertaken by pushing through to their limits the implications in the thought of Kant, Descartes, Hegel and others. At this point one can see an affinity between Nietzsche, Hegel and Jacques Derrida, whose term ‘deconstruction’ best describes Nietzsche’s stance towards metaphysics. The notion of *Aufhebung* or ‘sublation’ possesses a double sense; it denotes processes of both preserving and negating. In the *Science of Logic* Hegel offers perhaps his most succinct definition of the concept, when he writes that ‘what is sublated is at the same time preserved; it has lost only its immediacy but is not on that account annihilated.’¹² Dialectical negation is not simply the cancelling out of a position; it is rather a process of mediation in a detour through the other. Derrida has admitted the profound similarity between Hegel and his own deconstructive practice,¹³ and this relation can be triangulated to include Nietzsche. This is nowhere more apparent than in the reception by Derrida and Nietzsche of the history of metaphysics. Just as for Derrida, metaphysics cannot simply be negated, so too Nietzsche displays a profoundly ambivalent attitude towards Kant, Hegel and, more significantly, Socrates. For all his censure of Socrates, Nietzsche’s project overlaps in many ways with that of the Athenian ‘gadfly.’¹⁴

Because of its simultaneous negation and appropriation of metaphysics Nietzsche’s thinking is often characterised as an ironic discourse: not in the sense of a wilful playing with forms, though this may be what he aims to accomplish in many cases, but rather in the sense of

INTRODUCTION

maintaining a pathos of distance. Distance towards one's own values and those of one's culture, knowing them to be purely interpretative stances towards the world, lacking resilience when put under scrutiny, while simultaneously adhering to them as if they had something more than a purely contingent worth. I shall examine this pathos of distance in Nietzsche in my opening chapters.

The concept of an interpretative dialectic forms the basic framework in my exposition of Nietzsche, and as such it constitutes the main core of my first two chapters. In Chapter 1 I offer an articulation of the above problem as it relates to Nietzsche's critique of 'knowledge' and 'truth,' and to his awareness of the significance of metaphor and interpretation for any process of constructive thinking. In particular I shall outline the relation between the dialectic and the notion of interpretation, to which Nietzsche turns in order to resist the metaphysical connotations of the concept 'knowledge.' Central to Nietzsche's critique of metaphysics is its implied assumption of the possibility of transcendence, whether it can be regarded as the Absolute Knowledge of Hegel, the revelation of the form of the good for Plato, or Descartes's grounding of knowledge in the self-certainty of the cogito. For all three, recurrent targets of Nietzsche's deconstruction of metaphysics, immanence within the system of thought is broken. Thus while in Hegel's dialectic the unfolding of thought occurs through its own internal dynamic, its *telos* still stands at the moment of stasis of the system, in which the dialectic has completed its course. In contrast, through the notion of an interpretative negative dialectic, Nietzsche conceives of a practice that refuses the lure of transcendence, whose interpretative criteria are immanent to its practice. As in Hegel, negation acts as a spur to the reformulation of an existing value, but in contrast there is no final moment when it is recouped in the positivity of final or absolute knowledge. Nietzsche thereby attempts to preserve the contradiction between his critique of the metaphysical search for foundational certitude and the continuing place of some (non-metaphysical) interpretative grounding.

In the second chapter I discuss the negative dialectic in relation to Nietzsche's critique of subjectivity. I argue in like manner to Chapter 1 that Nietzsche is concerned not with the mere destruction of a key metaphysical concept, namely the subject, but rather its transformation

INTRODUCTION

in order to twist it free from the limited metaphysical understanding of selfhood. Decentering is not dissolution. The claim is crucial inasmuch as I shall assert that Nietzsche's writings on art are incomprehensible if we see him as proclaiming the death of the subject *tout court*, most particularly because of his emphasis on the artist as the key to overcoming metaphysical culture and its attendant nihilism.

Having laid out the basic parameters of my discussion of Nietzsche, I turn to the specific theme of art, and in particular to the manner in which the dialectical tension in Nietzsche's work between a radical scepticism and his search for a post-metaphysical normative discourse is fully worked out and resolved by the model of the artist and the artistic creation of meaning. Writing a full-length study of Nietzsche's philosophy of art is a highly problematic task. Nietzsche does not have a unified philosophy of art or aesthetic theory in the way one might take to be the case for, say, Hegel, Schiller or Schopenhauer. Instead, his oeuvre presents scattered writings frequently lacking any apparent unifying theme. Moreover we come up against the fact that his only substantial treatment of the subject belongs to his early years, after which Nietzsche's thought underwent considerable changes as he left the shadow of Schopenhauer, changes which lend it a frequently fragmentary and disjointed character. I have nevertheless attempted to overcome this problem by discerning themes in his writing on art which recur, which are both closely connected and serve to provide some means of releasing the wider tension which I have outlined above. In Chapter 3 I begin by exploring his first major text, *The Birth of Tragedy*. I attempt to understand that work, and most particularly the much analysed function of the Apollonian and the Dionysian, by analysing its dialectical structure and its considerable indebtedness to theories of the sublime. Just as the experience of the sublime both negates the subject and restores it, so tragedy presents the annihilation of the stable symbolic order and replaces it with an interpretative schema of radical contingency. As such the dialectic of Dionysus and Apollo prefigures the key motifs already discussed. Not merely a therapeutic device to 'hide' the nausea of becoming, as one recent commentator has suggested,¹⁵ tragedy becomes, in my reading, a site in which is dramatised the collapse of metaphysical certitude and its sublation into an immanentist interpretationalism.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-65155-4 - Nietzsche, Aesthetics and Modernity

Matthew Rampley

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

Nietzsche's philosophy of art has been described as pursuing an 'auto-aesthetic' practice that embodies the same logic of immanence underpinning his wider epistemological concerns.¹⁶ In Chapters 4–7 I examine the ways in which this auto-aesthetic is recast in the light of the developments Nietzsche's thought undergoes from the mid-1870s onwards. I am arguing that although one can discern a very real transformation in Nietzsche's thinking, the idea of a rupture in his writing underplays important continuities. In particular, *The Birth of Tragedy*, although labouring under the influence of romanticism and idealism, presents ideas which persist, albeit in altered form, throughout Nietzsche's career. In many respects one could read Nietzsche as engaged in the uncompleted project of constantly recasting the ideas at work in *The Birth of Tragedy* in the light of his more general development.

In Chapter 4 I discuss why Nietzsche comes to reject the Schopenhauerian and Wagnerian context that gave rise to *The Birth of Tragedy*. More specifically I shall look at his critique of the notion of transcendence, which plays a large part in the thought of Wagner and Schopenhauer, a notion which always threatens to govern the argument of *The Birth of Tragedy*. Having outlined Nietzsche's rejection of the metaphysical inclinations of his early mentors I shall go on to a wider discussion of his rejection of the notion of transcendence, a notion bound to the dualistic thinking of metaphysics. In keeping with his critique of the metaphysical yearning for the beyond, I shall argue that Nietzsche employs a number of themes in order to establish a counter-philosophy of 'immanence,' themes which ultimately centre around art.

In Chapter 5 I look at the question of time and history in Nietzsche's thought. Here I shall discuss not only the most obscure aspect of his thinking, namely the notion of Eternal Recurrence, but also his early work on the problem of history in the second of the *Untimely Meditations*. It has been claimed that the second of the *Untimely Meditations* differs from Nietzsche's later thought on the question of time inasmuch as it sees history as a problem to be overcome, in contrast to the later writings which represent an affirmation of the temporal flux of becoming to the detriment of any stable, and petrified, regime of pure being.¹⁷ My own interpretation instead views the two periods as united by a common concern to think through the problem of the relation of per-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-65155-4 - Nietzsche, Aesthetics and Modernity

Matthew Rampley

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

manence and historicity in a manner parallel to Nietzsche's wider concern with the relation between scepticism and belief. There is also a further dimension to the question of time in Nietzsche's work, namely, the problem of modernity. If, as already noted, one common definition of modernity attends to the evaporation of inherited values, norms and social practices, so too the sense of the modern is characterised by a transformed perception of time and history. In particular, from the mid-nineteenth century onwards the understanding of time came to be dominated by the 'new,' which, coupled with the Enlightenment belief in progress, redefined the present as essentially historical, a point of constant transition between an obsolete, irretrievable past and an indeterminate future full of the promise of perfection.¹⁸

Nietzsche's concern with time thus registers the larger issue of the understanding of time in modern culture, and it confronts aesthetic debates about the relation between the present and the past. From the *Querelle des anciens et des modernes* of the late seventeenth century onwards, the function of history in aesthetic practice has been a recurrent subject of debate. The rejection of the classical past as a model for artistic imitation mirrors the wider question of the immanent normativity of modern culture, and modernity's orientation towards the new found its most forceful expression in aesthetic innovation and the emergence of the avant-garde. Although the notion of an artistic avant-garde was in its infancy, and certainly makes no appearance in Nietzsche's writing, his adoption of 'Dionysian classicism' as an aesthetic norm undoubtedly counts as a response to the aesthetic inflections of the question of modernity and history. Dionysian classicism serves for Nietzsche as the mark of an 'authentic' artistic praxis, in which history is no longer something either to be transcended or to be mourned for as irretrievably lost. In this regard Nietzsche's stress on the negation of meaning in the work of art plays an important part, inasmuch as it embodies a specific temporal structure, namely one of selective repetition, which underpins Nietzsche's general idea of an interpretative dialectic and which is explored more speculatively in the metaphor of eternal recurrence.

In Chapter 6 I examine the function of his use of physiological metaphors as a second strategic device in his critique of (metaphysical) notions of transcendence, and his turn towards immanence. I shall be