

# The ‘Death’ of the Artist — A Nietzschean Approach to Aesthetics

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**ABSTRACT.** The purpose of this paper is to investigate the position of physiology in Nietzsche’s understanding of aesthetics in line with his critique of the subject. This exploration is inspired by the emphasis on the concept of physiology in Nietzsche’s overall philosophy and is based on the view that his transvaluation of the subject through the method of genealogy forms the ground for the “death” of the artist. The main argument of the paper is that Nietzsche’s physiological understanding paves the way for the emergence of the body as the unconscious artist.

## **I. Introduction**

Physiology has seldom been the object of inquiry throughout the history of Western philosophy. In the rare instances where the concept of body has been philosophically discussed it has been considered in opposition to a primary concept such as the soul, mind or intellect, as the famous body-soul and body-mind problems indicate. The dualities of body-soul and body-mind have troubled several thinkers of the Western world starting with Plato and extending to modern philosophers such as Descartes. We do not aim to give an in-depth analysis of the dualities mentioned above and for the general purpose of this paper it will suffice to focus on one of the most prominent characteristics of such dualistic thinking. This characteristic is the fact that regardless of the term against which the concept of the body is placed, the latter cannot escape from being the object of degradation. In other words, the body is at least ignored and at times treated with a severe disapproval when compared with the mind, soul or intellect.

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One of the presuppositions which underlie the contempt for the body is the thought that the body is considered at best useless and otherwise deceptive on the way to truth. In other words, it has been claimed by some philosophers that true knowledge of the reality can be attained only through reason and the body is worthless and even a hindrance or deceiver in this pursuit. A second reason why the body has been considered worthless is the fact that it is subject to change, and particularly to suffering. Being vulnerable to change (and destruction) has been the major objection in the attempt to grant the body a substantial position in terms of ontology. Suffering has been considered among the major troubles for human existence, resulting in moral theories negatively postulated on the basis of the exclusion of pain and suffering from human life. In fact, not only suffering but materiality and bodily feelings in general have been treated with contempt in this line of thought.

Plato's dialogue *Phaedo* is home to a blending of these two points of view underlying the degradation of the body over against the soul. First, conversing with Simmias about the attainment of truth and investigating the role of the body in this pursuit (whether a hinderer or not), Socrates clearly speaks for the inferiority of the body and remarks that "reasoning is ... at its best when none of those senses intrudes to trouble the soul, neither hearing nor sight nor pain nor pleasure; when it is, so far as may be, alone by itself, taking leave of the body, and having as little communion and contact as possible therewith while it reaches out after reality" (Hackforth, 1998, 65c). Second, Socrates claims that the soul, belonging in fact to the realm of the "divine and pure and single" (Hackforth, 1998, 83e), is trapped in the body and is unavoidably engaged in connection with it (Hackforth, 1998, 82d). Having left the invisible world of the "divine, immortal and wise," the soul is bound to live in the visible world of the body with all "follies and fears, its wild desires and all the other ills that beset mankind" (Hackforth, 1998, 81a). Moreover,

Every pleasure and every pain drives as it were a rivet into the soul, pinning it down to the body and so assimilating it thereto that it believes everything to be real which the body declares so to be. Indeed it seems to me an inevitable result of sharing the body's beliefs and joys that the soul should adopt its habits and upbringing, and so be destined never to reach Hades in a pure condition, but always to

depart with much taint of the body, and therefore to fall back again soon into another body, like a seed replanted in new soil. (Hackforth, 1998, 83d)

Thus, Socrates views the body as a threat or evil which has a potential to divert the soul from purity and concludes that the true philosopher's "concern is not for the body, but, so far as he can detach himself from the body, is directed towards the soul" (Hackforth, 1998, 64e). According to Nietzsche, Socrates' contempt for the body is so strong that he interprets Socrates' cheerfulness on the eve of his eventual death and his statement that he owes Asclepius (the god of healing in ancient Greek mythology) a cock as the sign of Socrates' conviction that he is being cured of the disease of life (of the bodily world, in other words) by death (Nietzsche, 1998, p. 11).<sup>1</sup> In terms of this negative attitude adopted towards the body, Nietzsche's philosophy is an exception to the conventional way of Western thinking in that it is permeated by a physiological understanding. The neglected concept of physiology plays a central role in Nietzsche's writings on different fields of philosophy ranging from ontology to aesthetics.<sup>2</sup>

Inspired by the emphasis on the concept of physiology in Nietzsche's overall philosophy, this paper aims to trace the significance of physiology in Nietzsche's understanding of aesthetics. For a better exposition of the position of physiology in Nietzschean aesthetics, first of all, an outline of Nietzsche's conception of the will to power and body is presented in the second section of the present paper. In this way, we hope to demonstrate how traditional understanding of the "subject" in Western philosophy is exposed to criticism through Nietzsche's thinking in terms of physiology. It is our general contention that Nietzsche's transvaluation of the subject from a physiological point of view is one of the cornerstones of his thought

<sup>1</sup> The meaning of Socrates' last words has been a controversial issue and Nietzsche shares the interpretation mentioned here with several scholars of the modern period. However, Socrates' words have been interpreted in different ways over the years. For a close investigation of these interpretations and a novel reading of them, see Most, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Not much literature on Nietzsche is focused on the role of physiology in his overall thought. For a general understanding on Nietzsche's physiological thinking see Rehberg, 2002 and for a critique of Heidegger's reception of Nietzsche's unfinished project "physiology of art" as well as an elaboration on the relation between physiology and art in Nietzsche's thought see Haar, 2010. This paper has benefited a lot from Rehberg's Nietzsche classes offered between 2010-2012 at the Middle East Technical University.

which endows his philosophy with its radical character. Moreover, thinking in terms of physiology is not peculiar to a certain period of Nietzsche's writing life. On the contrary, even his early writings harbour this way of thinking, which is pointed out by the references to *The Birth of Tragedy* especially in the second half of the paper. The third section focuses on the theme of the "death" of the artist<sup>3</sup> and explores major instances where physiology appears in Nietzsche's writing on art, revealing the emergence of the body as the unconscious artist.

## **2. The Dynamism of the Will to Power and the Body**

One of the key elements of Nietzsche's philosophy is his doctrine of the will to power, which has raised many debates among scholars, particularly as to whether it is a metaphysical, substantial or totalizing concept. It is true that Nietzsche famously regards life, or the whole world, as "the will to power – and nothing besides" (Nietzsche, 1967, note 1067). In this respect it seems that the will to power is bestowed with a substantial position and is postulated as an entity to which every phenomenon in the world could be reduced. However, there is an element of dynamism inherent in Nietzsche's understanding of the will to power, which, we suppose, strictly differentiates his philosophy from totalizing ones. This element of dynamism is the topic on which this section is focused and we consider that it forms the connection between Nietzsche's conception of the will to power and of physiology.

First and foremost among the vital aspects of the will to power is the fact that it refers to the "play of forces and waves of forces, at the same time one and many" (*ibid.*). In other words, life, or the will to power, does not refer to a single entity but to a multiplicity of forces which exist in

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<sup>3</sup> The title of this paper is an allusion to Roland Barthes' 1968 essay "The Death of the Author" where he attacks the view that the explanation of a literary work is sought in the person who produced it and argues that writing is, in fact, a realm in which the identity of the artist is lost. According to him, that which speaks in a literary work is not the author but language or writing itself, which necessitates impersonality. Based on this understanding of impersonality, the core of Barthes' essay could be expressed as the fact that the author, understood as that which speaks in a literary work, is not to be found in the person who actually produced the work but in the instance of writing itself, that is, in language.

relentless activity. Furthermore, forces within the will to power are not isolated but are engaged in complex relations with one another. These relations are characterized by the struggle for domination. Each force is in struggle with others and “expresses itself in obeying and commanding” (Nietzsche, 1967, note 492). However, the fact that a force obeys or commands another in no way implies an ultimate equilibrium that is reached or the end of the activity of the will to power. For a force always seeks further resistance and the activity of the will to power is perpetuated in this way. Thus, the pursuit for resistance, like that for domination, is presented as one of the fundamental characteristics of the will to power: “The will to power can manifest itself only against resistances; therefore it seeks that which resists it” (Nietzsche, 1967, note 656). Viewed in this way, forces, in Nietzsche’s understanding, are not entities but rather denote performance or activity. For this reason, the notion of the will to power points to a realm of pure activity, to which Nietzsche at times refers as *agon* and at the basis of which lies the *agonal* instinct (Nietzsche, 1998, p. 78).

Nietzsche’s genealogical method reveals that this agonistic realm is what gives emergence to all phenomena. In Foucault’s terms, genealogy is an investigation into the emergence of phenomena and “emergence is always produced through a particular stage of forces” (Foucault, 1991, p. 83). Thus, the genealogical method aims to reveal firstly that nothing exists prior to the activities of the forces and secondly that all alleged homogenous and unitary phenomena are in actual fact products, or from another point of view, isolated “surface phenomen[a]” (Nietzsche, 1998, p. 28) of certain heterogeneous processes. No phenomenon, no existence is exempt from being a product of the relation between forces, human beings involved. This becomes clearer when Nietzsche addresses the reader of his text as follows: “And you yourselves are also this will to power – and nothing besides!” (Nietzsche, 1967, note 1067). The features of dynamism and heterogeneity which are introduced to Nietzsche’s thinking by the agonistic nature of the will to power are what set his philosophy apart from traditional Western thinking.

In Nietzsche’s view, the body, understood broadly, signifies a realm of heterogeneous activity like the will to power. In Deleuze’s terms, “[w]hat defines a body is [the] relation between dominant and dominated forces. Every relationship of forces constitutes a body – whether it is chemical,

biological, social or political. Any two forces, being unequal, constitute a body as soon as they enter into a relationship” (Deleuze, 1983, p. 40). In this context, the body, understood in terms of physiology, can be seen in Nietzsche’s thinking as the epitome of the fact that life is characterized by the continual strife of forces.

On the basis of this conception of the body Nietzsche argues that if we view the human subjectivity from the perspective of physiology “we gain the correct idea of our subject-unity, namely as regents at the head of a communality” (Nietzsche, 1967, note 492). This correct idea shows us that in the context of physiology all unities are fictitious and, in this sense, can be regarded only as temporary phenomena which “continually arise and die” (*ibid.*). The implication of this thought finds expression in Nietzsche’s hypothesis of the “subject as multiplicity” which replaces the thought of unitary subject with that of the “multiplicity of subjects” (Nietzsche, 1967, note 490). This is to say that the conscious, rational, unitary subject, which has long been considered to be the efficient cause of a human being’s actions, consists of a multiplicity of forces. The “subject” is the outcome of an artificial projection of a unitary agent on to the vast richness pertaining to human organism (body).<sup>4</sup> This concept of the subject has traditionally been considered the ground in Western philosophy, particularly in the fields of morality (subject as the ground for free will) and epistemology (subject as the ground for knowledge) as well as aesthetics (subject as the ground for artistic creation and reception). However, through his method of genealogy Nietzsche traces the so-called “subject-unity” down to its multiple constituents which remain hidden from consciousness.

Thus, according to Nietzsche, the subject, regarded as the absolute, sole governor of all human action, is available to us merely as a superficial phenomenon on the surface and beneath lies a tremendous activity

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<sup>4</sup> Nietzsche considers it illegitimate to posit a doer (subject) behind deed. It is beyond the scope of this paper to dwell upon the details of this “error”, but the following quote might give further insight about this issue for the moment: “A quantum of force is also a quantum of drive, will, action (*Trieb, Wille, Wirken*) – in fact, it is nothing more than this driving, willing, acting (*Treiben, Wollen, Wirken*), and it is only through the seduction of language (and through the fundamental errors of reason petrified in it) – language which understands and misunderstands all action as conditioned by an actor, by a ‘subject’ – that it can appear otherwise (Nietzsche, 2000b, II, 13).

of bodily forces. Haar points to a metaphor that Nietzsche makes use of to illustrate this superficial characteristic of the unitary, conscious subject where consciousness “is compared...to a constitutional monarch who reigns but does not rule” (Haar, 1996, pp. 89-90). The real governors of human action are the forces, the bodily drives and instincts, which are hidden from the sight of the conscious subject. The fact that these drives and instincts are not registered at the conscious level does not mean that they do not exist or are not effective. On the very contrary, they are the real rulers but they need to work with a “regent” or “constitutional monarch” which must ignore their activity as a condition of its reigning.

In this way, the meaning of the will to power is better understood: what is at stake here is not the will of a subject but the struggle among a multiplicity of drives. Wherever we see the subject as governor, efficient cause of things, there exist in reality multiple drives fighting for domination against each other and trying to impose their perspective on the emergence of phenomena. This fight for domination and imposition of perspective depicted by the doctrine of the will to power is an already ongoing process. Human being is neither the initiator of this process nor its inhibitor, for the process exists infinitely regardless of the existence of specific beings. It is radically independent of human beings, which could only be claimed to be “the experimental material” in this process (Nietzsche, 1967, note 713).

This is why Nietzsche states that there flows an “inaudible stream” (Nietzsche, 1967, note 659) of drives under the surface phenomena. Nietzsche’s name for these drives which nevertheless express themselves in different ways is the “unconscious” as the following quote indicates:

For the longest time, conscious thought was considered thought itself; only now does the truth dawn on us that by far the greatest part of our mind’s activity proceeds unconscious and unfelt; but I think these drives which here fight each other know very well how to make themselves felt by and how to hurt *each other* (Nietzsche, 2008, section 333).

The unconscious makes itself noticeable through the imposition of its power within the realm of dynamism that is the body. Thus, the subject is

reinstated to its true domain that is the body through Nietzsche's physiological understanding. This is how Nietzsche reevaluates the unitary concept of the subject through the genealogical method so as to introduce an irreducible multiplicity of forces. The fact that traditional understanding of the subject is no more valid in Nietzschean philosophy is what is meant by "death" in the title of this paper.

### 3. Physiology in Aesthetics

This section is guided by the attempt to answer the following questions: What significance does the above-mentioned shift in the understanding of the subject have, when it is applied to the field of aesthetics? Namely, the radical shift according to which (I) the rational, conscious, unitary subject is replaced by the heterogeneous multiplicity of unconscious bodily forces and (II) human being is not the efficient cause of things but forces are.

Foremost among the implications of the genealogy of the subject in the field of aesthetics is that art is no longer regarded by Nietzsche as the creation of the artist as conscious subject but as the product of bodily forces. This means that the conscious artist leaves the throne to the body regarded as an unconscious artist,<sup>5</sup> which paves the way for an impersonal understanding of artistic activity. Before proceeding in this line of thought, it should be noted that Nietzsche had in mind the impersonal and physiological character of art throughout his entire writing life. Now, let us have a look at the instances where he ponders the fact that bodily drives or states are artistically creative and formative or at least provide the "atmosphere of creation" for art (Haar, 2010, p. 23).

As early as *The Birth of Tragedy*, his first published philosophical work (composed in 1870 and published in 1872), Nietzsche writes about two opposite drives (*Triebe*)<sup>6</sup> which are active in the emergence of art and exist "in perpetual strife with only periodically intervening reconciliations" (Nietzsche, 2000a, p. 33). These are the Dionysian and Apollinian artistic energies that "continually incite each other to new and more power-

<sup>5</sup> The phrase "the body as an unconscious artist" is a derivation from Michel Haar, who refers to the body as "artist" (Haar, 2010, p. 19).

<sup>6</sup> "Tendencies" in the Kaufmann translation.

ful births in order to perpetuate the strife of this opposition, only apparently reconciled by the common term 'art'" (*beide so verschiedene Triebe gehen neben einander her, zumeist im offenen Zwiespalt mit einander und sich gegenseitig zu immer neuen kräftigeren Geburten reizend, um in ihnen den Kampf jenes Gegensatzes zu perpetuieren, den das gemeinsame Wort „Kunst“ nur scheinbar überbrückt; ibid.*; translation modified). Nietzsche portrays the artistic drives of the Apollinian and Dionysian in opposition to one another but at the same asserts that each becomes more powerful as a consequence of the encounter with the other. The gaining strength of these drives is regarded as an element that plays the vital role in the continuation of the strife. What is described here is a circular movement: the continuation and intensification of the strife is made possible through drives and the more intensive the strife, the more powerful the drives become.

Now, if we remind ourselves of the characteristics of the will to power outlined in the previous section, we can grasp the connection between the features of the artistic drives in the context of *The Birth of Tragedy* and the will to power. Just like forces within the will to power, the Dionysian and Apollinian fight against, resist and are incited by each other. They constantly strive for domination and the stronger the resistance from the opposite drive is, the stronger each one becomes. It should be noted that Nietzsche considers art the product of this perpetual strife and characterizes it merely as an apparent phenomenon ("this opposition, only apparently reconciled by the common term 'art'"; *ibid.*). The importance of this remark lays in its suggestion that prior to the artistic drives there is neither artist nor artistic creation, just as there is no phenomenon prior to the activities or relations of the forces within the will to power.

Nietzsche makes this thought clearer when he renders the Apollinian and Dionysian free of anthropomorphic attributes. According to him, these two artistic energies do not belong to or are not rooted in human subjectivity but rather "burst forth from nature herself, without the mediation of the human artist – energies in which nature's art impulses (*Kunsttriebe*) are satisfied in the most immediate and direct way" (Nietzsche, 2000a, p. 38). That is to say that drives within the will to power, which appears in the context of this early work as "nature", are satisfied, that is, find the opportunity to express or reveal themselves, without any dependence on the human subject. This further shows that from Nietzsche's

perspective the human artist is not an agent but only an instrument, or “imitator” in his own words (Nietzsche, 2000a, p. 38), in this process of self-revealing of the artistic drives of nature and in the emergence of artistic states. Whether this state is expressed as “the image world of dreams” of the Apollinian or “intoxicated reality” of the Dionysian, it is never dependent upon the individual human being (*ibid.*).

The same thought finds expression in a late note (1885-1886) where Nietzsche elaborates on the relation between the work of art and the artist. He writes: “The work of art where it appears *without* an artist, e.g., as body, as organization (Prussian officer corps, Jesuit order). To that extent the artist is only a preliminary stage. The world as a work of art that gives birth to itself –” (Nietzsche, 1967, note 796). In the context of this note it is not only the work of art and the body but also the whole world which is presented as a self-creating, self-bearing element without any agent like the human artist (in the case of the creation of an art work) or God (in the case of the creation of the world). This late note can be considered the continuation of Nietzsche’s famous thought of the death of God, but here is added a further specification to it, which suggests that the world might be viewed as a product (work of art) constituted by impersonal forces. However, as the dash at the end of the note indicates, this is a difficult and unusual thought on which something could not be said quickly and for which a revaluation is necessary, as we hope to have shown in the previous section.

This note is one of the many examples which demonstrate the fact that the significance of the bodily drives and bodily states in the emergence of art is something that is also explicated by Nietzsche in his later period, perhaps in a more elaborate way. In what follows we will focus on Nietzsche’s unpublished notes ranging over a period from 1883 to 1888 (included in the section entitled “The Will to Power as Art” in *The Will to Power*) in which Nietzsche sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly argues that the aesthetic condition and production necessarily follow from certain bodily states.

In this context, rapture or intoxication (*Rausch*), one of the core concepts of Nietzsche’s understanding of art, is the most immediate and arguably the most important element that would give us some insight into the heart of the subject. Haar appropriately writes that “art is an inten-

sification of physical strength. Rapture means an ‘increase’ in objective strength, both in the creator and in the receiver” (Haar, 2010, p. 20). One can find many instances of this view in Nietzsche’s writing. For example, he maintains that “‘becoming more beautiful’ is a consequence of *enhanced* strength” and the “condition of pleasure which is called intoxication is precisely an exalted feeling of power” (Nietzsche, 1967, note 800). He adds to these remarks that “becoming more beautiful” and the increase in the feeling of strength are more common in the mating season, giving rise to new organs, new colours and forms (*ibid.*). Here is an allusion to the natural, or rather, instinctual element inherent to the aesthetic state. This is revealed by Nietzsche’s assertion that animals’ becoming more colourful, more beautiful and stronger in the mating season is indeed an outcome of intoxication. Besides, there is a direct association of the aesthetic impulse with the sexual impulse in this note. In fact, Nietzsche declares that the two are one and the same drive elsewhere:

The artist is perhaps *necessarily* a sensual man, generally excitable, susceptible in every sense to stimuli, meeting the very suggestion of a stimulus halfway even from afar. This notwithstanding, he is on the average, ... actually moderate, often even chaste. His dominant instinct demands this of him: it does not permit him to expend himself in any casual way. The force that one expends in artistic conception is the same as that expended in the sexual act: there is only one kind of force. (Nietzsche, 1967, note 815; emphasis added)

This is to say that art and sexuality are two different ways of expenditure of enhanced strength in the human body. An artist’s abstaining from sexuality is an economic manoeuvre directed towards the expenditure of the growing bodily energy in another realm, that is, for artistic production. To support this view Nietzsche further writes that “[m]aking music is another way of making children; chastity is merely the economy of an artist” (Nietzsche, 1967, note 800).

What has been said so far in this section culminates in the thought that Nietzsche sees the body of the artist as the ground for the emergence of art. In other words, art is an expression of the body and not of the conscious subject. Just as sexual act necessitates stimulation of the sexual instinct, which is a physiological phenomenon, so does the artistic

act or state necessitate arousal of the artistic drives. From Nietzsche's point of view, the existence of "surplus energy" (Nietzsche, 1967, note 800), "extreme sharpness of the senses" (Nietzsche, 1967, note 811), "animal vigor" (Nietzsche, 1967, note 802) and "excitation of the animal functions" (*ibid.*) can be counted among necessary conditions of the emergence of art. *Somebody* in which such physiological constitution, in the sense of health and disposition, does not exist, cannot be the realm of the emergence of art. Likewise they cannot receive anything from art either. Expressed with Nietzsche's terms, the aesthetic state

appears only in natures capable of that bestowing and overflowing fullness of bodily vigor; it is this that is always the *primum mobile*. The sober, the weary, the exhausted, the dried-up (e.g. scholars) can receive absolutely nothing from art, because they do not possess the primary artistic force, the pressure of riches. (Nietzsche, 1967, note 801)

However, for those bodies which possess "the primary artistic force," (*ibid.*) the emergence of the aesthetic state, and thereby art, is not a matter of choice. This is the sense that art emerges as a *force* in the human body and *forces* it to a response. On this issue Nietzsche writes that "*Apollinian – Dionysian*. – There are two conditions in which art itself like a force of nature (*Naturgewalt*) appears in human being and possesses it whether it will or not" (Nietzsche, 1967, note 798; translation modified). In other words, art presents itself into the human body as a force and commands it without the prior existence of any intentionality of the human subject. The aesthetic state is therefore a compulsion, which means that there is an element of necessity beyond the "free-will" of the "artist." Furthermore, just in the same way as it is impossible for the human being to intervene in and stop the activity of the will to power, "[i]t is not possible ... to suspend the interpretive, additive, interpolating, poetizing power" (Nietzsche, 1967, note 804). In this sense, art is understood by Nietzsche as a force always and already acting, entirely independent of the "artist." The emergence of aesthetic experience in *somebody*, in turn, depends on the specific constitution of that body and is revealed as the possession of the body by the force of art.

To sum up, the body of the “artist” is a small-scale model of the will to power in the sense that the body is regarded by Nietzsche as the battlefield of forces owing to which art is possible. Therefore, he writes that the “phenomenon ‘artist’ is still the most transparent: - to see through it to the basic instincts of power, nature, etc.!” (Nietzsche, 1967, note 797). The “artist”, from now on referring to the body, is transparent in the sense that it allows one to see in it the activity of forces, the strife of the Apollinian and Dionysian, which burst forth from nature, possess and command the “artist.” Thus, Nietzsche’s exposition of the aesthetic experience, both in the sense of artistic creation and reception of art, acquires the status of an opening to the reality of life (or the will to power), for the body is the arena of the *agon* of forces within life.

In this way, we hope to have demonstrated the view that Nietzsche’s understanding of aesthetics bears the imprint of his transvaluation of the “subject.” As a result, the “death” of the artist refers to the dethronement of the apparent artist (conscious, rational, unitary subject) by the real artist that is the body (unconscious forces).

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