

# Two Famous Philistines of Philosophy

Christopher Devlin Brown sees similarities and differences in Nietzsche's and Plato's critiques of art.

Received wisdom says that the philosophical projects of Nietzsche and Plato are about as diametrically opposite as any two philosophical projects can be. This impression is not without justification. Plato is the philosopher of otherworldly order who argued that our senses do not reveal any valuable or fundamental truths. Nietzsche is a self-proclaimed inverter of Platonic philosophy, denying and damning all that is eternal, perfect, and transcendent. However, an overlooked parallel between Nietzsche and Plato in their aesthetic ideas shows they have some unexpected common ground. Specifically, they both attack broad classes of art, arguing that such art is socially problematic. The problem for both of them is that art can negatively affect the development of higher types of people.

"But wait," you might already be saying, "I can remember Plato's anti-art attitude; but isn't Nietzsche a proponent of art, even at times holding it above his often beloved science?"

This is somewhat true. Throughout his career Nietzsche promotes art as one of the most important human activities, and some of the people he most admires are artists. However, Nietzsche's relationship with art is more complicated than a simple yea- or nay-saying. This is apparent from even a cursory glance at his writings criticizing the life and music of his former friend and hero, Richard Wagner. The later Nietzsche's sustained attack on Wagner is part of a wider account of the nature and value of art which gives criteria for distinguishing valuable from valueless art. As with Plato's aesthetic philosophy, these criteria are deeply related to broader moral and meta-

physical concerns. Here I will determine what the points of similarity and difference are between how Nietzsche and Plato view art, explaining these similarities and differences in the context of their broader philosophies.

## Nietzsche & Plato Against Art

The majority of Nietzsche's argument I'll use takes its most explicit form in aphorism 370 of *The Gay Science*. The same aphorism, with slight modifications, is also in his *Nietzsche Contra Wagner*. The argument is directed against Romantic and Christian art, and, in certain respects, it resembles some of Plato's arguments against poetry in the *Ion* and *The Republic*.

Nietzsche argues that all art serves to alleviate the suffering caused either by an underabundance of life (I'll call this 'underabundant art/music') or by an overabundance of life ('overabundant art' or 'overabundant music'). Overabundant art is socially neutral or beneficial; but underabundant art often manifests in one of two negative ways. This form of art either destructively takes revenge on the world or makes underabundance into an ideal. Both of these effects hinder the production and flourishing of great humans, which is the ultimate goal Nietzsche promotes.

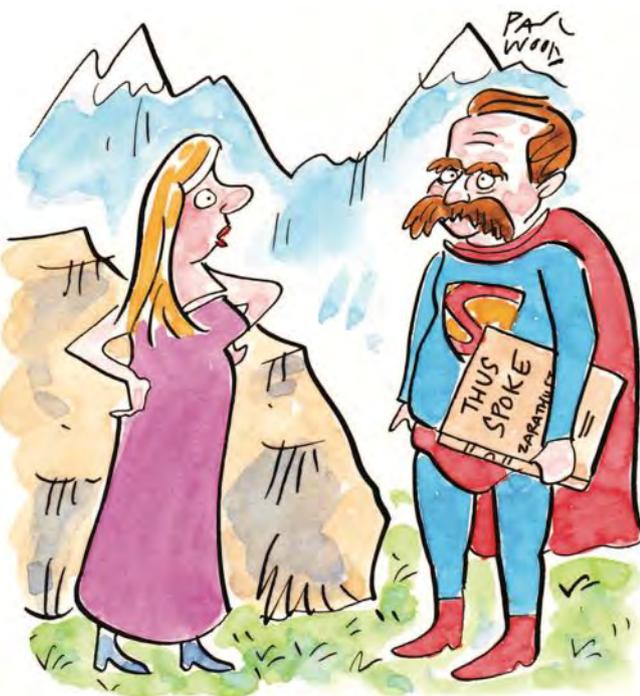
Plato's arguments are diverse, but amount to the idea that art is pleasurable but misleading, and so dangerous. He sees the artist as something like a Pied Piper. For instance, in the *Ion* he argues that philosophers rather than poets should be the teachers of the Greeks, since poetic genius comes from divinely inspired madness rather than from knowledge, and the knowledgeable people should be the teachers. In other words, the inspired but ignorant poets should keep quiet and not try to teach anyone through their recitations. In *The Republic* he argues that poetry should not be allowed in the ideal society because it stimulates people to attempt to fill social roles for which they are not ideally suited, and this would result in social disharmony.

## Nietzsche's Argument

The most well-known and important ideas of the mature Nietzsche first see expression in *The Gay Science*. The first four Sections of this work were written during 1881-82 as an outgrowth of his previous work, *The Dawn*, and constitute more-or-less the first blossoming of ideas that Nietzsche would develop throughout the rest of his career, including the will to power, the death of God, eternal recurrence, the revaluation of all values, and the nature and value of human greatness. The last Section was written later, published in the Second Edition of 1887, and contains the thoughts of an even more mature Nietzsche.

The earlier Sections contain a series of aphorisms specifically on art (76-107), but aphorism 370 comes from the last Section, and as such comes from the mind of Nietzsche only a few years before his collapse into insanity, and well after his break from Wagner (and, perhaps tellingly, after Wagner's death in 1883).

CARTOON © PAUL WOOD 2020 PLEASE VISIT WOODTOON.CO.UK



"That's it?! Your superpower is speaking in aphorisms?!"

This is Nietzsche's argument against Romantic or Christian art, based on 370 and a few other aphorisms:

1. All art is produced in the service of life, to alleviate some kind of suffering or illness.
2. Art-as-medicine can remedy either an overabundance of life, which must be discharged, or an underabundance of life, which must be supplemented.
3. Art that is a remedy for an underabundance of life often manifests itself as revenge on life: either as a vengeful destruction of the world which is the source of the artist's suffering, or in the immortalization of the artist's suffering as an ideal.
4. Consumption of either type of underabundant art has effects on the consumer, in particular preventing the flourishing of great spirits.
5. Great spirits are valuable; so if something prevents their flourishing then that thing should not be produced.
6. Therefore art that is made as a remedy for underabundance of life – which includes Wagnerian opera, Romantic pessimistic art and Christian art – should not be produced.

The first three premises are taken almost directly from 370. Here Nietzsche says:

“[First Premise:] Every art may be viewed as a remedy and an aid in the service of growing and struggling life; they always presuppose suffering and sufferers. [Second premise:] But there are two kinds of sufferers: first, those who suffer from the *over-fullness of life* – they want a Dionysian art and likewise a tragic view of life, a tragic insight – and then those who suffer from the *impoverishment of life*, and seek rest, stillness, calm seas, redemption from themselves through art and knowledge, or intoxication, convulsions, anaesthesia, and madness. All romanticism in art and insight corresponds to the dual needs of the latter type, and that included (and includes) Schopenhauer as well as Richard Wagner... those who suffer most and are poorest in life would need above all mildness, peacefulness, and goodness in thought as well as deed... in short, a certain narrowness that keeps away fear and encloses

one in optimistic horizons... [Third premise:] The desire for *destruction*, change, and becoming can be an expression of an overflowing energy that is pregnant with future (my term for this is, as is known, ‘Dionysian’); but it can also be the hatred of the ill-constituted, disinherited, and underprivileged, who destroy, *must* destroy, because what exists, indeed all existence, all being, outrages and provokes them... The will to *immortalize* also requires a dual interpretation. It can be prompted, first, by gratitude and love... But it can also be the tyrannic will of one who suffers deeply, who struggles, is tormented, and would like to turn what is most personal, singular, and narrow, the real idiosyncrasy of his suffering, into a binding law and compulsion – one who, as it were, revenges himself on all things by forcing his image, the image of torture, on them, branding them with it. This last version is *romantic pessimism* in its most expressive form, whether it be Schopenhauer's philosophy of will or Wagner's music – romantic pessimism, the last *great* event in the fate of our culture.”

### Overabundance vs Underabundance

What does it mean to be overabundant or underabundant with life? A pre-Nietzschean use of ‘life’ might assume every living thing to be as full of life as any other: to be full of life is to be alive, and to be underabundant is to be dead or perhaps dying. But this is certainly not what Nietzsche means. Nor does he mean the more colloquial use of ‘full of life’, which perhaps refers to excitable people, though this latter use may be closer to Nietzsche's.

Nietzsche considers people to be constituted by various drives and forces that operate below the level of consciousness and which manifest themselves in character, disposition and behavior. Our so-called ‘conscious will’ does nothing but provide false explanations for action after the action has occurred. The unconscious drives compete with each other and have varying strengths, the victorious drives manifesting themselves in disposition and action. Development of a drive's power occurs through internal conflicts between drives, which is a painful process. Looking through this lens, we see that people overabundant with life are constituted by strong internal forces, and these forces must sometimes discharge



Apollo & Dionysos:  
Not Philistines, but Greeks  
by Emalee Wickham 2020

in overabundant art. Underabundant people are constituted by weak internal forces, so they need spiritual or conceptual resting places to recover from activity, or spurs and intoxicants that temporarily give them more energy. Nietzsche argues that underabundance is often artistically expressed as vengefulness on the world, or idealization of suffering and underabundance. (It is unclear from his writing whether there are any socially beneficial ways for underabundant people to remedy their underabundance.)

As well as the influence of art, Nietzsche is concerned more generally with the conditions that produce great people. Diets are a frequent area of interest. For instance he asks, “Has anyone made a study of different ways of dividing up the day or the consequences of a regular schedule of work, festivals, and the rest? What is known of the moral effects of different foods? Is there any philosophy of nutrition?” (*Gay Science*, aphorism 7). Large parts of Nietzsche’s aesthetic and psychological projects consist of sketches of such a philosophy of consumption, in order to find what inputs will tend to yield what outputs in character or human development. He is looking for the means to the end he deems most valuable in human life: not pleasure or absence of pain, not virtue, not rationality, but greatness. Here I am mostly following Brian Leiter’s relatively well-known interpretation of Nietzsche’s moral philosophy (*Nietzsche & Morality*, 2008). Under this interpretation, Nietzsche is a consequentialist, judging the moral value of an event on its effects. He is also a perfectionist, considering something valuable only if it contributes to the development of human greatness.

Nietzsche’s enthusiasm for human greatness ties together his aesthetic, psychological and moral projects. He is always attempting to identify the conditions that encourage or discourage greatness. In addition, treating art and music as things to be consumed and which have subconscious, or even physiological, effects on the consumer, is consistent with his denial of the idea that we can consciously choose or determine our character and behavior.

What evidence is there that Nietzsche thought that consumption of underabundant art hinders the development of great humans? After all, this is the Nietzsche who says “what does not kill me makes me stronger” (though the full passage in *Twilight of the Idols* changes the meaning of that saying somewhat), and who often seems to assert some kind of adversity as a precondition for human flourishing. Might he not therefore think that adverse cultural conditions, which create seductive lures and traps for the weak, are actually good for the development of great humans?

*The Case of Wagner* (1888) makes it clear that he does not think this. Underabundant music is a lure that can trick even the strong, while overabundant music emboldens and enriches already vibrant spirits. About the music of Bizet (which he likes, and contrasts with Wagner’s) he says, “Has anyone ever observed that music *emancipates* the spirit, gives wings to thought, and that the more one becomes a musician the more one becomes a philosopher?... Bizet makes me productive. Everything that is good makes me productive” (*CW* 1). It seems Nietzsche must think that at least some of the value of overabundant music derives from how it elicits favorable changes in the listener.

On the corrupting influence of underabundant music Nietzsche has even more to say, targeting Wagner: “I could not think to look on approvingly while this *decadent* spoils our health – and music into the bargain. Is Wagner a man at all? Is he not rather

a disease? Everything he touches he contaminates. *He has made music sick...* And no one guards against it. His powers of seduction attain monstrous proportions... – and he has certainly not converted only *the poor in spirit* to his cause!... Wagner’s art is diseased.... Wagner is the great corrupter of music” (*CW* 5). Clearly Nietzsche has a particular problem with Wagner; but these quotes also indicate a more general worry about art and its effects. Music can be a disease that corrupts the listener, and not just the poor in spirit but also the strong and healthy can be damaged by this seductive poison.

That being said, even if Nietzsche thinks underabundant art is socially damaging because it prevents the flourishing of great humans, that doesn’t necessarily mean he thinks such art ought not to be created, which is the fifth premise of the argument. Perhaps underabundant art might work against the development of great people, but have other positive qualities that can make it worthwhile? And Nietzsche is also the philosopher who says, “I want to learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things... I do not want to wage war on what is ugly. I do not want to accuse; I do not want to accuse those who accuse. *Looking away* shall be my only negation” (*GS* 276). Also: “At bottom I abhor all those moralities which say: ‘Do not do this! Renounce! Overcome yourself!’” (304). A call to put an end to underabundant art seems like just such a morality of renunciation. However, in the case of Wagner it is pretty clear that he thinks underabundant art – at least Wagnerian underabundant art – should not be produced: “One pays dearly for having been a follower of Wagner. What has Wagner-worship made out of the spirit?... To him belong that ambiguity and equivocation and all other qualities which can convince the uncertain without making them conscious of why they have been convinced. In this sense Wagner is a seducer on a grand scale. There is nothing exhausted, nothing effete, nothing dangerous to life, nothing that slanders the world in the realm of spirit, which has not secretly found shelter in his art... He flatters every nihilistic (Buddhistic) instinct and togs it out in music; he flatters every form of Christianity, every religious expression of decadence.... He robs our young men; he even robs our women as well, and drags them to his cell... Ah, this old Minotaur! What has he not already cost us?” (*CW* Postscript). If this is not a call to suppress the music of Wagner, I don’t know what is. Wagner is even likened to the Minotaur of Crete! Surely Nietzsche would have us slay the Minotaur who is devouring the youth? So we see that Nietzsche *does* himself become a nay-sayer – though perhaps only nay-saying of things that are destructive to life and the future.

## Plato’s Conception of Greatness

So far I have only examined the premises of Nietzsche’s argument against underabundant art without touching on the relation between this argument and Plato. Allow me first to give a broad outline of Plato’s stance toward art.

In *The Republic* Plato tries to work out what an ideal state would be like. The guardian class, who comprise the philosopher-rulers of Plato’s imagined city, must be carefully educated in order to develop both the spirited and logical parts of their souls, since that is necessary for them to fulfill their assigned social task, and be the providers of justice. Poetry – especially poetry that depicts the gods doing such things as fighting, lying, seducing or trans-

forming – harms the education of the guardians by presenting them with ideal figures who convey bad lessons. Music or dance which encourages emotions or attitudes that a guardian ought not to have (sorrow, for example) are likewise considered harmful. However, the most interesting part of this story for us is Plato's view of higher-type people and how this view relates to his aesthetic project. This is where a great deal of his similarity and dissimilarity with Nietzsche can be most visible.

Various Platonic dialogues make distinctions between higher and lower types of people. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato describes a nine-fold scheme into which a soul must fall, with the souls of philosophers at the top and those of tyrants at the bottom. If Nietzsche could ever be said to agree with this attitude, it's worth noting that for Nietzsche the true philosophers are creators of new values, not identifiers of unchanging concepts, as they are for Plato. What determines where a soul falls in Plato's scheme is the degree of acquaintance the soul had with the Forms before the soul entered a body, as well as the soul's ability to recollect those Forms once embodied. Plato's Forms are a whole other story, but, briefly, all the things we perceive through our senses are shadowy imitations of perfect, eternal essences that can be known through reason alone. These essences are Plato's beloved Forms.

This hierarchy of souls is similar to the hierarchy of governments and people in Book IX of *The Republic*, but most of *The Republic* makes less fine-grained distinctions, offering only three general categories to which a human may belong, corresponding to the three parts of the soul: appetitive, spirited and logical. Thus, an ideal society has three social classes. The *appetitive* people are the commoners, farmers, craftspeople, merchants and laborers who occupy the lowest rank of society, do all the actual work, and are motivated by the desire for pleasure or money. The most *spirited* people are the Auxiliaries – the military protectors of the city. And the most *logical* people are the Guardians who rule the state. The Guardians are Plato's highest types, with the philosopher-king as the pinnacle of human excellence. They are wise, courageous, temperate, and just, through having a masterful knowledge of the Forms.

Such a mindset must be cultivated, and malign influences must be carefully eliminated. Much of *The Republic* consists of an analysis of the education that the Guardians must receive. If the Guardians are discontented with their assigned role, or not courageous enough, or alternatively, not gentle and reasonable enough, then they will be unable to excel in the art of justice. They must also have genuine knowledge of the Platonic Forms, since this knowledge should inform the decisions they must make. A Guardian's ability to recollect and understand the Forms is developed and nurtured through education. Poetry and fiction offer no knowledge – for, as Plato already argued in the *Ion*, poets are inspired by divine madness and do not possess knowledge which they can convey – and so they should not be presented to the Guardians. Moreover, the stories portrayed in theatre or poetry often offer bad morals and values, such as describing supposedly perfect beings (the gods) who fight, lie, seduce, and transform themselves.

Why are stories depicting the gods transforming themselves harmful to the education of guardians? Plato argues that gods are perfect beings, so they would only become less perfect

through a transformation, and so would never rationally choose to transform themselves. It would be bad for Guardians to internalize the moral that it is reasonable to become something lower than what you are most fit for – to think, for example, that it is fine for a Guardian to become a cobbler. This point is later generalized: poetic recitation and drama involve imitation on the part of the reciter or actor, which is bad because it teaches that character is not fixed, and that change of habit and character are both possible and acceptable.

At the core of these arguments lies a need for stability. A just state is stable, and happy as a result of being organized according to the ideal, eternal, changeless Forms. A philosopher flourishes with virtue due to knowledge of those Forms. Being a philosopher (Plato's highest type of person) is an intrinsically valuable state for an individual to be in, and is functionally necessary for the operation of a well-ordered society. This is because only a philosopher can know true reality beyond appearances, and hence understand the world of the Forms, including the Form of the Good from which justice derives.

### Nietzsche's and Plato's Conceptions Compared

So Plato's highest type of person is someone who derives his virtue from knowledge of the Forms and is able to practically apply that knowledge to make society more harmonious and stable. What then is the nature and value of a great human for Nietzsche? Answering this question will reveal the central point of dissimilarity between Plato and Nietzsche. For Nietzsche, a great person is one who embraces transience and facilitates change, and is moved by uncommon and violent forces (cf *GS* 26, 55). She accepts and affirms life and the world after fully acknowledging the death of God and loss of any transcendental world order (*GS* 108, 109, 110, 125, 341). She is an overabundant person, and if her strong drives run counter to the norms of society then she is a destroyer of old values and a creator of new ones – and this upending and invention of norms constitutes her social value (*GS* 4, 10, 39, 50). So the nature and value of human greatness is opposite for Plato and Nietzsche. For Plato greatness is derived from a relationship to the eternal and unchanging, while for Nietzsche greatness is derived from an individual embracing transience and change through an overabundance of life. Unlike Plato, Nietzsche had some positive things to say both about the inspiration of madness and the mischievous Greek gods.

For both philosophers, certain works of art or types of art are damaging because they impede the creation and flourishing of the highest types of people. Their disagreement rests entirely on how to understand human greatness. Their differing evaluations of greatness lead to different evaluations of what is damaging in art. Nietzsche's underabundant art takes vengeance on the transient world and depicts suffering as a timeless ideal, whereas for Plato poetry inspires change and nonconformity with social structures and positions. So before you choose your next concert tickets, consider what kind of greatness you're aiming for.

© CHRISTOPHER DEVLIN BROWN 2020

*Christopher Devlin Brown is an Assistant Professor in Philosophy at Bilkent University in Ankara, Turkey.*

- Thanks to Michael Moran for his valuable comments on an earlier draft.