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What Calls for an Ethico-Aesthetics?

I. In this paper, I will consider *'ethico-aesthetics'.* Are there identifiable intersections in the *'ethico-aesthetic'* critiques of Nietzsche, Berardi, Smith, Sartre, and Guattari? Are these thinkers' positions tenable in their calls for a return to an ethico-aesthetic, breaking out of the strangulating technological gestalt that Berardi and Smith identify? These are questions which will be explored (but not necessarily answered!) in this paper, and I will argue that a renewed and vigorous (in the Nietzschean sense) ethico-aesthetic response to the world in which we find ourselves is imperative.

'*Ethics*', the first-half of this essay's key word, may be defined as the philosophical study of morality, and more particularly, the "general study of goodness and the general study of right action" (Audi 284-5). "But ethics cannot be understood", we learn, "independently of historical developments. The connections between ethics, society, and politics" were recognized at least as early as Plato (Payne 178). As we begin to explore the ideas of and behind goodness and right action, we immediately encounter some dilemmas; we can't help but ask ourselves: What goodness should we, as "rational" human beings, pursue?; To what ends should this pursuit (through right action) be undertaken?; And what should serve as our moral compass in undertaking these pursuits? In other words, perhaps we can say that a "moral philosophy enables us to evaluate whether the story we tell ourselves about our moral context is reasonable or not" (Furrow 7). However, as Furrow points out, these stories and their moral contexts and constructs served many of us in the White, European sphere well during the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century. But today, there is clearly

something wrong, something seriously lacking, if not completely mis-directed to whatever we might think of as the *'ethico-foundation'* of our contemporary society. But I am getting ahead of myself.

The second half of this essay's key word, *aesthetics*, can begin to be explained by turning to Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714-62), who coined the term *'aesthetics'* in his *Reflections on Poetry* (1735), which he derived from the Greek *aisthanomai* ('to perceive') (Audi 12). Baumgarten argued, clearly against Plato, that epistemology should be viewed as comprising *two* branches of philosophical thinking: that of logic, as had been the Platonic norm; and that of sensory experience and its concomitant feelings, i.e., aesthetics. But when we consider our sensory experiences, the 'aesthetics' of our being, we might wonder, "is there a distinctive value, [an] aesthetic value, comparable with moral, epistemic, and religious values" (Audi 12)? And if so (as I will argue there is), what do contemporary Continental thinkers have to tell us about this ethico-aesthetic value?

II. My first encounter with the ethico-aesthetic occurred as an undergraduate during my freshman year. I had initially elected political science as my major course of study, but soon found that my time spent in Heuser Hall, where the *Fine Arts* department was housed, and where I would go three times a week for a Western Art History survey course, felt far more enlivening and invigorating than any of the time I spent in the political science lecture hall. It wasn't just the smell of the oil paint and the turpentine, or the plaster sculpture medium, although I found something about all this strangely intoxicating. But it was also the older students I happened on there, in blue jeans covered in paint and plaster and charcoal, who were the most intriguing. Their conversations ranged far and above what I had been used to on campus. There were conversations about philosophy and politics, war and peace,

literature and poetics, women's rights, black power, and drugs. There was an ethico-aesthetics at play that I had never encountered before; expressions of different views of the world and debates about the artist's place in it, and the inevitable pitfalls, the seductions of the marketplace, to be aware of and to beware of. There was an aesthetic attitude in the air, permeated by an ethico-sensitivity to the machinations of society and one's place in it — or outside of it. It was visceral, and exciting. I felt alive, and engaged in the world, while not just a little confused by it all. And there was a pervasive trust in the promise of a brighter, more just and moral historical horizon. There was, in fact, what would turn out to be a short-lived revolution taking place, culminating in the all-to-brief climax which was 1968. Berardi says that "'68 allows us to look at the twentieth century from the perspective of its dissolution, of its explosion. '68 acts as the start of a proliferation of forms of drift that are no longer reducible to any unitary history". Berardi goes on to say that "we can see '68 as the final chapter of the proletarian and socialist struggles of the twentieth century because it is certain that the movement of students and workers, united in struggle, was the critical fulfillment of that history" (Berardi *Guattari* 73).

III. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche's fundamental theme emphasizes "art and not morality [as] the proper metaphysical activity of man, and that the existence of the world finds justification only as an aesthetic phenomenon" (Kenny 955). Morality, for Nietzsche, is not a unitary, but rather a dynamic amalgam of many different components. Morality is not simply a question of beliefs, but rather a question of situations of reality and their interpretation; that is, real relations of power, real relations of weakness, and real relations of pain. *The Good* reigns supreme, yet is defined in relation to its opposites: bad, and evil.

Ethics and morality become ambiguous for Nietzsche, and ultimately shot through with nihilism. This nihilism, Bowie states, is for Nietzsche, "inextricably linked to the history of philosophy since Plato: 'The need for a *metaphysical world* is the consequence of being unable to derive any *meaning*, any *what for?* from the world at hand. 'Consequently', it was decided, 'this world can only be *apparent*' (Bowie 291). This turn, while significant for an earlier philosopher, Nāgārjuna, in explaining the nature of emptiness vis-à-vis the Buddhist Madhyamaka view, instead opens a whole new can of worms for Nietzsche, who can't bring himself to walk through the door labeled 'emptiness'; instead, he calls into question the very premise of an ethics or a moral compass. Bowie explains that, for Nietzsche, this

> 'psychological nihilism' is a result of three factors in modernity. The first
> is the failure to find any teleological meaning in existence, such as a
> movement towards a moral world order, so that 'becoming' ceases to
> have a goal and is just arbitrary change; the second is the realisation that
> there is no unity in the multiplicity of existence which would enable one
> to believe in one's own value as part of something greater; the third is
> the loss of the belief in a super-sensuous world, which is accompanied
> by the realisation that one cannot bear this world without that other
> [super-sensuous] world. Nihilism is therefore a *result* of metaphysical
> beliefs which have turned out to be illusory (291).

This moral dilemma of *What for?* figures centrally in the ethico-aesthetic critiques leveled at society by contemporary Continental thinkers. But how is it that this line of flight leads to a project of nihilism? NISHITANI Keiji unfolds this process of our unexpected

confrontations with what, for Nietzsche, is a 'psychological nihilism', in a clearer way. Nishitani explains that,

> normally we proceed through life, on and on, with our eye fixed on something or other, always caught up with something within or without ourselves. It is these engagements that prevent the deepening of awareness. They block off the way to an opening up of that horizon on which nihility appears and self-being becomes a question. When this horizon does open up at the bottom of those engagements that keep life moving continually on and on, something seems to halt and linger before us. This something is the meaninglessness that lies in wait at the bottom of those very engagements that bring meaning to life. This is the point at which that sense of nihility, that sense that 'everything is the same' [that] we find in Nietzsche and Dostoevsky, brings the restless, forward-advancing pace of life to a halt and makes it take a step back. In the Zen phrase, it 'turns the light to what is directly underfoot' (4).

This juncture has the potential to present us with the experience of the fullness and vivid potentiality of emptiness, as understood through the view of Mahāyāna Buddhism; or, on the other hand, one might remain in the dead-end of Nietzsche's psychological nihilism, as he himself did.

Berardi makes reference to 1968, when there was a rejection of the status quo gestalt, the capitalistic/technological framing, or enframing extant, and which devolved into the entanglement of the Viet Nam war. "The gestalt is enabling our vision", he says, "but simultaneously entangles our ability to see something different. The 'cognitive frame' frames

the world. The gestalt allows us to see, but simultaneously preventing the vision of anything

that does not comply with the gestalt" (Berardi '*Notes*' 3). Now, Berardi says, it is our project

to disentangle it all; a disentanglement from the prevailing gestalt carries with it the potential

of our liberation, he hints. But, liberation into… what? Berardi continues, "disentanglement is

the emancipation of the content from the form that contains it, and the full deployment of the

potencies belonging to social knowledge. Only by dissociation (not by contradiction) can

different forms emerge from the magma" (4). Berardi argues that it is Guattari's notion of

schizoanalysis which conceives "the relationship between singularity and its chaosmosis, that

is, its conceptual, artistic, psychic, existential, political, relational and linguistic creations –

the creations that constitute the world as a particular plane on which it is possible to start

walking toward[s] the encounter with other singularities" (Berardi *Guattari* 114). And it

seems that it is through a disentanglement of the elements of Guattari's *chaosmosis* which

Berardi is suggesting holds the key to our liberation.

Returning once again to the question of *What is aesthetics?*, Berardi argues poetically

that,

> in contrast to the prevalent understanding of Western philosophy,
>
> aesthetics is not only the science of an object's beauty. Aesthetics is also
>
> (and this is what is of greatest interest) the science of sensibility, of
>
> perception, the science of the contact between epidermises, and thus the
>
> science of the projection of worlds by subjectivities in becoming
>
> (Berardi *Guattari* 32).

This stands in stark contrast to Cassirer's position *against* 'primitive' myth and everything

empirical, and *for* the pure concept which is modern mathematics as the avenue for

discovering truth. Cassirer argues, as quoted by Smith, in the former's *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* that

> philosophy must above all come to grips with the linguistic and mythical
>
> worlds and place itself in dialectical opposition to them…And natural
>
> science arrives at the mastery of its specific task in very much the same
>
> way as pure philosophy. In order to find itself it, too, must first effect the
>
> great intellectual differentiation, the *krisis*, separating myth from
>
> language. This act of separation marks philosophy's hour of birth, and
>
> also the starting point of empirical research and the mathematical
>
> determination of nature (Smith 12).

This purely Platonic, mathematical view is precisely what Berardi is pointing at when he speaks of a blinding entanglement of

> gestalt [as] the mental pattern that frames the incoming perceptual
>
> stimuli, turning them into form. The gestalt can act as a tangle when it
>
> blocks our ability to see things in a different frame. In order to exceed
>
> the entangling effect implicit in the gestalt, we need a poetical potency of
>
> estrangement. […] When we look at a visual form, the present structure
>
> of our mind deciphers the visual stimulation according to gestalts that
>
> are inscribed in our mind, and it is quite difficult for us to see something
>
> other than the form that our mind is accustomed to seeing (Berardi *Notes*
>
> 4-5).

These gestalts function in such a way as to entangle or obscure our ability to think things in a different or wholly original frame. The gestalts which Berardi identifies, the entangling enframements, can also be seen in the work of Franz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks* (1952). As Smith writes, "the hidden origins of racism are always perpetuated through institutional authority, whether by family, church or state, most often all three" (35). The gestalt is as pervasive as it is illusive; always a moving target. Fanon framed it, and was enframed by it. He, in fact, gamed it. Writing about Jews, Fanon says that "anti-semitism is likely to be rationalized from the angle of land ownership. It's because the Jews commandeer a country that they are dangerous" (138). And writing about blacks, Fanon says

> the fact is that the Antillean does not see himself as Negro; he sees
>
> himself as Antillean. The Negro lives in Africa. Subjectively and
>
> intellectually the Antillean behaves like a white man. But in fact he is a
>
> black man. He'll realize that once he gets to Europe, and when he hears
>
> Europeans mention "Negroes" he'll know they're talking about him as
>
> well as the Senegalese (126-7).

Fanon points out again and again the insidious gestalt at work amongst the colonized people of color and the outcasts (the Jews). Fanon recognizes that what is needed is a "combined action on the individual and the group. As a psychoanalyst", he writes, "I must help my patient to "*consciousnessize"* his unconscious, to no longer be tempted by a hallucinatory lactification, but also to act along the lines of a change in social structure" (80).

IV. The gestalt of technology, and the nihilism it breeds in its wake, has become humankind's hallucinatory lactification. Berardi, Smith, Deleuze, Guattari and other

contemporary thinkers are calling on us to do nothing less than 'consciousnessize' our

unconscious, and 'act along the lines of a change in social structure'. Berardi exhorts us to

"imagine the possible political emancipation of the future essentially as an act of enunciation,

a linguistic act disentangling reality from bad mathematics, the mathematics of finance".

Technology has led us into an age of financial and economic emasculation. We have thus all

become slaves to the gestalt of technology, within Nietzsche's master/slave dialectic. "It is no

longer [just] a financial problem", Berardi notes,

> but a semiotic one: the words that try to express the economic process
>
> have no grasp on the reality of life or technology or knowledge. The
>
> words that describe and conceptualize the economic sphere are a source
>
> of permanent misunderstanding, as they are inconsistent with the reality
>
> of human life on the planet (Berardi *Notes* 5-6).

We are living Nietzsche's 'psychological nihilism', and are in desperate need of

bringing the 'restless, forward-advancing pace of life to a halt and take a step back'. We need

to 'turn the light to what is directly underfoot'. Bateson warned us, however, that "for a man

to change his basic, perception-determining beliefs, he must first become aware that reality is

not necessarily as he believes it to be" (Bateson vii). I am not sure we are there yet.

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