Nietzsche’s *Die dionysische Weltanschauung*: Faith and Nihilism
Part Two

Nietzsche’s “Dionysian worldview” as an existentialist interpretation of meaning and purpose in reaction to the growing trend of Nihilism at the end of the 19th century

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A consequence of the Industrial Revolution in Europe was the focus on science and rationality in conditioning man’s relationship to the world, in creating a new identifying statute of culture with science, that the world of human life was the product of human action. It determined new principles of intellectual freedom for an eager desire to follow whatever ideas they brought forth and follow them wherever they led, even if they transgressed against the constraints of social and religious orthodoxies. Nietzsche examined premises of established ideas, *re-examined* them, relative to the social atmosphere of the dominance of the scientific status. But unlike Schopenhauer’s bleak skepticism of man’s historicism and scientism, Nietzsche sought to find some forms of affirmation for life despite the growing predominance of nihilism in western culture, that which Schopenhauer’s criticism of historicism in his *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* expresses: that the history of man is superfluous to the essence of reality.
“A real philosophy of history [i.e., Humanity’s truth in reality] …consists, therefore, not in elevating the temporary aims of men into something eternal and absolute, and in constructing artificially and in imagination their advance to it through all complexities; but in the insight that history, not only in its execution but already in its essence, is mendacious.

The true philosophy of history consists…in the insight that, in all the endless changes and their disorder, one is yet confronted always only with the same, identical and unchangeable essence….This identical element, which persists amid all change, consists in the the fundamental qualities of the human heart and head – many bad, a few good.”

Nietzsche, following Schopenhauer, saw little in historicism (i.e., history, the science of humanity) that could elucidate what man in reality is-- “There is a degree to which history may be promoted, and a valuation of it, at which life shrivels away and becomes debased.” However, unlike Schopenhauer whose philosophy concluded in an ultimate skepticism for any possible meaning, albeit other than one of total meaninglessness—as history is the pointless “striving, doing, suffering and fate of the human race,” Nietzsche pursued a line of thought that would attempt yet to find something to affirm in life despite the rationale that it lacked “meaningful” purpose.

Nietzsche attacked the “tradition of ideas”— and then even the idea of nihilism itself. Ideas that evolved over the Christian centuries into cultural ideals, those that were based on metaphysical premises at variance with the new realities which rationalism ushered into society, and which, ironically, became the sources from which nihilism would draw its own power of conclusion.
Nietzsche’s Dionysian Life-Philosophy: A Faith in Antithetical Values

The growing importance of scientific ideas as a mode of interpreting reality conflicted with the old morality of the Judeo-Christian concept of humanity’s purpose in life and its values of meaning. This conflict of Christian culture with a rising modern (science-based) society created a crisis of meaning—significant even today—a crisis of spiritual conscience with rational consciousness: How to adjust reality to save the appearances of meaning which Christianity had given to mankind, and yet, to maintain the authority of reason and of what is “rational.” Nihilism was the non-resolution. Nietzsche’s philosophy of the existential was to this pernicious condition of irresolution: that an affirmation of personal meaning in life is yet possible even without the faith-based universal meaning promised by Christianity; that individual purpose was meaningful in defiance of the rationale that man in an ahistorical reality can’t possibly have any ultimate significance. Nietzsche used the only “reasoning” left, that of the irrational to conclude that life could be understood as meaningful; he established a new perspective of the irrational, the Dionysian instinct, as a means to ground this new understanding, that paradoxically, can make existence meaningful despite ultimate meaninglessness.

His specific treatment of existentialism as the “Dionysian” raises important issues about meaning and purpose, particularly in relation to traditional factors associated with society, culture, and spirituality. It further raises questions about the interpretation of tragedy, suffering, and the finite nature of human existence—the three conditions which give the question of meaning its relevance. Nietzsche’s dionysische Weltanschauung provides an interesting platform for developing one’s understanding of how reality
relates to experiences of crisis and loss, a new perspective on life, an
alternative to both the Judeo-Christian interpretation of human significance
and rationalism’s devaluation of it.

Nietzsche’s Dionysian perspective is a philosophy of life and spirit; life
which enfolds spirit and sustains it: A philosophy of a new culture for
life. Nietzsche’s Dionysian worldview is a mere perspective, not a truth.
A perspective as tool for creating a response to unappealing realities. It
is a re-valuation of the valuation of the irrational.

The Dionysian is not metaphysical irrationalism as an ultimate value,
however. I find that it seeks merely to give recognition to the value of
irrationalism in allowing one to creatively respond to the tragic conditions
of life. For Nietzsche even if it were true that the rational is the being-of-the
world and irrationality an epiphenomenon, nothing follows from that about
any evaluative priority of rationalism. (And coupled with rationalism is the
metaphysical idea of totality, that even immanent limits can be transcended
but yet remain within a whole of spiritual meaning.) Nietzsche’s Dionysian
points out the obvious that it could after all be true that the whole is the
irrational and only a part of the whole rational.

Life philosophy begins as a philosophy of awareness; ultimately words
and reason will not suffice, that’s why even the most devout of the faithful
personally faced with the greatest of horrors, suffering, and injustice ask
“Why?” Nietzsche challenged the presupposition that rationalism has greater
priority over irrationalism because of rationalism’s functional achievements
on behalf of life, and he confronted the idea of Christianity, that which
attempts to give meaning to life: that “God’s words will always prove true
and right, no matter who questions.”

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His Dionysian perspective is a “new agreement” for the “old agreement didn’t even work,” for “if it had, there would have been no need for another to replace it.” Nietzsche speaks of this “new agreement” as the *Dionysian* to replace the archaic Christian concepts of reality (“for the old one is out of date and has been put aside forever.”) and as an alternative to Schopenhauer’s worldview of the total disengagement of any agreement of meaning with reality.

The New Agreement: *The Dionysian and Nihilism*

Nihilism is a ‘rational’ response to the prevailing objective truth of man in reality: Nihilism as an interpretation of truth that the essence of all activity is purposeless or indifferent. Nietzsche’s Dionysian worldview is his critique of this ideology of reality and a critique of the metaphysical illusion that thought is capable of understanding reality. Nietzsche’s Dionysian is a theme of the *negation of rationality* for providing solutions to the issue of existential meaningfulness; the rejection of ‘objectivity,’ that the logical basis for knowledge somehow clears the path for understanding human needs and behavior. This critique leads directly to Nietzsche’s confrontation with the eminence of science and reason in our life, which he views as just another form of faith: “Faith, n. Belief without evidence in what is told by one who speaks without knowledge about things without parallel.”

Nihilism for which there is no escape for the individual from the fatal chain of rational objectivity in reality, for every individual is himself a part of this whole fateful reality. It is utter vanity for the individual to seek to break apart the chains of a reality of which he is bound in nothingness. The binding force of reality, of all of what constitutes the universe of
space, matter, and time itself, is what constitutes it: reality is, in Nietzschen terms, only “will to power.” As such it is both subject and object of itself--it is the object reality subject to the permanence of tensions and of constant changes. Reality exists without fixed being for it is ever its own becoming, without perishing; or in other words, its being is its becoming and its perishing for its being feeds on itself: Man’s Being, therefore, is not relevant to reality itself; it is quite inconsequential to the significance of the becoming of the world in which he lives.

Humanity moves in its tireless and self-conscious efforts to overcome this reality; it “lives” but is consigned to a tragic fate over which it has no control. When all is said, the conscious exercise of our will amounts to a delusion, a rationalization of dark instinctive drives (Trieben) which dispose of us on all levels of our being. Whatever we may take for our “activity” is at heart only something that comes to pass by way of our existence, and that we are, as it were, fated to do.

Living is no more than a passing of activities; life but a passion that we undergo. Passing and passion both literally, a happening. Existence as an event that by fate, and historically, is bound to come into being through and by our existence. (Etymologically in German: Geschehen “event,” Geschick “fate,” Geschichte “history”.) It is, paradoxically, an “act” of ours that we must suffer to be performed by us; an ‘act’ that has meaning only as an heroic assertion of being:

“Who sees the abyss but with the eyes of an eagle; who grasps the abyss with the talons of an eagle—that man has courage.”8

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Nihilism and Tragedy

Nietzsche’s Dionysian is the positive address to two related issues which spiritualism (religion and metaphysical meaning) ultimately fails to give full satisfaction: nihilism and tragedy. ‘Tragedy’ is for Nietzsche an anthropocentric term, the existence of which in the worldview of man should not be accommodated, and nihilism is man’s ultimate expression of the tragic because it cannot be convincingly refuted Christianity:

“In Christianity neither morality nor religion has even a single point of contact with reality. Nothing but imaginary causes, nothing but imaginary effects. ... Intercourse between imaginary beings and imaginary natural science (anthropocentric: no trace of any concept of natural causes).…”

For Nietzsche, nihilism is the necessary consequence of man’s obedience to rationality in conflict with his culture of metaphysical morality; but it is itself a philosophy based on the (false) significance of the tragic. Its very rejection of ‘meaningfulness’ presumes ‘meaning’ is significant to human existence: However, Nihilismus itself is yet another morality which Nietzsche rejects because it rejects life. Nihilism as a psychological state, one which is reached when a meaning is sought in all events that is not there: “Nihilism, then, is the recognition of the long waste of strength, the agony of the ‘in vain,’ the insecurity, the lack of any opportunity to recover and to regain composure—being ashamed in front of oneself, as if one had deceived oneself all too long…."

Nihilism is as much a solipisistic interpretation of life as is Christianity; it is just the “morality” of meaninglessness as is Christainity a morality
of man’s salvation, and both fail to satisfy because of the presupposition that “meaning” is a necessary category of existence.

Nihilism is an interpretation of rationality—and rationality is but another morality, that knowledge and truth are good. Yet nihilism, Christianity, and rationality are all based on the moralities of meaning, and all moralities are mere interpretations. Nihilism is, then, the interpretation of man’s reality that man’s existence is meaningless, and therefore, tragic. (There is no real ‘tragedy’ in the Christian view, as all is God’s will and all will be set correct in the posited afterlife.) Again, tragedy is the personifying of reality in terms of a negative morality. Morality is an interpretation; interpretation is knowledge, and knowledge is itself then just another morality:

“Morality is such a curious science because it is in the highest degree practical: so that the position of pure knowledge, scientific integrity, is at once abandoned as soon as the claims of morality must be answered. Morality says: I need many answers—reasons, arguments. Scruples can come afterward, or not at all—.”

As for tragedy itself, it is a value, not an event; it is mere interpretation. Again, it is predicated upon the most basic of human conventions, upon language, both as verbal expression and gesture. Tragedy as the esthetic ethos of “good” and “bad.” This is the Nietzschean concept of tragedy as a genre: that human tragedy, metaphysically seen, is an interpretation of the world as a stage for the tragic sense of life. Existence is man’s drama: “The world with which we are concerned is false, i.e., is not a fact but a fable and approximation on the basis of a meager sum of observations; it is “in flux,” as something in a state of becoming, as a falsehood always
changing but never getting near the truth: for—there is no “truth.”

Tragedy and “Amor fati”

“I want to learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things; then I shall be one of those who make things beautiful. Amor fati: let that be my love henceforth! I do not want to wage war against what is ugly...Looking away shall be my only negation...I wish to be only a Yes-sayer.”

The tragic vision of life is the issue which nihilism surrenders itself to without further response; for Nietzsche, the ‘error’ of nihilism is the misunderstanding of the significance of tragedy—nihilism would have it that life is meaningless and therefore tragic--meaningless because there is not something more than just one’s life and that time of it. For Nietzsche, however, tragedy is that which gives life meaningful significance, for tragedy is a kind of virtue which creates the heroic.

Amor fati is Nietzsche’s positivistic term for the tragic in life. “Tragedy” is a term for the weak who succumb to the allure that man is the center of meaning—and then are crushed by the truth that he is the center of nothing; Amor fati is the term which commands the tragic hero to obey the will to power which is life: it is the meaning (the Dionysian) which pursues life itself, and not a meaning within it. Amor fati controls and drives him toward his inevitable doom; the tragic hero’s acceptance of his “meaningless” fate is the beautiful because he pursues life nonetheless. Thus, grace, dignity, and courage are virtues which are possible only through Amor fati, because of the existence of tragic in life. For Nietzsche what gives the tragic hero the chance to display his heroism is the certainty of
annihilation; thus, the most awful truths of human existence are what make heroism possible—and, ironically, make life meaningful. *Amor fati*: that life is meaningful only because it is transitory and filled with “tragedies,” for transitoriness and the tragic are what are necessary in order for the individual to have the meaning of being virtuous and heroic.

**Fate and “Ja-sage”**

“Saying Yes to life even in its strangest and hardest problems; the will to life rejoicing over its own inexhaustibility even in the very sacrifice of its highest types—that is what I call Dionysian …Not on order to get rid of terror and pity, not in order to purge oneself of a dangerous affect—but on order to be oneself the eternal joy of becoming. …”

According to this passage, the individual accepts life and all it entails (even destruction), and accepts it actively. In *Ecce Homo* Nietzsche describes this acceptance “…as a formula of supreme affirmation born of fullness, of overfullness, a Yes-saying without reservation, of suffering itself, of guilt itself, of everything questionable and strange in existence. …This ultimate, most joyous, most wantonly extravagant Yes to life represents not only the highest insight but also the deepest….“

Thus, suffering is no objection to existence, not even in its eternal recurrence, --but rather, one reason more for one *becoming* the eternal Yes to all things, the tremendous, unbounded saying affirmation into all abysses.

“The affirmation of passing away and destroying….the decisive feature of the a Dionysian philosophy, saying Yes to opposition and war, *becoming*, along with radical repudiation of the very concept of ‘being’—.”
Existential “Ja-sagen” and rationality oppose one another. Nietzsche rejects rationality as the means of coming to terms with our reality. He does not reject the claim that reason plays an important role in the life; rather Nietzsche is concerned with whether reason/rationality enhances or limits life. And rationality itself is not the issue; it is man’s excessive rationality, his over valuation of rationality which has led him to the face of modern day nihilism.

However, reason and rationality do play a fundamental role in human nature, and should be cultivated to enhance life—to the extent which it can, but ‘reason’ at the expense of other instincts has the opposite effect: it reduces life to science and technology, stripping even one’s religious faith away. So when Nietzsche writes that “art is the good will of appearance,” he is referring to the psychic healthfulness of being unreasonable, of wearing a “fool’s cap” to help us deal with the truth of reality which otherwise would lead us “to nausea and suicide.” An irrational perspective on reality gives one the creative freedom to make sense of chaos, to explore a richer life of possible significance and its own temporal meaningfulness. The irrational ‘artists’ of life do not reject reason, but that they do not make a tyrant of it; they are in control of it and can let it pause to make room for other instincts when necessary:

“At times we need a rest from ourselves by looking upon, by looking down upon, ourselves and, from an artistic distance, laughing over ourselves or weeping over ourselves; we must discover the hero no less than the fool in our passion for knowledge, we must occasionally find pleasure in our folly, or we cannot continue to find pleasure in our wisdom!”
Nietzsche’s Affirmations: *Dionysus and Apollo*

The Birth of Tragedy introduced two fundamental Nietzschean terms: the Dionysian and the Apollinian, a unity that is conceptually distinct. The relationship between the terms is not one of simple opposition, although antinomic, but of a conflicting parallelism and of a complex synthesis, the synergy when Dionysus speaks the language of Apollo, and Apollo finally the language of Dionysus. The mythopoeic terms cover a concept as a discourse (*logos*) for the genesis of further ideas; they express Nietzsche’s misiology in man’s reasoning for meaning. Nietzsche’s gods sweep away the minutiae of suffering and the “spell of that perspective” and give transfiguration to the individual as the tragic hero.

The Apollinian and Dionysian are not the literal gods, but rather tropes or the meta-language which Nietzsche had to use to expound his ideas; they are the metaphorical used as expressions of psychological drives (*Trieben*). Nietzsche saw the ancient gods as standing for the fearful realities of a universe in which mankind had no special privileges and turned them into symbolic manifestations which signify what is creative and possible for man to achieve: the Apollinian and Dionysian are essentially the primal drives/forces (*Macht*) of man’s nature that have been repressed through culture and the socio-historical defined order of his existence. The Apollinian is the drive to individuation, the drive of form, balance, proportionality; the force of plasticity, ‘image,’ and the dream, the force of light and (positive) limitation. The Dionysian is the drive to unity, the primordial nothingness-- the “Ur-Eine”: It is expressed as ‘self-overcoming,’ and its analogy is frenzy and intoxication.
Nietzsche saw the ancient gods as standing for the fearful realities of a universe in which mankind had no special privileges, a universe which does not respond to man’s questioning. For Nietzsche, what gave the possibility of dignity to existence was the presence of the tragic and the meaningless; they combine to allow the individual to assert purpose, to display heroism, and thus they are what make heroism true: The certainty of one’s annihilation is the very opportunity of allowing one to be heroic, for greatness to be personified, and of making one’s life worth living. How so?—because reality is “not an organism at all, but chaos”\textsuperscript{23} and for man that is its terror and tragedy; heroism achieved requires that one face his reality with dignity and grace. The greatest, the ultimate force of the universe is expressed by its meaninglessness \textit{for man}, and for the individual to overcome the ‘truth’ of this reality, one must affirm life despite its “meaningless” nature—that one \textit{affirms} one’s life despite its meaninglessness. This idea is the closest Nietzsche comes to being an ‘irrationalist’: that to affirm one’s significance in a meaningless universe is ‘irrational’; that one can creat personal \textit{significance} in existence although his reality is essentially meaningless. For Nietzsche, that life contains this tragic antinomy does not entail that one is fated to nothingness: “What makes one heroic? Going out to meet at the same time one’s highest suffering and one’s highest hope.”\textsuperscript{24}

\textit{The Dionysian}

Nietzsche’s Dionysian worldview addresses itself to self-\textit{purposefulness}, not to personal meaningfulness; but fulfilling the former answers the latter. The Dionysian is the self’s power of transformation; its energy is “artistic,” distinctly the creativity of re-shaping and mastering the raw conditions of his reality. It is the conscious mastery, control, and overpowering of his
material to create what he can of his interpretation of the world. Man the artist who creates the hero. The Dionysian power of transformation makes the man who accepts his destiny to act for the creativity of his being in the world; one who is able to create a personal purposive order and unity out of the otherwise meaningless. And what is it that Meaningless asks other than “What is the purpose?” If all is meaningless, then there is no purpose; for Nietzsche, however, the issue is turned so that the significance of purpose is gained because of meaningless. What greater beauty is there than the heroism of man who knows and accepts the meaningless yet creatively styles a purpose nonetheless.

The question of ‘meaning’ is confused as an issue of “happiness.” (Insofar as “pleasure” and “happiness” are distinct emotions, often at odds with one another.) Yet it would be better understood as a question of one’s purpose—happiness has nothing to do with one’s purpose, no more than is the degree of one’s happiness in some corresponding relation to a pleasure. Purpose is without predication; there is no ‘ought’ to one’s purpose: What one does simply is one’s purpose, and that doing is one’s meaning—purpose justified. The question of meaning then is not Dionysian because the question of ‘the meaning of life’ is not a “real” issue at all; it has been artificially formulated on the presumption of happiness. According to Nietzsche, as I interpret, it is not a serious (rational) existential question for “meaning” is already defined in purpose, and purpose is just what one does. Of course that does not satisfy those who want happiness and pleasure to have some stake in meaning, but for those who seek meaning through forms of happiness and pleasure, their being is the purpose of asking the question.
The Dionysian Self: Being and Becoming as an Aesthetic Phenomenon

The self, the primordial self (Ur-Eine), is the center of experience, the moving center of its purposeful world, a point about which the phenomenal world spreads. The objects of this center of the world are all sorts of ‘objects’ of one’s consciousness—“empirische,” “Realität,” “Vorstellung,” “Schein,” “Bild,” etc. Existence, then, is this relationship between the Ur-Eine and the projected world of purpose and its objects. These are the “two halves of our existence, the waking and the dreaming states.” The Dionysian is the ecstasy of the universal self, the primordial, which is the dream world of symbolic powers; it is the imagistic embroidering of one’s existence and reality.

Existence has this paradoxical unreality about it: It is empirically real but essentially meaningless, and it is metaphysical (unreal) and meaningful. But both conditions are static pictures of the world; they are the static ideals of being of the becoming, which is essential reality. How can becoming ever be reflected in a static pose? The issue for Nietzsche is that these two forms are exclusive of one another, and yet, modern culture desires to keep these images of reality transposed over one another, as it were, which does nothing more than confuse one’s clear sight of what both visions seek to distinctly reflect. For Nietzsche, the sensual metaphysical image may be as real as the empirical, but they are both no more than images of a dynamic and ever changing reality.

Man’s purpose is as individual possibility; there is no meaning to man apart from the creative self. Nietzsche conceives of the perspective of the possible. The Dionysian force of creation is the force of possibilities, that
which can transform, shape, dominate, integrate, idealize reality; it is the dynamic center of one’s being in a reality of meaningfulness. Possibility is creative; and the creative is Nietzsche’s concept of life justified as an “aesthetic phenomenon.” Life as “art” is a Dionysian perspective; it encompasses different ideas, of purpose and freedom, creativity and beauty, but essentially it is the perspective of the affirmation of the possible:

“Dionysian art …wants to convince us of the eternal delight of existence. But we must seek this delight, not in appearances, but behind them.”

Perhaps it is the description of the Dionysian as one of intoxication and “mystical obliteration” which allows for an uninhibited participation in life—uninhibited to feel the power to affirm life, to feel fearless in its reality. The Dionysian is an illusion spread over things. Illusion is a creative opportunity, and that is what Nietzsche means when he says, “Dionysian art wants to convince us of the eternal delight in existence.” All art is, for Nietzsche, an overcoming of things as they are; it is the will to conquer “being,” to eternalize oneself in becoming.

This “becoming” is a self-idealizing, in seeing the essence of one’s being in a reality whose being itself is always the becoming. The Dionysian perspective mediates between rationalism and faith, replaces the need for ‘meaning’ with the idea of purpose: Purpose is one’s possibilities; possibility is one’s freedom; freedom is the essence of creativity, and creativity is the significance of beauty. If nihilism is correct and life is rationally ‘meaningless’ then, according to Nietzsche, such meaninglessness does not result in the negation of life and purpose, but rather is the offering of creative possibility within its lived experience.
Dionysis and Art

The work of art is a common Nietzschean metaphor for the self of man, and “existence is justified as an “aesthetic phenomenon” because it is a mode of escape from the horrors of man’s reality, “Here beauty is victorious over the suffering inherent in life. The pain is brushed away from the face of nature.”

The ‘escape’ is from pain to pleasure, from meaninglessness to meaningfulness; it is the overcoming of suffering with joy through the act of ‘escaping.’ This overcoming is not dialectical in the sense that ‘escaping’ is the synthesis (Hegelian) as a third term; rather that the two terms (suffering and joy) exist as necessary parallels (the one exists because of the other). Nietzsche’s dionysische Weltanschauung is the choice of joy over suffering.

“Art makes the sight of life bearable by laying over it the veil of unclear thinking.”

The “unclear thinking” is the intoxication of the Dionysian energy of the ecstatic self; and the Dionysian ecstasy taps into the universal self and releases the symbolic powers of identity and meaning through art:

“If there is to be art, if there is to be any aesthetic doing and seeing, one physiological condition is indispensable: intoxication (Rausch) –What is essential in such intoxication is the feeling of increased strength and fullness. Out of this feeling one lends to things, one forces them to accept from us, one violates them—this process is called idealizing…. A man in this state transforms things until they mirror his power—until
they are reflections of his perfection. This *having to* transform into perfection is—art.”

Nietzsche is not referring to the plastic arts, of course, but to the art itself of creativity—in this case, the creation of meaningfulness (*Idealisiren*). This is the artistic energy of shaping and mastering, not that of projecting. Man in conscious mastery and control of the ‘material’ of existence is an artist; for the artist, like the man who really loves his destiny, is able to bring purposive order and unity into the accidental and meaningless.

*Art and Symbolism*

“I know of no more exalted symbolism than this Greek symbolism, the symbolism of the Dionysian. The profoundest instinct for life, the instinct for the future of life, for the eternity of life. …”

Art is both metaphysical and empirical in that it employs a full range of symbolic powers to ‘assert’ a truth about reality. The Dionysian self drives forth all the symbolic powers, and the symbolic powers are various levels of meaning which represent or show man’s possibilities. Nietzsche repeatedly refers to Dionysian ecstasy as exciting all the symbolic powers inherent within one’s sense of creativity, but what exactly is meant by ‘symbolic powers,’ and what are the specific assertions they make for one’s existence?

“In the Dionysian…man is incited to the greatest exaltation of all his symbolic faculties….Now the essence of nature is to be expressed symbolically; we need a new world of symbols; and the entire symbolism of the body is called into play, not the mere symbolism of the lips, face, and speech,
but the whole pantomime of dancing, forcing every member into rhythmic movement….To grasp this collective release of all the symbolic powers, man must have already attained that height of self-abnegation which seeks to express itself symbolically through all these powers.”

The primacy of the Dionysian worldview here is the idea that “self-abnegation” is not the nihilistic relinquishing of oneself to an arbitrary universe into a world of pessimism and meaninglessness; it is the self-abnegation of one’s personal need for meaning, and with that one is transformed into a world of symbolic potentials.

This personal transformation is the creative adaptation of oneself of the empirical world in which one is essentially insignificant to a reality of symbolic meaningfulness. Nietzsche apparently means that acts have their own kind of meaning, and thus, they are symbolic; they are kinds of ‘assertions’ which express reality, reality here being the Dionysian “Ur-Eine.” However, these layers of symbolic meaning gravitate between two parts, the Dionysian and the Apollinian.

Symbolism of the Gods: Apollo and Dionysis

“…the one truly real Dionysus appears in a multiplicity of shapes, in the mask of a struggling hero, and, as it were, bound up in the nets of the individual will. So now the god made manifest talks and acts in such a way that he looks like an erring, striving, suffering individual. The fact that he appears in general with this epic definition and clarity is the effect of Apollo, the interpreter of dreams. …”

The Apollinian definitely introduces a new realm of symbolic possibilities
and a new kind of articulation. Nietzsche’s Apollo is the “interpreter” of the Dionysian: Dionysus is objectified by the Apollinian. The Dionysian is still causally basic, but the Apollinian adds a distinct kind of articulation; without the Apollinian, one merely feels the value of life in experiencing Dionysian energy for Dionysian reality is characterized by nature on which no form has been imposed, and to this disorder, the Apollinian imposes the ideal of images; it gives ‘form’ to force. The imposition of symbolic form onto the world is the only response to suffering; this suffering is characterize by the profound sickness of (ultimate) meaninglessness which obsessive rationality has introduced to our lives. It follows that in order to render this suffering (the tragedy of man’s meaningless fate) tolerable what needs to be done is to find some fulfillment in the creation of meaningfulness: “the ugly that could not be removed…has been reinterpreted and made sublime…”

However, the question arises how this Dionysian instinct can be redemptive, how the loss of meaningful individualization can be a joyous hope considering that the realities of horror remain.

Nietzsche’s Dionysian concept of ‘the ugly,’ the tragic, is that it can be a kind of ‘tonic’ to life; essentially, if all were in bliss, then how would one know unless ‘tragedy’ was a real possibility? How does one know the good without an awareness of the evil? Tragedy, therefore, is essential to life; it is as much an intoxication for the senses as bliss—but of course their relation to the individual are quite different: tragedy is significant for one’s happiness in terms of its presence for others, wheras bliss is more significant for oneself than for others. But tragedy is also significant for oneself in direct confrontation with oneself because it grants the possibility
of other virtues, such as courage, heroism, perseverance, and empathy. Thus, tragedy in the Dionysian worldview is far removed from pessimism and nihilism; it is above all an affirmation of life of further possibilities in one’s life.

If man cannot rationalize tragedy, he consigns himself to nihilism; if he rationalizes it, he is consigned to pessimism. The way out for Nietzsche was too affirm (*Ja-sagen*) the seeming ‘irrationality’ of tragedy in the context that it provides the opportunity for personal “greatness. This greatness is achieved by one affirming life despite its tragic meaninglessness, and is Nietzsche’s concept of the Dionysian:

“The word ‘Dionysian’ means: an urge to unity, a reaching out beyond personality, the everyday, society, reality, across the abyss of transitoriness: a passionate-painful overflowing into darker, fuller, more floating states….”

The Dionysian is the natural force (*Macht*) which shakes man out of his peaceful, rational condition of awareness and enraptures him; the Dionysian exemplifies uninhibited energy and passions let loose; it is an organic metaphor for how man can live with meaninglessness and tragedy by *creating* meaningfulness: *Creating* is the Dionysian redemptive wisdom to the reality of human tragedy.—“the consciousness of once having glimpse the truth, man now sees everywhere only the horror and absurdity of being.”

The Apollinian Ideal: *Kunstanschauung*

Light and clarity, symmetry and beauty; these are the artistic intuitions which drive man to *form*. Form is function in the Apollinian ideal. Func-
tion in the general sense of having some purpose; purpose which therefore becomes a *rational* undertaking. Something *is* because it has meaning through purpose. Apollo is the symbol for understanding and making sense of the world; he is the radiance of rationality—*der “Scheinende.”* A sculpture has a purpose to exhibit a meaning of “beauty.” That it is already exhibits meaning: minimalistically, the purpose of doing is the meaning of its beauty. Thus, there is purpose to all forms because all forms have some function; and to a greater or lesser extent purposes then do have meaning. The Apollonian is what is rational because of its effect of structure. The *structure* of the world has meaning according to the Apollonian ideal.

In opposition to the Dionysian sense of the Chaos which is the organic compound of reality, the Apollonian is form and significance—but it is also the illusory; illusory because it is what is made of the world, not the world in itself. Man seeks to form meaning from reality, but whatever meaning derived is ultimately illusory. Both religion and scientism seek meaning; the former through faith, the latter through facts, nonetheless both are based in rationalistic modes of thought—that is, a need to know and make sense of the world. Religious beliefs are therefore rationally motivated, and their explanations of the world are structured—rational; Scientism and religion are both within the Apollonian ideal, they are forms of man’s understanding of the world, and as such illusory truths.

What is illusory to scientism is that understanding is explanation; knowing the origins of the universe explains nothing: suffering, injustice, and death remain unmoved. If religion then would explain these catastrophes of existence, that is no understanding: one may understand the explanation but not the meaning. The “why” remains so the devout abandon themselves
to faith. Rationalism answers to itself, but not to the world. Nietzsche’s objection to rationalism, the *apollonian Kunstanschauung*, is not that it is valueless, but that it is overvalued.

**Summa summarum**

The Dionysian is an instinctual lust; it is the lust of one’s becoming for one’s own self-creation. It is a problematic position involving a circle of relativism, nihilism, and axiology. Nevertheless, it is a central issue for Nietzsche’s total philosophy for it is bound up with his negation of the postulate of reason and rationality as positive guiding forces of modern society: rationality as the blind desire to know everything, without selectivity or distinction with regard to what is actually knowable and worthy of knowing. For Nietzsche, rationality is not *the* logic which makes knowledge *worthy* of truth; it is just its own logic. Nietzsche considers conceptual knowledge as an overestimation of reality, it takes linguistic-logical (grammatical) categories to be actual categories of *being*. His question, “…are the axioms of logic adequate to reality or are they a means and measure for us to create reality, the concept “reality,” for ourselves?”⁴¹ is the issue which the *alogia* of the Dionysian responds to.

The ability to “overcome,” then, is no less an essential feature of human nature than rationality in Nietzsche’s view. Today it is the overcoming of the burden of the historical-cultural forces to which we are born; the very evolutionary instinct of *homo sapiens* that allowed it to overcome and conquer the forces of nature is the instinctual drive which rationality and Christianity seek to repress, and thereby, they being responsible for the modern phenomenon of nihilism. Nietzsche speaks of the rational
need to embrace ‘irrationality’ for man to normalize himself, to regain his psychic health from the grip of nihilism in a world determined by natural forces and chaos. But this ‘overcoming’ requires that we are able to turn on ourselves, to be able to turn away from the divisive cultures of rationalism and religious metaphysics which dominate our perspective of life and reality--not to reject them by the turning away, but in the ‘turning’ being able to become more flexible in our responses to the conditions of life, and in so doing gaining greater strength to direct the forces that constitute our drives. For Man is made up of drives—instincts—and the Dionysian is the force of creativity “giving style to one’s character,” by assessing every possibility of reality and shaping the whole into an “artistic plan.” To overcome oneself is to be able to embrace all of reality for the sake of the independence of one’s creative soul, and this is one’s ‘artistry’ in dealing with the fundamental concerns of human existence.

Man is the possibility of the ‘aesthetic phenomenon’ which justifies (his) existence: that beauty is of one’s heroic life; and that heroism is made possible only by the realities of one’s finitude and the possibility of real suffering. The virtues of courage, dignity, and grace are what justify tragedy, for only is it that through tragedy are they made possible to be able to be expressed. Thus, life must be heroic if it is to be beautiful; and it can only be heroically beautiful if there is a doom which cannot be escaped or explained, and yet, it is embraced without fear. For Nietzsche, the ‘good life’ is the active life, one in which the will to power expresses itself in heroism; and heroism is a creative instinctual drive of a Dionysian perspective. The way to do this is to turn upon oneself, to shape one’s character and make it strong in the face of reality: ‘power’ for Nietzsche is first and foremost power over oneself, the power to be commended and
pursued but not in the sense of arbitrary dominion over others, but rather the power as the *will* to face one’s tragic reality; it necessitates the practice of self-overcoming—to overcome pain and suffering, and to do what seems most difficult—to live with meaning in a meaningless universe.

Nietzsche’s *dionysische Weltanschauung* has many facets; principles such as the priority of act over circumstance, the demand of reality over expectation, and the criteria of necessity and desire, but essentially it can be viewed as an understanding that *action* defines meaning: Life itself constitutes the *act* of meaning. The despair of “meaning”—the dark conception of nihilism that prevails in modern society—is only relevant because of tragedy, yet tragedy is a quality of action, and action is the language of the human experience. Nietzsche’s Dionysion perspective is not about understanding reality or an explanation of life, it is an idea of the centrality of transformation; that *act* which embraces the limitations of human control and understanding of reality, and responds to them as opportunities for experiences that enlarge and heighten one’s *own* meaning in life. It is the perspective that one’s life itself is the criterion of what counts for meaning; that the meaning of life is just that which one gives to it.

*Key to Abbreviations of Texts*

- **BGE** Beyond Good and Evil (Jenseits von Güt und Böse)
- **BT** The Birth of Tragedy (Die Geburt der Tragödie)
- **D** Daybreak (Morgenröte)
- **DD** Dionysische Dithyrambs (Dionysos-Dithyramben)
- **EH** *Ecce Homo*
- **GM** On the Genealogy of Morals (Zur Genealogie der Moral)
- **GS** The Gay Science (Die fröliche Wissenschaft—La Gaya Scienza)
- **HAH** Human, All to Human (Menschliches, allzumenschliches)
**Notes**

1. Schopenhauer. The World as Will and Representation, Vol. II. Ch. 38 (*Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*)
3. Schopenhauer. The World as Will And Representation, Vol. II. Ch. 38
5. ibid. Hebrews 8.7
6. ibid. Hebrews 8.13
7a. AC. Sec. 52: “‘Faith’ means not wanting to know the true.” / “‘Glaube’ heißt Nichtwissen-wollen, was wahr ist.”
8. Z. Part Four, On the Higher Man (73.4, s.3)
9. AC. 15
10. WP. Bk. i. 12.1
11. WP. Bk. ii. 423
12. WP. 616.
13. GS. iv. 276
14. TI. *Was ich den Alten verdanke* / EH on BT (see TI. p. 139)
15. EH On BT 2
16. EH of Z 6
17. EH on BT. 3
18. GS. ii. 107 “…die Kunst, als den guten Willen zum Scheine.”
19. *ibid.* “—nothing does us as much good as wearing a fool’s cap: we need it in relation to ourselves—we need all exuberant, floating, dancing, mocking, childish, and blissful art lest we lose the freedom above all things that our ideal demands of us.”
20. *ibid.* “…the realization of general untruth and mendaciousness…(of) science—the realization that delusion and error are conditions of human knowledge and sensation. … Honesty (the rational truth of the world) would lead us to
nausea and suicide.”

21. *ibid.* 107; also GS. ii. #78

22. GS. ii. s.78 “… the spell of that perspective which makes what is closest at hand and most vulgar appear as if it were vast, and reality itself.”

23. WP. Bk. iii. 711 “ daß die Welt durchaus kein Organismus ist, sondern das Chaos.”

24. GS. iii. 268 “Was macht heroisch?—Zugleich seinem höchsten Leide und seiner höchsten Hoffnung entgegengeh’n.”

25. The “object” here does not mean purpose or thing; it is an intentional state in the sense in which *Bild* is the object of a state of dreaming.

26. BT, sec. 4

27. BT. 17

28. BT. 2 “mystischen Selbsttäusserung”

29. BT. 17 “Auch die dionysische Kunst will uns von der ewigen Lust des Daseins überzeugen…”

30. GS. ii. 107 “As an artistic phenomenon existence is still bearable for us, and art furnishes us with eyes and hands and above all the good conscience to be able to turn ourselves into such a phenomenon.”

31. BT. 16. 5 “Here beauty is is victorious over the suffering inherent in life. The pain is, in a certain sense, brushed away from the face of nature.”

32. HAH. s.151 “Die Kunst macht den Anblick des Lebens erträglich, dadurch dass sie den Flor des unreinen Denkens über dasselbe legt.”

33. TI, “Skirmishes…,” sec. 8-9

34. TI. *What I owe the Ancients.* 4

35. BT. sec.2

36. BT. sec. 1 “…these two instinctual drives….of dreams and of intoxication…”

37. BT. sec. 10

38. GS. Bk. iv. 290

39. WP. s.1050

40. BT. 7.9

41. WP. Bk. iii. a. 516.3

42. GS. Bk. iv. 290 “to ‘give style’ to one’s character—a great and rare art! It is practiced by those who survey all the strengths and weak-
nesses of their nature and then fit them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye.”

References


