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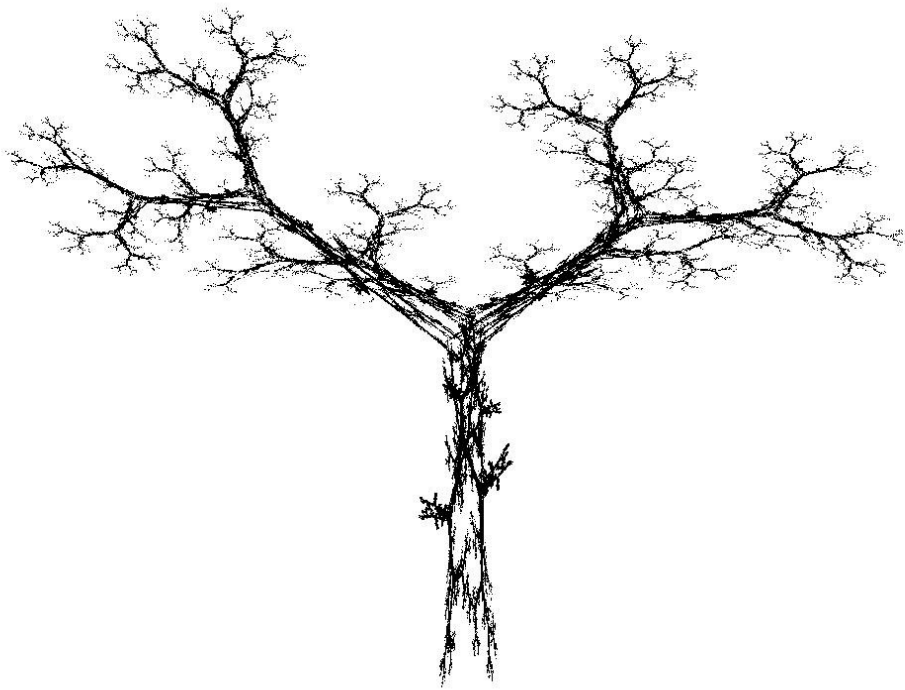
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A return to interdisciplinarity, the root of philosophy.



## ***PSYCHE***

*Eudaimonia* at Smith College seeks to encourage human flourishing among undergraduate students by opening them to the pursuit of wisdom that is strongly encouraged by Smith's liberal art curriculum. Moreover, since today's various disciplines originated from the study of "philosophy", Smith's philosophy department seeks to bring together the different disciplines into unique synergies.

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# Artistic Beauty and the Beholder

## A Stimulus Account of Abstract Art

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**Abstract:** In this paper, I apply the cognitivist vs. stimulus model debate, as presented by Paul Taylor and Albert Mosley respectively, to visual art. This paper primarily focuses on contemporary (post-1920) abstract art and attempts to answer a variation of the question that Taylor asked about music: “What are we listeners doing?” (Taylor 159). I pose a similar question about visual art: What are we doing when we look at a piece of artwork? Supporters of the cognitivist model would argue that a better understanding of artistic properties such as color, shape, patterns, etc. enhances one’s experience of looking at art and therefore demonstrates that visual art does not stimulate the viewer the way “sweetness ‘moves’ the tongue” (Taylor 159). By contrast, supporters of the stimulus model would contend that appreciation of art is not limited to cognitive perception—there is also a sensual aspect to the enjoyment of art that does not require knowledge of artistic properties. It seems that abstract art in particular seeks a cognitivist explanation, as it utilizes unorthodox artistic methods that may make the artwork vague and inaccessible to someone without any knowledge of those methods. However, I argue that the stimulus model enables a wider audience to participate in the enjoyment of abstract art, particularly those who are not artistically literate. Furthermore, I attempt to show that sense experience, as interpreted by the stimulus model, can provide one with a better appreciation of abstract art than intellectual knowledge can. In doing so, I draw upon Mosley’s version of the stimulus model and apply it to my analysis of a few works of art in the Smith College Museum of Art.

**Keywords:** Aesthetics, cognitivist model, stimulus model, abstract art

# Introduction

In his book, *Black is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics* (2016), Paul Taylor poses a succinct yet complex question about music: “*What are we listeners doing?*” (Taylor, 2016, p. 159). He embarks on the project of exploring how music moves listeners—in both the figurative and literal senses of the word. In doing so, he accepts Peter Kivy’s cognitivist theory of music, which argues that there is a direct “*relationship between musical sophistication and musical appreciation*” (Taylor, 2016, p. 160). Albert Mosley pushes back against this theory in his paper, “Music in the Philosophy of the Black Aesthetic: Paul Taylor’s Critique of Funk” (2017), instead arguing that one’s experience of listening to music is better described as sensually stimulating. A similar debate can be applied to the field of visual art—what are we doing when we stare at a piece of artwork? In this paper, I will argue in favor of a stimulus model of viewing contemporary (post-1920) abstract art. It seems, *prima facie*, that a cognitivist model would be particularly apt for explaining our reactions to abstract art, as abstract artists utilize unconventional methods that can make their artwork vague and inaccessible to people without any knowledge of those methods. However, I seek to challenge this assumption by arguing that the stimulus model allows a wider audience to participate in the enjoyment of abstract art, particularly those who are not artistically literate. Furthermore, I will attempt to show that sense experience, as interpreted by the stimulus model, can provide one with a better appreciation of abstract art than intellectual knowledge can.

## Two Theories of Music

### The Cognitivist Model

Taylor addresses three main questions in his chapter, *Make It Funky; Or, Music’s Cognitive Travels and the Despotism of Rhythm*. The first is whether “*there is such a thing as black music,*” what it is, and what specifically makes it “*black*” (Taylor, 2016, p. 156). The second asks what blackness means for music and whether black musical identity is inseparable from rhythm. The third and final question, which inspires the focus of this paper, explores how musical rhythm moves the listener, both in terms of dancing and listening. Taylor makes clear that he is sympathetic to Kivy’s argument for the cognitivist model, writing: “*The more one knows about music theory, the more one can hear in the music, and the more opportunities one creates for musical discernment and, if all goes well, enjoyment. One does not just hear sounds, one hears progressions, and dissonance, and resolutions, and so on*” (Taylor, 2016, p. 160). In this vein, music is not pleasurable to the ear the way candy is to the tongue—there is a cognitive aspect to it in which understanding of musical elements, or at least the ability to identify them, leads to greater appreciation for the music itself. Taylor also argues that perception is necessarily tied to cognition, meaning sense stimuli provoke a cognitive response, even if that response is subconscious. He goes on to argue that rhythm is fundamental to black music and music in general, but that it is not “*primitive*” or “*[lacking in] cognitive or cultural sophistication*” (Taylor, 2016, p. 165).

The cognitivist model provides Taylor with a solution to the labeling of amelodic, primarily rhythmic music as “primitive.” He writes that “*we take pleasure in the way [rhythmic] micro innovations surprise us while still sustaining the overall pattern of musical organization*” to support his argument that recognition of rhythm’s complexities enables the listener to appreciate rhythmic music more (Taylor, 2016, p. 171).

## **The Stimulus Model**

Mosley offers two primary counterarguments to Taylor and Kivy’s cognitivist model. The first is that music does indeed stimulate the mind, but not in the cognitive sense that Taylor and Kivy argue for. In response to the assumption that perception is always a cognitive response to sense stimuli, Mosley argues that “*in both musical and non-musical cases, the feelings we experience are bodily reactions to our perception of patterns and their evolution*” (Mosley, 2017, p. 2). This is not to say that music *only* stimulates physical responses, but rather that one need not be able to recognize and analyze the theoretical elements of music in order to have a meaningful response to it. Mosley identifies our awareness of a pattern’s completeness or incompleteness as a feeling that is independent of the level of understanding. In this sense, music acts as both a stimulant and simulant—it is a means of conveying emotions that we experience in real life without there being any particular object those emotions are directed toward, creating “*a kind of virtual reality in ‘virtual time’*” (Mosley, 2017, p. 3). Mosley’s second counterargument is that one need not be musically literate to be able to appreciate music. He challenges the cognitivist model’s claim that music does not stimulate the soul the way coffee stimulates the brain because one’s enjoyment of music increases with greater knowledge of its technical aspects, arguing that there are many people who lack musical literacy but still produce music of the highest caliber and enjoy music deeply. For example, many musicians in the African and African-American traditions are musically illiterate and therefore utilize improvisation instead of musical scores. (Mosley, 2017). The ability to improvise is significant because it enables the musician to adjust his or her performance according to context, rather than be confined to a pre-written score, thus giving him or her greater freedom to express him or herself emotionally and eliminating the barrier between musician and audience.

## **Major Aesthetic Theories**

### **Formalism**

One could imagine a version of Taylor and Kivy’s cognitivist model being applied to visual art. It seems that abstract art in particular seeks a cognitivist explanation given its often vague, non-representational style. Proponents of the cognitivist model would argue that an understanding of artistic elements such as color, shape, and patterns would enhance one’s experience of looking at abstract art and help him or her better understand the details in the artwork. When looking to the major aesthetic theories, however, one finds that they tend to better support a stimulus model.<sup>1</sup> Advocates of the formalist approach emphasize the visual elements of art such as color, shape, and texture over the historical and social contexts in which it is produced. At first glance this may seem like an argument for the cognitivist model, as a better understanding of art’s visual elements would likely enhance one’s

experience of looking at abstract art. However, formalism also emphasizes the significance of people's emotional responses to artistic form. In his book entitled *Art* (1914), Clive Bell writes that "*the starting point for all systems of aesthetics must be the personal experience of a particular emotion*," which he calls "*the aesthetic emotion*" (Bell, 1914, Ch. I).<sup>2</sup> This emotion can take on different forms depending on the viewer and the artwork but is a unique type of emotion because only art can evoke it. Bell argues that significant form, or the combinations and arrangements of artistic elements that move us, is the cause of the aesthetic emotion. Under a formalist approach such as Bell's, it is the sensual aspects of art captured in combinations of color and form that elicit an emotional response, rather than the artist's intention behind those aspects. Thus, one need not possess any knowledge of color *theory* to experience the aesthetic emotion when looking at a striking combination of colors.

## **Expressive Theory**

Expressive theory takes an opposite approach from formalist theory, as it places greater emphasis on the artist's intention. Advocates of expressive theory view art as an outward expression of an artist's inward emotional state, rather than merely a combination of artistic forms. Expressive art is therefore greater than the sum of its visual components. In *The Principles of Art* (1938), R.G. Collingwood argues in support of art as emotional expression and, like Bell, identifies the existence of an "aesthetic emotion." Similar to Bell, he rejects the notion of a specific "aesthetic emotion" that an artist chooses to express but writes that "*the specific feeling of having successfully expressed ourselves*" can be called the "*aesthetic emotion*" (Collingwood, 1938, par. VI.4). Although Collingwood's philosophy differs from Bell's in that it focuses on the artist's experience of the aesthetic emotion instead of the viewer's, it nonetheless supports the stimulus model because it prioritizes emotional expression and response over intellectual analysis of art's visual elements. This calls to mind Mosley's emphasis on improvisation, which allows the musician (or in this case, the artist) to express his or her current emotional state rather than be limited to a preconceived idea of what the final product is supposed to be.

## **Defense of the Stimulus Theory**

One need not rely on existing aesthetic theories to make the case for a stimulus model of abstract art, however. Taylor and Mosley differ in how they view listeners' reactions to music—Taylor explores how listeners interpret and understand music, while Mosley focuses on listeners' participation in the experience of hearing music, particularly in regard to funk. It may seem that abstract art calls for at least some degree of audience interpretation in order for it to be understood. However, I seek to argue that abstract art does not necessarily need to be understood for it to be appreciated. There is much to be gained from partaking in the sensory experience of art that cannot be gained from merely intellectualizing it. This is especially relevant to abstract art because it is more open to interpretation than are other styles of art. The stimulus model enables the audience to engage in questioning the meaning evoked by the different colors, shapes, and patterns, instead of being told what those colors, shapes, and patterns are intended to signify. Though it may seem that questioning is in itself a cognitive action, in this context the mind is not the driver of the questioning. Instead, the audience questions based on their visceral responses to art and the emotions it evokes. This

allows for greater diversity in audience experiences, as the less people know about a piece of artwork, the more they will question it. The stimulus model also permits abstract art to appeal to a more diverse audience, particularly those who lack artistic literacy, by eliminating the expectation that the audience must already understand what they are looking at in order to enjoy it.

The cognitivist model is also lacking in its assumption that all understanding can be found in intellectualized knowledge. One can indeed learn more about art from simply looking at it than he or she can from studying it *a priori*. An analogous argument is made by Frank Jackson in his essay entitled “Epiphenomenal Qualia” (1982). Jackson makes a case against physicalism, or the belief that all knowledge can be derived from and reduced to physical information—that is, scientific information that is learned independent of experience (Jackson, 1982). He proposes a thought experiment in which a scientist named Mary is forced to study the world from a black-and-white television monitor in a colorless room. She learns all the physical information there is to know about colors, such as their wavelengths, how they stimulate the retina, and how color is perceived and registered in the brain. However, she does all of this without ever having seen color herself. Jackson arrives at the conclusion that if Mary were to leave the black-and-white room and see color for the first time, she would learn something that the physical information did not teach her, which proves that physicalism is an inadequate theory of knowledge (Jackson, 1982).

This thought experiment can apply to theories of abstract art, or any visual art for that matter. Although the cognitivist argument is not an argument for physicalism, it certainly supports the idea that aural stimulation is not enough to truly understand music—that one requires some level of physical information, or at least the ability to discern harmonies and rhythms, in order to appreciate music. It is important to clarify that cognitivism is not identical with or necessarily linked to intelligence. Rather, it is associated with one’s knowledge of art’s technical elements and ability to discern them, which poses limitations for people who do not have access to the education required to become artistically literate. I acknowledge that Taylor and Kivy believe that theoretical information *enhances* one’s perception of music, rather than replaces it, but it is unclear what that information adds to a listener’s musical experience that makes that experience per se superior to a purely stimulating one. Kivy writes that “[one’s] enjoyment of the music is the enjoyment of perceiving [musical features such as melodies, harmonies, tempos, and modulations],” which seems to be an attempt at reducing music to a sum of its parts (Taylor, 2016, p. 40). Like music, abstract art is not algorithmic in the sense that it can be broken down into a set of artistic features and then reassembled. To return to Jackson’s thought experiment, there is a quality about the color blue that cannot be described in technical terms. As Mosley puts it, “*Such problems do not arise in the ‘stimulus’ account, where meaningful musical passages are felt, not understood under some description*” (Mosley, 2017, p. 6).

## Case Studies

To support my argument, I will present a series of case studies from the Smith College Museum of Art. All of these examples are works of contemporary abstract art that help illustrate my point that the stimulus model provides a better framework for looking at



abstract art. The first work of art is entitled *Triptych* (1954-55, Figure 1) and was painted by American artist Ad Reinhardt. *Triptych* looks to be the definition of “abstract,” as it is simply composed of three canvasses that appear to be completely black. Upon close examination, however, one sees that there is a subtle spectrum of different shades of black. One could argue that this painting alienates those who do not understand Reinhardt’s intention to create a piece that contains “*no things, no ideas, no relations, no attributes, no qualities—nothing that is not of the essence*” (Reinhardt, 1955). When presented with something so abstract, however, the viewer has more of an opportunity to be provoked by the artist’s avant-garde choices and feel the “aesthetic emotion” that formalists and expressionists believe to be an essential part of the artistic experience.



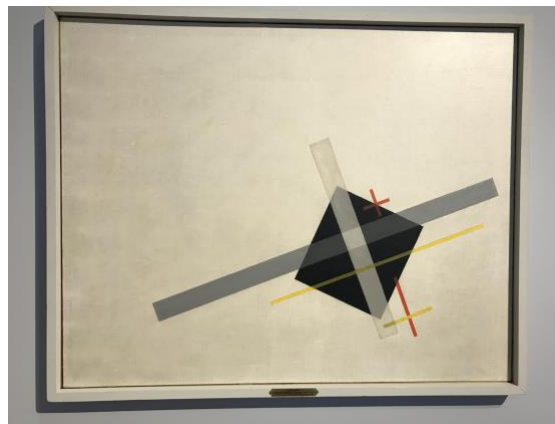
**Figure 1.** Ad Reinhardt, *Triptych*, 1954-55

A similar argument can be made for Ushio Shinohara’s painting entitled *Boxing Painting* (2009, Figure 2), which is simply comprised of splatters of black paint on a white canvas. Shinohara created the piece by wearing boxing gloves covered in black paint and punching the canvas—a style he adopted as a rejection of traditional aesthetics and expectations of what is considered “art.” A cognitivist might argue that one cannot properly appreciate Shinohara’s style without knowing the process he took to create the painting and understanding that the paint splatters are not just *any* paint splatters. However, Shinohara’s work does not call for intellectualization because his artistic process itself was improvisational. He did not paint with the intention of creating any particular shape or pattern, so it is unreasonable to expect his audience to only take pleasure in the technical aspects of his painting.



**Figure 2.** Ushio Shinohara, *Boxing Painting*, 2009

My final example – Laszlo Moholy-Nagy’s *K I* (1922, Figure 3) – is not quite as abstract as are *Triptych* and *Boxing Painting*, but nevertheless seems to ask for a cognitivist explanation. The piece is composed of a combination of shapes (primarily rectangles and squares) and utilizes little color. Moholy-Nagy was part of the Constructivism movement, in which artists sought to “construct” art from basic shapes in order to make their work accessible to a universal audience. Although a cognitivist theorist would argue that when one enjoys *K I*, he or she enjoys perceiving the arrangement of shapes and colors, the stimulus theory would counter that one need not cognitively perceive and, by extension, understand the shapes and colors of a painting in order to enjoy looking at it. We (i.e. the audience) regain our autonomy when art lacks an explanation. This is to say that we become free to feel emotions that may not be the emotions that the artist attempted to convey but are nonetheless worthwhile because some quality of the artwork speaks to our non-artistic emotional experiences, in turn “[producing] *bodily reactions that are experienced as personal emotions*” (Mosley, 2017, pp. 3-4).



**Figure 3.** László Moholy-Nagy, *K I*, 1922

## Addressing Counterarguments

One might counter that because many works of abstract art are not beautiful or visually appealing, an understanding of art’s technical aspects greatly enhances a viewer’s experience

of looking at abstract art. Art does not have to be visually appealing for it to stimulate the senses, however, and abstract art in particular is meant to evoke a range of emotions that is not limited to happiness and appreciation for conventional beauty. Just as different types of beauty elicit different emotional responses, the aesthetic emotion can arise from various causes. By reducing a work of art to its technical elements, we lose the fundamental cause of the aesthetic emotion—provocation of our emotions via sensory stimulation. Why else do scores of people with no artistic literacy visit art museums around the world every day?<sup>3</sup> Even if they do not understand what they see, they take pleasure (or any other emotion) in the aesthetic experience. Furthermore, aesthetic taste itself is a subjective concept that is determined by one's own sentiments. In "Of the Standard of Taste" (1757), David Hume writes: "*Beauty is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty*" (Hume, 1757, p. 7). It is ultimately one's individual bodily and emotional response to art that dictates whether he or she finds something beautiful. For example, an artist may use a particular shade of red because he or she believes it is beautiful, but an audience member may find that same shade of red visually repulsive. Since visual appeal is highly subjective, the stimulus model gives the audience the autonomy to decide for themselves what is and is not beautiful.

Another objection to the stimulus model is that it does not adequately differentiate between reactions to natural beauty and reactions to art produced by an artist. Advocates of the cognitivist model might argue that under the stimulus model, there is essentially no distinction between natural beauty and art so long as they "stimulate" the audience. Art certainly contains an intentionality that nature lacks, particularly when the artist attempts to make a social or political statement. However, this is not a serious objection because the stimulus model does not require that there be a distinction between the aesthetics of nature and the aesthetics of art. Knowledge of the artist's specific intentions, or that an intention exists, inevitably causes the audience to have certain expectations of art that they would not have of nature. There is nothing fundamentally different between a sunset and a framed photograph of a sunset in a museum, except for the frame and descriptive plaque hung beside it. This is not to say that the artist's intentions do not matter, but that it is possible to appreciate art solely for its aesthetic value, rather than as a composite of choices in color, shape, and patterns. Thus, the stimulus model reconciles natural beauty and artistic beauty by allowing anything that aesthetically provokes a visceral emotional response to be called "art."

## Conclusion

The goal of this paper is not to argue that the cognitivist model prevents people from enjoying art, as artistic literacy and the ability to appreciate art's technicalities are indeed valuable. The goal instead is to argue that the stimulus model offers a *better* answer to the question posed at the beginning of this paper: What are we doing when we stare at a piece of artwork? Art museums and galleries attract many people who are not artistically literate but nevertheless feel something in themselves when they see a striking work of art. Abstract art moves its audience because it prompts questioning and curiosity, which are essential parts of the aesthetic experience. The stimulus model therefore provides the audience with a better appreciation of abstract art because it enables more people to participate in this questioning,

including those who are not artistically literate, and enjoy art beyond its theoretical descriptions.

# Endnotes

1. I take the three major aesthetic theories to be the formal approach, the representational approach, and the expressive approach. Since the focus of this paper is abstract art, which tends to be non-representational, I will center my attention on the other two theories.
2. There is wide-ranging literature written on the “aesthetic emotion” and whether such a thing exists. For the purposes of this paper, I will not engage in this debate and will instead write with the assumption that there is an “aesthetic emotion.”
3. There are, of course, many reasons why artistically illiterate people visit art museums. However, my argument refers to the subset of visitors who do so to appreciate art for the sake of its aesthetic value.

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# Weber vs. Marx: The Causality Dilemma

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**Abstract:** This essay will demonstrate the striking dichotomy between Marxist and Weberian thought and explores the onset of the industrialized capitalist system and its relation to ideology and culture. While Marx attributes cultural transformations to byproducts of economic change in the modes and relations of production, Weber claims that ideology shapes economic activity, such as Protestant beliefs that have cultivated the “spirit of capitalism” to form the internal motivations and work ethic of all actors within a capitalist system.

**Keywords:** industrialization, culture, Protestant ideology, work

# Introduction

The behemoth of industrialization triggered the development of social theory, which then endeavored to understand this novel yet dominating force. Beginning in England in the eighteenth century, the transition from an agrarian to a manufacturing society ushered in urbanization, a culture of consumerism, and education for the masses. Denoted as the founding fathers of sociology, Max Weber and Karl Marx examined the onset of the industrialized capitalist system and its relation to ideology and culture. Weber's business and Protestant family background influenced his work, unlike Marx whose writing was inspired by his political activism for the working class. This essay will demonstrate a striking dichotomy between Marxist and Weberian thought. While Marx attributes cultural transformations to byproducts of economic change in the modes and relations of production, Weber claims that ideology shapes economic activity, such as Protestant beliefs that have cultivated the "spirit of capitalism" to form the internal motivations and work ethic of all actors within a capitalist system.

## Weber and Capitalism

In the *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber theorizes that Protestant ideology originating from the Protestant Reformation has catalyzed modern capitalism. During the Protestant Reformation from 1517 to 1648 A.D, a variety of Protestant denominations such as Baptism and Lutheranism rebelled against the Roman Catholic Church to establish their distinctive worship of Christianity. Protestants emphasized increasing God's "glory" through ascetic work according to a "calling", assigned by God himself (Weber in McIntosh 1997, 123). One's calling served as one's profession. Economic actors worked in accordance to their particular callings fostered the division of labor within industrial economies. Only "hard, continuous bodily or mental labor" was viewed as divine; "leisure" activities and indulgences were perceived as sinful (Weber in McIntosh 1997, 123). God required all Protestants, regardless of financial status, to perform rigorous work. Since Protestants also believed in predestination, the doctrine that God has already willed their place in the afterlife, Protestants worked to justify their salvation. As long as they acquired and spent wealth righteously, it was moral to accept God's "gifts" in the form of wages and profits, proliferating pecuniary incentives (Weber in McIntosh 1997, 125). Weber's analysis exhibits how Protestant beliefs have nurtured the "spirit of capitalism", institutionalizing the importance of a productive work ethic.

These values of self-discipline and abstinence practiced within the domain of everyday work have systematically created calculative and profit-seeking capitalists who have propagated prominent features of the capitalist system: savings, investment, commodification, and entrepreneurial success (Scaff in Stones 1998, 36). In fact, from demographic data, Weber deduced that the majority of business leaders identify with Protestant faith. Business leadership typically requires a "Protestant" work ethic. Due to the influence of Protestant leaders, this work ethic has trickled down to their employees and their posterity. Today, all

economic actors within predominantly Protestant nations adhere to this severe work ethic, which has been separated from its religious origins.

## Marx and Socialism

In direct opposition to Weber's analysis of the causation of capitalism, Karl Marx asserts that productive forces form the basis for culture and values. The "existence of living human individuals" is Marx's primary assumption (Marx in McIntosh 1997, 66). People *must* enter the relations of production corresponding to the economic system within their social world that hopefully at least meets their material needs. The relations of production are the social relations that organize the world of work into two classes: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat—the owners and the non-owners. Within the context of industrialization, the capitalists who owned the means of production controlled the unskilled labor of the working class. By paying the laborers wages, the capitalists also owned their labor. According to Marx, "the sum total of these relations of production constitute the economic structure of society...to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness" (Marx in McIntosh 1997, 66). Our roles within the domain of production transform our collective beliefs and cultural inclinations, since human activity within the domain of work is an expression of human will and awareness.

Marx's historical materialism demonstrates that economic changes that produce the conditions of material survival are responsible for noteworthy cultural and institutional changes over time. For example, from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, the British East India Company monopolized tea consumption in India (Marx in McIntosh 1997, 91). Upon dominating the Indian economy, the British established their rule over the Indian people, bringing in widespread Christian missionaries and railroads across the nation. Additionally, international trade, such as on the Silk Road from Africa to Eurasia and on the Atlantic slave trade in the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries not only created work for producers and traders, but also transmitted and transformed cultures. The Silk Road was the primary route for the spread of Buddhism, while the Atlantic slave trade introduced African cultures and religions to the Americas. These historical examples demonstrate that economic development transforms culture.

## Weber versus Marx

Weber's and Marx's divergent positions on the foundation of social life correspond to differing views on the purpose and nature of work within the economic domain. In Weber's theory, Protestants demonstrate their place in heaven through austere and rational labor within an assigned calling (Weber in McIntosh 1997, 125). All Protestants regardless of class position viewed work as a religious and moral activity. The practice of such beliefs sustained a spiritually righteous work ethic among Protestants characterized by rigor and aestheticism—a key feature for expanding productivity-driven businesses. No longer working for religious salvation in the modern day, people in productive capitalist economies continue to work



persistently for “material goods” and “mundane passions” within a rational bureaucratic social structure that bolsters their dedicated attitude towards work (Weber in McIntosh 1997, 130).

In fact, Weber suggests that within this form of planned social organization, workers today are confined to an “iron cage of rationality”-the “effective maximization of practical goals within a capitalist system”, resulting in the “constriction of opportunities and possibilities” (Scaff, in Jones 1998, 38). Bureaucratic organizations are characterized by impersonal implicit and explicit rules and a hierarchy of subordinates that report to superiors to meet their organizational objectives (Weber in McIntosh 1997, 42-144). Activity that does not conform to the rules or the relations within the hierarchy does not exist, constraining many possible actions that inhibit the freedom of the bureaucrat. Therefore, theoretically, only prudent actions according to natural and explicit organizational design occur within the bureaucracy to expand organizational efficiency. Marx proposes revolution as a mechanism of breaking the “iron cage” of social organization within modern capitalism to benefit the working class.

In terms of the purpose and nature of work, Marx argues that mundane material pursuits motivate productive capacities. In the capitalist economy in our current historical epoch, workers earn wages that can be traded for their livelihood, while accumulated profits enhance the luxurious lifestyles of the bourgeoisie. Unfortunately, the laborer has been separated from the expression and control of himself. Firstly, the laborer faces alienation from the products that he assembles that are ultimately owned and sold by the capitalist. He does not possess authority over the fruits of his labor and, hence, the manifestation of his own labor (Marx in McIntosh 1997, 17). Furthermore, since the worker’s commodified labor belongs to the capitalist, his labor does not belong to his “essence”; the worker feels miserable while working and labor becomes a manifestation of “self-sacrifice” and “mortification” (Marx in McIntosh 1997, 18). Humans only feel happy when expressing their true selves outside of the workplace.

Such inhumane alienation inspired Marx to advocate for combatting the class struggle faced by the vulnerable and disconsolate proletariat masses. Arising from the relations of production within economic structures, class struggle antagonizes the bourgeoisie and the proletariat classes due to differing class-based interests and life circumstances, especially the exploitation of the proletariat. Differing interests emerge from wages and profits that are in “inverse ratio to each other” (Marx in McIntosh 1997, 59). While the insatiable pursuit of profits drives the activity of the business owner, laborers strive to earn wages for their “subsistence”. A capitalist can generate greater profits by reducing costs. Decreasing the cost of labor has the greatest impact on cost reduction. Thus, the capitalist’s motivation for greater profits causes the depraved oppression of the masses. To enhance efficiency to increase profits, the capitalist continues to simplify the menial task of each laborer. Simplified labor reduces the value of work and its associated wage, fostering greater exploitation because workers are becoming poorer as capitalists acquire more wealth. Work then becomes even more “unsatisfying” and “repulsive”, demonstrating the cruel separation of man from the labor process (Marx in McIntosh 1997, 69).

Marx vehemently argues for an economic revolution led by the working class to overcome their oppression. He advises the Proletariat masses to begin rebelling by shattering factory machines and then expanding their efforts by solidifying under a union to promote their interests (Marx in McIntosh, 1997, 44-45). Improved methods of communication developed by industrialization such as railroads can now fully support unionizing efforts. Interestingly, Marxist theory instigated communist revolutions around the world, most notably in Russia that resulted in victory for the Bolsheviks who founded the Soviet Union, and in China where the communist party has founded and continues to govern the People's Republic of China.

In direct contrast to Marx's agenda for revolutionary political and social change, Weber simply analyzes the cause of modern capitalism without prescribing a course of action. Both Weber and Marx highlight a major tension in sociology: should social thought simply investigate the intricacies and patterns of social life or should it serve as an analytical tool for social change?

## Conclusion

Marx and Weber's theories provide opposing explanations of the causality between the modes and relations of production and ideology, advancing our understanding of the varying notions of the origins and nature of social life. Both social theorists examine the numerous implicit and explicit rules and the roots of the emergent, dominating capitalist system during their lives. While modern day sociologists empirically examine the validity of these proposed laws and causes of social life, insights derived from the works of Weber and Marx can also foster adept navigation of the social world and its constraints for any individual.

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# A Genealogy of Suffering

## A Look into How the Value of Suffering Has Been Lost

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**Abstract:** This essay aims at providing an overarching view of how the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche portrays suffering in his work *Genealogy of Morals*. For Nietzsche, suffering is a very important topic a topic toward which the common attitude has changed over time. Since, it is not the only subject matter discussed in the *Genealogy of Morals*, I shall attempt to paint a full and detailed picture only of this topic in order to then reflect on it.

**Keywords:** Nietzsche, suffering, genealogy of morals, existentialism

# Introduction

In one of his most widely known works, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche addresses a wide range of topics, including the main of this essay – suffering. A proper introduction to this inquiry, however, would be best executed by opening with the motifs from his preceding treatise *Beyond Good and Evil*. In passage 225, Nietzsche conveys the contemporary attitude toward suffering as follows:

*You want, if possible – and there is not more insane “if possible” – to abolish suffering”. And we? It really seems that we would rather have it higher and worse than ever... The discipline of suffering, the great suffering – do you not know that only this discipline has created all enhancements of man so far (BGE 225, p. 343).<sup>1</sup>*

As one may notice, the mindset toward suffering depicted here appears to be negative. Along with the overall modern outlook, the reader is introduced to Nietzsche’s own attitude toward suffering as well. It is a rather positive view; he, in fact, deems suffering to be an important aspect of human essence.

The theme of the common attitude toward suffering is developed further in *Genealogy of Morals* – a work that this paper will primarily focus on. I shall chronologically trace the presence of suffering and different outlooks on it in all three essays of this work with an attempt to create a full picture of suffering and reflect on what the outcomes of its genealogical development are. Additionally, I aim to identify specific connections between the developmental stages of the common attitude toward suffering, that Nietzsche vaguely seems to be implying.

## An Analysis of *On the Genealogy of Morals*

### What is “good”?

For a proper introduction into the topic of suffering in the first essay of *Genealogy of Morals*, I shall first consider the content of the sections leading up to it. The main agenda of the first piece is Nietzsche’s discussion of the different origins of *good*.

*...the judgement ‘good’ did not originate with those to whom ‘the good’ was shown! Rather it was ‘the good’ themselves, that is to say, the noble, powerful, high-stationed and high-minded, who felt and established themselves and their actions as good, that is, of the first rank, in contradistinction to all the low, low-minded, common and plebeian (GM I:2, pp. 461-2).<sup>2</sup>*

He has a fairly novel outlook on the origin of the term good, which is that goodness was established by the individuals that considered themselves good and regarded anyone different from them as bad; in doing so creating opposing values. Nietzsche then discusses the priestly caste, which is essential to the narrative, that conjured up such opposing values as “pure” and “impure”. He explains that initially that caste used to be part of the higher, aristocratic, master strata and was distinct in its abstinent lifestyles.<sup>3</sup>

In the next part of this essay, Nietzsche discusses how the priestly caste diverged from the master class and developed into its opposite. He claims such a division was easily created by the “warrior” and “priestly” castes’ mutual jealousy and unwillingness to compromise; warriors’ taste for battles and priests’ impotence in that field. Hence, the priestly class departed from the masters and joined the slave rank, for, anything different from master (good) is considered slave (bad). The reformed lowly caste developed hatred of tremendous magnitude, which amounts to an extremely powerful weapon against those they hate, who is everything they are not – masters. The slave class substituted the word “bad”, which is used by the noble, with the word “evil,” in referencing the master strata. This is important, for the former does not entail hatred, whereas the latter does. Nietzsche calls this an outright revaluation of values, or – *the slave revolt in morality*; he introduces the Jewish people as the most prominent priests that joined the slave strata and spurred the most successful, yet gradual rebellion. An important detail to consider is the specific adjective that Nietzsche uses in describing the lowly class’ raging hatred and thirst for revenge: “the most spiritual and poisonous kind of hatred,” the former hinting at the religious aspect of slave morality, while the latter suggests a high level of its influence. He states that from their hatred was born a new kind of love, which, curiously, does not come in contradiction with their lust for vengeance. Nietzsche calls crucifixion a type of diversion and bait, for any opposer of Israel. Thus, comes to existence the most victorious slave revolt in history. Everything is becoming Judaized, Christianized etc.<sup>4</sup> This affirms that the aspect of reliance on religion, or as Nietzsche would call it – *mask*, that the lowly employ in their struggle against the master morality.

## **A Nietzschean reading of “suffering”**

Let us return to suffering. Nietzsche portrays suffering as characteristic of the master class, however, not in the sense of experiencing suffering, but rather that of inflicting it. Since the Noble respected those like them, suffering was to be only inflicted on those lower in class: “...profound joy in all destruction, in all the voluptuousness of victory and cruelty...” (*GM* I:11, p. 478). To conclude the first essay of *Genealogy of Morals* with respect to suffering, one can note that, according to Nietzsche’s view there historically existed two opposing moralities, one of which triumphed over the other with a resounding, yet steady and barely noticeable revaluation of values. I shall add that, since all values of the master class had been overturned, so had the infliction of suffering, thus creating a new and negative common attitude toward suffering, which will become more apparent in Essay II.

In the second essay of *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche delves into the subjects such as memory, forgetfulness, guilt and debt. In section 6, he discusses the relationship between guilt and debt, and suffering, claiming that suffering used to be a genuinely satisfying activity, for a creditor, who, not being able to receive his payment, could at least enjoy the pleasure of inflicting suffering on the indebted; it is described as a “genuine festival” (*GM* II:6, p. 501). In the following section, Nietzsche states that this attitude had been reversed:

*Today, when suffering is always brought forward as the principal argument against existence, as the worst question mark, one does well to recall ages in which the opposite opinion prevailed because men were unwilling to refrain from making suffer and saw in it an enchantment of the first order, a genuine seduction to life* (*GM* II:7, p. 503 ).

In one of the sentences, that precede this passage, Nietzsche effectively utilizes his use of language in a phrase “when mankind was not yet ashamed of its cruelty” (*GM* II:7, p. 503). The reversal of values that took place was a gradual process. Hence, I claim that, when Nietzsche states “as the worst question mark”, he is hinting at the new stage of the process of overturning the common outlook on suffering. Rather than a sharp, abrupt inversion of the value of suffering, the transformation was instead a long and winding road with the examination of the initial attitude as one of its turns. That is to say, on the course of the reversal of morality, one had to beg the question “Why are we made to suffer?” Nietzsche addresses this question in the same section, stating: “What really arouses indignation against suffering as such but the senselessness of suffering...”, thereby affirming that the value of suffering had first been scrutinized by means of inquiry, yet already with a negative outlook (*GM* II:7, p. 504). I argue that the answer was ready as soon as the question was asked, however, had only been brought forward postliminary, so as to maintain the image of a gradual change of the attitude towards suffering.

The last idea in Essay II of *Genealogy of Morals*, is brought forward in the statement: “Hostility, cruelty, joy in persecuting, in attacking, in change, in destruction—all this turned against the possessors of such instincts: that is the origin of the ‘bad conscience’” (*GM* II:16, p. 521). This is the concept that I had previously mentioned, when discussing the phrase “ashamed of cruelty.” Bad conscience is the result of man’s suppression of his natural instincts, which used to be discharged outwardly, that now turned inward and caused one to suffer – “...makes itself suffer out of joy in making suffer” (*GM* II:18, p. 523). However, it is crucial to note that Nietzsche would not regard this kind of suffering in the manner that he expressed previously in *Beyond Good and Evil*, that is, it being a driving force of enhancement. He puts it simply: “The bad conscience is an illness, there is no doubt about that...” (*GM* II:19, p. 524). In summary of Essay II of *Genealogy of Morals* with respect to suffering, one observes a change, namely, that the attitude toward suffering had, in fact, through a gradual process, changed to a negative one. So, the answer to our question “Why are we made to suffer?” may as well be this: there is no good reason why we should suffer, hence we must aim to *abolish* it (*BGE* p. 225). This development became part of the formation of bad conscience, for infliction of suffering is an outwardly directed instinct, that, due to constant suppression, turned inward and created one of its most destructive types –

self-torture, which shall be prevalent in discussion of Essay III, which deals with yet a new notion – the ascetic ideals.

In the last segment of *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche directs his full attention to the definition and the problematique of the concept of the ascetic ideals. In the first section of this segment, the reader is introduced to a rather vague description of the Nietzsche's take on the matter. However, it contains a number of key insights. The first has to do with the way philosophers and scholars define the ascetic ideals: "...something like a sense and instinct for the most favorable preconditions of higher spirituality" (*GM* III:1, p. 533). The words "higher spirituality," which mirror his description of slave morality, hint at the fact that philosophers and scholars had submitted to the views of the triumphant lowly strata, alongside with the rest of the herd, for, as had already been mentioned in discussion of Essay I, reliance on spirituality and religion are essential to the ignoble morality. The second insight portrays the way in which priests view ascetic ideals: "their best instrument of power, also the 'supreme' licence for power..." (*GM* III:1, p. 533). Here, I argue that Nietzsche is conveying the solution to the question "Why are we made to suffer?" to which we answered that there is no good reason why we should suffer, hence we must aim at to abolish it. In no coincidence, the thinker's language in the fragment: "...horror of the vacuum. it needs a goal – and it will rather will nothingness than not will," addresses the universal of all people, including priests, in a nearly identical manner as used in regard to the previously mentioned frustration with not having a purpose for suffering (*GM* III:1, p. 533). Hence, the priests use the ascetic ideal as an instrument of power and a way of allegedly providing liberation from suffering.

Further into Essay III, Nietzsche returns to the relationship between philosophers and the ascetic ideals. He uses the example of none other than Schopenhauer in a quote, summarizing a fairly long discourse on the latter thinker: "what does it mean when a philosopher pays homage to the ascetic ideal?" —here we get at any rate a first indication: he wants to gain release from a torture" (*GM* III:6, p. 542). Torture is arguably synonymous with suffering, moreover, had it been torture as part of bad conscience, Nietzsche would have equipped the word "torture" with the prefix "self-." That is not to say, that Schopenhauer does not have bad conscience. He provides an example of that for Schopenhauer, as follows: "treated his sexuality as a personal enemy (including the tool, woman...)" (*GM* III:7, p. 542). As is clear, Nietzsche's philosophical predecessor suffers from bad conscience, for his violent suppression of an instinct, namely sexual desires, will inevitably lead the instinct to turn inward and cause unnecessary and meaningless pain. Nietzsche suggests that the vast majority of philosophers oppose sensuality in the way that Schopenhauer does, and the reason why he chose to display the latter as an exhibit of self-deprivation is due to the fact that he is the most eloquent on this matter.<sup>5</sup> Philosophers are prime examples of individuals that possess the following tendencies - desire to escape suffering, bad conscience and faith in the ascetic ideals – as noted in section 7: "There also exists a peculiar philosophers' prejudice and affection in favor of the whole ascetic ideal" (*GM* III:7, p. 542). Nietzsche claims that Schopenhauer prefers to escape suffering while it is clear that other philosophers fall into bad conscience (by opposing sensuality, for instance) and praise the ascetic ideal; these individuals must be genuinely desperate for a means of avoiding suffering.

Nietzsche thereafter identifies the ways in which the ascetic ideals operate. There is, naturally, an ascetic priest. From the word priest, one is able to infer that this individual is needed for conjuring up and then sustaining, proclaiming and imposing the values of the ascetic ideals. The ideology, as Nietzsche interprets it, is, as follows: "...treats life as a wrong road on which one must finally walk back to the point where it begins" (*GM* III:11, p. 553). Aside from this formula appearing to be a maximalist/pessimistic solution to the issue of suffering, it sounds fairly similar to a Christian (and Buddhist) doctrine, that of, viewing existence as a temporary stage preceding the entering the Kingdom of God (which in Buddhist tradition would be called attaining Nirvana), which relates it back to the strong bond between the slave (priest) morality and spirituality/religion. Another snippet to consider is Nietzsche's supposition of how life on Earth must look like to an extra-terrestrial observer: "...the distinctively ascetic planet, a nook of disgruntled, arrogant, and offensive creatures filled with a profound disgust at themselves..." (*GM* III:11, p. 553).

To segue into the next part, it would be proper to quote a line that would connect with the preceding sentence: "the ascetic ideal springs from the protective instinct of a degenerating life," which, when considered as a single thought, serves as proof of the fact that despisement of suffering is the cornerstone of asceticism (*GM* III:13, p. 556). According to an earlier statement, the slave revolt in morality was successful, which means that the old master values had exchanged positions with the lowly caste's values in holding the position of universal. That is to say, surely in that case there should not be a good reason for people feeling disgusted at themselves. However, there is but one aspect of human condition that is beyond control – suffering. Was not asceticism supposed rid humanity of suffering, one might ask. The answer is yes. However, as we have seen previously, absence of suffering leads to something far more painful and meaningless – bad conscience. Since inflicting suffering is an instinct, when turned inward, it creates the most horrifying type of bad conscience – self-destruction. As one remembers, Nietzsche crowned bad conscience an illness, which he comes back to, as follows:

*That this ideal acquired such power and ruled over men as imperiously as we find it in history, especially wherever the civilization and taming of man has been carried through, expresses a great fact: the sickliness of the type of man we have had hitherto, or at least of the tamed man, and the psychological struggle of man against death (more precisely: against disgust with life...) (GM III:13, p. 556).*

From this one can infer, that the ascetic ideal has ruled the morals of men for an extremely long time, while at the same time begat and sustained bad conscience within its every follower (or tamed animal).

Later, while discussing the sickliness of man, Nietzsche notes that the only individual capable of saving people from the illness has to be someone who is sick himself and at same time could pose as a doctor figure, our old friend – the ascetic priest. However, his mission is – *dominion over the suffering*.<sup>6</sup> Yet, to do so is to maintain their state of bad conscience. The way the ascetic priest manages to continue to dominate the suffering, while not losing



them to the will to nothingness is a rather tricky procedure. Nietzsche summarizes it as: “the priest alters the direction of resentment” (*GM* III:15, p. 563). In his view, the current ruling morality entails resentment toward individuals that cause one suffering. Yet, in the case of a mass bad conscience, one finds that the only person to blame for having to suffer is oneself. The priest must do everything in his power to turn the direction of resentment outward, while keeping suffering and the rest of the instincts directed inward. Nietzsche brings forth the way the result of this procedure would be expressed in words: “I suffer: someone must be to blame for it” (*GM* III:15, p. 564). Thus, the priest completed his task.

I shall finish the analytical part of my work by quoting Nietzsche’s very last segment of the book *Genealogy of Morals*. I deem the most essential part as: “This is precisely what the ascetic ideal means: that something was lacking, that man was surrounded by a fearful void” (*GM* III:28, p. 598). Therefore, the conclusion follows: throughout his existence, man had been afraid of not knowing his place and his purpose. The ascetic ideal was the meaning that was provided to man for the first time in history. Although, this might sound as something hopeful and bright, this new purpose entails bad conscience, and consequently eternal sickness of two plausible scenarios, neither of which should appear desirable: (1) gradual self-destruction, by virtue of the ascetic priest’s efforts, or (2) complete atrophy of everything with the exception of the will to nothingness, for “...man would rather will nothingness than not will,” which I interpret as a desire to return to the fearful void, so as to abandon this smothering state (*GM* III:28, p. 599).

Friedrich Nietzsche’s philosophical thought is by far the only one that speaks to me with as much variety in its concepts than any other previously could. Indeed, there are certain aspects of his views that I do not agree with, yet even with that in mind, I nonetheless find merit in his view. Out of the limited number of his writings that I have read, I consider *Beyond Good and Evil* to be my favorite work by the German philosopher. Now, I would like to revisit the Nietzschean concept of suffering.

Infliction of suffering is first introduced as one of the actions that the noble perform on the lowly. Therefore, only one type of people enjoyed inflicting, while the other suffered. Over time, the slave class had developed tremendous amounts of hatred towards the masters, which was not suppressed, due to the fact that the high-stationed did not take the vassals’ dissatisfaction seriously, which led to a revolt in morality, or in other words, revaluation of values, with which suffering was quietly dragging along behind. The attitude toward suffering gradually changed as well, for it was a quality that was prevalent within the resented master class – it had to be abolished. With the switch in the outlook on suffering, the master class had to begin suppressing some of their instincts, such as to inflict suffering, to kill, to insult, which resulted in bad conscience.

## **Nietzschean Suffering and Dostoevsky’s *Underground Man***

I would like meditate on said discourse in the context of Dostoevsky’s *underground man*. Let us try to analyze this character from the standpoint of proper suffering versus bad

conscience. Most likely, his character will be of bad conscience, for there are clear expressions of self-torture from the underground man himself; his liver hurts, which he is almost proud of, his teeth hurt etc. These seem to be signs of his violent instinct exercised in an inward direction. However, one thing that we are able to note immediately, is that, for instance, the liver pain almost makes the character happy. He does not see the doctor for it: he lets the condition worsen and he appears to become happier the more it hurts. At least to my understanding, I am not inclined to think that someone experiencing bad conscience is capable of having any type of positive feelings about such a condition. One might argue that if someone is a masochist, then any type of pain they experience is welcomed and greeted with a smile. Yet, I believe that this is not the case for Dostoevsky's character, for had he been a mere pain addict, the narrative would not have been interesting to analyze, for everything that he does would be considered an act of bringing pain upon himself. Instead, I grant that while the present version of him (from the time in which the narration takes place) does have masochistic tendencies, what uniquely distinguishes him from an average pain addict is his increasing contentment with pain over the course of the narrative.

We can observe that in the time leading up to the *underground man* meeting Liza, he is not such a firm lover of hurting himself; we are presented with short stories in which the character tells of how he was malevolent to his peers and everyone else, including Liza. In this we see typical features of a man belonging to the master morality, who is not forced to suppress his instincts; he exercises the instinct of inflicting suffering on people every opportunity he is granted. The turning point of this narrative is when Liza came to the protagonist's residence. His behavior had not changed yet; he sustains his image of a malicious person. However, when Liza leaves, after having showed her love for him, for the first time in his life, the underground man actually felt that something is more important than his love of being a bad person (exercising natural instincts). However, like in any tragic fiction, he was too late. She was already gone. The character's love of pain started only after these events, which is indicative of two things: first, since we know that he was not a masochist from the beginning, we cannot be certain that that is precisely what he became at the end, second, we now see a clear distinction between a man suffering from bad conscience and Dostoevsky's character: it is that individuals exposed to bad conscience do not choose to fall into it, while *the underground man* brought it upon himself, and, in my reading, this is one reason why he is constantly suffering.

To the question regarding what kind of enhancement does this kind of suffering bring (ref. to *BGE* p. 225), I answer: his attitude. The fact that he remains jubilant even under terrifying amounts of pain indicates that his character was enhanced by the aforementioned experience in such a way, that he is now capable of differing between pain that he deserves, and that which he does not. Ultimately, unlike bad conscience, his pain does not originate from a system of morals that was imposed on him and made him change, for he is not part of any society; the only place that his pain and the attitude toward it could have originated (especially as new feature) is his own values and the events that happened to him. Here I conclude that proper suffering and bad conscience are not always easy to tell apart, which in turn is a serious obstacle in attempts to reestablish the positive value of suffering.

# Conclusion

Overall, I hope to have successfully traced the genealogical development of the common attitude towards suffering and revealed as well as argued for the links that connect the stages of this process. This discourse serves to show, how in the course of history and evolution of morals, what used to be an essential aspect of human life has gradually deteriorated both in value and presence. Through tracing these changes in the *Genealogy of Morals*, we are now exposed to a horrifying truth – if the value of suffering falls to zero and suffering itself gets diminished, it is not the entirety of the suffering that will be omitted from human life, rather it is the positive and enhancing one, and what we are going to be left with is a sickness called bad conscience, which is quite similar to suffering, with the exception that it is senseless and leads to such conditions as gradual self-destruction (that is with the aid of the ascetic priest) or atrophy of mostly all of the senses and drives of the body, except one – a will to nothingness, which is return to the fearful void, back to the very beginning, so as to not remain in the sick state that the ascetic ideals have provided. I am very hopeful that the positive value of suffering could be restored, in order for humanity not to become “...a nook of disgruntled, arrogant, and offensive creatures filled with a profound disgust at themselves...” (GM III:11, p. 553). One plausible obstacle on the way to achieving the aforementioned goal is how challenging it has become to differentiate proper suffering from bad conscience. As Nietzsche would put it: we *lost the taste* for suffering.

# Endnotes

1. From here onward, “BGE” will refer to Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil*.
2. From here onward, “GM” will refer to Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals*.
3. GM I:6, p. 468
4. GM I:7-11, p. 469-476
5. GM III:7, p. 542
6. GM III:15, p. 561

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# A Quasi-Cartesian Reply to Bennett's and Hacker's Position on Volition and Voluntary Movement

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**Abstract:** Max Bennett and Peter Hacker argue against the notion of volition or human will and its influence on voluntary human action in their chapter "Volition and Voluntary Movement" of book *Philosophical Foundations of Neuroscience* (2003). This paper will challenge Bennett's and Hacker's claim via a quasi-Cartesian objection that rests on Descartes' view of free will as well as weaknesses in Bennett's and Hacker's arguments.

**Keywords:** Philosophy of mind, Cartesian dualism, Volition, Voluntary human action

# Introduction

In chapter 8 “Volition and Voluntary Movement” of book *Philosophical Foundations of Neuroscience* (2003), Max Bennett and Peter Hacker (B&H) argue against the idea that voluntary human action is driven by volition or human will. They make the case that modern day neuroscience relies upon a faulty conception of free will as the cause of human action, in a way which is “covertly Cartesian” and ultimately leads to confusion regarding the nature and origins of voluntary movement (B&H, 233). This paper seeks to argue against B&H’s claim that we are capable of identifying whether another individual’s actions are voluntary by introducing a quasi-Cartesian objection to their position. In this examination, I present a thorough explication of the relevant components of B&H’s argument, as well as of Descartes’ position on free will, before I introduce a Cartesian-inspired response to B&H’s position. Attempting to anticipate B&H’s response to this objection, I illustrate how, without presenting an alternative explanation for the causal source of voluntary action, Bennett’s and Hacker’s argument ultimately fails in its project to dispute the Cartesian notion of volition and voluntary movement.

## Bennett’s and Hacker’s View on Volition

B&H note that both modern-day neuroscientists and philosophers of the past have supposed that voluntary actions are driven by our inner will in a way which is “covertly Cartesian,” and ultimately leads to confusion regarding the sources of voluntary movement (B&H, 233). The central line of argumentation underpinning B&H’s argument that we are able to determine the conditions of voluntary action claims that if we identify ‘acts of willing’ as the causal source of voluntary action, we would have to identify these acts in order to know whether actions are voluntary. Presumably, it would be possible that we misidentify them and in turn, misidentify the voluntariness of the supposed action. However, B&H claim that humans are able to properly identify voluntary acts “without any such identification, let alone misidentifications, when we act voluntarily,” therefore ‘willing’ or volition cannot be the causal predeterminate of an action (B&H, 226). By laying this framework, B&H seek to argue that volition and the will cannot be the source of voluntary action.

The classic Cartesian view which they seek to argue against holds that free will and its volitions are the actions of the soul (B&H, 235). In his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes characterizes the will as the human capacity to either undertake or refrain from an action. According to this Cartesian view, volitions arising from human free will are what affect and cause all voluntary physical actions. Voluntary movements are a result of ‘spirits’ which operate on our limbs via our ‘nerve’ pathways (Descartes, 21, 30-32).

To argue against this Cartesian view of casual volition, B&H introduce a conception for action that distinguishes between ‘voluntary’ action, ‘involuntary’ action, ‘not voluntary’ action. They explain that in order for an action to be *voluntary*, it must be voluntarily brought about. For example, a person who accidentally kills a bug did so *not voluntarily*, because in

order to be deemed voluntary any potential action must contain a ‘two-way power,’ which enables the agent to choose between either performing the action or not performing the action. Additionally, the person performing the action must be aware that they are performing the action, and in control of it “in its inception, continuation and termination,” in order for the action to be considered voluntary (B&H, 225). One can imagine a person walking along the sidewalk, who, suddenly hearing a crunch underfoot, checks the bottom of their shoe to find the remains of a crushed bug they had just stepped on. B&H would hold that this action of crushing the bug was *not voluntary*, since the person is surprised to find that they had performed it. The crushing of blades of grass underfoot when someone intentionally walks across the lawn would be considered *voluntary* since they are aware of that consequence.

## A Quasi-Cartesian Take on Bennett and Hacker

The quasi-Cartesian objection which I would like to posit, objects to B&H’s claim that we have awareness of the voluntary conditions of another individual’s action (in so much as we are capable of determining whether or not another person is acting voluntarily or not). Upon a reconstruction of both B&H’s and Descartes’ view, it appears that a key component to each of their conceptions of voluntary action is choice. Both views hold that the will is a faculty, or something that humans actively participate in, and that this operation requires the agent to make a decision to undertake an action (B&H, 226-27 & Descartes, 20-21).<sup>1</sup> B&H would like to claim that if we identify the will as the source of voluntary action then we would be required to identify the specific act of will corresponding to any given physical action in order to know whether that action is truly voluntary. They claim that since we are already capable of identifying voluntary acts without any need to identify these causal acts of will, then the will cannot be the causal predeterminate of an action (B&H, 226-227).

However, I am not ready to accept that we actually have a clear-cut ability to determine whether or not the actions of other individuals are really voluntary. B&H posit no method for ensuring that judgements regarding the voluntariness of actions are not confused. According to the Cartesian framework, human understanding is finite and imperfect. Humans are simply not able to trust all of our judgements of reason (Descartes, 4). I believe that this Cartesian position is a defensible one, and that it causes trouble for B&H’s position.

One can find many real-world cases in which notions of voluntary and non-voluntariness are nuanced and not necessarily agreed upon. Modern U.S legal systems, for example, contain provisions for “crimes of passion,” in which people are held less responsible for illegal actions they commit while in the heat of a passionate moment. When a person undertakes an action when their judgement is clouded by emotion, their action is considered to be voluntary to a lesser degree, thereby mandating a lighter punishment in the eyes of the law. International justice tribunals created in the wake of the Holocaust and World War II recognized that lower officers may have committed acts that could have been considered crimes of war or human rights violations under the command and pressure of superior officers. Since the penalties for disobeying a superior officer during a time of war are often

harsh and immediate, many of courts found the actions of these lower ranking officers to be not fully voluntary, thereby deserving of lesser sentences.

Although, the notion of a crime of passion and of lessened responsibility carry similarities to cases which B&H define as not voluntary, these examples are still troublesome for B&H's view because they show that there is clearly nuance to real-world understandings of voluntariness and how we determine its conditions. B&H deeply want to argue that we are able to know black-and-white when others are acting voluntarily or not voluntarily, positing as a necessary premise to their claim that free will cannot be the causal source of voluntary movements. They attempt claim that the Cartesian view that memories and thoughts are "private, mental pictures" is incorrect to help bolster this view, but their claim hinges on the presumed claim that we possess ability to identify the voluntary conditions of another's action (B&H, 232). However, if that ability turns out to be false, as it appears to be in light of real-world nuances, then B&H's argument also fails at several key points.

If someone were to point out these similarities to B&H, forcing them to account for the difficulties that arise in determining whether or not particular cases of action are voluntary or involuntary according to their conception, B&H may try to claim that their conception was only intended to be a sketch opposing the Cartesian framework for voluntary action. They could cite their claim that detailed analysis would require an entire book and could even posit that willing may very possibly be a prerequisite for voluntary action without being the causal force driving it. This reply would still be able to function in support of B&H's central claim that current neuroscientists misappropriate and incorrectly employ the modern classic framework for free will in their conception of human action, but it would not be able to defend their claim that we are able to know when other's act voluntarily or not voluntarily. As this notion functions as the basis for grounding B&H's argument against the notion that free will acts as the source of voluntary action, their overarching argument also appears shaky.

## Conclusion

Their argument may still succeed in casting doubt that will is the sole casual-precipitant to human action at present, but it fails to provide an alternative conception for a causal force behind voluntary action and their position remains ultimately unconvincing. Perhaps if B&H had posited an alternative conception for how voluntary actions arise (i.e. for how voluntary action otherwise arise if not from free will) then their argument could have better accounted for the grey-areas in determining voluntariness of actions and better refuted modern-day Cartesian notions of the will.

## Endnotes

1. Descartes' view holds that will involves the choice to engage in or refrain from an action. Interestingly enough, B&H would like to exclude the act of refraining from an action from the category of voluntary movements. However, they simply assert

this distinction a part of their definition of voluntary movements and fail to provide any defense for it, stating; “[Excluded from the category of voluntary acts are] acts of omission, such as abstaining or refraining from doing something. We shall say no more about these” (B&H, 225).

## References

Bennett, M.R., & Hacker, P.M.S. (2003). Volition and Voluntary Movement. In *Philosophical Foundations of Neuroscience* (pp. 224-236). Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.



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