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Painting, drawing and printmaking

The global challenge of nihilism and the artists responsibility to counter this.



## Introduction- What is the role of an artist within society?

To answer this question comprehensively, leaving no stones unturned, I will firstly articulate what the artist aims to do. On the deepest level, the artist aims to enlighten. To do this, they undertake a task the rest of society refuses. They venture into the depths of the human psyche to retrieve information about our being that we aren't consciously aware of, but nevertheless underlies all our behaviour. A process of expanding awareness which entails turmoil, evokes dread but is resolved with hope when answers eventually reveal themselves. The artist's contribution to society from this seemingly selfish endeavour involves conveying the wisdom they gathered through this process, which manifests in the medium of a creation.

Inevitably this creation is going to encapsulate pain, suffering and confusion as much as it's going to convey faith, hope and elation. When the artist puts their all into a creation; whether this is done through the medium of a painting where colour, form and symbols convey a message, a poetic piece of writing where metaphors and euphemisms convey the feeling or a novel/story where allegories are used to construct a narrative relating to contemporary society and the human condition in relation to it, there is no discrimination in the content the artist puts into the work. The personal philosophy which weaves its way into creations is impacted by but not limited to; observations of people's actions, reflections on their philosophies and psychology, all in consideration of what direction this is steering society in.

In this sense, artists are providers, but not ones who offer monetary wealth. Instead they offer knowledge; but not necessarily knowledge which is conveyed through objective statements, instead, vague sentiments where the essence can only be extracted via active interpretation combined with application to one's life. They'll lead you to the river but won't sip it for you, and for very good reason; because they acknowledge the power of wisdom and keep truth shrouded to contain its mystique. With great truth comes great responsibility, as truths have the ability to shatter realities or transform perception—The difference in impact depending on who it's bestowed onto. *"Knowledge is either poisonous or healing, it is one or the other, that is why some myths say that it brings about corruption, whereas others say it heals."* (Franz, 1980, p55). The artists are the ones who tend to possess these esoteric truths, but aren't able to freely express them and be met with understanding or a positive result. A disposition which results in one's tongue being held. But with the artist assuming the role of a provider, there is an inherent trait within them to share what they know; which is when wisdom, knowledge and truths become captured in paintings discreetly but powerfully. Not forcing but inviting the recipient to embark on the endeavour of wisdom. Due to this, the artist conveys wisdom through code and allusion, in a way that requires studious effort and serious introspection to decipher. Within this covert means of transferring knowledge there's an establishment on behalf of the learner that they want to possess this knowledge. In addition to this, there is a mutual understanding between the teacher and learner that this knowledge can only be grasped through self-inquisition combined with external consideration through application of knowledge.

As a result of this, pieces contain deep meaning and symbology reflective of the artist's personal life, underlying beliefs and intellectual escapades whether they are aware of it or not. Which is where the artist's role in society as a provider becomes apparent. They reveal insights and outlooks about society not everyone will perceive but many people can understand. The power of an artist's work is not an objective quality the work inherits, instead it is a subjective response to said work. When the right work reaches the right person a resonance occurs where understanding is transferred from medium to recipient where work evokes feelings, thoughts or perceptions within an individual which have the potential to reconfigure apperception; but most importantly harness the power to inspire those who resonate and respond to the work. The work most likely transformed the artist through the process, so there's nothing to say it can't instigate something equally as powerful within others.

Artists previous to me have acknowledged the power of art, not just personally, but politically. *"All mass revolutions are not action, but reaction. Revolution begins in you. These are not original ideas but eternal values."* (Collins, 1947, p28). Personal transformations that occur through work are seen by Collins as a necessary preliminary for a wider shift to occur in society, not just because of what it does for the artist but also because of what happens subsequent to this. The result of a powerful piece causes the artist to move around the world differently and the piece that transformed the artist has the possibility of inciting such a change in many others who are receptive to the sentiment captured by such a piece. But, this creativity that's inspired doesn't have to be a product of some innate creative talent. Instead, it can evoke creativity in everyday facets of life by prompting the individual who was impacted to reinvent their beliefs, expressions or actions in a more individualised way, wrought outside of societal impositions that constrict individuality.

Maslow referred to this potential for creativity people possess as "self-actualising creativity" rather than "special talent creativity" (Maslow, 2010, p129). This type of creativity isn't an innate gift, instead, an ability anyone has the chance to possess. It won't necessarily inspire people to make art in a traditional sense such as a painting, drawing or printmaking. Instead it will inspire creativity which might manifest in the way someone cooks for a loved one, the way they express academic ideas to non-academic people, or the way they develop a distinct footwork in a martial art they practise. But most importantly, this inspiration can give rise to the construction of a personal philosophy that will guide and direct the individual through life.

The importance of this is due to the fact the current global challenge modern society is confronted with is a moral, ethical as well as a philosophical dilemma. In fact, the ethical and moral consequences are a byproduct of a philosophical disruption, showing how philosophy precedes behaviour. And the conscious formation of value systems, which give way to principles for one to live by, are an essential component when it comes to orienting behaviours in a constructive manner. And the artist's role of inspiring people to construct a new set of solid principles to live by is the antidote for the current philosophical problem which confronts societies all around the globe—Nihilism. Nihilism being the philosophy of

meaninglessness and the denouncement of higher values, which results in reproach to the idea of moral systems guiding behaviour (Britannica, 2024).

**Global challenge- detailing the contemporary problem the artist is here to confront.**

Nihilism is a cognitive pathogen that took over societies across the globe following the collapse of religious systems which previously constructed the underlying value structure society adhered to; a shift partly introduced by the rise of scientific truth that contradicted previous religious belief. Within the midst of this newfound, objectively oriented perception of reality we encountered a decrease in stable values to live by as previous religious principles have become admonished. Something which we have reaped the repercussions of and will continue to reap the consequence for. *"What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: the advent of nihilism."* (Nietzsche, 1968, p3) This quote and Nietzches thinking took place in the 19th century, whereas the events I will be discussing occurred in the following century after this was written; therefore giving the claims of this philosopher credibility as time has told a substantial portion of these writings to be prophetic.

Desecration of the previous values society was founded upon (the collapse of religious systems and the reproach of spiritual thought that followed), showed us the volatility of human behaviour when there's no overarching value system to inform how we should behave. What followed was an influx of nihilism, with the first notable mass manifestation occurring during world war two. Global consequences being; the Nanjing massacre, soviet russia and the injustices toward the population who were unfortunate enough to reside under it being a few examples of some other consequences that aren't discussed within this essay. Due to a limited word count and a proclivity toward depth, I will focus my writing on the final solution carried out by nazi Germany and the endemic nihilism I believe to be involved with the facilitation of such atrocious acts.

I believe a key component in understanding nihilism is the emphasis on no strong values guiding behaviour. The cause of this arriving after the truth behind religious dogma was challenged and the objective truth of the claims crumbling under this scrutiny, a byproduct of this was that religious stories were also challenged in terms of the value they contained. And for most people the conclusion was that religions teachings aren't scientifically substantiated, therefore the ways of living and moral guidance given by the scriptures must also not be valuable. To accommodate for these newfound scientific understandings, previous beliefs and everything associated with them were desecrated in the process of doing so. With the desecration of this overarching value system people previously lived according to, aimlessness occurred when it came to what should be strived for morally and ethically. The result being principles and values that are liable to change depending on a situation someone finds themselves in. A symptom that is apparent when we dissect historical accounts regarding the final solution.

There's many historical recordings that allude to the collapse of morals being a factor in the facilitation of an act as inhumane as this. An interesting study came from the inquiries made toward 'The police battalion 101', a contingency of men enrolled into carrying out the final

solution by visiting towns where jews were reported to be inhabiting, where they were then given the task of carrying out the rounding up of workers for concentration camps and shooting those deemed incapable of work—including children, women and the elderly. Post war interviews with these men give unique and earnest insights into the mindset of perpetrators and how these atrocities were justified. Indulging in these accounts, it seems apparent all higher values and aspirations toward righteousness are inexistent. As a result of this, individual morality was deferred to a collective conscience and a lot of soldiers rationalised their actions with statements such as *“not taking part in the shooting would not alter the fate of the jews.”* (Browning, 1992, p72). But some other rationalisations come across even more shocking due to how thoughtful they are.

*“I made the effort, and it was possible for me to shoot only children. It so happened that the mothers led the children by the hand. My neighbour then shot the mother and I shot the child that belonged to her, because I reasoned with myself that after all without its mother the child could not live any longer. It was supposed to be, so to speak, soothing to my conscience to release children unable to live without their mothers.”* Excerpt from an interview with the soldier Friedrich M, in (Browning, 1992, p72-73).

The underlying nihilism which was nurtured for decades/centuries prior to this created a means for the perpetrators of the holocaust to justify their actions while carrying out the most inhumane task. A parallel between this event and the existential fiction writer Dostoevsky’s diagnosis of evil can be drawn which gives a daunting insight into the importance of a strong underlying philosophy as a guiding star for action. Within Crime and punishment there’s an excerpt where Rasklnikov has a morbid dream about an owner of a steed who beats his horse to death in front of a crowd, laughing and feeling exhilarated by the act as he does so. A crowd member insinuates this is due to “no fear of god” (Dostoevsky, 2014, p67-68) suggesting that the root of immortality is due to an abandonment of religious values. A parallel which appears in historical accounts from holocaust perpetrators.

Upon research, it’s evident how this was a philosophical error. But not the result of a dark philosophy that supported and glorified such behaviours, instead a lack of strong principle which allowed such acts to fester with no condemnation. In fact it wasn’t until after the war -during the nuremberg trials- that the perpetrators started being held accountable for what they were a part of. And this is why it’s a global challenge, as not only were people morally absent enough to carry out such tasks, there was no-one judging them for how morally reprehensible this was- therefore acting as bystanders. But as the war and acts were in full motion, injustice and ethical questions were not considered, and if they were, it wasn’t deemed a cause zealous enough for one to stand against.

All this attests to Nietzche’s ultimate claim that “God is dead” (Nietzsche, 1882 section 125). Which at essence means the abolition of the idea of a god, a higher entity that judges action, leads to less consideration of moral and ethical consequences of behaviour. As Nietzche and Dostoevsky philosophised and History exemplified, the rejection of religious teachings is dangerous because religious/spiritual tales function as blueprints for behaviour

that when adhered to, contribute to a healthy society. But when these teachings are disregarded, issues arrive in the form of right and wrong being a matter of subjectivity determined by individual reasoning, rather than a collective consensus; resulting in reasoning that easily becomes skewed by situations, people's wants and needs and even people's temporary emotional state. This is the danger of nihilism.

### **How the artist postures themselves against this problem.**

With all this being said, as bleak as it is, this crisis of meaning is one that the artist aims to confront. Inherently, art has meaning. All art is a potential antidote to meaninglessness. Even if it's just made to look nice and contains no profound essence, art here serves an epicurean function, providing comfort and a sense of leisure to someone, therefore reminding them each time they look at a piece that things can, and do, contain value. However, regarding more profound pieces that contain an embodied perception of the human experience, art has the power to evoke thought, change belief and reconfigure philosophical perspective. Even art that comes from the darkest mire of personal experience has the ability to remind us that these situations can be transcended, and if the creation is executed well enough, it serves as a visual representation that beauty can be derived from the ugliest impositions. Full circling back around, this is where the artist's role in society as a provider becomes apparent. And the specifics of what they're contributing to society is value. Because as Nietzsche states "The world looks valueless" (Nietzsche, 1968, p13) , therefore it is the self imposed task of the artist to reinstate this meaning into the collective psyche in a way that is profound and intrinsic, combating the superficial and material value society bombards the collective psyche with. Profound value, which I believe in its most potent form, is delivered through the vessel of great artworks; ones that inspire, ones that evoke intense feeling and ones which demand attention.

Speaking from personal experience, art is the last hope at reinstating meaning into people's lives on a level that can turn them around from an aimless nihilist to a purpose driven person who contributes to the intellectual development of society. From the days where I nearly abandoned hope and laid lazy in bed swallowed by feelings of meaninglessness, at war with finding the value inside my own existence; consuming art (music in particular) was the only thing tethering me to a hopeful outlook of the world and what's within it. The power of art in my case is something which restored purpose into my life at a time when it was nearly entirely depleted. A human to human reminder that there's two responses to a predicament- destruction or creation, great art being a reminder of the latter. As impending problems that challenge society present the drift into nihilism as more enticing, it's important that creatives are proactively reminding people that value exists abundantly.

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