

# NIETZSCHE ON THE VALUE OF VALUING THE PASSIONS

JOSHUA ISAAC FOX 

*Philosophy, Bryn Mawr College*

In his understanding of passion, Nietzsche closely follows Kant and Schopenhauer. For all three, passion is a uniquely demanding variety of desire: desire so strong that we are compelled to pursue its object regardless of the cost. In his evaluation of passion, however, Nietzsche is unique: while Kant and Schopenhauer both condemn passion, Nietzsche celebrates it. I argue that this celebration of passion is more central to Nietzsche's thought than it might initially appear. Nietzsche does not encourage appreciation of passion simply because it functions as one means among many for driving change and growth. Rather, Nietzsche holds that valuing passion is essential to valuing life. This follows from passion's role in resolving a problem highlighted by Schopenhauer's pessimism: namely, the difficulty of valuing life when avoiding harm is your dominant concern.

**Keywords:** Nietzsche; Schopenhauer; Passion; Pessimism; Tragedy; Positive and Negative Good

## 1. Introduction

In a recent paper, Keith Ansell-Pearson (2022: 245) notes that little work has been done on Nietzsche's view of passion. This is regrettable, because Nietzsche's assessment of passion is distinctive in the history of philosophy. Nietzsche

---

**Contact:** Joshua Isaac Fox <jifox@brynmawr.edu>

*Journal of Modern Philosophy* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the Aperio. © 2026 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.



OPEN ACCESS

understands passion as a uniquely demanding variety of desire: one that compels pursuit of its object regardless of the cost. Viewed this way, passion has been broadly condemned: even philosophers friendly to desire have few kind words for its most dangerous form.<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche, however, celebrates passion: dangerous or not, Nietzsche thinks passion can play an important role in human life.

On Ansell-Pearson's account, this follows from passion's contribution to self-cultivation. Passion offers a powerful motivational force. As such, it can push us into new experiences and situations, leading to change. Change, in turn, is a prerequisite for growth. Passion is thus valuable as one means among many for the individual's transformation into their most beautiful form.

What Ansell-Pearson says about passion's role as a source of growth seems right to me. However, focusing on this aspect of passion's value undersells its significance. Nietzsche does not just identify passion as one means among many that can contribute to self-cultivation. He also suggests that valuing passion is essential to valuing our lives.

In what follows, I will take a somewhat indirect route to justifying this assertion. After saying a bit about how Nietzsche understands passion, I will turn my attention to a surprising claim Nietzsche makes about Schopenhauer's pessimism. Nietzsche suggests that the clearest evidence against Schopenhauer is provided by *tragic psychology*, the variety of aesthetic experience involved in appreciating tragic drama and similar works of art. I will argue that Nietzsche sees the distinctive feature of tragic psychology as *delight in passion itself*: to appreciate tragic drama is, Nietzsche suggests, to appreciate the passion such dramas celebrate.

If this is correct, then Nietzsche took Schopenhauer's pessimism to be refuted by the possibility of valuing passion. In the remaining sections of the essay, I will explain this connection between valuing passion and valuing our lives. I will

---

1. Ansell-Pearson (2022: 248) actually understates this point, identifying Hume, Malebranche, Rousseau, and Spinoza as exceptions to the general trend. However, these thinkers used the term 'passion' quite differently than Nietzsche. For them, passion covered a broad class of affective states. Praising some members of that class does not entail praising the uniquely demanding kind of desire for which Nietzsche reserves the term. A more plausible exception is Plato's praise of *eros*, understood as overwhelming madness, in places like the *Phaedrus*. Plato is critical of overwhelming desire elsewhere, however, so he too may count as an enemy of passion on the whole.

By the same token, Ansell-Pearson understates how little work has been done on Nietzsche's view of passion. While several scholars have discussed the passions in Nietzsche, they have typically used this as a term for emotions writ large. Solomon (2003), for example, includes a chapter entitled 'Nietzsche's Passions'. However, Solomon explicitly notes that the term is being used broadly: 'I will not make any sharp distinction between passion and emotion here except to suggest that passions are particularly strong and durable emotions' (2003: 65). Nietzsche's appreciation for 'the sort [of emotion] that is said to "sweep us away"' (87)—which is to say, passion proper—is discussed only in the last two pages of the chapter. The discussion of passion in Tuncel (2022: 40–42) is in the same vein.

argue that Nietzsche took Schopenhauer's pessimism to turn on the claim that human beings spend life fleeing harm rather than pursuing benefit. The merely *negative* good obtained by escaping harm can never compensate for the *positive* ill involved in the harm itself. As such, human beings inevitably experience life as harmful on the whole.

Passion's uniquely demanding character allows it to answer these Schopenhauerian worries. A passion compels us to pursue its object *regardless of the cost*. As such, someone dominated by passion is not dominated by the flight from harm that Schopenhauer presents as our exclusive concern.

This will hold, however, only if passion's object is not itself valued as a mere means of escaping harm: even if there is one harm that I would undergo any other harm to avoid, the avoidance of harm still remains my priority. It is here that the possibility of not only having passions but *valuing* those passions becomes relevant. I will argue that Nietzsche takes our appreciation for a passion to play a significant role in determining how we experience its object. Where a passion is disvalued, we will long for its elimination. As a result, its object will be experienced as nothing more than a means to remove something harmful from our lives: namely, passion itself. Resolving Schopenhauer's challenge, then, turns on valuing our passions. It is only when we long for passion's extension rather than its elimination that passion's object can be viewed as anything more than a source of relief; and only when passion's object is viewed as more than a source of relief can something other than the flight from harm be our dominant concern. If valuing life requires being more concerned about obtaining positive benefit than avoiding positive harm, it follows that valuing life requires valuing passion as well.

## 2. What is Passion?

Throughout this paper, I will argue that Nietzsche takes valuing passion to be a precondition of valuing life. As noted above, however, Nietzsche uses the term 'passion' (*Leidenschaft* or *Passion*) differently than many philosophers. Before proceeding, then, it will be worth clarifying Nietzsche's understanding of passion. This understanding is continuous with a view of passion developed by both Kant and Schopenhauer. Looking at the treatment of passion in their works will thus be a good starting point for understanding Nietzsche's account.<sup>2</sup>

In the *Anthropology*, Kant discusses two kinds of desire that create special problems for deliberation. On the one hand, there are *affects*: sudden upsurges

---

2. Ansell-Pearson (2022: 248–49) briefly notes the continuity with Kant's view. I am grateful to Sean T. Murphy for helping me see the continuity with Schopenhauer.

of powerful desire that interfere with deliberation by preventing it. The person in the grip of an affect immediately rushes after some object, never considering the costs of its pursuit. On the other hand, there are *passions*: desires so powerful that they do not need to prevent deliberation in order to distort it. Unlike someone gripped by an affect, the passionate person may take time to plan and reflect. The strength of their passion, however, prevents them from carrying out that reflection in a comprehensive way: they do not deliberate about *whether* the object of their passionate desire should be pursued, only about *how* the object of their passionate desire might be obtained. As Kant puts it:

Inclination that prevents reason from comparing it with the sum of all inclinations in respect to a certain choice is passion. (APV: 265)

A passion, then, is a desire strong enough to rule out consideration of the costs involved in pursuing its object. The passionate person does not consider whether pursuing this one thing that they want might cost them many other things that they want: in Kant's terms, they do not compare the significance of gratifying this one inclination with that of gratifying all other inclinations. Even if obtaining the object of their passionate desire means losing the objects of every other desire, they still press ahead. In this respect, Kant presents the passionate person as uniquely insensitive to *risk*:

The ambitious person nevertheless also wants to be loved by others; he needs pleasant social intercourse with others, the maintenance of his financial position, and the like. However, if he is a passionately ambitious person, then he is blind to these ends, though his inclinations still summon him to them, and he overlooks completely the risk he is running [*Gefahr lauft*] that he will be hated by others, or avoided in social intercourse, or impoverished through his expenditures. (APV: 266)

Ordinarily, the ambitious person pursues status *carefully*. They recognize social ostracization and poverty as serious harms, and their desire to avoid those harms will often trump their desire for status. Where ambition is a passion, however, these dangers no longer check status' pursuit. This disregard of danger is typical of the passionate individual. They do not consider anything other than how to obtain the object of their passionate desire. Their pursuit of that object is thus unconstrained by the desire to avoid harm that typically holds the passionless in check.

This same view of passion appears in Schopenhauer's explanation of regret:

*Passion* is an inclination so strong that the motive exciting it exerts more control over the will than any counter-motive that might oppose it, and

so it achieves absolute dominance [*Herrschaft*] over the will, which consequently behaves *passively* with respect to it and *suffers* from it. (WWR II: 608)

Like Kant, Schopenhauer understands passion as a uniquely *dominant* form of desire. When in the grip of a passionate desire, our actions are exclusively directed by the effort to obtain that desire's object. All counter-motives are disregarded, as a result of which the passionate person recklessly exposes themselves to suffering they would normally avoid. This is, Schopenhauer suggests, one origin of regret: once passion's grip has loosened, the significance of the disregarded harms is brought home to us. For both Kant and Schopenhauer, then, passion is an overwhelmingly powerful form of desire, one strong enough to cause us to disregard any dangers involved in its object's pursuit.

Nietzsche's discussion of passion rests on this same view. Thus, Nietzsche characterizes passion as an 'unconditional inclination and urge [*unbedingte Hang und Drang*]' (GS 123).<sup>3</sup> The passionate urge is *unconditional* in the same sense that it was for Schopenhauer and Kant: while a normal desire motivates us to pursue its object *only on the condition* that this object can be pursued safely, a passionate desire motivates us to pursue its object *regardless of the cost*. Thus, Nietzsche emphasizes that we only speak of passion when desire has gripped an individual so firmly that they no longer take dangers into account:

An animal that protects its young at the risk of its life, or that during the mating period follows the female even into death, does not think of danger [*Gefahr*] and death; its reason also pauses, because the pleasure in its young or in the female and the fear of being deprived of this pleasure dominate it totally [*werden es ganz beherrschen*]: the animal becomes more stupid than usual—just like those who are noble and magnanimous. They have some feelings of pleasure and displeasure that are so strong that they reduce the intellect to silence or to servitude: at that point their heart displaces the head, and one speaks of 'passion'. (GS 3)

As in Kant and Schopenhauer, passion is presented as an obstacle to rational deliberation: when in the grip of passion, an individual's reason 'pauses', they 'become[] more stupid than usual', and their intellect is reduced 'to silence or to servitude'. Again as in Kant and Schopenhauer, passion is taken to have this effect because it prevents us from considering the costs of pursuing its object:

---

3. I have slightly modified Kaufmann here: he translates *Hang und Drang* as 'urge and passion', which seems to eliminate 'Hang' (inclination) and add 'passion' instead.

the passionate individual ‘does not think of danger and death’. For this reason, Nietzsche characterizes passion as a uniquely *dangerous* form of desire:

All these morals directed at the individual person to promote what people call his ‘happiness’ — are they anything other than recommendations for constraint, in proportion to the degree of danger [*Grade der Gefährlichkeit*] in which the individual person lives his life? or cures for his passions, his good and bad tendencies [*Hänge*] to the extent that they have will to power and want to play master [*Herrn*]? (BGE 198)

Passions are desires that ‘want to play master’: that is, desires which require their objects to be pursued unconditionally. In this sense, they are rightly condemned by any morality focused on reducing the ‘degree of danger’ in which an individual lives. To be in the grip of passion is to no longer make avoiding danger a priority. Passion is thus a threat to the kind of happiness that Nietzsche puts in quotation marks: namely, the *negative* happiness of a comfortable existence in which all harm is avoided.

Nietzsche, then, seems to share an understanding of passion with Schopenhauer and Kant: for all three, passion is a desire strong enough that no consideration is given to the potential harms involved in pursuing its object. For both Kant and Schopenhauer, it follows from this view that passion is a disaster. As Kant puts it:

No human being wishes to have passion. For who wants to have himself put in chains when he can be free? (APV: 253)

Nietzsche, then, has a question to answer. He shares Kant and Schopenhauer’s definition of passion. Why does he nonetheless encourage us to value it?

### 3. Nietzsche’s Case for Valuing Passion

I argue that Nietzsche has a striking answer to that question: valuing passion is a prerequisite for valuing life. As noted earlier, I rest this interpretation on a claim Nietzsche makes about Schopenhauer’s pessimism. Namely, that this pessimism finds its clearest counterexample in *tragic psychology*, the variety of aesthetic experience involved in the creation and appreciation of tragic drama and similar works of art.

Before getting into the details of this argument, it will help to explain what Nietzsche means when describing something as a *counterexample* to pessimism. Typically, pessimism is understood as a claim about life’s value to the one who

lives it: the pessimist holds that life is inevitably harmful when taken on the whole, and thus that it would be better not to exist at all than to exist as a human being.<sup>4</sup> Put more crisply, pessimism considers ‘the problem of the *value of existence*’ (GS 357), and provides that problem with a fairly dispiriting solution.

As many have noted, however, Nietzsche’s engagement with pessimism takes an atypical form. This is because Nietzsche denies that pessimism’s fundamental problem admits of an epistemically significant answer: no human being can *justify* their views about the value of existence. As Nietzsche puts it:

Judgments, value judgments on life, for or against, can ultimately never be true: they have value only as symptoms [*Symptome*], they can be taken seriously only as symptoms—in themselves, judgments like these are stupidities. (TI “Problem” 2)

Judgments about life’s value ‘can be taken seriously only as symptoms’: that is to say, they always reflect features of the individual making the judgment rather than the thing being judged. When someone denounces life, that does not tell us anything about life. Rather, it tells us something about the psychology of the person judging life. For Nietzsche, then, seriously engaging with pessimism requires converting it into a *psychological* thesis. We cannot have a meaningful debate about whether life is valuable. We can, however, have a meaningful debate about whether human beings are capable of valuing life.<sup>5</sup>

This way of thinking about pessimism is what underwrites Nietzsche’s claim that pessimism might have a *counterexample*. Pessimists are, Nietzsche suggests, guilty of a hasty psychological generalization: they correctly observe that *some* people are incapable of valuing life, and wrongly infer that *all* people are bound within these same psychic limits. Thus, Nietzsche claims to have carried out

a patient and tedious campaign against the unscientific basic tendency of [] romantic pessimism to interpret and inflate individual personal experiences into universal judgments [*einzelne persönliche Erfahrungen zu allgemeinen Urtheilen and . . . auszudeuten*], indeed, into condemnations of the world. (HH II “Preface” 5)

The pessimist overgeneralizes: they take a limited number of cases and inflate those cases into the basis of a universal judgment. In so doing, they overlook the sharp differences between human beings, never acknowledging that different

4. For the standard definition, see Beiser (2016: 4): ‘Pessimism is the thesis that life is not worth living, that nothingness is better than being, or that it is worse to be than not to be’.

5. This point has been made by several scholars. See, for example, Came (2006: 42), Gemes (2008: 461), May (2011: 90–92), and Leiter (2018: 156).

*types* of people have different sets of capacities and incapacities. After observing that some people cannot value life, they do not ask the appropriate follow-up question: namely, ‘Which *type* of life [*Art von Leben*] is making value judgments here?’ (TI “Morality” 5, my emphasis). Instead, they simply take it as a given that the limitations characteristic of the particular type of person they are observing reflect the limitations of human beings as such.

Nietzsche makes this same claim about Schopenhauer specifically. Schopenhauer’s pessimism consists in taking features of his own psychology—things that made valuing life difficult for him in particular—and treating them as general obstacles to life’s appreciation:

But it [the will to immortalize] can also be the tyrannic will of one who suffers deeply, who struggles, is tormented, and would like to turn what is most personal, singular, and narrow, the real idiosyncrasy of his suffering [*das Persönlichste, Einzelste, Engste, die eigentliche Idiosynkrasie seines Leidens*], into a binding law and compulsion—one who, as it were, revenges himself on all things by forcing his own image, the image of his torture [*Bild seiner Tortur*], on them, branding them with it. This last version is *romantic pessimism* in its most expressive form, whether it be Schopenhauer’s philosophy of will or Wagner’s music. (GS 370)

On this account, Schopenhauer’s pessimism consists in taking something idiosyncratic as if it were ‘a binding law’: the particularities of some individuals’ psychology (in this case, of Schopenhauer’s own psychology) are treated as reflecting the basic laws of human nature.

Where a general conclusion is reached using a narrow dataset, counterexample becomes the relevant form of counterargument. Schopenhauer holds that human beings cannot value their lives. He rests this conclusion on the claim that *all* people possess psychological characteristics that rule out valuing life. Nietzsche aims to undercut this conclusion by establishing that these psychological characteristics are only possessed by *some* people. To do this, he relies on a counterexample: a case that demonstrates certain people possess capacities incompatible with Schopenhauer’s account of human psychology.

As noted earlier, this counterexample is the ability of at least some people to create and appreciate tragic drama. This point is made in *Twilight’s* concluding section, a passage Nietzsche later describes as recounting his discovery of ‘the psychology of tragedy [*die Psychologie der Tragödie*]’ (EH “BT” 3):

The psychology of the orgiastic, as an overflowing feeling of life and strength where even pain acts as a stimulus, gave me the key to the concept of *tragic* feeling [*tragischen Gefühls*], a concept that had been mis-

understood by Aristotle and even more by our pessimists. Tragedy is so far from proving anything about Hellenic pessimism in Schopenhauer's sense of the term that in fact it serves as the decisive refutation and *counter-example* [entscheidende Ablehnung und Gegen-Instanz] to Schopenhauerian pessimism. Saying yes to life, even in its strangest and harshest problems; the will to life rejoicing in its own inexhaustibility through the *sacrifice* of its highest types—*that* is what I called Dionysian, *that* is the bridge I found to the psychology of the *tragic* poet. *Not* to escape horror and pity, *not* to cleanse yourself of a dangerous affect [gefährlichen Affekt] by violent discharge—as Aristotle thought—: but rather, over and above all horror and pity, so that *you yourself may be* the eternal joy in becoming,—the joy that includes even the eternal *joy in negating*. (TI “Ancients” 5)

The details of this passage are difficult to parse. I will elucidate them later by appealing to places where Nietzsche presents tragic psychology in plainer language. For now, what matters is simply the following: tragic psychology, the variety of aesthetic experience involved in the creation and appreciation of tragic art, is ‘the decisive refutation and *counter-example* to Schopenhauerian pessimism’. To understand Nietzsche's account of this psychology, consequently, will also be to understand his conception of Schopenhauerian pessimism. Whatever tragic psychology's distinctive features are, the claim that these things are outside humanity's psychic reach will constitute the pessimism that Nietzsche denies.

### ***3.1 Delight in passion as the distinctive feature of tragic psychology***

What, then, does Nietzsche identify as tragic psychology's distinctive features? I take the answer to be the following: tragic psychology is distinguished by *delight in passion itself*. Artists create works of tragedy to celebrate their passions, and spectators enjoy works of tragedy because they are receptive to passion's worth. To see this, it will help to consider some places where Nietzsche offers relatively concrete accounts of tragedy's life-affirming character.<sup>6</sup>

---

6. As noted in Kirwin (2023), Nietzsche's mature understanding of tragedy has been largely neglected. There is much work on Nietzsche's early views in *The Birth of Tragedy*, but little on tragedy's role in Nietzsche's later thought. In her own discussion, Kirwin effectively argues that Nietzsche's later account relies on a distinction between two groups: those for whom tragedy's depiction of human suffering functions as an excuse to wallow in pity, and those for whom tragedy's depiction of human suffering functions as an aid to life affirmation. My discussion aims to supplement Kirwin's by further explaining why Nietzsche thought that tragedy could sometimes have a life-affirming effect.

A good starting point is the following passage from *Daybreak*, where Nietzsche suggests that tragic drama celebrates life precisely by rendering passion itself attractive:

Whoever thinks that Shakespeare's theater has a moral effect, and that the sight of Macbeth irresistibly repels one from the evil of ambition, is in error: and he is again in error if he thinks Shakespeare himself felt as he feels. He who is really possessed by raging ambition beholds this its image with *joy*; and if the hero perishes by his passion this precisely is the sharpest spice in the hot draught of this joy. . . . Do you suppose that Tristan and Isolde are preaching *against* adultery when they both perish by it? This would be to stand the poets on their head: they, and especially Shakespeare, are enamored of the passions as such [*die Leidenschaften an sich*]. (D 240)

Tragedy expresses the attitude of someone 'enamored of the passions as such'. This love is passed to the viewer not by inspiring new passions, but by changing the experience of passions already possessed: *Macbeth* does not turn its viewers into ambitious people; rather, it causes those already 'possessed by raging ambition' to experience that ambition differently. Importantly, it does this not by glorifying passion's *objects*, but by glorifying *the passions themselves*. It is not satisfied passion, content in possession of its object, that tragedy holds before us. Rather, tragedy's great achievement is to present *struggling, unsatisfied* passion as a source of joy. It thus causes us to delight not in passion's objects or passion's satisfaction, but in the experience of passion *as such*. My claim is that, when Nietzsche says tragic psychology is the decisive counterexample to Schopenhauerian pessimism, it is this feature of that psychology which he has in mind. In the appreciation of tragedy, we reveal an ability to value our passions. In valuing our passions, we are able to value our lives.

This reading is borne out by a variety of places where Nietzsche identifies tragedy's valorization of passion as the aspect of it which the Schopenhauerian pessimist must misunderstand in order to maintain their view:

Schopenhauer taught that the overall aim of art was 'to free yourself from the will', and he admired the great utility of tragedy in 'teaching resignation'.—But this—I have already suggested—is a pessimist's optic, his 'evil eye'—: you need to ask artists themselves. *What is it about himself that the tragic artist communicates?* Doesn't he show his *fearlessness* in the face of the fearful and questionable?—This is in itself a highly desirable state; anyone who knows it will pay it the highest honors. He communicates it, he *has* to communicate it, provided he is an artist, a genius of communi-

cation. The courage and freedom of affect [*Tapferkeit und Freiheit des Gefühls*] in the face of a powerful enemy, in the face of a sublime hardship, in the face of a horrible problem,—this *victorious* state is what the tragic artist selects, what he glorifies. (TI “Skirmishes” 24)

Schopenhauer rightly notes that tragedy presents many of life’s most horrible possibilities. Maintaining his pessimism, however, requires him to miss that tragedy presents these horrible possibilities only in order to celebrate passion’s ability to shine even in the face of such horrors. It is ‘the courage and freedom of *affect* in the face of a powerful enemy’ (my emphasis) that tragedy communicates. Blindness to tragedy’s passion-valorizing effects is thus what constitutes the ‘pessimist’s optic’: this is what the pessimist must misunderstand to interpret tragedy as supporting their view. The same point underlies Nietzsche’s critique of Wagner’s efforts to give his own early tragedies a Schopenhauerian meaning:

What happened to [Wagner] has happened to many artists: he misinterpreted the characters that he himself had created and misunderstood the philosophy that was implicit in his most characteristic works of art. . . . nothing could be more contrary to the spirit of Schopenhauer than what is distinctively Wagnerian in Wagner’s heroes: I mean the innocence of the utmost selfishness, *the faith in great passion as the good in itself* [*der Glaube an die grosse Leidenschaft als an das Gute an sich*]. (GS 99, my emphasis)

Holding on to Schopenhauer’s pessimism in the face of his own early works required Wagner to overlook what was most essential to them: the celebration of passion.<sup>7</sup>

As a confirmation of this reading, it also explains Nietzsche’s language in the difficult *Twilight* passage with which we began. Nietzsche’s descriptions of tragic pleasure in terms of ‘the will to life rejoicing in its own inexhaustibility’ and ‘the eternal joy in becoming’ can be understood as poetic ways of describing delight in passion itself. To delight in passion *itself*, as opposed to delighting in passion’s satisfaction, is to take joy in a sort of will, in the continued pressure of a motive rather than the final stability of an endpoint. As Nietzsche puts it in *Daybreak*, a valued passion ‘at bottom fears nothing but its own extinction [*im Grunde Nichts fürchtet, als ihr eigenes Erlöschen*]’ (D 429). In delighting in passion, we hope it will be inexhaustible: we want the stable being offered by motiveless indifference to be permanently ruled out by the continued force of passion within our

---

7. Additional discussion of tragedy’s role in celebrating passion can be found in GS 80, GS 98, and GS 135.

lives. This same point explains the contrast Nietzsche draws between his view and Aristotle's: tragic psychology involves longing for the *enduring* experience of passion rather than quick relief from it. The role of tragedy is 'not to cleanse yourself of a dangerous affect by violent discharge—as Aristotle thought'. Tragedy does the opposite of this: it turns our passions—our '*dangerous affect[s]*' (my emphasis)—into something we love and cling to rather than long to escape. Tragedy achieves this by showing us that passion shines even when it brings disaster in its wake. To return to an earlier example, *Tristan and Isolde* brings us to delight in love precisely by showing us how love brings its heroes to ruin. In Nietzsche's language, tragic appreciation involves 'the will to life rejoicing in its own inexhaustibility through the *sacrifice* of its highest types'. The depiction of Tristan and Isolde's doom is essential to the tragedy's efficacy. Their love *must* lead to ruin for the work to celebrate love *itself*, rather than just love's satisfied state.<sup>8</sup>

### 3.2 Schopenhauer's pessimism: life is dominated by the flight from harm

Nietzsche identifies tragic psychology as the chief counterexample to Schopenhauerian pessimism. I have argued that tragic psychology plays this role by establishing that we possess a particular capacity: namely, the capacity to delight in passion itself. Nietzsche must, then, take Schopenhauerian pessimism to turn on the claim that human beings cannot value passion. The next question, then: why did Nietzsche understand Schopenhauer in this way?

My answer to this question will come in two stages. In this section, I will argue that Nietzsche identified Schopenhauer's pessimism with the claim that human life is dominated by the flight from harm. Then, in the next two sections, I will argue that Nietzsche took valuing our passions to be the key to avoiding this domination.

As I understand Schopenhauer's pessimism, a crucial role is played by the distinction between negative goods and positive goods. A negative good is valued for removing something harmful from our lives. It makes us better off by making our condition in some respect *less bad*. A positive good, in contrast, is valued for adding something beneficial to our lives. It makes us better off by making our condition in some respect good.

---

8. Young (1992) and Ridley (2019) suggest that Nietzsche's discussion of tragic psychology in TI "Ancients" 5 constitutes a reversion to metaphysical ideals he has officially renounced. This follows from putting Nietzsche's last discussions of tragedy in dialogue with his first while jumping over all the development in the middle. In *Twilight*, Nietzsche repurposes the poetic language of *The Birth of Tragedy* to express the non-metaphysical account of tragic psychology developed in passages like *Daybreak* 240.

At a big-picture level, Schopenhauer's pessimism turns on the view that human life is exclusively spent in the pursuit of negative goods. He claims that

I know of no greater absurdity than that of most metaphysical systems which declare evil [*Ubel*] to be something negative [*Negatives*], whereas it is precisely the positive [*Positive*] that is making itself felt. On the other hand, the good [*Gute*], i.e., all happiness and satisfaction, is the negative [*Negative*], that is, the mere suspending of desire and ceasing of a pain. (PP II: 262–263)

Human beings experience various things as *positively* evil: desires and pains are taken to add harm to life rather than remove benefit. Good, in contrast, is experienced purely negatively: we appreciate certain things for their role in eliminating harmful pains and desires, but we never encounter anything that makes life better in a positive way.

Schopenhauer takes it to follow from this that the best human efforts can achieve is access to a *neutral* condition. Positive evil is experienced as harmful, and we spend our lives fleeing those harms. Even if we do escape, however, all we end up with is a condition experienced as *negatively* good: which is to say, a condition that would be *indifferent* to us apart from its role in escaping harm. As Schopenhauer puts it:

In the end, we never gain anything more than liberation from some suffering or desire, and so we find ourselves just the way we were before we had the desire. (WWR I: 345–346)

A negatively good condition has exactly one thing to recommend it: it is a state in which some harm is absent. As such, accessing a negatively good condition does not move us one step beyond a state of neutral indifference. Rather, it simply restores that neutral state by cancelling out a distressing departure from it. In the absence of positive good, then, human life is composed of two basic states: conditions of positive evil, which are experienced as harmful; and conditions of negative good, which are experienced as having merely neutral value.

From this account of life's components, Schopenhauer concludes that human beings inevitably experience life as harmful. Human life is a whole composed out of parts that are experienced as harmful and parts that are experienced as neutral. If some parts of life are experienced as harmful, then it will be experienced as harmful on the whole unless it contains other parts capable of compensating for those harms. As Schopenhauer sees it, harm can only be compensated for by benefit. Human life, however, contains no beneficial parts. As such, the presence of *any* harmful parts, however small, is enough to leave life condemned.

Loss cannot be made up without gain. The absence of positive good ensures that every life contains some loss and no life contains any gain. In Schopenhauer's words, 'life is a business that does not cover its costs' (WWR II: 589).

The above account of Schopenhauer's pessimism skims over a tremendous amount of detail. Nonetheless, I hope it has established that it is at least plausible to see Schopenhauer's pessimism as turning on a particular claim: namely, that human beings are not capable of aiming at anything better than negative good. Our lives are not spent pursuing things we experience as beneficial; they are spent fleeing things we experience as harmful. This asymmetry ensures that life is always experienced as harmful on the whole.<sup>9</sup>

That this understanding of Schopenhauer's pessimism is plausible does not necessarily mean that it is correct.<sup>10</sup> For present purposes, however, the key question is not whether *we* should endorse the above account of Schopenhauer's pessimism. It is whether *Nietzsche* would have endorsed it. We can break this question into two parts: 1) would Nietzsche have taken Schopenhauer to hold that all good is negative, and if so, 2) would Nietzsche have strongly identified Schopenhauer's pessimism with this claim?

As far as the first question is concerned, the answer is clear: Nietzsche reads Schopenhauer as holding that *all* good is negative. Thus, Nietzsche uses Schopenhauer's claims about negativity to illustrate how philosophers prefer *unqualified* positions:

Philosophers have at all times appropriated the propositions of the examiners of men (moralists) and *ruined* them, inasmuch as they have taken them for unqualified [*unbedingt*] positions and sought to demonstrate the absolute validity of what these moralists intended merely as approximate signposts [*ungefährer Fingerzeig*] . . . Thus we find pieces of popular wisdom originating with the moralists employed to buttress Schopenhauer's celebrated doctrines of the primacy of the will over the intellect, of the unalterability of the character and of the negativity of pleasure [*Negativität der Lust*]*—*all of which are, in the sense in which he understands them, errors. (HH II: 5)

For Nietzsche's point to make sense, he has to view the three Schopenhauerian claims mentioned as fully universal. Popular moralists offered pleasure's nega-

---

9. This view of Schopenhauer's pessimism is not intended to be revolutionary. It is close to what Simmons (2021) and Bather Woods (2022) call the 'standard interpretation' of Schopenhauer's argument.

10. This reading would be denied by many modern interpreters, who suggest that Schopenhauer grants the existence of some positive good. In agreement with Bather Woods (2022) and my Fox (2023), I take this modern view to be untenable. However, nothing turns on resolving that dispute here.

tivity as an ‘approximate signpost[.]’: they meant to highlight the negativity of *many* pleasures, not to claim that *all* pleasure is negative. Schopenhauer, however, radicalizes the popular claim: his error consists in holding that *all* pleasure is negative, when the popular insight only suggested that some pleasures are. As Nietzsche puts it later in the passage, Schopenhauer suffered from ‘the philosopher’s rage for generalization’: he wants every claim to be universal in scope, and thereby turns true but limited positions into false but limitless ones.

Nietzsche, then, takes Schopenhauer to view *all* pleasure as negative. However, he also views Schopenhauer as an evaluative hedonist. Indeed, he suggests that hedonism belongs to pessimists writ large:

Hedonism, pessimism, utilitarianism, eudamonianism: these are all ways of thinking that measure the value of things according to *pleasure* and *pain* [*Lust und Leid*]. (BGE 225)

That Schopenhauer is included among the pessimists Nietzsche references here is apparent from the larger context of the passage: a critique of the morality of pity and the effort to ‘abolish suffering’ (BGE 225). For not only does Nietzsche standardly treat Schopenhauer as the main advocate of this effort,<sup>11</sup> but he explicitly refers to him when connecting the same set of views elsewhere:

In Germany it was Schopenhauer, in England John Stuart Mill who gave the widest currency to the teaching of the sympathetic affects and of pity or the advantage of others as the principle of behaviour. (D 132)

As Nietzsche presents them, pessimists and utilitarians are united by a commitment to the morality of pity. Underlying this is another shared commitment: namely, an embrace of evaluative hedonism. It is only because Schopenhauer and Mill both take pleasure and pain so seriously that they converge on the project of suffering’s elimination. On Nietzsche’s reading, then, Schopenhauer takes all pleasure to be negative, and identifies pleasure as the only good. From this, it follows that Nietzsche takes Schopenhauer to identify all *good* as negative as well.<sup>12</sup>

---

11. For a particularly clear expression of this, see GM “Preface” 5, where Nietzsche characterizes his struggle against the morality of compassion as primarily a struggle against Schopenhauer.

12. As will be discussed in the following paragraph, Nietzsche took Schopenhauer’s pessimism much more seriously than that of later figures like Hartmann. This is sometimes explained by suggesting that the later pessimists made heavier use of hedonism, which Nietzsche saw as playing a more secondary role in Schopenhauer’s argument (see, e.g., Hassan 2023: 252–56). On my account, Nietzsche saw Schopenhauer as seriously committed to hedonism, but also saw the basic problem Schopenhauer identified as easily separable from that hedonism. The basic problem of Schopenhauer’s pessimism is our relationship to *whatever we experience as harmful*. Whether the harmful thing is pain or something else, the real problem is that fleeing it is our exclusive concern.

Having answered the first question, the second still remains. Nietzsche took Schopenhauer to view all good as negative, but did he see this as the distinctive marker of Schopenhauer's pessimism? An affirmative answer to this question can be supported in two ways: by looking at how Schopenhauer was presented in works Nietzsche was familiar with, and by looking at how Schopenhauer was presented in Nietzsche's own work. To start with the contextual point: in the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century pessimism dispute, Schopenhauer was frequently discussed alongside the more contemporary pessimist, Eduard von Hartmann. Nietzsche, who thought little of Hartmann, acknowledges this pairing with regret:

There are even worse case of 'and'; I have heard with my own ears, although only from university professors, 'Schopenhauer *and* Hartmann' . . . (TI "Skirmishes" 16)

However much Nietzsche disliked this 'and', it was unavoidable in contemporary work on pessimism. This led contemporary discussions of Schopenhauer to emphasize places where his and Hartmann's views diverged: what was distinctive of Schopenhauer's pessimism was, above all, what distinguished it from Hartmann's pessimism. Among the things commonly used to draw this distinction was the claim that Schopenhauer views all pleasure (and hence all good) as negative, while Hartmann takes some positive pleasure (and hence some positive good) to exist. To take examples from sources Nietzsche knew well, consider the following passages from the pessimist Olga Plümacher and the anti-pessimist James Sully respectively<sup>13</sup>:

Schopenhauer does violence to experience from love of his theory and denies the positive nature of pleasure [*die Positive Natur der Lust verneint*], whereas Hartmann again does justice to unbiased experience and interprets pleasure and displeasure as equally real and positive [*Lust und Unlust für gleich real und positiv erklärt*]. (Plümacher 1884: 162)<sup>14</sup>

if pleasure be nothing but satisfaction of will, it follows, and has been commonly held to follow, that all pleasure is preceded by desire, that is by pain. . . . Hartmann, as we have seen, seeks to modify this doctrine; of this I shall speak presently. Schopenhauer, on the other hand, recognises the connection between the idea of pleasure as satisfaction of will and

13. For Plümacher's influence on Nietzsche, see Janaway (2022). For Sully's influence on Nietzsche, see Hassan (2024). For broader discussion of how participants in the pessimism dispute identified Schopenhauer's pessimism with the Negativity Thesis, see Hassan (2023: 45–50).

14. The translation is my own.

that of the negativity of pleasure, and asserts the logical consequences of his doctrine without any attempt at qualification. (Sully 1891: 218)

Both commentators take it as a given that Schopenhauer denies the existence of positive good. Moreover, far from treating this as a marginal feature of Schopenhauer's account, both treat it as a defining feature of his view. Schopenhauerian pessimism is a distinctive kind of pessimism in part because it rests on the negativity of all good.

This same suggestion appears (albeit in a complex way) in Nietzsche's discussion of Schopenhauer in *Gay Science* 370:

Every art, every philosophy may be viewed as a remedy and an aid in the service of growing and struggling life; they always presuppose suffering and sufferers. But there are two kinds of sufferers: first, those who suffer from the *over-fullness of life* [*Ueberfülle des Lebens*]—they want a Dionysian art and likewise a tragic view of life, a tragic insight—and then those who suffer from the *impoverishment of life* [*Verarmung des Lebens*] and seek rest, stillness, calm seas, redemption from themselves through art and knowledge, or intoxication, convulsions, anesthesia [*Betäubung*], and madness. All romanticism in art and insight corresponds to the dual needs of the latter type, and that included (and includes) Schopenhauer . . . He that is rich in the fulness of life, the Dionysian god and man, cannot only afford the sight of the terrible and questionable but even the terrible deed and any luxury of destruction, decomposition, and negation. In his case, what is evil, absurd, and ugly seems, as it were, permissible, owing to an excess of procreating, fertilizing energies that can still turn any desert into lush farmland. Conversely, those who suffer most and are poorest in life would need above all mildness, peacefulness, and goodness in thought as well as deed. (GS 370)

In this passage, Nietzsche draws a distinction between two kinds of people: those who suffer from 'the *over-fulness of life*' and those who suffer from 'the *impoverishment of life*'. I will have more to say about what this might mean below. For the moment, I just want to highlight what Nietzsche presents as the distinguishing marker of each group's thought: those who suffer from the overfullness of life believe in positive good, while those who suffer from the impoverishment of life believe only in negative good. Thus, the impoverished 'seek rest, stillness, calm seas'. They need 'mildness, peacefulness, and goodness'. These are all things which Nietzsche equates with 'anesthesia': in both art and thought, the impoverished present relief from suffering as the greatest of goods. This is in contrast to the overfull, who can 'afford the sight of the terrible and questionable'. They can

afford to confront life's harms, for they take there to be something which compensates for those harms: namely, positive good which is their goal in place of the anesthetization sought by the impoverished. In presenting Schopenhauer's philosophy as an expression of impoverishment, then, Nietzsche seems to be characterizing it in just the way that our discussion leads us to expect. As an expression of impoverished life, Schopenhauer's pessimism is distinguished by its commitment to negative good. This point is anticipated in the preface, though without the explicit reference to Schopenhauer:

Every philosophy that ranks peace above war, every ethic with a negative definition of happiness [*einer negativen Fassung des Begriffs Glück*] . . . permits the question of whether it was not sickness that inspired the philosopher. (GS "Preface" 2)

GS 370 seems to characterize Schopenhauer's pessimism as one such sickness-inspired philosophy. It is unsurprising, then, that a negative conception of happiness would be among its defining features.<sup>15</sup>

### 3.3 *The importance of having passion*

In the last section, I suggested that Nietzsche identifies Schopenhauer's pessimism with the claim that human beings exclusively seek *negative* goods. On Schopenhauer's account, our lives are spent fleeing states experienced as harmful rather than pursuing states experienced as beneficial. This leaves us with no way of genuinely valuing those lives: the harmful states we flee cannot be outweighed by the merely neutral states which relieve those harms.

We can now return to passion. Above, I argued that Nietzsche takes Schopenhauer's pessimism to be refuted by the possibility of valuing passion. If I am correct about how Nietzsche understands Schopenhauer's pessimism, then we can convert this into a claim about negative good. The claim that human beings pursue exclusively negative goods is refuted by the possibility of valuing passion. To put it another way: that human beings are capable of valuing passion proves that their lives can be spent on more than the effort to escape harm.

To understand this claim, it will help to recall the definition of passion Nietzsche is working with. A passion is a desire strong enough that we disregard

---

15. Langsam (2025) argues that Nietzsche broke with Schopenhauer about the negativity of pleasure, and suggests this may be important to their disagreement about life's value. If the above is correct, then Langsam is very much on the right track: given Nietzsche's understanding of Schopenhauer, the existence of positive goods (including positive pleasures) is the decisive point of contention.

the costs of pursuing its object. An ordinary desire only pushes us to pursue its object on the condition that this can be done safely. A passionate desire, in contrast, is an ‘unconditional inclination and urge’: our concern to pursue its object so far outstrips our concern to avoid harm, that the possibility of harm is not even taken into consideration before we act.

From this definition alone, we can already see the shape of a challenge to Schopenhauer’s pessimism. For a passionless person, the desire to avoid harm holds a veto power over all other motivations. Nothing else is desired strongly enough to break aversion to harm’s grip. As Nietzsche puts it when contrasting ‘noble’ passionate individuals with ‘common’ passionless ones in GS 3:

What distinguishes the common type [*gemeine Natur*] is that it never loses sight of its advantage [*Vortheil*], and that this thought of purpose and advantage [*Zweck und Vortheil*] is even stronger than the strongest instincts [*stärker, als die stärksten Triebe*]; not to allow these instincts to lead one astray to perform inexpedient acts [*unzweckmässigen Handlungen*]*—*that is their wisdom and pride. (GS 3)

For the passionless person, concern for ‘advantage’ functions as the dominant motive. In this context, however, seeking ‘advantage’ simply means avoiding inexpedient risks: which is to say, potentially harmful actions. In case there is any doubt about this last point, it is even clearer when Nietzsche picks up the same distinction again in a later work:

There is something in Plato’s moral philosophy that does not really belong to him, but is there in spite of him, as it were: namely, the Socratism that he was really too noble [*vornehm*] for. ‘Nobody wants to harm himself [*sich selbst Schaden thun*], and therefore everything bad happens involuntarily. . . .’ This type of inference stinks of the rabble [*Pöbel*], who see only the disagreeable effects [*leidigen Folgen*] of bad actions and are in fact judging ‘it is stupid [*dumm*] to act badly’. (BGE 190)

Here again, we see Nietzsche distinguishing the noble and the common. As in GS 3, this distinction is made in terms of the common person’s commitment to never act in a way that is ‘stupid’, disadvantageous, inexpedient, etc. This is explicitly a matter of prioritizing *avoiding harm* above all else. For the ‘rabble’, the question ‘will this action produce any “disagreeable effects”?’ is the decisive one. Their Socratism consists in the fact that the desire not to harm themselves is their *dominant* desire. For them, knowingly acting in a way that is expected to cause harm is simply a psychological impossibility. The reason for this is, as we have seen, that Nietzsche takes the rabble to lack *passion*: if the desire to

avoid harm dominates their lives, it is because they lack any other desire strong enough to seize that dominance for itself.<sup>16</sup>

Nietzsche, then, takes the passionless person to live in a way that fits Schopenhauer's account. For the passionless person, positive good is, at the very least, a marginal concern. The Schopenhauerian project of escaping harm is the dominant project of the passionless individual's life. Negative good and negative good alone is what they prioritize. Judging solely from passionless individuals, Schopenhauer's conclusion that life cannot be valued may be correct.

What blocks Schopenhauer's conclusion is the existence of the passionate. The passionate are not dominated by the desire to avoid all harm. Rather, there is something else that they desire with such force that any general desire to avoid harm fades into the background. If the object of this powerful desire is something experienced as *positively* good, then the order of their priorities will be the reverse of those just described. The pursuit of positive good will be the dominant project of their life, while concern for negative good will be something marginal.

This is, I take it, what Nietzsche had in mind when distinguishing between those who suffer from 'the *over-fullness of life*' and those who suffer from 'the *impoverishment of life*' in the GS 370 passage discussed above. The passionate suffer from an overfullness of life: their desires are so strong that they rush into suffering without a second thought. The passionless suffer from an impoverishment of life: their desires are so weak, that the struggle to avoid suffering becomes the dominant project of their existence. Both lead lives in which suffering plays a central role, but only the passionless experience suffering as the determinant of life's overall value. However much suffering the passionate experience, it is still something that they disregard. However little suffering the passionless experience, it is still the only thing that they take seriously.

Passion, then, opens a path for life to be experienced as more than a whole composed out of harmful and neutral parts. Where the object of passion is experienced as *positively* good, the pursuit of something *beneficial* is given so much weight that all concern for what is harmful and neutral falls away. Those parts of life that are experienced as beneficial would thus play the biggest role in deter-

---

16. Nietzsche's depiction of 'the last men' may offer a helpful image of the passionless life. The last men possess no powerful desires: they ask 'What is yearning [*Sehnsucht*]?' (Z I "Preface" 5), blinking in incomprehension at the idea of an overpowering urge. As such, they lead lives entirely structured around avoiding minor harms: 'One continues to work, for work is entertainment. But one takes care lest the entertainment become a strain. One no longer becomes poor or rich: both are too burdensome. Who wants to rule anymore? Who wants to obey? Both are too burdensome' (Z "Prologue" 5). In each case, the motivating concern is avoiding some petty distress: the flight from boredom, strain, and burden are the last men's dominant aims. What explains this is the total absence of any desire strong enough to overcome their general aversion to harm: in other words, their lack of passion.

mining how such a passionate person experienced the overall character of their existence.<sup>17</sup>

### 3.4 *The importance of valuing passion*

An objection may quickly arise against the suggestion that passion answers Schopenhauer's pessimism. As we saw back in section 2, Schopenhauer was very much aware of passion's existence. He too understood that human beings can desire something so strongly that they disregard any dangers involved in its pursuit. Above, I suggested that Nietzsche takes Schopenhauer's pessimism to rest on a hasty psychological generalization. Whatever that generalization is, it cannot be moving from the observation that some people lack passion to the conclusion that everyone lacks passion. The mere possibility of passion, then, cannot be sufficient to overcome Schopenhauer's pessimism.

To clarify, however, the previous section's claim was not that Schopenhauer's pessimism is answered by the mere possibility of passion. Rather, it was that Schopenhauer's pessimism is answered by the possibility of passion *for something experienced as positively good*. Passion ensures that life is not dominated by a desire to avoid harm *in general*. It does not, however, prevent life from being dominated by a desire to avoid some *particular* harm. The desire to escape some particular harm might be powerful enough to make us disregard any other harms involved in fleeing from it. This too would be passion – it would simply be passion for a specific *negative* good.

When Schopenhauer thinks about passion, it is precisely this that he has in mind. On this view, the passionate person is *less* likely to value life than anyone else: their passionate desire is itself an acute form of suffering; their reckless pursuit of that desire's object exposes them to even more suffering; and if the object is ever obtained, it simply cancels out the passionate desire, restoring neutral indifference. Thus, Schopenhauer's characterization of passion as a source of suffering and regret:

---

17. It is worth noting that the passionless individual is not entirely identical to the Schopenhauerian individual. The Schopenhauerian individual is *exclusively* concerned with avoiding harm. The passionless individual simply cares about avoiding harm *more than they care about anything else*. They may still have some attraction to positive good; it is just that their aversion to harm always surpasses this attraction. This is why I described positive good as a *marginal* concern for the passionless individual, whereas it is simply *no concern* for the Schopenhauerian one. I take Nietzsche's view to be that an individual's *dominant* concerns determine their experience of life's value. If an individual is more concerned about avoiding the smallest harm than obtaining the greatest positive good, then the presence of even the greatest positive good will have little impact on their sense of life's worth. Like the Schopenhauerian individual, there will be nothing which can compensate them for harm. Unlike the Schopenhauerian individual, however, this is not necessarily because they never experience any positive good. Rather, it is because they discount whatever positive good they might experience: they take harm so much more seriously than positive good that the latter could never serve as compensation for the former.

Neglect of one's own well-being can lead to an egoistic regret: for instance, if an otherwise unadvisable marriage takes place as a result of passionate love that is extinguished [*erlischt*] by this very marriage, then this allows the counter-motives of personal interest, lost independence, etc. to enter consciousness and say what they would have said before if they had been allowed to speak. (WWR II: 609)

As Schopenhauer sees it, passionate desire is *extinguished* by its own satisfaction. This is because it is simply another impulse to flee a harmful condition. The passionate lover is tormented by the lack of their beloved. Once that lack is removed, their torment ends, and with it the sole basis of their interest in the beloved. All that distinguishes this case is that, while satisfying an ordinary desire generally leaves us 'just the way we were before we had the desire' (WWR I: 346), satisfying a passionate desire generally leaves us even worse off than we were before. The passionate person overlooks all the harms involved in satisfying their desire, and thus ends up purchasing something worthless at a high cost.

Countering Schopenhauer's pessimism, then, requires more than just the possibility of passion. It requires the possibility of passion *directed at an object experienced as positively good*. It is here that we see the significance of what tragic psychology shows us. As discussed earlier, Nietzsche emphasizes that appreciating a work of tragedy does not involve coming to have new passions. Rather, it involves coming to experience already possessed passions in a new way. *Macbeth* does not create ambitious people; it causes the passionately ambitious to find ambition newly attractive. It is not the possibility of merely *experiencing* passion that Nietzsche takes to undermine Schopenhauer's pessimism. It is the possibility of both experiencing passion *and valuing it*.

What explains this is Nietzsche's belief that only valued passion will have positive good as an object. When a passion is disvalued, we will suffer from it in the way that Schopenhauer suggests. Suffering from passion, we will long for its elimination. Longing for passion's elimination, we will come to experience passion's object as valuable for its role in securing that elimination. The object of a disvalued passion thus comes to be experienced as a negative good, appreciated only for removing the harm that passion itself constitutes. We see this in *Beyond Good and Evil* 200, where Nietzsche describes what happens when someone suffers from the conflict between multiple, contradictory passions<sup>18</sup>:

---

18. Nietzsche does not use the term *passion* in BGE 200: he refers to conflicting *drives*. However, he refers to passion when discussing an identical case of inner conflict in Z I.5. For the problem to arise, both contradictory drives must be powerful enough to find expression in passion: neither can accommodate the other, because each demands absolute priority for itself.

His most basic desire is for an end to the war that he *is*. His notion of happiness corresponds to that of a medicine and mentality of pacification [*beruhigenden . . . Medizin und Denkweise*] (for instance the Epicurean or Christian); it is a notion of happiness as primarily rest, lack of disturbance, repletion, unity at last and the ‘Sabbath of Sabbaths’. (BGE 200)

When conflict between passions leads them to be experienced as suffering, it changes the motivation that they provide. What might have been experienced as an impulse to obtain some wonderful good is instead experienced as an impulse to escape a terrible misfortune. Passion’s object is seen as nothing more than a kind of ‘medicine’: a mere means to bring a disquieting desire to an end.<sup>19</sup>

As discussed earlier, Nietzsche understands a valued passion as one that ‘at bottom fears nothing but its own extinction [*Erlöschen*]’ (D 429). To disvalue a passion, in contrast, is to experience precisely this extinction as desirable. Experiencing a passion in this way encourages us to experience its object as nothing more than a means to secure this extinction. Devalued passions, then, are also typically *Schopenhauerian passions*: that is, ones with objects experienced as nothing more than negative goods and balms. In GM III.6, Nietzsche describes Schopenhauer as someone who experienced his own desires as a ‘torture [*Tortur*]’ he longed to escape. This may well be the torture Nietzsche had in mind when describing Schopenhauer as someone who ‘revenge himself on all things by forcing his own image, the image of his torture [*Bild seiner Tortur*], on them’ (GS 370). Indeed, Nietzsche claims that Schopenhauer’s whole philosophy may ‘originate from a generalization of [his] sexual experience [*einer Verallgemeinerung jener Sexual-Erfahrung*]’ (GM III.6). Schopenhauer experienced desire as something unbearable. Generalizing from his own case, he held that desire was unbearable for everyone else as well. He only acknowledged *devalued* passion, never considering what passion might be like for someone who experienced it not as a torture but a joy (in Nietzsche’s language from Z I.5, not as a *Leidenschaft* but a *Freudenschaft*).<sup>20</sup>

---

19. Beyond conflict between passions, many other things might lead to passion’s devaluation. Passion’s inherent recklessness creates natural pressure against it (TI “Morality” 1). This is exacerbated by ascetic moralities that condemn passion (D 76) and sometimes punish its expression (TI “Skirmishes” 45).

20. This is compatible with Nietzsche’s claim that Schopenhauer did delight in one of his passions: namely, anger, understood as a desire to fight enemies. For Nietzsche presents this as in tension with Schopenhauer’s self-understanding: Schopenhauer ‘would have become a *pessimist* (for he was not one, as much as he wished it) without his enemies’ (GM III.7). I take the point to be that Schopenhauer’s own psychology was out of sync with the larger view of human psychology on which his pessimism rested. Preoccupied by his torturous experience of certain desires (such as the sexual desires mentioned above), he made a generalization that did not even accord with his own experience of other desires.

Countering Schopenhauer's generalization, then, is more complicated than it initially appears. It is not enough to show that some human beings are capable of passion. For positive good to play a significant role in human life, human beings must be capable of actually *valuing* their passions. As we saw earlier, it is precisely this that Nietzsche took tragic psychology to establish. In appreciating tragedy, we delight in passion itself. Tragic psychology thus proves that human beings can experience passion without longing for its quick elimination. In so doing, it establishes that passion's object will not always devolve into a negative good: where passion is experienced as a form of joy rather than suffering, there will be no pressure to view its object as a mere source of relief. Not just experiencing passion but valuing the passion that we experience turns out to be the key to valuing our lives.

#### 4. Conclusion

Nietzsche claims that tragic psychology offers the clearest counterexample to Schopenhauerian pessimism. I have argued that this follows from tragedy's role in the celebration of passion. That at least some people are capable of genuinely appreciating tragic drama proves that at least some people are capable of genuinely appreciating passion. This is decisive evidence against Schopenhauer, because his pessimism turns on depicting human life as nothing more than an endless flight from harm. The passionate individual is not dominated by the flight from harm *in general*: they desire something strongly enough to pursue it *no matter the cost*. Nor is the passionate person who values their passion dominated by flight from some *specific* harm: their passion is not itself some great misfortune that they would accept any other misfortune in order to escape. Schopenhauer's pessimism thus rests on a faulty generalization. He correctly observes that the flight from harm can function as an individual's dominant motive, preventing them from valuing their life. What he overlooks, however, is the existence of those dominated by a quite different kind of motive: namely, the overwhelming desire for positive good typical of passionate people who value their passions.

There are many different obstacles to valuing life. An individual who values their passion is able to overcome *one* of those obstacles, but others may remain. Nietzsche is thus not committed to the view that valuing passion is sufficient for valuing life. He is, however, committed to the view that valuing passion is sufficient for overcoming the specific obstacle to valuing life highlighted by Schopenhauerian pessimism. This is the deeper reason why Nietzsche breaks with the longstanding critique of passion as a dangerous and destructive force. It is not just that Nietzsche sees passion as one means among many for moti-

vating growth and change, as Ansell-Pearson (2022) suggests. Rather, Nietzsche encourages valuing passion because he sees doing so as a precondition of valuing life itself.<sup>21</sup>

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

## References

- Ansell-Pearson, Keith. 2022. "Nietzsche on the Passions and Self-Cultivation: Contra Spinoza and the Stoics." *Continental Philosophy Review* 55: 245–65. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11007-021-09563-8>
- Bather Woods, David. 2022. "The Standard Interpretation of Schopenhauer's Compensation Argument for Pessimism: A Nonstandard-Variant." *The European Journal of Philosophy* 30 (3): 961–76. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12699>
- Beiser, Frederick. 2016. *Weltschmerz: Pessimism in German Philosophy, 1860-1900*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198768715.001.0001>
- Came, Daniel. 2006. "The Aesthetic Justification of Existence." In *A Companion to Nietzsche*, edited by Keith Ansell-Pearson, 41–57. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470751374.ch3>
- Fox, Joshua. 2023. "Does Schopenhauer Accept Any Positive Pleasures?" *European Journal of Philosophy* 31 (4): 902–13. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12830>
- Gemes, Ken. 2008. "Nihilism and the Affirmation of Life: A Review of and Dialogue with Bernard Reginster." *European Journal of Philosophy* 16 (3): 459–66. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0378.2008.00314.x>
- Hassan, Patrick. 2023. *Nietzsche's Struggle Against Pessimism*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009380287>
- Hassan, Patrick. 2024. "James Sully's Psychological Reduction of Philosophical Pessimism." *The British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 32 (5): 1097–1120. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2023.2268125>
- Janaway, Christopher. 2022. "Worse than the Best Possible Pessimism? Olga Plümacher's Critique of Schopenhauer." *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 30 (2): 211–30. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2021.1881441>
- Kant, Immanuel. 2006. *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. Translated by Robert Louden. Edited by Robert Louden and Manfred Kuehn. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. [APV]

---

21. The ideas in this paper developed out of my dissertation work, none of which would have been possible without the support of Agnes Callard, Brian Leiter, and Martha Nussbaum. The paper itself benefited from the feedback of several anonymous reviewers and my colleagues at Bryn Mawr College: Macalester Bell, Lawrence Dallman, Robert Dostal, and Adrienne Prettyman.

- Kirwin, Claire. 2023. "Beyond the *Birth*: Middle and Late Nietzsche on the Value of Tragedy." *Inquiry* 66 (7): 1283–1306. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2022.2164051>
- Langsam, Harold. 2025. "The Will as Joy-Bringer: Nietzsche's Response to Schopenhauer." *Inquiry* 68 (7): 1863–1873. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2022.2126392>
- Leiter, Brian. 2018. "The Truth Is Terrible." *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 49 (2): 151–73. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5325/jnietstud.49.2.0151>
- May, Simon. 2011. "Why Nietzsche Is Still in the Morality Game." In *Nietzsche's On the Genealogy of Morality: A Critical Guide*, edited by Simon May, 88–110. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139014977.006>
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1974. *The Gay Science*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Random House. [GS]
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1986. *Human, All Too Human*. Translated by R. J. Hollingdale. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. [HH]
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1997. *Daybreak*. Translated by R. J. Hollingdale, edited by Maudemarie Clark and Brian Leiter. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. [D]
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1998. *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Translated by Maudemarie Clark and Alan Swensen. Indianapolis: Hackett. [GM]
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 2000. *The Birth of Tragedy*. Translated by Douglas Smith. Oxford: Oxford University Press. [BT]
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 2002. *Beyond Good and Evil*. Translated by Judith Norman, edited by Rolf-Peter Horstmann and Judith Norman. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. [BGE]
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 2005a. *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*. Translated by Judith Norman, edited by Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. [A, EH, TI]
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 2005b. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Translated by Graham Parkes. Oxford: Oxford University Press. [Z]
- Plümacher, Olga. 1884. *Der Pessimismus in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart*. Heidelberg: Georg Weiss Verlag.
- Ridley, Aaron. 2019. "Nietzsche on Tragedy: First and Last Thoughts." *The Monist* 102: 316–30. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/monist/onzo12>
- Schopenhauer, Arthur. 2010. *The World as Will and Representation*. Vol. 1. Translated and edited by Judith Norman, Alastair Welchman, and Christopher Janaway. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010. [WWR I]
- Schopenhauer, Arthur. 2015. *Parerga and Paralipomena*. Vol. 2. Translated and edited by Adrian Del Caro and Christopher Janaway. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. [PP II]
- Schopenhauer, Arthur. 2018. *The World as Will and Representation*. Vol 2. Translated and edited by Judith Norman, Alastair Welchman, and Christopher Janaway. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. [WWR II]
- Simmons, Byron. 2021. "A Thousand Pleasures Are Not Worth a Single Pain: The Compensation Argument for Schopenhauer's Pessimism." *The European Journal of Philosophy* 29 (1): 120–36. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12561>
- Solomon, Robert. 2003. *Living with Nietzsche*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sully, James. 1891. *Pessimism: A History and a Criticism*. New York: D. Appleton and Company.

- Tuncel, Yunus. 2022. *Nietzsche on Human Emotions*. Basel: Schwabe Verlag.  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24894/978-3-7965-4365-4>
- Young, Julian. 1992. *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Art*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511586316>

**Submitted:** 13 June 2025   **Accepted:** 10 November 2025   **Published:** 09 February 2026

**aperio**