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*The Sun Once Shone on Auschwitz:*

*Ethics and the Threat of the Aesthetic*

Amia Srinivasan  
Yale University  
New Haven, CT

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The Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity  
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## **The Sun Once Shone on Auschwitz: Ethics and the Threat of the Aesthetic**

Recently leafing through an old journal, I read the following in my 14-year-old script:

*October 8, 1998*

*The sun was blazing beautifully today: how awfully inappropriate. It's not the weather that I expected to find when I visited Auschwitz. Isn't it a betrayal of everything that the place symbolizes, remembers, mourns? The sun shouldn't shine on Auschwitz, and yet today it did. With a shudder, I felt the warmth of the sun envelop me, and watched a fresh wind sway the grass that now blankets the floor of the death camp Birkenau. With a shudder I observed the symmetry of furnaces, row after row, stretch across the vista—crumbling brick symbols of an obsessive rationality—and thought to myself: someone once probably found this beautiful, too...*

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The sun should not shine on Auschwitz, and yet that day it did. At the time—the beginning of my freshman year of high school—I was briefly disturbed by the incident, but found myself soon overtaken by other thoughts and concerns, as happens when one is fourteen. The memory was recorded and wrapped away into the past, between lined sheets in an old notebook.

The recent re-discovery of my observations at the Polish death camps has not left me so easily this time. What my younger self took at the time for a sort of meteorological inappropriateness, I now realize is a touchstone for a tension that I believe is fundamental, troubling, and too often overlooked in our contemporary ethical discourse. And yet, it is a problem with a long tradition of philosophic and literary investigation, and that is subtly pervasive throughout modern popular culture. And it is a problem that is embodied, for me, in the fact that one day, I thought Auschwitz—the site of the

grossest monstrosities ever committed by mankind against itself—almost looked beautiful.

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The problem to which I allude might be called the *threat of the aesthetic*. The possibility that even the most heinous ethical acts and situations can be redeemed by their beauty. And that this redemption can, moreover, be turned into justification.

The possibility of aesthetic redemption, of course, is what makes art meaningful. It is what allows beautiful creations to emerge from terrible destruction and loss. It's the force that inspired Gericault to paint his tremendous *Raft of the Medusa* after dozens of French citizens were compelled towards cannibalism on an abandoned raft; it's the force that motivated Sylvia Plath to write her *The Bell Jar* out of her personal struggles with depression; it's the force that allowed Toni Morrison to sensitively portray the tragic history of African Americans in *Beloved*; it's the force that helped Maya Lin to shape the Vietnam War Memorial, a structure in which loss, grief, and the sanctity of human life touch so viscerally. Indeed, it is this impulse towards aesthetization of suffering that has motivated the most valuable creations of mankind: the great operas, poems, novels, paintings, memorials, films and symphonies. Everywhere we look—from our mantelpieces and personal diaries to the famous museums and stages of the world—sadness, horror, and human grief are transformed into objects whose beauty moves us.

In many ways, our ability to turn the painful into the beautiful is the saving grace of humanity. And yet, this vital life-force is not always benign. For, the fear is: if art can *redeem* evil and suffering, might it ever *justify* it?

This is the threat of the aesthetic: it can assuage and comfort, but it can also, when taken to the extreme, motivate a wholesale abandonment of the ethical outlook. Under an aesthetic gaze, people, actions, and situations are not judged according to their moral worth, but according to a different standard—a standard that values the beautiful above the ugly, the elegant above the inelegant, and order above chaos. And sometimes, what morality requires of us is not as beautiful, as enchantingly elegant, or as perfectly ordered as what evil allows of us. In his *This Side of Paradise*, Fitzgerald tells us that the favorite literary quotation of his young protagonist Amory Blaine is found in *Arsène Lupin*, the story of a charming gentleman-thief: “If one can’t be a great artist or a great soldier, the next best thing is to be a great criminal.”<sup>1</sup> This image of the irresistibly attractive villain is a common trope of modern culture—from Willoughby in Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility* or Roskolnikov in Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, to the protagonists of the films *Badlands* or the recent *Pirates of the Caribbean*—and is generally considered harmless. And yet, how much distance really separates this ‘aesthetic admiration’ of evil from more virulent forms?

One thing is certain: Fitzgerald’s Amory Blaine is not unique. Most of us have felt, even if only in some fleeting moment, the pull of the aesthetic—the conviction that beauty can not only redeem evils, but might also somehow justify them.

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<sup>1</sup> Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *This Side of Paradise*. New York: Scribner, 2003 (p. 23).



*If you had the choice, would you allow the bombings of the Spanish Civil War just so that Picasso could paint his masterpiece Guernica?*

Thus we arrive at the type of question that is often thrown around by ethics professors, but rarely makes its way into daily life: is something beautiful ever worth its cost in human suffering? The ethical answer—the answer that cares fundamentally about humanity and seeks to minimize pain—is a resounding *no*. And yet, some might be tempted to answer *yes*: some might be tempted to allow the horrendous bombings of the Basque country just so that Picasso could have occasion to create a work that has moved so many. Luckily, we will never be asked to make such a terrible choice. The horrors have happened, and cannot be undone; Picasso's *Guernica* hangs in a museum in Madrid as their testimony.

But what if we *had* to choose? It's a disturbing thought to think that the question need even be entertained; surely, from an ethical perspective, it's what we might call a 'no-brainer'.

And yet, whether we like it or not, the sun sometimes shines on Auschwitz. Whether we are willing to admit it or not, sometimes the aesthetic threatens to trump the ethical.

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*Putting it negatively, the myth of eternal return states that a life which disappears once and for all, which does not return, is like a shadow, without weight, dead in advance, and whether it was horrible, beautiful, or sublime, its horror, sublimity, and beauty mean nothing. We need take no more note of it than of a war between African kingdoms in the fourteenth century, a war that altered nothing in the destiny of the world, even if a hundred thousand blacks perished in excruciating torment...*

*If the French Revolution were to recur eternally, French historians would be less proud of Robespierre. But because they deal with something that will not return, the bloody years of the Revolution have turned into mere words, theories, and discussions, have become lighter than feathers...For how can we condemn something that is ephemeral, in transit? In the sunset of dissolution, everything is illuminated by the aura of nostalgia, even the guillotine...<sup>2</sup>*

--Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*

For the Franco-Czech writer Milan Kundera, himself a descendant of Holocaust victims, the passage of time brings with it the threat of a sort of *moral nihilism of memory*, the possibility that the true pain of events can be blurred as they recede further behind us in the past. It is only something like Nietzsche's doctrine of the 'eternal return'—by which all events of human history repeat themselves *ad infinitum*—that events of our personal and collective pasts can be weighed down, ensuring that their significance, positive or negative, does not dull with age.

Kundera, we might say, is concerned with the issue of 'aesthetic distance', the phenomenon that allows us to remove ourselves from situations and treat them as objects of speculation, even appreciation. Such aesthetic distance is a posture that the artist necessarily takes. And yet, as Kundera warns, it is also a gateway for toleration of moral evil.

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<sup>2</sup> Kundera, Milan. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Michael Henry Heim, transl. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1999. (pp. 3-4).

We need only consider, for example, two of the most famous and disturbing pieces of modern literature, Nabokov's *Lolita* and Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange*. What has made these works so notorious is not simply their controversial content—pedophilia and juvenile violence, respectively—but the artistry with which those themes are dealt.

Nabokov's prose is some of the most elegant to be found in English:

*Lolita, Light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta. She was Lo, plain Lo, in the morning, standing four feet ten in one sock. She was Lola in slacks. She was Dolly at school. She was Dolores on the dotted line. But in my arms, she was always Lolita*<sup>3</sup>.

In Nabokov's talented hands, the theme of pedophilia, which normally provokes such natural repugnance, becomes lulling, even seductive. We find ourselves unwillingly empathizing with the novel's narrator, though we know that Humbert Humbert should provoke our moral outrage, not our pathos. Similarly, Burgess' shockingly violent *A Clockwork Orange* invites the reader into a strange camaraderie with the novel's criminal juvenile protagonist, through its stylized use of language and rhythm:

*And nor would he be able to stop his own son, brothers. And so it would itty on to like the end of the world, round and round and round, like some bolshy gigantic like chelloveck, like old Bog Himself (by courtesy of Korova Milkbar) turning and turning and turning a vonny grazhny orange in his gigantic rookers.*<sup>4</sup>

Burgess' descriptions of brutal rape and murder are glossed in a veneer of nonsensical wordplay, desensitizing and distancing us from the horrors at hand.

This technique of 'aesthetic distancing' has become commonplace in contemporary culture. Countless recent films artfully celebrate the beauty of violence, often employing stunning visual effects to do so. Consider, for a few, *Kill Bill*, *American*

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<sup>3</sup> Nabokov, Vladimir. *Lolita*. New York: Random House, 1997.

<sup>4</sup> Burgess, Anthony. *A Clockwork Orange*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1986.

*Beauty, Fight Club, The Matrix, Ocean's Eleven, or American Psycho.* All these films have been fantastically popular, precisely because they appeal to something intrinsic in human nature. As much as we are naturally empathetic creatures, desiring to heal the wounds of others, we are also naturally aesthetic creatures, admiring beauty and elegance wherever we find it. The aesthetic, then, as much as it can redeem sufferings of the past, can also make us more tolerant of evils in the present, even if only in fiction.

And yet, the 'aesthetic threat' is *not* relegated to the fictional worlds of art, novels, and films. It finds its way into mainstream political culture, playing out in history, on battlefields, and in the streets of the modern world. The powerful appeal of the aesthetic has trumped the requirements of ethics again and again.

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*WHAT IS NOBLE?*

*EVERY elevation of the type "man," has hitherto been the work of an aristocratic society and so it will always be—a society believing in a long scale of gradations of rank and differences of worth among human beings, and requiring slavery in some form or other. Without the PATHOS OF DISTANCE, such as grows out of the incarnated difference of classes, out of the constant out-looking and down-looking of the ruling cast on subordinates and instruments, and out of their equally constant practice of obeying and commanding, of keeping down and keeping at a distance—that other more mysterious pathos could never have arisen, the longing for an ever new widening of distance within the soul itself, the formation of ever higher, rarer, further, more extended, more comprehensive states, in short, just the elevation of the type "man," the continued "self surmounting of man," to use a moral formula in a supermoral sense...<sup>5</sup>*

--Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*

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<sup>5</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Beyond Good and Evil*. Walter Kaufman, transl. New York: Randomhouse, 1989. (Chapter IX).

Nietzsche, the 19<sup>th</sup> Century philosopher and cultural critic, gives us one image of a politics driven by aesthetics rather than ethics. Nietzsche's aesthetic is an aristocratic one, after the Greek tradition, which values the inspiring nobility of powerful, creative men above all else. The result is a beguilingly beautiful society in which strength is prized over weakness, the heights of human potential are scaled and transcended, and in which the suffering of the many is redeemed by the greatness of the one—thus Nietzsche's claim that all of the atrocities of the French Revolution were justified by the coming-to-be of Napoleon:

*Like a last signpost to the other path, Napoleon appeared as a man more unique and late-born for his times than ever a man had been before, and in him, the problem of the noble ideal itself was made flesh...*<sup>6</sup>

But when we think for just a moment about what such a society would be in practice—when we consider, for instance, that most of us and our loved ones are hardly Nietzsche's *übermenschen*—we quickly realize the gross ethical failures of a politics grounded only in considerations of beauty. In such a society, suffering is rife, the claims of the few are placed above the rights of the many, and some of the best aspects of human nature—empathy, care, love—are never demonstrated. This is a society in which few would want to live, and yet the sort of aesthetic dream that infatuated Nietzsche has motivated many in political reality.

The later German philosopher Martin Heidegger, for example, found himself seduced by the pull of evil Nazi ideology on aesthetic grounds. In his lectures to the students of the Freiburg Universität, Heidegger became a seductive spokesperson of evil cloaked in aesthetic terms. Exalting a Freiburg student and Nazi martyr, Albert Leo

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<sup>6</sup> Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Keith Ansell-Pearson, ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. (p. 36).

Schlageter, Heidegger called on German youth to embrace a terrifying but alluring vision:

*Student of Freiburg! German student! When on your hikes and outings you set foot in the mountains, forests, and valleys of this Black Forest, the home of this hero, experience this and know: the mountains among which the young farmer's son grew up are of primitive stone, of granite. They have long been at work hardening the will. The autumn sun of the Black Forest bathes the mountain ranges and forests in the most glorious clear light. It has long nourished clarity of the heart. As he stood defenseless facing the rifles, the hero's inner gaze soared above the muzzles to the daylight and mountains of his home that he must die for the German people and its Reich with the Alemannic countryside before his eyes...*

*Student of Freiburg, let the strength of this hero's native mountains flow into your will! Student of Freiburg, let the strength of the autumn sun of this hero's native valley shine into your heart!<sup>7</sup>*

As we imagine Heidegger's disturbing words ring out through a packed lecture hall of impressionable students, we realize with a shudder the full threat that the aesthetic can wield.

The vision of an aestheticized politics does not simply pull on individuals, and certainly not just on philosophers. It is capable, as history has tragically borne out, of motivating entire groups of people to commit moral atrocities. The aestheticized ideals of a free and liberal Republic led to the uncontrollable bloodshed of the French Revolution, particularly the Reign of Terror; the hollow image of a beautiful and 'pure' Germany seduced countless numbers into complicity with murder; and naïve romanticism led European liberals to celebrate China's Cultural Revolution, ignoring the clear moral atrocities implicit in it. The aesthetization of evil is not limited to our film screens or

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<sup>7</sup> Heidegger, Martin, "Political Texts, 1933-1934", from *The Heidegger Controversy*. Richard Wollin, ed. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993 (p. 41).

bookshelves; it is a force that has driven many of the tragedies of history, and a force for which we must be forever vigilant.

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Where, then, does this leave us? The essential human impulse towards the aesthetic—to enjoy symmetry, admire elegance, to dislike chaos—cannot be disposed of, nor should it be. Even if we were able to somehow rid ourselves of our capacity to be moved by beauty, few would embrace that possibility. So much of what is valuable in life is grounded in a certain aesthetic sensibility: sunrises on winter mornings, the sounds of children playing outside, the crispness of new snow, the aching tenderness of a half-remembered melody, the arch of a dancer’s back, the creased hands of grandparents, the first glimpse of home after an overdue return, silences shared by lovers. If we could not appreciate these things—and if we could not capture them in words, songs, and music—then life would be profoundly less worth living.

And yet, our natural love of aesthetics is a double-edged sword. As long as beauty moves us, it also threatens to overtake us, to convince us that it, alone, is the true measure of value. Aesthetics have the capacity to turn things that are profoundly *unbeautiful*—suffering, pain, death, destruction—into perverted attractions. If we are attentive, we see this threat everywhere: from classical novels to contemporary cinema. Moreover, the threat is not confined to art or public entertainment; the impulse to justify ethical wrongs in terms of aesthetic value has had a long and disturbing political reality. Too often, we

have seen people march, raise arms, and kill under the banner of an exclusionary aesthetic ideal.

Unsurprisingly, Plato was one of the first to identify the moral threat that the aesthetic can represent. There is much debate of precisely why Plato chooses to banish the poets from his perfectly just city, *Kallipolis*—(literally, “*beautiful city*”)—in Book X of his *Republic*. There, he argues that poetry, being a mere mimesis of physical reality, itself already an inferior reflection of the Forms, is thrice-removed from Ultimate Reality. As such, warns Plato, poetry is deceptive and harmful. Plato gives us more insight into the nature of this deceptive threat when he has Socrates describe, in Book IV of the *Republic*, how the young aristocrat Leontius is mesmerized by the horrific sight of human corpses:

*“I once heard something that I trust. Leontius, the son of Aglaion, was going up for the Piraeus under the outside of the North Wall when he noticed corpses lying by the public executioner. He desired to look, but at the same time he was disgusted and made himself turn away; and for a while he struggled and covered his face. But finally, overpowered by the desire, he opened his eyes wide, ran towards the corpses, and said: ‘Look, you damned wretches, take your fill of the fair sight.’”*<sup>8</sup>

Leontius, like lovers of violent films—or worse yet, lovers of the aesthetic in real violence—struggles between his aesthetic desires and his ethical repulsion. Might this be why Plato wants to banish the poets from his Kingdom? If it is indeed the *aesthetic* that threatens the ethical in this way—making us feast on our eyes on that which should morally repulse us—then perhaps it must be suppressed.

Shall we, then, banish the poets from our cities, along with the filmmakers, the novelists, and songwriters? The answer, I think, is a clear no. Beyond its intrinsic worth,

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<sup>8</sup> Plato, *Republic*. Allan Bloom, transl. Chicago: Basic Books, 1991. (IV: 440a).

art also plays an important instrumental role in the sphere of ethics. For is it not so often the artists who call to attention the plight of the suffering, the musicians who remind us of our common humanity, the filmmakers who document horrors that should never be forgotten, and the novelists who inspire us to empathize with those very different from us?

The relationship between the aesthetic and the ethical, thus, is not always one of tension, but often one of mutual affirmation. It is this sort of aesthetic that must be cherished and nourished; it is the aesthetic value of the ethical that must be affirmed, particularly in times of political instability, and particularly in the education of our youth. In this way, evil will be disrobed of its aesthetic mask, and laid bare for all to see.

We must then not banish the poets from our cities, but listen to them all the more closely when they sing of our common human enterprise.

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In London's Tate Modern Gallery, housed in the imposing structure of the former Bankside Power Station, there is a room with muted grey walls entirely dedicated to the work of the Russian-American abstract expressionist artist Mark Rothko. Rothko, who was witness to the horrors of both world wars, painted large oil canvasses with luminous layers of deep color. While he was alive, Rothko always insisted that even abstract painting had to be about *something*, and endeavored to have his work speak to a post-war generation in need of a soothing reminder of our common humanity. The appreciation of

colors and abstract forms, Rothko maintained, was a universal capacity: his work spoke equally to every person who had felt deep joy or sadness.

The quiet, meditative room in the Tate Modern is still, decades after Rothko's death, a reminder of our common humanity. In the dim light, Rothko's paintings are suspended like hovering swaths of sunset, touching deeply everyone who sees them—city denizens and visitors, children and adults, men and women, connoisseurs and novices.

Rothko's room, my favorite in the Tate Modern, always reminds me of this: there is nothing as potent as the synthesis of the aesthetic and the ethical, when the realms of goodness and of beauty merge into one. While the appeal of the aesthetic will perhaps always threaten, at least on occasion, the hold of the ethical on us, that appeal is ultimately no match for the power that the aesthetic and the ethical, together, wield.

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The recent unearthing of my old journals led me to this:

*May 5<sup>th</sup>, 1999*

*At dawn cobbled London streets are ghostly still. Then the sun begins to arch over Neoclassical arches and Gothic turrets, pouring itself into alleyways and sheltered alcoves. Strange to think that it is the same sun that awoke not just me, but the shopkeeper on Finchley Road, the farmer in Devon, the businessman on his way to Canary Wharf; the same sun that has already woken people by the banks of the Ganges in India and Thailand's seaside villages; the same sun that will soon shine on the inhabitants of New York's gleaming metropolis, Mexico's bustling cities, and finally the golden coasts of California. The same sun, always.*

*What a comforting thought, I think. The same sun, always.*