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The heaviest burden

Nietzsche and the death of God

Nietzsche's response to having lost faith, but not being able to live without it, was to invent the figure of a new creator — someone who could bring together Man and World once again. In order to do this, man had to begin to think through his own existence: the heaviest burden of all.

The madman. — Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly: "I seek God! I seek God!" — as many of those who did not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter. [...] The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. "Whither is God?" he cried; I will tell you. *We have killed him* — you and I. All of us are his murderers.
Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

With the metaphor of the "Death of God", Nietzsche means that the highest principles of all hitherto accepted world conceptions have lost their values. The death of the biblical God does not just leave behind a world as it has always been. Rather, it leaves behind a world which has lost its meaning. Only the guffawing rabble surrounding the "Madman" believes that a world without God and a world with God is the same. But if by "world" we mean the human world, the one that concerns us, the one in which all our needs, desires, joys and hopes are rooted, it makes a difference to this world whether it was created, and whether its creator has, at the same time, revealed itself to its creations as their redeemer.

The Madman brings a message about that condition of the world which the rabble cannot yet perceive: namely, that the "personal" ties between God, the World and Man — the arch concepts of traditional European thought — have been loosened. We can see the beginning of this loosening in the emergence of the modern scientific worldview of the seventeenth century and its de-humanization of the world. The relentless dismantling of the relation between Man and World played a central role in this process. The emerging de-humanized world, one which no longer relates to man from within itself, henceforth became a dead world. The prelude to the death of God was the death of the World.

In Nietzsche's mind, the total collapse of hitherto existing goals and values — their general loss of reality — is formulated as the absence of world.

According to him, unlike the ancients, modern man no longer inhabits an eternal world created for him. He is "moving, away from all suns, plunging continually, through an infinite nothing".¹ However, because the meaning of the news about the death of God are still distant and strange to him, he still lives as if he lived in a divinely created world, even if he does not believe in it. In Nietzsche's conception, the images man makes of the world and of himself are the externalizations of his goals, values, mistakes, truths and prejudices. More precisely, the ones emerging victorious from the battle over goals and values will be the ones giving shape to the world of posterity. It is they who become its "higher man". Regardless of greater or smaller differences across different customs, or of the historical evolution of beliefs, the essential nature of these goals and values — the fundamental structure of world they belong to — remains the same.

The moral consciousness of contemporary Europeans, for example, is evidently of Christian heritage. Even with the appearance of modern atheism, it did not yield its place to some form of "primitive", pre-Christian consciousness. Instead, it changed itself into a secularized version of Christian morality: becoming one of its acceptable, convenient presuppositions. The fact that the self-centered individual finds it necessary to present its own narrow will — dishonestly — as the will to truth, does not mean that it can no longer distinguish evil from good. If anything, if it serves its own interest, it might even sharpen that distinction. And this, in the words of the Madman, means that modern man cannot assume the death of God as a result of his own actions. Morality is not lacking in a God-bereft world. What is lacking is rectitude: the ability to take upon oneself the tragic consequences of being *of* the world.

The heaviest burden. — What, if someday or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: "This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and an innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have return to you all in the same succession and sequence [...] Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him; "You are a God and never have I heard anything more divine."²

Nietzsche's thought of the Eternal Return involves the capacity to view one's life from within, and the willingness to reject all possible "external" perspective on oneself. The Overman, the one who is able to identify its own life with the totality of existence, is not some immortal being. Nothing in it has infinite duration. It has no life other than the one it lives. But that life, as Nietzsche says, is eternal: "This life — your eternal life".³

Interpreters of Nietzsche's thought of the Eternal Return run into problems the moment they ask whether this thought might provide an adequate explanation for the world as we know it. They think of it as one possible cosmological theory among others. Following this, most conclude that, as a theory, it is incoherent. One source of the problem is that they give too much weight to Nietzsche's somewhat long winded passages, in the unpublished works, where he attempts a natural-scientific "proof" of his doctrine. In view of the relative shortage of remarks in Nietzsche's published writings on the subject, the above

approach might be understandable. Nevertheless, the approach is unsound methodologically. For what is ignored by these critics is the fact that our world, as we experience it, is incommensurable with the world in which everything returns. In other words, it is not the case that there is *one world* — an always already existing "substratum" — for which Nietzsche's fundamental thought is one possible cosmological hypothesis.

The question that is not asked, but that should be asked, by these critics is: "What kind of world is the world in which the Overman could live?" Whether the world that "you yourselves should create"⁴ is comparable to the one *we* live in? According to Nietzsche's world conception, how a world comes to be, or whether it comes to be at all, is inseparable from how, and what, it is. For example, Zarathustra's world — the one that is a multitude of creating/self-creating power centres, cannot be the same as the one which is created from nothing — *ex nihilo*. Using Thomas Kuhn's formulation, we might say that instead of seeing the same world in two different ways we actually see two entirely different worlds. Consequently, the comings and goings, familiar to us in our everyday experiences, teach us nothing about the eternal becoming of the world-totality.

A central feature of Nietzsche's conception of "world-totality" is that it has never been, it has not become what it is; it is, rather, eternally becoming. That it has no origin means that it has no goal either: this world is always already accomplished in all its instances, it is already done, and it is always at its goal. In one of his rare speeches about eternal recurrence, Zarathustra asks: "Must not all things that *can* run have already run along this lane? [...] And are not all things bound fast in such a way that this moment draws after it all future things? *Therefore* — draws itself too?"⁵ It follows from this that all that can run, in the final analysis, runs toward itself.

We can illustrate Nietzsche's thinking here with the example of musical performances. We cannot claim that the purpose and meaning of the performance is to reach the last note. Nor can we claim that any given moment of the work is causally related to its preceding or succeeding moments. At the same time, the score (partition) establishes the constellation and succession of notes with unshakable necessity. We hear the music always only in time. We never hear it in its totality: we are confronted with its fleeting (fleeing) sounds (notes) only. It could be said that the performance runs through the totality of the composition. The performance's constant presences roll on in succession through the non-successive, simultaneously (concurrently) existing sound world. Our enjoyment of a perfectly crafted and executed musical work consists in the fact that we can affirm the entire score in each of its fleeing notes.

The above example helps us to clarify what it means for the world to be always already accomplished. In the mouth of the Overman, expressions like "universe" or "world-totality" do not just refer to its spatial extension. They refer, also, to its temporal totality. The Eternal Return, as communicable thought, asserts that the totality of the world is always already completed — in each of its moments. Namely, it is complete in all non-successive movement of world history. The presence of its performance in its actually "sounding" notes passes through each point of the "work". The claim that the world is eternally accomplished — that it is eternally complete in its totality — does not mean that some essential kernel of world history passes through a mere succession of formal changes. That the world is eternally complete means that in its spatial and temporal totality — in its entire course — it is always already

complete. The *now* that throws light on its singular moment is the eternally returning present. Neither does Eternal Return mean that the world–totality repeats itself cyclically, again and again. That would commit the doctrine to viewing the universe as the infinite totality of cycles of cycles. But, as the following passage indicates, Nietzsche rejects such an interpretation of eternal recurrence: "All becoming is internal to recurrence — therefore, such false analogies of coming and passing away as that of the stars, the tides, day and night or seasons, are inadequate characterization of eternal recurrence."⁶

In sum, according to the thought of Eternal Return, the unique present draws its eternal circle through the always already existing world–totality. The real "flesh and blood" Overman who could make the thought of eternal return his own — who could transform it into his own flesh and blood — would make the world's temporal totality his present. The Gateway under which it would stand would be the gateway to the universe. The eternal return returns eternally, it has no "First Instance", it has no precedent. Putting Nietzsche's views somewhat paradoxically, we could say: "everything always happens for the first time because there is only one circle". If time itself flows in a circle, always back to itself, then the whole never begins: life lives eternally, once and for all.

The Overman liberates itself from the weight of the previously existing supernatural world. At the same time, it liberates itself from the moral world order, along with the weight of all its previous actions. It is the thought of eternal return that leads it to the point where it can do everything for the first time. The harbinger of this thought calls forth from itself each moment as an absolute beginning. The moral character of its actions is rooted in itself, not in some previously existing moral code. In this the Overman is in marked contrast to what Zarathustra calls "last man".

Zarathustra's "last man" is the vessel of future time, and, as such, it cannot be a redeemer of time. Its time is the time of waiting. It waits for a future when thing will "get better" — when, at least, his grandchildren will be better off. The peculiarity of this kind of future is that it can appear only within the horizon of the last man: in which the future — though not yet here — will come, inevitably. Actually, the future within the time horizon of the last man is merely the prolongation of the present. A future which is beyond the last man's horizon will never come for him. Its prolonged present is like an infinitely long line, beyond which there is nothing. The last man cannot give himself an effective future. Naturally, he does not lack a future in its everyday sense. "Future time", as it is commonly understood, always comes, being the monotonous succession of one present after another, on and on. The last man is last because no one comes after him. Whoever would come after it would still belong to the last man's world, to the last man's own time horizon. And, for that reason, it would only be another "last man". In other words, the last man is not last in relation to what has preceded it. It can be last only from the standpoint of a radically different time horizon: that of the Overman. The Overman's time is what determines that the last man's time be last. But, in that new time horizon the last man can no longer appear. For that is a time of creation and of redemption.

In one of the central chapters ("Of Redemption") of the work that carries his name, Zarathustra declares: "To redeem the past and to transform every 'It was' into an 'I wanted it thus' — that is what I call redemption". What can be the meaning of this enigmatic statement? A possible clue for the answer might lie in a few lines preceding it: "I walk among men as among fragments of the

future: of that future which I scan. And it is my art and aim to compose into one and bring together what is fragment and riddle and dreadful dance". Based on this, and on our previous account of Eternal Return, we might say that from the standpoint of the Overman, the world of the last man is one of scattered fragments. And, it is only the "handed down" moral fabric — woven out of the fears and hopes of man hitherto — that holds together these fragments. The Overman shatters this fabricated world with its creative will in order to be able to create a new one from its fragments. So, while the last man's time and world are homogeneous, the Overman's world is an eternal eruption of each new "note" of the identical world–totality. This means that only the creator, in the moment of creation, can say "Yes!" to "It was". He alone can affirm the eternal present of the world in each of its moments.

At this point we must ask: "What, after all, has the death of God, or the eternal return of the same, to do with us?" We know that towards the end of his life, Nietzsche went mad. But it would be much too facile to say, as many have done, that thoughts like Nietzsche's can only come from a mad man. His diagnosis of the collapse of the Christian worldview cannot leave us indifferent: our atheism should not be taken lightly. Nietzsche's own response to the double challenge of having lost faith, but not being able to live without it, was to invent the figure of a new creator — someone who could bring together Man and World once again. But in order to do this, he felt that man must begin to think through his own existence: the heaviest burden of all.

¹ *Gay Science*, 125.

² *Gay Science*, 341.

³ 1880, [11] 183.

⁴ *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, 110.

⁵ *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, "The Vision and the Riddle", 110.

⁶ 1880, [11] 157.

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