

Zarathustra's Disgust: Rejecting the Foundation of Western Metaphysics

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"Giving an affect a name is one step beyond the affect. The deepest love, e.g., does not know what to call itself and asks appropriately: 'am I not hate?'" (KGW VII 1 3[1]. p.56.12)

Research on disgust as an emotion has lagged behind research on other emotions due perhaps to the same repulsion it confronts. Disgust is disgusting. In a recent study by Olatunji it was found that there are 10-20 times more papers per year on fear and anger than on disgust (Olatunji). Despite this, there has still been a large number of investigations into the importance of disgust in a variety of areas. Disgust plays an essential role in our socialization, in selecting our friends, sexual partners, social group, and even our moral concepts (Vivario, "Core, Social and Moral Disgust", 185). Despite the comparative lack of research on disgust compared to other emotions, the empirical work has blossomed in the last decade. There is a greater understanding of the neural-correlates of disgust including insula and its interconnected circuits (Murphy et. al.; Wicker et. al.; Schäfer et al.; Fusar-Poli et. al.; Kirby and Robinson). There has also been research conducted on the importance of genes for the experiences of disgust regarding taste and smell (Reed, "Diverse Taste"; Reed "Genetics of Taste and Smell"). This has also included research on the neuro-functional relationships disgust plays within our moral experiences (Chapman and Anderson; Chapman and Kim et. al.; Whitton et.

al.; Vicario "emotional Appraisal"; Vicario, "Morality and Disgust"; Tybur et. al.; Landy; Jones; Eskine). A few studies have also suggested the importance of disgust for communication and education (Curtis). A communicative and pedagogical approach to disgust has been found effective, for example, in hand washing rates (Drummond et. al.; Judah et. al.).

However, one area of research that has been lacking is philosophical use of disgust to pedagogically diagnose and communicate something foundational to the western tradition; misanthropy. I explore this possibility through an analysis of the pedagogical use of disgust within the texts of Friedrich Nietzsche.

Disgust (*Ekel*) plays a foundational role in Nietzsche's philosophy in a variety of ways. Nietzsche's use of "*Ekel*" and other cognates occur in many important passages in Nietzsche's published work.¹ Nietzsche often uses the term as scientists tend to today. Usually something that causes disgust to arise is diseased, decomposing, or contagious in some way. Typical objects of disgust are feces, corpses, urine, and taboo sexual acts. Nietzsche associates disgust with these kinds of objects such as; excrement (urine and fe-

¹*Ekel*: BT 7, 19, "Attempt at Self-Criticism", 5; UM DS 4, 6; UM HL, 1, 2, 4, 7, 9; UM SE, 2, 3, 5; UM RWB, 2, 3, 5, 8, 11; HAH I 149; HAH II VM 111, 286; WS 7, 211, 213, 246, Preface 3; D 56, 109, 136, 202, 273, 483; GS 49, 76, 86, 107, 277, 295, 302, 306, 318, 335, Pref. 1, 347, 364, 373; Poems 10 "Rimus remedium. Or: how sick poets console themselves."; Z I Pref. 2, 3, Z I 6; Z II 6,11, 13, Z III 2.2, 5.3, 10.2, 11.2, 12.14, 12.28, 13.1, 13.2; BGE 10, 26, 119, 203, 210, 224, 227, 241, 253, 258, 269, 270, 278, 282; GM II 24, III 7, 13, 14, 19, 26; CW postscript; A 38, 39; TI "Untimely" 36, 48, "Ancients" 4; EH "Wise" 8, Z 8, "Destiny" 6; NCW "How I Broke Away From Wagner" 1, "The Psychologist has a Word" 3.

Ekelhaft: UM HL 9; HAH II VM 2; GS 86.

Ekels: HAH II WS 246; GS 39, 49; GM II 7; EH "Why I am so Wise" 8.

Ekelhafte: UM SE 4, 5; HAH II WS 174; GM II 7.

Ekel: BT 3 (cf. DW 3); UM RWB 11; GS 109; Z III 7, Z IV 4, 5.

Ekelhaften: UM SE 8; HAH I 217; D 56; GM I 11.

Ekeln: HAH II WS 368; GS 292; Z III 12.14.

Ekelhaftes: D 203.

Ekelgedanken: BT 7 (cf. DW 3 & *Die Geburt des tragischen Gedankens* 3).

Ekelhafteste: GM II 14.

ces), bad smells, decay, overindulgence, and saliva (UM HL 1; GM II 7; HAH II 111; D 109). However, Nietzsche is very clear that disgust plays an important functional role within argumentation as well (HAH II WS 7; HAH II WS 211).

Further, Nietzsche also gave disgust a deeper role within his philosophy. Throughout Nietzsche's work, disgust at existence itself forms one of the central problematics of philosophical inquiry. Early in Nietzsche's career he encountered Schopenhauer's work that argued we can justify the absurdity of existence through aesthetic experiences (particularly of music), an ethics of compassion, and ascetic self-denial and resignation. For Nietzsche, in the *Birth of Tragedy* and other early writings, nihilism and disgust [*Ekel*] at existence can be assuaged or justified through music (BT 24-25; DW 1). Following some lines of thought in Schopenhauer, Nietzsche's early work saw the aesthetic justification of existence as a discharge of disgust [*Ekel*] at existence that resulted in an ascetic, will-negating mood (BT 7; DW 3).

Nietzsche eventually saw this will negation through music as participating in, and glorifying, the denial of life at the core of the ascetic ideal (GM III 5-6, 28; A 7). In later writing Nietzsche vehemently rejected these Schopenhauerian solutions to suffering and disgust as simply an escapism which treats the symptoms of disgust but do not make way for affirmation or overcoming (HAH I 103; D 63; GM pref. 5). In Nietzsche's mature period, it becomes clear that Schopenhauer did not think pessimism to its depth and the Schopenhauerian solutions to nihilism and disgust were untenable (BT ASC 6; BGE 56; GM 5-7). In his late works, Nietzsche clearly suggests that the philosophy of Schopenhauer is only a formula for resignation, not affirmation (EH BT 2; TI "Ancients" 5; BT ASC 6). Instead of simply treating the symptoms of this foundational disgust with human experience, Nietzsche wanted to think this disgust with all existence and the human condition to its depths and overcome it. This explains why disgust plays a pivotal role in one of his most central ideas: eternal recurrence.

The idea of eternal recurrence is, perhaps, Nietzsche's most contentious idea because scholars find it difficult to agree, even in broad terms, about what it means. However, Nietzsche himself, in his autobiography *Ecce Homo*,

describes it as "the unconditional and infinitely repeated circular course of all things" (EH BT 3). The idea is that every event, every action, and every experience that occurs in the universe will repeat in the same way, not only once, but an infinite number of times. One important place Nietzsche puts the idea forward is his work *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Nietzsche goes so far as saying that eternal recurrence is the fundamental conception of the work (EH Z 1).

In the penultimate section of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, "The Convalescent," Zarathustra encounters his most abysmal thought and eternal recurrence. Both of these involve disgust. Until this point in the text, Zarathustra had been trying, and failing, to think his most abysmal thought. In the beginning of the section, Zarathustra finally draws up his courage to think his most abysmal thought. Upon doing so, Zarathustra cries out, "Disgust [*Ekel*], disgust [*Ekel*], disgust [*Ekel*] - woe is me!" (Z III 13.1). Zarathustra then collapses. In the second part of the section, Zarathustra is wrestling with his most abysmal thought off stage and the reader only hears a report about it from the final part of the section. In the final part, Zarathustra recalls his wrestling with the thought and again claims, "Ah, Disgust! [*Ekel!*] Disgust! [*Ekel!*] Disgust! [*Ekel!*] - Thus Spoke Zarathustra, and sighed and shuddered; for he remembered his sickness" (Z III 13.2). After Zarathustra has recovered from his sickness, he is finally able to affirm the value of life and existence in the final section of the book and affirms again and again, "For I love you, O Eternity!" (Z III 13.2).²

Scholars tend to take Zarathustra's most abysmal thought [*abgründlicher Gedanke*] simply to be eternal recurrence [*ewigen Wiederkunft*] or determinism more generally (Seung, 188; Loeb, *The Death of Nietzsche's Zarathustra*, 102; Loeb, "The Gateway-Augenblick, 94; Loeb, "Find the Übermensch", 169, 175n18; Cutrofellow 346; Shapiro 39; Gillsepie 115). However, when one pays close attention to the text, these are distinct and not necessarily coexten-

²This is the actual ending of the book. Part IV was published privately and distributed to only a few friends. In the end, Nietzsche asked for all the copies back.

sive (Nehamas 148; Clark 262). Nietzsche is very clear to distinguish his most abysmal thought and the eternal recurrence of his most abysmal thought.

The first indication that eternal recurrence and the most abysmal thought are distinct occurs in "On the Vision and the Riddle." In this section, Zarathustra relates a vision to a group of sailors. In that vision he is conversing with a dwarf who is referred to as the spirit of gravity. The dwarf gives a cosmological interpretation of eternal recurrence stating, "time itself is a circle" (Z III 2.2). However, Zarathustra claims, "you do not know my abysmal thought! That - you could not endure!" (Z III 2.2). This implies, first, that the dwarf understands eternal recurrence cosmologically and, second, this is not the same as knowing Zarathustra's most abysmal thought. They are, therefore, not coextensive.

Further, Nietzsche's own reading of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in *Ecce Homo* supports reading eternal recurrence and Zarathustra's most abysmal thought as separate. He writes that the psychological problem of the Zarathustra type is,

how someone with the hardest, the most terrible insight into reality, who has thought 'the most abysmal thought', can nonetheless see it *not* as an objection to existence, not even to its eternal return, but instead finds one more reason in it for *himself to be* the eternal yes to all things, 'the incredible, boundless yes-saying, amen-saying'... (EH Z 6)

The most abysmal thought is considered an understandable objection to existence. Eternal recurrence just amplifies that thought because it must eternally return. This means that the most abysmal thought is not eternal return itself. It is something that returns within each recurrence. Therefore, the most abysmal thought is something distinct from eternal return itself. This conclusion is textually born out in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. In the section "The Vision and the Riddle," Zarathustra sees a vision of a young shepherd who is choking on a snake that has crawled into his throat and bit him. Near

the end of the section Zarathustra asks the sailors who the shepherd was in the vision but receives no answer.

In the section directly following "The Vision and the Riddle" it becomes clear that Zarathustra was the young shepherd in the vision, and it is his most abysmal thought that will bite him in the future. Zarathustra states,

At last my abyss stirred and my thought bit me.

Ah, abysmal thought, which is *my* thought! When shall I find strength to hear you burrowing and no longer tremble?

My heart rises to my throat when I hear you burrowing! Even your silence wants to choke me, you abysmal silent one!

As yet I have never dared to summon you up: it has been enough that I - have carried you about with me! (Z III 3).

Therefore, what bites Zarathustra later in the text is specifically his most abysmal thought.

In the penultimate section of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, "The Convalescent," Zarathustra finally encounters his most abysmal thought firsthand. Zarathustra recalls the encounter stating, "that monster crept into my throat and choked me! But I bit its head and spat it away from me" and Zarathustra continues, "The great disgust with man - it choked me and had crept into my throat" (Z II 13.2). So, Zarathustra's most abysmal thought is his great disgust with man.

The text gets even more specific about the disgust. The great disgust with man is that even the greatest of men are still small and all-too-human. Further, it is textually demonstrable that this disgust with man is distinct from the eternal return of this disgust. Zarathustra claims,

Once I saw both of them naked, the greatest man and the smallest man: all-too-similar to one another - even the greatest, all-too-human!

The greatest all-too small! - that was my disgust at man! And the eternal recurrence even of the smallest! - that was my disgust at all existence! (Z III 13.2)

This passage demonstrates that Zarathustra's most abysmal thought causes his great disgust with man, however, this is distinct from the eternal recurrence of his most abysmal thought which causes his great disgust with all existence. So, not only can we see that the most abysmal thought and eternal recurrence are not identical, but that this also seems to be the way Nietzsche himself interprets it in *Ecce Homo*.

It is important to note that the eternal return of "the smallest", that creates a disgust at all existence, does not mean disgust only about the smallest man, rather, all of humanity has become small. It is not simply the small man that creates disgust but mankind itself including great men. This has been previously pointed out by Seung and Loeb (Seung 164; Loeb, "The Dwarf, the Dragon and the Ring of Eternal Recurrence", 99). What this means is that great men cannot justify the value of existence. In *Human, All-to-Human* Nietzsche rejects the attempt to justify existence through great men, excluding all other human beings, as a type of "impure thinking" (HAH I 33).

What eternal recurrence does is amplify an opinion already held by Zarathustra and blows it up to unreasonable proportions. In so doing, it allows us to really think the most abysmal thought to its depths. The most abysmal thought is a pessimistic thought. That it, the most abysmal thought concludes that there is no value to existence. This value judgment Nietzsche sees at the foundation of western thought. It is implicit in our value systems in philosophy ever since Socrates. Nietzsche states in *Twilight of the Idols*, in the section "The Problem of Socrates,"

The wisest men in every age have reached the same conclusion about life: it's no good [...] Even Socrates said as he died: 'living—that means being sick for a long time: I owe Asclepius the Savior a rooster'. (TI "The Problem of Socrates" 1)

Here Nietzsche's interpretation is that Socrates owes Asclepius, who is the God of doctors, a rooster because he has been cured of the disease that is life (GS 340). The idea that this world is a disgusting disease we should flee from is implicit in the western tradition. This includes various forms of Platonism

and Christianity. Until we confront this foundational disgust with earthly existence, we cannot fully affirm life.

According to Nietzsche, one of our fundamental problems is that we do not know how to justify the meaning of our existence. The meaning of suffering is unjustifiable, and this makes life itself repulsive and disgusting. It is not simply that we suffer but that we suffer *in vain*. Nietzsche writes, "The meaninglessness of suffering, *not* suffering itself, was the curse that lay over mankind" (GM III 28). One way we can deal with this is to fit our suffering into a larger metaphysical or religious scheme in which we can *redeem* our suffering. Nietzsche claims that the "insanities of Metaphysics" are an attempt to answer the question of the "value of existence" (GS Pref. 2). By redeeming suffering through metaphysics, "the tremendous void seemed to have been filled; the door was closed to any kind of suicidal nihilism" (GM III 28). Our disgust for human existence and the purposelessness of human suffering, if left to its own, would lead to suicide. If we were honest about the conditions of our existence it would be unbearable. Nietzsche writes, "*Honesty* would lead to nausea [disgust/*Ekel*] and suicide" (GS 107). We can either cure this foundational disgust or provide symptomatic treatment.

Symptomatic treatment functions as a type of therapy that only treats the symptom not the cause (GM III 16, 17). We can flee this disgust and treat its symptoms by either metaphysics or universal compassion. Metaphysics provides a reason for our suffering in some larger structural system that provides a justification for our suffering. Universal compassion, on the other hand, allows us to empathize with and ease the suffering of humanity. When we treat the symptoms of disgust for the human condition in this way, there is a sense in which life is preserved. One is no longer forced to suicidal nihilism. However, and Nietzsche is very clear about this, while not suicidal, such treatments are still unhealthy and essentially passively nihilistic.

Nietzsche tightly links the tendency of disgust for this world to Christianity. In 1874 Nietzsche claims that the ideals of Christianity make us disgusted by our own naturalness (UM SE 2). In his 1886 new forward to *The Birth of Tragedy*, "An Attempt at Self Criticism," he writes,

From the very outset Christianity was essentially and pervasively the feeling of disgust [*Ekel*] and weariness which life felt for life, a feeling which merely disguised, hid and decked itself out in its belief in ‘another’ or ‘better’ life. (BT “Attempt at Self-Criticism” 5.)

Christianity, therefore, demonstrates a disgust for everything human and finite. In positing heaven, Christians are trying to escape the world which they find disgusting and intrinsically valueless.

This critique also extends more generally to the metaphysical tradition that posits some transcendent afterworld in distinction to this world. As Nietzsche writes, this “metaphysical *need* [*Bedürfniss*]” indicates a sickness, passive nihilism, a world weariness and aversion to life (HAH I 26, I 37, I 153; GS 151; cf. HAH I 222; GS 1 [need “*Bedürfniss*” for metaphysicians], 110 [need “*Bedürfniss*” for truth]; cf. BGE 59). To have this kind of *metaphysical need* is a sign of weakness and decay. “Needing” metaphysics is a weakness and “impotence” that comes from deep sickness, deep suffering, deep “distress” with life and this world (Z I 3; GS Pref. 2; cf. Z I 4, I 8). As Nietzsche says in the 1887 preface to *The Gay Science*,

In some it is their deprivations that philosophize; in others their riches and strengths. The former *need* [*nöthig*] their philosophy, whether it be as a prop, a sedative, medicine, redemption, elevation, or self alienation. For the latter it is merely a beautiful luxury [...] (GS Pref. 2)

For Nietzsche, the need for metaphysics can be seen as a form of nihilistic revenge on a life one finds disgusting. To falsify the world by means of conceptual schemes is to take revenge upon it. This world of flux and change seems degraded when we compare it to a transcendentalized and deified world. Nietzsche writes,

Here and there one encounters an impassioned and exaggerated worship of “pure forms,” among both philosophers and artists:

let nobody doubt that whoever stands that much in *need* [*nöthig*] of the cult of surfaces [metaphysics] must at some time have reached *beneath* them with disastrous results.

Perhaps there even exists an order of rank among these burnt children, these born artists who find enjoyment of life only in the intention of *falsifying* its image (as it were, in a long winded revenge on life): the degree to which life has been spoiled for them might be inferred from the degree to which they wish to see its image falsified, thinned down, transcendentalized, deified. (BGE 59)

Metaphysical and theological systems which posit some form of backworld [*Hinterwelt*] or afterlife can be seen as a symptom (Z I 3; HAH II 17; cf. KGW VIII 2 11[99]). That is, they are the result of a predisposition to see everything that is this-worldly as disgusting. It demonstrates an implicit pessimism about the value of existence.

Comfort from Suicidal Pessimism

Metaphysical systems, be they Christian or Platonic, give us comfort. They allow us to fit seemingly meaningless and purposeless suffering into a broader picture where the value of existence can be justified. These systems are intended to save us from suicidal nihilism. Without these systems of comfort, if we really thought pessimism through to its depth, it would be unbearable. The meaninglessness of suffering would hang upon us as the greatest weight.

In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Essay II section 14, which is to some extent a commentary on “The Convalescent” in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche describes what has a calamitous effect: profound disgust and great compassion. In this section he is describing how man’s weakness and smallness make them resentful and vengeful against life. He writes,

What is to be feared, what has a disastrous effect like no other disaster, would not be great fear, but *disgust* for humans, likewise

great *compassion* for humans. Supposing these were to marry someday, then immediately something uncanny would inevitably come into the world, the “last will” of humanity, its will to nothingness, nihilism. (GM III 14)

Disgust and compassion are central features of diagnosing sick predispositions towards life that result in nihilism.

This raises the question as to why such a combination is so very nihilistic? Nietzsche had this fully worked out by 1881 when he published *Dawn*. Disgust at all existence itself in an individual is not necessarily a bad thing for humanity itself since those individuals will select themselves out of the species via suicide. It confirms the wisdom of the satyr Silenus which Nietzsche quotes in *The Birth of Tragedy*, “The very best thing is utterly beyond your reach not to have been born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*. However, the second-best thing for you is: to die soon” (BT 3). That is, an unpolluted and clear-sighted pessimism that became conscious of this kind of disgust at all existence would lead to suicide. However, such pessimism and disgust does not self-extinguish when it is combined with compassion. Nietzsche writes,

If, like the people of India, one establishes knowledge of human misery as the *goal* of all intellectual activity and remains faithful to such a horrible objective throughout many generations of spirit, then, in the eyes of such people of *inherited* pessimism, *feeling compassion* acquires, in the long run, a new value as a *life-preserving* power that makes existence bearable, even though it seems, for all the disgust and horror it evokes, worth tossing away. As a sensation containing pleasure and meting out superiority in small doses, feeling compassion becomes the antidote to suicide. (D 136)

While a disgust at all existence might cause one to commit suicide, if one has compassion for others then one will remain in this sick state for a long time.

However, this compassion only functions as an antidote to suicide if it is not thought through completely. If it is thought through to its depths, as Zarathustra does, it unravels and compassion can no longer justify existence. In fact, universal compassion is an argument against the value of existence. Early in Nietzsche’s career we can find seeds of the thought that universal compassion and empathy lead to nihilism. In *Human, All-Too-Human* he argues that the exceptional person able to really think compassion to its depth, would reveal their own nihilism. He writes,

Thus, for the ordinary, everyday person, the value of life rests solely upon him taking himself to be more important than the world. The great lack of imagination from which he suffers makes him unable to empathize with other beings, and hence, he participates in their fate and suffering as little as possible. By contrast, anyone who really could participate in such things would have to despair of the value of life; if he did manage to conceive and to feel the total consciousness of humanity within himself, he would collapse with a curse against existence - for humanity as a whole has no goal and consequently the individual cannot find anything to comfort and sustain him by considering the whole process, but only despair. (HAH I 33)

This section in *Human, All-Too-Human* is illustrative of what it means to think compassion through to its depths as Nietzsche suggests in *Beyond Good and Evil* 56. Universal compassion seems to initially provide an antidote for suicidal nihilism. However, when we think universal compassion through it becomes unbearable. It is difficult to justify the seemingly unjustified suffering in one’s own life. If one expands this to one’s friends and family, it becomes even more difficult. Expanding this to the human species in general makes it even more difficult to affirm the value of life. If one goes one step further and applies the eternal recurrence of such universal compassion it becomes completely unbearable.

The above section from *Human, All-Too-Human* I think is helpful for understanding Zarathustra's experience in "The Convalescent." This form of compassion that seeks to do away with all things in life that are painful simply has a misconception of life. This approach to life sees what is difficult and what is challenging as a problem to be solved, eradicated, and cured. The end goal of life would simply be a lack of discomfort. However, this ignores that perhaps what makes us most human is striving against what is difficult and expressing our strength against opposition. Nietzsche writes in *The Gay Science*,

The 'religion of compassion' (or 'the heart') commands them to help, and believe they have helped best when they have helped most quickly! Should you adherents to this religion really have the same attitude towards yourself that you have towards your fellow men; should you refuse to let your suffering lie on you even for an hour and instead constantly prevent all possible misfortune ahead of time; should you experience suffering and displeasure as evil, hateful, deserving of annihilation, as a defect of existence, they you have besides your religion of pity also another religion in your hearts; and the latter is perhaps the mother of the former - *the religion of snug cosiness*. (GS 338)

The tendency towards compassion that eternal recurrence exaggerates shows us something about the anesthetic vision of the good life the western tradition has created for itself. The best life is the painless life. When this is exaggerated and thought through to its depths it is shown not to be life affirming but actually a kind of life negating pessimism.

Such a view is completely compatible with the suicidal nihilism present in the wisdom of Silenus presented earlier, "The very best thing is utterly beyond your reach not to have been born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*. However, the second best thing for you is: to die soon" (BT 3). This is precisely the pessimism of Socrates that Nietzsche introduced directly before his first presentation of eternal recurrence in *The Gay Science*. Nietzsche writes, "[Socrates]

said: 'O Crito, I owe Asclepius a rooster.' This ridiculous and terrible 'last word' means for those who have ears: 'Oh Crito, life is a disease'" (GS 340). The need to 'cure' the problem of life reveals that Socrates, and the western tradition generally, sees human life itself as a disgusting disease.

Nietzsche does not mean disgust at a particular person but disgust at being a living embodied human in general. This disgust is not only outward but internalized. Most treatments of disgust involve the object of disgust being something exterior to oneself. However, in the moment of thinking though eternal return of the most abysmal thought, one is also part of the disgusted category. In this sense, this great disgust involves shame (*Scham*) at being human. Nietzsche writes,

The darkening of the sky above humanity has always increased in proportion to how humans' shame at humans has grown. The weary pessimistic gaze, the mistrust of the enigma of life, the icy No of disgust at life [...] On their path to becoming "angels" (not to use a harsher word here) humans have bread themselves that ruined stomach and that coated tongue through which not only the joy and innocent of the animals have become repugnant to them, but even life itself has become distasteful. (GM II 7)

Disgust and universal compassion go hand in hand. They are not separate phenomena but form the basic nihilistic instinct at the foundation of western metaphysics and Christianity. The combination of these two leads to nihilism.

The most abysmal thought reveals the foundational disgust at the human condition that we consistently find within the western tradition. Metaphysics, from Plato through Kant, is a kind of escapism founded on a disgust with the this-worldly conditions in which humans live.

The centrality of disgust that Nietzsche diagnoses at the foundation of western philosophy, however, is not hopeless. Throughout his career Nietzsche uses the metaphor of disgust as something that must be overcome

[*überwinden*] (UM DS 6). The most abysmal thought provides the opportunity for such an overcoming. As Gooding-Williams writes, “Zarathustra regards his abysmal thought to be a good reason for becoming a sublime and leonine being who *rejects his abysmal thought*” (Gooding-Williams; 373). If we philosophically reflect on the deep role that disgust of human finitude plays in western metaphysics, we may be able to heal ourselves and become convalescent. By thinking the most abysmal thought to its end, we will confront the hidden origin of our systems of thought. Nietzsche tells us that thinking pessimism to its depths, may actually point to an opposite ideal. An ideal that affirms life.

In *Beyond Good and Evil* 56, a section addressing eternal recurrence, Nietzsche writes that thinking pessimism to its depths provides the possibility of life affirmation,

Whoever has endeavored with some enigmatic longing, as I have, to think pessimism through to its depths [...], looked into, down into, the most world-denying of all possible ways of thinking [...] may just thereby, without really meaning to do so, have opened his eyes to the opposite ideal. (BGE 56 [Kaufmann trans])

For Nietzsche, it is important that we come to terms with our foundational disgust with the human condition so that we may be able to overcome it and affirm the kind of life we have.

Nietzsche writes, “Anyone who has ever thought this possibility through to the end knows one more nausea [*Ekel/disgust*] than other human beings - but perhaps also a new *task!*...” (BGE 203). This new task requires that we reevaluate the systems of thought that have led us to this point and seriously consider if they are a healthy perspective to have on life.

One could consider life quite differently from the start. Struggle and difficulty in life are not something that we ought to get rid of. Rather, is what makes us truly human. To be presented with a challenging situation is not necessarily a bad thing but an invitation to rise to the challenge. Trying times can be an opportunity to let our courage and power truly come forward. We

can see the difficulties in life as a way to test ourselves and exert our inner determination upon the world. It is only when we are pushed to our limits that we truly express our full potential. Perhaps we should welcome a challenging life because it will forge us, like a piece of iron between hammer and anvil, into something truly great. Hardship might allow us to become our full selves, to become who we truly are.

Such a view of life is absolutely antithetical to disgust and universal compassion. Such a view embraces hardship as one’s highest hope! Rather than feeling disgust and compassion, one ought to see the potential for courage. In the section entitled “On the Vision and the Riddle”, Zarathustra suggests,

Courage is the best slayer: courage also slays pity. But pity is the deepest abyss: as deeply as man looks into life, so deeply does he also look into suffering.

But courage is the best slayer, courage that attacks: it slays even death itself; for it says: “was that life? Well then! Once more!” (Z III 2.1)

If one thinks pessimism and the most abysmal thought to their depths, one reveals a basic disposition of western metaphysics that is not necessary. By seeing the depths of life denial, the opposite ideal emerges,

the most exuberant, lively and world-affirming human being who has learned to reconcile and come to terms with not only what was and is, but also want to have it again as it was and is, for all eternity, insatiably shouting *da capo* [from the top (play it again)]. (BGE 56)

Such an individual would not be crushed by the weight of universal compassion and disgust when he hears about the thought of eternal recurrence. Such a being is not disgusted by life at all. Rather, hearing that this life would repeat again in exactly the same way would bring them great joy and reason for celebration. A life affirming person of this type would say upon hearing

this, “You are a god, and never have I heard anything more divine” (GS 341). Such a reaction would indicate that one has thought pessimism through to its depth and found the opposite ideal of life affirmation. Such a predisposition would embrace the hardships and challenges in life and to affirm what is difficult. One would love one’s fate, *amor fati*, because hardship is what is necessary to forge one into what one is. This world affirming perspective would want nothing to be different and love every moment of life because life is inherently valuable. Nietzsche writes,

My formula for human greatness is *amor fati*: that you do not want anything to be different, not forwards, not backwards, not for all eternity. Not just to tolerate necessity, still less to conceal it [...] but to *love* it...” (EH “Clever” 10)

To love life this way is to have overcome one’s disgust with being human beings qua human being. To fully embrace being human, all-too-human, is to overcome our foundational disgust with everything this-worldly.

The foundational disgust with mankind that sparks the need for metaphysical backworlds and theological afterworlds must be thought through to its end. Linda Williams holds that the thought of eternal recurrence functions as a mirror that shows us our true selves. It allows us to see our predispositions towards life. However, it is not simply a diagnostic tool or litmus test because thinking the thought of eternal recurrence through does more than just reflect our image back to us. Rather, it magnifies and over exaggerates our own predispositions and the predispositions of western metaphysics. By exaggerating our predispositions, it shows us just how strange this disgust with human finitude really is and gives us the opportunity to overcome it.

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