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Nietzsche's Ever-Present Future

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Abstract

Nietzsche is unique among historically significant philosophers in his conception of and emphasis on the future. In many of his later works, Nietzsche suggests that his focus and purpose is directed at both describing and bringing about a particular future condition. I will attempt here to defend two separate, though related, claims: First, any plausible account of Nietzsche's philosophical project will have to accommodate a likewise plausible account of Nietzsche's particular emphasis on the future. Second, we can read Nietzsche's understanding of the future as the organizing principle through which we can best interpret his later work.

Keywords: *Nietzsche; understanding of future; organizing principle*

Nietzsche is unique among historically significant philosophers in his conception of and emphasis on the future. Of course, the future is important to the nature of time, free-will and determinism, history etc., and Nietzsche himself is not silent on these matters. But frequently when Nietzsche writes about "the future," he does not have in mind a metaphysical, logical, or theological concept or object. In many of his works, Nietzsche suggests (in both tone and statement) that his focus and purpose is directed at both describing and bringing about a particular possible future condition. In a manner of speaking, his concern is less with what is true (truth is another thorny subject) *about* the future than with what will be true *in* the future. I will attempt here to defend two separate though related claims regarding Nietzsche's future.

First, I will argue that any plausible account of Nietzsche's philosophical project will have to give or at least accommodate a likewise plausible account of Nietzsche's particular emphasis on the future. Just what "the future" is for Nietzsche is not so easy to interpret, and must be worked out *within* a theory of Nietzsche's philosophical project. To complicate matters somewhat further, a good account of Nietzsche's philosophical project must also make sense of what Nietzsche thinks philosophy was, is, and will be as well as how he understands his own work.

Second, I will suggest that we can read Nietzsche's understanding of the future as *the* organizing principle through which we can best interpret his later work. Clearly, if we take Nietzsche's project in these years to be in some sense oriented toward the future, it will be quite easy to make sense of Nietzsche's discussion of the future in these works. But this theme is not the only one which must be accounted for in a thoroughgoing interpretation of Nietzsche's works. I will therefore also attempt to show that we can make sense of other crucial themes, motifs and ideas (many of which have been offered by

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various Nietzsche scholars as candidates for Nietzsche's *central* idea) given the centrality of the future to Nietzsche's project.

I.

To understand the importance of accounting for Nietzsche's thinking about the future, I should say a bit more about the uniqueness of it. There is a somewhat trivial sense in which any normative theory and indeed any attempt to persuade others is an attempt to bring about some future effect. But what makes Nietzsche unique is his attention to the conditions of a particular time at least somewhat distant from the time of his writing. This emphasis of Nietzsche's is subtly different, even, from those of thinkers (Marx, for instance) who predict – from empirical investigation of the past and present alone – some condition holding or event occurring at some time or other in the future. For Nietzsche the future itself seems to be the primary concern. It is for him the proper object of an active philosophy. As such, his concern is primarily with a very general and at times very vague account of a preferable possible future condition.

Perhaps the nearest kin to this sort of philosophizing before Nietzsche may have been Kant's in his *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*. But even here the similarity to Nietzsche is at most methodological. Kant looks into the future of metaphysics and science, and says that his work is partly for the use of "future teachers," but his stated purpose in writing the *Prolegomena* is to "persuade" the teacher and the student of metaphysics "to propose first the preliminary question: Whether such a thing as metaphysics be even possible at all?" (156) Kant's concern here is really with metaphysicians of all ages - his own included. Nietzsche, however, has a purpose other than simple persuasion. As he says:

My task of preparing a moment of the highest self-examination for humanity, a *great noon* when it looks back and far forward, when it emerges from the dominion of accidents and priests and for the first time poses, *as a whole*, the question of Why? and For What? - this task follows of necessity from the insight that humanity is *not* all by itself on the right way... The question concerning the origin of moral values is for me a question of the very first rank because it is crucial for the future of humanity. (EH "Dawn" 2)

What I describe as "novel" in Nietzsche's work is the project described above, and here, in the voice of Zarathustra: "I have the overman at heart, *that* is my first and only concern - and *not* man: not the neighbor, not the poorest, not the most ailing, not the best... O my brothers, what I can love in man is that he is an overture and a going under." (Z 1.4) Passages like these suggest that Nietzsche and Zarathustra, reflecting on their tasks, see them as aimed at the future. What is done today is done in anticipation of and as preparation for some future condition.

Aside from the philosophical distinctness of Nietzsche's thinking about the future, there is also the sheer number of direct references to and time spent gazing into the future, especially in *The Gay Science*, *Zarathustra* and *Beyond Good and Evil* but also in the *Genealogy*,



Daybreak, *Human, All Too Human*, *The Antichrist*, *Ecce Homo*, and in his notebook writings collected in *The Will to Power*. One can hardly read these works without noticing the emphasis Nietzsche places on the future. But this is not a result of quantity alone. In many places, Nietzsche gives particular emphasis to his discussions of and references to the future. He refers to the planned "Will to Power" work as "this gospel of the future." (WP Preface 3) Zarathustra's first words to the people in the marketplace, his introduction to them and the introduction of his teachings direct people toward the future and to being creators of it: "*I teach you the overman. Man is something that shall be overcome. What have you done to overcome him?*" (Z I.3) Later, Nietzsche concludes Zarathustra's speeches and the entire first part of the book this way:

From the future come winds with secret wing-beats; and good tidings are proclaimed to delicate ears. You that are lonely today, you that are withdrawing, you shall one day be the people: out of you, who have chosen yourselves, there shall grow a chosen people - and out of them, the overman. (Z I. On the Gift-Giving Virtue. 2)

Very often, Nietzsche ends passages, sections and books with this gaze toward the future. For instance, in addition to the books in *Zarathustra*, Parts One, Three, Five, and Eight of *Beyond Good and Evil*, Books One, Two, and Five (the final part) of *Daybreak*, *The Antichrist* itself and the First and Second Treatises of the *Genealogy* all conclude this way. Nietzsche wants to remind us of the importance of the future in understanding what he has written and in understanding his purpose. Making sense of his philosophical project - however we do that - thus requires that we provide an interpretation that accounts for the significance of the future in Nietzsche's philosophy. In what follows, I will suggest such an interpretation.

II.

In much of his later work, Nietzsche is creating and practicing a philosophy of the future. Let us try and understand this suggestion by exploring at what "philosophy of the future" might mean to Nietzsche. The phrase itself puts us in mind, of course, of Nietzsche's subtitle to *Beyond Good and Evil*, "*Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*." Three puzzles arise out of this subtitle. If we settle them, we will go a long way toward developing a theory about just what is going on in *Beyond Good and Evil* and perhaps in Nietzsche's larger project in this period. First, there is an ambiguity that arises out of the genitive construction. Read either objectively or possessively, "philosophy of the future" refers to a philosophy that will exist in the future just as "cars of the future" refers to cars that have not, but will be developed. Read either subjectively or descriptively, it refers to a philosophy that is in some way about the future just as "philosophy of mathematics" refers to philosophy that is about mathematics. The second puzzle concerns the word "philosophy." In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche writes

How I understand the philosopher - as a terrible explosive, endangering everything - how my concept of the philosopher is worlds removed from any concept that would include even a Kant, not to speak of academic

'ruminants' and other professors of philosophy - this essay gives inestimable information about that, although at bottom it is admittedly not 'Schopenhauer as Educator' that speaks here, but his opposite, 'Nietzsche as Educator.' (EH "The Untimely Ones" 5)

Nietzsche's philosophy is not an advancement of traditional philosophy. It is in a sense meant to be a *replacement* of traditional philosophy for a select few. In the process of working through the first puzzle, it will be necessary to make better sense of just what "philosophy" means for Nietzsche. The third puzzle surrounding Nietzsche's subtitle and the book as a whole concerns the word "prelude". In what sense is *Beyond Good and Evil* a prelude?

Regarding the genitive ambiguity of "philosophy of the future," I suggest that Nietzsche is providing both an account of the philosophy that he sees in the future *and* himself philosophizing about the future and also that these projects, far from mutually exclusive, are intimately tied together. Nietzsche's "philosophers of the future" are themselves future-looking. They are commanders and creators of the future rather than prognosticators, but their energy is directed toward the future, toward the development of man. Their task will be the creation of values which will replace what has come before. As Nietzsche says vis-a-vis overcoming democratic values, we must look

Toward *new philosophers*; there is no choice; toward spirits strong and original enough to provide the stimuli for opposite valuations and to revalue and invert "eternal values"; toward forerunners, toward men of the future who in the present tie the knot and constraint that forces the will of millennia upon *new* tracks. (BGE V, 203)

In passages such as this, it seems that Nietzsche's "philosophy of the future" looks *toward* the future to a time and a group, the "new philosophers" who will themselves look forward and command. They will determine rather than discover new values. But no one has ever been wrong saying "things with Nietzsche are not so simple," and we must do so here. In addition to the "new philosophers" and the "philosophers of the future," Nietzsche also talks about "genuine philosophers." It would take a herculean effort of exegesis to develop an adequate *dramatis personae* for Nietzsche's works. I doubt, in fact, that such a thing is possible without begging questions or cherry-picking passage. At any rate, what is important for our present purposes is to notice that it is not *necessarily* only philosophers in the future who do what Nietzsche describes the philosophers of the future doing. Consider the following:

Genuine philosophers, however, are commanders and legislators: they say, "thus it shall be!" They first determine the Whither and For What of man, and in so doing have at their disposal the preliminary labor of all philosophical laborers, all who have overcome the past. With a creative hand they reach for the



future, and all that is and has been becomes a means for them, an instrument, a hammer. Their "knowing" is *creating*, their creating is a legislation, their will to truth is - *will to power*.

Are there such philosophers today? Have there been such philosophers yet? *Must* there not be such philosophers? – (BGE VI.211, see also WP IV.972, 979)

The question of whether Nietzsche means for *Beyond Good and Evil* to be about a philosophy in the future or a philosophy about the future is really a question about whether Nietzsche himself is doing what the genuine philosopher does - what he says the philosophers of the future will do.

Nietzsche scholars, naturally, disagree on this point. Walter Kaufmann thinks that "Nietzsche's conception of his own relationship to the legislating philosophers is expressed quite clearly in an earlier aphorism of [*Beyond Good and Evil*] where he speaks of himself as a 'herald and precursor' of 'the philosophers of the future'. Instead of rationalizing current valuations which appear to him as previous 'value creations that have become dominant and are, for a time, called 'truths,'" he offers a critique and thus prepares the ground for a new 'value-creation' or 'value-legislation' in the future." (Kaufmann 1974, 109) Kaufmann is right, I think, that Nietzsche sees himself as a "precursor" and a "herald" of the new philosopher. But this does not make his relationship to the legislating philosopher "clear." Recall that the "genuine" philosopher also legislates.

The key questions, then, are: "are there genuine philosophers in the present?" and if so, "is Nietzsche a genuine philosopher?" Nehamas for one answers "yes" to these questions. As he says, "The future, therefore, is the time with which genuine philosophers are concerned, not the time when they exist," (1988, 58) and

Beyond Good and Evil itself is a philosophy of the future; its narrator (and its author as well) is a genuine philosopher. The work is a 'prelude' to such a philosophy not because it simply heralds its arrival, but because - like Wagner's preludes to his artworks of the future (which themselves existed in what was for them the present) - it sounds the major themes and motifs of one philosophy of that kind. (Ibid., 59)

For Nehamas, "to proclaim that one is 'a genuine philosopher,'... is precisely to claim that one has the right to think unusual thoughts and to promote uncommon values because one already thinks of oneself as a person of a certain rare sort." (Ibid., 65) It is being of this "certain rare sort", presumably, that makes the genuine philosopher capable of legislation. This also seems plausible to me.

Both Kaufmann and Nehamas think that these two readings of *Beyond Good and Evil* are incompatible. But we need not see them as incompatible if we think of Nietzsche's philosophical project as most fundamentally about the creation of the conditions necessary

for some future state of affairs or individuals. On this interpretation of Nietzsche, his thinking and expressing unusual thoughts is simply part of creating those conditions. Talking *about* the philosophy of the future is then the method by which Nietzsche *brings about* the philosophy of the future. So *Beyond Good and Evil* is a "prelude" in both the sense of something that precedes something greater and also the sense of something that introduces something of its own kind.

III.

How is it, though, that thinking and speaking about the philosophy of the future can bring it about? I see the motivation for Nietzsche's prevalent discussions of the future as the same, ultimately, as his motivation for all his writing in this period. Recall that Nietzsche says that all of his writings after *Zarathustra* are "fish-hooks." His works are meant to find or to create an audience capable of bringing about certain conditions. This is the purpose of his philosophizing. This is, in fact, a purpose Nietzsche sees hidden in all philosophy: "what was at stake in all philosophizing hitherto was not at all 'truth' but something else - let us say, health, future, growth, power, life." (GS Preface, 2) Nietzsche's primary project is the cultivation of a type of audience and ultimately a type of person rather than the search for truth. Thus Nietzsche says that, "The falseness of a judgment is for us not necessarily an objection to a judgment; in this respect our new language may sound strangest. The question is to what extent it is life-promoting, life-preserving, species-preserving, perhaps even species-cultivating." (BGE, I, 4)

Nietzsche's motivations for his philosophy are the same as Zarathustra's motivations for teaching. "Companions, the creator seeks," Zarathustra says, talking about himself, "not corpses, not herds and believers. Fellow creators, the creator seeks - those who write new values on new tablets.... I shall join the creators, the harvesters, the celebrants: I shall show them the rainbow and all the steps to the overman." (Z I.9)

It is in looking forward into the future, toward the overman, that the dual purpose of philosophizing about the future and the development of a future philosophy find their culmination and goal. We today "are only just beginning to form the chain of a very powerful future feeling, link for link." (BGE IV.337) That chain appears for Nietzsche to end in the appearance of the overman. While man cannot create gods, he "could well create the overman. Perhaps not you yourselves, my brothers. But into fathers and forefathers of the overman you could re-create yourselves: and let that be your best creation." (Z II. Upon the Blessed Isles) His concern is with "what type of man shall be *bred*, shall be *willed*, for being higher in value, worthier of life, more certain of a future." (A 3)

Philosophy for Nietzsche is in part the process of destroying old values and creating new ones. Its immediate purpose is the cultivation of fellow creators. Its ultimate purpose is directed toward the future, toward an era of new "health" and a higher "type" of man. But we ought to notice how little is really said about the overman or what might characterize him. We do not have access to any such characterization, but we do have access to the values that must be destroyed and the values that must be created in order for the overman to be possible. Specifically, man must overcome the externally prescribed moral values of actions in favor of values internally determined by actions themselves. Thus, we can reconcile Zarathustra's claim that the overman is his "first and only concern" with Nietzsche's characterization of *Zarathustra* as the "Yes-saying" part of his task. An



exact specification of the future conditions which the philosopher cultivates may be impossible, but, Nietzsche thinks, "Our vocation commands and disposes of us even when we do not yet know it; it is the future that regulates our today." (HATH Preface 8)

We can also make sense of the emphasis Nietzsche places on overcoming morality and Christianity as part of the future-directed project. These are particularly pernicious and infectious values and modes of valuation that impede the development of man. Importantly, this is also how we can make sense of Nietzsche's twofold motivation in writing the *Genealogy*. First, Nietzsche thinks that "we need a *critique* of moral values, *for once the value of these values must itself be called into question* - and for this we need a knowledge of the conditions and circumstances out of which they have grown, under which they have developed and shifted." (GOM Preface 6) Nietzsche's need for such a critique again comes from his emphasis on the future of man. He asks us to consider the "good" as "a danger, a temptation, a poison, a narcotic through which perhaps the present were living *at the expense of the future*." (Ibid.) So by inquiring into the "*origins* of our moral prejudices," (GOM Preface 2) and suggesting that they developed not out of anything either intrinsic nor beneficial to man, Nietzsche attempts through the *Genealogy* to help us overcome a "dangerous" ideal that is hindering the development and self-overcoming of man.

In this way, the *Genealogy* looks into the future for its goal. But there is also a sense in which the *Genealogy* tells us *how* to look into the future. Because there is little said, because there is little that *can* be said directly about the overman, about the conditions that constitute the goal of philosophy, we need some other way of looking into the future toward that goal. Nietzsche's genealogical method provides us with that ability. Just as we look into an imagined past to answer the question, "what kind of conditions must have held to create the values that underlie our present condition?" so too can we look into an imagined future to ask, "what kind of conditions must come about given the kinds of values that we create?" As Zarathustra says, "Whoever has gained wisdom concerning ancient origins will eventually look for wells of the future and for new origins. O my brothers, it will not be overlong before *new peoples* originate and new wells roar down into new depths." (Z III. On Old and New Tablets. 25) This is how we come to know the overman. He is the last conceivable link in a chain that begins with philosophers questioning the value of our "values so far," through the creation of new values that determine the character of new peoples through the ascendancy of fitter, healthier individuals who may finally be capable of overcoming man and his inability to internally determine values. Nietzsche's sense of responsibility and possibility, I think, is genuine, when he says, "Being new, nameless, hard to understand, we premature births of an as yet unproven future need for a new goal also a new means - namely a new health, stronger, more seasoned, tougher, more audacious, and gayer than any previous health." (GS V.382) Just as *ressentiment* turned into a value-creating force has created modern man, democracy, Christianity and the herd, so too can a future-looking philosophy as Nietzsche conceives it create values that will create a higher type of man. As he later writes, "we must consider the future as decisive for all our evaluations - and not seek the laws of our actions *behind* us!" (WP IV.1000)

IV.

The interpretation of Nietzsche's philosophical project as an essentially future-oriented creative endeavor that I have sketched above is certainly not the only plausible one. Many Nietzsche scholars have offered plausible candidates for organizing principles

of Nietzsche's philosophical thought, usually corresponding to some major theme or idea in the works we have been primarily dealing with. I will not attempt to argue against these interpretations. Rather, I will try to briefly show that thinking about Nietzsche's philosophy in the way I have suggested can accommodate these other features. I have already touched on the ways in which Nietzsche's emphases on morality, revaluation and philosophy might be understood. Here I will provide a similar treatment of the doctrines of will to power and eternal recurrence.

Many scholars, following Kaufmann, have taken the concept of the will to power to be the organizing principle of Nietzsche's philosophy. "With *Zarathustra*," Kaufman claims, "the discovery of the will to power as well as Nietzsche's philosophic 'development' is completed; the gap between his early and late work has been bridged." (1974, 212) Nietzsche certainly does make bold claims for this concept of his, saying at one time that "life itself is *will to power*," (BGE I, 13) and at another that "*This world is the will to power – and nothing besides!* And you yourselves are also this will to power – and nothing besides!" (WP 1067)

We must first say something about what "will to power" means. I will follow Richard Schacht in thinking that "will to power" is but the expression [Nietzsche] uses to convey the idea that the world consists of nothing other than force which is so constituted that the sole disposition attributable to it and operative in it, in terms of which all of its modifications are to be understood, is the impulse to... transformation." (1983, 229) The kind of transformation Schacht has in mind here is a transformation in order-relations and valuations. The will to power is the will to re-evaluate and re-order. In terms of people and peoples, the will to power is the force that drives the higher man to recognize (and in so doing form) the order of rank among them. (BGE IX. 263) In terms of the creative new philosopher, will to power is manifested in his commanding new values and new valuations.

When Nietzsche looks to the future, it is to a time when the ranks of men have been radically re-ordered and all values have been re-valued. The will to power, then, has such prominence in Nietzsche's philosophy because it (and it alone) is the fact of the world that enables and, in fact, determines such massive upheavals. Now, we need not read "will to power" as a cosmological or metaphysical thesis, or the thing-that-explains-everything that we find in Schopenhauer's concept of "will." Rather, we may ask ourselves what cosmology, what metaphysics, what thing-that-explains-everything would be adopted by those who take for themselves the right to change orders of rank and our otherwise deepest-held valuations? And also: what cosmology, metaphysics and thing-that-explains-everything would be endorsed by someone who sought to create or "catch" such people?

The primary valuation through which we may understand the development of man Nietzsche wants to bring about is the affirmation of - the "yes-saying" to - life. If this sounds to our ears like a platitude fit for self-help books, then Nietzsche means something very different, something extraordinarily difficult. The overman is anticipated as the result of the development of man through individuals who have been able to say "yes" to life, who love life *enough*, but this is for the very few. Loving life "enough" is Zarathustra's great challenge. And he is challenged through the doctrine of eternal recurrence. Christianity, because it is fundamentally averse to life, creates an afterlife. So long as we believe in an afterlife, we need not affirm life. Indeed we are rewarded for turning away from it. As



Nietzsche writes in *The Antichrist*, "The great lie of personal immortality destroys all reason, everything natural in the instincts – whatever in the instincts is beneficent and life-promoting or guarantees a future now arouses mistrust." (A 43) Denying the afterlife, affirming death and nothingness still does not require that we affirm life, for we may in our pessimism embrace death as an escape from life, and thus we still do nothing to "guarantee a future." Thus Nietzsche introduces Eternal Recurrence, the *idea* whose affirmation would require a complete affirmation of life.

Paul Loeb has suggested that the Eternal Recurrence ought to be understood as a metaphysical or cosmological thesis, that in fact "Nietzsche holds that time itself recurs." (2007, 29) Somewhat less heroically, Lawrence Hatab defends a view of Eternal Recurrence in which the doctrine ought to be read "literally" but not "factually," he thinks that "eternal recurrence should be seen as the only authentic expression of a Nietzschean life-affirmation by force of its literal meaning." (2008, 149-150) If Loeb is correct, then everything I've said about Nietzsche's view of the future is at least made more complicated. Hatab seems to think that the importance and challenging force of the doctrine is lost if it is not considered "literally" but only as a kind of thought experiment. The trouble is, eternal recurrence *is* introduced as a kind of thought experiment in *The Gay Science*:

If this thought gained possession of you, it would change you as you are or perhaps crush you. The question in each and every thing, "Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?" would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight. Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life *to crave nothing more fervently* than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal? (GS IV. 341)

In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche says of *The Gay Science* that "it even offers the beginning of *Zarathustra* and in the penultimate section of the fourth book the basic idea of *Zarathustra*". (EH "Thus Spoke Zarathustra" 1) Now, Hatab is perhaps right to wonder how a thought-experiment could possibly be the "basic idea" of a book as important as *Zarathustra*. But the importance of eternal recurrence is not, on my reading, the value it has *as* a thought-experiment or even *as* a doctrine. It is the "basic idea" of *Zarathustra* because of what the thought experiment forces upon the reader. What is important is our reaction to it. Nietzsche thought, perhaps rightly, that nothing else would do so well to challenge us to see the value in life, to see the difficulty and importance of truly saying "yes" to life.

V.

I have meant the preceding discussion to be suggestive, but I mean it to be doubly suggestive. On the one hand, I think that proper attention to the centrality of Nietzsche's conception of the future requires new interpretations of much of Nietzsche's philosophical work. I also think, though, that in the light of such attention, we ought also to reconsider Nietzsche's *purpose* in writing and our own interpretive strategies in approaching Nietzsche. That is to say, we ought perhaps to reformulate our questions about his views and works. For instance, instead of asking "Was Nietzsche a compatibilist?" we might ask "Why would someone trying to help bring about the conditions Nietzsche seems to say the things he

does about free will and determinism?" True to Nietzsche's method, the latter is ultimately a question about the *value* of questions about free will.

The project of evaluating Nietzsche then becomes the project of determining the value (for us) of the future he envisions and the capacity of his writings to help bring it about. On the latter criterion, we can see better just how brilliant Nietzsche was; on the former, we can see just how dangerous.

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