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**Life, Injustice, and Recurrence in Nietzsche's  
Early Writings**

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Here I consider a few passages from "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life" and *Human, All Too Human*, with the aim of articulating Nietzsche's early position on the connection between life and injustice. My ultimate aim is to consider what that connection can tell us about the doctrine of eternal recurrence expressed in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. My main conclusion is the surprising one that recurrence plays a relatively minor role in that work.

## 1. Injustice in "Uses and Disadvantages"

In "Uses and Disadvantages" Nietzsche asserts that injustice is inseparable from life, and that as parts of life we are unavoidably guilty of injustice – "...to live and to be unjust is one and the same thing" (*UM2* 76; *HAH* P:4). We can approach this claim by appealing to Nietzsche's understanding of life in terms of drives, wills, and affects, in relation to which the world comes to be 'colored' with value. As living beings, we are *valuing* beings existing in a world full of things that appear agreeable or disagreeable, repulsive, inspiring, worthy of love, etc. At the same time, however, our particular drives, wills, and affects are both groundless and malleable. They are just one way in which life does exist, or could exist. Thus we have no *right* to privilege our present estimations of value, or the value properties that constitute the world as we currently see it, in relation to the estimations and value properties connected with some other configuration of life.

This is where the charge of injustice becomes comprehensible. Our estimations of value are unjust because we cannot defend them in relation to any other estimation of value. Nietzsche later expresses this point by claiming that we are unjust because our value judgments are illogical (*HAH* 32; *GS* 111). The claim here is *not* that in making value judgments we mistakenly think that things have value in themselves. It is only that an accurate understanding of why we take something to be valuable does not provide us with any way of defending our judgment in the face of a radically different judgment. It is a consequence of this injustice in valuation that all of our actions, which express our drives and are responses to what we take to be valuable, are likewise unjust. In *UM2* Nietzsche expresses this point using Goethe's claim that in acting, a person is always without a conscience (*UM2* 64).

While Nietzsche holds that all life is unjust in this sense, he also maintains that many people have little awareness of this injustice in their valuations. He describes such people as living within a “horizon as narrow as that of a dweller in the Alps” (UM2 63) insofar as they are not aware of what exists outside their own conative and affective perspective. He also notes that a parochial outlook of this sort has its advantages. Nietzsche says of the Alps-dweller that “in spite of this injustice and error he will nonetheless stand there in superlative health and vigor, a joy to all who see him” (UM2 63). We might think of this vitality as resulting from the fact the value-properties that stimulate action and life can ‘shine’ at their brightest when a living being has no reason to doubt their reality. In a later context Nietzsche speaks of life as “*conditioned* by the sense of perspective and its injustice” (HAH P:6), and in *UM2* he describes injustice as creating the “atmosphere” in which we can live, “germinate”, and be “fruitful” (UM2 63, 95, 97). These remarks yield a second sense in which injustice is essential to life. A living being not only cannot help but be unjust, but also flourishes in its injustice.

These remarks appear in an essay on history because Nietzsche regards some ways of practicing history as capable of damaging this atmosphere and thus retarding life. There are many strands in Nietzsche’s critique of the practice of history, and I will consider just a few. On the one hand, Nietzsche claims that history “confuses the feelings and sensibility when these are not strong enough to assess the past by themselves” (UM2 86). While some persons see in the past a range of persons, events, ways of life, and values that they might emulate in creative ways, others are overcome by this diversity. These weaker types have less confidence in their own perspective of value once they encounter other perspectives that cannot be understood as parts of their own. The result of this encounter, for the weaker person, is an increased sense of justice that damages the atmosphere in which such a person lives (UM2 95). Nietzsche sees a second form of historical justice in the recognition of what is “crude, inhuman, absurd, or violent” in the past (UM2 95). Awareness of these features of history is said to undermine the “pious illusions” that shape our lives.

## 2. The Suprahistorical Standpoint

These two forms of justice involve engaging with the past while at the same time seeing oneself *within* history. Nietzsche maintains that the practice of history can also lead one to what he terms the “suprahistorical” [*überhistorische*] standpoint *outside of* history. From this standpoint, he claims, surveying the series of human events reveals a single timeless structure underlying the diversity of ways of life that overwhelmed the weaker person (UM2 98). But apprehending this structure leads to disgust or nausea [*Ekel*] in the suprahistorical person, accompanied by a reluctance to go on living, and it’s this response to history that ties Nietzsche’s remarks in *UM2* to *Zarathustra*.

...in opposition to all historical modes of regarding the past, [suprahistorical persons] are unanimous in the proposition: the past and the present are one, that is to say, with all their diversity identical in all that is typical [*typisch gleich*] and, as the omnipresence of imperishable types, a motionless structure of value that cannot alter and a significance that is always the same [*ewig gleicher Bedeutung*]. Just as the hundreds of different

languages correspond to the same typically unchanging needs of humanity, so that anyone who understood these needs would be unable to learn anything new from any of these languages, so the suprahistorical thinker beholds the history of nations and of individuals from within, clairvoyantly divining the original meaning [*Ursinn*] of the various hieroglyphics and signs: for how should the unending superfluity of events not reduce him to satiety, over-satiety, and finally to disgust [*Ekel*]? (*UM2* 66)

I will consider three questions in connection with this passage.

First, what exactly is this imperishable structure that underlies the past and future and renders them (in this respect) identical? Nietzsche describes it as a *value* possessing a meaning or significance that is always the same. Just as all languages are identical in the sense that they express those basic needs that are distinctively human, all nations and individuals are said to be identical in that they express the same unchanging value. Nietzsche does not name this value, but the value essential to all nations and individuals could only be one connected with life itself. As I've already stated, I take Nietzsche to understand life as a matter of being driven one way or another. But there is one further essential quality of life, which Nietzsche states in *UM2* by describing life as that "dark, driving power that insatiably thirsts for itself" (*UM2* 76). In addition to aiming at particular ends, the living thing *also* aims at itself, that is, at the maximal expression and expansion of its particular drives. This second-order drive is the other essential feature of life in *UM2*. We might see in this feature of life both the influence of Schopenhauer's talk of a will to live and an early appearance of Nietzsche's theory of life as will to power (*Z* 226). In this context, however, I would like to emphasize Nietzsche's characterization of the suprahistorical person as one who grasps that all of history is a matter of life aiming at, and thus *valuing*, the maximal expression and expansion of particular drives. That life aims only at itself is what Nietzsche describes as the 'wisdom' characteristic of the suprahistorical person (*UM2* 66).

The second question concerns the claim at the end of this passage that all events in history are superfluous. Why should the recognition of the essential features of life that underlie human history lead one to regard all individual events and actions as superfluous? The answer, I think, lies in the fact that as a "power that insatiably thirsts for itself" life is indifferent to what its constitutive drives are. In thirsting for itself it wants its drives – whatever those may be – to be exercised and to grow. But this means that any *particular* drive, and any action based upon it, is superfluous in the sense that it could in principle be replaced by another. Suprahistorical wisdom is the apprehension of this superfluity. It sees in all human history only the essential structure of life and takes any particular action, considered merely as such, to be unnecessary or pointless. In *UM2* this wisdom also receives the name of "historical justice" – both because it's a matter of regarding individual actions as they are, and because this standpoint is opposed to the partiality towards one's own actions characteristic of the injustice of life.

At this point we can turn to a third question, namely, why is the suprahistorical person's reaction to this superfluity one of disgust? I will begin by noting that disgust is a state of a *living* being, a bodily response composed of an aversion and an unpleasant affect. Disgust is also triggered by a particular object. In this case, the state of unpleasant aversion on the part of the suprahistorical person arises from apprehending

the “unending superfluity of events”. The claim, then, is that as living beings, we find ourselves with an unpleasant aversion to life once we apprehend that all events are superfluous. This is the case, I suggest, because this realization by a living being makes clear to it *its own* injustice. A living being that possesses historical wisdom immediately sees all of its own actions as arbitrary and pointless, and the atmosphere of value in which it acts and strives is destroyed. As a result, that same life that previously thirsted for itself insatiably has suddenly had enough and finds itself sated. The individual actions and drives that it previously saw as valuable now appear, from the suprahistorical point of view, as completely worthless.

### 3. Injustice in *Human, All Too Human*

This opposition between two points of view a living being can occupy also appears in *Human, All Too Human*. There Nietzsche asserts that we are “unjust beings and can recognize this: this is one of the greatest and most irresolvable discords of existence” (HAH 33). Recognition of this essential injustice is surely what Nietzsche in “Uses and Disadvantages” terms “wisdom”, which means that this discord is just the clash between life’s injustice and its ability to occupy a cognitive standpoint of complete justice.

This discord is the topic of the following section of *Human, All Too Human*, entitled “Error regarding life necessary for life”. There Nietzsche states that it is only through our inability to “feel our way” into others and partake in their fortunes and sufferings that we can take existence to have value. This lack of imagination enables us to privilege our own perspective, and to see the world and our actions as ‘lit up’ with value. On the other hand, Nietzsche here imagines a process through which a single person could experience what he terms the “total consciousness of humanity”, thus leaving behind his own particular point of view and treating all as equal. The result is similar to the disgust described in *UM2*:

...if he succeeded in encompassing and feeling within himself the total consciousness of mankind he would collapse with a curse on existence – for mankind has as a whole *no* goal, and the individual man when he regards its total course cannot derive from it any support or comfort, but must be reduced to despair [*Verzweiflung*]. If in all he does he has before him the ultimate goallessness of man, his actions acquire in his own eyes the character of useless squandering [*Vergeudung*]. But to feel thus *squandered* [*vergeudet*], not merely as an individual but as humanity as a whole, in the way we behold the individual fruits of nature squandered, is a feeling beyond all other feelings. (HAH 33)

These remarks fit my reading of *UM2* quite neatly. Because apprehending the total consciousness of humanity reveals that no perspective is privileged, that each contains a set of contingent drives and values and nothing more, the person who takes this point of view is no longer able to find any course of action worth pursuing. There is no single goal privileged in relation to the countless human goals that do exist, have existed, or could exist (cf. Z I “1001 Goals”). Thus wisdom and justice lead to despair

and an inability to act. (Or, as Nietzsche puts it in *BT*, “knowledge kills action” (*BT* §7).) One’s past actions appear as squandered, and all future action appears to be in vain.

#### **4. Some Similarities with *Thus Spoke Zarathustra***

I will now turn to some points of contact between my reading of these passages and central elements of *Zarathustra*.

First there is Zarathustra’s distress in hearing the soothsayer’s doctrine “All is empty, all is the same, all has been” (Z 245, 331). This doctrine closely resembles the claim in *UM2* that past and present are identical insofar as they contain a single structure of value determined by essential features of life (or, as a ‘soothsayer’ like Schopenhauer would put it, by the nature of the will). Nietzsche also describes the doctrine as claiming that all of our fruits have turned rotten, and that all of our work is in vain (Z 245), which echoes his talk of human action as useless squandering.

Second, consider Zarathustra’s distress in considering the persons he encounters - “Naked I had once seen both, the greatest man and the smallest man: all-too-similar to each other, even the greatest all-too-human” (Z 331). If we understand seeing something ‘naked’ as seeing only its essential qualities, then it would be clear why Zarathustra finds this vision distressing. The great person would be, in this respect, no different from anyone else, and would offer no ideal for action. We might see here the wisdom of the suprahistorical standpoint, which takes all human drives and actions to be equal – and equally superfluous. Zarathustra’s remark that the greatest and the smallest are both instances of the “small man” (*der kleine Mensch*) encourages this reading.

Third, consider Zarathustra’s reaction of disgust (*Ekel*) upon confronting an unnamed “abysmal thought” (Z 328). Whatever this thought is, Zarathustra first reacts to it by collapsing as a dead man would and remaining on the ground as if he were dead. Upon regaining consciousness he continues to lie on the ground, pale and shaking, and has no desire for food or drink. We can see here a reaction similar to the disgust of *UM2*, which leaves a person disinclined to go on living. Zarathustra’s reaction to his abysmal thought is first one of an apparent lack of life, followed by mere consciousness without the most basic drives of life, those for food and drink.

#### **5. Eternal Recurrence and Zarathustra’s ‘Abysmal Thought’**

These three points suggest a remarkable conclusion. The abysmal thought that plays such an important role in *Zarathustra* is not the thought of the eternal recurrence, as many have assumed, but instead the thought of the essential injustice of life – or something quite close to this. Zarathustra’s response of disgust and a lack of interest in food, drink, and life more generally (Z 328; Z 246) is the same as that of the suprahistorical person, and the object of that disgust is similarly an unchanging structure of human life.

The distinction I am making between the doctrine of recurrence and the abysmal thought is suggested by other parts of Nietzsche’s writings. In *Ecce Homo*, for example,

Nietzsche characterizes Zarathustra as one who “has the hardest, most terrible insight into reality, that has thought the ‘most abysmal idea’, nevertheless does not consider it an objection to existence, not even to its eternal recurrence...” (*EH* III:Z). Understanding the abysmal thought as that of the eternal recurrence seems to make nonsense of the passage. Thus my approach is at least consistent with another important passage.

But what, then, is the relation between the abysmal thought and the doctrine of eternal recurrence? The passage from *Ecce Homo* suggests that accepting the doctrine of recurrence makes the abysmal thought even more difficult to accept, which would explain why Nietzsche would refer to the eternal recurrence the “highest formula of affirmation” (*EH* Z:1). The interpretation I’ve articulated fits this point neatly. Both in *UM2* and in *Zarathustra* Nietzsche connects the ‘just’ thought that “all is empty, all is the same” (Z II “Soothsayer”) with the conclusion that “everything deserves to pass away” (Z 252) or that “everything is worthy of perishing [and] it would be better if nothing existed” (*UM2* 76; *UM2* 66). For a person possessing this ‘just’ view of things, the thought that everything actually recurs infinitely many times would be exceedingly difficult to accept. Thus following my interpretive approach, affirming recurrence requires more of a person than does affirming a world in which all is injustice and emptiness.

Understanding the doctrine of recurrence as serving only to intensify a person’s reaction to the injustice of life has two more significant virtues. First, it does not require that the doctrine of recurrence be true. Nietzsche would be concerned with the question of whether a person thinking the abysmal thought of injustice could endure taking recurrence to be true, or could even want it to be true. Neither question requires that we read Nietzsche as maintaining that everything does recur eternally. This is a benefit of my approach because nowhere in the published writings does Nietzsche himself state that the recurrence doctrine is true. Figures such as “the spirit of gravity” (Z 270), Zarathustra’s animals (Z 329f.), and the demon of *GS* 341 state the doctrine of recurrence – but Nietzsche does not. In fact, in *UM2* he states clearly that individual things do not recur. He ridicules the Pythagorean doctrine of recurrence and states that the chain of causes in the future will *not* produce any individual persons or events “exactly similar to what it produced in the past” (*UM2* 70). He also describes the question of whether one would want to relive the past simply as a test of one’s attitude toward life (*UM2* 66).

My approach also explains why figures such as Zarathustra’s animals have no trouble confronting the eternal recurrence (Z 329f.). They have not thought Zarathustra’s abysmal thought of the injustice of life. To use the image from *UM2*, they are safely enclosed within the atmosphere produced by an unjust perspective, and the world is ‘lit up’ for them as full of value. From this point of view – what gets termed the “unhistorical” in *UM2* (60-61) – affirming recurrence is exceedingly easy and also somewhat ridiculous. Zarathustra suggests as much in “The Convalescent” when he mocks his animals as “buffoons” for repeatedly formulating the recurrence doctrine.

There *is* one obvious objection to my reading of *Zarathustra* – If the thought of the injustice of life is so important to Zarathustra’s development, why do we hear so little about it, and so much about the eternal recurrence? Happily, *UM2* provides an answer to this question as well. While Nietzsche does believe that wisdom concerning the

injustice of life can possess value for life – a point that I haven't discussed here – he also maintains that in almost every case this wisdom is disadvantageous for life. Thus it should be no surprise that Nietzsche and Zarathustra, both of whom love life, would be careful about propagating this wisdom.

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