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**Nietzsche, Timely and Untimely: The Overcoming of  
Metaphysics, Environmental Ethics, and Politics**

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“the eternal life is given to those who live in the present.”

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*

## **Part I: Introduction**

In this essay I will explore the logic of the Nietzschean programme to overcome metaphysics. In assessing its structure, I will investigate what I consider to be the essential aporetic structures intrinsic to Nietzsche's logic, which prevent him from realizing the ultimate fulfillment of his project. I will contend that this ultimate conclusion lies in an environmental ethics of sorts, and that this latent, unrealized environmental ethics is best expressed by what I call an 'existential politics'. As a result, I will demonstrate how Nietzsche's anti-metaphysical project actually turns against itself, and, in a sense, *becomes* metaphysical as a result of his inability to realize his project. Nonetheless, I will show how the *timely* character of his doctrine of the 'eternal return' points a way towards an authentic realization of this programme in spite of its incompatibility with the rest of his oeuvre, generally.

## **Part II: The Problem of Metaphysics**

Christianity, democracy, the state, and modern science all fall under the broad umbrella, for Nietzsche, of the slave morality intrinsic to a metaphysical world-view, a "will to nothingness." All of these are mere expressions of an otherworldly, "metaphysical faith" in truth.<sup>1</sup> It is this morality, of course, this metaphysical world-view, along with the corresponding loss of meaning, ingenuity, and individuality that Nietzsche predicts—and clearly hopes—will one day be overcome by an overman who will redeem man's long fast from the exertion of the will to power upon the world. But what are the stakes of this self-overcoming of metaphysics? What is the logic of the Nietzschean position?

### Part III: Environmental Ethics

For Nietzsche, by abstracting ourselves from nature (or, the will to power), denying it, and instrumentalizing it, we have abstracted, denied, and instrumentalized everything—including, of course, our very lives—for the sake of nothingness. It is my claim, then, that the logical conclusion of Nietzsche's project to overcome the "otherworldly hopes" and aspirations of metaphysics—which Nietzsche, himself, could not realize—would clearly entail a faithfulness to the earth, as he, himself, puts it, or, as we might call it today, a kind of environmental ethics of sorts. And, whereas other commentators, for years now, have recognized this, as well, a Nietzschean environmental ethics would be an environmental ethics of a peculiar kind. Nevertheless, Nietzsche does *not* offer us an environmental ethics. But why? We will return to this point shortly. Nonetheless, it is because an *unrealized* environmental ethics of sorts lies at the heart of his philosophical project that I am in agreement with the commentators who, like Max Hallman, have argued that Nietzsche's project entails a kind of environmental ethics, *and* their critics, like Ralph Acampora, who have argued that Nietzsche's philosophy is incommensurate with the aspirations of environmentalism.

With this in mind, I submit that there are two central aporias in Nietzsche's project to establish a materialist construal of the universe conceived of as an end in itself, rather than an instrumentalized realm to ascetically be transcended. The first aporia concerns the logical end of the Nietzschean project (which Nietzsche cannot realize), and the second concerns the means necessary to promote that end (which Nietzsche cannot think).

First, Nietzsche's latent environmental ethics calls, unequivocally, for a return to nature (after all, "to sin against the earth is now the most dreadful thing"<sup>2</sup>), as opposed to the ascetic instrumentalization, exploitation, and attempted escape from the suffering intrinsic to nature propounded by metaphysics. Paradoxically, however, this return to nature (which he calls 'justice'<sup>3</sup>) entails a restoration of the exploitation, struggle, and inequality of nature<sup>4</sup>. So, on the one hand, he is against the instrumentalization and exploitation of nature (this 'faithfulness to the earth' is why he has a latent, but unrealized environmental ethics), while on the other hand, his return to nature, itself, entails instrumentalization and exploitation (making Nietzsche's latent environmental ethics unlike any other of its kind). After, all, Nietzsche (arguing against the socialist rhetoric of his time—which he saw simply as a paradigmatic expression of a 'religion of pity' or slave morality) cannot commit, philosophically, to the direct manifestation of his own project, the exploitation of the earth, because exploitation is part and parcel of the will to power, and denying it, says Nietzsche, is akin to denying life itself.<sup>5</sup>

The second aporia within Nietzsche's project that precludes Nietzsche from its logical fulfillment is, on one hand, his desire to lay the groundwork for a man who will one day command and legislate through the creation of his own tablet of values, with, on the other hand, his strictures against the metaphysical, Kantian, de-ontological tradition that he had inherited. This tradition, of course, suggests that man is a metaphysically and transcendently free subject who can impose the 'oughts' and 'shoulds' of the categorical imperative upon humanity. So, if, for Nietzsche, there is no

such thing as the 'freedom of the will', and all is merely a necessary discharging of will to power (because there is no transcendental subject, and we are always already contextualized in the world), then one cannot, rightly, proclaim how this world *should* look *now*. For, we do not possess the metaphysically-generated free will to re-fashion it.

It follows, then, that Nietzsche cannot realize the latent environmental ethics that lay at the heart of his philosophical programme to overcome metaphysics, as a result of 1) the structural limitations of his own philosophy vis-à-vis the notion of 'exploitation', and 2) his own anti-metaphysical inclinations, which actually seem to prevent the introduction of legislating and commanding into a seemingly anti-metaphysical philosophy wholly focused on legislating and commanding.

Nietzsche, therefore, can only remain committed to an ontological discovery of the human condition (though, Nietzsche, of course, would not use these terms), and to an anti-enlightenment re-introduction of teleology (for Nietzsche, the goal of mankind, as he perpetually reminds us, *is* the overman). Nietzsche cannot communicate how this goal 'should' be realized for the aforementioned anti-metaphysical reason. He can merely point to the fruit of his longing, his highest hope, but he cannot explain how our world must be re-fashioned in order to facilitate this new type of man's arrival. But it is precisely this re-shaping, this re-fashioning of our world that politics is all about. Even in the most rudimentary of senses, politics is precisely about these deliberative machinations concerning how we ought to live together as a community *here* (in this world) and *now* (as opposed to simply relegating ourselves to being "men of tomorrow" or yesterday) based upon our lessons from the past, and our longing for the future. As a result, an anti-metaphysical commitment to the earth would, at once, entail both a kind of environmental ethics and a political legislating of the here and now, so as to promote it.

#### **Part IV: Existential Politics**

So, what, then, might such a Nietzschean environmental ethics look like? An environmental ethics, for Nietzsche, would most assuredly *not* be one that sought the safety and security of the eco-system as a whole. Such liberal interpretations, though rare, are spurious, if not ridiculous. Rather, it would resemble the aforementioned 'justice'; in other words, it would entail the restoration of the struggle and inequality of the will to power, of life itself. As a result, it would look something akin to what I, borrowing from Norman Mailer and others, call an 'existential politics'. Existential politics would entail the establishment of a material realm (including our own bodily selves) that is not instrumentalized or exploited for the sake of nothingness; a domain of human activity in which the bounds of human uniqueness, difference, *hierarchy* and agonistic creativity (agonism *does not* entail democratic values, as some commentators have suggested) would be allowed to flourish. The members of such a community would command how *this* world *should* look *now*, based upon their affirmation of the past and the future, in conjunction with a refusal of otherworldly non-political content. This, then, is what the logic of the Nietzschean project to overcome metaphysics might

resemble if it were to surmount the aforementioned structural delimitations that Nietzsche himself has established, and, thus, simply cannot overcome.

So, while traditional politics only corresponds to the instrumentalization of this anti-metaphysical arena, and Arendtian 'webs of appearances' aestheticize the political, an existential politics unites the two in a worldly concern for the here and now that has a stake in both the future and the past—in other words, it is an affirmation of temporality, an affirmation of *eternity*.

## **Part V: Modernity and Temporality**

Clearly, then, a fully realized Nietzschean environmental ethics, and, thereby, an existential politics would have something to do with temporality. Nietzsche, however, as we said, cannot realize the environmental ethics that is the fulfillment of his project. Nevertheless, Nietzsche does recognize that there is something integral about time itself to the overcoming of metaphysics. He recognizes this, I would argue, because he realizes that the metaphysical worldview conceives of the world as measured by that which is timeless (the timeless being God, of course, who is eternal and stands outside of time, as almost all great philosophers from Augustine to Kant have attempted to show us). An anti-metaphysical worldview, therefore, must hold that the world is measured by that which is *timely*. For, as the timeless being begins to lose all credibility, time itself becomes the modern measure of all that is imperfect and changes. That is, eternity belongs, not to timelessness, but, rather, to time itself. The overcoming of metaphysics, then, must be governed by temporality, and by laying out the doctrine of the eternal return, Nietzsche *attempts* to fashion a project, which remains faithful to temporality as constitutive of an anti-metaphysical world. For Nietzsche, the affirmation of time, therefore, entails the affirmation of the earth. It follows, then, that the denial of time or the timely is a refusal of everything earthly, and therefore an expression of the metaphysical denial of life par excellence. Nietzsche, in other words, realizes that he must affirm time, but can this untimely philosopher affirm time?

## **Part VI: Nietzsche and Temporality**

We might ask, then, if Nietzsche is even capable of understanding time in an anti-metaphysical sense? Nietzsche, I argue, cannot fully understand time in an anti-metaphysical sense, because his philosophical programme necessitates a repudiation and instrumentalization of the present for the sake of the future—thus, the present only makes sense in his philosophy in light of the promise of the future (in which man today is left as a mere 'precursor to a future age', as Heidegger put it). Preoccupation with a future world, I would argue, however, is just as life-denying and metaphysical as preoccupation with an afterworld, as it is a denial of the world with which we live. For, the only question that matters *today*, as Nietzsche constantly reminds us, is whether or not one is the parent who will give birth to his or her "children's land"<sup>6</sup>. All varieties of "fatherlands" (in other words, all contemporary political constitutions) are to be shunned for this highest of hopes, this new dawn.

Nietzsche, then, can only remain committed to a future world, due to the structural delimitations against exploitation in his project, and his own anti-metaphysical biases against the introduction of Kantian 'shoulds' and 'oughts' into an anti-metaphysical philosophy. An existential politics, however (the domain of anti-metaphysics proper), says 'this is how *this* world should be *now!*' What's more, Nietzsche's fondness for the "untimely", in fact, belies his, in this sense, metaphysical commitments, and, thus, his refusal of politics, the this-worldly. So, politics, in order to be worldly—that is, in order to be existential—must be based, not only on the teachings of the past and not only the hopes for the future, but an abiding concern for the present. For, as Georges Bataille argued, Nietzsche's philosophy precludes political appropriation, because of its inherent untimeliness.<sup>7</sup>

So, in the end, Nietzsche's anti-metaphysical project, in this sense, emerges as a refusal of this world, and, thus, merely another expression or variant of the metaphysical paradigm. After all, those who think that this world is a degradation wish to move or leap beyond it to a future world which no longer is, but this is a denial of our world, and, in fact, just as much of a denial as that of the metaphysicians who wish to transcend it. For, *an overcoming of metaphysics must not entail any leaps from the world with which we live.* And while Nietzsche, himself, bemoans the "preachers of death," this, too, is a kind of longing for death, and an all too metaphysical refusal of life. As Keith Ansell-Pearson put it, Nietzsche must sacrifice the present for the future kingdom of the overman. But does this not, itself, derive, Ansell-Pearson asks, from the very spirit of revenge that Nietzsche protests against?<sup>8</sup> He continues:

"through the positing of a world-historical conception of the overman, Nietzsche's conception of a great politics succumbs to the resentment of the spirit of revenge by sacrificing the present for the willed production of some ill-defined future."<sup>9</sup>

So, what I call an 'existential politics' (an anti-metaphysics proper) is not a denial of the present world in favor of a future one. The true overcoming of metaphysics, then, entails a faithfulness to the eternal, a faithfulness to everything that has been, is, and is yet to come—this is what it would mean to be faithful to the here and now. *Nietzsche remains faithful to the here, but not the now.* For, as Nietzsche, himself, shows us, when you command the present, you command all of eternity. In the end, then, Nietzsche's anti-metaphysical project to realize a material realm that is not instrumentalized, appears to lapse into the same instrumentalization of the earth that metaphysics itself propagates, as a result of his inability to realize an anti-metaphysical (i.e. political) conception of time.

The reason, then, that I side with those commentators who typically ascribe an apolitical philosophical orientation to Nietzsche is not because of what he does not say (for, he, of course, does not lay out any positive political programme, as even the 'political Nietzsche' interpreters concede), but what he *does* say, and what he *cannot* say. For, the reason, I would argue, that Nietzsche is apolitical is because he is unable to realize the concept of time in an anti-metaphysical sense. But it is Nietzsche, himself, who gives us glimpses of what an anti-metaphysical, and, yes, political,

affirmation of time would look like. Hence, we turn to his doctrine of the 'eternal recurrence of the same'.

## Part VII: The Overman and The Eternal Return

Many commentators like Lawrence Lampert, Maudemarie Clark, and Erich Heller will argue that Nietzsche's doctrine of the overman and his doctrine of the eternal return form "the paradigm of logical incompatibility."<sup>10</sup> But whereas there are those who, like Lampert, will argue that this incompatibility is indicative of the fact that the doctrine of the overman is simply a "provisional teaching" that is overcome by the "definitive teaching" of the eternal return, I side with Ansell-Pearson and others, in that there is simply no textual evidence to support the claim that Nietzsche abandons his commitments to the futural overman; quite the contrary —Nietzsche actually emphasizes his arrival more pointedly in the fourth part of *Zarathustra* after the teaching of the eternal return in the second and third parts. Moreover, the overman is the true fulfillment, for Nietzsche, of his gateway named 'moment', in which all of time is redeemed by an individual who possesses the free-spirited innocence not to be burdened by the past or the future, but is a 'self-propelled wheel', a joyous affirmation and conjunction of the eternity of past, present, and future. What's more, *Beyond Good and Evil* (published several years after *Zarathustra*) is riddled with references to the overman —Nietzsche simply employs a new metaphor to refer to the overman, and this new metaphor is, alternatively, 'new philosophers,' 'free-spirits,' or 'great attempters.' Are we to honestly believe that the 'new philosophers' of the future, and the overman are two different concepts? Nietzsche is constantly using new metaphors to refer to the same basic concepts. This ever-changing style is, after all, the very definition of what it means to "write in blood." So, we must maintain, I argue, Nietzsche's futural commitments to the overman, and, thus, anti-political, indeed, metaphysical disavowal of the present *moment*. The incompatibility, then, lies in the fact that, while the overman *can* affirm the present —and, thus, all of eternity— we must actively disavow the present until the overman emerges. In other words, whereas the eternal return is reconciled in the overman, it is incompatible with the structural demands of *Nietzsche's* project, since "never yet has there been an overman."<sup>11</sup>

The incompatibility that most commentators recognize, then, has to do, I argue, with the untimely, metaphysical denial of eternity (through the denial of the now, the present) in Nietzsche's doctrine of the overman (and, thus, in his philosophy generally, since the overman is both the realization of the self-overcoming of will to power, and, simultaneously, the goal of mankind, the "meaning of the earth") with the timely, anti-metaphysical affirmation of eternity found in Nietzsche's doctrine of the eternal return. The two meet in the free-spirited overman, but the overman is a "man of tomorrow," and man today is but a "rope tied between beast and overman."<sup>12</sup> Thus, the dissimilating, irreducible character of the eternal recurrence into Nietzsche's project is indicative of the unrealized logic of the overcoming of metaphysics whose fulfillment would entail a kind of environmental ethics articulated in the form of something akin to an existential politics.

## **Part VIII: Conclusion**

So, Nietzsche articulates the goal of mankind, and gives us a clue via the doctrine of the eternal return—which affirms the present moment and thus all of eternity—of how to realize that goal, but it's incompatibility with the doctrine of the overman due, once again, to his strictures against exploitation and his anti-metaphysical commitments against Kantian legislating, prevents Nietzsche from realizing the temporal, and, thus, political means necessary to promote that goal. His only recourse to these limitations entails the hollow teleology of the overman, devoid of his existential basis in the present. Ironically, then, Nietzsche, actually, in this sense, becomes metaphysical as a direct result of his anti-metaphysical project, which can only point towards a future world and a future man, but only denies this world as a result. And this metaphysical denial of our world results from his inability to realize the latent environmental ethics within his programme—an environmental ethics for which there is no greater expression, I would argue, than that of an existential politics.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 152.

<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1978), 13.

<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche, 99-102.

<sup>4</sup> This is the linchpin of Acampora's critique of Hallman's straightforward appropriation of Nietzsche as an environmental ethicist.

<sup>5</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good & Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 203.

<sup>6</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1978), 204.

<sup>7</sup> Georges Bataille. "Nietzsche and Fascists." *Acéphale* (January 1937).

<sup>8</sup> Keith Ansell-Pearson, *Nietzsche Contra Rousseau: A Study of Nietzsche's Moral and Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 161.

<sup>9</sup> Keith Ansell-Pearson, *An Introduction to Nietzsche as Political Thinker* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

<sup>10</sup> Erich Heller, *The Importance of Nietzsche: Ten Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 184.

<sup>11</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1978), 93.

<sup>12</sup> Nietzsche, 14.

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