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Nietzsche on Context and the Individual

I. Introduction

Napoleon's advance into Russia and the abandonment of Moscow by the Russian army in September 1812 provides the focal point for many of the significant events of Leo Nikolayevich Tolstoy's *War and Peace*: the union of Nikolay and Princess Marya; a final reconciliation between Prince Andrey and Natasha; Pierre's captivity and transformation. Tolstoy also uses the abandonment of Moscow as a platform for a discussion of the relationship between the individual and his historical context. He asks us to think about why individuals act as they do: „Why did it happen? What can have induced these people to burn houses down and murder their fellow creatures?“¹ – Tolstoy's answers challenge our intuitions about individual freedom. One can distinguish three strands of individual freedom, all of which he seeks to undermine. First, a backward-looking strand: to be free, we must be free from context – we must be able to decide or act, believe or value in spite of, say, our history, environment or intellectual climate. This, Tolstoy suggests, is an unreasonable assumption. Napoleon and Alexander believe that they act freely; however „every action they perform, which they take to be self-determined and independent, is [...] interconnected with the whole course of history and predetermined from eternity“.² In what way „predetermined“? Tolstoy doesn't say (for reasons we shall come to). Nonetheless, it is clear that he wholly rejects the image of the individual as prime mover of his thoughts and actions. – Second, a forward-looking strand: once my decision is made, I must be able to bring about that which I desire. There would be no overall freedom in coming to some context-independent decision to X, if I am then compelled not to X. Often, Tolstoy claims, individual decisions make no practical difference. Kutuzov at the Council of War after Borodino might freely decide to fight for Moscow, not to abandon it; but, Tolstoy insists, whatever he decides there will be no battle, because the army isn't positioned correctly and it has no will to fight. This second strand, while significant, will not play a part in this paper. – Third, an epistemic element: even if my actions and values

¹ Tolstoy, Lev Nikolayevich, *War and Peace*, Penguin, London 2005 (1869), 1318. Hence Tolstoy's claim that *War and Peace* isn't a novel at all. See 1379.

² Ibid., 671.

are free from past influences (first strand) and that I successfully pursue those actions and values (second strand), one could argue that I am not truly free unless I know that this is the case. We cannot know why Napoleon decided to march eastwards; and we cannot know why thousands of Frenchmen obeyed him or why thousands of Russians allowed him to reach Moscow. With so many interlocking wills, events, actions, and so on, how could we possibly know what causes any event to happen? At the level of human thought and action, questions of causation are inappropriate: „The more deeply we go into the causes, the more of them there are, and each individual cause, or group of causes, seems as justifiable as all the rest, and as false as all the rest in its worthlessness [...] (unless you combine it with all the other associated causes)“.³

Combining the first and third strands of Tolstoy's thinking, he claims that some unknown and perhaps unknowable forces determine the course of our lives. Yet many reject his epistemic scepticism whilst retaining his negative conclusions about freedom. In ‚Historical Inevitability‘, Isaiah Berlin presents a vast spectrum of theories and outlooks, which, despite their differences, conclude that individual freedom is impossible. Hence Tolstoy is joined in his conclusion regarding the first strand by those who disagree regarding the third – by those, indeed, who think that we know too much about causation to believe in freedom. Berlin divides theories of this kind into the teleological, the metaphysical and the scientific.⁴ Teleological theories (Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Karl Marx) claim that things are heading inevitably in some direction. Metaphysical theories present a ‚Reality‘ in contrast to the world of ‚Appearance‘ (Platonists and ‚Eastern Philosophy‘⁵) which undermines the significance of the individual. Scientific theories (Marquis de Condorcet and August Comte) posit a physical or biological pattern from which the individual cannot escape. Isaiah Berlin labels all these theories ‚deterministic‘: Just like Tolstoy, despite different epistemology, such theorists reject individual freedom: „the lives, characters and acts of individuals, both mental and physical, are governed by the larger ‚wholes‘ to which they belong“; „how then can I help choosing and acting as I do? The values in terms of which I conduct my life are the values of my class, or race, or church, or civilization, or are part and parcel of my ‚station‘ – my position in the ‚social structure‘“.⁶

In this paper, I present Nietzsche as a contributor to the debate about individual freedom. In particular, I present Nietzsche's thoughts in relation to the first strand. He was fundamentally concerned with the influence of context upon individual freedom. As early as HA, he writes: „The past continues to flow within us in a hundred waves; we ourselves are, indeed, nothing but that which at every moment we experience of this continued flowing“.⁷ And in the later TI: „The individual is, in his future and in his past, a piece of fate [...]. To say to him ‚change yourself‘ means to demand that everything should change, even in the past“.⁸

³ Ibid., 668.

⁴ Berlin, Isaiah, *Historical Inevitability* (1953), reprinted in his *Four Essays on Liberty*, OUP, Oxford 1969, 48ff.

⁵ Ibid., 104.

⁶ Ibid., 62ff.

⁷ HA II, 223.

⁸ TI IV, 6.

Such quotations suffice to place Nietzsche among Berlin's 'determinists'. However, as with Tolstoy, to pin Nietzsche down to any one of Berlin's many determinisms is extremely difficult. He doesn't offer any teleological explanation of history – instead emphasising the contingency of our values; he is critical of metaphysical explanation; he often attacks scientists and the 'will to truth'. Nonetheless, Nietzsche clearly holds, and to a substantial degree, that our thoughts, actions and values are determined by our context. (That is a central message of GM.) This is sufficient for my purposes. For I claim that Nietzsche's contribution to the general discussion lies not in his providing some new theory of freedom or determinism; rather, it lies in undermining the value placed upon individual freedom given, as all agree, that the individual's context has such a significant influence. This paper offers an interpretation of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Z) in the light of these concerns. At the heart of that book is the problem of individual freedom vs. the many influences of context. This problem is most apparent in the conflict between Zarathustra's initial ideal of *Übermensch* and his subsequent acceptance of Eternal Recurrence.

II. An Initial Conflict

When Zarathustra first comes down from his mountain, he addresses his audience: „I teach you the *Übermensch*“.⁹ These teachings, we are to understand, are „the gift“ that he is going to „bring to mankind“.¹⁰ By Part 3 of Z, Zarathustra is „the teacher of Eternal Recurrence“.¹¹ Eternal Recurrence states that everything that happens has happened before and will continue to happen over and over again for eternity. Zarathustra's animal companions explain it as follows: „I shall return eternally to this identical and self-same life, in the greatest things and the smallest.“ A certain time period (a „great year“) is repeated again and again, identically.¹² – Zarathustra is teacher of *Übermensch* and Eternal Recurrence. Yet, on *prima facie* interpretations of *Übermensch* and Eternal Recurrence, the two concepts conflict. On the one hand, Zarathustra encourages man to make progress – to become *Übermensch*. On the other hand, Eternal Recurrence entails that, even if man makes progress towards becoming *Übermensch*, his efforts will in any ultimate sense have been in vain. For Eternal Recurrence entails that, even if we succeed in ‚overcoming man‘ (as Zarathustra entreats), we know that man will return – not just once, but eternally. – There are three critical responses to this initial conflict. Firstly, some commentators don't accept, even *prima facie*, that there is tension between the progress of the *Übermensch* and

⁹ Z P 3. I shall use *Übermensch* in place of translator's preferred *Superman*.

¹⁰ Z P 2.

¹¹ Z III, 13, *The Convalescent*.

¹² Z III, 13, *The Convalescent*. Earlier in Z III 13, Zarathustra rejects some of what the animals say to him, calling them „buffoons and barrel-organs“. This rejection is aimed at their lack of appreciation of the significance of Eternal Recurrence. However, there has been speculation that their description of Eternal Recurrence itself (not merely their grasp of its consequences) is thereby undermined. I don't take this suggestion very seriously, principally because I am yet to discover a convincing account of what else Eternal Recurrence might be. For an attempted alternative, see Adrian Moore, *Williams, Nietzsche, and the Meaninglessness of Immortality*, in: *Mind*, Vol. 115, No. 458, 2006.

the undermining of progress as indicated by Eternal Recurrence.¹³ Second, other commentators accept that there is a *prima facie* conflict, but argue that this conflict resolves during Z.¹⁴ The third interpretation (which I offer) is as follows: Zarathustra initially offers the ‚gift‘ of the Übermensch to man; but, when he understands Eternal Recurrence, he realises that Übermensch is flawed.¹⁵

This paper argues for a version of the third response. The initial conflict between Übermensch and Eternal Recurrence is not neutralised by a closer reading of Z; rather, it is deepened and a further conflict is revealed. My argument is in three stages. First, I look at what Zarathustra says about ‚overcoming‘: the ‚overcoming‘ of aspects of individuals and the ‚overcoming‘ of man himself. Second, I argue that the Übermensch is one possible response to the idea of overcoming – one which requires us to forget about the context which determines our moral values. Third, I explain why Eternal Recurrence undermines Übermensch as a response to overcoming: Übermensch is insufficiently life-affirming, because affirmation requires remembering the past (including the context which determines our moral values), whereas Übermensch requires forgetfulness.

III. Two Overcomings

Zarathustra’s opening words to his audience are as follows: ‚I teach you the Übermensch. Man is something that should be *overcome*‘.¹⁶ I begin by presenting an interpretation of overcoming and how this relates to the Übermensch.

In Part I, Zarathustra tells his friends that ‚a table of values hangs over every people [...] It is the table of its overcomings‘.¹⁷ Zarathustra does not explain in any detail what he means by ‚overcoming‘ in this context; therefore, we may be justified in looking elsewhere in Nietzsche’s writing for some kind of definition. – It is Nietzsche’s consistent message regarding morality¹⁸ (as Zarathustra would have it, ‚tables of values‘) that to be moral is to be divided in some sense: morality is ‚the self-division of man‘.¹⁹ This

¹³ Ivan Soll, *Reflections on Recurrence*, in: Robert C. Solomon (ed.), *Nietzsche: A Collection of Critical Essays*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame 1980; Walter A. Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, PUP, Princeton 1950; Kathleen M. Higgins, *Reading Zarathustra*, in: Kathleen Higgins and Robert C. Solomon (eds.), *Reading Nietzsche*, OUP, Oxford 1988.

¹⁴ Laurence Lampert, *Nietzsche’s Teaching*, New Haven 1986; Robert Gooding-Williams, *Nietzsche’s Life Sentence*, New York 2001.

¹⁵ Robert B. Pippin, *Irony and Affirmation in Nietzsche’s Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in: Michael Allen Gillespie and Tracy B. Strong (eds.), *Nietzsche’s New Seas*, Chicago 1988.

¹⁶ Z P, 3, (my emphasis) – see also Z I, 5.

¹⁷ Z I, 15, *The Thousand and One Goals*.

¹⁸ Nietzsche uses ‚morality‘ in two different ways: the set of values of a certain people at a certain time; or the set of values of *his* people at *his* time (namely: 19th Century Christian European morality). Zarathustra’s discussion of the moralities of the Jews, Persians etc at Z I, 15 indicates that he intends the former. Hence when I am discussing Nietzsche’s claims about morality and overcoming, I too mean the former. For more on Nietzsche’s use of the term ‚morality‘, see Raymond Geuss, *Nietzsche and Morality*, in: *European Journal of Philosophy* 5, 1997.

¹⁹ HA I, 57. See also GM II, 18.

division lies at the heart of overcoming: morality is one part of the individual trying to overcome another part. Often enough, the objects of this moral overcoming are the individual's „passions“ or „feelings“.²⁰ Nietzsche also talks of the overcoming of some aspect of man's nature, which amounts to the similar claim that our morality consists in the overcoming of certain instinctive or natural features of ourselves (such as our passions). Thus in BGE, Nietzsche states that „every morality is [...] a bit of tyranny against nature“²¹, where nature is best not understood as a metaphysical concept but as that which comes naturally to the individual concerned. Indeed, Nietzsche names a chapter of *TI Morality as Anti-Nature*, in which he states that „virtually every morality which has hitherto been taught, revered and preached“ has been an „anti-natural morality“ (where an „anti-natural morality“ is one which amounts to a „condemnation of the instincts“ of the individual).²² The connection between morality and overcoming, then, is that the moral man „divides his nature and sacrifices one part of it to the other“.²³

Which aspects or parts of our nature does our morality demand that we overcome? Nietzsche speaks of the morality of a people in terms of overcoming what comes most naturally to that particular people. This definition of overcoming is explicitly given in HA: „to be a good German means to degermanise oneself – the German becomes good by „overcoming his German qualities“.²⁴ This is echoed by Zarathustra when he talks about the different tables of overcomings for the Persians and the Jews. Hence, the moral code of any particular people is contingent upon the history, the background, the context of that people. This is put so strongly that Zarathustra makes the extraordinary claim that if he were told everything he wanted to know about any people's „need and land and sky and neighbour“²⁵ (its context), he would be able to „divine the law of its overcomings“: so strict is the relationship between morality and context that knowledge of the latter is sufficient for calculating the former. Zarathustra is making the point that the table of values for any individual – the particular way in which that individual is divided against his own nature – is determined completely by the history of the society of which that individual is a member.²⁶

We now have an interpretation of Zarathustra's claim that a table of values is a table of overcomings. Individuals are divided. The table of values (the morality) is a table of the ways in which individuals within some particular society seek to overcome aspects of their natures, which vary according to context. This first kind of overcoming occurs at the level of individual men. What would it be to overcome man in general? The use of ‚overcoming‘ as a feature of human value systems and as a description of what man must do to become *Übermensch* provides the clue as to how we should answer this question. Suppose the two uses of ‚overcoming‘ differ only in scope, rather than in meaning. The first overcoming concerns smaller populations (the Persians, the Jews) and looks at how their moralities repress aspects of what comes naturally to them. The second overcoming

²⁰ HA WS, 53; HA WS, 136.

²¹ BGE 188. See also HA I 57; HA II 323.

²² TI IV, 4.

²³ HA I, 57; D, 9; D, 109.

²⁴ HA II, 323.

²⁵ Z I, 15, *The Thousand and One Goals*.

²⁶ See also D, 38 and GS, 116.

looks at man as a whole: what comes naturally to man is precisely to be divided between his nature and morality (overcoming). Zarathustra tells us that every man obeys a table of values which is determined by his context. Crucially, then, *Übermensch* overcomes that very division between nature and morality which characterises every man.²⁷ The kind of overcoming offered by *Übermensch* is an instance of overcoming, in that man must strive to overcome something which comes naturally to him (namely: to be divided by a morality which is determined by his context). However *Übermensch* represents not just any instance of overcoming, but a new, second-order overcoming. The object of this second-order overcoming is the divide between nature and morality which constitutes the various other (first-order) overcomings, such as those of the Persians, Jews or Germans.

An earlier aphorism supports this interpretation. At HA I 40, Nietzsche calls man „*das Ueber-Thier*“ (the over-animal) because he has overcome his animal past. The animal ‚man‘ becomes the ‚over-animal‘ just when he becomes divided, when he ‚imposes sterner laws upon himself‘. Without this moral division, man ‚would have remained animal‘. Animal man becomes over-animal man when he becomes moral and overcomes what it is to be animal. So, I claim, man becomes *Übermensch* when he overcomes the very division which made him man (the over-animal) in the first place. To repeat this important point, Nietzsche’s major claim is that the *Übermensch* represents the (second-order) overcoming of the (first-order) overcoming which is constitutive of man.- Zarathustra illustrates this point when he concludes Z I 15 (which is called *The Thousand and One Goals*) by claiming that the thousand tables of values are a beast with one thousand necks. We are lacking the final, thousand-and-first goal, which would provide ‚the fetters [...] for these thousand necks“. This beast is the Nature vs. Table of Values structure represented in each society. Supposing that, as Zarathustra implies, this thousand-and-first goal is to be provided by *Übermensch*, this fits well with my interpretation. After all, *Übermensch* treats the thousand different value systems as arising out of the same beastly division of man; the thousand-and-first goal is, of course, to overcome this division which is instantiated one thousand times. My intention is to present Z as a commentary on the relationship between the individual and his context. This brief discussion is a helpful start. What is fundamental to man is to be divided by context-dependent values. Somehow, *Übermensch* is meant to overcome this context-dependent division

IV. *Übermensch* and Context-Free Values

In the previous section, I argued that ‚overcoming‘, both that which is inherent in all moralities (first-order) and that which must be achieved with respect to man (second-order), provides an explanation of *Übermensch*. In this section, I support that interpretation by

²⁷ Zarathustra (and, in places, Nietzsche) presents the division as a general feature of mankind. Two points here: first, Nietzsche later offers a more subtle analysis of the various ‚nature vs. values‘ divides in different moralities (notably in A); Christianity emerges as most divisive. Second, we should be wary of crediting Nietzsche with a theory of Human Nature (a basic or essential picture of man), although sometimes he does speak that way. Hence, one might argue that Zarathustra thinks he is offering a basic picture of man; but in fact he is merely expressing a context-dependent (Christian) analysis.

appealing to what Zarathustra says about *Übermensch*. Most of this occurs in the Prologue and in Part 1. At the beginning of Part 1, Zarathustra describes „three metamorphoses of the spirit: the spirit shall become a camel, and the camel a lion, and the lion at last a child“.²⁸ These three metamorphoses describe a progress from man towards *Übermensch*. Many commentators appear to have missed the implicit structure of Part 1²⁹: Following his first speech about camel, lion and child, Zarathustra makes no explicit reference to those three creatures – but on close reading it is clear that Part 1 is structured such that Zarathustra looks at each in turn.³⁰ Thus although Part 1 makes little explicit reference to *Übermensch*, it is structured to illustrate how man becomes *Übermensch*.

The description of these three metamorphoses (camel, lion, child) enable us to understand how *Übermensch* will differ from man. What Zarathustra describes is not a physiological transformation – a natural evolution or a programme of eugenics – but rather a development in the relationship between the individual and his system of context-dependent values. – The camel spirit readily takes difficult ‚moral‘ burdens upon itself: it obeys the ‚great dragon [...] which is called ‚thou shalt‘“. Zarathustra here talks of man’s desire to punish himself (or ‚burden himself‘) with difficult and heavy rules (moralities), whether they are Christian morals („to love those who despise us“) or scientific morals („for the sake of truth to suffer hunger of the soul“).³¹ Zarathustra illustrates the camel spirit, its desire for heavy moralities and the psychological reasons for this: the „academic chairs of virtue“, who „must discover ten truths a day“ in order to sleep at night³²; the „Afterworldsmen“, who created gods and other worlds out of „suffering and impotence“³³; the „despisers of the body“, „angry with life and with the earth“.³⁴ – The lion spirit breaks free from ‚thou shalt“. The lion cannot create new values, but can „create itself freedom for new creation“.³⁵ It can replace the camel’s obedience to ‚thou shalt“ with its own ‚I will!“ – a ‚sacred No“ to the commands of the dragon. Again, Zarathustra’s speeches flesh out what he means by the lion spirit: the „warriors“ for whom the „highest idea“ is that „man is something that must be overcome“³⁶; those who „flee into solitude“³⁷ (it is „in the loneliest solitude“ in which the camel can change into the lion) away from the herd morality. The lion spirit illustrates how we must say ‚No‘ to our context-dependent moralities as a step towards bringing about the *Übermensch*. – The lion must become a child: for „the child is innocence and forgetfulness, a new beginning“ – a sacred ‚Yes‘

²⁸ Z I, 1, *Three Metamorphoses*.

²⁹ Others have not. For more detailed discussion of this point see Michael Allen Gillespie, *Nietzsche and the Anthropology of Nihilism*, in: *Nietzsche-Studien* 28, Berlin 1999, 145; Lampert (1986), 35; Gooding-Williams (2001), 132.

³⁰ Roughly: the camel is illustrated at speeches 2, 3 and 4, the lion at 10, 11 and 12 and the child at 17.

³¹ Z I, 1, *Three Metamorphoses*.

³² Z I, 2, *The Teachers of Virtue*.

³³ Z I, 3, *The Afterworldsmen*.

³⁴ Z I, 4, *The Despisers of the Body*: Zarathustra here makes familiar Nietzschean points (GS 344; GM).

³⁵ Z I, 1, *Three Metamorphoses*.

³⁶ Z I, 10, *War and Warriors*.

³⁷ Z I, 12, *The Flies of the Market Place*.

which follows the ‚No‘ of the lion. Zarathustra calls the child spirit a „self-propelling wheel“ and a „first motion“.³⁸ Later in Part I, he uses the very same metaphors when addressing the ‚creators‘. If you want to be both „self-propelling wheel“ and „first motion“, you must be „free“: free, that is, in order to „furnish yourself with your own good and evil“; you must „hang up your own will above yourself as a law“.³⁹ Crucially, the Lion’s ‚No‘ is still a reaction to old values; it is still dependent on context and circumstance, rather than a true creation of new values (a ‚first motion‘). The Lion demonstrates that even somebody who stands in opposition to all the values of his time is still context-dependent. If I am „the person who struggles against X“, then I am still dependent on X for my defining characteristics.⁴⁰

In this respect, the child differs completely from the lion: the child is „self-propelling wheel“ and „first motion“; the child is „innocence“ and „forgetfulness“. As first motion, the child is uncaused cause (hence „self-propelled“) of what it creates. As „innocence“ and „forgetfulness“, the child is completely ignorant of what has gone before it. Hence the new values, created by the child, must not merely be a reaction to the old, but rather an entirely new, uncaused, innocent and context-free creation. Tracy Strong has suggested that the child connects with Nietzsche’s notion of „conscious innocence“⁴¹; but Zarathustra does not mention ‚conscious‘ innocence. Instead, it is fundamental to the child spirit that it has no self-awareness – this would undermine its status as a break from the past. Zarathustra in some respects repeats Nietzsche’s use (in an earlier essay) of the image of a child as „unhistorical“ and in a „state of forgetfulness“: the child, „having as yet nothing of the past to shake off, plays in blissful blindness between the hedges of past and future.“⁴² In that essay, Nietzsche had argued that an excess of historical consciousness has a variety of debilitating effects. He recommends the cultivation of certain kinds of illusion with respect to the past – ‚for the sake of life and action‘. This thought finds an echo in Zarathustra’s *Übermensch*.

It is not clear exactly how Zarathustra’s child relates to *Übermensch*. It is unlikely that the child is the *Übermensch*: it would be peculiar to choose a (human) child to represent *Übermensch*. In any case, what is crucial for my argument is that Zarathustra considers the child necessary for *Übermensch*. That is, becoming *Übermensch* requires forgetting the dragons, camels and lions of the past – a fresh start, unencumbered by context or past moralities. Man is characterised by his enslavement to context-dependent tables of overcomings. If we want to become the *Übermensch*, we must replace the „table of values which hangs over“ us, which results from our „need and land and sky and neighbour“⁴³; we must replace it with our own will – so that „[our] will hangs above [us] as a law“.⁴⁴

³⁸ Z I, 1, *Three Metamorphoses*.

³⁹ Z I, 17, *The Way of the Creator*.

⁴⁰ The Lion spirit is closely related to HA’s „Free Spirit“ (HA I, 225) – although I cannot pursue this connection here.

⁴¹ Tracy B. Strong, *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of Transfiguration*, Berkeley 1975, 259.

⁴² UDH, 1. Nietzsche’s world-view is quite different in that essay. A discussion of the difference is beyond the scope of this paper.

⁴³ Z I, 15, *The Thousand and One Goals*.

⁴⁴ Z I, 17, *The Way of the Creator*.

We can summarise significant points of Sections III and IV as follows: (1) Every morality is a set of rules which restricts aspects of the nature of individuals; (2) Every morality arises out of a people's context; (3) A necessary step towards becoming Übermensch is becoming the child spirit; (4) The child spirit can create freely because it is forgetful: it has forgotten the context which would otherwise determine its values; (5) Hence Übermensch overcomes man because he no longer experiences an internal conflict between his nature and context-dependent values; he obeys only his own will.

V. Eternal Recurrence and the Affirmation of Life

Eternal Recurrence states that a certain time period is repeated and that every detail of what happens in that time will also be repeated. Eternal Recurrence is described differently in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* from elsewhere in Nietzsche's writings (published and unpublished). An important interpretative question is whether we are to understand Eternal Recurrence as a metaphysical doctrine or not (and, if not, then what?).⁴⁵

In one of the first passages in which Nietzsche writes about Eternal Recurrence (written before *Z*) it is clear that he intends it not as metaphysical doctrine, but as a thought experiment, designed to test the extent to which we affirm our lives. In Part 4 of *GS*, Nietzsche asks how we would react „if a demon were to“ tell you about Eternal Recurrence. „Would you not“, Nietzsche asks the Nay-Sayer, „throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus“? Hence the test of how much you affirm life: for „how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to crave nothing more fervently than this ultimate eternal confirmation?“⁴⁶ Here in *GS*, Eternal Recurrence is posed by Nietzsche (unambiguously) as the ultimate test of how much we love our lives: enough to find ‚Godlike‘ the prospect of living the exact same life an infinite number of times.

In some of his unpublished notes, however, Nietzsche appears to suggest that Eternal Recurrence is more than just a test – it is a reality. He calls it „the most scientific of all possible hypotheses“ and some have argued that he gives (in his notes) the outlines of a supporting scientific argument. Since it remains an impossible task to interpret Nietzsche's notes, especially given that, as Kaufmann says, „the manner in which he utilized his notes in his other finished books makes it clear that many notes would have been given an entirely new and unexpected meaning“⁴⁷, these notes – while interesting – should not be allowed to form a basis for an interpretation of Eternal Recurrence.⁴⁸

In *Z*, we find a synthesis of Eternal Recurrence as life-affirming test and metaphysical doctrine. Zarathustra certainly equates being life-affirming with wanting wholeheartedly the eternal repetition of one's own existence – that is why he tells the pessimistic Dwarf

⁴⁵ For a useful overview of various critical interpretations of Eternal Recurrence: Lawrence J. Hatab, *Nietzsche's Life Sentence*, New York 2005, Chapter 6.

⁴⁶ *GS*, 341.

⁴⁷ Kaufmann (1950), 19.

⁴⁸ See Soll (1980) for a good selection and discussion of Nietzsche's unpublished notes on the Eternal Recurrence.

that Eternal Recurrence is a thought which „you could not endure“⁴⁹; however, the conditional nature of Eternal Recurrence, as emphasised in GS („What if ...“⁵⁰), is simply not found in Z. In other words, while Nietzsche may not have believed in Eternal Recurrence from what Zarathustra says, Zarathustra believes that all recurs eternally: „Must not all things that can happen have already happened? [...] Must we not return eternally?“⁵¹ Nietzsche had shown himself capable of expressing Eternal Recurrence as a mere thought experiment; but in the mouth of Zarathustra, he chose not to. This is not because Nietzsche changed his mind about the metaphysical status of Eternal Recurrence. Rather, it is because treating Eternal Recurrence as real has important consequences in the context of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* – especially as regards *Übermensch*.

Some have thought that Zarathustra can't believe in a metaphysical Eternal Recurrence because he rejects the metaphysical doctrines of the „Afterworldsmen“⁵² – his word for those who believe in other worlds which are in some sense beyond our own (heaven or Kant's transcendental metaphysics⁵³). If Zarathustra rejects Afterworlds, then how can he consistently endorse Eternal Recurrence which, after all, posits an infinite number of Afterworlds? The resolution of this apparent inconsistency comes with a full appreciation of how Eternal Recurrence differs from the Afterworlds of the Afterworldsmen. It is also important in coming to understand how *Übermensch* and Eternal Recurrence conflict. – The Afterworlds Zarathustra rejects are those created in order to turn away from the real world, towards the fictitious ‚beyond‘; they are „another existence in which to creep“⁵⁴; they are, in short, an escape. This contrasts starkly with the ever-recurring Afterworlds of Eternal Recurrence; those Afterworlds are no escape at all, because they are identical to this world. Instead of allowing the weaker minded and unhappy to turn away from the real world and look to Afterworlds, Eternal Recurrence forces them to face this world head on – for it is *this* world they must experience for all eternity, this world from which they cannot escape. This confirms Eternal Recurrence as an acceptable metaphysical doctrine for Zarathustra, regardless of whether or not Nietzsche himself believed it.

In assessing Eternal Recurrence in this way, we have also highlighted another important point: Zarathustra values affirmation of life. His criticism of Afterworldsmen is not that their doctrines are false, but that they exhibit a negative attitude towards the world. The same applies to other „camel spirits“: the „despisers of the body“ are „angry“ with life⁵⁵; the „Preachers of Death“ are „weary of life“ and preach that „life is refuted“⁵⁶. Throughout Z, Zarathustra never abandons his commitment to affirmation of life as currency of value.

⁴⁹ Z III, 2, *The Vision and the Riddle*.

⁵⁰ GS, 341.

⁵¹ Z III, 2, *The Vision and the Riddle*.

⁵² Z I,3,*The Afterworldsmen*.

⁵³ WS 44; D P, 3. Although these are examples from Nietzsche's other works – not Z.

⁵⁴ Z I,3,*The Afterworldsmen*.

⁵⁵ Z I, 4, *The Despisers of the Body*.

⁵⁶ Z I, 9, *The Preachers of Death*.

VI. Conflict Revisited

We might have hoped that the discussion of *Übermensch* and Eternal Recurrence would have made it clearer how the two fit together. In fact, not only have we not solved the initial conflict – we have made it worse. Now we have a further conflict. On the one hand, Zarathustra's innocent, forgetful child is necessary for the *Übermensch* – so that *Übermensch* can escape from his context and be truly free to express his own will. On the other hand, if we want to be maximally affirmative towards life, then we must affirm everything that has happened in the past to the extent that we wish it to recur eternally. At the end of Section IV, I summarised the relationship between *Übermensch* and context ((1) to (5)). From that summary and our discussion of Eternal Recurrence, the tension between *Übermensch* and Eternal Recurrence can be formalised: (1) An individual is valued (by Zarathustra) to the extent that that individual exhibits an affirmative attitude towards life. (2) The greatest affirmative attitude towards life is exhibited by him who is made joyful by the Eternal Recurrence of all things – including whatever has happened in the past. (3) The *Übermensch* is only possible if we forget the context which determines our moralities; for only then can we freely create values ((1) to (5)). (4) Therefore, the *Übermensch* cannot be maximally affirmative towards life (from (7) and (8)). The tension between *Übermensch* and Eternal Recurrence is located at (7) and (8): Eternal Recurrence demands remembrance in order to affirm ((7)) and *Übermensch* requires forgetfulness ((8)). One attempt at reconciliation, then, between Eternal Recurrence and *Übermensch* might lie in the notion of 'forgetting', which has so far remained unanalysed. If one could demonstrate that Nietzsche uses the term 'forgetting' in two different ways, then one might argue that *Übermensch* forgets his context (in the sense required for (8)) and yet simultaneously remembers it (in the sense required for (7)). I should like to consider two such arguments, each making use of differing interpretations of remembering and forgetting.

A first argument for the resolution of the conflict might proceed as follows. Consider the *Übermensch*'s forgetfulness. Zarathustra can hardly mean 'forget' in the sense that I mean when I say „I have forgotten my umbrella“ (a momentary absence from consciousness. After all, the subject matter that *Übermensch* must forget) the context which would otherwise determine his morality – is wide-ranging, detailed and as such rarely directly present in anyone's mind. So what can 'forgetting' mean? Presumably, it has nothing to do with consciousness, but rather it has to do with our motivations for valuation.⁵⁷ You aren't directly aware, Zarathustra claims, of your (context-dependent) motivations for valuing X; but nonetheless, such motivations act upon you. *Übermensch* will have no such motivations – he will have 'forgotten' them. – Is it 'motivational' remembrance that is required for the affirmation of the past at (7)? No (so the argument goes). Suppose X is some past event: in order to exhibit an affirming or negating attitude towards X, I must believe (in some sense) that X happened – and that is all. This makes the affirmation demanded by Eternal Recurrence propositional in nature: „I affirm X“. What seems to be

⁵⁷ The forgetfulness of the child in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* differs from another kind of Nietzschean forgetting, namely the active force of forgetting which Nietzsche claims is needed to prevent certain perceptions from disturbing our conscious thoughts (GM, II, 2).

required for affirmation, then, is the kind of ‚presence in consciousness‘ remembrance which we rejected when analysing (8). So (the argument continues) *Übermensch* can motivationally-*forget* his past as required at (8) (what happened to his ancestors does not motivate what he values); but he can simultaneously consciously-*remember* the facts about his past (as if told about it in a history lesson), in the sense required for affirmation at (7). We must reject this first argument when we consider the notion of affirmation as presented by Zarathustra. Presupposed by the discussion of the kind of remembrance required for affirmation is that I can affirm or negate X only when X is present to my mind. Perhaps that is one way I might affirm or negate X; but Zarathustra makes it clear that it is not the only way. The first affirmative type discussed in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is the child spirit: its ‚innocence and forgetfulness‘ is necessary for the ‚Sacred Yes‘⁵⁸ (an affirmation). The metaphor of the child as affirmer suggests that conscious, present-to-mind affirmation is not at the forefront of Zarathustra’s thought. It hardly makes sense of the metaphor to claim that the child is affirmative because it consciously affirms specific facts and events. Instead, Zarathustra indicates a more subtle affirmation: the child’s ‚Yes‘ is brought out by the way it behaves, by the attitudes it displays. Similarly, the life-negating ‚Despisers of the Body‘⁵⁹ do not explicitly say ‚We are angry with life‘; rather their negation is brought out in how they act.

Feeding this more subtle notion of what it is to affirm back into the argument, we now see that it fails. *Übermensch* does not fail to affirm his context in the sense that he consciously says ‚no, I don’t affirm that context‘ (that kind of explicit negation is exhibited by the lion, who consciously says ‚No‘ to the dragon’s ‚thou shalt‘). Rather, *Übermensch* fails to affirm his context in the way that he behaves and in the attitudes he displays towards that context. By his very existence, *Übermensch* must display a negating attitude towards the past: he must imply by his actions, by his very (motivational) forgetfulness, that he does not value it. It is for this reason that the conflict persists and that Zarathustra must abandon *Übermensch*.

This counterargument to the first attempt at resolution of the conflict might be grounds for a second attempted resolution. I have just explained that affirmation of the past (which requires remembering the past and hence is problematic for *Übermensch*) is to be found in the way the individual behaves, not in his consciousness. A second argument against the further conflict might then proceed as follows. No kind of remembering is necessary for the affirmation of the Eternal Recurrence. We just need a generally positive attitude towards past, present and future, whatever that past, present or future may be. Hence Eternal Recurrence might require merely a content-free cheerfulness – an ‚affirmation‘ which is not an ‚affirmation of‘. That Nietzsche may have had something like this in mind, might be indicated by his endorsement of *amor fati*.⁶⁰ Pursuing this second argument against the conflict, one might argue that this love of fate indicates love (an affirmative attitude), regardless of whatever happens, rather than a specific love (or affirmation) of what has happened – the latter alone being what is problematic for *Übermensch*. The former would allow for an *Übermensch* who has forgotten about the past in the motiva-

⁵⁸ Z I, 1, *Three Metamorphoses*.

⁵⁹ Z I, 4, *The Despisers of the Body*.

⁶⁰ GS, 276; EH, ‚Why I am so clever‘, 10.

tional sense I argued for above, but who affirms it as a result of having such a positive attitude (never mind whatever happens to have happened).

I doubt that this is what Nietzsche intended by *amor fati*. In any case, Zarathustra is reasonably clear that it is not what he intends by a very similar kind of claim. Against this second argument, therefore, consider Zarathustra's version of *amor fati* (or something very like it): „to redeem the past and transform every ‚it was‘ into an ‚I wanted it thus!‘“⁶¹ It is not (as the second attempted resolution would have it) that the redeemer (and affirmer) has a generally positive attitude towards things, regardless of the specifics. Rather, Zarathustra's comments here indicate a more complex task: to consider every ‚It was‘, and to transform each and every ‚It was‘ into an ‚I wanted it thus‘. This is not a content-free affirmation, but affirmation which must be directed towards every ‚It was‘ – towards the past. I have already argued above that the affirmation is not a conscious, propositional one. Hence, the best option we have is the motivational kind of remembering. It is precisely that motivational remembering which is problematic for *Übermensch*.

VII. Zarathustra's Rejection of *Übermensch*

This section considers the textual evidence for Zarathustra's rejection of *Übermensch* which supports the philosophical considerations offered previously. There is a great deal of textual evidence that Zarathustra rejects *Übermensch* and that he does so precisely for the reasons I have given. A first warning of Zarathustra's dissatisfaction with *Übermensch* comes in his remarks about poets. A disciple recalls Zarathustra's earlier comment that „the poets lie too much“⁶², and asks Zarathustra to explain himself. Zarathustra's response is peculiar. Firstly, he distances himself from what he once said: ‚it is already too much for me to retain my own opinions‘. Secondly, he affirms his earlier words, but with a twist: „What did Zarathustra once say to you? That the poets lie too much – but Zarathustra too is a poet“. He continues: „But granted that someone has said [...] that the poets lie too much: he is right – *we* do lie too much. We know too little and are bad learners: so we have to lie“.⁶³ Zarathustra does more than to undermine his own teachings in general. He singles out *Übermensch* as an example of how the poets lie too much; and he likens *Übermensch* to the kind of Afterworlds („gods“) we have seen him reject: „We set our motley puppets on the clouds and call them gods and *Übermenschen*. And are they not light enough for these insubstantial seats? – all these gods and *Übermenschen*. Alas, how weary I am of all the unattainable that is supposed to be reality“.⁶⁴

These comments foreshadow what is to come. Not only do they support my claim that Zarathustra rejects *Übermensch*, but they also support my analysis of his reasons for doing so. Recall the discussion of why Zarathustra rejects gods and Afterworlds: they are not sufficiently life-affirming, because they draw our attention away from life to an imagined ‚beyond‘. It is precisely for this reason that Zarathustra rejects the *Übermensch*: he

⁶¹ Z II, 20, *Redemption*.

⁶² Z II, 2, *The Blessed Isles*.

⁶³ Z II, 17, *Poets*.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

too is not sufficiently life-affirming. Übermensch was supposed to be the „meaning of the Earth“⁶⁵, but this was a lie; instead, Übermensch is a puppet set upon the clouds – beyond the Earth, just as the Afterworlds are. This echoes Nietzsche’s earlier use of ‚clouds‘: “we must again become *good neighbours to the closest things* and cease from gazing so contemptuously past them at the clouds“.⁶⁶ It also explains why Zarathustra will later go on to dismiss poets as „accusers of life“⁶⁷: as a poet who taught Übermensch, Zarathustra was just an accuser.

Zarathustra’s discussion of the poets occurs before he understands Eternal Recurrence.⁶⁸ If Übermensch were meant to fit well with Eternal Recurrence, then we would expect Zarathustra to welcome the revelation of the latter. Instead, note the great difficulty and unrest which the acceptance of Eternal Recurrence causes to Zarathustra. An early hint at the Eternal Recurrence comes in the words of the ‚soothsayer‘ who tells Zarathustra that „everything is past, everything is one“.⁶⁹ The soothsayer’s cryptic words have a serious effect upon Zarathustra. He „took no food or drink, had no rest and forgot speech“; he is immediately troubled with a dream from which he is awoken by his own screaming.⁷⁰ In that dream, Zarathustra finds himself the guardian of ‚death’s coffins‘ – the guardian of what is past, not the herald of the future; hence he breathed the odour of dust-covered eternities. Zarathustra is slowly coming to understand that Eternal Recurrence forces him to face the past – but the Übermensch, by definition, does not face the past and hence must be abandoned.

Zarathustra’s struggle continues: „the past and present upon the Earth – [...] that is *my* most intolerable burden“⁷¹, he tells his disciples. In his ‚ stillest hour‘, Zarathustra imagines a conversation with himself in which he debates whether or not to accept Eternal Recurrence and its implications: „I know, but I will not speak“, Zarathustra tells the ‚voiceless something‘. ‚Speak your teaching and break!‘, it replies.⁷² Zarathustra’s disciples cannot (despite his hopes) understand why events at the end of Part 2 force Zarathustra to abandon them for good. There has been no explicit statement of Eternal Recurrence, just the hints we have discussed. Nietzsche, however, leaves the reader in no doubt about the reasons for Zarathustra’s „violent grief“⁷³; for at the start of Part 3, we are told of Eternal Recurrence when Zarathustra speaks to the Dwarf.

Nietzsche emphasises Zarathustra’s horror at coming to terms with Eternal Recurrence. Immediately after hearing explicitly of Eternal Recurrence, Zarathustra tells of his vision: a shepherd writhing and choking because a black serpent had „crawled into his

⁶⁵ Z P, 3.

⁶⁶ HA WS, 16. See also HA WS, 310.

⁶⁷ Z III, 13, *The Convalescent*.

⁶⁸ Pippin (1988) does not appear to recognise the significance of Z II 17, instead regarding Z II 19 as the sharp divide before which Zarathustra has confidence in Übermensch and after which he does not.

⁶⁹ Z II 19 *Soothsayer*

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Z II, 20, *Redemption*. See also my comment on this section in the note above.

⁷² Z II, 22, *The Stillest Hour*.

⁷³ Ibid.

mouth – and there it had bitten itself fast“.⁷⁴ The shepherd frees himself from the serpent by biting off its head and spitting it out. Zarathustra is initially unclear about what this means. Later on he understands better, identifying himself with the shepherd: „that monster crept into my throat and choked me. But I bit its head off and spat it away“⁷⁵ Eternal Recurrence forces Zarathustra to face his disgust at the ‚little man‘. It is that aspect of Eternal Recurrence which, Zarathustra clearly tells us, was what choked him: „that great disgust at man – it choked me and had crept into my throat“. Zarathustra continues: „Alas, man recurs eternally! The little man recurs eternally [...] And Eternal Recurrence even for the smallest! That was my disgust at man! Ah, disgust! Disgust! Disgust!“⁷⁶ – What Zarathustra is expressing is not merely a recognition of the initial conflict between *Übermensch* (progress) and Eternal Recurrence (no progress) – although that is doubtless a factor. Additionally, he is coming to understand how Eternal Recurrence is linked to affirmation and the *Übermensch*. To affirm life maximally, Zarathustra must affirm the little man and all that brought him about; but affirming the context which brought about the little man is precisely what *Übermensch* must avoid.⁷⁷

In opening section of *Z*, Zarathustra tells the sun that ‚Like you, I must go down‘ [Ich muss, gleich dir, untergehen] That the Prologue is the beginning of Zarathustra’s ‚down-going‘ is repeated again at *Z* I 1 and at *Z* I 10 (‚Thus began Zarathustra’s down-going‘ [Also begann Zarathustra’s Untergang]). As many commentators have noted, Nietzsche is playing with three meanings of the German ‚untergehen‘: to descend (in Zarathustra’s case, to descend the mountain); to set (as of the sun in ‚Sonnenuntergang‘); to be destroyed. A plausible and commonplace reading of this is that Zarathustra himself intends only the first two connections: he is going down the mountain and, as the sun does, he will bring light to mankind. Yet the further connection in the reader’s mind may well be that the Prologue marks the beginning of Zarathustra’s destruction or downfall.⁷⁸

I should like to add one further point. If Eternal Recurrence forms the basis of Zarathustra’s downfall (at least, his downfall as teacher of *Übermensch*), then there is another irony at work, over and above the level of Zarathustra or the first-time reader: Zarathustra likens himself to the going-down of the sun; yet the motion of the sun is the most prominent experience we have of a kind of Eternal Recurrence, in that it rises and sets every day.⁷⁹ A concept much like the repeated *Untergang* of the sun (the Eternal Recurrence

⁷⁴ *Z* III, 2, *The Vision and the Riddle*.

⁷⁵ *Z* III, 13, *The Convalescent*. Pippin (1988), 51f.: Pippin agrees that Zarathustra rejects *Übermensch* because he comes to understand that „he cannot affirm his doctrine [*Übermensch*] without affirming everything“. My interpretation may be taken as a development of the Pippin line. However, Pippin doesn’t give a developed account of *Übermensch* and so gives no full account of the deeper conflict between the forgetfulness of *Übermensch* and the affirmation demanded by Eternal Recurrence.

⁷⁶ *Z* III, 13, *The Convalescent*.

⁷⁷ For an alternative interpretation: Hatab (2005) Chapter 4.

⁷⁸ Gooding-Williams (2001), 58; Lampert (1986), 15; Daniel W. Conway, *Solving the Problem of Socrates: Nietzsche’s Zarathustra as Political Irony*, in: *Political Theory* 16, No. 2, May 1988, 261f.

⁷⁹ That Zarathustra’s comparison between himself and the sun hints at repetition is mentioned in passing at Conway (1988), 276; curiously, Conway does not appear to connect it with Eternal Recurrence.

of all things) forms the basis of Zarathustra's *Untergang*; although that information is available neither to Zarathustra nor to the first-time reader of Zarathustra's Prologue. Nietzsche's placement of *Untergang* in the Prologue may be seen as an indication to the reader that the speeches therein are not to be taken at face value; they may not be Zarathustra's triumphant final message to man, instead forming part of his downfall. The subject matter of these speeches, to large extent, is *Übermensch*. The additional meaning of *Untergang* (the comparison with the motion of the sun) serves to suggest a reason why Zarathustra's *Übermensch* speeches may be an aspect of his downfall: like the sun, he (along with everything else) must return again and again. This Eternal Recurrence will be the downfall of *Übermensch*.

Earlier, I used Nietzsche's claims about man as *Ueber-Thier* as evidence in favour of my interpretation of *Übermensch*. There is another passage in Nietzsche's earlier work in which he talks about ‚das Ueberthier‘ with a very different meaning and connotation. At WS 12, Nietzsche mocks man for thinking of himself as possessing free will when all other creatures are fettered by necessity. He puts it ironically: „Man is the free being in a world of unfreedom, the eternal *miracle worker* [...], the astonishing exception, the *Ueberthier* and almost-god, the meaning of creation which cannot be thought away, the solution of the cosmic riddle [...] – *Vanitas vanitatum homo*.“ Something of this different, mocking, ironic ‚Ueberthier‘ must surely carry over to Zarathustra's *Übermensch*, who was supposed to be the ‚meaning of the earth‘ and the solution to the problem of freedom from context. Instead, *Übermensch* is revealed as yet another vain fiction.

VIII. Concluding Remarks

It has often been remarked that Nietzsche's philosophical contribution lies in asking new questions, rather giving new answers. Hence, he asks not is theory X true?, nor even ‚what is the value of theory X? but rather what kind of person would invent or be drawn to theory X? So the philosophical method of Socrates is analysed not with reference to Socrates' arguments, but rather with reference to his ugliness.⁸⁰ Similar questions are asked about systems of values: Nietzsche tried to explain how a morality is explicable with reference to the context of those who adhere to it – every morality has its own genealogy. It is perfectly natural for someone with that kind of outlook to seek values which escape the prison of context, to want to „furnish yourself with your own good and evil“ and „hang up your own will above yourself as a law“. ⁸¹ Otherwise, what we value seems to have less importance – merely an expression of certain contingent historical facts. This longing for radical individual freedom is expressed in the form of Zarathustra's *Übermensch*. – Yet here again Nietzsche asks his new question: what kind of attitude is expressed by the longing to be new and free? The answer: a life-negating attitude. Nietzsche took the hope for free creation of values to its breaking point. Via *Übermensch*, he presents the only true individual freedom: one which is neither the expression of context (the Camel) nor simply a reaction to it (the Lion). Yet Nietzsche does not (in the end)

⁸⁰ TI, II.

⁸¹ Z I, 17 *The Way of the Creator*.

advocate a new kind of freedom or individuality. Instead, through Zarathustra, Nietzsche tells us not only that the longing to escape our context can never be satisfied, but also that such a longing is the wrong sort of longing because it is not life-affirming. The final position in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* as regards individual freedom is that we ought not to long for it. Zarathustra's Eternal Recurrence forces us to turn our eyes away from Afterworlds, from gods and Übermenschen, from forlorn, life-negating thoughts.⁸²

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⁸² I'm very grateful to Raymond Geuss and Robert Pippin for their helpful comments on this paper.