

Nietzsche's task

In 1885, when Nietzsche was 41 years old, he sued his publisher. He felt that the publisher had been inexcusably lax in sending copies of his books to bookstores and had been reluctant to sell them to anyone but the most insistent customers. Nietzsche eventually won the case, and with his settlement he bought a large, new headstone for his father, who had died some 36 years earlier. On the headstone Nietzsche had inscribed “*Die Liebe höret nimmer auf*” -- “Love never faileth,” from 1 Corinthians, chapter 13.

The purchase of the headstone raises a variety of interesting questions. First, in less than three years after this date, Nietzsche would be writing his *Antichrist*, one of the most important and caustic criticisms of Christianity ever written. But how can the tone of that work square with the pious devotion of the headstone? Second, Nietzsche barely knew his father; he had a few memories, some fond, and some no doubt of the painful agony and madness suffered by his father just before he died. Why should this need to memorialize him arise over three decades later? Moreover, the type of man his father was -- a country pastor of a rural Lutheran church -- was a type he would regularly ridicule in various works with great severity: Christian, pious, rural, German. And, finally, the stone was going to his childhood home, placed in a cemetery he never wished to see again. Nietzsche never had money to waste. Why then did he spend such a considerable sum on a distant monument to the father he hardly knew, a father with whom he seemed to have so many deep and irreconcilable differences?

This puzzle takes us into the heart of Nietzsche's life and into some of the deepest themes in his mature philosophy. To begin to solve it, we need to begin with a brief retelling of that life.

Nietzsche's Life

Nietzsche was born in 1844, the first child of Karl Ludwig and Franziska Nietzsche.¹

Karl Ludwig was a much beloved pastor. Nietzsche later recalled sitting on his lap as he played the organ. He had been told that the villagers of Röcken looked upon his father as a compassionate man of the Word who knew the meaning of true Christian love. Their second child, Elizabeth was born in 1847, and their third, Joseph, in 1848. Then came tragedy. Karl Ludwig grew very ill, and in a short time he grew blind and insane. After great pain, he died in 1849. The cause of the blindness and insanity is anybody's guess; the attending physician diagnosed "liquefaction of the brain." Less than a year later, little Joseph, barely two years old, suffered from severe cramps and died as well. Franziska, with two children to care for, and only a small pension, relocated to nearby Naumburg -- a move Nietzsche resented, as it meant losing yet another familiar presence in his life.

It became clear early on that Nietzsche possessed unusual intelligence -- and an even more unusual capacity for introspection and solitude. At the age of 14 he was sent to a prestigious but severe boarding school at Pforta, thus isolating him further from his remaining family. He was often very homesick, and he found it difficult to find a safe harbor in the school. But gradually he made some friends and led them in encouraging one another to write ambitious essays on gods, heroes, culture, music, and tragedy. Some

¹ This brief biography is based on Krell and Bates (1997) and Safransky (2002).

of his letters home reveal a zany sense of humor. Also at this time he began to complain of headaches and eye trouble -- from which he would suffer more and more for the rest of his life.

Indeed, recent research suggests that these headaches which began in his teens were caused by a condition that would eventually lead to Nietzsche's collapse in 1889, his final decade of insanity, and his death in 1900. The prevailing view for the last century has been that Nietzsche's demise was caused by paretic syphilis, which was the original diagnosis of his doctors. Scholars have argued over exactly how he contracted syphilis -- perhaps a brothel in Bonn, perhaps as a medical orderly in the Franco-Prussian war -- but the diagnosis has rarely been questioned. Recently, however, in the *Journal of Medical Biography* (2003), Leonard Sax has argued that the cause of Nietzsche's collapse was more likely a brain tumor -- specifically, a meningiomatic growth behind his right eye. Sax points out that the diagnosis of syphilis does partly account for some of Nietzsche's symptoms -- the slow response of one of the pupils to light, the sudden appearance of grandiose ideas, and dementia. But it cannot account for Nietzsche's long history of migraine-like headaches (from age 14 onward), nor why he survived for so long after the symptoms became apparent (at this time syphilitics rarely survived for more than two years, while Nietzsche lived for another decade), nor why his headaches were only on the right half of his brain (syphilis affects both sides), nor why he lacked some of the telltale signs of syphilis (such as slurred speech and a trembling tongue). Sax argues that the available evidence is better accommodated by the diagnosis of a brain tumor just behind the right eye. This would also explain the obvious bulge of Nietzsche's right eye, his near blindness in it, and his lifetime of headaches. As the tumor grew, it

would have eventually resulted in a *de facto* frontal lobotomy -- which would account for his collapse and the specific ways in which Nietzsche deteriorated from 1889 onward.

So as a young teen Nietzsche may well have begun to suffer from what would eventually bring madness and death. It would have been impossible for the young Nietzsche not to worry that his future was closed off by whatever brought blindness and insanity upon his father. Whatever killed Karl Ludwig – and perhaps little Joseph? – was heading his way as well. Of course, he could not be sure of this, nor could he be sure of when his death would come. But as he grew older he became increasingly confident that each year might well be his last, as his journals record.

He graduated from Pforta, spent a “wasted” year in Bonn, and enrolled in the University of Leipzig in 1865. By this time he regarded himself as practically freed from the religion of his father. By 1861 he had stopped attending church services with his family. He now was drawn to the world of Greek heroes and great philosophers. He studied classical languages and texts and Hegel; he was already reading translations of the American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, and he was lit afire by Schopenhauer. He worked endlessly to hone his own writing style, so that his writing would be like improvisation at the piano: “as free as possible, yet still logical and beautiful” (letter to Gersdorff; quoted in Krell and Bates, p. 42). And then in 1868 he met Richard Wagner. Wagner seemed to Nietzsche to be exactly what Schopenhauer had defined as genius. Wagner presented a new world of possibilities, themes, and ideas that would never be reached by mole-like scholars digging after the worms and bugs in ancient texts and tomes. Nietzsche by this time wanted to be a cultural hero, not a mere scholar, and Wagner’s world spoke to him of heroic possibility. The two hit it off -- Wagner being just

the age Nietzsche's father would have been -- and Wagner invited Nietzsche to visit him in Lucerne.

It was an exciting time for Nietzsche. He was a confidant of the great Wagner. He had already published articles on classical philology. He felt that he had unique and important contributions to make to the grand cause of culture. Because of his skills and evident potential, one of his classicist professors recommended him for a professorship at the University of Basel. The offer was made, Nietzsche accepted, and he became a university professor at the unprecedented age of 24.

He might have believed he was about to take the cultural world by storm. If so, he was wrong. His first book, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), eagerly anticipated by the scholarly community of classicists, was read with disappointment. In that work one finds no new close examinations of Greek texts or new advances in the science of philology. Instead, one finds the young Nietzschean philosophy projected upon ancient Greek drama. He argues that Greek drama arose from Dionysian religion, which attempted to find some magical way of uniting ourselves with one another and the origin of nature, thus overcoming human loneliness and partiality. The Greeks knew well the human capacity for rage, cruelty, power, and triumph; and they knew how to control those monsters in order to create Apollonian beauty in their great works of art. Or rather, the Greeks *had* this knowledge, Nietzsche thought, until Socrates, Plato, and Euripides found asylum from these terrible forces by escaping into a fantasy world they called "Reason." They killed great tragedy, Nietzsche thought, though he also believed that perhaps Wagner had found a way for us to renew our acquaintance with our own depths.

He went on to style himself as a cultural critic, planning a series of “untimely meditations” to prompt his culture toward a deepening of its own self-knowledge. Over the next four years he published four of these meditations until his eye troubles, headaches, and stomach problems forced him to take extended leaves from the university. He traveled alone and with friends through the Alps and the northern Mediterranean coast, and used the time to write *Human, All Too Human* (1878). By this time, he and Wagner had disappointed one another. Nietzsche had begun to style himself as a philosopher-psychologist, seeking out natural explanations for pathological attitudes and beliefs. He was especially eager to deflate religious and quasi-religious prejudices by pointing out how they grew from petty concerns and drives, and are nourished by peculiar features of diet, national origin, gender, or race. Wagner, on the other hand, by this time had written the all-too-Christian *Parsifal*. Their break was inevitable and final.

1879 was a dreadful year for Nietzsche. He had reached the age of his father when he died, and his headaches and sickness were getting much worse. He resigned from the university, and was convinced that his own death was very near. He experimented with travel, taking note of his environmental needs: sunshine, a certain air pressure and temperature, altitude, exercise, diet. If everything was not just right, he was completely incapacitated. But he met with some success in these experiments, and he wrote and wrote and wrote. From 1881 onward, he published at least one major work *every year*.

But what he sought, above all else, were similar spirits – friends who could see what he could see: the decay of German culture, the sickness of Christianity, the glory of the Greeks, and the possibility of creating something of real value. He dreamed of a class of friends who were able to free themselves from the trappings of conventional thought

and bravely explore the uncharted potential of human resource and creativity. And in 1882 he believed himself to have found such friends. He and his friend Paul Rée met Lou Salome, a captivating woman who seems to have cast a spell over every man she met. (And she met her share of greats, including Nietzsche, Freud, Tolstoy, and Rilke.) She was intelligent, creative, and daring – just the qualities Nietzsche thought his free spirits must possess. Together they planned to form their own small intellectual commune, combining forces to make actual a new human possibility of cultural creation. But the triangle self-destructed. Rée and Salome went off together to Berlin, and Nietzsche was left answering priggish and defamatory letters from his sister and mother.

Nietzsche turned from the embarrassing debacle into a rich and deep solitude. He began to write what he later considered to be his masterpiece, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. To some extent, in crafting the work he became his own Zarathustra -- an untouchable man in the mountains who believed himself to need nothing but his serpent and his eagle, but who descends to the sea in order to shine for others. He published the four parts of the work over the years 1883-1885. As he created this work, he may well have tried to convince himself that he really did need no one else – no fellow free spirits (he prophesies that they will come many years in the future), no teachers, no students, no readers. He could be the sun illuminating his own universe. Nietzsche felt that in order to obtain this independence and strength, he had to overcome the pains and fears that had haunted his entire life – his miserable childhood, his loneliness, his sicknesses, his failure to influence the cultural world around him, and his fate to die blind and mad, just like his father. Like Zarathustra, Nietzsche's greatest obstacle was to overcome pity – pity for himself, for the higher man and his solitude.

And in 1885 he bought the new tombstone for his father. We are still getting to that, but first we must say something about the eternal recurrence.

Eternal Recurrence

Nietzsche was gripped by an idea. The idea was that the world would repeat itself endlessly – that its whole scope of events had unfolded infinitely many times and would continue to recycle just as it had, without end. The dinosaurs, the ice age, the Greeks, Nietzsche, today, tomorrow – all these have existed countless times in the past, and will exist countless times in the future. What is happening now has happened before and will recur again. The world never began, and it will never end, and there is nothing beyond it.

The idea had come to Nietzsche at several times in his life, but it struck him with powerful force in August of 1881, in the woods near Lake Silvaplana in the Alps. The idea came to him as he stopped near a boulder on the shore – “6,000 feet beyond humanity and time”, as he recalled (Krell and Bates, p. 133). He later tried to provide several pseudo-scientific or quasi-metaphysical arguments for this theory, all variations upon the theme that a finite number of particles stirred up by lawful forces of nature over an infinity of time must eventually find themselves duplicating the same sequence over and over again. Still, it would not be quite right to call this a *theory* of Nietzsche’s. It was more of a *challenge* he posed for himself: could he get himself to believe that all he can ever expect is to live his life, just as it was, over and over again? And an even tougher challenge: could he get himself to *embrace* this fate?

The true power of the idea, Nietzsche felt, lay in the fact that the eternal recurrence was the only metaphysical view which permitted the world to redeem itself.

The Christian postulation of heaven brings with it the belief that this world is valuable precisely because it is a prelude to *something else*: heaven. The Buddhist belief that consciousness can finally be extinguished reinforces the interpretation of conscious life as constant painful thirsting: this world is again *something to get over*. The futurist notion that there is progress in our inventions makes the present valuable only as a bridge to *something else*: the future. But if we say that this world leads only to *itself*, recurring again and again -- without change or improvement of any kind -- then there is nothing beyond this world that serves as its redemption. Our life is hemmed in on both ends; only the world redeems the world.

We might wonder whether we could get by on the cheap and insist that there is no heaven, no nirvana, no progress -- and no recurrence. Why must there be recurrence in order for the world to redeem itself? Here lies the importance of the idea as a personal philosophical challenge for Nietzsche. Nietzsche did not want to allow himself the emotional and cognitive possibility of accepting his life in bad faith. That is, it would be easier to accept a life filled with myopia and migraines if one were confident that one will never have to suffer those pains again. But the real challenge is to accept one's life with the belief that the life will be lived again and again, just as it was, without a single departure from what has already happened. We cannot embrace that challenge unless we truly *love* our lives. As Nietzsche wrote in his autobiographical *Ecce Homo*, "My formula for greatness is *amor fati* [love of fate]". It is at that point that we redeem our lives; we redeem them by embracing them, for their own sake, and not for the sake of any other valuable thing they can bring us.

Nietzsche was seized by the idea -- and horrified by it. In his *Zarathustra*, he pictured his own relation to the idea as a man with a serpent stuck fast in his throat -- revolting, choking, and trapped. The man could only bite through the serpent and swallow, and thus be free of the horror. Similarly, Nietzsche regarded the idea with nausea, revulsion, and fascination. Could he will again the deaths of his father and brother? His loneliness and failures? His fate to die as his father did? But the invitation could be neither ignored nor resisted. All his thinking led him to this point. To stand free and triumph over ghostly ideologies and to be hard and resist soft thinking required biting through this challenge and taking a big gulp. Accepting the eternal return was the key to overcoming his pity for his own life.

The headstone

Nietzsche finished the final part of *Zarathustra* in 1885 and was ready for significant changes in his life. He wanted release from his old publisher, who had made the first part of *Zarathustra* wait while the press was cranking out half a million hymnals and perhaps just as many vitriolic anti-Semitic tracts. (There is more irony in that fact than even Nietzsche could invent!) The lawsuit brought about this release. Nietzsche felt he had reached a stage at which he was ready to propound his mature philosophy. *Zarathustra* was, in a way, his own fanfare.

Why then at this time, would it have seemed natural to Nietzsche to invest in a headstone for his father? We have barely a scrap of evidence for any immediate motive. In one letter he mentions the headstone purchase to a friend, and remarks only that he did it to please his mother. But the event must have meant more to him than this. For 36 years

his father's death had cast a dark shadow over Nietzsche's life, and for at least 25 years Nietzsche must have feared that he shared the fate of his father. Now he had come to terms with that fate, and had even learned to embrace it. The headstone must have figured, in a way, as a monument to his own embrace of the eternal recurrence. It marked the fact that he would no longer live in fearful expectation of madness and death. The stone said, in effect, "Here is my father's death, which will be also my own, and I do not hide from it, but raise a monument to it." And the inscription -- "love never faileth" -- certainly reads like a marvel of Nietzschean double-entendre, signifying both Karl Ludwig's belief in the unfailing love of Christ for humanity and Friedrich Wilhelm's belief in his own unfailing love for the world, his own great and terrible Dionysian *Yes*.

Since Nietzsche was famous first as a classicist, it is hard to resist reading his relation to his father as a variation upon the life of Odysseus's son, Telemachus. Telemachus grows up not knowing his father -- Odysseus was away at Troy for ten years, and for another ten as he tried to return home. But in the year of Odysseus's return, Athena visits Telemachus and directs him along the path to becoming a hero. Before this, Telemachus was only a young whelp, ineffectual against the suitors besieging his mother and his home, and even joining them at times. But Athena recalls him to his own proper station, as his great father's son, and arranges meetings with some of the other great friends of his father. Finally Odysseus returns, and the son joins the father in the slaughter of the suitors and the reestablishment of Odysseus as king of Ithaca, with Telemachus as his rightful heir.

Nietzsche's father, of course, would never return. So what would Telemachus have done, had Odysseus perished at Troy? If he still were to rise to greatness, he would

have had to have done it all on his own. Perhaps he would have forsaken his father's throne and set out to establish his own kingdom, just as Nietzsche early on parted ways with his father's Christianity. Perhaps he would have felt the necessity to rebel openly against his father's legacy, proving to himself that he was something more than the son of the dead Odysseus, just as Nietzsche felt compelled to cast himself as the Antichrist. Perhaps finally, as he attained the status he had set for himself, he would have paid tribute to his father as no longer a threat, but as a respected equal, just as Nietzsche did with the purchase of the headstone.

Admittedly, this sort of psychobiography is too easy and it is endlessly speculative, and we do not really have any textual evidence for it. But given Nietzsche's temperament and his affinity for the Greeks, it probably does capture some of the mythical and powerful dimensions in which Nietzsche saw his own life. As Emerson wrote, we need not envy the ancients, for the sun shines also for us today, and Nietzsche surely agreed: there is nothing in the life of Telemachus he would be unwilling to see in his own life. And his embrace of the eternal return was, in his own mind, as heroic as anything ever done on the fields of Troy.

The task

This account of Nietzsche's life, the significance of the eternal recurrence, and his relation to his father presents Nietzsche as pursuing a philosophical task that is quite different from the tasks philosophers usually set for themselves. Philosophy is often regarded as the pursuit of a special kind of truth: the *deepest* truth, about the ultimate nature of reality or the about our most sacred obligations or about the fundamental

structure of the intellect. These truths are pursued mainly through a high-powered introspective examination. The philosophers then devise arguments to try to prove to others and to themselves that what they have found through their examination is true.

But Nietzsche – like Emerson – was pursuing something else. To be sure, he wanted truth: he wanted to know what kind of animal we are, what natural and psychological pressures we are under, and the historical forces which shaped our traditions and our society. But this pursuit of natural truths was in the service of a higher ideal. The higher ideal motivated all his thinking, his travels, his problematic personal relations, and his high-octane prose. The ideal was *emancipation*. Nietzsche sought emancipation from the pathological ideologies he diagnosed in his stagnant culture; he sought emancipation from the dishonest dogmas he found in religion and philosophy; he sought emancipation from his fear that he would end up like his father, and from his terrible loneliness (he sought to transform his loneliness into a potent solitude); and, finally, he sought emancipation from anything other than his own creative genius. He used the truths he came to know and the ideas he encountered as tools in his great struggle for personal and philosophical emancipation. Truth, as he said, was not nearly as important to him as *health* – and the health he had in mind (as we shall see) was based upon this philosophical emancipation.

The task, then, was not solely the task of acquiring truth, but that of bringing about a kind of personal development. Nietzsche's *task* was his *life*. The task was partly psychological self-improvement: Nietzsche certainly sought emancipation from psychological pressures peculiar to his own history and development. But his task was also broader. It included *philosophical* self-improvement. Despite his injunctions to move

beyond good and evil, Nietzsche nevertheless sought to become the sort of person he felt *should* be revered. Nietzsche's pages are filled with valuations – not of course of the old-fashioned moral sort, but valuations of more subtle and stronger and purer human beings (and at some point, even beings beyond human beings). The model to have in mind of Nietzsche's broad philosophical approach is not of a neurotic seeking mental health, and even less of a Socratic inquirer seeking ultimate truths, but the model of a devoted initiate seeking a special kind of wisdom and a *way of being* from a hidden master -- or a god.

In *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), he identified the style of person he sought to become. He identified the person as a “genius of the heart”. It is a lengthy passage, but worth quoting in full since it reveals a Nietzsche intoxicated by his vision, probing it through his own writing, trying to grasp all the dimensions folded into his inspiration:²

The genius of the heart --

As it is possessed by that great hidden one, the tempter god and born piper of consciences whose voice knows how to descend into the underworld of every soul, who says no word and gives no glance in which there lies no touch of enticement, to whose mastery belongs knowing how to seem – not what he is but what to those who follow him is one constraint *more* to press ever closer to him, to follow him ever more inwardly and thoroughly –

The genius of the heart –

² Section 295; Hollingdale's translation. I have reconfigured the long sentence with some breaks for easier reading.

Who makes everything loud and self-satisfied fall silent and teaches it to listen, who smooths rough souls and gives them a new desire to savour – the desire to lie still as a mirror, that the deep sky may mirror itself in them --;

The genius of the heart –

Who teaches the stupid and hasty hand to hesitate and grasp more delicately; who divines the hidden and forgotten treasure, the drop of goodness and sweet spirituality under thick and opaque ice, and is a divining-rod for every grain of gold which has lain long in the prison of much mud and sand;

The genius of the heart –

From whose touch everyone goes away richer, not favoured and surprised, not as if blessed and oppressed with the goods of others, but richer in himself, newer to himself than before, broken open, blown upon and sounded out by a thawing wind, more uncertain perhaps, more delicate, more fragile, more broken, but full of hopes that as yet have no names, full of new will and current, full of new ill will and counter-current....

Nietzsche goes on to identify the genius of the heart as the ancient god *Dionysus*, and Nietzsche claims to be his initiate. But what does this mean? For surely Nietzsche took Dionysus's existence as metaphorical. Dionysus was an ideal for Nietzsche, a limit he sought to approach. And indeed, as he fell into insanity in 1889, he began signing his postcards "Dionysus". Nietzsche sought to be this genius of the heart – the great

cultivator and raiser of human souls, opening up for them new inner depths and difficulties and riches. The genius is not exactly an *übermensch*, nor exactly a free spirit (two other sorts of imaginary friends Nietzsche invented for himself), but a *transformer* of human souls from simple and shallow pretenders to full-blown individuals: a true *educator*. He entices us to become who we are, beneath the layers of false consciousness and alien ideologies.