

Ethics after the *Unmensch*.

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

— Matthew Arnold, 'Dover Beach' (1867)

If those arrangements were to disappear as they appeared...
one can certainly wager that man would be erased,
like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea.

— Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1966)

§ *The Sea of Faith*

Two withdrawing tides of the Sea of Faith scour recent history in the West: Faith in God in the nineteenth-century and Faith in Man in the twentieth.¹ Both essentially theological events,² they nevertheless produce profound philosophical consequences: metaphysical, epistemological and ethical currents of thought swirl with the backrush of these departing categories. Yet, any given historical moment, in so far as it is useful to invoke steady historical states at all, rarely produces a coherent ideological polarity of the order 'God is alive' or 'God is dead'; 'Man is alive' or 'Man is dead.'

Arnold is clearly a reluctant apostate: the resonance of his poem depends on the very theological sanction that it mourns. His poem functions as a lament. As Arnold is reluctant to cede God to history, so Foucault anticipates but seems to shy away from a decisive pronouncement on Man. He remains resolutely in the subjunctive mood ('If those arrangements were to disappear...man *would* be erased'),³ whereas philosophers who come after or even alongside him have no difficulty speaking in the indicative (e.g. Derrida: 'In the thinking and the language of Being, the end of man has been prescribed since always, and this prescription has never done anything but modulate the equivocality of the *end*, in the play of *telos* and death').⁴

¹ 'God' should here be understood to imply the Christian Godhead, 'Man,' where capitalized, the Humanist subject.

² Theological because the overturned conceptual bodies are objects of belief.

³ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 387. My emphasis.

⁴ Jacques Derrida, 'The Ends of Man' in *Margins of Philosophy*, 134.

Conceptual turbulence and interference need to be accounted for in any historical modelling of Man that we might undertake. The quotations from Arnold and Foucault given here are intended to mark complex fields of ideological forces rather than simple progressive states in a teleological calculus of the present. Ebb tides retreat in a long succession of waves: we understand that the Sea of Faith and the figure of Man are still with us even as they continue to withdraw.

What will concern us here, however, is the differential rate at which they have been disappearing. ‘God’ and ‘Man’, in the specific Western ontico-theological sense in which we intend them, should have *disappeared together*. No authority makes this clearer than the Bible—the Old Testament insists that Man is a figure traced directly from God, clearly delineating their shared physiognomy: ‘And God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.”’ (*Gen 1:26*). Further, this resemblance obtains at the level of ‘Man’ – an abstraction prior to the first man or woman: ‘So God created man in his image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.’ (*Gen 1:27*). ‘Man’ is explicitly invoked (‘created he him’) as an entity named (and thus created) prior to particular gendered biological instantiations of the human (‘male and female created he them’). Logically then, men and women might survive God, but not ‘Man.’

Yet Man has proved resilient. We should be able to interpolate Foucault and Arnold’s accounts, yet their words are separated by a century and would read awkwardly if combined. There is a clear historical lag-time between the disappearance of God and the disappearance of Man. Though traced perilously on the shoreline, the figure of the last Man is scored deeply in the sand. The retreating Sea of Faith would seem to have left an anomalous trace. What, specifically, are the *ethical results* of Man’s slow disappearance? How does history change our philosophical understanding of Man?⁵ Finally, can we begin to discern the contours of a new ethical territory, revealed as Man is washed away?

⁵ As Deleuze makes clear ‘the same object, the same phenomenon, changes sense depending on the force which appropriates it. History is the variation of senses...’ Deleuze, Gilles. *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 3.

Original failing of philosophers. - All philosophers have the common failing that they start with the present day human beings and suppose that they will reach their goal by analysing them. Involuntarily, they allow "man" to hover before their eyes as an *aeterna veritas*, something that remains the same throughout all turmoil, a secure measure for things. All that the philosopher asserts about humanity, however, is basically nothing more than testimony about human beings of a very restricted stretch of time.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human* (1878)

§ *Les fins de l'homme*

Nietzsche's thought stands as a paradigmatic ethical remapping, 'a revaluation of all values.' His genealogical laying bare of God, Man and morals is the *sine qua non* for most vanguard twentieth-century thought. As Deleuze concisely puts it: "It is clear that modern philosophy has largely lived off Nietzsche."⁶ As such, it is Nietzsche's methodological approach to the question of Man that will orient our discussion here.

Nietzsche is the first to clearly articulate the 'original failing of all [Humanist] philosophers,' diagnosing their tendency to treat Man as an '*aeterna veritas*.' In response, he sets about offering a corrective to such a limited view of Man. Schacht convincingly argues that it is a genealogical enquiry into the nature of Man that animates Nietzsche's entire philosophical project:

His general and underlying concern... is with *our human* nature and possibilities. And in the *Genealogy* he is offering us further suggestions pertaining not only to the genealogy of morals and of knowers but also to the genealogy of the humanity we exemplify... with a view to attaining a more comprehensive perspective upon them by means of which we might at once arrive at a better understanding of what he calls "the type *Mensch*," and also discern "what might yet be made of man."⁷

Schacht goes on to encapsulate Nietzsche's concern with "the type *Mensch*," as an example of what he terms 'philosophical anthropology.' Undertaking an updated philosophical anthropology of the

⁶ Deleuze, Gilles. *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 1.

⁷ Schacht. 'Of Morals and *Menschen*' in *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality*. 433.

type Mensch will form the project of this essay. In order to focus enquiry on the figure of Man, I will treat two contrasting sub-types of the general type *Mensch*—the *übermensch* and the *unmensch*. These figures will be read as embodying variant eschatological accounts, two possible ‘ends’ of Man (with the second ‘end’ developing largely out of the poststructuralist critique of the first). As Derrida makes clear:

Man is that which is in relation to his end, in the fundamentally equivocal sense of the word. Since always. The transcendental end can only appear to itself and be unfolded only on the condition of mortality, of a relation to finitude as the origin of ideality. The name of man has always been inscribed in metaphysics between these two ends. It has meaning only in this eschato-teleological situation.⁸

The *übermensch* and the *unmensch* are the high and low tide marks of ‘the type Mensch.’ Both figures reveal their own version of the last Man - each has an ethics, each has a value.⁹ They can be summarised as follows:

1. The *übermensch*. – Man as overman. Nietzsche’s argument that Man is a threshold to be surmounted.
2. The *unmensch* – Man as brute/inhuman. A generic term I employ to name Man as surmounted by his threshold.

Before treating each figure in detail we should touch on the methodological challenges of writing a philosophical anthropology alive to the challenges of history. History should not be bracketed out of philosophy – Nietzsche thought that this had not been recognised before him: ‘As is the hallowed custom with philosophers, the thinking of all of them is by nature unhistorical; there is no doubt about that. The way they have bungled their moral genealogy comes to light at the very beginning...’¹⁰ Derrida makes it clear that many philosophers since have also fallen into this trap: ‘The history of the concept of man is never examined. Everything occurs as if the sign “man” had

⁸ Derrida, ‘The Ends of Man’, 123.

⁹ ‘Genealogy means both the value of origin and the origin of values.’ *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 2.

¹⁰ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morality*. 461.

no origin, no historical, cultural, or linguistic limit.¹¹ Genealogy is Nietzsche's methodological corrective to unhistorical philosophizing. Geuss helpfully unpacks the approach:

Starting from the present state of, say, Christianity (or of whatever else is the object of genealogical analysis), the genealogy works its way backward in time, recounting the episodes of struggle between different wills, each trying to impose its interpretation or meaning on the Christianity that existed at its time, and thereby disentangling the separate strands of meaning that have come together in a (contingent) unity in the present. Each such episode is, as it were, the branching node of a genealogical tree.¹²

Our philosophical anthropology of the type Mensch will take the form of schematic genealogies of the *übermensch* and the *unmensch*; key nodes on the branching tree of Man. Genealogy will be used to set these two figures of Man in their particular historico-philosophical context¹³ and to open on to the question of their value, or lack of it, for any contemporary ethical reckoning. By offering an account of the *übermensch* and the *unmensch* a short 'history of the concept of man' will be adumbrated alongside its ethical implications.

¹¹ Derrida, 'The Ends of Man', 116.

¹² Geuss, 'Nietzsche and Genealogy' in *Morality, Culture, and History*, 14.

¹³ For Nehamas, genealogy 'simply *is* history, correctly practiced' and I am persuaded by this argument. See *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, 246 (note 1).

What is the ape to man? A laughingstock or a painful embarrassment. And man shall be just that for the overman: a laughingstock or a painful embarrassment. You have made your way from worm to man, and much in you is still worm. Once you were apes, and even now, too, man is more ape than any ape.

— Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1892)

§ *Übermensch*

Nietzsche reveals that there is a moral psychology underlying all philosophising. Furthermore, he seeks to make the often hidden moral values underlying the Western philosophical tradition explicit. He is interested in what values a given philosophical claim both presumes and seeks to produce. Alluding to Kant, he wonders ‘Even apart from the value of such claims as “there is a categorical imperative in us,” one can still always ask: what does such a claim tell us about the man who makes it?’¹⁴ Rather than assessing the ‘truth’ of any given philosophical claim, Nietzsche teaches us to ascertain how it works, for whom it works, whether it works at all... Truth is significant only as truth-*value*. As far as Nietzsche is concerned, from Socrates to Schopenhauer, Western philosophy’s ostensible concern with the ‘truth’ has obscured its fundamental lack of any useful, life-affirming, purpose:

Apart from the ascetic ideal, man, the human *animal*, had no meaning so far. His existence on earth contained no goal; “why man at all?” — was a question without an answer; the *will* for man and earth was lacking; behind every great human destiny there sounded as a refrain a yet greater “in vain!” *This* is precisely what the ascetic ideal means: that something was *lacking*, that man was surrounded by a fearful *void*—he did not know how to justify, to account for, to affirm himself; he *suffered* from the problem of his meaning.¹⁵

Man’s suffering from his lack of meaning has thus produced a widely ingested ideological placebo: philosophy without use value but loaded with purported truth content. Nietzsche’s corrective prescription is to make the motivation of his philosophy explicit: his account of the type *Mensch*,¹⁶ is concerned to provide a positive value for human life, an affirmation of the world and our place in

¹⁴ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 289.

¹⁵ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, 598.

¹⁶ Here, for reasons of discursive and conceptual economy, I will confine my argument to the four later texts considered Nietzsche’s most accomplished: *The Gay Science*; *Beyond Good and Evil*; *Genealogy of Morals* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

it. He sets about attempting to cure us of our reliance on a metaphysical ground for meaning through affirmation of this life and this life alone.

Consequently, his first task is to conclusively dispatch any residual ‘otherworldly hopes’ that Man might be harbouring: ‘I beseech you, my brothers, remain faithful to the earth, and do not believe those who speak to you of otherworldly hopes! Poison-mixers are they, decaying and poisoned themselves, of whom the earth is weary...’¹⁷ Self-evidently, on this accounting, God must be conclusively and publicly dispatched: ‘God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him...’¹⁸ Yet Nietzsche is mindful of the fact that the will to truth survives the death of God, that in a certain sense it is the ascetic ideal which overturns faith in God: ‘two thousand years of truthfulness... finally forbids itself the lie involved in belief in God.’¹⁹

Nietzsche knows that a strong principle must be articulated in opposition to the ascetic ideal. Man must consequently be made strong enough to overthrow the ascetic ideal but clearly has not so far been equal to the task. Nietzsche is thus led to postulate a new figure of the type *Mensch*, one who will be up to the challenge posed by the ascetic ideal. This figure is the *übermensch*: ‘Behold, I teach you the overman. The overman is the meaning of the earth. Let your will say: the overman shall be the meaning of the earth!’²⁰ The *übermensch* must be affirmed, Man is a threshold that must be overcome:

Man is a rope, tied between beast and overman—a rope over an abyss. A dangerous across, a dangerous on-the-way, a dangerous looking-back, a dangerous shuddering and stopping. What is great in man is that he is a bridge and not an end: what can be loved in man is that he is an overture and a going under.²¹

¹⁷ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 125.

¹⁸ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, [Section 126].

¹⁹ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, 596.

²⁰ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 125.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 126-7.

Though the *übermensch* is conceived as absolutely immanent to the earth it is impossible to avoid noting the recurrent theological tone that Nietzsche employs when discussing this new type. From the performative fiat that invokes the overman ('God died: now we want the overman to live'),²² via the insinuation of a great chain of being which he tops (What is the ape to man? A laughing stock or a painful embarrassment. And man shall be just that for the overman),²³ to the promise of redemption he embodies ('I will teach men the meaning of their existence—the overman, the lightning out of the dark cloud of man.),'²⁴ the overman is spoken of in overtly religious rhetoric.

Above all else it is the resolutely *singular* invocation of the *übermensch* that is most striking. Though there are occasional hints of a plurality of self-overcoming ('We, however, want to become who we are – human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves!'),²⁵ Nietzsche seems vulnerable to charges of equating the *übermensch* and the One (i.e. an individualised metaphysical and ethical ground). In an attempt to surpass the threshold of man, Nietzsche to some degree reproduces the structures that produced the limit that he would overcome. Nietzsche's last man is still too closely related to the first.

²² *Ibid.*, 399.

²³ *Ibid.*, 124.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 123.

²⁵ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 189.

[T]he anthropological machine of the moderns... functions by excluding as not (yet) human an already human being from itself, that is, by animalising the human, by isolating the nonhuman within the human: *Homo alalus*, or the ape-man. And it is enough to move our field of research ahead a few decades, and instead of this innocuous paleontological find we will have the Jew, that is, the non-man produced within the man, or the *néomort* and the overcomatose person, that is, the animal separated within the human body itself.

— Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal* (2002)

§ *Ummensch*

Nietzsche operates on the ‘upper’ threshold of the human, a point at which philosophy risks, in Derrida’s diagnosis, recapitulating ‘the metaphysical unity of man and God, the relation of man to God, the project of becoming God as the project constituting human-reality.’²⁶ Nietzsche paradoxically is the first of the last metaphysicians. Yet such an onto-theology also has a ‘lower’ threshold—namely that zone of indistinction between man and animal, human and inhuman—and this threshold is no less important in considering what Man is. It is precisely the threshold, between Man and non-Man (as opposed to Man and God) that becomes important for poststructuralist thought, picking up on Nietzsche’s legacy and offering a corrective to his oversights and unwitting reinscription of metaphysics (as onto-theology). As Nietzsche relies on God to secure the being of the *übermensch* so Agamben demonstrates that Man relies on the ape to produce his humanity:

Homo Sapiens, then, is neither a clearly defined species nor a substance; it is, rather, a machine or device for producing the recognition of the human. In line with the taste of the epoch, the anthropogenic (or—taking up Furio Jesi’s expression—we might say anthropological) machine is an optical one... It is an optical machine constituted of a series of mirrors in which man, looking at himself, sees his own image always already deformed in the features of an ape. *Homo* is a constitutively “anthropomorphous” animal (that is, resembling man, according to the term that Linnaeus constantly uses until the tenth edition of the *Systema*), who must recognize himself in a non-man in order to be human.²⁷

There are various ways of thinking the limit, or threshold, that surmounts Man, all of which undermine Nietzsche’s conception that there is a stable threshold of Man that the overman can simply surmount. This ‘threshold that surmounts’ becomes a preoccupation of poststructuralist

²⁶ Derrida, ‘The Ends of Man,’ 116.

²⁷ Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, 26.

thought: notable examples include the temporal limit-horizons of Man outlined by Leroi-Gourhan (Pre-Man: that moment prior to the speciation of *Homo sapiens*)²⁸ and Lyotard (Post-Man: that moment after the heat death of the sun where life can no longer be supported).²⁹ But it is the most local threshold of the human, what we might designate the ‘spatial’ threshold of man (the spacing of Man and non-Man) that is most urgent and interests us here.

Agamben argues that there is a clear ethical link between the moderns’ (and here he certainly intends Nietzsche) ‘isolating the nonhuman within the human’ and the production of the ‘non-man... within the man,’ a philosophical event whose real historical ramifications will include the *Shoah*:

Auschwitz is the catastrophe of the subject that then follows, the subject’s effacement as the place of contingency and its maintenance as existence of the impossible... It defines a biopolitical experiment on the operators of Being, an experiment that transforms and disarticulates the subject to a limit point in which the link between subjectification and desubjectification seems to break apart.³⁰

It is a sentiment that we find anticipated in Adorno: ‘The subject still feels sure of its autonomy, but the nullity demonstrated to subjects by the concentration camp is already overtaking the form of subjectivity itself.’³¹ Indeed, the *Shoah* can be considered as the historical event that intervened most powerfully in our contemporary understanding of Man. The camps were the definitive manifestation of an ethical rupture, one that directly feeds into the way in which the human must be thought today.

Here history directly bears on our moral genealogy of the present. Agamben summarises the profound philosophical challenge posed by the *Shoah*: ‘almost none of the ethical principles our age believed it could recognise as valid have stood the decisive test, that of an *Ethica more Auschwitz demonstrata*.’ The *Shoah* raises the question not of theodicy (God has already been dispatched) but rather of an *anthropodicy* (the impossibility of Man after the death camps). Drawing on a reading of

²⁸ See *Gesture and Speech*, passim.

²⁹ See ‘Can Thought go on Without a Body’ in *The Inhuman*, 9 ff.

³⁰ Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 148.

³¹ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 15-16.

Primo Levi's accounts of life in Auschwitz, Agamben shows the way in which *Muselmänner* (those camp inmates so mentally and physically broken down as to exist only as 'indefinite being[s] in whom not only humanity and non-humanity, but also vegetative existence and relation, physiology and ethics, medicine and politics, and life and death continuously pass through each other')³² constitute the 'site of an experiment in which morality and humanity themselves are called into question.'³³ As he most clearly phrases it:

What is at issues here, therefore, is a zone of irresponsibility and "*impotentia iudicari*" that is situated not *beyond* good and evil but rather, so to speak, *before* them. With a gesture that is symmetrically opposed to that of Nietzsche, Levi places ethics before the area in which we are accustomed to consider it. And, without our being able to say why, we sense that this "before" is more important than any "beyond" — that the "underman" must matter to us more than the "overman."³⁴

I want to extend Agamben's argument here slightly and propose that the term *unmensch* be employed for this state of the human that is decisively revealed in the camps (but is not only confined to them). The term in German connotes both 'brute/animal' as well as 'inhuman.' As such it would seem to name with complete clarity the sub-type of *Mensch* which destroys the very category it is supposed to sit under. The *unmensch* is the personification of what Agamben terms 'bare life:'

Precisely because they [*Muselmänner*] were lacking almost all the rights and expectations that we customarily attribute to human existence, and yet were still biologically alive, they came to be situated in a limit zone between life and death, inside and outside, in which they were no longer anything but bare life.³⁵

Bare life represents a fundamental plurality prior to the existence of Man. It represents the dissolution of the metaphysical concept of Man in the brute facticity of flesh and bone:

³² Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 48.

³³ *Ibid.*, 63.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

³⁵ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 159.

The subject... is a field of forces always already traversed by the incandescent and historically determined currents of potentiality and impotentiality, of being able not to be and not being able not to be.³⁶

Agamben is most concerned with the political space created by the camps. For Agamben, the birth of the camp in our time appears as an event that decisively signals the political space of modernity itself.³⁷ Yet he is also prepared to begin to speculate on its ethical import: '[I]n Auschwitz ethics begins precisely at the point where the *Muselmann*... makes it forever impossible to distinguish between man and non-man.'³⁸

We might restate this concern in more general terms as: 'Can we advance an ethics of the type *Mensch* after the decisive historical and philosophical recognition of the type *unmensch*?' Is there an ethics after the *unmensch*?

³⁶ Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 147-8.

³⁷ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 174-5.

³⁸ Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 49.

§ *Terra incognita*

We have seen how the *singularity of the übermensch* is dissolved in the *plurality of the un mensch*:

Nietzsche's will to a valuation of human life through an overcoming of its threshold is undone by the threshold's overcoming of Man. Though the figure of the *un mensch* was always already inscribed in the type *Mensch*, its decisive historical staging as the *Musselmann* ends Western philosophical speculation on the *übermensch*, or any similar attempts at an overpassing of the subject. The *un mensch* decisively ends any humanism and thus ends Man.

As the sea of faith withdrew it occasioned a backwash of humanism (to which Nietzsche must be assimilated). Humanism, subjected to the pull of undeniable historical objections, now itself recedes, finally taking the image of Man with it. The Christian God and the Humanist subject have decisively taken leave of our shores. Nevertheless, Jean-Luc Nancy suggests that we do not have to abandon a value for the human even as we accept the loss of Man. In other words, there may still be an ethics, or at least a morality, possible after the *un mensch*.

He makes the extent to which we must remap our conception of the human quite emphatic:

In order for the human to be discovered, and in order for the phrase "human meaning" to acquire some meaning, everything that has ever laid claim to the truth about the nature, essence, or end of "man" must be undone. In other words, nothing must remain of what, under the title of meaning, related the earth and the human to a specifiable horizon.³⁹

Yet it is precisely in the *singular and plural* movement of human Being ('the singular-plural constitutes the essence of Being, a constitution that undoes or dislocates every single, substantial essence of Being itself')⁴⁰ that we can find a possibility for an ethics. Rather than seeking an ethical ground in God or Man, we must instead raise our eyes to the horizon, that imaginary conjunction of land, sea and sky and look there for a new figure of the human: 'It [the horizon of the infinite] is the opening

³⁹ Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, xi

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 28-9.

[la brèche] or distancing [l'écartement] of horizon itself, and in the opening: us. We happen as the opening itself, the dangerous fault line of a rupture.⁴¹

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, xii.

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