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Measuring the Greatest Weight: A Comprehensive Interpretation of Nietzsche's Doctrine of Eternal Recurrence

Sebastian Brumfield Mejía

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Measuring the Greatest Weight:

A Comprehensive Interpretation of Nietzsche's Doctrine of Eternal Recurrence

by

Sebastian Brumfield Mejía

Undergraduate Honors Thesis under the direction of

Dr. Husain Sarkar

Department of Philosophy

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The Doctrine of Eternal Recurrence

1.1 Introduction

Considered by Nietzsche himself to be his greatest philosophical contribution, the doctrine of eternal recurrence has puzzled scholars since its first appearance in *The Gay Science* (1882). In this thesis, I hope to reach ever closer towards a coherent and comprehensive solution to the puzzle of its true meaning. Through extensive literature review, I will establish some scholarly agreements and disputes as a starting point for my discussion of Nietzsche's elusive doctrine. Then, I will compare the exegetical merits of each interpretation and provide various objections made by myself and Bernard Reginster among others. Finally, I will contribute to further discussion by offering my own novel interpretation of the doctrine of eternal recurrence.

1.2 The Greatest Weight: Eternal Recurrence According to Nietzsche

Nietzsche's primary project is to overcome the problem of nihilism, or the meaninglessness of life.¹ Nihilistic despair comes about as a result of the agent holding life-negating values as their highest values, which Nietzsche seeks to replace with life-affirming values.² In order to measure an agent's affirmation of their life, Nietzsche constructs the doctrine of eternal recurrence.³ Nietzsche outlines his doctrine in section 341 from *The Gay Science*:

¹ *The Will to Power*, 36.

² Note on gender-neutrality: Throughout this thesis, I use the gender-neutral singular pronouns they/them/their/themselves to refer to the agent. When appropriate, I also use gender-specific singular pronouns to refer to Nietzsche or his interpreters. Based on my interpretation of the text, I do not think the agent's gender is relevant to the doctrine of eternal recurrence or its implications. My usage of gender-neutral pronouns reflects this claim as well as my respect for people of all gender identities.

³ Reginster, 50.

The greatest weight.—What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: “This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence—even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!”

Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: “You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine.” If this thought gained possession of you, it would change you as you are or perhaps crush you. The question in each and every thing, “Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?” would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight. Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to *crave nothing more fervently* than this ultimate confirmation and seal?⁴

Identifying the correct interpretation of eternal recurrence is essential to understanding the necessary conditions for a truly affirmed life. If an agent successfully affirms their life, they will have overcome nihilism and restored meaning to their life. With this picture in mind, nothing less than our values, choices, and hopes for a meaningful life are at stake.

⁴ *The Gay Science*, 341.

In order to parse the various interpretations of eternal recurrence, Bernard Reginster distinguishes between the theoretical and practical roles of eternal recurrence in his book *The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism*. The theoretical role describes the metaphysical nature of an eternally recurring life, while the practical role describes the nature of the affirmation of life in an eternally recurring life.⁵ Theoretical interpretations resign the agent to certain properties of life which must therefore be affirmed.⁶ Practical interpretations provide the framework for how the agent must affirm their life without committing them to certain metaphysical properties.⁷

Reginster crucially differentiates between purely formal and substantive ideals. The formal ideal of the affirmation of life requires the agent to successfully affirm whatever values they hold. Conversely, the substantive ideal of the affirmation of life requires the agent to adopt specific values in order to be able to affirm their life. If the agent does not hold those substantive values, they must conduct a reevaluation of some or all of their values so that their values align with the values required for affirmation.⁸ The distinction between a formal and substantive doctrine may bear significant weight on the kind of lives we lead if we have any hope of affirming them.

Literature Review

2.1 The Fatalist's Choice: Lowith and Soll

Karl Lowith's theoretical interpretation of eternal recurrence favors metaphysical fatalism. Lowith interprets the demon literally to mean that eternal recurrence is the exact sequential

⁵ Reginster, 202-3.

⁶ Ibid., 203.

⁷ Ibid., 204.

⁸ Ibid.

repetition of a life's events infinite times before and after the current life. If the life's events occur at the exact same temporal and spatial point with the exact same particulars in each recurrence, then each recurrence is already fated to repeat the previous identical recurrences. Lowith therefore believes that the doctrine of eternal recurrence describes a complete metaphysical determinism.⁹

Given metaphysical determinism, ethical action is a metaphysical impossibility. If an agent's actions are pre-determined, they cannot deliberate about potential choices on the basis of any ethical principles. Any action seemingly aligned with ethical principles is an accidental result of the circumstances of a particular agent's life rather than an example of deliberative free will.¹⁰

Lowith's practical interpretation considers Nietzsche's affirmation of life as *amor fati*, or a love of fate.¹¹ If the agent's life is wholly pre-determined, then the demon appears to implore the agent to accept their unchanging fate. In order to affirm their life, an agent must not only accept that their fate is pre-determined but cease willing anything but their fate. In doing so, the agent sheds any pretenses of the purposefulness of their existence and recognizes its necessity instead. Notably, the ceasing of willing is not an act of willing itself, but another pre-determined event in the life of the agent. This resignation prevents the will from holding onto life-negating values which are metaphysically impossible given the circumstances of an agent's life. Lowith's conception of will-lessness as the affirmation of life, combined with metaphysical determinism, provides the basis for his interpretation of eternal recurrence as metaphysical fatalism.¹²

Ivan Soll's practical interpretation of eternal recurrence questions the importance of choice. In his interpretation, Soll emphasizes the demon's question to the agent about their desire to will

⁹ Lowith, 88-9.

¹⁰ Reginster, 65.

¹¹ Lowith, 79.

¹² *Ibid.*, 79-80.

their life again in infinitum. Soll understands eternal recurrence as a thought experiment proposed to make the agent realize the significance of their choices. The concept of an identically recurring life shows that the most choiceworthy actions are those which leave the agent with no regret. Soll's agent must be able to affirm all of their choices, no matter how trivial, in an eternally recurring life.¹³ Life-negating values under Soll's interpretation are those which guide the agent to make regrettable choices. Therefore, eternal recurrence behooves the agent to act consistently according to their values.

Soll's theoretical interpretation of eternal recurrence underlines a key aspect of the eternally recurring life. He believes that eternal recurrence must be a supra-historical phenomenon, since two actions are not the same if they exist at two different times within one historical cycle. Therefore, each life cycle in the eternally recurring life must be identical but distinct.¹⁴ This supra-historical phenomenon has drastic consequences for Soll's identity of the self and the importance of choice in light of metaphysical determinism.

Like Lowith, Soll believes that the doctrine of eternal recurrence implies metaphysical determinism. However, Soll's concept of supra-historical life cycles demonstrates that the self is not identical across recurring life cycles. Soll believes the self is the product of causal connections which create continuity in the agent's life. The agent can trace the events of their life back to their earliest memories in that particular life cycle, but they cannot see beyond their life cycle into any previous or future ones. As such, the self in each recurring cycle is a doppelgänger of the others.¹⁵ Doppelgängers share "qualitatively identical" life experiences, physical and psychological properties, and spatial and temporal location, yet the self remains distinct. Far from increasing the

¹³ Soll, 339.

¹⁴ Ibid., 335.

¹⁵ Ibid., 340.

importance of choice, Soll argues that this creates a feeling of indifference for the agent towards the lives of their doppelgängers.¹⁶ The pain and pleasure of doppelgängers are not relevant to the agent's particular cycle, so the agent takes neither into consideration when choosing actions.¹⁷

The agent, having a distinct self, cannot be aware of their life's events in previous or future life cycles. As such, the agent must choose their actions in each life cycle despite already having made the same exact choice previously. While Soll believes Nietzsche stresses the importance of choice, he argues against Nietzsche that the agent's awareness of their pre-determined fate undermines the significance of their choices. Either through a resignation to fate or an indifference to their doppelgängers' pain, the agent removes the greatest weight of their choices repeating endlessly.¹⁸

2.2 Evaluating Our Lives: Nehamas, Clark, and Janaway

In his practical interpretation of eternal recurrence, Alexander Nehamas' affirmed agent "[wants] nothing in that life and the world to be in any way different."¹⁹ The agent cannot affirm one property of their life without affirming all properties of their life. If the agent only affirmed some events in their life, they might concede that their desires could have been better fulfilled in another world without the presence of life-negating events. A student may affirm their good grade in a class while simultaneously wishing they did not have to suffer for its attainment. Since Nietzsche believes that suffering is essential to life, joy can only come about through the

¹⁶ Soll, 339.

¹⁷ Ibid., 340.

¹⁸ Ibid., 342.

¹⁹ Nehamas, 159.

affirmation of both happiness and suffering.²⁰ However, Nehamas' formal practical interpretation could apply to any set of values, so long as the agent can will their recurrence.

Essentialist egalitarianism is Nehamas' theoretical interpretation that "all properties are equally essential to their subjects."²¹ For example, the agent's lunch is equally essential to the agent's identity as their intellectual ability. The self is comprised of many properties, the unique combination of which makes the self an individual. If any properties change, the individual would be a different individual than before. Therefore, the properties which comprise an individual are inseparable from each other.²² This theoretical interpretation corroborates Nehamas' practical interpretation; all properties are equally essential and thus equally affirmed by the joyful agent.

Normative contextualism is Nehamas' alternative theoretical interpretation that the agent can change the subjective significance of the facts of their life.²³ Essentialist egalitarianism presents the practical difficulty of trying to affirm every property of life, especially those beyond the agent's control. Instead, normative contextualism takes advantage of the interconnectedness of properties in the self by enabling the agent to reevaluate the subjective significance of their life's events each time a new event occurs. Reevaluation is only possible if each property lacks a determinate significance beyond the agent's will. The "redeemed" life is one in which the agent successfully ameliorates the significance of a previously regrettable property of their life.²⁴

In her theoretical interpretation, Maudemarie Clark attempts to resolve the issue of coherence present in Soll's theoretical interpretation by ignoring its logical plausibility.²⁵ Clark,

²⁰ Nehamas, 159.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 155.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Reginster, 214.

²⁴ Nehamas, 157-8.

²⁵ The issue of coherence in Soll's interpretation comes from his claim that supra-historical eternal recurrence precludes eternal recurrence of the same self (Soll, 340). Like Soll, Clark concedes that

unlike Soll, is willing to ignore this assumption for the sake of understanding Nietzsche's doctrine hypothetically. Clark refers to her concession as the unrealistic model.

Clark proposes a simple yet novel practical interpretation of eternal recurrence. Instead of asking the question, "Would you be willing to live this same life eternally?" Clark proposes the intuitive question, "If you had to do it all over, would you marry me again?"²⁶ The advantage of Clark's marriage question is that it seemingly aligns closer to the typical agent's psychological process of evaluating their life. The agent's response to the marriage question should indicate their degree of affirmation for the properties of their life already lived.²⁷ Since the self remains the same across cycles, the agent has reason to care about their life events in future cycles. Therefore, the affirmation of life is the affirmation of these choices with the knowledge of their endless recurrence. Clark's practical interpretation appears to be a formal argument, since the agent affirms whichever values lead them to desire the eternal recurrence of their life.²⁸

Clark's theoretical interpretation conflicts with her formal practical interpretation of the affirmation of life.²⁹ Clark's theoretical interpretation prevents the agent from wishing for any property of their life to exist infinitely within that life cycle. This leads Clark's practical

eternal recurrence requires the self to remain the same across different life cycles in order for the agent to avoid the indifference of their actions (Clark, 268). Unlike Soll, Clark is willing to grant Nietzsche this unrealistic concession in order to "play the game," (Clark, 270).

²⁶ Clark, 269.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 270.

²⁹ Reginster presents the counterexample of a Christian who satisfies Clark's formal affirmation of life. By wishing the recurrence of their mortal life, the Christian acknowledges their life as a necessary condition of reaching the hereafter (Reginster, 218). The Christian may be willing to suffer through a miserable mortal life with the understanding that they will reach "infinite bliss" in the hereafter (Reginster, 219). However, Clark recognizes that an infinite life cannot occur within one finite cycle. Therefore, each life must be finite for recurrence to occur. If finitude is a necessary condition for recurrence, then Christians may not hope for infinite bliss in the hereafter (Clark, 272).

interpretation to a substantive reevaluation of values, since the values which desire permanence are metaphysically untenable and therefore life-negating. Sisyphus' desire to finally reach the top of the hill is frustrated by the boulder's inevitable fall.³⁰ As such, any values that do not require permanence for their fulfillment can be affirmed by the agent.

Like both Nehamas and Clark, Christopher Janaway believes the truthfulness of cosmological recurrence is irrelevant to Nietzsche's project. Janaway's theoretical interpretation aligns closely with Nehamas' normative contextualism, in which the agent can change the subjective significance of the facts of their life.³¹ He argues against Bernd Magnus' interpretation that essentialist egalitarianism cannot be a correct reading of eternal recurrence.³² Since the agent cannot control all of the properties of their life, affirming each becomes a near impossible task. In order to lessen the virtually insurmountable task of affirmation, Janaway proposes a system of first and second-order attitudes towards life events. First-order attitudes capture the agent's initial reaction to a particular event.³³ Second-order attitudes enable the agent to reevaluate life events in the context of their whole life and subsequently affirm them. In this way, an agent may feel

³⁰ Clark, 272.

³¹ Janaway, 255.

³² Magnus believes that eternal recurrence requires the agent to "love each moment *simpliciter*" instead of "[viewing] each moment holistically...as a necessary blemish in...the scenario of her total life," ("Deification of the Commonplace: Twilight of the Idols," 171). The necessity to affirm each moment rather than the whole presents the agent with the same dilemma as essentialist egalitarianism. If a single property beyond the agent's control defies their desires, they cannot affirm their life as a whole (Janaway, 257).

³³ Magnus' essentialist egalitarianism prevents the agent from affirming undesirable moments of their life without participating in self-delusion about their true first-order attitudes. It is paradoxical for an agent to simultaneously experience something undesirable and affirm it in the same breath. By embracing normative contextualism, Janaway enables the agent to recognize a moment of suffering as undesirable and yet affirm it within the context of their life as a whole (Janaway, 258).³³

negatively towards particular life events while still being “well enough disposed to want [their] life again.”³⁴

Janaway’s normative contextualism is best articulated in his analysis of the demon’s final line. When the agent “[*craves*] *nothing more fervently* than this ultimate confirmation and seal,” the object of their craving is left unspecified.³⁵ Janaway concludes that the object of the agent’s craving is “*to confront [themselves] repeatedly with the demon’s scenario* and, whatever life may bring [them], *always to react to it with joy.*”³⁶ Upon the accumulation of each first-order attitude toward new life events, the agent engages in a process of reevaluating their second-order attitude towards their life as a whole. The significance of particular life facts changes over time, such that each event contributes to the agent’s possibility of affirmation. The affirming agent experiences joy in all their pain and pleasures, since both are essential properties of their life.³⁷

Janaway’s practical interpretation concerns the psychological qualities of a self-affirming agent.³⁸ Magnus rightly points out the problem that if given the choice, “each of us would affirm the eternal recurrence of our lives only selectively.”³⁹ This cannot be the case for Nietzsche, since he demands that the affirming agent want the properties of their life “*all back.*”⁴⁰ Fortunately, Janaway’s idea of affective belonging offers a pathway to joyful affirmation. Janaway concedes that almost all agents could imagine a better life than the one they lived. However, he believes far fewer agents would actually desire that better life instead of their own. Janaway claims that those

³⁴ Janaway, 257-8.

³⁵ *The Gay Science*, 341.

³⁶ Janaway, 257.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Janaway agrees with Clark that the practical role of eternal recurrence is meant to assess the agent’s attitude towards the properties of their life, à la Clark’s marriage question (Janaway, 257).

³⁹ “Deification of the Commonplace: Twilight of the Idols,” 170.

⁴⁰ *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, IV 19.

agents experience affective belonging, or a “preference for something *because it is mine*.”⁴¹ The mere fact of experiencing one’s life creates an attachment within the agent to that life, regardless of its quality. By fully loving themselves, the agent could willingly affirm a life much lesser than the best possible life.⁴²

2.3 Truth and Religion: Lampert, Russell, and Ridley

Lawrence Lampert restricts his analysis of Nietzsche’s doctrine of eternal recurrence to *Beyond Good and Evil*, a book in which Nietzsche alludes to the doctrine of eternal recurrence quite sparingly. In his interpretation, Lampert instead focuses on the relationship of eternal recurrence to two interconnected Nietzschean concepts present in *Beyond Good and Evil*, the will to truth and the religion of the future.⁴³

Nietzsche’s religion of the future originates from the philosophers of the future. The philosophers of the future are those who face the necessarily unrealizable ideals of Platonism and Christianity with ever-growing pessimism. Nietzsche’s will to truth and religion of the future are predicated upon his belief that transcendental values such as morality are fictitious psychological projections rather than objective reality.⁴⁴ If Nietzsche believes that the unobtainable goals and ideals of Platonism and Christianity necessarily lead to what he terms “European nihilism,” then his religion of the future is meant to be man’s salvation from nihilistic despair.⁴⁵

According to Lampert, Nietzsche sees the Christian sacrifice of human instincts to false projections of morality as the first religious cruelty. The final religious cruelty is Nietzsche’s

⁴¹ Janaway, 259.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Lampert, 114-115.

⁴⁴ *The Will to Power*, 12; *The Gay Science*, 301; *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, I 15.

⁴⁵ Lampert, 116.

declaration that “God is dead,” leaving the Christian to accept nothing in His place. Although God presents psychological comfort to the Christian desiring a meaningful finite life and an eternal life in the hereafter, the will to truth denies such comfort. If the will to truth prevails over psychological comfort within the Christian, they fall into nihilism.⁴⁶

Eternal recurrence represents Nietzsche’s new ideal for the religion of the future. If the will to truth correctly identifies Nietzsche’s doctrine of the will to power as a metaphysical reality, then eternal recurrence provides hope for the eternal and repeated satisfaction of the will to power.⁴⁷ The will to power as a metaphysical reality recognizes that suffering and becoming are essential to life, so living requires participation in the activity of overcoming resistance. Notably, the relationship between eternal recurrence and the will to power mirrors the satisfaction of Christian values in the ideal of the hereafter. However, eternal recurrence uplifts the true value of will to power instead of the false values of Christianity.⁴⁸

Nietzsche describes his own will to truth as an unintended and “riddlesome longing.” In doing so, he distinguishes himself from Christians seeking only “truth” which confirms their existing religious and moral beliefs.⁴⁹ This riddlesome longing compels both Nietzsche and his philosophers of the future to exhaustively explore their pessimism. His riddlesome longing provides insight into the meaning of the title *Beyond Good and Evil*; Nietzsche wants to reach beyond the dictates of traditional, transcendental “good and evil” to fulfill his search for truth.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Lampert, 115-116.

⁴⁷ See my discussion of the will to power under the next section titled “The Value of Becoming: Reginster’s Substantive Interpretation.”

⁴⁸ Lampert, 121.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 116.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 117.

Upon encountering the object of his love, a new ideal will arise to provide the religion of the future with its ethical force.⁵¹

In Section 295 of *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche describes how his life-long will to truth intertwined with the teachings of the god Dionysus. If Nietzsche's will to truth led him to accept the will to power as a metaphysical reality, the highest value, and the basis for his ethical system, then that same will to truth enabled him to recognize the embodiment of the will to power in Dionysus.⁵² The Platonic solution to the "stupendous Greek problem of the value of truth" banished Dionysus, only for Dionysus to make his triumphant return in time to provide salvation from European nihilism. Nietzsche contrasts the Platonic gods, perfectly wise and clothed in virtue, with Dionysus, the naked philosopher.⁵³ Dionysus, like his last disciple Nietzsche, seeks to improve humanity by making it "stronger, more evil, more profound; also more beautiful."⁵⁴ Nietzsche's myth-making of Dionysus' return serves as a metaphor for his project in establishing the religion of the future, with Dionysus as its central god. The ideal of eternal recurrence motivates the agent to *crave nothing more fervently* than the will to power, embodied by their object of love and worship, Dionysus.

Eternal recurrence, to Lampert, serves an important practical role in Nietzsche's religion of the future. It provides a test to measure the degree to which an agent affirms their life, but it necessitates the agent to first pursue the will to truth. Without an understanding of the metaphysical impossibility of the Platonic-Christian worldview, the agent cannot affirm their life according to

⁵¹ Lampert, 117.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 290.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 291.

⁵⁴ *Beyond Good and Evil*, 295.

Nietzsche's desired ideal. The contradiction between the Christian desire for eternal bliss and the Nietzschean concept of the will to power makes affirmation for the Christian untenable.⁵⁵

Lampert interprets Nietzsche's affirmation of life as *amor fati*, a concept previously discussed in Lowith's interpretation. Uniquely, Lampert's interpretation posits both the will to truth and the affirmation of life as a particularly lustful craving.⁵⁶ Lampert's interpretation broadens the scope of the affirmation of life from encompassing the agent's particular life events to including all events in the world which made their contingent life possible. Self-affirmation is the first step towards the affirmation of life, and world-affirmation is the second. By affirming their own fate, the agent necessarily affirms the whole of the world which enables their fate.⁵⁷ In affirming life and the world as it is, the agent's "love of truth grows into love of the true."⁵⁸ Lampert's interpretation is decidedly substantive. According to Nietzsche, the will to truth necessarily leads to the will to power, so any affirmation of life requires that the agent endorse the will to power as the metaphysical reality of the world.

Louis Russell's interpretation similarly focuses on both truth and affirmation. Russell conceives of Nietzschean "truthfulness" as an honesty towards oneself in the face of reality. Platonists and Christians trade reality for comforting self-delusion, and their supposedly objective ideals are simply manifestations of their hopes and fears. Conversely, the truthful agent is able to

⁵⁵ Lampert, 120.

⁵⁶ According to Nietzsche, the life-affirming agent "has not only come to terms with and learned to get along with whatever was and is," (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, II 20). The philosophers of the future have an overwhelming love of truth which supersedes their previously held Platonic-Christian values. Rather than deplore the world for being inhospitable to all *oughts*, the agent learns to love the world for all that it *is* (Lampert, 118). The life-affirming agent sees the harsh metaphysical truths of the world and loves it all the same, thereby heeding Nietzsche's counsel to "*remain true to the earth*," (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, I 1).

⁵⁷ Lampert, 119.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 120.

reject false psychological projections and courageously face the harsh metaphysical realities of the world.⁵⁹ Since truthfulness is an ethical ideal for Nietzsche, false projections are insufficient for the affirmation of life.⁶⁰

Unfortunately, truthfulness has severe consequences for the nihilist. Realizing the insignificance of their life and actions, the nihilist may succumb to feelings of resignation towards the world. Since the truth has negative psychological consequences for the nihilist hoping to “cope” with the world, he allows the nihilist to participate in “life-preserving errors.” Life-preserving errors are not “errors” so long as they enable the agent to overcome overwhelming despair. The conflict between life-preserving errors and the will to truth is resolved through *experimentation*; evidently, some degree of self-deception in the face of harsh metaphysical reality is necessary in order for the agent to successfully affirm their life.⁶¹ The task of the agent is to find the balance between their will to truth and the life-preserving errors necessary for their psychological health. Presumably, the best among us require the least of the latter.

Russell’s practical interpretation of eternal recurrence claims that since the agent’s finite life is also their only life, the affirmation or denial of life is the affirmation or denial of themselves. Whereas affirmation constitutes self-love, denial constitutes self-hatred.⁶² Russell describes the latter as a “miscarriage,” since the agent experiences life while simultaneously lacking the desire

⁵⁹ Russell, 80.

⁶⁰ Russell’s interpretation is substantive in much the same way as Clark’s, since the agent cannot will transcendental values which require permanence. Russell does not claim that the metaphysical truth of the world is necessarily the will to power, so the agent may affirm other values which correspond with the general value of becoming. This difference between Russell’s and Lampert’s interpretations is mostly inconsequential, since the latter presents a metaphysically true will to power absent a substantive ethical system. Therefore, they are both mildly substantive like Clark and unlike Reginster.

⁶¹ Russell, 86-87.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 91.

for their life. Furthermore, Russell believes the affirmation of life cannot exclusively be the affirmation of particularly worthy goals or their successful achievement. Rather, the agent must affirm the activity of their living.⁶³ Under Russell's interpretation, eternal recurrence asks the agent their willingness "to live prosperously as before less the craving for justification."⁶⁴ The agent who answers affirmatively passes Nietzsche's test.

Similarly to Lampert and Russell, Ridley discusses eternal recurrence within the context of Nietzsche's attempt to discredit Christianity and its transcendental ideals. However, Ridley also offers a critical interpretation of Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal recurrence. Ridley completely dismisses a cosmological interpretation of eternal recurrence and instead construes eternal recurrence as a test of affirmation, much like other practical interpretations.⁶⁵

Ridley's theoretical interpretation understands eternal recurrence as a temporal resolution to the death of God. He distinguishes between the meanings of past, present, and future actions. In Christianity, God provides hope for redemption from original sin. Individual decisions are taken seriously by the Christian, because each one has the possibility of bringing them closer to eternal salvation in the hereafter. Past actions can be redeemed by present ones, which in turn can influence the possibility of future salvation. Therefore, the meaning of present actions is of the

⁶³ Russell, 92.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁶⁵ Like previous interpretations, Ridley takes Nietzsche to believe that God represents the hopeful yet life-negating fantasy which leaves the Christian in a state of nihilistic despair. In order to escape this despair, he echoes Clark's interpretation that the test of affirmation provided by eternal recurrence requires the agent to avoid necessarily unfulfillable transcendental values at all costs (Ridley, 19-20). Ridley also notes the resignation objection brought up by previous interpretations such as Lowith's and Soll's. However, Ridley believes that Nietzsche must have been aware of the seemingly obvious resignation objection while developing his doctrine. In order to resolve this discrepancy, Ridley surprisingly concludes that previous interpretations must have misidentified the so-called "greatest weight," (Ridley, 20).

utmost importance to Christians. In the absence of God, the hope for future salvation disappears; each present action loses any and all urgency.⁶⁶

In order to overcome the inevitable resignation experienced by the nihilist, Nietzsche must restore significance to each action. If our lives are finite, each action will only be present once. Once present actions become past actions, their significance diminishes. However, Nietzsche designs eternal recurrence so that the agent must face all of their actions again. The repetition of present actions affords them a newfound significance. Through Ridley's interpretation, the agent understands how Nietzsche is able to "will backwards;" by facing their past actions again in the future, the agent may will for their return and in effect affirm the same actions in their past. Furthermore, future actions will have already occurred during the eternal recurrence, so the agent may affirm them as well. Combined, Nietzsche provides the agent the means to will their past, present, and future actions, thus restoring their significance without the need for a transcendental ideal.⁶⁷

Although Ridley's interpretation ostensibly aligns with Nietzsche's own writings, he claims that eternal recurrence becomes incoherent when taken alongside other Nietzschean concepts like *amor fati* and tragic wisdom. *Amor fati* requires the agent to love the world in both its beauty and ugliness without adopting life-negating values to abolish the latter. Tragic wisdom provides the insight that the truth of the world need not conform to agential interests.⁶⁸ One fundamental Nietzschean truth is that human existence is finite and contingent. Additionally, the

⁶⁶ Ridley, 21.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 22.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 23.

agent's will cannot supersede temporal limitations to redeem the past or guarantee the future. To claim otherwise would violate the value of becoming in favor of being.⁶⁹

Ridley argues that by affirming past and future actions as actions which will occur again in the present, the agent violates the temporal limitations imposed upon them by the world's metaphysical truths. In effect, Nietzsche commits the same error as the Christians in "[transcendentalizing] the present."⁷⁰ Since the agent cannot truly "will backwards," their participation in the delusion of eternal recurrence commits them to the same nihilistic fate as the Christian. Eternal recurrence defines *amor fati* as a metaphysically impossible love of past and future events, rather than a love of the mere activity of living.⁷¹

Ridley concludes by identifying what he believes is the true greatest weight: "the prospect that the demon might not 'steal after' [them] at all."⁷² Eternal recurrence is meant to replace the death of God with another possibility for meaningful action to stave off resignation. Indeed, a test guaranteeing the affirmation of all actions should provide similar psychological relief to the agent in search of meaning. By committing the same errors as Christianity, eternal recurrence makes its ultimate confirmation and seal a broken promise. Ridley claims that Nietzsche "has no business to be offering" such an impossible, transcendental confirmation, and the agents who truly love their fate need no test to prove so.⁷³ He ends by calling eternal recurrence a "philosophical and moral embarrassment," especially in light of Nietzsche's magnificent ambition.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Ridley, 24.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., 24-25.

⁷³ Ibid., 25.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

Although it appears that Ridley's interpretation is substantive, his argument demonstrates why eternal recurrence cannot support Nietzsche's substantive values. If Nietzsche's own values require the endorsement of a transcendental confirmation and seal, they cannot be the kind of values which align with his value of becoming. Thus, the truly life-affirming agent need only recognize the metaphysical truth of becoming.⁷⁵

2.4 Zarathustra's Religion, Recurrence, and Time: Higgins and Loeb

Nietzsche, believing that Christianity promotes life-negating values, beliefs, and attitudes, employs the fictional Zarathustra in his book *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* to proselytize on behalf of his doctrine of eternal recurrence, which presumably promotes life-affirming values, beliefs, and attitudes. Although Nietzsche claims that "God is dead," he must still seduce the masses towards his alternate visions of time, redemption, meaning, and theodicy, all of which are fundamental concepts in Christianity. Kathleen Marie Higgins' interpretation of Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* describes those alternate visions by contrasting the doctrine of eternal recurrence with the doctrine of sin.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ This is the effectively the same conclusion as the one pioneered by Clark.

⁷⁶ I have covered numerous interpretations of the doctrine of eternal recurrence at length, so I will only briefly recount Higgins' general interpretation before I delve into its comparison with the doctrine of sin. Higgins recalls Magnus' three general ideas about the type of doctrine eternal recurrence may be: cosmological, ethical, and attitudinal (*Nietzsche's Existential Imperative*, 140-142). Higgins favors the attitudinal interpretations of Magnus and Nehamas herself, but her interpretation also shares similarities with Soll and Clark (Higgins, 161-162). Higgins, like others, believes that eternal recurrence is not a compelling doctrine considered realistically. The lack of continuity of the self across recurrences is evidenced by our lack of memories of previous cycles. Subsequently, the agent's only response to the thought of eternal recurrence would be indifference. Instead, the key to understanding eternal recurrence is not the agent's particular life events but how they interpret the significance of each event (Higgins, 163-164). The significance of the agent's actions is more important because "there is no time in our experience in which some attitude on our part is absent," (Higgins 165). The agent cannot have a highest value or goal without

According to Higgins, different conceptions of time are what fundamentally separate Christianity and eternal recurrence. Put simply, Christians conceive of time as a linear progression with a distinct past, present, and future in which the future contains an infinite hereafter. Dionysians conceive of time as a circular progression, in which the titles of past and future are not permanently fixed to particular moments but instead only relative to the current present.⁷⁷ The present moment connects all other moments, which, like points on a circle, are infinite in number. Notably, the extension of the present moment outward in both directions gives the past and future their relational character. Whereas the Christian present is unfixated and determined by an agent's free will, the Dionysian present is bound causally to the past and future which have and will have already occurred. However, the Dionysian present is distinguished from past and future by the former's potentiality which the latter do not yet contain. Clearly, the Dionysian model has no room for an infinite hereafter which does not return to its past, since all points in the circle must eventually repeat.⁷⁸

If our attitude towards life depends in large part on our understanding of time, then Christian attitudes and Dionysian attitudes towards life will differ. First, the Christian attitude toward life. Higgins claims that the Christian linear model of time enables "belief in future punishment or reward for past action...past causes determine future effects that are permanent and represent an end point to which the flow of time leads." The Christian project is to redeem the

desiring it above all others. Ultimately our disposition towards our lives and actions is what determines our response to the demon, not our lives and actions themselves.

⁷⁷ Zarathustra illustrates the Dionysian model to the dwarf at the gateway in the section titled "On the Vision and the Riddle." He speaks, "Behold...this moment! From this gateway, Moment, a long, eternal lane leads *backward*: behind us lies an eternity...And are not all things knotted together so firmly that this moment draws after it *all* that is to come? Therefore—itsself too?" (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, II 20).

⁷⁸ Higgins, 175-177.

past, tracing back to the initial fall of man from the Garden of Eden, by enacting vengeance upon it. Since “the will cannot will backwards,” the Christian must constantly reinterpret the significance of past events to repent for their sins.⁷⁹ To the Christian, “what was gratifying action at the time...is reinterpreted as sin...seen as a catalyst to eternal suffering unless one adopts the church’s route to redemption.”⁸⁰ Fear of eternal damnation fuels all-consuming penitence.

Christianity “trains believers to look for guilt” in order to repent for their sins and punish others to prove their moral superiority.⁸¹ The consequence of Christian guilt-seeking is that the earthly life revolves around the act of punishment. Those who suffer must be guilty of sin and thus deserve it. Since suffering is unavoidable, humanity is guilty and deserves punishment.⁸² Our mere presence on Earth is a permanent reminder of man’s original sin, so our natural lives are doomed to punishment from which we are only “saved” in the hereafter. With its focus trained on the past and future, the doctrine of sin denigrates the only moment in which we ever live: the present. This attitude towards life necessarily condemns both the temporal present and all life spent on Earth, so it is an inherently life-denying attitude.⁸³

Enter Dionysus. Higgins speaks of the Dionysian attitude toward life through an analogy with music. According to Higgins, “the individual tone or chord of tones that is heard at any particular moment, though related to both the past and future of the musical work, is experienced

⁷⁹ *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, II 20.

⁸⁰ Higgins, 170.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁸² With such a bleak worldview, it is easy to see why Nietzsche calls Christian values life-denying: “[Christians] have measured the value of the world according to categories that refer to a purely fictitious world...all the values by means of which [Christians] have tried so far to render the world estimable for [themselves]...have proven inapplicable and therefore devaluated the world,” (*Will to Power*, 12).

⁸³ Higgins, 174.

only in the present.”⁸⁴ The musician centers individual tones in a sequence. Likewise, the Dionysian centers the present moment in all of its potentiality while acknowledging its causal and relative relationships with both past and future.⁸⁵ But what does this analogy say about our attitudes towards life? Higgins suggests that the Dionysian attitude towards the present reflects our attitudes toward listening to music. Rather than desiring to get from start to finish, music-listeners take pleasure in the activity of listening to each note and chord within the sequence, no matter consonant or dissonant. Similarly, the Dionysian takes pleasure in life’s present moments regardless of where they lead. By embracing this attitude towards life, the Dionysian exhibits *amor fati*.⁸⁶

If the doctrine of sin promotes intensely life-denying values, the doctrine of eternal recurrence promotes equally life-affirming values. Nietzsche beseeches us to “remain true to the earth, and do not believe those who speak to you of superterrestrial hopes!”⁸⁷ The Christian condemns this earthly existence because of the permanent presence of sin, whether others’ or their own. Conversely, the Dionysian exalts this world because of their attitude of *amor fati*. Furthermore, the Dionysian need not construct fantasies of a transcendental world to escape the present reality. Ultimately, the Dionysian attitude offers the only “redemption” possible under a circular concept of time.

Besides offering alternative visions of time, redemption, and meaning, the Dionysian model parallels with Christianity on a fourth key concept: theodicy. The problem of evil is a problem of affirmation, since Zarathustra seemingly implores the agent to “[say] Yes too to *all*

⁸⁴ Higgins, 182.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 183.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁸⁷ *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, I 1.

woe” in the passage “The Drunken Song.”⁸⁸ Higgins describes Zarathustra in this passage as a “blues singer.”⁸⁹ The title “The Drunken Song” clearly lends itself to such an interpretation. According to Higgins, the song “suggests that the whole may be valuable even if some of the parts...are horrible or tragic, and that if we love life as a whole we cannot edit out the vulnerability to the tragic.”⁹⁰ It is precisely that vulnerability revealed by both Zarathustra and blues singers that allows them to embrace both joy and woe.⁹¹ The emphasis on affirming *all* woe may simply be a rhetorical device capturing the depth of tragic feeling in song, rather than the imposition of an absolute standard of affirmation.⁹² To reintroduce the analogy of music, evil comes like dissonant tones which strike our ears in unpleasant ways. Evil may prevent us from affirming every single detail of our lives, but we may affirm our lives as a whole so long as we affirm the activity of living.⁹³

Although many of the interpretations, including Higgins’, cover similar ground, it is worth noting that her interpretation suggests that the purpose of Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence project is theological. By comparing the doctrine of eternal recurrence to the doctrine of sin, Higgins presents them as corresponding opposites; Nietzsche replaces the life-denying Christianity with his life-affirming religion of the future. Higgins implies such by claiming the doctrine of eternal

⁸⁸ “The Drunken Song” goes like this: “Have you ever said Yes to a single joy? O my friends, then you said Yes too to *all* woe. All things are entangled, ensnared, enamored; if ever you wanted one thing twice, if ever you said ‘You please me, happiness! Abide, moment!’ then you wanted *all* back. All anew, all eternally, all entangled, ensnared, enamored—oh, then you *loved* the world. Eternal ones, love it eternally and evermore,” (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, IV 19).

⁸⁹ Higgins, 198.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 199.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Higgins’ interpretation proves that Clark’s lower standard of affirmation mentioned earlier may indeed be the correct reading of Nietzsche’s doctrine. I discuss Clark’s marriage question, which proposes a lower standard of affirmation, in the section titled “Evaluating Our Lives: Nehamas, Clark, and Janaway.”

⁹³ Higgins, 199-200.

recurrence is “accepted on faith...not a conclusion of logic,” much like the doctrine of sin.⁹⁴ Higgins demonstrates the religious nature of Nietzsche’s doctrine while also claiming its cosmological falsity.

Upon Nietzsche’s insistence on his doctrine’s cosmological truthfulness, we are left with a glaring contradiction between Nietzsche himself and his many interpreters.⁹⁵ While each interpretation previously discussed offers a fresh perspective, all share exactly one assumption: the acceptance of both Georg Simmel’s objections and counterexample dismissing the possibility of cosmological recurrence.⁹⁶ The clearest yet most controversial resolution lies with Loeb.

Loeb’s theoretical interpretation is unlike any previous interpretation for a few reasons. First, it seriously considers the cosmological possibility of eternal recurrence even in the face of Simmel’s compelling and widely accepted objections. Second, it establishes a specific moment in time in which the demon appears to the agent. Finally, it provides clues about the consequences a cosmological recurrence would have on the nature of affirmation, including the form and substance of life-affirming values. I will discuss each unique contribution in turn.

⁹⁴ Higgins, 191.

⁹⁵ Lowith and Soll consider the cosmological possibility of eternal recurrence, but both dismiss it off-hand as entirely false. The vast majority of interpretations take either the ethical or attitudinal tract. Most accept that Nietzsche’s doctrine is a hypothetical thought experiment designed to test the agent’s attitude towards life, whether it meets an absolute or lower standard of affirmation. Within these ethical or attitudinal interpretations lies the tacit assumption that the “test” comes at a point in the agent’s life in which they still have time to live their life differently. This enables them to affirm a previously un-affirmable life.

⁹⁶ On page 327 of *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, Walter Kaufmann discusses Georg Simmel’s counterexample which claims to demonstrate the falsity of a cosmological recurrence. Simmel supposes three wheels of equal size rotating on the same axis. Each wheel is marked with a point, and all three points align. According to Simmel, if the second wheel rotated at twice the speed of the first, and the third at $1/\pi$ of the speed of the first, the points on the wheels will never again align. This lack of recurrence would prove Nietzsche’s cosmological doctrine false, since the properties of one life, much less all lives, could not recur. This source was brought to my attention by Professor Husain Sarkar.

Loeb details Simmel's objections in depth. First, Simmel objects that the agent cannot become aware of cosmological recurrence in a later life cycle or their awareness would no longer be identical to the first, oblivious life cycle. Second, Simmel objects that "if an experience is repeated within my existence, this repetition as such can be of the most enormous importance for me; but only because I am reminded by it of the first instance."⁹⁷ Third, Simmel objects that the self cannot recur over multiple life cycles, meaning all individuals who share identical life properties in other life cycles are merely *doppelgänger*s differentiated numerically.⁹⁸

To Simmel's first objection of agential recurrence-awareness, Loeb says that "I may be said to possess an awareness of my eternally recurring lives as soon as I hear the demon's message."⁹⁹ So long as the agent becomes aware of cosmological recurrence at exactly the same point in each cycle (the moment they hear the demon's message), there exists no contradiction in recurrence-awareness.¹⁰⁰ Simmel's fatal flaw, Loeb claims, is that he misrepresents Nietzsche's concept of time.¹⁰¹ His hasty dismissal of recurrence-awareness stems from his assumption that

⁹⁷ Presumably, the thought of recurrence is insignificant for one of two reasons. As Simmel would argue, we cannot be aware of previous recurrences and are therefore unaffected by them. As others have argued, our recurrence-awareness invites the agent to accept a fatalist point of view towards their actions, removing the "greatest weight" upon them (Loeb, 13).

⁹⁸ If each recurrence contains identical properties down to the smallest detail, then each life event necessarily contains the same temporal location. If that is the case, there cannot be multiple recurrences in a sequence but rather a single, repeating occurrence. One can no longer differentiate between *doppelgänger*s numerically. Simmel cannot make sense of this conclusion (Loeb, 12-13).

⁹⁹ Loeb, 15.

¹⁰⁰ In fact, Nietzsche wrote the passage in such a way that "the first instance of the demon refers to the second instance of the demon and thereby acknowledges itself to be the first *while still remaining qualitatively identical with the second*," (Loeb, 15).

¹⁰¹ Higgins takes Simmel's position, claiming that "the recurrence would not be a repetition of the original with the addition of a recognition that it is a recurrence," (Higgins 2000, 128). Ironically, Higgins' own interpretation of time in "On the Vision and the Riddle" demonstrates Zarathustra's view that past and future both extend infinitely from the present, precluding the possibility of a first recurrence.

the instance presented in the passage is the *first* appearance by the demon. This cannot be so.¹⁰² Simmel's claim imposes concepts of linear time on Nietzsche's concept of circular time and is therefore untenable.

Since Simmel's second objection also relies on the notion of a "first" recurrence, it falls equally short. The agent can have recurrence-awareness, as Loeb shows, and they can be affected by their awareness.¹⁰³ The thought of eternal recurrence reasserts its greatest weight upon the agent.

Simmel's third objection concerns the self and the temporal location of recurrences. In brief, Loeb claims two things. First, there is no absolute or universal conception of time; past, present, and future are all relative to one another and each moment will inevitably be all three. Time is not a spiral, which would entail qualitative differences over an underlying linear time. It is instead a circle which "itself is destroyed, recreated, and repeated along with everything else...the time at which I am recreated and live my life is always exactly the same."¹⁰⁴ So far, Loeb

¹⁰² The demon explicitly says, "This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more...and there will be nothing new in it...even this moment and I myself," (*The Gay Science*, 341). This means that the agent has already encountered the demon in *every* previous recurrence.

¹⁰³ The fatalist objection presents a much stronger threat to Loeb's argument. As Ridley argues, "[the demon] has presumably also been to me...innumerable times before—and what difference has *that* made? If I passed the test I passed, if I failed I failed, and I'll go on doing whichever I did infinitely many more times... Why *care*?" (Ridley, 20). Ridley supposes that the agent is bound by fate and cannot change their life in any meaningful way this go-around. Loeb identifies a significant logical error motivating this fatalist objection. The fatalist objection rests on the assumption that there is a *first* recurrence in which the agent did not experience the greatest weight and lived out their life; in *subsequent* recurrences, they now experience their fated life events only with the addition of the greatest weight. Loeb has already shown how ideas of a first recurrence are invalid according to Nietzsche's doctrine. The agent can indeed acknowledge determinism and simultaneously be motivated by the greatest weight to change their life, so long as the greatest weight has already motivated them in every recurrence. As Loeb puts it, "'Fated' change...is still change," (Loeb, 23).

¹⁰⁴ Loeb, 26.

has answered for the temporal location of recurrences. Second, there is no large gap between recurrences for the self which would strain the connection between two recurring selves.¹⁰⁵ The agent's childhood appears in both their past and future, making it of the utmost importance for the dying agent headed swiftly towards its recurrence.

What does it mean to have a cosmological recurrence with identical selves and temporal locations?¹⁰⁶ Loeb's answer is this. Recurrence-awareness allows us to peer into our past and future (relative to the moment of awareness) and feel connected to our other recurring selves. He suggests that Nietzsche's concept of the word "I" "depends upon temporal proximity," meaning that recurrence-awareness in the same temporal location creates a greater sense of self than linear conceptions of the self across a distinct past and future.¹⁰⁷ Additionally, recurrence-awareness reveals to us the repetition of this recurrence, so that we are not giving a single occurrence multiple names but rather giving multiple names to multiple eternal recurrences of the same.¹⁰⁸ In just one book chapter, Loeb's theoretical interpretation manages to dispel over one hundred-years' worth of misconceptions about Nietzsche's idea of a cosmological recurrence.

Many practical interpretations assume that the demon appears to the agent while they still have time to change their life in case they were unable to affirm it then and there. None offer a

¹⁰⁵ This is the objection made by Clark. Since the agent is not alive to witness the entire life cycle of the universe, it will appear as if no time had elapsed to them. Unlike Clark's disinterest in future selves, Loeb believes that "the concern [the agent] might now have for [their] dying self is precisely the same concern [they] should have for [themselves] as [they begin] to relive [their] life," (Loeb, 28).

¹⁰⁶ Would that mean that "we are giving a single event two or more names," as Magnus claims? (*Nietzsche's Existential Imperative*, 109). This would make Nietzsche's doctrine incoherent, bringing us back to the consensus that eternal recurrence is only a hypothetical test of affirmation. Or does it mean that the selves are numerically distinct and thus *doppelgänger*s, as Simmel claims? If so, Loeb has not yet subdued the objection that we cannot feel a "greatest weight" upon us for actions *this* self will not relive (Loeb, 30).

¹⁰⁷ Loeb, 30-31.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

specific time in the agent's life when this would happen, say during a mid-life crisis or upon their 21st birthday. By contrast, Loeb uses clues from the final three sections in Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* to establish the exact moment and location at which the demon appears: the agent's deathbed.¹⁰⁹

The event of the demon's appearance at one's deathbed is significant. In section 340, Nietzsche presents Socrates on his deathbed; in section 342, it is Zarathustra. Loeb claims that Nietzsche uses this "deathbed revelation" as a means of demonstrating Socrates' life negation and Zarathustra's life affirmation. Socrates, having lived a miserable life, is healed "from the long illness that is life" by the god Asclepius upon his deathbed.¹¹⁰ Meanwhile, Zarathustra experiences an overabundance of joy on his deathbed and can hardly contain himself.¹¹¹

The contrast between Socrates' and Zarathustra's deathbed reactions illuminates our understanding of the demon's question. The demon is asking the agent whether they are among "those who suffer from life's overfullness," or "those who suffer from life's impoverishment."¹¹² Under Loeb's practical interpretation, agents who suffer from the former satisfy the Zarathustran ideal, while agents who suffer from the latter satisfy the Socratic ideal. Obviously, Nietzsche himself favors the former. The life-affirming agent will necessarily accept cosmological

¹⁰⁹ As Loeb points out, the phrase "ultimate confirmation and seal" in section 341 may allude to the symbol of the seven seals in the Bible's Book of Revelation, which represent final judgment (Loeb, 34). The word "ultimate" also implies the last moment of one's life rather than any other moment preceding. Additionally, the eerie, chilling symbols of a spider, moonlight, and dust imply nighttime and death; in fact, the moonlight motif reappears in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in the context of "the drunken happiness of dying at midnight," (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, IV 19).

¹¹⁰ It is possible that Nietzsche chose the demon as an allusion to Socrates' own inner *daimonion*, which would imply that it is Socrates asking "himself the demon's question of affirmation (Loeb, 36).

¹¹¹ Zarathustra expresses the desire to "[empty] himself of his overflow like a cup, by giving away and distributing his wisdom among men, by shining for them," (Loeb, 42). He attempts precisely this in Nietzsche's next book, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

¹¹² Loeb, 41.

recurrence, circular time, and *amor fati*, all of which Zarathustra teaches in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. However, the particular values which cause the agent to suffer from life's overfullness are left unspecified.¹¹³

2.5 The Value of Becoming: Reginster's Substantive Interpretation

In his book *The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism*, Bernard Reginster offers a fresh, substantive interpretation of Nietzsche's doctrine. Reginster believes that Nietzsche proposed the cosmological role of eternal recurrence as a critique of the Christian doctrine of eternal life. Nietzsche thinks Christian values are life-negating, since they encourage Christians to dismiss this finite life in favor of an infinite life in the hereafter.¹¹⁴ Reginster's theoretical interpretation claims that an eternal life can only be one life, not multiple lives. Cosmological recurrence necessitates the existence of only finite lives, since infinite lives cannot recur. Furthermore, the entire sequence of life cycles must be finite in order to repeat. Therefore, Reginster asserts that "our only life is also a finite life."¹¹⁵

Reginster favors a substantive practical interpretation of eternal recurrence in accordance with Nietzsche's doctrine of the will to power. In order to overcome the problem of nihilism, Nietzsche attempts a substantive revaluation of all values according to the will to power, which replaces moral values as the highest value.

¹¹³ Loeb's practical interpretation seems substantive à la Clark's, in which the agent's highest value must fit a particular metaphysical picture but need not meet particular ethical criteria.

¹¹⁴ Reginster, 222.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 223.

Reginster defines the will to power as “the will to the overcoming of resistance.”¹¹⁶ This presents a paradox, since the states of resistance and of having overcome resistance cannot be present at the same time. The former deprives the agent of their end, while the latter temporarily deprives the agent of further growth. Reginster’s interpretation proposes a clear way of resolving the paradox that “the satisfaction of the will to power implies its own dissatisfaction.”¹¹⁷ The will’s indefinite striving means that it must always participate in the *activity* of overcoming resistance.¹¹⁸ In order to fulfill the will to power, the agent must constantly one-up themselves.¹¹⁹

Reginster believes *joy* holds another key to understanding Nietzsche’s substantive ethical project. He distinguishes between joy, which requires perfection, and pleasure, which can be experienced while leaving unmet desires. While the agent may “disapprove of the object of [their] pleasure,” the feeling of perfection precludes disapproval of their object of joy.¹²⁰ Ultimately, the joyful agent wishes the eternity of their perfect moment.¹²¹

In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche writes that “all joy wants eternity.”¹²² Reginster reframes eternal recurrence as a struggle between the ideals of being, or permanence, and becoming. Nietzsche abhors being and exalts becoming.¹²³ The nature of joy’s eternity can either be permanence or eternal recurrence. The finitude of their life prevents the agent from ever

¹¹⁶ He understands the will to power through a framework of first and second-order desires. Power is “devoid of any determinate content” and relies on the determinate ends of first-order desires to define it. The will to power itself functions like a second-order desire because it does not aim at power directly; it desires first-order desires to define its pursuit of power. The will pursues both determinate ends of first-order desires and power through those ends. In this pursuit, the will to power necessarily overcomes resistance (Reginster, 132).

¹¹⁷ Reginster, 136.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 127.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 137.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 224.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, IV 19.

¹²³ *The Twilight of the Idols*, III 1.

successfully willing the permanence of a joyful moment. Furthermore, Reginster argues that some joyful moments are unaffected or enhanced by their impermanence. Therefore, the joyful agent must wish the eternal recurrence of a perfect moment.¹²⁴

Given this picture, Reginster believes eternal recurrence establishes the substantive value of becoming against the life-negating Christian value of being. Nietzsche's doctrine of the will to power obligates the agent to actively overcome resistance and increase their will to power.¹²⁵ The agent can only overcome resistance by constantly becoming. Thus, Reginster claims that the value of becoming enables Nietzsche's revaluation of all values according to the will to power. Reginster concludes that the affirmation of life requires the finite agent to adopt values which emphasize becoming over being.¹²⁶

Discussion

3.1 Rejecting Resignation: The Case for Soll Over Lowith

Soll's interpretation of eternal recurrence is preferable to Lowith's for multiple reasons. Against Lowith, Reginster raises the objection that his interpretation of *amor fati* leads the agent into a state of resignation emphatically opposed by Nietzsche himself. Resignation is life-negating, since it denies the agent the joy derived from wanting and receiving a life they deem perfect. Instead, Nietzsche wants the agent to experience such joy in their fate that they would want nothing more than its eternal recurrence.¹²⁷

¹²⁴ Reginster, 225.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 177.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 226-227.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 209.

Reginster objects that Lowith's substantive revaluation of values differs greatly from Nietzsche's own revaluation of values. Lowith's will-lessness frees the agent of one set of life-negating values, namely whichever values the agent wills against their fate, but does not replace them with any other values.¹²⁸ Nietzsche's revaluation places the will to power as the highest of all values.¹²⁹ Nietzsche's will to power cannot function if the agent believes it is better not to will at all. Since the will to power is the cardinal notion in Nietzsche's solution to the problem of nihilism, Lowith's interpretation of affirmation as will-lessness cannot be a satisfactory exegesis of the doctrine of eternal recurrence.

Reginster claims that Soll's criticism of agential indifference mischaracterizes Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal recurrence. Lucretius had previously written his own version of the doctrine, with which Nietzsche was likely familiar. In his version, Lucretius anticipates the criticism of agential indifference.¹³⁰ Absent Nietzsche's own anticipatory discussion of agential indifference, Reginster cannot make the claim that Nietzsche's doctrine is impervious to Soll's criticism, so his first objection to Soll falls short, albeit on a technicality.

Reginster also objects that Soll does not demonstrate why seemingly insignificant choices are equally important to major decisions. Reginster asks why the agent cannot still treat apparently minor decisions as just that.¹³¹ Soll explicitly states that by "[repeating] eternally our present lives in all details," each choice must have equal significance, no matter how trivial.¹³² Soll's theoretical

¹²⁸ Reginster, 220.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 103.

¹³⁰ Reginster claims that Nietzsche's knowledge of Lucretius' doctrine would have prevented Nietzsche from falling victim to Soll's criticism (Reginster, 212). Although Nietzsche *likely* knew of Lucretius' doctrine, it is *possible* that Nietzsche was not aware of the criticism of agential indifference.

¹³¹ Reginster, 212.

¹³² Soll, 339.

interpretation lends itself to an essentialist egalitarianism akin to Nehamas' view. In order for the agent to affirm their life, each choice made must be perfect in their mind.¹³³ Consequently, the agent cannot want a different lunch in another life than the one they just ate without negating their current life. This implies the absolute standard of affirmation, with which Reginster clearly does not agree. It seems that Soll, like Nehamas and others, have incorrectly assumed that Zarathustra's prompt to affirm "*all woe*" in "The Drunken Song" is literal rather than poetic. Reginster's second objection is much more defensible since it denies the absolute standard of affirmation.

According to Soll's practical interpretation, choices are affirmed if the agent can will them again eternally without regret. However, the agent's life need not actually recur again for them to affirm their choices in this life.¹³⁴ Soll's agent considers the concept of eternal recurrence to affirm their life while simultaneously embracing it as their only life. Likewise, Nietzsche implores the agent to "*remain true to the earth*" and act as if the agent's current life will not extend infinitely in the hereafter.¹³⁵ Soll's practical argument about the nature of affirmation seems consistent with Nietzsche's exaltation of our current lives.

Soll's formal practical interpretation better accommodates Nietzsche's substantive reevaluation of values. Lowith's practical interpretation excludes the possibility of fulfilling the will to power out of metaphysical necessity. Since Lowith's agent cannot will any action contrary to their fate, any action which coincides with Nietzsche's ethics of power would be accidental as a result of the agent's life events. By enabling the agent to consistently will their values, whatever they may be, Soll leaves open the possibility of *amor fati* denied by Lowith's will-lessness.

¹³³ Reginster, 224.

¹³⁴ Soll, 342.

¹³⁵ *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, I 1.

3.2 Joyful Affirmation: The Case for Janaway and Clark Over Nehamas

Reginster objects to Nehamas regarding the extent to which the agent contextualizes their life's events. Reginster differentiates between moderate and radical contextualism. Radical contextualism, which Nehamas favors, maintains that any one property of an agent's life has significance only in relation to *every* other property. Moderate contextualism, which Reginster favors, maintains that any one property of an agent's life has significance in relation to *some* other properties. Reginster believes that Nietzsche does not much care about how the agent affirms seemingly arbitrary properties like the number of hairs on their head.¹³⁶ His standard of affirmation is lower than Nehamas' but higher than Clark's. Despite ignoring arbitrary physical properties, Reginster places particular emphasis on affirming "*all* woe" according to Zarathustra's "The Drunken Song."¹³⁷ When we affirm our lives, it seems we do so on account of our joys, not our woes. If anything, the presence of all woe detracts from our ability to become life-affirming agents. Although the ability to affirm even all woes would make for an extremely strong agent, it seems an unnecessarily high standard compared to Clark's.

Unsurprisingly, Reginster objects to the formal nature of Nehamas' practical interpretation. Nehamas' practical interpretation requires the agent to reevaluate the significance of their life's events such that they can affirm them, but it says nothing about the content of the particular values by which the agent affirms their life.¹³⁸ Reginster believes that Nietzsche's eternal recurrence invokes a substantive reevaluation of all values according to the will to power, so he must reject

¹³⁶ Reginster, 216.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 217.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 221.

Nehamas' formal interpretation.¹³⁹ Since Janaway's interpretation is also formal, Reginster would reject it on the same grounds.

Reginster's final objection to Nehamas' interpretation is that he does not necessitate that cosmological recurrence be eternal. Nehamas believes eternal recurrence suggests that "this life and this world are the only life and the only world there are."¹⁴⁰ Unfortunately, Reginster's desire for a necessary cosmological recurrence goes unfulfilled by all three interpretations; both Clark and Janaway deny that cosmological recurrence as metaphysical truth is necessary or important to Nietzsche's project. Reginster himself admits that the significance of Nietzsche's doctrine cannot come from the validity of a cosmological recurrence.¹⁴¹ He bases his own interpretation on a hypothetical recurrence with a substantive revaluation of values. If Reginster need not answer to his own objection, then how valuable is it? Until Reginster justifies why his objection is valid only applied to others, it appears hollow.

Reginster objects that Clark's substantive revaluation of values only devaluates those values which require permanence.¹⁴² In addition to the value of becoming, Reginster claims that Nietzsche's revaluation of values aims to exalt power and suffering.¹⁴³ Therefore, Clark's revaluation would inadequately account for all the values espoused by Nietzsche's substantive ethical doctrine.

Reginster would likely object to Janaway's first-order devaluation of suffering. In Reginster's account of the revaluation of all values, Nietzsche emphasizes the intrinsic value of suffering. Nietzsche's doctrine of the will to power takes suffering to be an essential feature of

¹³⁹ Reginster, 219-220.

¹⁴⁰ Nehamas, 157.

¹⁴¹ Reginster, 206.

¹⁴² Clark, 272.

¹⁴³ Reginster, 177.

every agent's life. The will to power necessitates suffering in two ways: the agent suffers when experiencing resistance and those who resist suffer when overcome by the agent.¹⁴⁴ As a result, Nietzsche exalts the activities of cruelty, or inflicting suffering on others, and asceticism, or inflicting suffering on oneself.¹⁴⁵ He places the onus upon the agent to affirm their suffering, since the denial of such an essential feature of their life is life-negating.¹⁴⁶ Janaway's first-order attitudes enable the agent to disavow the intrinsic value of suffering; but, second-order attitudes enable the agent to affirm their life despite the suffering.¹⁴⁷ Reginster would likely not allow Janaway to first devalue suffering before reconfiguring its value to his life as a whole.¹⁴⁸

Reginster's objection to Nehamas' radical contextualism is ill-founded. Nietzsche conceives of the will to power as the activity of overcoming resistance. Clearly, the agent cannot satisfy the will to power without experiencing both suffering and the overcoming of suffering. The agent who satisfies the will to power must have both components to affirm his life.¹⁴⁹ By definition, joy cannot exist without the revaluation and affirmation of both suffering and overcoming suffering. Reginster's moderate contextualism is untenable, while Nehamas' radical contextualism adequately describes the formal possibility of the affirmation of life. Although Reginster does not

¹⁴⁴ Reginster, 177.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 176.

¹⁴⁷ Janaway, 258.

¹⁴⁸ Reginster's understand of suffering trades on an essential ambiguity of the word's meaning. Suffering can mean pain, but it can also mean the agent's experience of frustration to their pursuit of their desires. Suffering conceived as "facing obstacles" works just as well according to Reginster's interpretation of the will to power as "overcoming resistance." Furthermore, this meaning of suffering does not ascribe any substantive ethical demands of cruelty and asceticism. Obstacles are essential to growth but do not require infliction of pain. Suffering as "facing obstacles" is far more plausible than Reginster's ambiguous reading of suffering, yet it commits one to a purely formal interpretation.

¹⁴⁹ Reginster, 136.

address Janaway's interpretation, this objection and its conclusion could equally apply to Janaway's normative contextualism.

On its face, Clark's interpretation is initially more objectionable than Nehamas'. Clark does not account for the perfection of joy experienced by a life-affirming agent in her practical argument about the evaluation of life. By asking the agent if they would "do it all over," Clark sets a lower standard for the affirmation of life than Nietzsche may accept.¹⁵⁰ In order to affirm their life, Clark's agent only needs to believe it was better for them to exist than not. This allows the affirmed agent to dismiss or condemn undesirable properties of their life. By contrast, Nietzsche's conception of joy finds perfection in the totality of happiness and suffering. Unless the agent can will it "*all back*," they have not successfully affirmed their life.

There are two reasons to believe that Clark's lower standard of affirmation is the correct exegesis of Nietzsche's thought. First, "The Drunken Song" from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* often used to justify the absolute standard of affirmation can be read in multiple ways. I previously suggested that Higgins' interpretation of Nietzsche's theodicy offers a way out for Clark's lower standard of affirmation. If Zarathustra is meant to be singing "The Drunken Song," then he conveys the Dionysian or tragic attitude towards life. This attitude only requires that the agent affirm the activity of living, not every single detail of their life. Hence, Higgins' interpretation offers redemption for Clark's intuitively appealing lower standard of affirmation.

Second, Clark's lower standard of affirmation has precedence in its inverse, the standard of life-denial. Reginster describes Nietzsche's suicidal nihilist as an agent who, terrified by the nothingness of life, the inherent vacuum of objective meaning, decides to commit suicide.¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰ Clark, 269.

¹⁵¹ Reginster, 27.

Evidently, the decision made by the suicidal nihilist is a comparative one, that it is better to die than to live given the lack of objective meaning. The life-affirming agent need only decide the opposite, that it is better to live than to die given the same circumstances. Like Clark's standard of affirmation, the lower standard of life-denial is likewise intuitively appealing. We generally do not consider people who commit suicide to deny *all* details of their lives, simply enough total or important details to want not to exist.

Janaway's affective belonging provides an advantage over both Nehamas' and Clark's interpretation regarding joy. While Clark fails to adequately address the perfection in joy, Nehamas does so in discussing affirmation under both essentialist egalitarianism and normative contextualism. However, Janaway's affective belonging resolves the immense difficulty of affirmation left unaddressed by Nehamas. Furthermore, the concept of self-love fits in with Nietzsche's instruction to "love oneself with a sound and healthy love, so that one may endure it with oneself and not go roaming about."¹⁵² Through affective belonging, the possibility of an affirmed life becomes much clearer. For this reason, Janaway's interpretation is a valuable contribution to the literature on Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal recurrence. Clark's lower standard of affirmation is an equally powerful contribution, since it demonstrates the substantive form life-affirming values must take without prescribing any particular substantive values.

3.3 Love of the True: The Case for Lampert Over Russell and Ridley

All three interpretations frame eternal recurrence within the context of Nietzsche's attempt to discredit Christianity, and Lampert's and Ridley's interpretations allude to eternal recurrence serving a parallel function to the Christian transcendental ideal. Their distinct conceptions of the

¹⁵² *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, III 2.

will to truth leave significant room for disagreement about the nature of affirmation under eternal recurrence. Taken alone, Lampert's interpretation remains preferable for reasons I will discuss below. However, aspects of all three interpretations can be coherently synthesized.

All three interpretations given by Lampert, Russell, and Ridley are substantive interpretations of the doctrine of eternal recurrence. Much like Clark's substantive interpretation, the agent in their interpretations is confined to a metaphysical truth which negates the Platonic-Christian value of being in favor of the Nietzschean value of becoming. Lampert's interpretation in particular obligates the agent to accept the will to power as metaphysical reality. Because Lampert's substantive interpretation necessitates the will to power, I believe Reginster would support it. However, the mere rejection of Platonic-Christian transcendental ideals in favor of the general value of becoming does not necessarily commit the agent to accept the specific value of will to power as Nietzsche defines it. The activity of living and the activity of overcoming resistance are similar but not the same. Obstacles to one's goals are an essential feature of life, but Nietzsche's espoused ethical obligations to inflict cruelty upon oneself and others do not necessarily follow from that premise. It is possible for the agent to overcome resistance without having to inflict unnecessary cruelty. A boxer may defeat their opponent without beating them to death. Given that, it seems that Russell's and Ridley's substantive interpretations are preferable for avoiding the logical stretch from the general value of becoming to the specific value of will to power. For this reason, I would imagine Reginster objecting to Russell's and Ridley's substantive interpretation in the same way as he did to Clark's.

Lampert's interpretation, as well as Russell's, may provide crucial insight in how to resolve Ridley's objection that *amor fati* and eternal recurrence are incompatible. Lampert's practical interpretation explicitly includes *amor fati*, not only as self-affirmation but also the higher world-

affirmation. Russell's interpretation shifts the focus of affirmation from particular motivating goals to the entire activity of living. Since both self and world-affirmation are essential for Nietzsche, Lampert's interpretation offers a better framework for understanding how the latter necessarily follows from the former, but Russell's interpretation identifies the same general argument. Ridley objects that eternal recurrence "[transcendentalizes] the present," making *amor fati* a simultaneous yet impossible affirmation of the past and future. Ridley would be correct if *amor fati* was defined by the agent's particular life events, but Lampert and Russell show how *amor fati* can instead represent the agent's love for living in the contingent, natural world, regardless of the particular life events which await them.

A significant issue with the thought of eternal recurrence is that Ridley's transcendental objection is seemingly correct. According to Ridley, Nietzsche constructs a truth-denying exercise for the agent to undergo in an attempt to resolve the problem of resignation. If this test is to have any relevance to the agent's life, they must engage seriously with it, yet engaging seriously implicates them in a similar transcendental delusion as the Christian. Ridley hints at a possible solution to his objection which, combined with Lampert's framework of the religion of the future and Russell's nature of life-affirming and negating agents, has the potential to redeem the thought of eternal recurrence through a synthesis of interpretations.

Ridley suggests that the truly life-affirming agent requires no ultimate confirmation and seal; someone fully in love with life is not concerned with passing a test to prove it. Lampert positions eternal recurrence as the new ideal central to Nietzsche's religion of the future. Much like Christianity's promise of eternal salvation guides the hopeful masses to adopting its metaphysical assumptions, Nietzsche may desire the promise of eternal recurrence to guide

European nihilists to accept his own metaphysical picture. Since Nietzsche's metaphysical picture represents the truth, eternal recurrence is the means for nihilists to develop a love of the true.

Nietzsche recognizes that very few agents will succeed in affirming their lives; indeed, he wants affirmation to be difficult to separate the psychologically weak from the most courageous among us. The most courageous among us will, in the words of Russell, "*dance* across the abyss," while the psychologically weak need guidance or justification in the face of the truth.¹⁵³ By promulgating the false thought of eternal recurrence, Nietzsche incentivizes his new congregation to follow his will to truth. The strongest among them will inevitably learn to love the true absolute, which reveals the falsity of cosmological recurrence. Ultimately, the new ideal of eternal recurrence serves to encourage spiritual worship of the metaphysical truth of becoming. The real test of affirmation is if the agent can affirm their life without the spiritual safety net of the religion of the future.

Russell's interpretation includes one glaring contradiction: the attempt to balance between truthfulness and life-preserving errors. The agent genuinely practicing truthfulness may not shy away from the ugliness of the world, however psychologically convenient to do so.¹⁵⁴ Could the worshippers of Dionysus successfully affirm their lives despite making the crucial life-preserving error of believing in the thought of eternal recurrence, which the will to truth demonstrates is necessarily false?¹⁵⁵ If they cannot, then what difference does it make for agents to accept yet

¹⁵³ Russell, 88.

¹⁵⁴ Russell claims that the agent may experiment to find their appropriate subjective boundary between life-preserving errors and truthfulness. However, Russell provides no explanation for the amount or type of life-preserving errors the agent may acceptably engage in while still affirming their true life.

¹⁵⁵ The assumption that the will to truth would reveal the falsity of cosmological recurrence relies on Simmel's counterexample, which neither Loeb nor anyone else has satisfactorily managed to refute. More on this in the following section titled "Evidence for Recurrence? The Case for Higgins Over Loeb."

another apparently false doctrine in place of Christianity? The answer must be that accepting Nietzsche's doctrine over Christianity *does* make a difference and that affirmation *is* possible.¹⁵⁶ The Dionysian makes no distinction between objective truth and subjective life-preserving errors; to Nietzsche, all truth is subjective. The key to salvation from nihilism is the affirmation of one's own ability to create subjective values which satisfy one's psychological needs at any given moment and honor the "justification of all perishableness."¹⁵⁷ Nietzsche's doctrine teaches the agent that God cannot provide meaning for their life, and they must believe in the ability of their subjective truth and creative power to satisfy their question, "Why?"

Ridley's interpretation, being argumentative rather than exegetical, has powerful flaws to match his powerful criticisms. First, Ridley claims that previous interpretations have misidentified the actual greatest weight in the passage from *The Gay Science*. However, Nietzsche is quite

¹⁵⁶ It seems the value in the thought of eternal recurrence constructed hypothetically must be this: Christianity serves a psychologically function for the Christian by providing a clear worldview and standard of affirmation. So long as the agent follows God's law, they may affirm their life and be confident in their prospects of salvation in the hereafter. This psychological reassurance saves the agent from nihilism, so long as they refuse to question the subjective foundations of their "objective" beliefs. Nietzsche's doctrine attempts to similarly provide psychological reassurance for agents experiencing nihilism after the death of God. So long as the agent adheres to the general values of becoming, will to power, and *amor fati*, they may affirm their life and be confident in the overfullness of their worldly life. Like the Christians, the Dionysians cannot dig too deep or risk falling back into nihilism. The key difference is that the subjective foundations of belief does not present a contradiction for the Dionysian, since they constantly and openly affirm the subjective nature of their values.

¹⁵⁷ The full quote by Nietzsche captures the Christian's transformation into their own creator of values: "But let this mean Will to Truth unto you, that everything be transformed into the humanly conceivable, the humanly visible, the humanly sensible!...And verily, for your bliss, ye discerning ones!...God is a conjecture: but who could drink all the bitterness of this conjecture without dying?...God is a thought—it maketh all the straight crooked, and all that standeth reel. What? Time would be gone, and all the perishable would be but a lie?...Evil do I call it and misanthropic: all that teaching about the one, and the plenum, and the unmoved, and the sufficient, and the imperishable!...But of time and of becoming shall the best similes speak: a praise shall they be, and a justification of all perishableness! Creating—that is the great salvation from suffering, and life's alleviation," (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, II 2). This quote was taken from Thomas Common's translation of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

explicit in saying “the question in each and every thing, ‘Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?’ would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight.”¹⁵⁸ If the greatest weight constitutes the question of the agent’s desire for eternal recurrence, then it cannot be the fear of never being asked that question. In his attempt to criticize Nietzsche, Ridley commits an error which invalidates his accusations of Nietzsche’s “failure of nerve.”¹⁵⁹ If my synthesis of all three interpretations holds, the truly life-affirming agents need not be asked the question of eternal recurrence at all. In that case, life-affirming agents lack anything but nerve.

3.4 Evidence for Recurrence? The Case for Higgins Over Loeb

While Loeb presents a remarkable defense of cosmological recurrence against Simmel’s objections, he fails to do so against Simmel’s well-known counterexample to Nietzsche’s proof. Loeb dismisses Simmel’s counterexample for being only a footnote in his critique rather than a main argument against Nietzsche.¹⁶⁰ Unfortunately for Loeb, the centrality of the counterexample in Simmel’s critique has no bearing on its validity. If we undertake the monumental task of proving the possibility of cosmological recurrence, we must be prepared to answer for any counterexamples and objections. Loeb has not done so. Absent a viable objection, Simmel’s counterexample remains unchallenged.

Loeb believes that the possibility of recurrence-awareness can suffice as evidence of the possibility of cosmological recurrence.¹⁶¹ He faces objections that recurrence-awareness “cannot count as *evidence* of the reality of recurrence precisely because it is exactly repeated.”¹⁶² To Loeb,

¹⁵⁸ *The Gay Science*, 341.

¹⁵⁹ Ridley, 25.

¹⁶⁰ Loeb, 13.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

recurrences can be qualitatively identical yet numerically distinct. The demon itself supports Loeb's claim by saying that the agent's life will identically repeat "once more and innumerable times more."¹⁶³ By differentiating between recurrences numerically, one does not change any properties within the recurrence itself. I agree with Loeb that recurrences can be differentiated numerically without contradiction.¹⁶⁴ Where I disagree is in Loeb's tacit understanding that recurrence-awareness *alone* can count as proof of recurrence.¹⁶⁵ Although recurrence-awareness cannot be discounted outright as supporting evidence of cosmological recurrence (he argues against Simmel's objections quite convincingly), it does not necessitate actual recurrence or even make it likelier true than not. Recurrence-awareness cannot be very useful without a more substantial answer to Simmel's counterexample or a completed proof.

One potentially damning criticism of cosmological recurrence, made in particular by Clark, is that Nietzsche left his proof of it unfinished.¹⁶⁶ Loeb addresses Clark's objection in two ways.

¹⁶³ *The Gay Science*, 341.

¹⁶⁴ For example, a banana and its perfect clone would have exactly identical properties yet constitute separate objects. Loeb would likely point out that the recurrence is a complete circle, not sequential cycles, so my analogy is inaccurate. In Loeb's case, the banana's (B) clone (B₁) is the exact same object. He must demonstrate how this works conceptually, or Magnus' incoherence objection stands and my analogy remains preferable.

¹⁶⁵ Loeb takes agential recurrence-awareness as proof that we are not giving a single event two or more names, in the words of Magnus. My position is that of Magnus'. Since the agent's awareness is based on life properties contained in this occurrence and extrapolated backwards and forwards, it is entirely possible that recurrence-awareness is not the agent's awareness of cosmological truth but rather their imagination of recurrence. I believe Loeb is mistaken for making this extra step from imagination to cosmological truth. Recurrence-awareness does not prove that cosmological recurrence *is* so, only that the agent *believes* it is so. Absent some greater evidence of cosmological recurrence, it must be conceptually incoherent and only viable conceived hypothetically.

¹⁶⁶ Clark claims that "if we are rational, we will ask what reason exists for accepting this cosmology," (Clark, 251). Absent a finished proof, Nietzsche has presumably not held up his end of the bargain. To explain this glaring omission, Clark assumes that Nietzsche's portrayal of the demon appearing at the agent's "loneliest of lonelinesses" evokes their desire to believe at the expense of rational thought (Loeb, 19). The burden still rests on Nietzsche to demonstrate why we should accept cosmological recurrence as true.

First, he claims that her translation of loneliness, which she uses to justify the agent's receptivity to an allegedly irrational doctrine, is better translated as solitude. This difference, while apparently minute, explains how the agent must "[isolate themselves] from the common opinion in order to discover and bring to the surface [their] own deepest instinctive wisdom."¹⁶⁷ This solitude enables the agent to contemplate the thought of eternal recurrence fully.¹⁶⁸ Apparently, Loeb believes that the agent's "deepest instinctive wisdom" can provide enough justification to believe in the truth of Nietzsche's doctrine absent a completed logical proof.¹⁶⁹ By no means does this conclusion confirm the reality of cosmological recurrence. Rather, this response to Clark's objection demands an alternative explanation for Nietzsche's inadequate proof.

Following this first response to Clark's objection, Loeb offers another in two parts. Although "mere contemplation" or the "psychological force of this thought" are insufficient evidence of its validity, Loeb claims that the demon creates a "quasi-mystical sensory experience" as powerful and tangible as reality itself.¹⁷⁰ According to Loeb, the agent can "literally *see* moonlight streaming between the trees...literally *feel* a demon crawling...literally *hear* the demon whispering."¹⁷¹ My objection is this. Loeb is correct in claiming that the psychological force of the thought alone is not proof of the possibility of cosmological recurrence. I believe an even stronger, more graphic hallucination is equally insufficient as evidence of a physical recurrence. Just because I see a demon does not mean a demon is *actually* there. Loeb's epistemic claim does

¹⁶⁷ Loeb, 20.

¹⁶⁸ In his dissertation "Embracing the Void: Nietzsche's 'Zarathustra' and the Political," James D. Stewart claims that Nietzsche believes that "within the confines of collective existence, humans are not capable of reaching their full potential *qua* humans," (Stewart, 265). The only method of maximizing one's critical aptitude seems to be isolating oneself from society. This understanding of Nietzsche makes Loeb's translation far more plausible than Clark's.

¹⁶⁹ Loeb, 20.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 20-21.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

accord with Nietzsche's beliefs about revelation, but there is a substantial difference in eternal recurrence being real for *all* agents versus real to a *particular* agent.¹⁷² This objection alone does not disprove the possibility of cosmological recurrence, since the revelations experienced by a select few agents may still reveal hidden truths about the world that indeed apply to all agents. For now, Loeb has not provided any justification for that to be the likeliest case.

Loeb adds that the agent experiencing recurrence-awareness would have a concrete memory of their past lives (since each life cycle is identical to the one they currently live) as well as a "precognition or prevision of a future that includes and extends beyond the moment of [the agent's] death."¹⁷³ Because the agent will experience their current life again in their relative future, they can in essence "remember" future life events. My objection to Loeb is that the agent's precognition does not provide evidence for a cosmological recurrence. Suppose the agent accepts the demon's message and develops a recurrence-awareness. They believe that their life has already and will recur infinitely many times, and they know exactly which life events will recur because they will remain the same from this particular life cycle.¹⁷⁴ In short, the agent can believe in

¹⁷² In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche writes "the concept of revelation, in the sense that something suddenly, with unspeakable certainty and subtlety, becomes visible, audible, something that shakes and overturns one to the depths, simply describes the fact. One hears, one does not seek; one takes, one does not ask who gives; a thought flashes up like lightning, with necessity, unfalteringly formed—I never had any choice," (*Ecce Homo* Z:3). Nietzsche believes that reality and knowledge are empirical and always conditioned by the agent's perspective. From this passage, I take it that Nietzsche believes revelations can be so powerful as to not just be indistinguishable from reality but reality itself. If the distinction between revelation and reality is irrelevant, then so are epistemological claims denigrating knowledge gained from revelation. I will accept that the demon is *actually* there because the agent experiences its message, but I must disagree with respect to cosmological recurrence. Either the world physically recurs eternally or it does not. If it recurs for one agent, it must recur for all. The cosmological *truth* of eternal recurrence cannot depend on agential perspective whatsoever, even if it is only ever *experienced* while being filtered through agential perspective.

¹⁷³ Loeb, 21.

¹⁷⁴ Events A and A₁ are identical in all properties yet distinct numerically. Event A occurs in the current life cycle, while event A₁ occurs in the next recurrence. There are two necessary conditions

cosmological recurrence and imagine particular life events repeating identically, but that does not mean that their imagination, however concrete, will come to fruition. One might remember every single detail of their wedding day and imagine it recurring identically without it actually doing so. While cosmological recurrence could still be possible, Loeb's arguments could only be supplementary to more substantial evidence. This evidence continues to elude us, so Clark's objection stands.

The least objectional aspect of Loeb's interpretation is his claim about when the demon appears. The Dionysian model of time accepted by both Loeb and Higgins always centers the present moment as the moment of potentiality. The Dionysian agent focuses on the present moment, since that is the only moment in which they ever act, think, and breathe. It would make no sense for the demon to appear well before the agent's death; why should the present-focused agent be worried about their life beginning to recur again after they die in one, two, three, or more decades? The demon must appear on the precipice of recurrence in the exact moment at which its message can affect the present-focused agent.

Loeb's insistence on the validity of cosmological recurrence is admirable, particularly given Nietzsche's own adamance. Unlike other interpreters, he denies that the "What if" beginning section 341 is a conditional phrase establishing a hypothetical cosmology, a mere thought experiment.¹⁷⁵ Loeb is justified in questioning decades of assumptions regarding the demon's

for a precognition of event A_1 : the memory of event A and a cosmological recurrence. The agent can always remember event A from this occurrence, but their life *must* recur in order for them to have a precognition of event A_1 . The same applies for hypothetical "memories" of identical life events in past recurrences. The agent can associate a memory with the possibility of its repetition without it ever actually repeating. For this reason, recurrence-awareness does not necessitate the possibility of cosmological recurrence.

¹⁷⁵ Loeb, 19.

message, but I must concur with the consensus here.¹⁷⁶ Given my argument that knowledge gained from revelation alone is not sufficient to establish the reality of recurrence, it seems that the demon's message must function hypothetically no matter how seriously the receptive agent treats it. We may now discuss the religious, ethical, and attitudinal implications of Nietzsche's doctrine conceived hypothetically in the context of Higgins' interpretation.

I believe Higgins' exegesis of the Dionysian model of time is correct. Unfortunately, she contradicts herself by taking Simmel's position vis-à-vis recurrence-awareness. As Loeb has demonstrated, it is possible to have a recurrence-awareness in each recurrence so long as it occurs identically. The Dionysian model of time prevents any "original" recurrence which would serve as an objection to recurrence-awareness. Higgins may still dismiss actual recurrence while accepting Loeb's logical argument that recurrence-awareness within hypothetical recurrences does not contradict. This is a minor point but one worth mentioning given Higgins's own understanding of Dionysian time.

A hypothetical interpretation of the demon's message does not necessarily mitigate or eliminate its greatest weight upon our lives. Higgins claims that Nietzsche's doctrine is "accepted on faith...not a conclusion of logic, but an expression of the implications of a fundamental world-

¹⁷⁶ Simmel's counterexample appears very similar to one formulated by Nicole Oresme in his treatise *On the Commensurability or Incommensurability of the Celestial Motions*. Oresme concludes that "three or more objects will either never conjunct, conjunct only once, or conjunct an infinite number of times," (Small, 124). Simmel presents a case in which three objects only conjunct once, but Nietzsche requires that all objects conjunct infinitely many times forming identical combinations. Some suggest that approximately identical conjunctions with only imperceptible differences can recur infinitely without contradiction. This solution is unsatisfactory given that imperceptible differences in conjunctions become perceptible over infinite time. A serious cosmological reading of Nietzsche requires the impossible. Rather than dismissing his cosmological doctrine as incoherent, I believe that the best interpretation is hypothetical. This allows us to retain the practical features of the doctrine which remain potentially useful.

view for a particular aspect of human experience.”¹⁷⁷ This holds true for both Christians and Dionysians. The Christian lives their life according to God’s commands despite lacking infallible proof for His existence. The thought of eternal recurrence, whether cosmologically true or false, would have a similarly compelling effect on the Dionysian. The compelling effect would originate differently for the Christian (externally from God) and the Dionysian (internally from drives), but the function is the same. Each agent’s particular worldview will motivate corresponding agential actions and attitudes towards life. That motivation comes from feeling the greatest weight, whether it is fear/hope of eternal damnation/salvation for the Christian or fear/hope of suffering from impoverishment/overfullness of life for the Dionysian.¹⁷⁸

Higgins’ analogy of music and time is innovative and quite convincing. Her centering of the present through individual tones strikes me as exactly what Nietzsche desires for the Dionysian attitude towards life. Furthermore, the experience of listening to music reflects *amor fati* quite well. There may be particular movements during the song that appeal more or less to each particular agent. The life-affirming agent can favor particular moments or eras in their life while still affirming the *activity* of living above all else. This interpretation conflicts with essentialist egalitarian views of Soll, Nehamas, Magnus, and others, since the agent can affirm the significance of life properties unequally. Higgins’ understanding of *amor fati* aligns more closely with Lampert’s.

¹⁷⁷ Higgins, 191.

¹⁷⁸ The competing Socratic and Zarathustran ideals described by Loeb are indicative of the greatest weight under a theological interpretation of Nietzsche’s doctrine. The Christian believes in the transcendental hereafter and is primarily concerned with their life beyond this world. Nietzsche only believes in this world, but the basis of his concern is the same. Both feel the greatest weight of fear and hope, two of the most powerful human emotions.

The analogy of music is instructive in understanding the affirmation of life as well. Not every agent will have a taste for this particular life, much like not every agent has a taste for any given song. Two agents listening to a rock and roll song might have wildly different reactions ranging from elation to disgust. If we consider life as a single song, then life-affirming agents can be one of two kinds of people. Either the life-affirming agent must have a taste for life's particular song, or they must have a taste for any song. While possible, it seems exceptionally unlikely for any agent to have absolutely no specific music preferences. Since all music tastes likely contain some specific preferences, the only kind of life-affirming agent possible must be one who enjoys life's particular song. This condition reduces the population of possible affirmers to a number more appealing for the difficulty of affirmation Nietzsche desires.

The absolute standard of affirmation, along with necessary cosmological recurrence, are the two most beguiling concepts preventing a coherent interpretation of Nietzsche's doctrine. Without them, the picture becomes much clearer. Higgins' concept of theodicy offers the best explanation yet to the puzzle of "The Drunken Song." Previous interpretations have struggled to interpret the phrase "*all* woe" in the context of affirmation, generally reading it literally and accepting its implication of an absolute standard of affirmation. By treating Zarathustra as a blues singer, Higgins offers a reading that does not necessitate an absolute standard of affirmation while capturing the musical quality of Nietzsche's doctrine.¹⁷⁹ This interpretation provides greater evidence in support of Clark's well-known lower standard of affirmation, which is much more plausible than an absolute standard of affirmation given an only hypothetical recurrence.

¹⁷⁹ One might object that Nietzsche would not have likely been familiar with blues music and would not have written one for Zarathustra to sing, since it originated in the United States in his later life. Melancholic feelings are not exclusive to blues music, so Higgins' reference to a "blues singer" is intended as a useful comparison, not an accurate description.

3.5 Moral Relativism: The Case Against Reginster

The most glaring objection to Reginster's interpretation of eternal recurrence is that it too cannot be substantive in the way he desires. Nietzsche emphatically rejects normative objectivism, or the idea that the normative authority of a value depends on its objectivity, in his critique of Plato and Immanuel Kant. Nietzsche calls moral values "false projections" borne of psychological necessity.¹⁸⁰ He also denies the existence of free will, on which the possibility of ethical action is predicated.¹⁸¹ Taken together, Nietzsche's critiques preclude the agent from engaging in rational deliberation independent of their inclinations; all "deliberation" is based on the agent's drives, which can include psychological drives that desire moral and religious values to dictate the agent's actions for them. Nietzsche's idea of deliberation is piecemeal, since the agent considers each drive only in the context of all of their drives. In every case, the agent's strongest drive or combination of drives ultimately prevails.¹⁸² Rather than acting against their desires according to rational maxims à la Kant, the agent is forever beholden to their most powerful desires.

Against normative objectivism, Nietzsche adopts normative subjectivism, or the belief that the normative authority of values does not lie in their objective standing.¹⁸³ In *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche states that "all evaluation is made from a definite perspective: that of the preservation of the individual, a community, a race, a state, a church, a faith, a culture."¹⁸⁴ The agent's particular perspective is inescapable, so normative authority can only come from within their perspective. Evidently, Nietzsche believes that the agent's contingent perspective is enough to grant normative authority to their particular values. However, by rejecting normative objectivism and the ability to

¹⁸⁰ *The Will to Power*, 12; *The Gay Science*, 301; *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, I 15.

¹⁸¹ *The Twilight of the Idols*, VII 1.

¹⁸² Reginster, 72-73.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹⁸⁴ *The Will to Power*, 259.

act against one's desires, Nietzsche is left with moral relativism. Agents can only proclaim, "This is *my* good and evil;"¹⁸⁵ with no other recourse, Nietzsche must "find a way to persuade the nihilist" towards his particular set of subjective values through "*seduction*."¹⁸⁶

If Nietzsche espouses moral relativism, his doctrine of eternal recurrence must either be formal or substantive only with regards to the type of affirmable values, not their specific content. If an agent is not bound to a particular set of objective normative values, they can select whichever subjective values are agreeable to them. According to Reginster, Nietzsche's revaluation of all values according to the will to power embraces the intrinsic value of suffering, whether self-inflicted through asceticism or inflicted on others through cruelty.¹⁸⁷ Reginster's interpretation mistakes the value of suffering in Nietzsche's thought. Rather than specifically inflicting cruelty upon oneself and others, it appears that Nietzsche primarily wants the agent to experience growth and achieve their full potential. Although that may involve inflicting cruelty, the general value of suffering can be understood as experiencing obstacles to one's desires rather than physiological pain. By overcoming these obstacles, the agent can experience self-improvement. The general value of becoming provides the structure for affirmable values under this morally relativistic picture. The agent can create and affirm any values they want, so long as they do not engage in delusions of the objectivity or permanence of their values.

Reginster's interpretation of joy begs the question, "What is the nature of perfection?" Without objective normative values, an agent can only judge perfection according to their subjective values. If an agent's subjective values are subject to their own approval, then perfect moments must likewise be subject to their own approval. Reginster claims that joy leaves no

¹⁸⁵ *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, III 11.

¹⁸⁶ Reginster, 70.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 139.

possibility of disapproval for its object, yet normative subjectivism necessitates the approval of perfection. In this case, perfect moments are not really perfect. Rather, they reflect the current psychological state of the joyful agent. Under Reginster's interpretation, the subjective grounding of perfect moments precludes their *intrinsic* value. Joy must represent the ideal alignment of an agent's values and desires at a particular moment.

Reginster's criticism of other formal interpretations does not hold. He derives the value of becoming from the temporal conditions placed on joyful affirmation. However, temporal change as a metaphysical reality is not some fresh, substantive value only satisfied by Reginster's interpretation. The value of becoming is a general value, not a specific value, and is consequently compatible with the other interpretations. Lowith and Soll believe Nietzsche wants a realistic eternal recurrence, which precludes the possibility for the agent to resist fate. By denying the supra-historical self, Soll enables the agent to experience their one finite life while being free to incorporate the general value of becoming. Nehamas, Clark, and Janaway all deny the possibility of a realistic cosmological recurrence, so their agents may recognize the finitude of their one life. By affirming their lives all the same, these agents may still embrace the value of becoming.

Reginster's cardinal argument for a substantive revaluation of all values according to the will to power does not necessarily follow from the value of becoming. So long as the agent subscribes to any value which complies with becoming, they can affirm their life. This seems no different than the conditions Clark places on the agent to reject values which require permanence. The practical role of eternal recurrence forces the agent to consider its conceptual consequences, but it does not necessitate that they accept the truthfulness of its cosmological argument. The agent can entertain the marriage question without believing they will face the decision to marry their spouse anew.

Finally, if we reject the cosmological argument for eternal recurrence, we need not accept the finitude of our lives or the value of becoming. If a Christian refuses to grant Nietzsche his unrealistic cosmological assumption for the sake of “[playing] the game,” they are no longer subject to the Sisyphean limitation imposed by Clark.¹⁸⁸ They can then affirm their values according to Clark’s simple evaluative question yet still posit an infinite existence in the hereafter. While valid, this objection misses the point of evaluating Nietzsche’s doctrine of eternal recurrence. In Nietzsche’s own words, “the real philosopher...feels the weight and duty of a hundred experiments and temptations of life: – he constantly puts himself at risk, he plays the rough game.”¹⁸⁹ Without playing the game, we risk missing out on a serious consideration of the merits of its practical interpretation.

Conclusion

4.1 Typology of Interpretations

Before I discuss my own interpretation, I wish to contribute one final discussion regarding possible types of interpretations of eternal recurrence. Adding to Magnus’ typology, I believe there can be five types of interpretations of eternal recurrence: cosmological, ethical, attitudinal, *psychological*, and *theological*. Almost all interpretations focus on one type but touch on one or a few others. The best interpretations of the doctrine satisfactorily address all five. I hope my novel interpretation will demonstrate why the psychological and theological aspects of the doctrine are substantial enough to be considered separately from the traditional three types.

¹⁸⁸ Clark, 270.

¹⁸⁹ *Beyond Good and Evil*, 205.

The traditional approach of interpreters is to answer two main questions: “Is eternal recurrence cosmologically possible?” and “What are the conditions for life affirmation?” While important, these are not the only two relevant questions relating to the doctrine. However, given their dominance in interpretations, I wish to offer a quick evaluation of the most promising approaches to both questions in conjunction with another.

The first possible approach for interpreters is to accept an actual cosmological recurrence and an absolute standard of affirmation. If eternal recurrence repeats every detail infinitely many times, then each life property must be equally important. This approach, while internally consistent, makes affirmation extremely difficult if not virtually impossible for the agent. It could very well be the correct exegesis of Nietzsche’s doctrine, but given the difficulty of affirmation I think it can be dismissed from consideration as the best approach. While Loeb does not fully commit to the reality of cosmological recurrence, his interpretation can be best grouped among this approach. Lowith’s and Soll’s interpretations are also examples of this approach. This approach may be called the actual-absolute approach.

The second possible approach is to accept an actual cosmological recurrence and a lower standard of affirmation. This approach is somewhat incoherent, since it would contradict the idea that life properties must be equally important when repeated in infinitely many recurrences. The only example of this is Reginster’s objection to Nehamas’ radical contextualism, which he terms moderate contextualism. I believe moderate contextualism is not a promising exegesis. All actual examples of the lower standard of affirmation are present only in interpretations which contain

hypothetical eternal recurrence, so interpretations with this approach are non-existent. I believe this is the worst approach to take. This approach may be called the actual-majority approach.¹⁹⁰

The third possible approach is to construe eternal recurrence as a hypothetical thought experiment yet maintain an absolute standard of affirmation. This approach makes little sense as well, since a thought experiment has no power over the agent beyond their willingness to entertain it. If the agent is contented with their overall life, then why would they believe (as the game would claim) that they are not truly life-affirming without affirming “*all* woe” as well? They would scoff at the game and refuse to play, so for this reason the third approach is also lackluster. Examples of this approach include Nehamas’ and Magnus’ essentialist egalitarianism. This approach may be called the hypothetical-absolute approach.

The fourth and final possible approach is to treat eternal recurrence as a hypothetical thought experiment and adopt a lower standard of affirmation. This approach seems to make the most sense, since for many reasons I have claimed that life evaluation occurs from the standpoint of the lower standard. Clark’s marriage question best captures the spirit of life affirmation. This approach, taken seriously, eliminates the difficulties of claiming an actual cosmological recurrence while making affirmation attainable to some agents. It is both the simplest explanation and the most defensible given what we know about cosmological recurrence, making it by far the most plausible approach. Examples of this approach include Clark’s, Janaway’s, Higgins’, and my interpretation. This approach may be called the hypothetical-majority approach.

¹⁹⁰ I use majority instead of lower here for clarity. A lower standard of affirmation implies that the agent must minimally believe that it was better to have lived than not. Thus, the agent must affirm a simple majority of their total life properties (or a simple majority of their weighted significance) to successfully affirm their life overall.

4.2 Eternal Recurrence as Life Review: My Psychological Interpretation

My theoretical interpretation of Nietzsche's doctrine focuses on the psychological phenomenon of life review. Individuals nearing death often describe experiencing their "life flashing before [their] eyes." Widely understood by this colloquial phrase, this phenomenon is called life review. Our knowledge of life review comes from people who survive near-death experiences, since they alone live through the experience and can describe it afterwards. Taking Loeb's interpretation of eternal recurrence as a deathbed revelation one step further, I propose that Nietzsche's doctrine describes the experience of life review. Understanding recurrence as life review has many interpretive benefits while remaining a faithful exegesis of Nietzsche's work.

I must first clarify the phenomenon of life review itself. Among people who have near-death experiences, some describe having lucid experiences often from a third-person perspective. These experiences can involve a review of some or all past life events. The person experiencing life review may gain a newfound understanding of the emotions experienced by other individuals during particular life events. People who experience life review confirm that these visions are devoid of "unrealistic content."¹⁹¹ Regardless of the frequency of life review experiences across individuals who reach near-death, consistency across their accounts, debate about the meaning of near-death experiences, or medical evidence for life review, it is clear that there are individuals who *believe* they have experienced life review and can recall their experiences.¹⁹² I trust that their

¹⁹¹ Consistent characteristics across accounts of near-death experiences have given form to the phenomenon of life review (Long, 376). Here is one typical account of life review: "I then began to see my whole life unfolding before me like a film projected on a screen, from babyhood to adult life. It was so real! I was looking at myself, but better than a 3-D movie as I was also capable of sensing the feelings of the persons I had interacted with through the years. I could feel the good and bad emotions I made them go through," (Long and Perry, 111).

¹⁹² Although near-death experiences are sometimes interpreted by pseudo-scientists as evidence for the hereafter, I do not believe that life review can be considered in the same way. Life review

belief alone counts as sufficient evidence for the phenomenon and meets Nietzsche's standards for truth.¹⁹³

What is the connection between life review and eternal recurrence? If we discard the possibility of a physical cosmological recurrence, we must search for alternate explanations of Nietzsche's doctrine. Perhaps it is a purely hypothetical thought experiment, or perhaps there is still more to it. I believe that the demon's message foretelling "every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in [our lives] will have to return to [us], all in the same succession and sequence" may in fact allude to life review.¹⁹⁴ If so, the demon appears on the brink of each life review experience to forewarn the agent of their fate.

The phenomenon of life review is one and maybe the only instance in which our lives recur to us in a powerful way. When life review occurs, we are forced to relive our lives in partial or full detail.¹⁹⁵ The existence of a psychological recurrence of the same can be proven true for life review

itself suggests nothing resembling transcendence, since its content is restricted to the agent's already lived experiences in this world.

¹⁹³ One might object that I am committing the same error for which I accused Loeb. As I claimed in footnote 172, either cosmological recurrence is true or false. Likewise, either the agent actually experiences life review or he does not. However, the agent's experience of life review need not be universal like a cosmological recurrence. Cosmological recurrence is a physical property of the world, while life review is a subjective experience of the agent. Both are "real" in different senses and subject to different truth conditions. The truth or falsity of life review depends on the agent experiencing it, so he is the ultimate arbiter. The truth or falsity of cosmological recurrence depends on no agent, so its ultimate arbiter is the physical properties of the world.

¹⁹⁴ *The Gay Science*, 341.

¹⁹⁵ Although some people only experience partial life review, many experience a full life review. Also, the implicit understanding of the phrase "life flashing before one's eyes" is that the entirety of one's life flashes, not simply segments. Any agent has the *potentiality* for full life review upon death or near-death. It matters none that near-death (and presumably death) experiences do not always *actually* include life review, much less full life review.

in a way that cosmological recurrence cannot.¹⁹⁶ My interpretation is initially promising but requires more work to be a plausible reading.

Cue Reginster's objection that my interpretation of life review only necessitates one, two, or maybe even three *psychological* recurrences of the agent's life, but it certainly cannot support a *cosmological* and *eternal* recurrence. It is true that life review describes a psychological reliving, not an actual physical repetition of the agent's life. For multiple reasons, creative logical responses like a nesting doll conception of life review could not suffice.¹⁹⁷ My best explanation is that the eternal nature of recurrence is hypothetical (as most interpreters argue) so the doctrine describes the only actual recurrence possible within the agent's life, a psychological one.¹⁹⁸ For reasons I have already explained, a psychological recurrence can be powerful enough to make recurrence

¹⁹⁶ I will concede that life review is vulnerable to the will to truth in the same way as cosmological recurrence. If an ambitiously truthful agent discovers new medical evidence that makes life review explainable in other ways (perhaps it is a very vivid dream, or the life reviewer has convinced himself that it recreates his life events exactly when it distorts them), then it too must be overcome as an adequate interpretation of eternal recurrence. In good Nietzschean spirit, I hope and expect that this will be the case.

¹⁹⁷ In order to make the recurrence eternal, one could argue that upon reaching their deathbed again the agent would initiate a life review within their life review. Within each subsequent life review, the agent would initiate another life review, and so on for eternity. This thought works like the concept of a nesting doll. While creative, this solution falls hopelessly short for a number of reasons. First, the agent must eventually emerge from the life review in order to continue living their life after near-death or die. Second, the agent must actually live their life in order to review it, so there must be an initial occurrence. Unfortunately, Loeb has already demonstrated the incoherency of a first or original occurrence within eternal recurrence, so this cannot be so.

¹⁹⁸ I agree with the interpretations which maintain that the beginning "What if" phrase introduces a hypothetical scenario, not a cosmological reality. My reading is supported by the substantial evidence for the impossibility of cosmological recurrence. Unfortunately, my reading cannot fully satisfy the demon's claim that the agent "will have to live...innumerable times more," (*The Gay Science*, 341). Every agent has a finite amount of possible life events. Since the agent cannot have infinite life events, the agent cannot have infinite psychological recurrences within a finite life. A finite number of psychological recurrences makes life review and a truly *eternal* recurrence incompatible. Luckily, there is no compelling evidence for reality of eternal recurrence, leaving finite psychological recurrences as a plausible explanation for recurrence construed non-cosmologically.

subjectively true to the agent.¹⁹⁹ Since all of the agent's life events are conditioned by the agent's perspective, they are all equally subjectively true. The experience of life review is just as real to the agent as any of the life events contained within it.

My practical interpretation considers the ethical and attitudinal implications of life review and brings new insight into the mystifying concept of "the greatest weight." I will propose a simple solution to the argument over *when* the demon appears during the agent's life based on my interpretation of life review. Most interpreters have assumed that the demon appears at any given point well before death. The implications (or lack thereof) of the demon's message on the agent's fated future become the greatest weight on their actions. This type of interpretation offers the agent an opportunity to change their actions, affirm their changed life, and avoid resignation over the remainder of their life.²⁰⁰ This viewpoint's disadvantage is that the demon's appearance lacks a clear temporal location within the agent's life. Agents can only be affected *if* they encounter the demon, so there must be uniform point of encounter to guarantee its appearance.

In his interpretation, Loeb provides significant textual evidence that the demon appears at the agent's deathbed. This solves the problem of a uniform point of encounter within each agent's life, but the agent no longer has the opportunity to change their life after hearing the demon's message. This eliminates the ethical imperative of the greatest weight. The message's effect is reduced to a single momentary exclamation of denial or affirmation based on already known life properties. Building from Loeb's interpretation, I believe the demon's message occurs at any point

¹⁹⁹ See footnotes 172 and 193.

²⁰⁰ Oddly enough, many such interpreters argue the opposite with regards to resignation. Lowith, Soll, Clark, Ridley, and others all maintain to varying degrees that the agent's recognition of their fate would prevent them from changing their actions and affirming their changed life. Loeb demonstrates why this is not the case in footnote 103 of the section titled "Zarathustra's Religion, Recurrence, and Time: Higgins and Loeb."

right before the agent experiences life review during near-death and death experiences.²⁰¹ If the agent experiences a full life review on their deathbed, they will presumably repeat all of their life events up until the point where they initiated life review. Therefore “even this moment and [the demon itself]” *will* return at exactly the same moment during the recurrence, exactly as the passage predicts.

The temporal location of the message has been established, but what about the presence of an ethical imperative? Additionally, if life review is a contingent possibility rather than a universal reality, then how can the greatest weight actually affect the agent? I agree with Loeb that the ethical imperative is necessarily removed during life reviews within death experiences. However, anticipation of possible life review means that the ethical imperative is relevant up until the agent’s deathbed revelation.²⁰² The ethical imperative is a formal one. The greatest weight, put simply, is the pressure placed by the agent upon themselves to “get things right,” or make their single finite life one worth affirming.

What does life review say about the form or substance of values one can affirm? In short, the anticipatory agent must adopt values which allow them to stomach the experience of life review. Many accounts of life review mention that they felt not only their own emotions but the emotions of others who were present for and affected by their actions during particular life

²⁰¹ This interpretation also coheres with Loeb’s translation of the agent’s “solitude” mentioned in the section titled “Evidence for Recurrence? The Case for Higgins Over Loeb.” The agent on their deathbed is entirely alone and undisturbed in their experience of life review.

²⁰² Facing their inevitable death experience, all agents must anticipate at least the possibility of undergoing life review. An awareness or survived experience of life review imposes an ethical imperative on agents to reevaluate their values, change undesirable aspects of their lives, and so on in order to affirm their lives at the moment of death. This ethical imperative is undoubtedly more intense for those who survive near-death experiences, but the agent merely aware of life review can seriously consider its implications and feel its weight upon their actions.

events.²⁰³ Since the agent observes their life events from an omniscient perspective, the agent must abide by values which leave them without feelings of regret, guilt, or misery upon reflection on the consequences of their actions.²⁰⁴ The objection that it is impossible to truly have an omniscient perspective, since it requires transcending the self to understand the emotions and thoughts of others, seems eminently true. A better explanation for the so-called omniscient perspective during life review is that agents undergoing life review discover a fuller perspective of their own emotions rather than an insight into the minds of others. This fuller perspective is enabled by intense reflection upon their life events.²⁰⁵

Experiences of life review, which include the sum emotional weight of one's actions, may prompt the agent to radical change their lives by adopting new or emphasizing neglected values (e.g. an increased prioritization of family, compassion, personal growth, etc.).²⁰⁶ Depending on

²⁰³ One anonymous account claims that "I hadn't just seen what I had done, but I felt and knew the repercussions of my actions. I felt the injury or pain of those who suffered because of my selfish or inappropriate behavior," (International Association for Near Death Studies, "All is Everything, Everything is One").

²⁰⁴ Consider this scenario: Person A robs Person B on the street at gunpoint and takes all of Person B's money. Since the robbery gratified his inner desires, Person A wills values of greed and selfishness without contradiction. Upon his deathbed, Person A experiences life review and relives the robbery, only this time from an omniscient perspective. Person A feels the desperation and fear of Person B, who is afraid for their life but gives up all their money. Person A now feels regret about their actions and wishes to will backwards and rectify the situation, to no avail. Person A can no longer affirm his previously affirmable life.

²⁰⁵ The agent does not actually feel what others felt at the time; they merely feel their own previously latent emotions to a greater extent. Now consider the previous scenario under this new light. Person A does not actually feel Person B's desperation and fear, but rather their own guilt for having potentially caused Person B to feel desperation and fear. The previously selfish Person A finds their innate empathy and must reconsider their life events with it in mind. Life review is not meant to increase the agent's empathetic feelings or cause regret for selfishness. Rather, it presents an opportunity for the agent to reevaluate their drives so that they can affirm or deny their life events according to their highest value/s, even and especially if the agent's highest values were previously lesser or absent.

²⁰⁶ This understanding provides context for the anecdotal accounts of people "turning their lives around" after near-death experiences.

their newfound strength, the agent's previously latent emotions can prompt the reorganization of the agent's drives (and the subsequent revaluation of values) or be subdued by the still dominant primary drives. The denial or affirmation of life depends on the agent's psychological receptivity towards their entire life's events according to their highest value/s held during life review, whatever they may be. In this case, life review enables the ultimate motivation for the revaluation of values within life-denying agents or the "ultimate confirmation and seal" for life-affirming agents without deep regrets.²⁰⁷

The concept of joy is the feeling which occurs when the agent's psychological state and highest value/s align perfectly during near-death or death experiences. The joyful agent, so pleased at the overfullness of their life, wants desperately to repeat it again and again.²⁰⁸ Not all life-affirming agents experience joy, since the lower standard of affirmation espoused by Clark, Higgins, and others is acceptable for mere affirmation. However, all joyful agents meet the absolute standard of affirmation proposed by Nehamas and others. Joy is only possible according to Nehamas' normative contextualism, in which the agent reassigns significance to their life events

²⁰⁷ Unfortunately for life-denying agents, the revaluation of values caused by life review only causes further frustration if they cannot resolve contradictions between their highest values and fixed life events. Since they can no longer change their life, life review is a final condemnation for the dying agent, a twist of the knife.

²⁰⁸ The deathbed moment above all others is essential for the affirmation of life. Assuming we all live finite, non-recurring lives, nothing could be worse than experiencing a final moment of horror. The finite agent may experience the worst horror imaginable in the middle of their life and still persevere because of opportunities for future moments of happiness. However, the finite agent on their deathbed no longer has any future moments to redeem previous horrific life events. Life review intensifies the affirmation or denial of life by presenting the agent their life again in full just before death and affording them no opportunity to change it. This is not Loeb's conclusion, since his cosmological recurrence allows the life-denying agent to still cherish moments of happiness in his relative future (after his recurrence). Conversely, all finite agents face an all-consuming void upon their deathbed. The life-denying agent will die having lived a sad, unfulfilled existence permanently fixed in time. The life-affirming agent's future is no better, except that they will have faced final death with a smile.

according to their highest values. The joyful agent experiencing life review first reevaluates all of their values, realizes a new highest value, and interprets their life from the perspective of that new highest value. Once the highest value accords perfectly with the agent's life events, they experience a joyful death. In the case of agents who survive near-death experiences, this joy is temporary and must be realized again and again throughout the remainder of their life. However, one has to assume that the joyful survivor is at least on the right track towards final life affirmation.

I believe that Nietzsche's doctrine is mildly substantive with regards to the values one can affirm. His concepts of the will to power, the value of becoming, and *amor fati* bear on the agent because they describe the nature of the world the agent must affirm their values in. While I do believe that Nietzsche lacks a substantive ethical system, my interpretation is mildly substantive rather than purely formal because I accept Clark's Sisyphean objection. Evidently, all three Nietzschean concepts encourage an affirmative psychological state within the agent regardless of their particular highest values.

Nietzsche's concepts of the will to power and the value of becoming attempt to explain the nature of life, including the self and the world. Both concepts particularly emphasize growth. The will to power demonstrates that life is about the activity of overcoming resistance, or continually defeating obstacles in one's pursuit of fulfillment. The value of becoming, as I have shown, is a general value describing the ever-changing nature of the world. This outlook on life stands in stark contrast to outlooks based on the value of being, or the general value that everything stays the same and no (meaningful) changes to the nature of life occur. Undoubtedly, Nietzsche wants the agent to adopt an outlook based on change, overcoming, growth.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁹ This outlook, as Soll, Nehamas, Clark, and others have shown, does not necessitate the acceptance of a cosmological recurrence. I can believe that the essential nature of the world is becoming and live accordingly without also believing in my physical recurrence.

The outlook based on will to power and the value of becoming has significant effects for the agent undergoing life review. In one moment, the agent may possess one particular goal; in the following moment, the agent's drives may compel them to possess a goal antithetical to the first. In order to affirm previously desirable but now undesirable goals from the perspective of the present moment, the agent must affirm that the nature of their life is change.²¹⁰ In other words, the agent can affirm goals which contradict across moments so long as those goals did not contradict within moments. Life review offers the agent an opportunity to revisit past goals and affirm them all the same from the perspective they held during the relevant moment.

The agent who experiences *amor fati* will love experiencing life review, since the latter is simply the psychological activity of living one's life events again.²¹¹ Although life review can induce a reevaluation of values, *amor fati* is not dependent on particular values but instead on the agent's overall disposition towards the activity of living. The agent can have their highest values frustrated and still enjoy the challenge of trying to overcome that frustration. Since we are always in the activity of living our own lives, *amor fati* and Janaway's concept of affective belonging cannot be separated conceptually. During life review, the agent feeling *amor fati* and affective belonging enjoys the repetition of *their* life whether or not it could have contained better properties. While the agent could affirm their life without experiencing *amor fati* or affective belonging, the

²¹⁰ Suppose a philosophy professor falls gravely ill to the point of near-death, experiences life review, then survives. This professor realizes during life review that their life would be incomplete and unaffirmable without instead pursuing their passion for music. They spend the rest of their life being a musician. Now, the musician on their deathbed undergoes life review a second and final time. How can they affirm the first half of their life spent doing philosophy instead of making music? They must accept the changing nature of their desires and values. Their time spent being a philosopher is still affirmable so long as it aligned with their highest values at that time.

²¹¹ I accept Lampert and Higgins' interpretation of the concept of *amor fati* as a love of the activity of living.

presence of both concepts within the agent's psychological state makes affirmation that much easier.

My interpretation of eternal recurrence as life review is designed to be, above all else, practical.²¹² When we ordinarily contemplate the affirmation of life, we often envision ourselves on our deathbeds. We think of this moment as one last opportunity to decide whether we lived a full life or not, we lived with regrets or without, and so on. This involves a deep, final reflection on our life's events. Life review is one way of thinking about this process of reflection which aligns with the experiences of many near-death survivors. Full life review captures every detail of our lives exactly as the demon foretells. If the primary aim of the doctrine of eternal recurrence is to explain the process of reflection during the deathbed moment, then recurrence as life review is a plausible and valuable exegesis.

4.3 Eternal Recurrence as the Dominant Religion: My Theological Interpretation

While I primarily understand eternal recurrence through the phenomenon of life review, I agree with Lampert and Higgins that Nietzsche's doctrine contains a significantly religious character as well. Higgins' comparison between the doctrines of eternal recurrence and sin is very useful, so I will continue to use her framework in my theological interpretation. Nietzsche addresses the replacement of the doctrine of sin with his doctrine of recurrence in a fragment from his unpublished works:

²¹² Not to be understood by my previous usage of the word "practical" to refer to ethically and/or attitudinally focused interpretations.

“Let us guard against teaching such a doctrine as an upstart religion! It must sink in slowly; entire generations must cultivate it and become fruitful on it—in order that it may become a great tree overshadowing all humanity still to come. What are the two millennia during which Christianity has survived! For the mightiest thought many millennia are needed—*long, long* must it remain small and powerless!²¹³

In this passage, I believe Nietzsche makes three tacit claims. First, the doctrine of eternal recurrence is something to be *taught*. Although previous interpretations of the doctrine focus primarily on its implications for the individual, the fact that it must be taught means that there must be a teacher. Whether that teacher is the demon itself or another individual altogether remains to be seen. Second, the doctrine is indeed a religion. Nietzsche does claim that it must not be taught as an *upstart* religion, but the negation addresses the adjective. The remainder of the passage compares Nietzsche’s ambitions for his doctrine to the staying power and societal influence of Christianity, which further suggests that the doctrine is a religious one. Third, the long-term goal of Nietzsche’s doctrine is to tear up current society from its roots and plant a new, resilient tree in its place. Western society since Plato has been defined entirely by metaphysical *being* against the metaphysical *becoming* espoused by Nietzsche (and Heraclitus before him). Furthermore, the Christian tradition has dominated for two millennia and rests entirely on the former metaphysical assumption. In its place, Nietzsche’s religion of the future rests entirely on the latter metaphysical assumption.

²¹³ *Kritische Studienausgabe*, 9:11 [158].

The obvious answer to the question, “Who is the teacher of eternal recurrence?” is Zarathustra. In fact, Nietzsche dedicates the entirety of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* to the prophet’s proselytizing. Zarathustra wants to share the tragic wisdom which has enabled him to suffer from life’s overfullness with everyone he encounters. Despite “teaching” eternal recurrence, Zarathustra cannot answer what the subjective truth or the meaning of life is or ought to be for his disciples. He implores them to find their own truth and be the creators of their own values. Zarathustra’s pedagogy stands in stark contrast to that of Christianity, which commands unwaveringly from on high. Like the best of teachers, Zarathustra equips his pupils with the tools to understand inquiry itself so that they may arrive at their own answers.

If the doctrine of eternal recurrence is a religion, then what does that mean for my interpretation of psychological recurrence through life review? I believe, perhaps unsurprisingly, that the two types of interpretations can be synthesized. Christianity has a psychological effect on the Christian by providing them with the reassurance of objective truth and meaning of life. Nietzsche’s religion of the future similarly has a psychological effect on the Dionysian, but the effect is not universal. Rather, the effect of the doctrine on the Dionysian depends on its relation to their subjective truth and meaning of life. Dionysian or tragic wisdom promotes a healthy attitude towards life by encouraging the agent to replace false psychological projections through their will to truth. These projections are false if and only if they do not satisfy the agent’s original need for creating them. A belief which aims towards the affirmation of life within Nietzsche’s metaphysical picture is a psychologically healthy one, since it justifies its own creation. Life review prompts a deep reflection on one’s actions and values for the purpose of living an affirmable life. Belief in the inevitability of life review, even if it may never occur, is psychologically healthy. If the sole purpose of religion is to provide a solution to nihilism, then Nietzsche’s religion of the

future will have succeeded for promoting psychologically healthy beliefs and establishing a superior framework for answering the stubborn question, “Why?”

Why can the doctrine of eternal recurrence not be taught as an “upstart” religion? Its insight cannot be vertically imposed; rather, it must generate from within the agent’s subjective perspective yet follow the form of will to power and becoming. Because of this, the doctrine cannot be commanded or imposed throughout society without corrupting its fundamental nature by universalizing it. Nietzsche does not want his religion to fall victim to the will to truth as Christianity has, so faith in it must patiently develop within each agent’s perspective. If it does not “remain small and powerless,” it may never hold power at all. The success of Nietzsche’s religion will always contingently depend on the perspectives of living agents, and thus may never gain power over Christianity at all. That is a risk Nietzsche must take if his religion of the future is ever to accomplish its goal of meaningfully vanquishing nihilism.

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