

*What Makes the Affirmation of Life Difficult?**Paul Katsafanas*

Nietzsche repeatedly claims that *Zarathustra* is his most important philosophical work (*EH P:4*; *EH Z:6*; *EH Z:8*). He tells us that the core idea of *Zarathustra* is the eternal recurrence (*EH Z:1*, 8). Moreover, he associates eternal recurrence with “the highest formula of affirmation that is at all attainable” (*EH Z:1*; see also *BGE 56*, *EH* “Clever” 10).¹ And he suggests that most of us will fail to attain this highest form of affirmation; most of us, when confronted with the thought of eternal recurrence, will either fail to appreciate the thought or will be plunged into despair (*GS 341*). In short: Nietzsche thinks that his most important thought in his most important work is that most of us cannot truly affirm life.²

That much is clear; unfortunately, much else is mysterious. The idea of eternal recurrence is evocative but cryptic. There are a number of scholarly controversies concerning how it should be interpreted and what problem it is intended to pose. I think we can make progress on these matters by asking a very simple question: why is affirming eternal recurrence supposed to be more difficult than affirming a non-recurring, singular life? Once we raise this question, a number of traditional interpretations of eternal recurrence begin to look problematic.

Section 3.1 introduces the problem, arguing that an adequate interpretation of eternal recurrence will have to show why affirming recurring lives is more difficult than affirming singular lives. The next four sections consider some influential interpretations of eternal recurrence, which attribute the difficulty of affirming eternal recurrence to the inescapability of suffering (Section 3.2), the interconnectedness of events (Section 3.3), the valuation of permanence (Section 3.4), and vengefulness (Section 3.5).

¹ The following translations are used in this chapter: *BGE* (1968); *BT* (1968); *EH* (1968); *GM* (1968); *GS* (1974); *TI* (1954); *Z* (1954).

² Of course, this is coupled with a more positive thought: we can strive to become capable of affirming life. *GS 341* is sandwiched between *GS 340*, which discusses Socrates’ condemnation of life, and *GS 342*, which points us toward Zarathustra, who ultimately succeeds in affirming life.

I argue that none of these interpretations can offer a good account of why affirming recurring lives would be more difficult than affirming singular lives. In Section 3.6, I offer a new interpretation of eternal recurrence, which attributes its difficulty to the conditional nature of ordinary affirmation. Affirmation is conditional when it depends on the possibility of excising objectionable elements from the object of affirmation. What Nietzsche means to reveal, with eternal recurrence, is that even the most apparently affirmative individuals often manifest only a conditional affirmation of life, a form of affirmation that conceals a tacit negation. Eternal recurrence brings this hidden negation to light, thereby encouraging us to move toward an unconditionally affirmative stance. In Section 3.7, I conclude by reflecting on why Nietzsche takes the distinction between conditional and unconditional affirmation to be such an important philosophical idea. I argue that those who devote themselves to challenging, long-term goals will face psychological pressures that tend to deform unconditional affirmation into conditional affirmation.

3.1 The Affirmation of Life

We can all think of things that might make life seem problematic. Pervasive suffering; the collapse of traditional sources of meaning or direction; the entanglement of good events with bad ones; ennui; the perceived valuelessness of pursuits; the banality of many forms of modern life. Or, to pick some non-Nietzschean candidates: injustice; the viciousness of human beings; unending conflict and war; environmental collapse; and one could go on and on.

Suppose you are worried about these things. And suppose that you come to a view like this: although there is plenty that is bad about the world, you see a way of being positively disposed toward it. You think life is worth living, despite these objectionable features. Moreover, you do not think this affirmative attitude rests on any false presuppositions or reflectively unstable beliefs. You have thought carefully about life, you have cleared away illusions and false beliefs, and you have found a way of affirming life. Your affirmation could be grounded in any number of ways: perhaps it is mindful engagement with particulars; perhaps it is having some great creative goal to which you are devoted; perhaps it is throwing yourself into political struggle; perhaps it is love; perhaps it is the quiet comforts of home.

I want to emphasize that *many* people find themselves in this position. Over the years, I have discussed Nietzsche's ideas about affirmation with hundreds of students and dozens of philosophers, and by far the most

common reaction that I have encountered is the belief that life is affirmable. It is rare to find anyone who thinks that life is perfect; but it is equally rare to find those who reject life. Most people take themselves to affirm life, though of course it is unusual for them to put it this way until they are introduced to the Nietzschean terminology.³

It is possible that these individuals are self-deceived, confused, or thoughtless. It is possible that if we cleared away these distortions and deceptions, these individuals would negate life. Perhaps most of us are in that state: after all, Nietzsche emphasizes the opacity of the human mind, the mendacity of individuals, the pervasiveness of self-deception, the inability to understand our own motives and values. In short: it is possible that most or all cases of apparent life-affirmation would turn out to be illusory once we clear away these sorts of epistemic failings.

But even if that were true, it would not by itself explain *why* the thought of eternal recurrence is supposed to render affirmation difficult. To see this, let us imagine one of these perfectly ordinary individuals, someone who takes herself to affirm life. She is thoughtful, serious, and thorough in her reflections: she attends to all of the horrors of existence but nonetheless thinks that life is on balance affirmable, perhaps because she sees the bad in life as potentially correctible, or perhaps because she sees the good in life as potentially outweighing the bad. Then you confront her with the thought of eternal recurrence. You tell her: your life, as you have lived it, will repeat endlessly, with no details changed. Everything will come back to you, again and again. You will have no capacity to alter anything.

How might the putatively affirmative individual respond? Nietzsche expects a dramatic reaction:

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 power over you, as you are it would transform and possibly crush you; the question in each and every thing, "Do you want this again and innumerable times again?" would lie on your actions as the heaviest weight! Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to long for nothing more fervently than for this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal? (*GS* 341)

³ And Nietzsche knows this. First, consider his discussions of the last men: "we have invented happiness,' say the last men, and they blink." (*Z*:I "Prologue" 5). The last men are content, albeit superficially so. Second, Nietzsche defines the "omni-satisfied" as "those who consider everything good and this world the best . . . Always to bray Yea-Yuh—that only the ass has learned, and whoever is of his spirit" (*Z*:III "Spirit of Gravity"). Although both the last men and the omni-satisfied are presented in disparaging ways, Nietzsche acknowledges that they take themselves to affirm life.

Nietzsche lists two possible reactions to the thought of recurring lives: despair, which he suggests is the most common reaction; and joy, which is rare. Nietzsche thus suggests that someone who *believes* that she affirms life can find herself devastated by the thought of eternal recurrence. Indeed, Nietzsche's texts emphasize just this point: putatively affirmative individuals typically despair when confronted with eternal recurrence. This is, after all, what happens to Zarathustra: he takes himself to be the teacher of how to reconcile oneself with existence, how to be well-disposed toward life (Z:I "Prologue"). But then he is confronted with eternal recurrence and he is broken (Z:III "Vision and Riddle"). He is incapacitated; he cannot go on until he finds a way of reorienting himself in light of this thought (Z:III "Convalescent"). And a similar dynamic occurs in *GS*: from *GS* 125 onward, Nietzsche repeatedly emphasizes that people who seem content with the death of God may be unaware of some deeper problem: the "shadows of god," the lingering concepts, values, and orientations that permeate our lives but that presuppose a religious context. And he urges us to become well-disposed toward life, discovering the malleability in our ways of experiencing events, striving for ever more affirmative modes of experiencing life (see esp. *GS* 107, 276, 277, 290, 299, 301). In *GS* 340, we are told that the seemingly affirmative Socrates, who especially in Nietzsche's time was taken as a sign of exuberant, affirmative life, had in fact tacitly rejected life. And then in the next section we are presented with eternal recurrence, prompting us to ask whether the same might be true of us: even if we think we are well disposed toward life, might we be incapable of affirming life in some deeper sense? *GS* 342 then invites us to read *Zarathustra*.⁴

If we keep this context in mind, we can see that Nietzsche intends eternal recurrence to present even the most apparently affirmative individuals with a problem. Contemplating eternal recurrence is supposed to be *more difficult* than contemplating a singular life. Someone who thinks that she is affirming life, that she is well-disposed toward it, could be traumatized by contemplating eternal recurrence.⁵

Accordingly, Nietzsche must think that eternal recurrence presents some *new, distinctive* problem, a problem that either does not arise or is not apparent when contemplating singular lives. If we are to understand

⁴ The final sentence of *GS* 341, especially when taken as leading into *GS* 342 and *Z*, suggests that someone who is traumatized by eternal recurrence might strive to change that fact, moving toward a fully affirmative reaction.

⁵ Compare *KSA* 12:5[71], which suggests that eternal recurrence can be "the most extreme form of nihilism"; it can drive home the thought that existence is "without meaning or goal" and thereby deprive us of traditional forms of protection "from despair."

eternal recurrence, we will need to understand what this problem is. I will treat this as a criterion of adequacy for interpretations of eternal recurrence: an acceptable interpretation of eternal recurrence must explain why it is more difficult to affirm recurring lives than singular lives.

3.2 Affirmation Is Difficult Because Life Is Full of Suffering

We want to know what might make it difficult to affirm recurring lives.⁶ Let us start by considering the stance that Nietzsche opposes: pessimism. We can define pessimism as the claim that the bad in life inevitably and invariably outweighs the good. Schopenhauer argues for a particular version of pessimism, in which he both identifies goodness with the absence of suffering and argues that facts about the nature of willing guarantee that suffering is omnipresent and inescapable (Schopenhauer 1969: 319–363). Although Schopenhauer inaugurates these debates, they continue beyond him. The clash between Pessimists and their opponents, the Optimists, is one of the dominant intellectual movements from the 1860s onward, continuing through Eugen Dühring, Eduard von Hartmann, Philipp Mainländer, Julius Bahnsen, and others.⁷

It is uncontroversial that Nietzsche is gripped by the Pessimism debates. And there is an obvious connection between the Pessimism debates and eternal recurrence: eternal recurrence, like the Pessimism debates, is concerned with whether an unprejudiced view of life leads us to despair. This has led some readers to think that eternal recurrence is responsive to Schopenhauer's concerns about suffering.⁸ But this is too quick. If Nietzsche were merely concerned with Schopenhauer's problem, then eternal recurrence would do no additional work. If someone already accepts the idea that the pains of life necessarily outweigh the pleasures, then eternal recurrence would not matter. Schopenhauer, for example, thinks that even the prospect of living life *once* is sufficient to motivate pessimism, once we see what living actually involves. So the person who

⁶ An interpretive note: many commentators assume, often without argument, that what renders eternal recurrence difficult are facts about the agent's own past. I find it very strange that this assumption has gripped the literature (it is present most explicitly in Nehamas 1985 and Anderson 2005, but it is quite widespread). In *Z*, Zarathustra evinces no concern whatsoever with *his own* past; what he finds troubling is more general features of his world, specifically the presence of the "small man" or the "rabble" (*Z*:III "Convalescent"; *Z*:III "Redemption"). So, while it has become standard to present eternal recurrence as if Nietzsche wanted us to focus on our own pasts and our own choices, that assumption is not warranted by the texts.

⁷ Beiser 2016 provides a helpful introduction to these figures. For Nietzsche's discussions of pessimism, see for example *WS* 184; *D* 354, 561; *GS* 48, 56, 134, 312, 313, 318, 326.

⁸ See Reginster 2006 and Janaway 2007.

accepts Schopenhauer's arguments will *already* have the pessimistic reaction to life, independently of the eternal recurrence.

And the reverse also seems true: if you have reconciled yourself to life despite the pervasiveness of suffering, then eternal recurrence should not bother you. If suffering is not an objection to living once, it should not be an objection to living twice, five times, or an infinite number of times. After all, while the total amount of suffering would be increased as lives are multiplied, the ratio of suffering to whatever one sees as redeeming suffering would remain constant. Being content with a singular life despite suffering while rejecting a repeating life because of the very same suffering would be incoherent; it would be involve treating the very same thing in opposite ways depending exclusively on the number of times it occurs.⁹

Of course, another form of pessimism is manifest in what Nietzsche likes to call "the wisdom of Silenus": that the best thing is never to have been born, and the second best is to die soon (*BT* 3). It is possible to read eternal recurrence as expressing the inescapability of life: the second best option, that of dying soon, is not available, because your life will repeat eternally. There is no escape from the cycle of death and rebirth, no escape from willing. Perhaps eternal recurrence is supposed to target this thought. But, aside from the fact that this is a fairly obvious point and thus hard to square with Nietzsche's claims about the novelty of eternal recurrence, it does not generate any additional problem for recurring lives. Someone who is satisfied with a singular life is not going to be trying to escape from that life; someone who rejects a singular life already is. So eternal recurrence, interpreted merely as claiming that we cannot escape from life, would be of limited import and limited originality.¹⁰

Thus, we face a problem: this interpretation cannot fulfill the interpretive criterion. The alleged fact that suffering outweighs happiness is no more of a problem for a repeating life than for a singular life. Affirming eternal recurrence despite suffering should be no more difficult than affirming a singular life despite suffering.

3.3 Affirmation Is Difficult Because Everything Is Interconnected

Let us consider a more complex reading: Alexander Nehamas' influential interpretation of eternal recurrence. Notice that when eternal recurrence is discussed in *Zarathustra*, the interconnectedness of events is emphasized:

⁹ Soll 1973 also makes this point. For an argument against it, see Loeb 2018.

¹⁰ Compare Jenkins (2020: 30), who also emphasizes that this kind of thought is unoriginal and cannot be the content of eternal recurrence.

Have you ever said Yes to a single joy? O my friends, then you said Yes to *all* woe. All things are entangled, ensnared, enamored; if you ever wanted one thing twice, if you ever 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. (Z:IV "Sleepwalker's Song"; see also Z:III "Vision and Riddle" and *EH* BT:2)

Drawing on passages on this type, Nehamas argues that Nietzsche rejects the distinction between accidental and essential properties. Instead, he accepts a view that we can call (following Anderson 2005) inverse superessentialism: every property is equally essential to who you are. If this is right, then any change in a person's life would result in a new person.

Nehamas thinks that Nietzsche's eternal recurrence presupposes this metaphysical thesis. Nietzsche asks us to consider reliving just this life, with no detail changed, because reliving any other life would not count as reliving one's own life. As Nehamas puts it, "If my life were to recur, then it could recur only in identical fashion" (Nehamas 1985: 153). So, if we are to affirm our lives, we have to affirm our lives with no details changed. That is the problem that eternal recurrence poses.

I am skeptical that Nietzsche actually endorses inverse superessentialism, but let us set that aside.¹¹ I want to focus on a simpler point: if Nietzsche were interested in the difficulty of affirming life given the interconnectedness of events, then eternal recurrence would be unnecessary. Suppose Nehamas is correct in claiming that Nietzsche accepts inverse superessentialism. And suppose I hesitate to affirm X (say, my life) because X is connected to Y (say, a past misfortune). Whether X and Y repeat (and especially whether they repeat eternally) is irrelevant. Any difficulties generated by Nehamas' version of eternal recurrence are generated not by the idea of eternal repetition, but by inverse superessentialism. The point about interconnectedness is doing all the work. Eternal recurrence adds nothing.

So we could imagine a demon appearing on the shoulder of some superficial optimist and saying: your life as you live it depends, for its particularities, on all the horrors of history, on the Holocaust and on disease and massacre and war and death. If you are genuinely affirmative

¹¹ Why be skeptical of this? Simply put, the passages that suggest inverse superessentialism can be read more modestly: Nietzsche seems to me to be emphasizing that (1) events are interconnected in complex and unexpected ways, and that (2) in light of this certain ways of drawing the distinction between accidental and essential properties are untenable. But you can endorse those points without committing yourself to the much stronger claim that (3) all distinctions between essential and accidental properties are equally arbitrary.

toward your life, you also have to affirm all of *that*. Can you do it?¹² No doubt this is a difficult question. But it has nothing to do with infinite or eternal repetition. It does not help us to understand the question that eternal recurrence poses.

So the interconnectedness of events does not generate a special problem for recurring lives, as compared to singular lives. It does not make affirming repeating lives any more difficult than affirming a singular life.

3.4 Affirmation Is Difficult Because We Crave Permanence

Bernard Reginster claims that eternal recurrence is difficult because accepting it “requires a revaluation of values” (Reginster 2006: 219). In particular, it requires that change the way in which we evaluate “being” and “becoming.” Reginster argues that many philosophers have valued being or permanence over becoming. He writes:

In objecting to the aspiration for the eternal life, which is characteristic of Christianity but is also shared by a great many philosophers since Plato, Nietzsche is in fact objecting to their valuation of permanence, or “being,” and their corresponding devaluation of “becoming”: “Death, change, age, as well as procreation and growth, are for them objections—refutations even. What is, does not become; what becomes, is not . . . Now they all believe, even to the point of despair, in that which is” (*TI* “Reason” 1; *GM* III:28). (Reginster 2006: 224)

So Reginster’s claim is that many philosophers devalue “becoming” and value “being” or “permanence.” If we envision our lives eternally repeating, we envision a world in which nothing can be attained once and for all. Any attained ends are undone; time repeats. Permanence is impossible. Insofar as we continue to value permanence, eternal recurrence will therefore be troubling. Insofar as we value becoming, eternal recurrence need not be troubling. Eternal recurrence thus plays a role in revaluation: if we were committed to values that require permanence, we would need to shift to values compatible with transience. As Reginster puts it, “to live in accordance with the eternal recurrence requires a revaluation of the condemnation of becoming” (Reginster 2006: 226).

While Reginster’s claims are intriguing, this interpretation faces difficulties. Firstly, as Soll (1973) points out, the notion of eternal recurrence is compatible with a type of permanence – indeed, it is compatible with the

¹² This is, more or less, the question in Wallace 2013.

only type of permanence most of us actually care about. Let me illustrate this with an example. Suppose a scientist is struggling to develop a vaccine to a dangerous disease. She is making progress and hopes to have a successful treatment in a few years, thereby saving thousands of lives. But then you tell her: your attainment will not be permanent; time will revert, the disease will recur. Why should that matter? It will not change the fact that thousands will be saved during her actual lifetime. I think this is the only form of permanence most of us desire: not permanence in the sense of unending, eternal stasis, but permanence in the sense of something's lasting for a reasonable amount of time. If you told the scientist that the world would be destroyed a day after her discovery of the vaccine, then the pursuit of the vaccine would look senseless; if you told her the world would be destroyed a hundred years afterwards, its pursuit would be sensible.

Secondly, Reginster seems to me to underestimate the number of values that are compatible with the idea of becoming. Reginster claims that "a paradigmatic manifestation" of the values that would be compatible with eternal recurrence is "creative activity" (Reginster 2006: 226). He argues that the creative individual continuously seeks to establish and then overcome particular goals, never merely abiding in her particular goals or states of accomplishment, and thus being committed to unending becoming (Reginster 2006: 226ff). But is creative activity really so distinctive? Here are some valued activities that do not seem to depend on permanence: experiencing sensual pleasures, such as the pleasures of eating or having sex; listening to music; reading a novel; going for a nice walk; playing a game of basketball; going for a swim; taking a vacation; spending time with one's family and friends. None of those seem to depend on permanence, and yet these are the very activities and goals that most of us see as infusing our lives with value. And even if we focus on activities that more directly aim at some lasting accomplishment, it is not clear that we typically care about the permanence of that accomplishment. Picture the philosopher who spends years writing a book on some topic. It would be laughable if the philosopher thought his book would be read for all eternity, or would have an effect that lasted for all eternity. Most of us are perfectly content to have our writings read by a few contemporaries; we are under no illusions that we will attain more than that, and yet the activities still seem meaningful.

In light of these points, let us consider an individual who affirms his own singular life on the basis of these perfectly ordinary values. Will such an individual be troubled by the thought of his attainments being undone?

It is not at all clear to me that he would. If he genuinely wanted permanence, eternal recurrence would be dispiriting; but I have suggested that most of us do not want that kind of permanence. Insofar as ordinary values seem sufficient to underwrite the affirmation of a singular life, no additional difficulties would be generated by thoughts of recurring lives.

3.5 Affirmation Is Difficult Because We Are Vengeful

Scott Jenkins reads eternal recurrence as Nietzsche's attempt to "think pessimism through to its depths" (*BGE* 56). According to Jenkins, this means that Nietzsche wants to discover "the features of human psychology that either *produce* or dispose one to *accept* pessimistic worldviews" (Jenkins 2020: 24–25). And Jenkins notes that "Nietzsche consistently identifies a single need lurking behind a pessimistic valuation of existence – the need for *revenge*" (Jenkins 2020: 25).

If this is right, then eternal recurrence must be connected to vengefulness (that is, the need for revenge). But what, exactly, is the connection? Jenkins claims that vengefulness "is an orientation *within time*, and in particular, *toward the past*. Intuitively, a vengeful person is preoccupied or even obsessed with the past" (Jenkins 2020: 26). Vengefulness is backward-looking; it concerns past harms, dwelling on them again and again (see also Z:II "Tarantulas"; Z:II "Redemption"; and Z:III "Tablets").

Suppose a vengeful person tries to cultivate an affirmative attitude toward life. In being vengeful, he will see some past harm as highly objectionable. But, as we all know, there are ways of remaining affirmative despite this. For example, we can see the future as compensating us for these past harms: yes, the past was bad, but the future is bright. Imagine an individual of that form. He sees life as affirmable because and to the extent that life compensates him for past harms. Then we confront him with the thought of eternal recurrence. He will need to experience those past harms again and again. This could be traumatic, leading to despair. A non-vengeful person, by contrast, need not in the same way be bothered by the thought of the past's return.

I think this reading comes close to the truth, but is not quite right. Here is the key problem: it is not true that "revenge is completely backwards-looking" (Jenkins 2020: 7). Perhaps some people seek revenge in order to escape from, suppress, or compensate for past harms. But others – indeed, the very people for whom the term "vengeful" seems most accurate – are devoted to bringing about future harms to the offending object or person. Vengefulness manifests as a desire to harm, to detract. This need not be

actualized; it can be mere fantasy (see also *GM* I:10–11). But it does generate an orientation toward an imagined future. So Jenkins is right that the vengeful person broods, dwells, and in that sense orients himself toward the past; but he neglects the fact that just as essential is an orientation toward the future, in which the vengeful person seeks to retaliate against his object. Max Scheler, in his analysis of Nietzschean *ressentiment*, offers what seems to me an accurate description of the vindictive or vengeful person:

The vindictive person is instinctively and without a conscious act of volition drawn toward events which may give rise to vengefulness, or he tends to see injurious intentions in all kinds of perfectly innocent actions and remarks of others. Great touchiness is indeed frequently a symptom of a vengeful character. The vindictive person is always in search of objects, and in fact he attacks – in the belief that he is simply wreaking vengeance. This vengeance restores his damaged feeling of personal value, his injured “honor,” or it brings “satisfaction” for the wrongs he has endured. (Scheler 1994: 32)

The vengeful person, so described, could *welcome* eternal recurrence. After all, the repetition will bring ever more opportunities for harming and disparaging the rejected object. Let us call this *diabolical* vengefulness.¹³

Diabolical vengefulness is a complex psychological state: one wants to damage or destroy the resented object, and in that sense wants to be rid of it; but one also *needs* the resented object, in order to react against it. While this state is complex, I think it is perfectly ordinary. As Nietzsche points out in the *Genealogy* and elsewhere, psychological complexes of this form are common, perhaps ubiquitous. We are often attracted to that which we condemn: the ascetic priest seeks the very dominance that he consciously disparages; the sufferer thirsts after the very suffering that he wants to escape; “people no longer protested *against* pain, they *thirsted* after pain; ‘more pain! more pain!’ thus cried the longing of his disciples and initiates for centuries” (*GM* III:20). In analogous fashion, the diabolically vengeful person wants both to destroy and to preserve the object of his vengeance: he needs an “opposite, external world” in order to express his vengeful values (*GM* I:10). (Again, this can take the form of fantasy or imaginative reaction, as in the discussion of the diabolical revenge fantasies of Tertullian and Aquinas in *GM* I:15.)

Jenkins sees eternal recurrence as designed to distinguish the vengeful person from the life-affirmer. But if the diabolically vengeful person can

¹³ Thanks to Mark Migotti for suggesting the term diabolical.

crave eternal recurrence, then Jenkins cannot be right. It cannot be vengefulness as such that is at issue. I want to suggest that the problem posed by recurrence is much simpler: whether one can bear the return of the detested object. I will expand this point in the next section.

3.6 What Makes Affirmation Difficult Is the Desire to Eliminate Certain Aspects of Life

Let us take a step back. Consider an individual who seems to affirm his actual life, but despairs when confronted with the thought of recurring lives. Anyone who affirms life will have some basis for that affirmation, something in life that they take to render it affirmable. This might be a value, an ideal, a goal. For an individual with a vengeful ideal, we would have this structure:

I affirm life on the basis of A.

I value A because it negates B.

Eternal recurrence presents me with the prospect of B's continual return.

Let us think about that third step. Suppose I *welcome* the opportunity to negate, again and again, the rejected object B. For example, suppose I am a resentful priest in the Roman era who sees the collapse of archaic warrior morality. My primary focus is on harming my enemy, the noble. Insofar as I relish the harming of the noble, I could welcome the continuous return of the noble: after all, the continuous return of the resented object gives me something to damage, to destroy.

This points to an ambiguity in the notion of revenge or reactivity. We can distinguish:

The desire for revenge on X, which takes the form of desiring to *harm* X.

The desire to eliminate X, which takes the form of desiring *that X not exist*.

The desire for revenge, so construed, is not problematized by eternal recurrence. The person who desires revenge in this sense can welcome the prospect of eternal recurrence. But the desire for elimination, construed in the second sense, *is* problematized by eternal recurrence. Insofar as the rejected object's existence is seen as intolerable, eternal recurrence will be intolerable; for it will entail that the rejected object cannot be eliminated. It continuously returns.

Let us now relate this to our original question. What eternal recurrence seems to be revealing is not simple reactivity or vengefulness but

something more profound: the inability to sustain affirmation of life so long as life contains certain features, events, or things. With a singular life, one can envision the rejected object being eliminated once and for all. With repeated lives, the rejected object keeps returning, and is never truly gone. Thus, what is being revealed is whether the person's affirmation of life is conditional on life's being purified of the rejected object.

Let us call this *conditional affirmation*, and define it as follows:

Conditional affirmation: I affirm life on the condition that an aspect or feature of life can be eliminated.

Unconditional affirmation: I affirm life just as it is.

We can relate these notions to the plot of *Zarathustra*. Consider: initially, Zarathustra wants to rid existence of the rabble. He cannot bear that thought that life contains the rabble: "Life is a well of joy; but where the rabble drinks too, are wells are poisoned" (Z:II "Rabble"). He describes himself as "gagging" on the rabble:

The bite on which I gagged the most is not the knowledge that life itself requires hostility and death and torture-crosses—but once I asked, and I was almost choked by the question: What? does life require even the rabble? Are poisoned wells required, and stinking fires and soiled dreams and maggots in the bread of life? (Z:II "Rabble")

And he repeatedly returns to this theme: "the great disgust with man – *this* choked me and crawled into my throat" (Z:III "Convalescent").

So how does Zarathustra manage to affirm life? By isolating himself from the rabble:

verily, I had to fly to the highest spheres that I might find the fount of pleasure again. Oh I found it, my brothers! Here, in the highest spheres, the fount of pleasure wells up from me! And here is a life of which the rabble does not drink. (Z:II "Rabble")

Zarathustra affirms life by isolating himself from the rabble and fantasizing about a future in which the rabble has been eliminated; indeed, he admires those who "do not know how to live" without seeing themselves as a bridge to something future, in which the present has "gone under," presumably never to return (Z:I "Prologue"). And this carries him along well enough; he takes himself to be affirmative, to love life (Z:I "Prologue"). But then he encounters the Soothsayer, who tells him that "All is empty, all is the same, all has been!" (Z:II "Soothsayer"). Nothing is fundamentally new; we just get more of the same, over and over. And this leads into Zarathustra's discussion of eternal recurrence, in

which he envisions the continuous return of the rejected object. He “chokes” on it, chokes on his knowledge that the rabble will return (Z:III “Convalescent”). His initial affirmation of life is revealed to be conditional: he can affirm life only insofar as it is purged of the rabble. (Though I will not argue for that here, I believe Part III shows Zarathustra recognizing the conditionality of his affirmation and struggling to render it unconditional; he finally succeeds in Z:III “Seven Seals”.)

Nietzsche makes analogous points about other approaches to life. In *BT*, for example, we are told that the Dionysian stance involves affirming life conditional upon the purported recognition of a mystical primal unity (*BT* 3; *BT* 7–8); and that the Socratic stance portrays the pursuit of wisdom as redeeming life conditional upon its having the capacity to mitigate or even eliminate suffering, an assumption that Nietzsche presents Socrates himself as seeing through (*BT* 12–18). In both cases, the affirmation is conditional: on the possibility of individuality being eliminated; on the possibility of suffering and unreason being removed.

If we employ this distinction between conditional and unconditional affirmation, we can see why affirming a singular life would be easier than affirming a recurring life. A singular life can be seen as purified of the objectionable elements. Or, absent that, the purification can at least be seen as underway: one envisions a future in which the objectionable element has been eradicated. A recurring life blocks this possibility. The objectionable element will return, endlessly.

Thus, if your affirmation of life is conditional, the thought of eternal recurrence will undermine this affirmation. It will be more difficult to affirm eternal recurrence than to affirm a singular life: conditional affirmation is sufficient for affirming a singular life, but not recurring lives.

Moreover, this can make the thought of eternal recurrence useful for diagnostic purposes. Take someone who affirms singular life, and ask her if she can affirm eternal recurrence. If she despairs, this is an indication that her affirmation was conditional.

But, one might argue, doesn't this require that we treat eternal recurrence as a true description of the universe? Doesn't it require us to assume that life actually recurs?¹⁴ After all, suppose I can only affirm life conditionally. Then my affirmation of life is dependent upon the assumption that some feature – let us say, dire poverty – can be eliminated. And suppose further that it is *not* true that the past recurs. Then my affirmation of life is conditional, but this might seem unproblematic: I affirm the

¹⁴ Karl Löwith (1997) and Bernd Magnus (1978) address this point.

actual world, in which dire poverty *can* be eliminated once and for all; I just would not be able to affirm a different world, in which life and hence dire poverty recurred. In short: conditional affirmation is not problematic if the condition can be met!

But this objection misses its mark. Contemplating a counterfactual scenario can reveal deficiencies in one's relation to an actual scenario. Consider an example: Suppose I ask you whether your relationship with your partner would continue in the same fashion were your partner to suffer a debilitating illness, such as Alzheimer's. And suppose that in the actual world that will never be the case: you and your partner will enjoy good health to the end of your days. Nonetheless, we can distinguish two people: one of whom says "of course! I'd continue to love her, continue to relate to her in just the same way," and another of whom says "I'm not sure. I don't think I'd be able to go on with her." Assuming that these statements are sincere and accurate, they pick out different ways of relating to one's relationship: the former embodies a fuller, more complete form of commitment than the latter. And this is true regardless of the fact that the counterfactual scenario will never occur.

Just so with eternal recurrence: even if we stipulate that actual life does not recur, the way in which one relates to the prospect of life's repetition can reveal provisionality, deficiency, or incompleteness in one's relation to life. In short: eternal recurrence can be *false* as a description of the actual world, and yet our reaction to it can still reveal crucial information about our relation to the actual world.

With that in mind, let us relate my interpretation of eternal recurrence to some of the previous interpretations. Consider: Reginster is correct to think that eternal recurrence has something to do with permanence. But the question is not whether our values presuppose permanence; few of them do. The question is whether our affirmation of life is conditional on the possibility of eliminating detested features of life. When we contemplate eternal recurrence, we envision the detested object being a permanent, ineliminable feature of life. But what generates the problem is not the temporality of the value or the detested object (i.e., whether it is transient or permanent); what generates the problem is the fact that the agent's affirmation is conditional upon the possibility of eliminating the detested object. So eternal recurrence does not problematize the *temporality* of values but the *logical structure* of values.

Jenkins is correct to think that eternal recurrence is connected to something like vengefulness or reactivity. But this is not the full story, because some forms of vengefulness are compatible with eternal

recurrence. Indeed, vengefulness in its purest form would desire the return of the resented object, in order to negate it all the more. What eternal recurrence brings to light is something more than vengefulness: the desire to purge existence of certain elements. And what it reveals is not so much an orientation toward the past as a defective relation to the present. Eternal recurrence is concerned neither with what has happened nor with what will happen but with what is happening.¹⁵

3.7 Conditional Affirmation and Higher Values

I want to close by tying some points together. I have argued that the question of whether we affirm a singular life cannot easily distinguish between a case of conditional and unconditional affirmation, whereas contemplating recurring lives brings this distinction to the fore. The function of eternal recurrence, then, is to diagnose the nature of one's affirmation, revealing it to be either conditional or unconditional. One potential worry about this interpretation is that it is fairly simple: it does not involve abstruse metaphysical theses about interconnectedness, profound revaluations of being and becoming, or complex analyses of temporality. So why would Nietzsche think this distinction was so important? Why present it as his most profound philosophical insight?

To answer this question, we need to take a step back. Recall that Nietzsche repeatedly claims that we can reconcile ourselves to existence only by accepting some evaluative framework that renders existence sensible. As he puts it in the *Gay Science*, we need an interpretation that can “promote the life of the species, by promoting the faith in life. “Life is worth living,” every one of them shouts, ‘there is something to life, there is something behind life, beneath it; beware!’” (*GS* I). This is the central theme in *BT*, *GS*, *Z*, and *GM*, and is also discussed in most of Nietzsche's other texts. The “Why?” must find some answer: “life ought to be loved, because—!” (*GS* I). Absent an answer to that question – absent a way of filling in the blank –we suffer: “[Man] did not know how to justify, explain, affirm himself: he suffered from the problem of his meaning” (*GM* III:28).

¹⁵ I do not mean to suggest that Zarathustra is completely unconcerned with the past. In “On Redemption” and elsewhere, Nietzsche considers ways in which will to power and eternal recurrence might connect to certain ways of relating to the past. I lack the space to address these points here. Instead, I am making a more limited point: vengefulness is not simply an orientation toward the past (Sections 3.5 and 3.6); and Zarathustra is not simply concerned with events in *his own* past (Section 3.2).

What makes existence sensible, according to Nietzsche, is some religion, morality, ideal, or, more generally, some vision of human life (*GS* I). Just to have a neutral term to describe these things, let us call them *evaluative perspectives*. We are given examples: Christianity; Renaissance humanism; Socratism; Greek tragedy; the Homeric warrior ethic; and Nietzsche's will-to-power centered perspective. In each of these, we have some vision of the good life, some vision of what makes life worth living.

Some of these evaluative perspectives explicitly reject life, as in Schopenhauer or the Christian ascetic. Others can seem more affirmative but are, Nietzsche thinks, in the process of collapsing: here he cites the Socratic perspective or the prioritization of truth (*BT*, *GM* III). The evaluative perspective offered by Zarathustra initially seems different. It is supposedly fully affirmative; Zarathustra loves life and will teach us how to do so as well (*Z*:I "Prologue"). But problems with his ideals emerge.

First, Zarathustra's initial ideals have the same *structure* as the Christian and Socratic goals: they see the present as imperfect, as in need of redemption by some future goal.¹⁶ Man must be redeemed by the overman; a better world lies hidden beyond this one, if only we can serve as bridges to it (*Z*:I "Prologue"). Zarathustra's ideals thus deprecate the present by relating it to a putatively more valuable future: "The now and the past on earth – alas, my friends, that is what *I* find most unendurable; and I should not know how to live if I were not also a seer of that which must come" (*Z*:II "On Redemption"). So already there is a temptation to live for the sake of the future, to *bear* life in the hopes of changing it. Although this does not logically necessitate the condemnation of actual life, it does make it very tempting to think that actual life needs to be purified of objectionable elements in order to be affirmed.

Second, and relatedly, Zarathustra's ideals may be motivated – either at their outset or as they continue to manifest over time – by resentment or reactivity. What is primarily focused upon is getting rid of what is actual, in favor of some putative and rather hazily described future. This is why Zarathustra repeatedly "chokes" on his "great disgust with man" (*Z*:III "Vision and Riddle"); it is why the Soothsayer, who says that there is never anything new and there can be no escape from the past, terrifies Zarathustra (*Z*:II "Soothsayer"); it is why Zarathustra attempts to suppress the past, keeping it encased behind iron gates and glass coffins (*Z*:II "Soothsayer"). Regardless of how Zarathustra's ideas originate – and if Zarathustra is right they originate out of an active, joyous, creative "yes-

¹⁶ See Clark (1990: 273–277) and Anderson (2009).

saying” – the focus, as these goals are lived, is increasingly on what is rejected, rather than what is sought.

What would be best, by Nietzsche’s lights, is to have some evaluative perspective that placed full value in the present, allowing it to be affirmed unconditionally.¹⁷ But this introduces a new problem. Let me explain.

At the beginning of this essay, I noted that an ordinary person devoted to ordinary goals, a person who contents himself with everyday life, needn’t have much trouble with eternal recurrence: most of us will find that mundane pursuits infuse our lives with enough value to make our lives worth affirming. I think Nietzsche is aware of this. His “last men” are those who embrace simple pleasures and ordinary pursuits, who are indeed incapable even of understanding why one would pursue great, difficult, challenging goals. They lack any ideals that might inspire devotion, commitment, achievement. Any ideal that requires “exertion” is derided: pursuing such ideals is madness, and the last man tells us that “formerly all the world was mad” (*Z*:I “Prologue” 5).

The last men would view the eternal recurrence in the same way they view everything else: as a mild diversion that provokes no great troubles. And, as I pointed out in Section 3.1, this is just the reaction that eternal recurrence tends to provoke in our contemporaries. But suppose we focus not on the last men but on those striving for something more. Elsewhere, I have argued that the distinguishing feature of the last men is that their evaluative perspective lacks *higher values*. A large part of what disgusts Zarathustra about the last men and the rabble is the absence of higher values.¹⁸ Higher values are overriding, incontestable, and resistant to critical scrutiny. In addition, they confer a sense of meaning or significance on the activities that they regulate. Socrates’ higher value is something like understanding or truth; Zarathustra’s is, at the outset, the overman. In each case there is a difficult goal to be striven for, something that can confer meaning on the activities it regulates. So in both *GS* and *Z* we have individuals who espouse higher values and are beginning to recognize ways in which they are problematic.

Suppose eternal recurrence is meant to address those whose evaluative perspectives include higher values. People with higher values differ from the last men in that they see striving for great tasks as worthwhile,

¹⁷ See Richardson (2020); Chapter 9.

¹⁸ “What is love? What is creation? What is longing? What is a star?” thus asks the last man, and he blinks” (*Z*:I “Prologue” 5; see also *Z*:I “Prologue” 3). The descriptions of the last men consistently emphasize their inability to understand the pursuit of great, challenging goals, the very sorts of goals that higher values underwrite. See Katsafanas (2015) for a discussion of this point. Relevant passages include *GS* 1; *BGE* 263; *Z* Prologue; *KSA* 12:1[22]; *KSA* 12:10[95]; and *KSA* 13:11[100].

meaningful, or meritorious. They embrace goals that mandate devotion, compliance, and sacrifice of competing goods. They endorse the values of achievement and growth, the values that Nietzsche associates with the manifestation of will to power (see Katsafanas 2013a; 2013b).

When confronted with eternal recurrence, those with higher values face a deep and difficult problem. Can we be unconditionally affirmative while still harboring higher values? This is very hard. The focus on some valued goal that is not yet attained tends to lead us into a devaluation of the present, as we see in *Zarathustra*: because the value of the present activities is seen as lying in some future state, the present tends to be experienced as deficient relative to the imagined future. If the attainment of the future goal is the source of the present's value, then the value of the present seems to seep into the future; the present is denuded, and life is lived for the sake of the conjectural future. Schopenhauer makes this point in a lovely passage from his *Parerga and Paralipomena*:

We look upon the present as something to be put up with while it lasts, and serving only as the way towards our goal. Hence most people, if they glance back when they come to the end of life, will find that all along they have been living *ad interim*: they will be surprised to find that the very thing they disregarded and let slip by unenjoyed, was just the life in the expectation of which they passed all their time. (Schopenhauer 1851, Section 145)

Schopenhauer is not making a point about the contents of particular values or goals; he is not claiming that *some* pursuits lead us to a devaluation of the present, whereas others might not. He is making a deeper and perfectly general point: that the very *having of a goal* etiolates the present, drawing our attention to the future; and more so, to the extent that the goal is invested with great import. Our orientation toward goals displaces our interest into the future; we lose *life as it is lived*, in favor of an imagined future, so that the present is experientially barren and evaluatively deficient. And the greater the distance between the ideal and the actual, the greater the danger that this will occur. That is why higher values pose such a challenge.

Something like this, I suggest, worries Nietzsche. He does not follow Schopenhauer in thinking that the process described above is inevitable or inescapable (much of Nietzsche's work is designed to provide an alternative account of the relation between valuing, willing, and temporality).¹⁹ But he does agree with Schopenhauer that it is a real danger. Indeed, we

¹⁹ See in particular his reflections on will to power, discussed in Katsafanas (2013a). Put simply, Nietzsche thinks that rather than adopting means for the sake of ends, we sometimes adopt ends for the sake of the challenges that their means afford.

can see the tension embodied in Nietzsche's own life. Nietzsche wants to be "only a yes-sayer" (*GS* 276), and yet anyone who reads his polemics and critiques can see how tenuous his grip on that aspiration is. The danger is not just that his higher values will turn out to be reactive: the danger is that even values which start out as fully affirmative, fully active, can be deformed into their opposites.²⁰ This movement is on display in *Zarathustra*. I think *Zarathustra* has the familiar structure of a *Bildungsroman*, with the early parts showing Zarathustra succumbing to various misunderstandings and errors, the middle parts portraying Zarathustra's realization that his putatively affirmative ideals are expressions of reactive stances, and the later parts showing him restructuring his task in order to overcome these mistakes.²¹ But regardless of whether this is true of *Zarathustra*, it is clear that Nietzsche is interested, throughout his career, in teasing out the underlying structure of ideals, showing that apparently condemnatory ideals also express an attachment to life (*GM* III), or that apparently affirmative ideals also express a condemnation of life (*GS* 340, *GM* III). For Nietzsche is not only interested in the content of our ideals. He is also interested – arguably *more* interested – in what sustains our commitment to those ideals. What the eternal recurrence can reveal, and what the contemplation of a singular life occludes, is the deformation of an affirmative ideal into its opposite. Or, perhaps put in terms of a problem: it can suggest that any attempt to manifest an

²⁰ And, conversely, condemnatory ideals can be transformed into affirmative ones. It is also worth noting that these are extremes. In addition to ideals being transformed into their opposites, there will be cases in which ideals come to be mixed or contaminated with contrary elements: an ideal that is originally purely affirmative will come to incorporate reactive or condemnatory elements, without sliding all the way into total negation. See especially *BGE* 224.

²¹ In *BGE* Nietzsche claims that his higher individual *needs* the rabble. The higher individual requires a form of social hierarchy; in order for this hierarchy to exist, some people need to be at the bottom (*BGE* 257–260). So, in endorsing a form of hierarchy and the establishment of a "pathos of distance," Nietzsche cannot endorse the elimination of the rabble. Arguably this points to a difference between Nietzsche's ideals and the ideals that Zarathustra originally endorses: whereas Nietzsche wills even the existence of the rabble, Zarathustra, in preaching the overman, originally falls short of this. So Zarathustra must overcome his own disgust at the rabble, his own reactive attitudes, in part by coming to see the rabble as a necessary constituent of the ideal that he affirms. And, although I lack the space to develop this point, this relates to the role of the overman concept in *Z*. Some commentators argue that the notion of the overman is progressively abandoned as *Z* unfolds (e.g., Lampert 1986); others disagree, thinking that Zarathustra maintains his commitment to that notion (e.g., Loeb 2010). I think Ansell-Pearson (1992) is right to distinguish two different ways in which the overman can be understood: the overman as a fundamentally new, redemptive, transfigured humanity (which I take Zarathustra to endorse early in *Z* and reject later in *Z*) and the overman as an image of the person who bears an unconditionally affirmative attitude toward life (which is the picture that emerges in *Z* III). In short: Zarathustra abandons one notion of the overman and replaces it with another.

unconditionally affirmative ideal will be beset by tensions, perennially tempting the adherent to negate what is actual in favor of what is ideal; and the more so, to the extent that the ideal takes the form of a higher value. The question, for Nietzsche, is whether we can cleave to an ideal while simultaneously affirming a world in which that ideal is everywhere and always absent.²² To do so would be the purest form of affirmation.²³

²² Reginster (2006) points out that Nietzsche associates one form of nihilism with the commitment to unrealizable ideals. We should be careful to distinguish unrealizability in Reginster's sense from the type of commitment I am discussing above. Certain ideals are unrealizable because they have false presuppositions. For example, Nietzsche takes otherworldly ideals to be unrealizable, for the simple reason that there is no sense to be given to the notion of the otherworldly. Eternal recurrence, as I am interpreting it, does not focus on *that* kind of unrealizability. It instead confronts us with the thought that any goal, even if it is realized, will be undone. Nothing is realizable *once and for all*. But this is different from nothing being realizable *at all*. So the type of unrealizability with which eternal recurrence confronts us is not the same as the type of unrealizability that Nietzsche associates with nihilism. (Though compare *KSA* 12:5[71], which suggests that eternal recurrence can be "the most extreme form of nihilism"; it can drive home the thought that existence is "without meaning or goal" and thereby deprive us of traditional forms of protection "from despair.")

²³ For helpful comments on this paper, thanks to Keith Ansell-Pearson, Paul Loeb, Kaitlyn Creasy, Justin Remhof, Allison Merrick, Alexander Prescott-Couch, Mark Migotti, Tsarina Doyle, Andrew Huddleston, Rebecca Bamford, Ian Dunkle, Matthew Meyer, Richard Elliott, and the participants at the session on "Nietzsche, Nihilism, and Life-Affirmation" at the 2019 meeting of the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy.