

Eternal Return, Non-Temporal

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Abstract

I will begin by arguing against temporal interpretations of Nietzsche's doctrine of the eternal return of the same. The argument is simple: If time itself is circular, nothing will happen more than once, and if time is not circular, that which happens again is not the same in an interesting sense. In search of a non-temporal reading of Zarathustra's "abysmal thought", I will investigate the dramatic context in which it occurs. I will show that both Zarathustra's enemy, the spirit of gravity, and his friends, the animals, trivialize it by casting it in temporal terms. Both fail to realize the degree to which the thought that everything eternally returns is disturbing. This can only be seen, I argue, by thinking of eternity as a dimension *orthogonal* to time.

1. Loeb's Deductive Proof

Paul S. Loeb claims that in *Zarathustra*, "The Vision and the Riddle", Nietzsche outlines a "deductive proof" of his doctrine of eternal return (Loeb 2013, p. 647). The proof that Loeb has in mind operates with the following premises (2013, p. 659-660):

- (1a) The past and the future of any given moment are both infinite.
- (1b) If a time span is infinite, everything that can happen at all will happen within this time span.
- (2) Any two events in history are "causally entangled".
- (3) Time is relational.

The proof works roughly as follows. From premises (1a) and (1b), we infer that every possible event happens in both the past and the future of any given

event. Premise (2) limits the set of possible events, in that all events that happen in the past or the future of any given event must be causally connected to this event. Premise (3) makes sure, presumably, that if two moments in history are indistinguishable with respect to what happens before, during, and after them, they are in fact identical. From this it follows that time itself is circular.

This is a very powerful argument. Let us consider premises (2) and (3) in more detail. The second premise limits the set of “everything that can happen” to a subset of events that are causally connected to a given event. In the context of the argument, this is not an innocent move. Causal connections are often thought to be directional, so that it might well happen that there are two sets of events: one set of events that are causally connected to a given event by being its causes, and a disjoint set of events that are causally connected to this event by being its effects. This might happen, more specifically, if both of these sets are infinitely large. The set of possible events, given the present moment, might thus divide into two infinitely large subsets, and these two sets may well be disjoint, so that no event is in both of them.¹

For the argument to proceed, we need to establish that at least one event is part of both the past and the future of a given event. This can be done if we assume that the set of events that are causally compatible with the present moment is finite.² This will explain, as follows, why at least one of its members must occur more than once. By what mathematicians call the pigeonhole principle, if one puts six items, say, in five places, at least one of these places must have more than one item in it. The argument we need is the same in reverse: In order to put five items in six places, such that each place contains at least one item, we will have to put at least one item in two places at once.

¹ Since premise (1b) rules this out, the above consideration might speak against accepting this premise.

² Nietzsche asserts this in his unpublished notes (KSA 9:11[202], p. 523; KSA 9:11[245], p. 534; KSA 13:14[188], p. 376).

So, if one puts finitely many events to infinitely many points in time, such that no point in time remains empty, at least one of these events must be assigned to infinitely many points in time. If we now take premise (2) to imply that one cannot include any event in a set without also letting in all its causes and effects, there is good reason to assume that the same entire sequence of events must occur infinitely many times (Soll 1973, p. 329).

Let us now turn to the third premise, that time is relational. Loeb elaborates on this premise in the following passage:

Nietzsche is here presupposing a relational conception of time according to which temporal moments do not exist independently of the things with which they are associated. (Loeb 2010, p. 58)

One may reasonably take this to amount to the following: Moments in time are identified and distinguished exclusively in terms of what happens before, during, and after them.³ This is to say that no two distinct moments in time can be qualitatively exactly alike. Consider, for instance, the death of Anne Stuart, and try to assume that it occurs multiple times, such that none of its iterations differs in any way from any other. All instances of this event will be exactly alike, and they will all be preceded and followed by the exact same course of history. The relationality of time will then entail that all deaths of Anne Stuart are strictly identical. Which is to say that after all, there can be only one of them. For moments in time, exact qualitative similarity will thus imply numerical identity.

It will be good to be as clear as possible about what work premise (3) is supposed to do. Premises (1) and (2) entail that all events that are causally compatible with a given event will be repeated infinitely many times in the past and the future of this event. But the doctrine of eternal return is usually taken to involve more than that. Nietzsche seems to suggest that time itself is circular, and this does not follow from the first two premises. All we get out of

³ This is not exactly what Loeb says; I will argue momentarily that it must be what he means.

premises (1) and (2) is that all events in history are repeated infinitely many times, and this could happen in an infinitely long *linear* stretch of time. If this were so, however, the repetition of an event will merely be a numerically different, exactly similar event (Čapek 1983, p. 145). Every event would be repeated in the way in which I might repeatedly perform “the same” action: Its repetitions may be qualitatively indistinguishable, but they will be numerically distinct from one another. Presumably, Nietzsche does not merely want to claim that in the future, people exactly similar to us will lead a life exactly similar to ours. There would be no reason why anyone should be particularly impressed by this thought (Soll 1973, p. 339; Magnus 1978, p. 191; Clark 1990, p. 268; Ridley 1997, p. 20). Rather, Nietzsche seems to claim that we, numerically the very same people, will live our very same lives again and again (*Zarathustra* III “The Convalescent” 2; KSA 4, p. 276; Danto 2005, p. 185; Loeb 2018, p. 434). This is why time itself must be circular (Magnus 1978, p. 105-110).

Therefore, Loeb’s proof must involve the assumption that premise (3) prohibits two numerically distinct events from being qualitatively indistinguishable. The problem with this reading of premise (3) is that it now seems as though nothing at all could ever happen twice, let alone infinitely many times. If time itself is defined in terms of its relation to events, there can be no two different times for the exact same sequence of events to occur.⁴ If this is so, nothing ever recurs, and this does not at all look like a doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same.

Loeb is thus faced with the following dilemma:

⁴ In KSA 9:11[202], p. 523, Nietzsche writes that there can be no two different complete sequences of events (“Gesamtlagen”) that contain the exact same event. This might be his way of admitting that in fact, no event can happen as the exact same event at two different times. Nietzsche further suggests that within any given iteration of the eternal return of the same, no two events can be exactly alike. Small (2010, p. 130) seems to ignore this passage when he argues on behalf of Nietzsche that all events must be repeatable.

... either the temporal identity of recurrences entails their numerical identity, in which case the doctrine is conceptually incoherent; or it does not, in which case the doctrine is psychologically insignificant. (Loeb 2010, p. 30)

We have just explored the first horn of this dilemma. If the exact qualitative similarity of two events implies their numerical identity, there is no recurrence of anything. This is not exactly incoherent, but it certainly does not seem to be what we want. So Loeb opts for the second horn:

...any evidence of the reality of eternal recurrence would have to numerically differentiate what is qualitatively indiscernible. (Loeb 2010, p. 17)

In terms of qualitative identity, it is true, we have only one finite life; but in terms of numerical identity, we have innumerable finite lives. (Loeb 2013, p. 665)

The problem with this is not so much that this second option might render the doctrine of eternal return psychologically insignificant (which it does). It is rather that at this point, the second option is no longer an option. Premise (3) is essential for Loeb's deductive proof. He actually adds it to his proof, even though Nietzsche does not explicitly affirm it in "The Vision and the Riddle". And premise (3) could not do its work unless it implied that exact similarity implies numerical identity (cf. Čapek 1983, p. 145-46). Given premise (3), one cannot numerically differentiate what is qualitatively identical.

Let me show this in some more detail, since my rejection of Loeb's reading depends on it. According to a relational account of time, points in time are identified by what happens before, during, and after them, so that A and B are the same point in time if the same things happen before, during, and after them. And this must mean, more specifically, that A and B are *numerically* the same point in time if what happens before, during, and after them is *qualitatively* exactly alike. For consider the alternatives.

(i) There would be no need to introduce a premise to the effect that two points in time are *qualitatively exactly alike* if what happens before, during, and after them is *qualitatively exactly alike*; for this is simply what exact qualitative likeness means in this context. In themselves, points in time have no qualitative feel to them, so they can only differ in quality by virtue of the things that happen before, during, and after them.

(ii) It would not make any more sense to explicitly demand that two points in time be *numerically the same* if the things that happen before, during, and after them are *numerically the same*. Again, this would go without saying: Numerically one and the same event cannot happen at two numerically different points in time.

(iii) The same would be true for the postulate that two points in time are *qualitatively alike* if what happens before, during, and after them is *numerically the same*. If what happens before, during, and after two points in time is numerically identical, then it will also be qualitatively alike.

Premise (3), therefore, commits Loeb to the claim that there can be no two numerically distinct moments in time such that what happens before, during, and after them is qualitatively exactly alike. This, however, rules out what Loeb is suggesting: That our lives might occur numerically many times, such that these occurrences are exactly alike.

Loeb avoids acknowledging this commitment. When he says that time is relational, he does not explicitly take this to mean that moments in time are defined by their relation to all other events, he only says that they do not *exist* independently of other moments and events. This is a considerably weaker claim. It is compatible with the assumption of two qualitatively indistinguishable, yet numerically distinct temporal moments.⁵ However, if this

⁵ Loeb does not think so, however: "it is precisely because time-moments cannot exist independently of their associated events that they must recur along with these events" (2007, p. 87). This is to (wrongly) assume that if something cannot exist without an event, this event cannot exist without it.

were all the relationality of time amounts to, it would not be much more than a truism of common sense cosmology: All temporal moments are parts of one history, and none of them actually exists independently of this history. A premise like this would be pointless in the context of Loeb's argument. Premises (1) and (2) already entail that everything that is causally compatible with a given moment happens again and again, and the assertion that there are no temporal moments that are unconnected to the rest of history would not change this situation much. All it would add is that there are no events beyond the ones that are known to happen again and again. It would not imply that time is circular. Therefore, the reading of premise (3) that we have suggested above is the only one that gives us the circularity of time. Premise (3) must imply that there can be no two exactly similar events. If it implies this, however, nothing ever happens more than once (Oger 1997, p. 4).

These problems are not confined to Loeb's exposition. Every temporal interpretation of the "eternal return of the same" is bound to oscillate between two claims: *Either* time itself is circular *or* everything happens again and again. Nietzsche seems to want both, but they exclude one another. In this situation, one should ask how to make sense of the "eternal return of the same" in *non-temporal* terms. So far, however, we only have a negative result, and not much else to build on. It may thus be useful to spend some time beating about all the neighbouring fields. I will do this by asking: Who exactly says what in the *Zarathustra*?⁶

2. *The Vision and the Riddle*

Before Nietzsche introduces the doctrine of eternal return in the

⁶ Cohen and Ulfers write that "[I]f one attends carefully to the text, [the account that Nietzsche gives in *Will to Power* §1066] is precisely what the dwarf presented as a vision to Zarathustra" (2008, p. 87). If they had attended carefully to the text, they would have noticed that the dwarf does not present a vision to Zarathustra. He presents an interpretation of Zarathustra's vision.

Zarathustra, he announces the problem that it is meant to solve: The will cannot alter the past (cf. Richardson 2008, 105). “That which was” is the stone it cannot lift, and redemption can only result from turning “it was” into “thus I willed it” (*Zarathustra* II “On Redemption”; KSA 4, p. 180-181). It is easy to see how the idea of eternal return might appear to help in this situation. If all past events reoccur in the future, they can in principle all be willed, at least as much as all other future events (Ridley 1997, p. 22).

The doctrine of eternal return is then introduced both as liberating and as a heavy burden in itself, as something that is deeply disturbing. In “The Vision and the Riddle”, this happens in the context of Zarathustra’s struggle with the spirit of gravity, also known as the dwarf or the mole. Zarathustra alludes to an abysmal thought, a thought that the spirit of gravity will not be able to bear. This announcement already makes him be lighter: It causes the spirit of gravity to jump off his shoulder and listen. Zarathustra now begins to introduce his thought by setting out, give or take, Loeb’s first premise: The past and future of any given moment are both eternal. Asked whether there might be any event that is both past and future, the spirit of gravity then immediately jumps to the conclusion (he jumps a lot):

“All that is straight lies,” murmured the dwarf contemptuously. “All truth is crooked, time itself is a circle.” (*Zarathustra* III “The Vision and the Riddle” 2; KSA 4, p. 200)

It is significant that the spirit of gravity presents what Loeb takes to be the conclusion of Nietzsche’s argument *before* the actual argument is spelled out. Note further that the German for “contemptuously” is “verächtlich”: The dwarf does not quite despise the thought, he *disregards* it. By saying that time is a circle, the dwarf does not appreciate the actual significance of the abysmal thought that Zarathustra was about to develop. This is, at any rate, what Zarathustra immediately retorts:

“You spirit of gravity!” I said, angrily. “Do not make it too easy on yourself! ...” (*Zarathustra* III “The Vision and the Riddle” 2; KSA 4, p. 200)

Zarathustra thus appears to reject the dwarf's conclusion. It therefore looks like according to Zarathustra himself, "time is precisely *not* a circle" (Stambaugh 1972, p. 38-39; cf. Heidegger, *Nietzsche I*, GA 6/2, p. 295). This however is not the only way of understanding the exchange. Let me, before turning to alternative interpretations, say one more thing about the relevant context.

The dwarf's mistake is in fact a counterpart of a misrepresentation that Zarathustra had encountered earlier on. Worried that the image of his teaching has been distorted (*Zarathustra II* "The Child with the Mirror"; KSA 4, p. 106), Zarathustra had gone to the blessed isles to resume teaching. He emphasizes that God is a mere thought of something that transcends the will, and that there shall be no such thing. He describes the impact of this thought in terms very similar to the dwarf's pronouncement:

God is a thought that makes crooked everything that is straight, and causes everything that stands to turn. What? Should time be gone, and all that is not everlasting be merely a lie? (*Zarathustra II* "On the Blessed Isles"; KSA 4, p. 110)

It is not immediately clear, at this point, how a thought that makes everything turn should do away with time. What Zarathustra means is, presumably, that by postulating a divine perspective, everything *other* than the divine is made to appear crooked and unreal. The admission of a divine perspective turns everything that is not straight, in the sense of being everlasting, into a lie. However, according to Zarathustra, this admission would be a mistake.

Now when the dwarf calls everything that is straight a lie, he seems to agree with Zarathustra: He seems to dismiss the divine perspective in favor of one that is crooked, temporal, and not divine. And when Zarathustra replies that the dwarf is making it too easy on himself, he suggests that the divine perspective is not so easily dismissed.

Loeb reads the exchange between Zarathustra and the dwarf in a different

way. He thinks that the dwarf's mistake is to not actually believe his own statement, that time is circular (2007, p. 85; 2008, p. 95). This is, for Loeb, a desirable conclusion, given that he wants to attribute a relational and circular view of time to Nietzsche. If Zarathustra would not reject the claim, that time is circular, but only the supposed disregard for it, he would endorse the claim after all. However, this reading is tenable only to a limited extent. Usually, when people speak contemptuously, they mean what they say. And there are no signs in the text that the dwarf disregards the content of his own pronouncement. What he seems to disregard is rather the significance of the abysmal thought, and he appears to do this by interpreting it as implying that time is circular.

Let me attempt a more detailed account of how the dwarf makes it too easy on himself. His rejection of a supposed straight perspective rests on a contrast between divine eternity and human temporality. There is thus a sense in which the claim that time is circular, as opposed to straight, perpetuates the thought of a possible straight eternity (cf. Gooding-Williams 2001, p. 217). The dwarf does not go far enough: He rejects the divine perspective, but does not *eliminate* it from his thinking. By rejecting the dwarf's pronouncement, Zarathustra goes farther: He rejects the alternative between linear eternity and circular time. Time is not circular in the sense of being less straight than absolute time, as seen from a divine perspective. In fact, nothing is straighter than time; it is as straight as it gets. The divine perspective, the only perspective from which time might appear crooked, must not at all be admitted. If this is so, one should think of time as neither straight nor circular, for this opposition itself is mistaken. When the dwarf calls time circular, as opposed to straight, he avoids the part of the abysmal thought that is most difficult to bear: to not at all draw the distinction between the straight and crooked. If this is his mistake, we cannot simply correct it by saying that time is *not* circular. This, too, will be too easy, insofar as it still rests on a distinction between a divine and a human perspective.

Robin Small offers yet another interpretation of the dwarf's "disregard". He

suggests that by rejecting the linearity of time, the dwarf disregards the appearances (2010, p. 116). There is, again, some truth to this. Time can appear as circular only from a point of view outside of circular time (White 1990, p. 86). From within the circle, without the contrast to a supposed straight line, nothing would appear bent or crooked. By visualizing time as a circle, the dwarf thus pretends to occupy a position outside of time. However, it is not quite clear how disregarding the appearances in this way is “too easy”. There is more work to be done.

Zarathustra explains none of this in “The Vision and the Riddle”. All he says is that the dwarf fails to appreciate the weight of his thought. Where Zarathustra says that the dwarf is making it too easy on himself, the German for “easy” is “leicht”, that is, the opposite of heavy. Zarathustra, in contrast, emphasizes that his thought is extraordinarily “heavy”. In fact, and curiously, the abysmal thought is too heavy for gravity itself to bear.

So far, I have highlighted three things. First, Zarathustra’s abysmal thought is presented as extremely difficult to grasp and difficult to maintain. Second, to say that time is circular is to fail at this task. Third, the one who fails in this way is the spirit of gravity. Unfortunately, Zarathustra does not get to expound his own understanding of the abysmal thought in “The Vision and the Riddle”. After saying some more things that resemble premises in Loeb’s proof, he stops speaking, overwhelmed by disgust, and apparently gets side tracked.

3. The Animal’s Version

In “The Vision and the Riddle”, Zarathustra’s abysmal thought is misrepresented by his enemy, the spirit of gravity. In “The Convalescent”, it is articulated by Zarathustra’s friends, the animals. Zarathustra himself is still recovering from his disgust, and he is not yet able to express his disturbing thought in his own words, such as to convey its real, disturbing meaning.

Zarathustra’s animals are a snake and an eagle. It is fairly clear that among many other things, snakes generally symbolize the devil (the spirit of gravity) and the abysmal thought itself, which chokes Zarathustra at the end of “The

Vision and the Riddle". Snakes are incapable of getting off the ground, they are tied down by gravity. Zarathustra's friend, however, is also the friend of the eagle, curling itself around its neck (*Zarathustra* I "Zarathustra's Prologue" 10; KSA 4, p. 27). As such, *this* snake, Zarathustra's friend, is not the same as the black snake that chokes the shepherd. It takes part in the eagle's ability to fly.

The eagle defies gravity. In a striking passage in "The Song of Melancholy",⁷ Nietzsche points out that an eagle can deliberately move downwards at the speed of a falling object (*Zarathustra* IV "The Song of Melancholy" 3; KSA 4, p. 373). So the eagle can do what gravity makes other things do, but it will do so voluntarily. In addition, the depth it moves towards is described as an abyss, the home and origin of Zarathustra's disturbing thought. This thought, we may conclude, may be grasped by someone who appropriates gravity, who is in a position to freely choose when to be pulled down by it and when not.

Now in "The Convalescent", when Zarathustra is once again overwhelmed by disgust, the snake and the eagle claim to know exactly what he is thinking:

Everything goes, everything comes back; the wheel of being rolls eternally. ...

In every Instant being begins; around every Here rolls the ball There. The middle is everywhere. Crooked is the path of eternity. (*Zarathustra* III "The Convalescent" 2; KSA 4, p. 272-3)

Three things should be noted. First, the animals do not exactly repeat what the spirit of gravity had said. They describe eternity as a circle, but they do not claim that time itself is circular. They do not distinguish between straight eternity and crooked time, they rather conflate or merge them by speaking of crooked eternity. Second, they suggest that everything is at the center, so that there is no absolute up and down: The middle is everywhere (cf. Gooding-Williams 2001, p. 251). Still, and this is the third thing to note, Zarathustra is not going to agree with the animal's account of his abysmal thought (White

⁷ The German title alludes to gravity: *Lied der Schwermut*.

1990, p. 93). The animals, too, fail to capture its weight and significance. Much like the spirit of gravity, they claim to know what Zarathustra's thought is about before actually giving him a chance to explain it to them. In particular, the way in which Zarathustra responds to his friends clearly suggests that to introduce the picture of a spinning wheel is to trivialize his thought:

– “Oh you foolish rascals and barrel organs!” answered Zarathustra, smiling again. “How well you know what had to come true in seven days – and how that monster crawled into my throat and choked me! But I bit off its head and spat it away from me.

And you – you have already made a hurdy-gurdy song of it? ...”

(*Zarathustra* III “The Convalescent” 2; KSA 4, p. 273)

In saying that the wheel of being turns, the animals are like barrel organs, turning Zarathustra's thought into a hurdy-gurdy song. A barrel organ is an instrument that anyone can play who is able to turn a wheel, and it mechanically repeats the same melody again and again. The animals do not misrepresent the abysmal thought by stating that time itself is circular, and thus making recurrence impossible. They “know well” what had to come true. However, they still fail to put their knowledge in the right words. They do so by depicting eternity as a wheel that turns around and around.

Both his enemy, the spirit of gravity, and his friends, the animals, misrepresent Zarathustra's abysmal thought. The spirit of gravity turns it into a claim about the circularity of time itself. Our discussion of Loeb's proof has shown that if time itself were circular, nothing could recur. Nietzsche must have realized this, and it justifies his character, Zarathustra, in rejecting the dwarf's version of his thought. The animals, on the other hand, take it to mean that everything is repeated again and again. They seem to push towards a linear interpretation of time. As we have seen, however, this would imply that what recurs is not strictly speaking the same, but only something exactly similar. Again, Zarathustra resists. He rejects both possible versions of a temporal interpretation of the doctrine of eternal return. One of them is the

work of the devil, the other is a shallow trivialization by his friends. We should therefore not identify the abysmal thought with the doctrine of eternal return in any of these temporal interpretations.⁸

One of Nietzsche's unpublished notes suggests that he was not sure whether the idea of an "eternal return of the same" is tenable: He says that whether it is true or not, the thought of its mere possibility "can shake and reshape us" (KSA 9:11[203], p. 523; cf. Magnus 1978, p. 117; Nolt 2008, p. 313). Some commentators have therefore argued that it does not matter whether Nietzsche took the doctrine of eternal return to be true; all he wants is that we become such that we *could* affirm it if it *were* true (cf. Magnus 1978, p. 142; Nehamas 1980, p. 342; Oger 1997, p. 12; Clark 1990, p. 251-2). However, the problem is not merely that the doctrine might not be true in its temporal sense. It is that it makes no temporal sense. If everything recurs as the exact same, nothing actually recurs. It is therefore difficult to see how one can be supposed to entertain this thought at all.

In any case, it looks like in his published writings, Nietzsche is more concerned with possible *misrepresentations* of his doctrine of eternal return than with actually stating and explaining it (Soll 1973, p. 323; White 1990, p. 71). He may well have decided that the abysmal thought cannot be put in words without being trivialized in one way or another. As he says at one point, "[y]ou do not love your knowledge enough anymore, as soon as you communicate it" (*Beyond Good and Evil* 160; KSA 5, p. 100). If this is true, the only sensible way of introducing the abysmal thought will be to first misrepresent it and then reject this misrepresentation. This introduces the thought as one that cannot be properly expressed in words. The form that it

⁸ As Nehamas (1980, p. 337) points out, Nietzsche implies elsewhere that Zarathustra's abysmal thought cannot be the thought that everything eternally recurs. For Nietzsche says that Zarathustra does not consider the abysmal thought an objection to the eternal return of existence (*Ecce Homo* III "Zarathustra" 6; KSA 6, p. 345); and it would be rather odd to not consider a thought to be an objection to *itself*.

takes once it is communicated will then be a distorted reflection of a thought that must remain unexpressed in itself. It must remain a vision and a riddle.

By deciding not to attempt to state it clearly and directly, however, Nietzsche does not abandon the thought of eternal recurrence. Zarathustra, for instance, never rejects it in the shape it takes in *The Gay Science* 341. Rather than rejecting it, Nietzsche wants us to realize its proper status. It is not a *theory*, let alone one about time or history. Yet it is not a mere “thought experiment” either (as Magnus has it; 1978, p. 86). In its temporal version, it cannot be a thought experiment because any attempt to seriously *think* it must fail. And in any case, the real reason why it can be neither a theory about time nor a mere thought experiment is that neither of these could have the amount of weight that Zarathustra attributes to the abysmal thought.

4. A Different Kind of Eternity

It does not matter much whether Nietzsche himself, at one time or other, thought of the eternal return in temporal terms. What really matters is that a temporal reading is ultimately incoherent, and that Nietzsche’s character, Zarathustra, appears to reject it. Let us, nonetheless, briefly consider Nietzsche’s unpublished notes from 1881. These notes differ from the other passages considered so far in that Nietzsche speaks in his own voice, if tentatively. He proceeds from the following assumptions:

- (a) Time is eternal.
- (b) The set of possible events generated by the amount of force in the universe is finite.
- (c) If there were any point of time in eternity when nothing happened, nothing would ever happen after this point.⁹

⁹ This is pieced together from: KSA 9:11[148], p. 498; KSA 9:11[202], p. 523; KSA 9:11[245], p. 534; KSA 9:11[305], p. 558; cf. KSA 13:14[188], p. 374-6; *Will to Power* #1062-1066.

Nietzsche argues, roughly, as follows. Given that things are happening right now, premise (c) implies that there was never any point in time when nothing happened. Nietzsche further takes (c) to imply that there is no final goal in history, for if there was such a goal, nothing further would happen after it is reached (KSA 9:11[292], p. 553). By premise (b), only finitely many things can happen. Therefore, since time is eternal, at least one thing must happen infinitely many times. Note that Nietzsche does not introduce the assumption that time is relational, and that he does not conclude that time itself is a circle.

Now in presenting this argument, Nietzsche appears to use temporal language. He speaks of an *hourglass* being turned over *again and again*, of a ring of human existence, and of the eternal *recurrence* of all things (KSA 9:11[148], p. 498). He calls the current state of affairs a *repetition* (KSA 9:11[202], p. 523) and speaks of a circular *process* of the universe (KSA 9:11[312], p. 561). However, none of these concepts and metaphors *must* be taken in a temporal sense. And indeed, Nietzsche appears to reject a temporal understanding of eternal return fairly early on in his notes. The passage is worth a long quote:

— Let us guard against thinking the law of this circle as a result of coming to be, according to the false analogy of the circular movement *within* the ring: There was not first a chaos and then gradually a more harmonic and finally a fixed circular movement of all forces. Rather, everything is eternal, not a result of coming to be: If there was a chaos of forces, then this chaos was eternal, too, and recurred in every ring. The circle is not a result of coming to be, it is the primordial law, just like the amount of force is primordial law, without exception and transgression. *Every coming to be is within the circle* and the amount of force; hence the circles that do come and cease to be, e.g. of the stars or of ebb and flow, day and night, the seasons, are not to be used to characterize the eternal circle by false

analogy. (KSA 9:11[157], p. 502; my emphasis)¹⁰

On the face of it, Nietzsche says that the entire universe, the eternal repetition of all things that can happen, has never undergone any process of coming to be. However, what he says implies more than this. He says that nothing ever comes or ceases to be except within the circle. If by “circle” he means the circle of time, in which every event occurs exactly once, this means that the circle itself does *not* turn around in time.¹¹ This is where the animals go wrong. One must not think of circular time as a rotating wheel.

Nietzsche ends the passage quoted above by emphasizing that “the eternal circle” should not be likened to a regular recurrence of events, such as the seasons. This suggests that it should not at all be given a temporal interpretation. In a later note, Nietzsche implicitly confirms this:

A completely different eternalization – fame proceeds forward in a wrong dimension. We need to put the eternal depth in it, the eternal repeatability.

¹⁰ “Hüten wir uns, das Gesetz dieses Kreises als geworden zu denken, nach der falschen Analogie der Kreisbewegung innerhalb des Ringes: es gab nicht erst ein Chaos und nachher allmählich eine harmonischere und endlich eine feste kreisförmige Bewegung aller Kräfte: vielmehr alles ist ewig, ungeworden: wenn es ein Chaos der Kräfte gab, so war auch das Chaos ewig und kehrte in jedem Ringe wieder. Der Kreislauf ist nichts Gewordenes, er ist das Urgesetz, so wie die Kraftmenge Urgesetz ist, ohne Ausnahme und Übertretung. Alles Werden ist innerhalb des Kreislaufs und der Kraftmenge; also nicht durch falsche Analogie die werdenden und vergehenden Kreislaufe z. B. der Gestirne oder Ebbe und Fluth Tag und Nacht Jahreszeiten zur Charak[te]ristik des ewigen Kreislaufs zu verwenden.”

¹¹ The other option is that by “circle,” Nietzsche means the endless repetition of history, in which every event occurs infinitely many times. However, it is not clear why such an endless repetition would itself be circular. Nietzsche’s point seems to be that the eternal recurrence should not be compared with the rotation of a wheel.

(KSA 9:12[192], p. 609)¹²

Eternal fame, as one would usually understand it, is fame throughout an infinite stretch of time. Here, Nietzsche contrasts this temporal eternity with a different kind of eternity that is *orthogonal* to it. And he identifies this different, non-temporal eternity with eternal repeatability. If eternity is given a non-temporal sense at this point, repeatability must admit of a non-temporal sense, too. Again, the underlying idea seems to be that the eternal recurrence of the same is not itself happening in a distant past or future. The infinitely many iterations of the same do not actually happen at different times. They happen in a dimension that is, in some sense, orthogonal to time.¹³

4. Gravity

Our discussion of “The Vision and the Riddle”, “The Convalescent”, and the *Nachlass* has reinforced our previous result: Any temporal interpretation of the doctrine of eternal return must fail. We have further seen that Nietzsche deliberately attributes temporal interpretations to Zarathustra’s enemies and friends, only in order for Zarathustra himself to reject them as too superficial. Moreover, the doctrine of eternal return is characterized as deeply disturbing, so disturbing in fact that it must remain unexpressed. So we should ask: What is so disturbing about the abysmal thought?

No careful reader will have failed to notice that Nietzsche’s incomplete

¹² “Eine ganz andere Aeternisirung - der Ruhm geht in einer falschen Dimension vorwärts. Wir müssen die ewige Tiefe hinein legen, die ewige Wiederholbarkeit.”

¹³ Loeb 2018 argues, similarly, that eternal repetition should be construed as vertical and not horizontal in relation to time (p. 441), because the very moment when we accept the abysmal thought “*contains its own infinite repetition*” (p. 439). For reasons that are unclear to me, he frames this as a development, rather than a replacement, of his temporal reading of eternal return.

presentation of the doctrine of eternal return in “The Vision and the Riddle” is surrounded by an impressive amount of references to gravity. Yet only few commentators (e.g. Oger 1997, p. 8; Gooding-Williams 2001, p. 135 *et passim*) have paid attention to this. What is it about gravity that makes it so important to Nietzsche? Gravity is a force that pulls a thing towards a center that is usually external to this thing. For the most part, this force is reassuring. It makes for a stable ground on which things can rest, which they can fall back onto. Bridges, for instance, would not be possible without gravity, and bridges play an important role in the *Zarathustra*. Aside from crossing a bridge every now and then, Zarathustra speaks of a bridge that connects present and past (*Zarathustra* III “On the Three Evils” 1; KSA 4, p. 236), he describes man as a bridge to the *Übermensch* (*Zarathustra* III “On Old and New Tablets” 3; KSA 4, p. 248), and he describes received values and concepts as bridges over a Heraclitean flux (*Zarathustra* III “On Old and New Tablets” 8; KSA 4, p. 252).

On the other hand, gravity limits our options. As such, it signifies heteronomy, as opposed to autonomy. In the context of the “Vision and the Riddle”, the heteronomy in question is mainly one with respect to the past. We have seen that Zarathustra introduces the problem that the doctrine of eternal return appears to solve as follows: The will cannot will backwards, it cannot change its own past. The problem here is not simply that the will wants to will backwards but can't, as one might want to touch one's own ear with one's elbow. The problem is rather that the will, even if it is autonomous in every other respect, still tends to take the past as given. Even those of us who think of the future as entirely open and undetermined do this. The past is where we come from, what we work with, what we fall back onto. It exerts a kind of gravitational force, so that we stand on it in the same way in which a bridge rests on the ground.¹⁴ The will's problem is that as reassuring this reliance on a firm ground may be, it is incompatible with perfect autonomy. To fully become what it is, the will must “undo its past” (Gooding-Williams 2001, p.

¹⁴ Small (2010, p. 111) similarly describes past and future as forces that push and pull the “traveler” out of the “gateway”.

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Now as Loeb rightly stresses (2007, p. 88), Nietzsche nowhere says that willing backwards involves actually altering the past. Rather, it looks like willing backwards is to defy the gravity of the past by affirming it, and the doctrine of eternal return is meant to explain how this is possible. It might initially seem, as I suggested above, that it does this by actually asserting that everything that has happened in the past will happen again in the future, so that in principle, all of it can be willed. This, however, is to presuppose a temporal interpretation of the thought of eternal return. Supposing that Nietzsche does not want us to overcome the gravitational force of the past by thinking an unthinkable thought, we will have to do so by other means.

In any case, it ought to be significant that of all beings, it is the spirit of gravity who cannot bear the weight of the abysmal thought and therefore misrepresents it as a claim about time. The spirit of gravity stands for all of this: reassurance, a firm ground, the past, and a lack of autonomy. By the time of “The Vision and the Riddle”, he is already a familiar character. He is introduced in §6 of Zarathustra’s *Preface*, as the jester who jumps over the tight rope walker and causes him to fall (KSA 4, p. 21). Later on, Nietzsche describes him as “earnest, thorough, deep, and somber,” and he identifies him with the devil: “through him all things fall” (*Zarathustra* I “On Reading and Writing”; KSA 4, p. 49). We meet the dwarf one last time in *Zarathustra* IV, where he personifies the weight of memories (*Zarathustra* IV “The Welcome”; KSA 4, p. 350).

In “On Old and New Tablets”, Zarathustra tells us what the spirit gravity has created:

Where I once again found my old devil and arch-enemy, the spirit of gravity, and everything he created: compulsion, statute, necessity and consequence and purpose and will and good and evil: ... (*Zarathustra* III “On Old and New Tablets” 2; KSA 4, p. 248)

This list is remarkable because it does not simply contain things that

Zarathustra rejects. Note, for instance, that *the will* is one of them. The spirit of gravity is not his enemy because he creates things that should not be there; he is his enemy because first, he *competes* with Zarathustra in creating the same things, and second, he offers his creations as grounds for everyone to fall back onto. This is what Zarathustra rejects in “On the Spirit of Gravity”:

But he will have discovered himself who speaks: “This is *my* good and evil.” With this he has silenced the mole and dwarf who says: “Good for all, evil for all.” (*Zarathustra* III “On the Spirit of Gravity” 2; KSA 4, p. 243)

The spirit of gravity says “good for all.” As Small points out, he typically makes general statements (2010, p. 118). The one who liberates herself from gravity, in contrast, says “good for me.” Note, further, how the silencing of gravity is achieved: by self-discovery. In the beginning of the same section, Zarathustra similarly speaks of self-love:

Heavy do earth and life seem to him; and the spirit of gravity *wants* it so!
But whoever wants to become light and a bird must love himself – thus /
teach. (*Zarathustra* III “On the Spirit of Gravity” 2; KSA 4, p. 242)

The message is that we overcome gravity by discovering and loving ourselves. Just as Anaximander argues that the earth has no need to fall down because it is at the center of the universe (DK 12 A 11), Nietzsche suggests that we will become free of gravity by making ourselves the center of our values.¹⁵ In a sense, this is only to replace one kind of gravity with another one. Precisely by enabling us to defy gravity, the thought of eternal recurrence is its own heavy weight. It is heavy in a sense that the spirit of gravity cannot accept. Loving ourselves, we gravitate towards ourselves, so that we are tied down by an internal Heideggerian anchor (*Nietzsche* I, GA 6/1: 272), and no longer by an external constraint.

I think this is what is supposed to happen when we realize the significance

¹⁵ This, by the way, is how Augustine defines sin: presuming to be the center of values (e.g. *City of God* XIV 3 and 13).

of the abysmal thought. In *Gay Science* 341, Nietzsche describes two possible responses to it: One may either throw oneself down and gnash one's teeth, or one may embrace the thought as divine (KSA 5, p. 570). The first amounts to being pulled down, against one's will, by one's own weight. The second amounts to embracing one's weight, one's gravitas, by realizing the impact of one's own will. Like the eagle that deliberately moves at the speed of a falling object, we refuse to be pulled down by using our own weight to our advantage. Even more, we realize that we are, at least as much as anything else, our own center of gravity.

This kind of self-centering is a daunting task. It is no wonder that Nietzsche finds it deeply disturbing. If we are to give up all ground, everything external that we could possibly rely on, we are to become the ethical equivalents of astronauts floating in outer space. Nietzsche gives an impression of this task in his famous "God is dead" passage. In this passage, he is not simply affirming that God is dead (something that Christians have known since Jesus died); he is rather pointing out that as of yet, no one is able to deal with the *implications* of this event. Among these implications, we find the following:

What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Where is it moving to now? Where are we moving to? Away from all suns? Are we not continually falling? And backwards, sideways, forwards, in all directions? Is there still an up and a down? (*Gay Science* 125; KSA 3, p. 481)¹⁶

The point is that without any external guidance, there is no up and down any more. In the absence of gravity, we are falling in all directions at once.

All this explains what is wrong with the temporal version of the doctrine of eternal return. Zarathustra's abysmal, liberating and yet disturbing thought demands radical autonomy. To interpret this as a cosmological claim about

¹⁶ Note that in a draft version, Nietzsche adds that the death of God implies a denial of linear time: "How did we accomplish this, to wipe out this eternal, fixed, line?" (KSA 9:14[25], p. 631).

matters of fact is to misrepresent its significance. It is to take it *as given*, and this is what the spirit of gravity does. I will get back to this momentarily. For now we should note that the real task is for the will to free itself from its past, and this cannot be done by simply identifying the past with the future. It can only be done by either disregarding both past and future, or making them part of the present.

This, I take it, explains what is disturbing about Zarathustra's abysmal thought. It is disturbing because it makes each one of us the center of the universe, with no further ground to rest on. Many other interpretations of the abysmal thought do not explain this.

John Richardson (2008, p. 105) and Alessandra Tanesini (2012, p. 660), for instance, read the "eternal return" as a demand to reconcile the past with the future. This seems in line with what I said above, that we ought to make the future and the past part of the present. In most cases, however, this demand alone will not be very disturbing. There must be more to it.

Arthur Danto thinks that the abysmal thought is disturbing because it implies the impossibility of innovation (2005, p. 192; similarly Small 2010, p. 145).¹⁷ But the feeling of hopelessness that would result in this case does not look like a heavy burden. Rather, if no one can ever achieve anything, *no one* ever carries a burden. For if we can't change anything, why should we bother? Things that cannot be done (or avoided) at all are not *hard* to do (or avoid). Also if eternal recurrence were disturbing because it implies the impossibility of innovation, it would be disturbing because it implies nihilism (Heidegger, *Nietzsche I*, GA 6/1, p. 421). Nietzsche however presents it as a *response* to nihilism.

So I think that what is disturbing here must be the exact opposite of

¹⁷ In a note from 1887, Nietzsche describes the eternal return as a form of nihilism (KSA 12:5[71].6, p. 213). However, he goes on to point out that nihilism is not a necessary consequence of this thought, but only one possible attitude towards it.

nihilism. Instead of throwing our hands in the air and giving up, we are asked to take all responsibility for everything that concerns us - and this means, conversely, that we ought to be concerned only with what we can take full responsibility for.¹⁸ There shall be nothing in the past that excuses us, and no one in the future who will forgive us. We are to free ourselves from all dependence, whether limiting or reassuring, on aims, goals, and expectations. Like the child in “On the Three Metamorphoses”, we are to become “a wheel rolling out of itself” (*Zarathustra* I “On the Three Metamorphoses”; KSA 4, p. 31), with no external impetus and no predetermined direction (cf. Stambaugh 1972, p. 87 and 100). The point is not that we should accept everything as it is, it is that everything, as it is, must be what we choose and are accountable for.

We are now in a better position to see why Nietzsche does not put forward the doctrine of eternal return in his own words. If it could be *presented* as a theory, it could be *accepted* as one, that is, as a *given*. This however would be to miss the entire point of the abysmal thought. The thought demands that we free ourselves from all that is given, and therefore, no one can really think it without figuring it out on their own.

This further rules out interpretations of Zarathustra’s disturbing thought as a kind of categorical imperative. Nietzsche’s intention cannot be to provide a recipe that we can follow in order to determine what to do. If the eternal return has anything to do with Kant’s categorical imperative, it must be on a more fundamental level, namely insofar as the categorical imperative is a constitutive law of autonomy.

None of this means that we are to free ourselves from all determination. Rather, our task is to appropriate everything that determines ourselves, so

¹⁸ Richardson suggests as much when he says that Nietzsche urges us to limit our willing to the things we can will while knowing *why* we will them (Richardson 2008, p. 110); that is, while knowing how the past shaped our will.

that in the end, we determine ourselves. As Nietzsche puts it in “On Self-Overcoming”: “the one who cannot obey himself is commanded” (*Zarathustra* II “On Self-Overcoming”; KSA 4, p. 147). Liberation will be achieved by self-obedience. Self-obedience is the flip-side of autonomy, and it will liberate us. This means, in particular, that we are not supposed to simply disregard our past. The picture of the eagle pouncing downwards suggests as much: We may well do what gravity makes us do, but we ought to do it on our own terms.

5. Towards a Non-Temporal Reading

I have argued that temporal interpretations of Nietzsche’s doctrine of eternal return are necessarily incoherent. If time itself is circular, nothing can ever recur. If time itself is not circular, what recurs is not the same. I have then noted that Nietzsche surrounds his discussion of the eternal return with many references to gravity. The spirit of gravity proposes a temporal interpretation of eternal return precisely because this interpretation perpetuates the influence of gravity. By giving Zarathustra’s disturbing thought a temporal interpretation, the spirit of gravity evades the real weight of the thought: the demand to free oneself from gravity. Gravity, we have argued, represents a force that pulls us towards an external center. This force is at once limiting and reassuring. To free ourselves from it, then, is both liberating and disturbing. We have also seen that according to Nietzsche, we overcome gravity by relying exclusively on ourselves, creating our own values, and thus falling back onto ourselves. From here, it is not a big step to the idea that the eternal return of the same visualizes exactly this: The act of turning towards oneself, as opposed to defining oneself in terms of the past or the future, that is, in terms of received concepts, values, or expectations.

When Nietzsche contrasts two forms of fame, he seems to suggest that “deep” eternity is a sort of infinity in a dimension orthogonal to time (cf. Stambaugh 1972, p. 106), and he identifies eternal depth with eternal repeatability. He seems to suggest that fame for an action is eternally deep if

this action can be repeated infinitely many times. And this seems to amount to the suggestion that in order to find out which action deserves this kind of fame, one should ask what actions one would want to do again and again, infinitely many times. But the temporal language is in fact completely *optional* in this case, and we have seen that it is better to avoid it. The question is not actually whether one would do a thing again and again. (There are many things that people like doing again and again that do not deserve any fame.) The point is rather that only those actions deserve eternal fame, in the deep sense of “eternal”, whose value does not depend on anything beyond the agent. This involves two things: First, the agent must not be motivated or constrained by anything beyond the agent, and second, the agent must have appropriated enough of her environment such that all necessary motivation and constraint can come from within herself. In any case, the question is not the agent would do the same thing at a different time, but whether the agent has appropriated everything that would could possibly change her mind. Rather than asking whether we would do it again, we should ask ourselves whether we would do it under pressure, against the will of our loved ones, against the will of the majority, regardless of whether people will praise or condemn us, and so forth. To free oneself from all gravity amounts to freeing oneself from all differences that external influences might possibly make.

The “eternal return of the same”, thus understood, is an image of radical autonomy. It is eternal, in a non-temporal sense, because it does not end at a point where I could finally delegate responsibility to external factors. It is a return of the same in two senses: First, a perfectly autonomous agent must be perfectly indifferent towards external motivations and constraints, so that they are all the same for her, and she will “return to” the same conclusion no matter what. Second, the actions of such an agent will always be tied exclusively to herself, and never based on external motivations and constraints. In this sense, the return is a return of the self to itself (Stambaugh 1972, p. 102).

Let me close by pointing to yet another theme in the Zarathustra that tends to confirm my interpretation. Both the third and the fourth part of the

Zarathustra end by hammering home the claim that all joy wants “deep, deep eternity” (*Zarathustra* IV “Sleepwalker Song” 11-12; KSA 4, p. 403-4). This eternity is deep, not long (Cohen and Ulfers 2008, p. 89). In “Uses and Disadvantages of History”, Nietzsche similarly writes that “[o]ne who cannot set himself down on the threshold of the moment, forgetting all that is past, who cannot stand on one point like a goddess of victory, without giddiness or fear, will never know what happiness is . . .” (HL 1; KSA 1, p. 250). When joy wants eternity, it cannot want an eternal future or past, it must want eternity in a non-temporal sense. Yet it is a worldly eternity, for as Zarathustra says in the “Sleepwalker Song”, “the world is deep” (*Zarathustra* IV “Sleepwalker Song” 6; KSA 4, p. 400). Now in this same song, Nietzsche further associates this kind of eternity with self-love:

But joy does not want heirs, not children – joy wants itself, wants eternity, wants recurrence, wants everything eternally the same. (*Zarathustra* IV “Sleepwalker Song” §9; KSA 4, p. 402)

Zarathustra is waiting for his children (*Zarathustra* IV “The Sign”; KSA 4, p. 406), so much so that Gooding-Williams presents his hope for children as the concluding note of the *Zarathustra* (2001, p. 238-9 *et passim*). Here, however, Zarathustra realizes that no one other than *himself* can fulfil this hope. As long as his hope is one for heirs, Zarathustra will not be free from gravity, for he will remain “chained to the love of [his] children” (*Zarathustra* III “On Unwilling Bliss”; KSA 4, p. 205). In fact, however, his hope for children is a hope for the return of himself to himself in the eternal present moment. The only child that can satisfy the longing of joy is the child we turn into. If we take the “children” to signify those results of our decision that develop a life of their own, and are as such distinct from ourselves and beyond our control, the message is that we must never put our hopes in what we are not.

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