

BECOMING GODLESS: HEIDEGGER'S NIETZSCHE AND THE
ETERNAL RETURN

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ABSTRACT

Nietzsche's concept of eternal return best exemplifies his anti-theological thought, but it is often misread as either classical physics or a thought experiment. Insofar as Anglo-American and analytic interpretations reject eternal return's cosmology, their ethical implications are minimized. By contrast, Heidegger's synthesized cosmological and ethical reading is shown to be more normatively significant in framing Nietzsche's philosophy as radical atheism. However, it is also shown that Heidegger limits Nietzsche's radicalness by approaching eternal return as the notion that being as a whole returns identically. To that end, it is next argued that Heidegger's explication of the cosmology as an ethical projection is superior to scientific interpretations in analytic and Anglo-American readings, but also that Heidegger partially misreads eternal return's cosmology. It is therefore finally demonstrated that Nietzsche's cosmology actually rejects that an identical state of being returns. This finally allows for the most profound ethical implications in Nietzsche's philosophy.

DEDICATION

To my beloved Addie – I only wish I could continue to share my love for you in more precious days together. To my beloved Wang Jingjing, I would all too gladly share infinite recurrences with you. To life as a whole – that I may grow to love you ever more deeply with each new joy and sorrow.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS OF NIETZSCHE'S WORKS

AC – The Anti-Christ

BGE – Beyond Good and Evil

EH – Ecce Homo

GS – The Gay Science

GM – On the Genealogy of Morals

HAH – Human, All Too Human

TI – The Twilight of the Idols

TSZ – Thus Spoke Zarathustra

WTP – The Will to Power

Chapter 1: The Eternal Return of the Same as an Ethical Doctrine

1.1 INTRODUCTION

If God is dead, what is the nature of the knife in the hands of his killers? What structuration of the world would best epitomize the death of God, and even possibly make that death a cause for celebration? The answer may lie in the eternal return. By first understanding the merits and limitations of Heidegger's interpretation of the metaphysico-cosmological structure of eternal return and the implications that follow from it, we stand to place ourselves in a much better position to understand how Nietzsche's doctrine should be read. As we will see later, cosmological interpretations of eternal return are marginalized readings and constitute an area of the doctrine that tends to be harshly dismissed. The enduring strength of Heidegger's account is that it builds a totalizing vision of an atheist worldview that amounts to an ambitious assault on a perceived nihilism at the center of historical philosophy. Over the course of this analysis, I will try to show that failing to interpret eternal return's cosmology as a theory against the tradition of theology, or simply ignoring the cosmological details and focusing on eternal return purely as a thought experiment obfuscates its significance as a doctrine. The end result, I will hope to show, would be a version of Nietzsche that is pale and sickly next to what he *should* be. It is my hope that I can show how Heidegger paves the way for an account of eternal return that illustrates its full normative impact *qua* a philosophy of atheism. Nonetheless, in the end it will also need to be shown that his account doesn't go far enough. Hence, I will *also* argue that because Heidegger still interprets eternal return as the

return of the *same*, he finally deprives eternal return of the full normative impact it ought to have.

1.2 THE ALLEGED IMPORTANCE OF ETERNAL RETURN

As we will see a bit more clearly later, Heidegger interprets eternal return as Nietzsche's claim that all events return identically throughout eternity (Heidegger, 1984, p. 109). In comparing Heidegger's account to popular analytic and Anglo-American interpretations, at least one factor will render it simple. As we will see from here on out, most readings likewise interpret eternal return as the return of the same. However, Heidegger is distinct for the degree to which he repeatedly emphasizes eternal return's widespread importance. Heidegger directs our attention to Nietzsche's exact placement of the doctrine's first appearance in *The Gay Science*. The first communication of eternal return is followed by an aphorism bearing the ever so provocative title *Incipit tragoedia* – the tragedy begins. Heidegger declares that with the thought of eternal return, “[t]he tragic as such becomes the fundamental trait of beings” (Ibid., p. 28). Heidegger defines the tragic in Nietzsche as the convergence and affirmation of elements previously constructed as mutually opposing terms. As Heidegger puts it, “[t]he terrifying is what is affirmed; indeed, affirmed in its unalterable affiliation with the beautiful” (Ibid., p. 29). Heidegger's claim is not without textual evidence from Nietzsche's work either. When Nietzsche asks in *The Gay Science* what makes one heroic, indeed he responds, “Going out to meet one's supreme suffering and supreme hope alike” (1974, §268).

Before we wrestle with the cosmology then, it will help to examine *if* we should really care about eternal return. I believe that the significance of eternal return as an ethical doctrine can be divided into two main categories that it impacts. The first category is philosophy as a whole. The last and most important implication involves one's experience of the world in *relation* to philosophy as a whole, or that is to say in relation to the world as philosophy might theorize it through the eternal return

1.3 FIRST PRESENTATION OF ETERNAL RETURN

Interpretations of what the eternal return means typically echo Nietzsche's first presentation of the doctrine in *The Gay Science* in which no reference to any cosmology has yet been made (1974, §341):

The greatest burden. –What would happen if one day or night a demon went to steal upon you in your loneliest loneliness and say to you, “You will have to live this life - as you are living it now and have lived it in the past - once again and countless times more; and there will be nothing new to it, but every pain and every pleasure, every thought and sigh, and everything unutterably petty or grand in your life will have to come back to you, all in the same sequence and order – and even this spider, and that moonlight between the trees, even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence turning over and over – and you with it, speck of dust!” Would you not cast yourself down, gnash your teeth, and curse the demon who said these things? Or have you ever experienced a tremendous moment when you would reply to him, “You are a god; never have I heard anything more godly!” If that thought ever came to prevail in you, it would transform you, such as you are, and perhaps it would mangle you. The question posed to each thing you do, “Do you will this once more and countless times more?” would weigh upon your actions as the greatest burden! Or how beneficent would you have to become toward yourself and toward life to *demand nothing more* than this eternal sanction and seal? –

The above passage, which to my eyes represents some of Nietzsche's most chilling and powerful words, presents a devastating challenge that eternal return is to pose to the individual. The basic premise in this first presentation of eternal return invites the reader to imagine that they will (and have) relived the exact same life forever. In this hypothetical scenario, absolutely everything in world history, including one's individual life as it unfolds

from birth until death, will return as is. For the sake of argument, let us take the idea literally for now to explore some of the implications of such a concept on the world in general. I will then try to connect that to some imagined implications on one's personal life in a world where eternal return is thought of as real.

1.4 IMPLICATIONS OF ETERNAL RETURN ON A PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORLD

Eternal return has immediate implications for how we think of being as a whole. Karl Lowith pinpoints eternal return's unequivocal opposition to the following:

“...the Christian era when man believed in a progressive history determined by an absolute beginning and end, by creation and original sin at one end, consummation and last judgment at the other end - both eventually secularized into the modern idea of an indefinite progress from primitive backwardness to civilized progressiveness” (1945, p. 278).

Eternal return, with neither beginning nor end, represents the total teleological suspension of Progress. It is an overt revolt against this Christian, and later secularized, notion of successive epochal approximations of a utopian goal or culminating stage of world history. If everything returns exactly as it was and is, there can be no end to build to – there can be no culminating event, and thus there is simply life without (teleological) purpose. At least with certain interpretations of the Christian idea, one might say we are playing out the origin leading to a worldwide event of Armageddon. That would at least constitute a powerful meaning to existence, albeit for many a dark and frightening one. By contrast, without the hope of approximating to any utopian ideal or even any end times, there is simply life as a static form of being. As a static form of being, life can no longer unfold with any narrative that has an identifiable beginning or end from which meaning could be ascribed to human life. The absolute arbitrariness of life may here be the basis of dread.

1.5 ETERNAL RETURN AND AGENCY

Of course, it is not just the world at a distance that is impacted, but rather the individual's everyday life as well. This presentation of eternal return becomes powerful with a conscious awareness of its implications on individual agency. To understand why this must be so, let us briefly understand the concept of a choice. The concept of making any choice presupposes the belief in some degree of agency for the individual, or else the very notion is incoherent. To attribute the concept of decision-making to a person presupposes accepting the possibility of a range of possible choices in most situations. Such an understanding of choice, however, is impossible under this construal of eternal return because reality is "full" and complete – there is no logical space for the incoming of spontaneous events. There is no such thing as the possibility of a genuine alternative in any situation where I *seem* to have acted spontaneously, as this has been precluded by a hard determinism. As Ivan Soll writes, "[T]his version of the doctrine commits you to repeat *ad infinitum* all the logically possible alternative choices in every decision situation, *no matter how you now choose*" which entails the conclusion that one's choices are therefore "robbed of significance" (1973, p.332).

This notion of one reducible determination is exactly what one must reference to comprehend the full terrifying nature of eternal return as an ethical theory. For because I simultaneously know that *logically speaking* I have already made every possible decision (because I have already lived these choices an infinite number of times, and reality cannot be altered in this or any other time cycle), *and yet* I can have no memory of having done so, I shall proceed in full awareness that I am paradoxically equal parts spectator and executor of

all my actions. This aspect of eternal return demands one to psychologically come to terms with only *seemingly* making free choices in their life – all seemingly free choices would then be juxtaposed with an awareness of the logical impossibility of *actually* acting freely. In the words of someone who we can imagine realizing this very implication on their agency, “I had bestrode the world all my life as if I were free only to be choked by the realization that I was not, am not, and would never be.”

1.6 ETERNAL RETURN AND THE OTHER

Eternal return might also be powerfully felt when we imagine its application to others with whom we share the world. We can easily imagine eternal return being the greatest psychological burden for those who always despise life. From the perspective of someone for whom life need not even *necessarily* be filled with a particularly inordinate abundance of traumatic, tragic events for it to already (and always) be lamentable, the thought of living through the same *inherently* worthless and dreadful life eternally would be enough to cause one agonizing pain. If someone posits that life in the world is categorically bad or not worth living, eternal return would seem to bring with it the punishment of precluding any dream of being released from existence itself. The terrifying aspect for the pessimist or despiser of life in general would be the lack of escape from the world of merely fleeting pleasures and forever-inescapable pains.

Eternal return is of course also dreadful and heartbreaking for others who hate their *contingently* “bad” lives – those who might have loved life if their suffering was not of such an overwhelming degree. It is one thing for a quite satisfied person, and perhaps especially

one living in a peaceful and prosperous country, to imagine their life returning. It might even be tempting to dismiss the pessimist who hates existence writ large. Perhaps, one could think, it is poetic justice that one who simply hates life so be doomed to repeat it. For those who have suffered (or worse yet, are now suffering) egregious and uncontrollable life circumstances, the matter takes on a different level of complexity. There may be no worse fate imaginable for the most intense sufferers of the world than having to eternally live through the same life episodes without change. The simple fact of the matter is that we can certainly imagine enough scenarios where we should at the very least be sympathetic with someone's conclusion that their life was bad enough for them to not desire its exact return even once, let alone eternally. One who has witnessed a litany of atrocities and barely survived a genocidal war in their hometown might understandably find fewer things more repugnant to the intellect than the notion of living through such horrors eternally.

Hinting at the dread implicit in the return of *all* the content of the world's history, Gillespie argues that the eternal return of *everything* therefore necessarily affirms *precisely* this totality; precisely this "everything." For Gillespie, affirming anything in eternal return (any moment) would therefore mean affirming even (so typically regarded) monstrous acts such as rape and murder of the innocent (2009, p. 32). Gillespie's logic is not in error here. Every Charles Manson or Adolf Hitler would return just the same as every Ralph Waldo Emerson or Goethe, rendering them all equal in that respect. Similarly, every instance of a child dying of cancer or a town full of people being slaughtered would return just the same as a person saving a child from a burning house or one writing a magnificent poem. Because

everything returns equally, would we not have to either simultaneously affirm the worst and most mediocre in affirming the best and most glorious or else simultaneously deny the best and most glorious in denying the worst and most mediocre?

1.7 THE RETURN OF THE SMALLEST MEN

It is also hard to deny that there is something terrible about imagining the return of an always long and distressing list of miserable, petty life-deniers. For Zarathustra, it is the return of all the smallest men¹, all those who are bitter against life and incapable of affirmation that is enough to cause him great despair:

“‘Eternally recurs the man of whom you are weary, the small man’ – thus yawned my sadness and dragged its feet and could not go to sleep. Man’s earth turned into a cave for me, its chest sunken; all that is living became human mold and bones and musty past to me. My sighing sat on all human tombs and could no longer get up; my sighing and questioning croaked and gagged and gnawed and wailed by day and night: ‘Alas, man recurs eternally! The small man recurs eternally!’” (Nietzsche, 1976, TSZ III “The Convalescent”).

The effect of nausea or disgust will be strong regardless of how we might choose to understand what the “smallest man” is. It will be there regardless of how *we* (or anyone, for that matter, and this would include anyone who does not even self-identify as Nietzschean in any strong sense), might choose to define the most mediocre, self-contented and contemptible type of person; whether we consider this to be someone who slavishly pursues nothing but material wealth, someone who is dogmatically religious, or some other acknowledged type. There can be no hope of ever altering or removing the lowest imaginable type from the world we are in. Whatever the poison may be, for the smallest man to eternally return means that the smallest man cannot be overcome; the poison hath no cure.

¹ For the sake of being faithful to a reading of Nietzsche (who was admittedly a sexist), I have retained the gendered form of his writing of the term.

1.8 AFFIRMING THE PAST AND FUTURE

Heidegger's Nietzsche, however, is unwilling to rest in despair at the thought of sharing all of eternity with both the horrors of history and same cast of despisers of life and small men alike. Heidegger focuses on a particular passage in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* where Zarathustra speaks about the manner in which past and future relate to each other in eternal return:

““Two paths meet here; no one has yet followed either to its end. This long lane stretches back for an eternity. And the long lane out there, that is another eternity. They contradict each other, these paths; they offend each other face to face; and it is here at the gateway that they come together. The name of the gateway is inscribed above: ‘Moment’” (Nietzsche, 1976, TSZ III “On the Vision and the Riddle”).

In Heidegger's interpretation, the nature of the collision between past and future is inherent in one who performs actions that are simultaneously aimed toward the future and already contained in the past (in other time cycles). Whenever I act in the world (our world now, not the world of eternal return), I am doing so with some thought of an act's future consequences whether that anticipated future consequence will be seconds-removed or years-removed from the act itself. We are all future-oriented in at least a minimal sense. However, if we accept that the totality of reality cannot be altered in eternal return, every act that seems to be novel has, in fact, already happened in a previous time cycle. As we generalize to world events, the same is true of *all* acts that seemingly had far-reaching consequences. Acts that have been regarded as triggers for world wars return just the same as our personal acts.

For Heidegger, this simultaneity of past and future means crucially “accepting and affirming the past” (1984, p. 57). Eternal return challenges one to accept the totality of the

world's past because it can never be erased, altered, or overcome in any cosmological sense. Because it is not simply *my* past that will return, but rather also the collective history of the world, Heidegger's Nietzsche holds that one cannot affirm their *own* life from now (as it progresses toward the future) without simultaneously affirming the totality of history that will also return. To proclaim a love of life while knowing that it affirms not just the totality of its joys, but also the totality of all its horrors – Heidegger's Nietzsche seems to deem this necessary to affirm that which is ugliest as that which is also beautiful. It is this affirmation that seems to be what Heidegger means by eternal return as the signaling of the tragic age (Ibid., p. 29). One must affirm *both* its joys *and* horrors lest they only “affirm” life in the most superficial sense. In eternal return, there is of course also no future moment that will contain novel events, and so for Heidegger's Nietzsche the affirmation of past, *and* present, *and* future are inextricably linked by their temporal unity. This is how Heidegger can proclaim in his reading of Nietzsche that “[p]ast and future *run up against* one another” (Ibid., p. 57).

1.9 SELECTIVE ONTOLOGY: LOWER VERSUS HIGHER TYPES

Nonetheless, he is ready to insist that one needn't affirm all particularly mediocre or loathsome people as if all people were rendered equal by the fact of their collective return. Heidegger distinguishes between the low type of human being characterized as “fleeting” and the more rare higher types. It is worth quoting him at length here on this point so as to not misrepresent him in any way:

Those who do not “believe” in the [truth of the eternal return] are the “fleeting ones.” By that Nietzsche means two things. First of all, the fleeting ones are fleeing ones, in flight before magnificent, expansive

prospects which presuppose an ability to wait. The fleeting ones want their happiness right there where they can latch onto it; and they want the time to be able to enjoy it. These people who flee are fleeting in yet another sense; they themselves are without stability, are transient creatures; they leave nothing behind; they found nothing, ground nothing (Ibid., p. 131).

We must now juxtapose this passage with another in order to understand Heidegger's peculiar interpretation of what it means to be a fleeting type in contrast to something higher.

Heidegger continues thus:

The others, those who are not fleeting, are "the human beings with eternal souls and eternal Becoming and pains that tell of the future." We might also say that they are the human beings who bear within themselves a great deal of time and who live to the full the times they have – a matter that is quite independent of actual longevity. Or, to turn it around the other way: it is precisely the fleeting human being who is least fit to serve as the human being of proper transition, though appearances seem to suggest the opposite, inasmuch as "transition" implies evanescence. The fleeting ones, who do not and cannot think the thought, "must, according to their own nature, finally *die off!*" "Only those who hold their existence to be capable of eternal repetition will *remain*: and with *such* people a condition is *possible* to which no utopian has ever attained!" (Ibid., p. 131).

As Alexander Cooke notes, Heidegger emphasizes the possibility of one "hearing" the eternal return as the basis of an ontological determination (2005, p. 23). Those who cannot affirm the thought of their lives returning eternally are deemed inferior. Although everyone necessarily returns, Heidegger's Nietzsche is here arguing that not everyone returns equal - one's personal reaction to the thought of return corresponds to an ontological determination of their being as a person (as belonging either to a higher or lower type).

Heidegger's strategy is to talk about eternal return as selective ontology. With talk of "hearing" the eternal return, Heidegger is referring to what it means to fully comprehend the implications that eternal return poses to one's life. When Heidegger writes that "only the few, the rare" (1984, p. 28) will be capable of fully thinking through the concept of eternal return, he means that only a *select few* will be capable of understanding and affirming the implications that eternal return is to pose - eternal return determines the ontology of the

person who confronts it and therefore presupposes ontological inequality. “Never make equal what is unequal” (Nietzsche, 1990, TI “Expeditions of an Untimely Man” 48). Heidegger goes on further to claim that even Nietzsche was incapable of affirming eternal return completely, and that Nietzsche therefore had to construct the character of Zarathustra for whom the thought of eternal return is finally affirmed and celebrated fully. “The thought of eternal return of the same is so much the hardest to bear that no prior, mediocre human being can think it; he dare not even register a claim to think it; and that holds for Nietzsche himself” (Heidegger, 1984, p. 30). It is at least clear then that Heidegger upholds Zarathustra as one who is worthy of being considered among the highest, most admirable possible types.

Heidegger seems to have in mind then an element of hierarchy related to the thought of eternal return.

1.10 THE DECISION CRITERION

Heidegger’s distinction between higher and lower individuals becomes clearer through his explanation of the importance of decision-making. Heidegger asserts, “The *decisive* condition is you *yourself*, that is to say, the manner in which you achieve your self by becoming your own master...” (Ibid., p. 138). Heidegger’s claim is that acts in the eternal return either affirm or negate the thought of eternal return itself in decisive moments. The return of everything precludes any new determinations, so neither affirmation nor negation derive from the concept of novel actions and their consequences. For Heidegger, what remains in affirming eternal return is the possibility of possessing the will to create the totality of one's life in particular present moments. But let us not get lost now in ambiguities.

What does it really mean to create a totality of one's life in a moment? According to Heidegger, it means to recognize that whatever one is as an individual in a singular moment contains within itself the *potential* to embody a *thematic* totality of who they are, were, and will be in all of eternity. As a thematic totality, one's life can be regarded (by oneself) as encompassing a grand unfolding narrative with describable qualities that best embodied who one was as a person – much like how we can all reflect on complex figures in literature or television and film (be it Hamlet or Luke Skywalker) and reduce them to a succinct list of dominant personality traits or behavioral patterns that epitomizes the essence of their characters. As Heidegger phrases it, “If you allow your existence to drift in timorousness and ignorance, with all the consequences these things have, then they will come again, and they will be that which already was” (Ibid., pp. 135-36). Heidegger is hinting at using the thought of eternal return as a vehicle by which to regard one's life as a narrative that one could be proud of upon reflection when they consider that this narrative has the seal of eternity upon it. In other words, overarching themes under which one self-identifies in this lifetime, by virtue of the cognizance of their eternal return, can create a totalizing identity for oneself. In Heidegger's example, one will therefore have affirmed timorousness and ignorance as totalizing themes or characteristics of their identity. There is meant to be a sense of importance added to my life when I understand that the story of my life will return as is, as if Heidegger's Nietzsche is using the thought of eternal return as a warning to not create a contemptible life story that will signify what one was as a person - forever.

Implicit in such awareness then would be something like a decision criterion where I feel compelled to make certain superior choices for my life and avoid behavior of a timorous or ignorant nature and the associated thought of such life patterns defining me as a person forever. Awareness of eternal return then means having the will to create for oneself. To arm oneself against the dreaded thought of one's life being definable in mediocre or contemptible ways (as ignorant, timorous, etcetera), Heidegger's Nietzsche invites us to live with greater urgency and care for the type of person we can honestly consider ourselves to be. As Heidegger says, "And if on the contrary you shape something supreme out of the next moment, as out of every moment, and if you note well and retain the consequences, then this moment will come again and will have been what already was" (Ibid., pp. 135-36). The implication is that one represents *for all eternity* whatever one was able to create for their individual self in this particular cycle of eternity. Any meaning for oneself that I have the will to create within significant moments is done so in moments that simultaneously represent *all* moments of eternity. "Oh, that you would put from you all *half* willing, and decide upon lethargy as you do upon action. Oh that you understood my saying: 'Always do what you will – but first be such as *can* will!'" (Nietzsche, 1976, TSZ III "Of the Virtue That Makes Small"). These descriptions of "shaping something supreme" in a moment seem intentionally under-determined in Heidegger's writing. This is all the better for his interpretation - to overly specify what counts as a moment of creation would be to betray the notion of an individual creating for themselves; of truly having a will to *create* subjective notions of existential profundity or significance. Such willed creative moments would seem to be

entirely subjective and include anything then: seizing the courage to apply a radical idea or principle in a situation where all are in blissful conformity, writing counter-intuitive and politically radical scholarly works, or something as simple as experiencing a thought of awe rather than monotony during the first rain of Spring. Regardless, any one of these moments will therefore embody its meaning eternally by virtue of the fact that, as Bernd Magnus also notes, each present or “now” in eternal return is eternalized (1978, pp. 111-154).

We find a consonant view with some Anglo-American thinkers. Ivan Soll is, as far as I know, the first Nietzsche commentator on the analytic side to argue for what is now a common interpretation of eternal return as a decision criterion (Soll, 1973, pp. 322-23).² Similar to Heidegger, Soll sums it up as a practical imperative that adds importance to one’s actions by compelling the individual to perform only those actions that one would at the same time perform eternally. Soll reads Nietzsche as claiming that eternal return can either devastate us or inspire us. If we take heed of the thought that every action we performed would be ineradicable (because it would return forever), this notion (of each action’s recurring finality) might motivate us to act differently. That is to say, the thought that an act returns forever can give us greater pause when we consider the *worthiness* of an act – whether or not, given that awareness, we *still* want to perform a given act can reveal that it is (from our viewpoint) the best possible choice to make in a given situation. On the other hand, an awareness of the return of my life may psychologically motivate me to perform more

² We see this view prevail, for instance, in Brian Leiter (2002, pp. 119-20), and Bernard Reginster (2006, p. 223). Bernard Reginster, for instance, claims of eternal return that “[I]t is invoked to formulate a practical imperative and to point to a specific substantive ethical ideal” (2006, p. 223). Also, although he does not belong to the Anglo-American tradition as such, we find a very similar view in Keith Ansell-Pearson (1991, pp. 176ff.)

meaningful acts for my life; it might motivate me to act such that I fill my life with more joyous experiences and a greater abundance of (what I regard as) important or purposeful activities (Ibid.).

Let me add that by now it should be clear that there are two qualitatively different sets of acts with which to interpret such a formula. First of all, if *all* of my personal acts will be repeated an infinite number of times (and have therefore also been repeated already), this means that innocuous or meaningless acts like making a sandwich, taking money out of the ATM, and using the washroom are also necessarily implicated. Nonetheless, choosing from within this first set of acts is unlikely to make one feel strongly about the totality of their existence; such moments already pass by largely unnoticed for the vast majority of people. Rather, such acts only usually matter negatively. For most, it is only by virtue of *not* choosing to spend too many days watching insipid television programs or sitting around eating junk food that the decision criterion is significant for considering such otherwise mundane scenarios. It seems implicit within such an imperative of the will to create then that it is to apply to only a certain set of acts positively – the imperative, again, is to positively act so as to create moments deemed significant to the individual, whatever these may be from any subjective point of view.³

Regardless of the subjective nature of what constitutes a significant or beautiful moment, knowing that I am to live the same life again *ad infinitum* is supposed to act as a

³ By the logic of Heidegger's Nietzsche, with its under-determined definition of what constitutes something supreme, would we have to grant that for some rare individuals, watching television or even gorging on snacks could be construed as profound? How might we further distinguish acts of the fleeting versus rare types? This question could warrant further investigation.

constant intrinsic motivator to construct my life with greater attention to willing certain actions that create memorable, joyous experiences (or in the narrowed Heideggerian sense, that create a means by which to define and “master” oneself). Notice here the implicit premise. By focusing on the psychological awareness of each act returning as a means of augmenting the importance of each seeming choice, the implicit premise is that the awareness of an act’s eternal return augments its importance. Even though there is no memory of one’s total lived experience (in this interpretation of eternal return, I do not know how much longer I end up living, or what happens to myself or the world around me before I die), one is supposed to be motivated by the sheer notion that whatever life one ends up living will be recorded in eternity forever. Living the most joyous life possible would then theoretically turn the ugly nature of the condition of eternal sameness into a heavenly proposition, as I could rest content knowing I had just lived my life as if I had constructed an eternal (literally eternal) work of art.

1.11 THE PROBLEM WITH ANGLO-AMERICAN DECISION CRITERION THEORIES

Both Heidegger and the aforementioned thinkers may share similar views of eternal return as a type of decision criterion, but a very key difference separates them. While, as we will see later, Heidegger expounds a cosmology in Nietzsche’s work with which to defend eternal return as a physical doctrine, Soll (1973, pp. 322-23) and the like do not. While we will understand their reasons for rejecting the cosmology when we turn to that section later, for now it will suffice to note just how standard it is for the cosmology to be rejected. Bernd Magnus, who writes that “eternal return intensifies the dynamics of choice, because whatever

I choose to be, that I *shall* be for infinite recurrences” also commits himself to attempting to make eternal return “utterly indifferent to the truth value of the doctrine” (1978, pp. 111-154). Very similarly, Bernard Reginster clings to the notion of a “practical interpretation” as a merely ethical theory (2006, p. 223), and Georg Simmel also denies the cosmology of eternal return but still holds to a decision criterion in the doctrine (1991, pp. 170-72).

This intention to read eternal return purely as an ethical doctrine does irreparable harm to its normative power as a decision criterion. I agree with Maudemarie Clark who argues that the very thought of eternal return can only make certain acts more significant if the actual theory of eternal return “is or may be true” (1990, p. 252). She rightly adds that claiming Nietzsche proposes a decision criterion requires interpreting him as being concerned with the truth of eternal return’s cosmology (Ibid., p. 252). The psychological effect of knowing every act returns can only be intensified if I *believe* that the act will return, or if I have some reason to think my belief is true. Ivan Soll claims, “[I]f consideration of the mere possibility of eternal return can psychologically involve “the greatest burden,” the importance of any proof of the doctrine’s truth is diminished” (1973, p. 325). That being said, the less I believe in the doctrine as a distinct possibility, the less meaningful it quickly becomes. Otherwise, merely imagining it to be the case entails a rather superfluous decision criterion. The merely hypothetical scenario that my every decided act would return entails caring about each future act no more than (for this atheist writer, and for many Christians for that matter) the purely hypothetical scenario of an afterlife in Hell where I would suffer indescribable

agonies and burn alive forever for having failed to act as a pious Christian and confess my sins.

It may be counter-objected that Nietzsche himself writes of the psychological power of possibility. Nietzsche *does* state in one of his notes, “Even the *thought of a possibility* can shake us and transform us; it is not merely sensations or particular expectations that can do that! Note how effective the *possibility* of eternal damnation was!” (1881, XII, number 65). It is true enough that the possibility of eternal damnation even today is *still* probably effective and terrifying for certain believers, but there is an obvious difference between a possibility that is strongly considered and internalized (even without definite proof, or on strong faith alone) and one that is only casually imagined and dismissed as fantasy. Even consideration of eternal damnation as a possibility at least comes at the conclusion of a certain cosmology that is learned, however elementary the interpretation of scripture may be (an almighty creator who threatens eternal punishment if certain moral rules are not strictly obeyed, etc.). If eternal return’s cosmology is ignored or refuted, its basis as a decision criterion is evacuated of any urgency.

1.12 MERITS AND LIMITATIONS OF AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW OF ETERNAL RETURN AS AN IDEAL

Clark offers an alternative ethical interpretation for the individual that is not so obviously harmed by its rejection of any cosmology. Clark references the same passage in *The Gay Science* to suggest that we use the hypothetical scenario of eternal return strictly as a conceptual device to retrospectively assess the attitudes we have developed. These “attitudes” here refer to our thoughts on life as a whole – the extent to which we find life worth living

amidst our experiences with both joy and suffering. As she puts it, eternal return is an ideal to “become the kind of person who, in the situation described, would consider the demon’s message divine” (1990, p. 248). If we respond to the demon’s message with enthusiastic joy, it reflects a life-affirming, positive attitude toward ourselves and the lives we have lived. On the other hand, despondent misery or outrage at such a proposal would imply a self-loathing attitude or hostile disposition toward life (Ibid., p. 251). Clark’s idea then is to utilize eternal return as a mirror into one’s disposition toward life. This involves imagining eternal return in a strictly pre-analytical way, or “suspending all doubts concerning its truth or conceivability” (Ibid., p. 268/270).

Clark’s interpretation avoids the immediate pitfalls of the Anglo-American thinkers’ decision criterion theories, as it does not require eternal return to be actually or even possibly true. Even so, as an interpretation of eternal return’s ethical consequences, I find it somewhat wanting. As (nothing more than) a test of one’s disposition toward life, eternal return’s scope is extremely limited as a result. Such a focus on the individual’s disposition therefore has no application at all to the other or being as a whole. However, even just from the perspective of an individual, it renders the doctrine anticlimactic given how Nietzsche describes it. “The thought and belief is a burden which, in comparison with all other weights, oppresses you far more than they do” (Nietzsche quoted in Heidegger, 1984, p. 122). Why would a mere ideal be *so much worse* than any other burdensome thing I could think or believe? That would seem dramatic even for Nietzsche. What’s more, although it is still true that one could in principle utilize the demon’s message as a reflective test of our feelings about existence *in*

addition to something like a decision criterion, it is certainly not self-evident that it succeeds more strongly *qua* a test of our feelings than imagining the most typical following scenario: that this life I have lived thus far will be the only life I will ever have the chance to live. It is not obvious to me that eternal return, as no more than an ideal, is a *substantially* more powerful means of assessing my feelings about life than my reaction to the thought that I will be no more than a corpse beneath the soil for all eternity once I have breathed my last breath and thought my last thought.

1.13 THE HIGHEST SIGNIFICANCE OF HEIDEGGER'S DECISION CRITERION: AN INTRODUCTORY ANALYSIS OF NIHILISM IN PHILOSOPHY

While Heidegger's reading escapes the problems we saw associated with divorcing the decision criterion from eternal return's possible or actual truth (because he at least has a cosmology to underlie his decision criterion), I believe a similar criticism of Clark could still apply to his and perhaps any other decision criterion concepts in general. Similar to what I have said against Clark's reading of eternal return solely as an ethical ideal, it is not clear to me that focusing on the thought of living the same life innumerable times should be a *substantially* more powerful intrinsic motivator for my life decisions than the notion of living only one life and then departing from existence into nothingness. It seems to me somewhat more of an assertion that the thought of living the same life forever should be more determinative of preferential life choices than that of having only one precious chance to live any life at all.⁴ Fortunately, the Heidegger reading goes much further than motivating certain

⁴ This could be a good topic for a separate paper. The question would concern which is more intrinsically motivating for creating the best possible life for oneself – the thought that one's life choices shall return as a reflection of the choices they've made throughout eternity versus the thought that one will only have one chance to make certain life choices until

choices in our everyday decision-making solely on the basis of their permanence. We saw earlier a consonance between Heidegger and the other commentators regarding decision-making and the amplified importance of acts, but this could imply to the reader that locating other Nietzsche scholars' versions of the decision criterion within a Nietzschean cosmology (as Heidegger does) would effectively serve to put their decision criterion theories on equal footing with the implications found in *Heidegger's* decision criterion. On the contrary, I believe Heidegger's decision criterion goes importantly beyond these other commentators and contains a more important implication, a more profound basis for affirming one's actions, than what we have thus far discussed.

Heidegger locates what I believe are the most significant, because most far-reaching, consequences of affirming eternal return by arguing that eternal return, against the sweeping tradition of Platonism (and later almost all philosophy), represents the struggle against nihilism writ large. A brief understanding of the combined readings of Heidegger and Nietzsche's arguments about the origins and history of nihilism in Western thought will be useful for helping us better understand the connection Heidegger's Nietzsche makes between nihilism and decision-making.

Heidegger offers a useful description of nihilism for now as the negation of being as a whole (1984, p. 173). What it means for being as a whole to be negated will become clearer as we cover Heidegger's explanation of Platonism and its effects on Western philosophy. For now, we can say that *Nietzsche* believes being as a whole is negated – or closer to how he'd

they are vanquished by death. Is the return, for instance, of a truly terrible life decision *more* terrible than the thought of wasting an opportunity for a better choice that therefore disappears forever?

phrase it, that life is rejected - insofar as our transient world is judged to be bad in some way. For Nietzsche, this means that the delights and joys in the elements of becoming - sensuality, creativity, destruction and change - are stifled, shamed and consequently drained in favour of unchanging ideas of truth. Nietzsche believes, "The will to semblance, to illusion, to deception, to Becoming and change is deeper, more 'metaphysical,' than the will to *truth*, to reality, to Being" (Nietzsche quoted in Heidegger, 1984, p. 74). When Nietzsche references "the true" here, he is referencing the true in the Platonic sense of a supersensuous realm of Ideas.

How does all of this relate to how philosophy structures the world through its theories? In an important passage, Heidegger says that Platonism is the defining philosophy of the west for its distinction between the privileged world of Ideas and the world of appearance, change and death that we actually experience as embodied persons. For Heidegger, in Platonism the former represents the world of Being, and the latter, the world of Becoming.

As Heidegger claims in his own philosophical observations, Platonism begins the tradition of conceiving the Being of beings in terms of the permanence of presence (1984, p. 162). Insofar as the transcendental realm of Ideas is infinite, or true and real by virtue only of itself, it is superior. Such a tradition, Nietzsche claims, will privilege the unchanging realm, the world of Being, for its stable and enduring character as that which is real. The sensuous world, the world of Becoming, can then only be an inferior manifestation of true Being that, because it is subject to things like decay, flaws, and death, always distorts the perfect form of every being.

By further implication, Nietzsche also argues that the world of Becoming, or what we may call life or the world we experience, is debased under Platonism. It is reduced to being dependent on the world of Being for its truth, which means it is judged as inferior to what is truly real. That which is real, in this case, is the form or essence of singular beings. What makes life inferior are the powers or forces (the exact term does not matter for now) of a finite world that inevitably bring imperfection, destruction, and death. A denial to any degree of these forces or phenomena is tantamount to denying life entirely given that all such forces (creative and destructive) found within the world of Becoming are inevitably part of make life what it definitively *is*. Nietzsche summarizes it poignantly:

They kill, they stuff, when they worship, these conceptual idolaters – they become a mortal danger to everything when they worship. Death, change, age, as well as procreation and growth, are for them objections – refutations even. What is, does not *become*; what becomes, *is* not... (1990, TI “‘Reason’ in Philosophy” 1).

In Heidegger’s estimation, Platonism stands as the strongest conditioning systematic worldview that determines how subsequent philosophies evaluate and conceptualize the world. Platonism remains “determinative inasmuch as philosophy posits *specific conditions* for the possibility of being as a whole and for man as being within this whole. Such conditions set their seal on being. That which first and last *obtains*, that which accordingly constitutes the condition of “life” as such, Nietzsche calls *value*.” (Heidegger, 1984, p. 171). Every philosophical worldview is a valuation about life that it founds itself upon, and for Nietzsche nihilism is the defining value (though a purely negative value) that plagues the history of Western thought since the popularization of the two-world doctrine (reality versus appearance, or a world of Being versus a world of Becoming). Nihilism, as we stated at the

onset of this section, is consequently the negation of being as a whole. It is a value about the worthlessness of transient life; *the* founding value of Western philosophy that essentially says “No” to life. It is, as Heidegger calls it, “the fundamental development of history as such” that is later popularized and propounded by religious thought and the bodies of work of philosophy that are influenced by it (Ibid., p. 174). When the world of Becoming is implicitly deemed inferior for the qualities (like suffering, change and destruction) that deprive it of perfection and stability, such an influence renders the same final judgement about life, as Nietzsche understands it. “In every age the wisest have passed the identical judgement on life: *it is worthless*” (Nietzsche, 1990, TI “The Problem of Socrates” 1). In every such case then where Nietzsche believes a concept implies this sentiment, implies its nihilistic value about the worthlessness of life (such as in the two-world doctrine), he will reject it on that very basis.

Although one might laugh at the very idea of *explaining* why an historically entrenched nihilism is dreadful (what *good* things, after all, could possibly follow from the belief that life is worthless?), Nietzsche provides interesting details of *specific* implications that he believes our thoroughly nihilistic history has left us. An understanding of these implications will also serve to highlight the significance of Heidegger connecting his decision criterion to the *struggle* against nihilism. To that end, Gilles Deleuze provides a helpful outline of the different stages of nihilism (and their debilitating effects) explained in Nietzsche’s work.

Negative nihilism means the immediate consequence of life taking on a purely negative value. This happens, as we saw, by the positing of values that are deemed higher

than life – “fictions” (articles of faith or pure reason beyond the transient world) like the most overt theological ideas of God as well as similarly structured “other-worldly” notions like the realm of forms, etc. where a supersensible realm is real *beyond* the immediate world and takes logical and ethical priority *over* the immediate world. The transient, natural world of actuality becomes mere appearance in comparison, a comparative fiction, and thus these values are implicitly conceived as superior to the appearances and imperfections we encounter in daily life. “Values superior to life are inseparable from their effect: the depreciation of life, the negation of the world” (Deleuze, 1983, p. 147). To conceive of the superiority of a “true” world bequeathing knowledge, goodness, and perfection beyond the transient world presupposes a degree of contemptibility for life. “[T]his entire fictional world has its roots in *hatred* of the natural (- actuality! -)” (Nietzsche, 1990, AC 15). The transient world, a place of comparative deception, wickedness, and ugliness is now as inferior to the totality of these higher values as the totality of higher values is superior to *it*. In contradistinction to the affirmative will to create found in Heidegger’s Nietzsche, the creation of a superior other-world presupposes a will to *nothingness*. A will to nothingness is life becoming aversive to itself - a rejection of life as anything that could be worthwhile (life is nothing, empty), and a denial of the transient world as a basis for willing any positive meaning in one’s existence. The will turns against life inasmuch as it wants its ideas to presuppose permanence rather than transience. It is not a case of *non-willing*, but rather a type of willing that is nihilistic in kind. Nietzsche says as much when he writes, “. . . a will to

nothingness, an aversion to life, a rebellion against the most fundamental presuppositions of life; but it is and remains a will!" (1990, GM III 28).

It is philosophy as a whole that retains the theological character of a world that is depreciated in the name of values antithetical to life. The picture becomes complicated with Nietzsche's famous announcement that God is dead (and we, the once pious societies of the past, have "killed" him) (Nietzsche, 1974, GS §125), signifying that these higher values are no longer believed in with the same strength of conviction and piety, or are at least no longer as determinative of the conscious self-identification of the social subject (such as we see in the secularization of European societies during the Enlightenment period and onward). This second, *reactive* nihilism, reacts by trying to create new values in its place; values like the utilitarian project of securing maximal happiness (or goodness, or any other variation) for the greatest number, epochal human progress through practical reason, and other such theories that attempt to be recognized as universal and necessary truths. Hence, Nietzsche claims we are left now with the *last men* of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. "Let me speak to them of what is most contemptible: but that is the *last man*" (1976, TSZ Prologue 5). The *last man* represents societies after the more *overtly* theocentric periods of history that now espouse theories that could replace theological explanations of existence. "We have invented happiness," say the last men, and they blink" (Ibid.). At this stage, philosophy is still hostile to life insofar as it is guided by the desire for the world to have a determining center that explains existence, a transcendental signifier, in the absence of the old faith in God.

The last, inevitable form of nihilism is *passive*. At this stage, large swaths of people denounce *all* willing – even a will to nothingness. Passive nihilism represents the full collapse of the will where the will itself wants to disappear rather than posit anything at all. It requires no further coaxing or conditioning through values of any sort; it simply awaits death in weary hatred of existence (Deleuze, 1983, p. 149).

Previously, the will had at least experienced an initial moment of creativity with the formulation of both overtly theological and later more secular values. However, with passive nihilism the will is finally and fully exhausted:

All is empty, all is the same, all has been! . . . All our wells have dried up, even the sea has withdrawn. All the soil would crack, but the depth refuses to devour! Alas, where is there still a sea in which one might drown . . . Verily, we have become too weary even to die (Nietzsche, 1976, TSZ II “The Soothsayer”).

As Nietzsche here argues, it is not rage against life that results finally from an internalized nihilism as much as a miserable fatigue. Life becomes so overwhelmingly bleak and pointless, so wanting and empty, that existence defeats people entirely.

1.14 THE HIGHEST SIGNIFICANCE OF HEIDEGGER’S DECISION CRITERION: THE CONNECTION BETWEEN NIHILISM AND DECISION-MAKING

Insofar as nihilism means that life is devoid of positive value and meaning (i.e. worthless), it also serves the feeling that there is no meaningful *goal or purpose*. However, we know that eternal return *already* presupposes such things as meaninglessness and goal-less-ness through its anti-teleological and circular character. As Nietzsche writes regarding eternal return, “Let us think this thought in its most frightful form: existence as it is, without meaning and goal, yet inevitably recurring; existence with no finale to sweep it into nothingness: eternal recurrence” (Nietzsche quoted in Heidegger, 1984, p. 174). By

making important decisions in full awareness of their lack of any possible goal or innate meaning that could derive from a teleological end, one is presupposing the nihilistic character of their actions (in eternal return) (Heidegger, 1984, p. 175). By confronting the conclusion that one is always and inexorably in close proximity to nihilism vis-à-vis the simultaneity of nihilism and decision-making itself, the important decisions that create who one is (and in a context of eternity, already were and will be) will also therefore create a meaning for what *nihilism* is (more on this in a moment). This implication might already sound as if it could easily apply to decision criterion concepts from the Anglo-American thinkers we looked at – in other words, regardless of any specifics it might seem to signal nothing more than a different attitudinal approach to one's actions. Immediately, we need to note a subtle but important point. In the absence of a cosmology, the Anglo-American versions of the decision criterion can only connect nihilism to decisions in a superficial sense. One can only ever *imagine* that their choices lack true freedom, and one can only imagine that their lives will return unchanged forever. With Heidegger's Nietzsche, to believe in eternal return means believing existence really *is* circular and innately meaningless and goal-less. Both Heidegger and the aforementioned thinkers have a decision criterion that can involve an attitudinal shift, but Heidegger's Nietzsche always invites an attitudinal shift based upon a cosmological implication. It carries far greater weight as a result, as it surely means more to actually believe something and act differently in response rather than just role-play. It is comparable to a person with a terminal disease determinedly living their last days with joy versus a healthy person who decides to merely live *as if* they were facing imminent death.

1.15 THE FURTHER SIGNIFICANCE OF HEIDEGGER'S DECISION CRITERION: OVERCOMING NIHILISM THROUGH DECISION-MAKING

Paradoxically, eternal return both consummates and overcomes nihilism in the moment of decision. The life-affirming person is one who begins by recognizing nihilism in the nature of their actions: one recognizes that each act is intrinsically goalless and purposeless insofar as each act can literally do nothing to change the course of eternity. Because I can never remember the entirety of my life as I have lived it eternally, it merely *seemed* that I was actually choosing for the first time which university to attend, or which country to move to, etc. With awareness of the eternal return, I now know that in innumerable past lives I already decided such things, and that I can therefore never produce actions with novel consequences for my life or the world writ large. Only by this notion of nihilism being fully thought through and absorbed into the awareness of a moment's decision, is the decision at once therefore one that fully accepts nihilism on the most personal level.

At the same time, Heidegger's Nietzsche envisions one for whom this awareness does nothing to psychologically cripple one and prevent one from acting *as if* they could create, *as if* their lives have not already been lived and created an infinite number of times. One recognizes nihilism as that which is true of being as a whole in the confrontation with the thought of eternal return, and yet by virtue of the fully cognizant mind that ceases to submit to the usual connotations with which nihilism flattens the will, one is already creating a new meaning for nihilism that will no longer be incommensurable with a will to create for oneself. This is how Heidegger can say that "[T]he thought of return is to be thought only in conjunction with nihilism, as what is to be overcome, what is already overcome in the very

will to create” (Ibid., p. 175). One acknowledges that being as a whole is devoid of any possible goal or purpose but also creates as if the opposite were true all while constantly *maintaining* and *affirming* awareness of this truth. To affirm decision-making in full awareness of a reality that is literally nihilistic means to affirm and celebrate life in the face of such nihilism, and this goes against traditional philosophy inasmuch as philosophy has come to a conclusion of nihilism as the result of its *rejection* of life. One overcomes nihilism by affirming that it is an inextricable part of eternity. “My formula for greatness in men is *Amor Fati*: that one should not wish things to be otherwise, not before and not after, in the whole of eternity” (Nietzsche, 1992, EH “Why I Am So Clever” 10).⁵

1.16 LIMITATIONS OF HEIDEGGER’S DECISION CRITERION

Even with this important emphasis on the relation between individual decision-making in eternal return and nihilism in the tradition of philosophy in the west, Cooke rightly notes that in Heidegger’s reading it is still *mostly* the attitudinal experience that is *altered* by the thought of eternal return. While one’s reaction to being (including the smallest men that occupy the world) can be changed, being and the world itself (including the smallest men) can *never* change. Nothing can actually remove the smallest men from being nor thereby remove nihilism from the world – they are only psychologically overcome (2005, p. 23). Heidegger makes that clear enough. “It is not merely that another series of happenstances unfolds; what is different is the *kind* of happening, acting, and creating. Color, the very look

⁵ *Amor fati*, or “loving fate,” could also of course be applied to the notion of one’s personal life (and the world around them) returning exactly the same, but I find it carries the greatest profundity here in its connection to cosmological nihilism given what we have said about the normative limits of the decision criterion on the *sole* basis of every given act’s permanence.

of things, their *eidos*, presencing, Being – this is what changes. ‘Deep yellow’ and ‘incandescent red’ begin to radiate” (Heidegger, 1984, pp. 131-32). One’s *immediate relation to being* is transformed, but *being as a whole* is not.

Heidegger’s aforementioned emphasis on individual decision-making, through his glorification of the moment, means that most of the implications that Heidegger finds in eternal return itself are still rooted at the level of one’s relation to existential phenomena.⁶ To be sure, this is not at all insignificant – we saw that the connection between decision-making and nihilism was rather profound. Even so, this is somewhat unfortunate for how it limits the transcendental potential of the doctrine, as what is most at stake is one’s personal understanding of what being is rather than the structure of being itself. By extension, we are limiting the power of Nietzsche’s thought to *transform* the nature of the world, or transform the way we structure the world in our theories. This becomes clearer as we examine the following.

1.17 HEIDEGGER’S CRITIQUE OF PHILOSOPHY: BEING AS PRESENCE

Heidegger presupposes a limit to the radical character of eternal return when he situates Nietzsche in a Western philosophical tradition that he (Heidegger) harshly criticizes. We will not need to argue for or against Heidegger for the following. It will suffice to just briefly understand his reading of the history of philosophy to contextualize his critique of Nietzsche. It is well-known to anyone familiar with Heidegger that he considers the Being of beings to be the fundamental thought that must be determined by any philosophy. Heidegger argues

⁶ I am aware that I am perilously close to uncharitable treatment of Heidegger, so let me add some acknowledgement of his reading here. To be sure, he did at least specify that an ontological determination resulted (higher versus lower types) from the individual’s reaction to eternal return.

this by first explaining that inquiry into what being is, inquiry into the nature of being, has proceeded in two ways. The first historical determination of being comes from Parmenides who claims that being simply *is* – it is permanence and presence. On the other hand, being can also be determined, as it is by Heraclitus, to be that which *becomes* – from this point of view it is therefore best understood as perpetual flux and self-unfolding change (Ibid., p. 200). Heidegger, as we already saw, implicates philosophy from the time of Plato onward, and metaphysics in particular, for continually conceiving being as presence and thereby dividing the world into the Platonic distinction between a world of Being and a world of Becoming (Ibid., p. 174).

1.18 CONNECTING HEIDEGGER'S CRITIQUE TO NIETZSCHE AND ETERNAL RETURN

Finally critiquing Nietzsche, Heidegger argues that the problem with the eternal return is that Nietzsche is unwittingly using the concept to create his own theory of being *even though he thinks it is a theory of pure becoming* (Ibid., p. 35). According to Heidegger, Nietzsche's eternal return *attempts* to think of being as that which is really only becoming – the circular character of eternal return is meant to overcome metaphysics by moving away from any notions of a permanent world of being. Nietzsche tries to accomplish this, so says Heidegger, by conceiving of the eternal return as a theory that concerns itself solely with the transient world of becoming. There is only this finite world of becoming that returns forever as the eternal return, and so only becoming is real.

Heidegger claims that unbeknownst to Nietzsche, the eternal return actually represents the culmination of the Platonic tradition. Heidegger argues that with the eternal return,

Nietzsche fuses both historical determinations of being into one. Insofar as eternal return has one determined state that perpetually returns and therefore permanently *is*, it still expresses being as permanence and presence. At the same time, the moment of decision expresses momentary, fleeting creativity within the greater context of permanent being. Whenever one creates something in a given moment that, by virtue of the forever-returning totality of existence, is therefore whatever it is *in that moment* for all eternity, one is stamping being with the momentary character of becoming. Insofar as a solitary act of mine seems to create some novel meaning for my life, it encapsulates the becoming of existence as that which is change and creation. At the same time, insofar as the totality of existence can never change in eternal return, even that act of becoming is actually just a part of being. For *me*, because I cannot remember having ever acted in a past cycle of time, a momentous decision feels like a novel instance of the changing world of *becoming*. In actuality, it is but another instance of the same *being*. My act has actually already been performed; what seems like becoming, what seems like change, is really just another example of static being insofar as my act (and all others) has been performed an infinite number of times and will be performed again infinitely. “The “momentary” character of creation is the essence of actual, actuating eternity, which achieves its greatest breadth and keenest edge as the moment of eternity in the return of the same” (Ibid., p. 203). Nietzsche, it is claimed, merely *thinks* he is producing a theory of pure becoming through the eternal return. He merely *thinks* he has eliminated the two-world doctrine that divides life into a world of Being and a world of Becoming. Heidegger believes that in actuality, Nietzsche has provided another answer to the question of being that

incorporates *both* determinations with which metaphysics has concerned itself. As a result, Heidegger claims Nietzsche actually maintains the Platonic divide between a world of Being and a world of Becoming. Being is split between moments of a creative will, which could be said to represent the world of Becoming, and the unchanging totality of events under eternal return that could be called the world of Being (Ibid., p. 199).

It is on the basis of this characterization of Nietzsche as the last metaphysician that Heidegger de-radicalizes Nietzsche as a philosopher. “[P]recisely because it seems to eliminate the Platonic position, Nietzsche’s inversion represents the entrenchment of that position” (Ibid., p. 205). Heidegger turns eternal return into merely another theory of being, and consequently Nietzsche is read as no more than the last philosopher in that tradition, however radical he (and eternal return as a theory) is from within the strictures *of* that tradition.

Chapter 2: The Eternal Return of the Same as a Physical Doctrine

2.1 THE BASIS OF HEIDEGGER'S CRITIQUE: INTRODUCTION TO HIS INTERPRETATION OF NIETZSCHE'S COSMOLOGY FOR ETERNAL RETURN

To understand why Heidegger interprets eternal return as an ethical theory from the viewpoint of all events returning identically, we must turn to his interpretation of the cosmology. If Heidegger is right that eternal return is best read as the return of the same, it will ultimately mean that Nietzsche has not created a theory that is as successfully anti-theological as my argument contends it is. It will mean that Nietzsche's philosophy cannot remove the smallest men and the nihilism that they embody because it cannot transcend the philosophical tradition that spawns them. In the following cosmology section, we must address whether or not eternal return has a cosmology that entails a determination of being as the return of the same.

Let us first preface any cosmological claims for eternal return with an understanding that in keeping with eternal return as a primarily anti-theological concept, Nietzsche is opposing his cosmology to ones that contain theological overtones. In the following, I will try to show that Heidegger is misguided in his attempt to explicate the cosmology as a basis for concluding that Nietzsche posits the eternal return of the *same*. Nonetheless, the value of Heidegger's reading of the cosmology is that it will help us to situate the cosmology within a broader framework - Nietzsche's ethical project of subverting the theological *weltanschauung* by asserting a new form of life where God can be overcome. It is this ethical project rather than any logically proven metaphysical arguments that I believe best explains the cosmology,

and finally eternal return itself. Nietzsche states, for instance, “When will all these shades of God cease to darken our paths? When will we have a nature that is altogether undeified! When will we human beings be allowed to begin to *naturalize* ourselves by means of the pure, newly discovered, newly redeemed nature?” (1974, GS §109). In a similar manner does he write in *The Will to Power*: “It is still the old religious way of thinking and desiring, a kind of longing to believe that *in some way* the world is after all like the old beloved, infinite, boundlessly creative God – that in some way “the old God still lives” ... (1968, §1062). As I will try to show through the following exegesis, the cosmology that concludes with the theory of eternal return, rather than an attempt at a series of logically necessary truths or empirical claims, should be read as posits that present Nietzsche’s most aggressively atheistic manner of framing the world – a framing that helps us imagine the world in a radically new way by expunging theistic notions.

2.2 HEIDEGGER’S NIETZSCHE ON TRUTH – AGAINST THE TWO-WORLD DOCTRINE

To establish a broader context for the cosmology, Heidegger refers to an interesting passage in *The Will to Power* wherein Nietzsche characterizes truth as “a kind of error without which a certain species of life could not live” (Ibid., §493). That is, truth is not taken to refer to a representation in the mind that correctly corresponds to the world or some feature in it. Nietzsche is highly skeptical of such truth, but his argument is not mere skepticism. Rather, truth is taken to refer to a belief that enables or serves a certain form of life. As Heidegger puts it, “[T]hus truth and what is true are not first determined subsequently in terms of a practical use merely accruing to life; rather, truth must already prevail in order that

what is alive can live and life as such can remain alive” (Heidegger, 1979, p. 55). This peculiar characterization frames truth as that which manifests historically – as a set of contingent beliefs arising out of ethical, rather than logical, necessity (Ibid., p. 57).

Heidegger’s Nietzsche insists that philosophy, inasmuch as it has failed to acknowledge its own historical contingency, has also failed to acknowledge the historical contingency of the premise that truth can accurately be called correct representation. In other words, truth was never really *discovered* as correct representation so much as just *inferred* as correct representation. This inference was the result of a preceding estimation of *value* (Ibid., p. 57). According to Heidegger’s reading, Nietzsche holds that the essence of truth is an estimation of value that only then subsequently serves as the basis for an understanding of truth as correct representation. What, it must be asked then, was the valuation upon which this (historically contingent) sense of truth as correct representation arose? According to Heidegger, Nietzsche’s interpretation of the two-world doctrine derives from his critical reading of Plato (Ibid.). Plato shapes the metaphysical and epistemological standard of Western philosophy as a whole when he makes a very clear distinction between the *ontos on* (true being or that which matches with the essence of being and can be called its ideal form) and the *me on* (the external appearance of the *ontos on*). The *me on* is a sensuous instantiation that can manifest only as an imperfect form. Every sensuous instantiation of, for instance, a triangle fails to match the perfection of the “true being,” or ideal form of a triangle – a figure with three perfect lines whose lines add up to 180 degrees. The *me on* is an instantiation, that is, of what for Plato is the *pure* form known as the *eidōs* (the idea). The table that one sits at

would accordingly be an imperfect instantiation of the pure form of the table (its essence in purely abstract form, or the “tableness” of a table). All tables can be considered “real” tables in that they are instantiations of this form, but they remain always and only imperfect expressions. With such a two-world account, truth is defined as that which correctly represents some feature of an ideal realm of pure form. As a result, debates over the essence of truth refer to whether a representation is correctly corresponding to the *eidos*.

Heidegger explains that Nietzsche’s account of truth goes against the preceding Platonic view by basing itself on a different valuation of life. That is to say, if truth is indeed correct representation, it is *only so* because it has historically been maintained as such for its ethical purpose. What this means is that the sense of truth is not necessary *a priori* but has been deemed necessary because a certain way of life historically founded on certain valuations has made it so. As Heidegger says, “The essence of all beings is posited from the very beginning as value in general” (Ibid., p. 57).

The valuation in question that produces the preceding account of truth is the distinction between a true and an apparent world – this is precisely why Nietzsche feels compelled to attack it (Ibid., p. 58). As we saw in the ethics section, Nietzsche holds that such an account (of truth) denigrates life and leads to nihilism (see pages 22-28 of this essay) – hence Nietzsche’s disgust with such a valuation as a basis for understanding what truth is.

Besides attacking the two-world doctrine for its denigration of life, Nietzsche further chastises truth as correct representation for what he perceives as a means of escaping personal responsibility. “One positively wants to repudiate one’s own authority and assign it to

circumstances” (Nietzsche, 1968, WTP §422). Nietzsche views the belief in eternal truths as a means of denying the role of human authorship involved in such truths. Mind you, this is not to suggest that Nietzsche is a voluntarist like Sartre. For Nietzsche, our beliefs are inevitably conditioned throughout history and not at all a straightforward matter of exercising personal freedom by choosing them or creating them *ex nihilo* (Nietzsche, 2003, BGE §16)⁷. For Nietzsche, regardless of the factors that might influence us, to believe that truth is something that accurately describes the world really means passively receiving (allegedly) discovered truths about existence and consequently forfeiting one’s own powers of creativity and personal authority (however conditioned and limited they may be) to create our own concepts.

2.3 HEIDEGGER’S NIETZSCHE ON TRUTH: BEING IS BECOMING

Nietzsche takes a radically different turn with his own approach to truth. In place of any notion of accurate belief as *discovering-what-is-true*, Nietzsche defines belief as what Heidegger coins a “*taking-to-be-true*” (believing in what is represented as if it were true even though you take universal truth to be an illusion) (Heidegger, 1984, p. 124). For Nietzsche, believing is *not* an activity through which we transcend the world of appearances by ascertaining eternal truths. Rather, because the truths that people believe are in fact prescriptions for a certain form of life, our beliefs *create* and *maintain* a certain order of existence rather than reflect it. We can therefore only “take” something to be true, as truth is primarily an *ethical* and subsequently *creative* endeavour rather than primarily logical and

⁷ See Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1990) for Nietzsche’s most detailed account of how certain values have been conditioned since the historical rise of Judaism and Christianity.

descriptive. At this juncture though, does not Nietzsche risk self-referential incoherence by construing truth as an illusion that is merely taken to be true and yet simultaneously holding to the *truth* of the very claim (that there is no truth)? According to Heidegger, there is no danger of incoherence here, as he claims that Nietzsche is just consciously privileging a valuation that prioritizes the transient world we live in and precludes any other-worldly notions. Insofar as he has stated that truth is a vehicle for human beings to assert and preserve a certain way of life, Nietzsche's alternative account of truth implies historical contingency rather than correct representation. "A belief, however necessary it may be for the preservation of a species, has nothing to do with truth" (Nietzsche, 1968, WTP §487). To argue that truth is whatever *a particular* species needs to survive implies that beliefs will be prone to change depending on the particular people and circumstances. We saw, for instance, that the prominence of Platonic philosophy has sprung from what Nietzsche considers a nihilistic form of life.

To support his interpretation, Heidegger refers to a passage from *The Will to Power* where Nietzsche laments that by following the Platonic tradition and others that create a two-world doctrine, "We have made the 'real world' not a world of change and becoming, but one of being" (Ibid., §507). Against this Platonic, and indeed *theological*, subordination of becoming to being, Heidegger claims that Nietzsche attempts to construct the world as one in which *being* is really just *becoming*. In Heidegger's reading, it is this emphasis on becoming that is therefore central to Nietzsche's philosophical position. While a conception of truth as correct representation may have become historically reified, Heidegger's

Nietzsche would claim that an ethical commitment to the transient world of becoming presupposes moving away from the notion that concepts can ever represent a truth that is fixed and secure (as correct representation would have it). Heidegger interprets Nietzsche's characteristically dramatic statements like "There is no truth" to be a direct challenge to traditional philosophy's tendency to create a valuation of being as a set of fixed and static entities (Heidegger, 1979, p. 66). Nietzsche thus does the reverse by conceiving of being as becoming and reconfiguring truth accordingly. Because Nietzsche asserts that the world is to be understood as becoming, "Truth would then be incorrectness, error – an "illusion" (Ibid., p. 64). Nietzsche's counter-valuation of becoming over being attacks the notion of truth as correct representation. Truth, it is so alleged, should not be viewed as that which is discovered and held to be true of an essentially unchanging true world set against one of appearances. Nietzsche instead commits himself to the sensuous world of becoming in the interest of eliminating any supersensuous world of being. In rejecting the valuation that produces an alternative world of being and defines truth as correct representation, what remains is the world of becoming and contingent beliefs. With the sensuous world of becoming, truth as correct representation is rendered an illusion and truth is *only* a taking-to-be-true.

2.4 ETERNAL RETURN AS A PROJECTION

Nietzsche's separation between the valuations underlying the order we impose on the world and the logical necessity or truth of that order sets the stage for Nietzsche to posit a new form of life – a decidedly atheist one:

The falseness of a judgment is for us not necessarily an objection to a judgment; in this respect our new language might sound strangest. The question is to what extent it is life preserving, species-preserving, *perhaps even species-breeding* (Nietzsche, 2003, BGE §4, emphasis added).

Nietzsche's cosmology is constructed with this conscious purpose in mind of demonstrating what he takes to be ethically superior, species-breeding (because life-affirming) implications. In lieu of his rejection of truth (as correct representation), eternal return needn't be read in the narrowest sense as Nietzsche's attempt to accurately report how being as a whole is – it is not a matter of reading eternal return's cosmology as Nietzsche somehow trying to *mirror* how the universe is actually structured. His preceding account of truth would be exceedingly pointless if he were attempting any such thing. Rather, we may take his cosmology as offering one possible way the universe *can* be thought with its attendant ethical implications also showing us why it's a superior form of life to create. To that end, Heidegger's reading paves the way for a reading of eternal return as an ethical *projection* designed to achieve an atheist world structure.

Against the notion that eternal return could be deduced from empirical data, Heidegger further asserts that we cannot arrive at being as a whole by means of a chain of particular facts or “constellations of facts aligned in terms of cause-effect relations” (1984, p. 129). Instead, as Heidegger says, “We come to being as a whole always and only by means of a leap that executes our very projection of it, assisting and accomplishing that projection in its process” (Ibid., p. 129). In keeping with his interpretation that Nietzsche rejects the notion of deducible static facts, Heidegger ascribes to Nietzsche the notion of this “leap” as an initial statement Nietzsche deploys in order to aggressively assert an atheist picture of the world.

According to Heidegger, this projection of how the world *is*, as the theory of eternal return in

Nietzsche's work, is in fact simply stated. For Heidegger, Nietzsche's claims about force, space, and time are subsequent "posits" designed to cohere with and substantiate that initial projection, the mere assertion, itself. Heidegger writes:

"Is the principle of eternal return disclosed by way of a deduction from prior propositions asserted of the nature of the world? Or does not the very essence of the world first become palpable *as* an eternal chaos of necessity by means of the determination of the world totality as one that recurs in the same?" (Ibid., p. 116).

Such a move by Heidegger in the interpretation of eternal return's cosmology renders Nietzsche's initial characterization of the world as eternal return arbitrary precisely because Heidegger, echoing Nietzsche, claims that the world does not disclose any such universal truth of itself. Heidegger readily admits the arbitrariness that results. "To posit the nature of the world in terms of the fundamental character of eternal return of the same is hence purely arbitrary if the world totality does not really disclose such a basic character—if such a character is merely attributed to it, foisted onto it" (Ibid., pp. 116-17). Here I must remind the reader of something crucial. While the initial projection of the world as one that is eternal return is, as Heidegger just said, arbitrary inasmuch as Nietzsche is merely "foisting" such a character upon it at the start without logical necessity, it is not done randomly without sophisticated reasoning. To say it again, the matching assertions by Nietzsche amount to an attack on a theistic vision of the world and its values that privilege being and construct the two-world doctrine. The assertions amount to Nietzsche's ethical alternative. As a cosmology, it will rely merely on having a set of coherent assertions that match with the initial projection of the world as one of becoming - Nietzsche's proposed atheist alternative to theistic cosmologies. It is Heidegger who can be credited with inviting us to think through the

cosmology of eternal return in terms of pure possibility – a notion of possibility that is inextricably linked with its ethical conditions for an atheist worldview. It is likewise Heidegger who accomplishes this by situating a reading of eternal return within a larger framework that begins its assault on theology at the originary level of truth itself.

First, Heidegger's groundwork will help us assess each *specific* concept, each subsequent positing of the initial projection of eternal return, within Nietzsche's cosmology to see how they reveal more and more of Nietzsche's perspective. This will next allow us to better understand Nietzsche's supposed reasons for making claims concerning the return of being. Now that we have an established context from Heidegger's interpretation of Nietzsche's conception of truth, engagement with Nietzsche's cosmology must take us to an account of the concept of force in Heidegger's Nietzsche. The concept of force is really at the center of the cosmology of eternal return, as it characterizes the nature of what, exactly, is alleged to return in any cycle – the being as a whole that is allegedly to return. Accordingly, the significance of Heidegger's interpretation of eternal return as a physical doctrine will depend greatly on satisfactory treatment of what force *is* according to Nietzsche.

2.5 NIETZSCHE'S ANTI-THEOLOGICAL COSMOLOGY: FORCE AS THE DEFINITION OF BECOMING

To understand what force is, and why it is so important for Nietzsche, we first need to take a step back and briefly appreciate what he is specifically opposing *with* the notion of force. For Nietzsche, a chief problem arises in the common deed/doer distinction. According to Nietzsche, very early on in one's life one is seduced by the notion that the human person constitutes a substantial entity with the power to produce effects as the efficient cause.

Nietzsche claims this happens primarily due to the frequent use of the grammatical pronoun “I,” which gives us the psychological sense of this notion of a self that is independent of the deeds it performs. Accordingly, Nietzsche claims that such a notion leads to us extrapolating from subjective experience and growing accustomed to thinking of *the world in general* as though it were comprised of “things” controlled by the law of cause and effect (1968, WTP §503). Like Hume, Nietzsche is highly skeptical of our supposed knowledge of efficient causes. “We have absolutely no experience of a cause” (Ibid., §551). Nietzsche points out the phenomenological example of how when we think, we do not actually exert control over whether or not the thought comes to us – the “I” is not the *cause* of thinking. He thus states, “The “apparent inner world” is governed by just the same forms and procedures as the “outer” world” (Ibid., §477). We do not sense, and we certainly do not literally *see*, efficient causes in either the “outer” (phenomenal) world or “inner” (psychical) “world.”

In what will foreshadow the arrival of the notion of force, Nietzsche proposes the following as an alternative:

That one should take the doer back into the deed after having conceptually removed the doer and thus emptied the deed; that one should take doing something, the “aim,” the “intention,” the “purpose,” back into the deed after having artificially removed all this and thus emptied the deed (Ibid., §477).

The consequences are what inform the nature of what Nietzsche will call force. Such implications, which are far-reaching, include the following:

Grasped that the “subject” is not something that creates effects, but only a fiction, much follows. If we no longer believe in the effective subject, then belief also disappears in effective things, in reciprocation, cause and effect between those phenomena that we call things. There also disappears, of course, the world of effective atoms: the assumption of which always depended on the supposition that one needed subjects. At last, the “thing-in-itself” also disappears, because this is fundamentally the conception of a “subject-in-itself”. But we have grasped that the subject is a fiction. The antithesis

“thing-in-itself” and “appearance” is untenable; with that, however, the concept “appearance” also disappears (Ibid., §552(b)).

Nietzsche surmises that giving up the notions of “subject” and “object” as independent entities releases us from the notion of substance altogether, and any modification of it that may be posited – spirit, gods, atoms, and even the notion of matter altogether. “We have got rid of materiality” (Ibid., §552(d)).

What remains, finally, is Nietzsche’s alternative concept of *force*. Force is Nietzsche’s name for the alternative way of framing what exists in place of things-in-themselves, atoms, appearances, and any other derivation of the notion of a substance. He explains further:

Duration, identity with itself, being are inherent neither in that which is called subject nor in that which is called object: they are complexes of events apparently durable in comparison with other complexes – e.g., through the difference in tempo of the event (rest – motion, firm – loose: opposites that do not exist in themselves and that actually express only variations in degree that from a certain perspective appear to be opposites) (Ibid., §552(c)).

From the outset, force constitutes Nietzsche’s picture of the world of so-called “things.” Instead of viewing phenomena as stand-alone objects, or things-in-themselves (that can simultaneously stand in as examples of effects from causal subjects-in-themselves), Nietzsche views existents as parts of a greater process of flux and change – manifestations of force that do not imply the existence of any substantial entity underlying the actions they perform. To use Nietzsche’s example, we do not need to posit a substance of “lightning” to the activity of the flash of lightning itself (1990, GM I 13). This even applies to people and the qualities they are said to possess, such as in the case of a strong person. Nietzsche wholly opposes the notion that there is a substance (a person) in possession of an accidental quality (strength) that it may not otherwise use or have. Strength, rather, *is* that which one formerly called the effect. Strength is not a substance with the characteristic of being able to overcome

or perform action *x* or *y*. It is the effect, the act itself, *of* overcoming, *of* doing *x* or *y*. It is a doing rather than a mere being. Force means looking at what we called *things* so that we understand them as *just* these manifestations, *just* these processes of appearing and occurring, and nothing more. As he explicitly states, “Processes as entities” (1968, WTP §655).

By also asserting the nature of the *relation* between different quanta of force, Nietzsche further maintains the concept of force as one that precludes God. He assails the notion that the totality of force constitutes the universe as a *unity*. Nietzsche expressly asserts that force does *not* equate to any notion of a unitary world. “It seems to me important that one gets rid of *the* universe, of unity” (Nietzsche quoted in Conway and Groff, 1998, p. 217). In keeping consistent with force as that which moves away from the notion of substances under the law of cause and effect, Nietzsche is careful to specify the impossibility of any notion of an *unconditioned* force that logically precedes the others insofar as it grounds or unifies a plurality of forces. In his words, “One would not be able to refrain from taking it as the most serious court and baptizing it God” (Ibid.).

Against the idea of causal unity, every force is instead stated as always being in a relation with another force. When we look at seeming “things” or “objects,” Nietzsche suggests that we think of each of them as particular assemblages of numerous forces - *quantities* of force in mutual “relations of tension” (1968, WTP, §635). That is, every form of force (what we previously considered a “thing” or “object”) actually includes numerous forces within itself - every force is always in a relation with another force from which it differs as either stronger or weaker. As these relations of force interact with each other, some either come to prevail

over others or come to be dominated by them. Whether a particular assemblage of forces (that makes up a form) is strong or weak depends on its quantitative sum of either predominantly stronger or weaker forces within itself. “Might all quantities not be signs of quality?...The reduction of all qualities to quantities is nonsense” (Ibid., §564). The more precise implication of this relation will be clearer when we turn to the concept of will to power, but for now it suffices to show that for Nietzsche the world is “unified” *only* insofar as it is a totality of ubiquitous force.

To help us further understand more nuances of the anti-theological thread underlying Nietzsche’s concept of force, Heidegger provides us with notes dating around 1883-84. By setting Nietzsche’s assertions within a context that opposes the theological nature of the world, we can understand why Nietzsche makes certain further assertions. We can comprehend why he would insist, for instance, that force should be thought of as finite. “We insist that the world as force dare not be thought of as being unbounded—we forbid ourselves the notion of an infinite force as incompatible with the very concept ‘force’” (Nietzsche, 1883-4, XII, number 94). Because force can be understood more narrowly as Nietzsche’s primary theoretical component of a truly atheistic world-vision, we can understand his opposition to notions of infinite quantities because it would allow for one to posit a substance. That is, Nietzsche chastises any conception of force as infinite because it implies the possibility of an enduring substance (i.e. God) from which an unlimited flow of force may *derive* as its cause. In his words: “Infinitely new becoming is a contradiction; it would

presuppose an infinitely *growing* force. But *from what* should it grow! Whence does it nourish itself, nourish with surplus!” (Nietzsche quoted in Conway and Groff, 1998, p. 217).

Accordingly, Nietzsche goes further and adds that force undergoes neither augmentation *nor* diminution (XII, 1883-4, number 90). Nietzsche is talking about the quanta of force in the world – the finite *totality* of force that constitutes the world. Because Nietzsche is trying to create a theoretical framework that is atheistic, he must safeguard against arguments that would emphasize the possibility of anything with the power to supervene on what exists in the world. Accordingly, force must be described as neither increasing *nor* decreasing amidst the mundane occurrences of birth and death, creation and destruction, in the world. As Heidegger’s point here clarifies, such a narrow description of force allows a characterization of the world (as force) that precludes collision with anything that the world is *not* (1984, p. 88). Heidegger rightly interprets the claim of incompatibility between infinitude and force as Nietzsche positing that force is taken to be something determinate and “firmly defined in itself” (Ibid., p. 87).

To further clarify the positing above, force is determinate and defined in itself insofar as it experiences neither augmentation nor diminution and therefore does not depend on any concept outside itself to define itself and be real in this sense – it need not reference anything *but* itself. If such a notion of force does not experience augmentation or diminution by virtue of any creation or destruction, then the forms of force that appear do not presuppose the existence of a Supreme Being that *qua* a first cause could be said to have brought life into existence. In the same vein, a sum total of force that suffers no such diminution means that

the destruction of forms do not presuppose any Supreme Being that *qua* an infinite source has control and/or dominion over the world in which forms of force appear. Ergo, the echo of God grows fainter and fainter.

Heidegger also explains Nietzsche's conception of the relation between the finitude of the world and the possible forms that force takes within it. For now, let us be clear on something. These "possible forms" are all simply the specific beings that come into existence (the entities-as-processes that Nietzsche calls force). Heidegger specifies that these different forms are only *virtually* innumerable, or that they are merely uncountable in practice (Ibid., p. 89). Nietzsche seems to say as much when he writes, "The number of positions, alterations, combinations and concatenations of this force [is], to be sure, quite enormous and in practical terms *'immeasurable'*, but in any case it is still determinate and not infinite" (1883-4, XII, number 90). Nietzsche also rejects elsewhere the notion of an "innumerable quantity of states" (Ibid., number 97). In other words, the totality of force "has only a 'number' of possible properties" (Ibid., number 92). Therefore, there is nothing in the impossibility of an innumerable quantity that controverts its actual uncountable nature in practice. At this point, Nietzsche is repeatedly and determinedly emphasizing the finitude of force as a concept that encapsulates the world as one that contravenes the "infinite, boundlessly creative God" (Nietzsche, 1968, WTP §1062) of theological theories.

2.6 NIETZSCHE'S ANTI-THEOLOGICAL COSMOLOGY: INFINITE TIME

If force returns, what is the nature of the space and time in which it returns? Heidegger attempts to expound Nietzsche's conceptions of space and time⁸ together, a conceptual pairing that will come to be crucial for setting up the eternal return as Nietzsche's anti-theological theory par excellence. Contrary to what we will see when we turn to his concept of space, Nietzsche posits time as actual and real. "But, of course, the time in which the universe exercises its force is infinite; that is, force is eternally the same and eternally active" (Ibid., number 90). This unbounded, actual time, as Heidegger rightly says, is what Nietzsche grasps as "eternity" (1984, p. 90). The different forms that force take in the world come to be within an infinite stream of time. What then is the precise significance of infinite time here? The more precise significance of this will be clearer later, but if time is posited as infinite, this means first of all that a quantitatively unchanging sum of force literally has an unlimited duration of time to experience all logically possible transformations and changes.

How though could infinite time, one may wonder, not involve a theological ground?

Much more will be said about this in the first so-called proof of eternal return, but for now we can say that this concept of infinite time is important for Nietzsche for the sake of imagining how different forms could occur without an external substance or source to create them. In essence, Nietzsche has devised a way to imagine all the forms of force continually appearing in the world, to be "eternally active," without the notion of a Supreme Being entering into his constructed universe. As we will see in more detail later in our examination of the first of the

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See Robin Small (2010) for a thorough investigation into Nietzsche's thoughts on time throughout his body of work.

“proofs” for eternal return, the very notion of infinity allows force to be “eternally active” and avoid getting appropriated by theological notions.

2.7 NIETZSCHE’S ANTI-THEOLOGICAL COSMOLOGY: THE REJECTION OF SPACE

Contrary to time, Nietzsche rejects space altogether. He posits space as a bounded “subjective form,” maintaining that the supposition of “infinite space” is entirely false (XII, 1883-4, number 97). Against the notion of real space, Nietzsche is asserting that space is but a subjective construct imposed on the world. He also further stresses, “Space first emerged by virtue of the supposition of an empty space. There is no such thing. All is force” (Ibid., number 98). In Nietzsche’s cosmology, space is rejected in both traditional senses as either empty *or* infinite. While this turn in the cosmology may appear random or perplexing at first glance (especially considering that time was posited as both real *and* infinite), it turns out to be a surprisingly cagey move on Nietzsche’s part. Were Nietzsche to assert that force merely *occurs* in (any) space, this would leave open the logical possibility of metaphysical assertions of other substances or causal agents also existing at the same time. St. Augustine, for instance, concludes that God must have created space even as he wonders where God could have existed prior to creating it. Anselm, another famous Christian thinker, asserts that God can occupy *every* space (Cauchi, 2009, p. 25). Rather than imagine that there is a certain quanta of force *alongside* or *surrounding* a space that might *also* contain the one substance God, Nietzsche asserts that there is only ubiquitous force, the definition of which we have already seen is antithetical to the notion of substances like God.

Does not this discussion of force, time, and space-as-force now *still* seem insufficient for a conclusion of eternal return? Indeed, were we to stop here, there would seem to be a conceptual element missing for the eternal return to make full sense. Why, after all, would such forms specifically become in perpetuity? What would drive any forces to transform in any specific manner at all such that they become throughout eternity? To understand how all these forms of force continually appear in the world, and to understand the normative significance of them appearing within infinite time, Heidegger turns to Nietzsche's concept of will to power. Will to power, we will see, shall tie together these seemingly disparate (anti-theological versions of) concepts of space and time we have been examining into one totalizing theory of eternal return. With eternal return as our conclusion, we will then finally have the proposed final nail in God's coffin.

2.8 NIETZSCHE'S ANTI-THEOLOGICAL COSMOLOGY: FORCE AS WILL TO POWER IN THE ANGLO-AMERICAN AND ANALYTIC READINGS

We have thus far been discussing force, but to further describe the exact character of every form *of* force, Nietzsche employs the theory of will to power. "The *victorious* concept 'force', by means of which our physicists have created God and the world, still needs to be *completed*: an *inner* will must be *ascribed* to it, which I designate as 'will to power' (Nietzsche, 1968, WTP §619). Will to power, Heidegger acknowledges, is an important departure from past conceptions of the will (1984, p. 37). Heidegger is wise to recognize this, as Nietzsche makes it clear enough that he is not conceiving of the will as a faculty of the soul, or as that which effects consequences as a cause. "The 'inner world' is full of phantoms and false lights: the will is one of them. The will no longer moves anything, consequently no

longer explains anything – it merely accompanies events, it can also be absent” (Nietzsche, 1990, TI “The Four Great Errors” 4). “There is no such thing as a will” (Ibid., 1968, WTP §46).

As for the specific details of what will to power might then mean, there is perhaps no concept in all of Nietzsche more prone to debate and a wide range of interpretations. While we cannot possibly cover the enormous scope of literature on that topic here, it should be noted that most analytic interpretations of Nietzsche derive a variation of the psychological reading provided by Walter Kaufmann.⁹ Kaufmann denies that will to power is a metaphysical theory and instead interprets it as “essentially an empirical concept arrived at by induction” that explains individual behaviour in terms of the drive for self-aggrandizement. Kaufmann's interpretation claims that Nietzsche posits will to power as a monistic explanatory principle of human psychology in which all empirical instances are merely *quantitatively different* expressions of this one universal drive (1968, p. 204). As O'Brien notes, at one point Kaufmann's reading was “almost completely dominant in America” (O'Brien quoted in Clark, 1990, p. 5). Indeed, the influence of Kaufmann is apparent in several subsequent American readings. John Bernstein criticizes will to power precisely according to the Kaufmann interpretation, as he views will to power as Nietzsche's

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For further variations of the psychological reading, see Metzger (2009), Gillespie (2009), Rosen (2009), Ansell-Pearson (2009), and Soll (2012). For readings that deviate from this trend and may have been more influenced by the Heideggerian interpretation we are exploring, see Nehamas (1985), Richardson (1996), Danto (2005), and Haar (2006). In particular, Klein (1997) and Williams (1999) offer novel interpretations that are neither *strictly* psychological nor cosmological in any sense previously theorized, but that rather interpret will to power as a type of thought experiment or metaphor with normatively significant implications.

reductionist effort to re-define the quest for happiness as a psychological desire for the ultimate feeling of power (*machtgefühl*) (1987, p. 53). Maudmarie Clark offers a slightly more nuanced view, resisting the idea that Nietzsche intends will to power as the empirical hypothesis that *all* human behaviour is motivated by a desire for power. Nonetheless, she does not depart that radically from the psychologistic nature of Kaufmann's reading, as she still contends that will to power can illuminate large areas of human behaviour if we understand "power" as "the ability to do or get what one wants" (1990, p. 211). Satisfaction of will to power is, according to Clark, a sense of the effectiveness of one's actions in the world (*Ibid.*, pp. 211-12). And in another move that at least still retains the focus on the willing subject, Rex Welshon interprets "power" in Nietzsche as that which means striving to perfect one's activities and passions (2004, pp.180-81). These are all admittedly just sketches. The broader point is that Heidegger will break from any such psychologistic readings where the emphasis is on will to power as an explanatory psychological principle of the willing subject – where Nietzsche is read as a philosopher-psychologist attempting to do nothing more than ground the origins of subjective desire and explain certain human behavior.

2.9 THE PROBLEM WITH THE ANGLO-AMERICAN AND ANALYTIC READINGS OF WILL TO POWER

The chief problem with asserting will to power as a primarily psychological theory is that it presupposes some form of a unified subject who wills. In effect, such a presumed subject would depend on a more classical conception of the will that "sees in the will the cause and source of our actions" (Haar, 1971, p. 9). We have already seen that Nietzsche repudiates such a view. The very nature of the various psychological readings fails to accord with

Nietzsche's claims that such so-called "immediate certainties" like the will, the subject, and cause and effect are metaphysical superstitions (2003, BGE §16). In fact, Nietzsche is particularly critical of the notion of a unified subject for the distorting simplification it renders on every act of willing. For Nietzsche, every act involves the will both commanding and obeying. Insofar as in every act of will there is a *command* for some such willed act that is then *obeyed* insofar as the act is carried out, Nietzsche goes as far as claiming that the synthetic concept of the subject is merely used to disregard such complexities and associate the willing subject solely with the affect of command (Ibid., §19). It is to Heidegger's credit that he recognizes in this case that Nietzsche does not subscribe to the notion of a unified willing. Here he quotes Nietzsche from *Beyond Good and Evil*. "Above all else, willing seems to me something *complicated*, something that is a unity only as a word; and precisely in this one word a popular prejudice lurks which has prevailed over the always meager caution of philosophers" (Nietzsche quoted in Heidegger, 1984, p. 39).

2.10 HEIDEGGER'S ALTERNATE READING OF WILL TO POWER

In Heidegger's interpretation of Nietzsche, the term 'power' is a locution *inseparable* from the term 'will.' "[W]ill is nothing else than will to power, and power nothing else than the essence of will" (1984, p. 37). However, if power is the essence of will, what is the meaning of a phrase like will to power? Here we are advised by Heidegger to keep in mind, as we just noted above, that will to power is partly a response to Schopenhauer's idea of a pure, unified willing:

"Does the expression "will to power" then have no meaning? Indeed it has none, when we think of will in the sense of Nietzsche's conception. But Nietzsche employs this expression anyhow, in express

rejection of the usual understanding of will, and especially in order to emphasize his resistance to the Schopenhauerian notion” (Ibid., p. 41).

According to Heidegger, Nietzsche regards all life as “power,” as what is synonymous with every act of willing. Against the notion of a unified will, Nietzsche insists that there is *merely* the action of willing. Further, what is always willed is the power that is internal to every form of force – its intrinsic capabilities of enhancing itself to the utmost degree possible of what it can do or be. What is therefore emphasized is a notion of constant becoming. Whether it manifests as a life form growing beyond its physical state, or a person willing the creation of an idea, forces constantly seek to overcome their current states rather than just preserve them. As a will that has now been conceptually transformed into willing as the drive for power, the will to power is conceived as force striving without any alternative purpose to expand its capabilities as much as it can.

Heidegger further remarks that this condition of striving is meant by Nietzsche to be *inexhaustible* rather than ever arriving at a final state. “Willing is mastery over . . . , which reaches out beyond itself; will is intrinsically power. And power is willing *that is constant in itself*” (Ibid., p. 41, emphasis added). Every form of force is inexhaustible in its characterization as will to power. What is willed is power as an end in itself, but one that is a perpetually deferred end. Now obviously an object like a chair cannot try to become other than it is, so we need not think of such farcical examples. Nonetheless, even objects are comprised of what we typically called matter. This “matter” then is really just an assemblage of forces, and for Nietzsche, this too has the character of will to power. Because all willing is the expression of power, which is inexhaustible in its pursuit to be other than it is, will to

power is simultaneously a structuring principle of transformation and change positing that force must *always* grow, expand, or become beyond itself. Will to power, in essence, is structured as the *permanetizing* of the process of becoming in things.

In a passage from *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche also emphasizes the *cosmological* character of will to power:

“[G]ranted that one could trace all organic functions back to this will to power and could also find in it the solution to the problem of procreation and nourishment – they are *one* problem – one would have acquired the right to define *all* efficient force unequivocally as: *will to power*” (2003, §36).

Rather than limiting will to power to any one “entity” (such as human persons), Heidegger is therefore right to interpret will to power as Nietzsche’s basic characterization of *all* life: as the essence of all beings in the world (1984, p. 25). “All effective force is nothing other than will to power” (Nietzsche, 2003, BGE §36). Will to power, as rightly interpreted by Heidegger, means that *all living beings* in the world constitute themselves by transforming themselves into something more (1984, p. 61). A category of “all living beings” would certainly seem to exclude inanimate objects like rocks and pine cones. To say it again though, Heidegger has already noted that Nietzsche describes force proper as will to power, which would also then need to include all the forces that make up all the different entities-as-processes we see in the world. In particular, Heidegger focuses his attention on another passage in Nietzsche that also emphasizes this cosmological character of will to power:

-what man wants, what every smallest part of a living organism wants, is an *increase of power*....Let us take the simplest case, that of primitive nourishment: the protoplasm stretches its pseudopodia in order to search for something that resists it – not from hunger but from will to power. It then attempts to overcome this thing, to appropriate it, to incorporate it. What we call “nourishment” is merely a

derivative appearance, a practical application of that original will to become something *stronger* (1968, WTP §702).

This particular passage also helps clarify an earlier point made about forces always being in relations of tension. Even the protoplasm is a plurality of forces contending for dominance and superiority. In the given example it is expressed as the protoplasm appropriating or incorporating what initially confronts it as alien. The resistance that the protoplasm encounters, an expression of a relation between the stronger and weaker forces, is inseparable from the expression of its will to grow beyond itself. If we use a different example, the same logic applies. Even imposing a new idea means confronting the resistance of a prior idea or mode of thinking to which it is opposed. Resistance is a presupposition of power, and this is why Nietzsche must originally posit that forces are in qualitatively differing relations rather than equal to each other.

Lastly, this ubiquitous and inexhaustible cycle of continual becoming (creative and destructive), as what is meant by the term “power,” is posited as the *only* goal of willing. “Power says nothing else than the actuality of will” (Heidegger, 1984, p. 63). The aim or goal of the will is something internal to it as a principle of form – power as a “goal” of the will means aspiring for nothing that is *external* to the will such as wealth, physical dominance, or political tyranny. External goals as bases of power would presuppose a will that is parasitic on reified values and concepts rather than determinative – one which conforms rather than creates and maintains rather than overcomes. Will to power would negate itself by definition and be synonymous with the will to nothingness we saw earlier (see pages 25-27 of this

essay). “Power as the essence of the will and not as its goal” (Heidegger, 1979, p. 52). Will to power, above all, is *not* a justificatory terroristic concept.

By now we know that Nietzsche posits that the world is only one of becoming. Given what we have just discussed, it should also be clear how will to power can be interpreted by Heidegger as the key concept that epitomizes Nietzsche's *cosmology* of becoming. Because, in Heidegger's estimation, Nietzsche states that so-called being is *becoming*, this presupposes a constant tension within every form of force. Becoming can only “be” insofar as it is growing beyond that which it is. In other words, a form of force with will to power always resists the character of a “presencing, subsistence, permanence, withstanding disappearance and atrophy” (Ibid., p. 85). For Heidegger, will to power is unique in that structurally it does not reduce the process of becoming to a permanent state of being. Because will to power's moments of creating, striving or transformation *always* presuppose their own overcoming or opposition to themselves, will to power represents a favorable alternative to truth as correct representation. The static form of the *eidos*, the stillness of the supersensuous, is replaced by the continual movement of the sensuous world and eternal becoming of life. For Heidegger, will to power is the epitomizing concept that captures “true truth” as a “transfiguring semblance – a “shining forth of new possibilities” (Ibid., pp. 126-7).

2.11 THE CONNECTION BETWEEN WILL TO POWER AND ETERNAL RETURN IN HEIDEGGER'S READING

Will to power, as a theory that describes the nature of force's becoming, is what Heidegger believes finally determines eternal return as “[t]he way in which being as a whole is (1984, p. 109). It is also here, for reasons that will be clear much later on, that I believe

Heidegger is mistaken in his attempt to read will to power as the final posit that interprets eternal return as the eternal return of the *same*. Heidegger first says the following:

Because the world totality is finite in the configurations of its becoming, although immeasurable in practical terms, the possibilities of transformation in its collective character are also finite, however much they appear to us to be infinite, because unsurveyable and hence ever novel” (Ibid., p. 110).

We already examined the finite nature of force. However, it is because force has the character of will to power that every manifestation of it constantly changes by virtue of its nature as will to power to overcome itself. Because force is infinitely driving forward to become (something more or other-than) but has a finite number of possible configurations, Heidegger concludes that “The advance and progress of cosmic occurrence into infinity is impossible. Thus the world’s becoming must turn back on itself” (Ibid., p. 109). This “turning back on itself” supposedly happens through force (i.e. with the character of will to power) being characterized as limited combinations occurring within infinite time. With the aforementioned character of will to power, not even the exhaustion of every possible number of combinations of force would lead to force stopping at a final state. According to Heidegger’s reading, the only thing left would therefore be for a finally exhausted set of all possible combinations to eventually *recombine*. Hence, Heidegger is confident to read Nietzsche as claiming that these forms would *necessarily* reappear. In other words, all the forms of force have the character of will to power and therefore naturally strive to become something new. However, because a finite quantity of force can only produce so many different possible forms of itself, force cannot become different *new* forms forever. Instead, force eventually re-combines the same way and re-creates the *same* forms as before. For

Heidegger, will to power is the last key concept in Nietzsche's cosmology that makes the world paradoxically become forever only to become exactly the same.

2.12 THE FIRST LOGICAL "PROOF" OF ETERNAL RETURN: A FURTHER ASSAULT ON THEOLOGY

With all of this analysis complete, we are finally in a better position to assess Nietzsche's alleged *proofs* for eternal return to see if we should conclude along with Heidegger's reading that Nietzsche is asserting that a sum total of force returns as the same. Nietzsche allegedly constructs his first proof for the eternal return of the same in §1062 of *The Will to Power*:

If the world had a goal, it must have been reached. If there were for it some unintended state, this must also have been reached. If it were in any way capable of a pausing and becoming fixed, of "being," then all becoming would long since have come to an end, along with all thinking, all "spirit." The fact of "spirit" as a form of becoming proves that the world has no goal, no final state, and is incapable of being (1968).

If one accepts Nietzsche's assertion that time is infinite, it is a simple matter. To wit, because there has already been infinite time for becoming to reach its goal, and it hasn't, as beings are still constantly changing and becoming (throughout the duration of *this* time cycle, though they return to the same state in every other time cycle that follows), then it cannot be on its way to achieving it. In infinite time the past, present, and future are temporally identical. Within infinite time, whatever is the case now is what also *was* and *will be*. Infinity presupposes a temporal simultaneity between points of past, present, and future. To describe one of them therefore describes them all. If becoming is *still becoming* in the present time, that quite simply means it is this same state of becoming in the past and in the future.

To put it bluntly though, it is obviously *only* an assumption by Nietzsche that time is infinite. The mere fact that the world has not yet reached a goal tells us nothing significant in

and of itself. The world of becoming could very well be on its way to a final goal or state.

What purpose does the proof serve then if it too is clearly only an assertion?

With the aforementioned analysis of force (characterized as will to power) becoming in time, this so-called “proof” is actually better understood as an assertion that coheres with the initial ethical projection of eternal return. It may be said to run contrary to typical theological thought, and the thought it opposes is one that would have us believe that the logical impossibility of an infinite regress leads to the conclusion that the world was created by a Supreme Being. As Williams and Palencik note, Nietzsche agrees with the theologians at least that the world has yet to reach a final state but opposes the subsequent conclusion that the world had a first cause. Williams and Palencik further add that they believe it allows Nietzsche to cast doubt on the mechanistic world view of thinkers like William Thomson (Lord Kelvin), who predicts that the world will reach a final state (2004, p. 407). As we have noted throughout our cosmological analysis, the “proof” is a reminder of Nietzsche's resistance to theological notions. Let us now turn then to the second so-called “proof.”

2.13 THE SECOND LOGICAL “PROOF” OF ETERNAL RETURN: THE SCIENTIFIC RESPONSE

The most explicit explanations of the cosmology of eternal return appear in *The Will to Power* in section §1066 from which I shall now quote:

If the world may be thought of as a certain definite quantity of force and as a certain definite number of centres of force—and every other representation remains indefinite and therefore useless—it follows that, in the great dice game of existence, it must pass through a calculable number of combinations. In infinite time, every possible combination would at some time or another be realised; more: it would be realised an infinite number of times. And since between every combination and its next recurrence all other possible combinations would have to take place, and each of these combinations conditions the entire sequence of combinations in the same series, a circular movement

of absolutely identical series is thus demonstrated: the world as a circular movement that has already repeated itself infinitely often and plays its game *in infinitum* (1968).

It is tempting to reduce this “proof” to a scientific analysis. We need not make a scientific reconstruction of eternal return our main focus - we need only note that the scientific responses are anything but supportive. Capek, for instance, points out that quantum mechanics refutes a fundamental premise of eternal return: that the universe is composed of a finite number of differential elements. Capek references the development of the Bose-Einstein statistics to insist that quantum mechanics rejects both the idea that there are atomic elements that can be individually distinguished, or that any such elements would persist throughout time (Van Fraassen, 1962, p. 282). For this same reason, Robert Solomon harshly criticizes eternal return’s cosmological basis, concluding that it relies on little more than outdated (classical) physics (2001, p. 124). Worse yet, a scientific reading of the eternal return would seem to be refuted by the basic laws of thermodynamics. That is, even if the same energy remains, it does not remain useful energy, and so the present elements in existence may not be able to re-form again after the demise of the present universe.

2.14 THE PROBLEM WITH INTERPRETING ETERNAL RETURN AS A SCIENTIFIC THEORY

Presenting eternal return of the same as a simple scientific theory bears the consequence of making it far too easy to dismiss the cosmology entirely. Without question, that has been the predominant pattern in Nietzsche scholarship, most of which assesses eternal return precisely as a mechanical theory. For the scientific objections that we mentioned, Alexander Nehamas claims that the cosmology of eternal return is so weak as to be rendered unnecessary (1980, pp. 332-33). For the same reasons, Maudmarie Clark asserts even more

strenuously that the theory does not hold any cosmological credibility at all and should instead be evaluated solely for the normative impact it poses to the individual (1990, pp. 247, 269). She explicitly phrases it as “the most common objection to eternal recurrence,” namely, “that we have no reason to accept its truth” (Ibid., p. 245). Likewise dismissive views are found in Gary Shapiro (1989, p. 84), Alan White (1990, p. 68), and the pairing of Stanley Stewart and Jean-Pierre Mileur (1993, p. 114). Once again citing the scientific position, Craig Dove perhaps best epitomizes the common refutation of eternal return’s cosmology when he writes, “It is inescapable that, as a theory of physics, the eternal recurrence entails the sort of mechanistic theory Nietzsche directly criticizes throughout the *Nachlass* and indirectly dismisses in his mature published writings...” (2008, p. 16).

As a result of assessing eternal return as a scientific theory, many Nietzsche scholars too often dismiss Nietzsche’s cosmological writings. The problem is that this fails to account for the analysis of Nietzsche’s conception of truth that Heidegger presents us. Consequently, we lose the important context of Nietzsche’s anti-theological stance at the level of truth that underlies the structure of eternal return’s cosmology as a set of anti-theological assertions. Heidegger’s interpretation avoids this particular pitfall. It is he who points out for us that Nietzschean concepts like force are metaphysical and not scientific, as they do not depend on empirical observation derived from experiments (Heidegger, 1984, p. 111). To claim that physics alone can determine the possibility of eternal return would be to overlook the (as we saw) anti-theological purpose of certain of Nietzsche’s concepts in the cosmology. To only reference physics neglects, for instance, the special sense Heidegger’s Nietzsche gives to

“space” as force rather than as something that could have a first cause of God attributed to it, or force as that which is precisely *not* atomic. Moreover, it neglects that part of Nietzsche’s general critique of truth applies to science as well. Besides the obvious fact that the concept of force attacks such typical cornerstones of science as causality and materiality, Nietzsche expressly states that, “‘pure knowledge, free of will,’ is merely dressed up skepticism and paralysis of the will” (Nietzsche quoted in Nehamas, 1980, p. 335). For Nietzsche, a reliance on science for a definitive explanation of the world implies the same problem we examined earlier in truth as correct representation – the implied desire to escape from the responsibility of creating one’s own concepts of the world.

2.15 STRONG (LOGICAL) CRITIQUES OF HEIDEGGER’S READING OF THE SECOND LOGICAL “PROOF” OF ETERNAL RETURN

This having all been said, the most common logical objection to the second “proof” shows us why we’ll only confront failure if we attempt to prove the eternal return of the same with logic. The critique goes as follows: even *if* we grant both that time is infinite and force is finite, a finite sum of force should not in principle preclude the generation of an infinite number of qualitatively different states. To my knowledge, Georg Simmel (1907) was the earliest to put this type of objection forth.¹⁰ Simmel disputes the logic of the premise that every possible finite determination of force, given the infinite time within which it occurs,

¹⁰ See also Danto (1973, p. 318), Zuboff (1973, p. 351), Schact (1983, pp. 253-66), Wood (1989, p. 16), and Williams and Palencik (2004, pp. 397-8). Though they take their respective proceeding arguments in different directions, they all express this same doubt over the claim that finite elements will produce the same combinations given infinite time.

would eventually be exhausted and thus necessitate the eternal return of the same. Simmel gives the example of three wheels all of the same size situated on a common axle. Simmel specifies that in this scenario, we are to imagine each wheel is marked at a point on its circumference, with the points aligned along a thread stretched above the wheels themselves. Simmel argues that if the wheels were rotated at speeds of n , $2n$ and n/π they would be able to turn forever without ever returning to the initial condition of alignment under the thread. In other words, as Simmel writes, "Finitude in the number of elements does not at all necessarily insure, even if there is an infinite amount of time for their movements, that the situation of any moment is repeated unchanged" (Simmel quoted in Soll, 1973, p. 324). As the example shows, the original configuration would *never* line up again if the speeds of rotation of the wheels were all different. Finite elements and infinite time are insufficient conditions of cyclical realignment. As an attack on the internal logic of eternal return, Simmel's objection is devastating. Although Heidegger offers no direct response (for whatever reason), Ivan Soll is one Nietzsche scholar who at least tries. He responds to the objection by claiming that Simmel simply *assumes* that recombinations of force are determined in advance by rules. Soll thinks Simmel is imposing a determining condition on all the elements (of their differing speed of movement, in this case), skewing in his favor the conclusion that they would never recombine (1973, p. 327). Soll is simply misguided. What Simmel's objection points out is merely that unless force is bizarrely thought of as consciously *desiring* to become the same totality of forms, a finite number of elements can easily exist in infinite time without falling back into the same configuration that makes up a

specific totality. The counter-example clearly shows as much, and nothing in Nietzsche's cosmology specifies anything against it. In Heidegger's interpretation, we saw that force (with the character of will to power) strives to become something new and recombines into the same forms because the forces that make up each form are becoming within infinite time. Nietzsche nowhere says that forces consciously strive to organize themselves into the same assemblages again, and that is exactly what he would have *needed* to write to preclude Simmel's counter-example. With Simmel's objection, there is ample logical space for the notion that these finite elements exist throughout infinite time cycles without reforming.

There is another grave problem to confront in the second "proof" that once again reminds us why trying to prove the return of the same with logic fails. T.K. Seung argues that eternal return just doesn't make sense as a concept that explains a sum total returning the *same*. Seung argues that there can be no return if all "things" are eternally present (2010, p. 79). By "things," Seung is referring to the different forms that a finite quantity of force takes. As we re-examine the cosmology of eternal return a bit closer, we can see how damning this second objection is. If one cannot point to any particular member in an identical series as that which is the *initial* member, it is simply incoherent to say that any particular member is an example of a *returning one*. If we cannot posit the original cycle by which a sum total of force first begins to become and exist, it is incoherent to ascribe a notion of returning to *any* of these cycles in which a sum of force exists as identical forms. Nietzsche's own conception of time as infinite therefore would seem to create the equivalent of a final state; one that is identical

to every other state. What Heidegger had described as becoming “turning back on itself” (1984, p. 109) would seem much more like simple stasis.

Stasis results from the absence of any difference between time cycles. Again, the notion of a return (of anything) presupposes a beginning. However, a beginning is precluded because infinity logically means that there is no such thing as a first member. The existence of the same totalities across infinity would mean the impossibility of differentiating them from each other in a series and thereby allowing one to claim that a particular totality of force is one that has returned. The notion of a quantity of force returning is rendered incoherent. With the notion of the same forms becoming in perpetuity of one quantitatively unchanging sum, there is no way to stipulate that any of the innumerable cycles of becoming is either 1.) the first cycle of becoming (the original totality of force becoming the forms that then make up our world) *or* 2.) a qualitatively different totality of force (a sum total of force that becomes different forms) that constitutes a distinct totality of what is therefore *returning* force. Nothing can logically *return* if it is impossible to speak either of a qualitatively identical sum beginning, or that sum becoming qualitatively *different*.

2.16 THE ETERNAL RETURN OF THE SAME – SKETCHING AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW

With these two objections, the eternal return of the same now appears weaker than ever from the point of view of both logic and science. What’s more, earlier in this paper we saw that Heidegger’s ethical implications of the return of the same (as an ethical doctrine) framed Nietzsche as somewhat of a failure in his attempt to overcome theology. Has Heidegger just read Nietzsche badly then, or is the eternal return a case of Nietzsche’s philosophical

brilliance just faltering badly? In the following, I want to explain that if one wants to still accept Heidegger's readings of certain Nietzschean concepts like force and time for the sake of maintaining their normative force as anti-theological concepts, one can do so while simultaneously departing from Heidegger in reading eternal return as a totality of force that returns exactly the same. One can therefore preserve the powerful anti-theological connotations we have found it to contain.

To first put it simply, there is no need for eternal return to be read as the return of the same. To that end, in keeping consistent with the claim throughout this essay (that the eternal return, both as an ethical and physical doctrine, is intended as an anti-theological vision), we must ask ourselves a fundamental question in opposition to Heidegger: Do Nietzsche's assertions in the cosmology really assert in the end that a perfectly identical state is what returns throughout time cycles? If I am right that they *don't*, we can preserve all of the anti-theological importance contained in what Heidegger's Nietzsche asserted about the existence of a finite quanta of force, space-as-force, and infinite time while departing from Heidegger's problematic conclusion. None of this, interestingly enough, contradicts the ethical projection of eternal return or any of its anti-theological importance. In fact, as I will hope to show, Nietzsche is only emboldened as an anti-theological visionary as a result of such a reading.

2.17 A BRIEF LOOK AT AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW OF ETERNAL RETURN'S RETURNING FORCES

With that in mind, let us turn to the cosmological work of Rose Pfeffer, who can be credited for being one of the few to attempt to defend the cosmology while also challenging

the idea of eternal return as the return of the same¹¹. Pfeffer points out that Nietzsche expressly rejects a formulation of force that would resemble the corpuscular life forms of classical atomism. “The dynamic interpretation of the world with its denial of empty space and corpuscular atoms will shortly gain power over the physicists” (Nietzsche quoted in Pfeffer, 1965, p. 279). We therefore should not interpret Nietzsche’s “quantity of force” in the second “proof” in such a way as to suppose that Nietzsche is positing that it will return as the same static being. In keeping with force’s repudiation of matter, we can instead read force as more analogous to “energy” - as a fluid and changing totality of becoming rather than a totality of parts that are intrinsically immutable and therefore unchanging from one time cycle to the next.

When Nietzsche discusses re-combinations of force in the second “proof,” we ought not to interpret that as him referring to an unchanging fixed state. It should instead be taken to mean a quantity of force that is constantly in a state of activity or movement (with, we saw, the character of will to power in the Heidegger reading meaning that it is constantly striving to become other than it is). In the absence of the claim that there are eternally returning combinations of self-identical, permanent material elements, we have Nietzsche’s statement that, “Everything has been here before innumerable times, insofar as the total field of [force]¹² always returns. Whether aside from this anything identical has existed, is entirely indemonstrable” (Ibid., p. 281). This suggests conceiving of force more as a totality of energy

¹¹Deleuze, with his 1962 book *Nietzsche et la Philosophie*, is probably the most famous Nietzsche commentator to challenge the eternal return as a theory of the return of the same, but that work is so exhaustive as to require an entire paper devoted to its ideas. See Pecore (1986) and Cooke (2005) for an attempted repudiation and defense, respectively, of the rather unorthodox Deleuzian reading.

¹² Pfeffer actually translates the German into the word “energy,” but I have substituted “force” for the sake of maintaining consistency.

that is constantly formed and released in various manifestations across time cycles.

Admittedly, much could still be done to specify further about what this means about the nature of force and its character of will to power. For now though, this suffices as a counter-example that preserves most of the aspects of the cosmology of Heidegger's Nietzsche. Absolutely none of this contradicts, for instance, the earlier posits of space-as-force, force's characterization as will to power, or eternal time. It also seems more consistent with *what* Nietzsche is suggesting returns in the theory of eternal return given his overall explication of force that we looked at earlier.

Following Heidegger, we have already specified, after all, that eternal return is an ethical projection at the onset with posits that are meant to cohere with it – it is all intended as an alternative that would preclude theism. This, I hope I have shown, has been the enduring strength of Heidegger's reading – namely, that it has shown us the ways in which theism has been precluded in every facet of the cosmology. For our purposes, we needed only point out that nowhere in Nietzsche's cosmological writings were we shown that we had to conclude that he presents eternal return as the return of one identical state. Pfeffer's textually supported reading of Nietzsche helps demonstrate this by paying greater attention to the more subtle nuances of force - nuances that slip past Heidegger - which oppose any notion of self-identical material elements that must result in the same exact forms that make up what we call the world. If we hold to eternal return as an ethical projection with accompanying anti-theological posits, accepting Pfeffer's reading of force returning as the same totality of

force (but not the eternally same forms) does not conflict with the previous posits made by Heidegger's Nietzsche.¹³

¹³ It is certainly not my intention, but it *is* interesting to note that this modified reading of eternal return might seem far more plausible or easier to accept given that the claims seem much less extravagant. To say nothing of space-as-force, for one who is already atheist but has no interest in advanced metaphysical theorizing, it might certainly seem *prima facie* to be the case that there is no innate goal to existence, that beings continually become, or that time is infinite. The biggest exception to this, of course, would be Nietzsche's far more controversial and complex concept of force – it would doubtless not seem immediately true or obvious to anyone that there is no such thing as a doer behind every deed.

Chapter 3: The Eternal Return ~~of the Same~~ as an Ethical Doctrine

3.1 NORMATIVE IMPLICATIONS OF REJECTING THE RETURN OF THE SAME

If the majority of the cosmology remains unaffected, certainly we cannot say the same about the ethical implications. In lieu of turning away from the notion of one identical state of being, it will now lastly be up to me to provide ethical implications that are more powerfully anti-theological than the ones we found in Heidegger's ethical reading of eternal return. You will recall that Heidegger's reading of Nietzsche contained its most powerful implications against the nihilism it perceived at the core of Western philosophy, but that it also suffered from two limitations in the form of being unable to remove the smallest men from the world and limiting the radicalness of Nietzsche as a philosopher. I believe my reading overcomes these problems and solidifies Nietzsche as *the* philosophical exemplar of godlessness.

3.2 NIETZSCHE'S ETERNAL RETURN AND THE TWO-WORLD DOCTRINE

First and most importantly, moving away from a (mis)reading of eternal return as the notion of one identical state solidifies Nietzsche more completely as an anti-theological thinker insofar as it protects his philosophy against the critique Heidegger levied at him earlier. If eternal return is no longer read as the claim that one static totality of force returns, Nietzsche's theory can no longer be charged with conceiving being as permanence and presence, contrary to what we saw Heidegger argue (see pages 33-35 of this essay). Nietzsche's eternal return can no longer be said to divide existence into a world of Being on the one hand (as one identical totality of events that returns infinitely) and a world of Becoming on the other (in the form of passing moments that seem to provide opportunities

for creative decision-making). Heidegger's reading can thus no longer charge that on this basis Nietzsche's philosophy unwittingly maintains a form of the theological two-world doctrine we have mentioned (between a world of Being and a world of Becoming), and that it therefore fails to more radically oppose theology as a whole. If Nietzsche has been more accurately read as positing that force returns, but not necessarily as the exact same forms, Nietzsche has succeeded in establishing a world where there is only this world of becoming with force epitomizing becoming to the maximal extent insofar as its characterization as will to power means a world of continual transformation and change without any notion of self-identical substances.

3.3 ETERNAL RETURN AND THE CONTINUED STRUGGLE AGAINST NIHILISM

One could object that moving away from the idea of the return of the same deprives the theory of its connotations concerning nihilism. For instance, we saw that when Heidegger wrote, "[T]he thought of return is to be thought only in conjunction with nihilism, as what is to be overcome, what is already overcome in the very will to create" (1984, p. 175), Heidegger's Nietzsche was using the eternal return as a decision criterion that fought against nihilism by simultaneously acknowledging *and* affirming that nihilism was embodied in one's actions insofar as one returning totality meant one's actions were doomed to be intrinsically goalless and purposeless because they had already been performed an infinite number of times and therefore could never be novel or capable of changing anything. If we now understand that the same totality of events does *not* return, that everything I have experienced and will ever know of myself and the world does *not* literally return unchanged,

what becomes of what Heidegger's Nietzsche has said about the horrors of a returning world?

Can affirming eternal return still overcome nihilism and dread?

While one's agency will no longer be impacted by the doctrine as it was before¹⁴ (see pages 5-6 of this essay), nihilism is still embodied in one's actions under this reading of eternal return, albeit differently than before. To briefly return to a quote made by Nietzsche, "Let us think this thought in its most frightful form: existence as it is, without meaning and goal, yet inevitably recurring; existence with no finale to sweep it into nothingness: eternal recurrence" (Nietzsche quoted in Heidegger, 1984, p. 174). Existence can *still* be thought of as lacking any goal or meaning even if the same events do not return unchanged. With the Nietzschean cosmology in Heidegger's reading still precluding any God (even with the change we made with the help of Pfeffer's work), we are still left with existence without a meaning or goal. To wit, we can interpret Nietzsche here as positing that existence lacks any innate goal or purpose because it is no more and no less than a totality of forms continually coming into existence, continually becoming, and continually dying. In this sense, the innate meaning of the world is still nihilistic in that it still lacks an intrinsic goal or teleology. It contains no meaning beyond what one gives it, or beyond what one creates for oneself in certain opportune moments. If we embrace a vision of life in Nietzsche's philosophy as nothing more than a continually returning totality of force that inexhaustibly manifests as different forms across infinite time, existence is still no more than this circular (because

¹⁴ This is not to suggest that agency is completely unaffected under this modified reading. Although perhaps nothing would compare to knowing every possible choice has already logically been made, there are still implications to be found in our new reading. For sure, the removal of the subject-in-itself in Nietzsche's explanation of force (as that which returns) still necessitates skepticism about agency, and in turn this skepticism could constitute a certain horror all its own to be (psychologically) overcome.

infinitely unchanging) process. Without any God to give existence a divine plan, without any supersensuous realm in which things like everlasting truth, retribution or paradise could inhere, existence is still *innately* meaningless and goalless. That is, it is meaningless and goalless prior to any contingent creation of a goal or meaning by us – it is still every bit as innately nihilistic in these two specific senses as it was previously deemed by Heidegger's Nietzsche. Nietzsche's notion of *amor fati* still then applies. By creating a certain type of life for oneself in the world and stamping moments with one's own created meaning in full affirmation of the cosmological ineradicability of nihilism¹⁵ (see pages 21-31 of this essay for a reminder of the full details of what that entails), one is still thereby overcoming nihilism even if the *exact* forms or details of their life and world are not returning.

3.4 THE DEATH OF THE SMALLEST MEN

Further, a clear advantage of our reading of the cosmology is that it no longer makes it impossible for Zarathustra's smallest men, life's petty deniers of life, to be removed from existence. The predicament we encountered in Heidegger's Nietzsche was that being as a whole would always remain unchanged, and it was thus mostly one's relation to existential phenomena that was altered by the thought of eternal return. If the exact same collection of small men like Hitler and Charles Manson do not share existence with us *ad infinitum*, affirming life in the world we live in no longer means that we have to affirm that they will be alive again in every cycle of time. We can do nothing in the present to change the fact that they ever existed in the first place (and so we must, as Heidegger similarly mentioned in the

¹⁵ This is not to confuse *cosmological* nihilism (and its ineradicability) with *historico-cultural* nihilism.

ethics section, still affirm the past in affirming the present as we move toward the future), but we can *in principle* overcome them beyond the psychological sense of Heidegger's reading.

However, might one *now* object that such a move evacuates eternal return of its dread? The charge could be that if we abstract from the notion that we must affirm the return of every historical life denier, or tragic and abominable event in order to affirm life, we conveniently spare ourselves the true *horror* of the eternal return – the same horror that is meant to be psychologically overcome (by the few who can do it) and serve as one of the primary purposes of eternal return as a vehicle for affirming life.

3.5 THE REMAINING HORRORS OF ETERNAL RETURN – LIFE, DEATH, AND HISTORY AS A WHOLE

First, it might be said that the lack of return of the exact same beings actually makes eternal return more profound for anyone who loves being alive. Insofar as a totality of force inexhaustibly returns, Nietzsche permanentizes only the *process of becoming* and therefore presupposes absolute death for all singular beings. Previously, through the eternal return of the same I could find comfort in the notion that I would always exist. Although there was undoubtedly horror within the realization that the content of existence could never be altered, at least I knew I would exist again in my singularity. Although everything from my agency to my understanding of the events of history was impacted, I could in theory still have found solace in believing that the conscious, embodied person I self-identified as would return and be alive again. It would be the *same* life, yes, but at least it *would be* a life.

With the lack of return of the same beings, one must *now* overcome the permanence of one's own death. Previously, one of the greatest weights concerning one's death was that

one's own life and death were not novel events and were thereby seemingly deprived of significance. However, we saw that Heidegger's point was to emphasize that one was still capable of stamping their own contingent meaning on existence even as they were powerless to actually change how life and death would always occur. With our new understanding of eternal return, the death of the individual is absolutized in that notions of either an other-world *or* exact corporeal return are removed as qualifiers of this death. The only "solace" that remains is in further affirming life on the basis of affirming that my life represents the simultaneous finitude *of my life* and infinitude of becoming writ large. Affirming my absolute death can simultaneously affirm life *precisely because* in doing so I affirm that the totality of becoming exists an eternity beyond me. That I so love you, O eternity, I can someday joyously give myself to die in you – *this*, the eternal return now demands.

Furthermore, an eye that is keen and brave enough will see much horror to be overcome in this version of eternal return. While *specific* deniers of life and *specific* historical atrocities do not return, under our altered construal of eternal return, one must still affirm the worst aspects of life *in general* and their sad parade of awful tidings. Affirming life now still means affirming that the many faces of death, destruction, *and* nihilism perpetually show themselves without any innate justification or teleological retributivism. If eternal return is the inexhaustible return of a totality of force, even the lack of the same *exact* beings does not in itself preclude certain general forces from returning - one need only look at our own blood-soaked history for ample proof of that.

This version of eternal return signals no less of a tragic age, for affirming the eternal return still means affirming that one must live and struggle with certain events or problems like nihilism, war and religion that always seem to recur for historical Man¹⁶ – the ideas, practices, or in short the totality of our cultural heritage, that continues to shape who we become. A crucial element of Nietzsche’s thought includes (not unlike Marxism) acknowledging that even the strongest opponents of historical phenomena are nonetheless their byproducts. When speaking of the traditional will to truth, for instance, Nietzsche remarks in *On the Genealogy of Morals* that even the most radical atheism (of his kind) “is therefore *not* the antithesis of that ideal, as it appears to be; it is rather only one of the latest phases of its evolution, one of its terminal forms and inner consequences” (1990, III 27).

3.6 ETERNAL RETURN AND THE PERPETUAL CREATION AND DESTRUCTION OF IDEAS

Another burden that remains is the onus to create ideas that do not become reified. To return to the previous quote, Nietzsche there concludes that we are in the midst of “the awe-inspiring *catastrophe* of two thousand years of training in truthfulness that finally forbids itself the *lie involved in the belief in God*” (Ibid.) – this is the inner consequence to which he’s referring. “God” also signifies transcendental signifiers of truth rather than any specific deity, and we have seen that Nietzsche’s atheism opposes a metaphysics that constructs the “true” world as fixed and static by means of conceiving of a supersensuous realm. Ever-changing ideas are also therefore central to the eternal return as the embodiment of pure becoming. We have already noted that the will to power is, in Heidegger’s Nietzsche,

¹⁶ My retaining of the sexist term is fully intentional – sexism is obviously part of our cultural heritage.

the basic character of all beings, and that it can manifest in persons as an active power that seeks to create from out of its own sense of fullness. As it relates to people in the eternal return it therefore means willing the creation of new values, of new ideas – and if these ideas are to be consistent with eternal return as an atheist philosophy of pure becoming, they must always inevitably perish. “Whatever I create and however much I love it – soon I must oppose it and my love; thus my will wills it” (Nietzsche, 1976, TSZ II “On Self-Overcoming”). Against traditional, theological philosophy’s presupposition that “What is, does not *become*; what becomes, *is not*...” (Nietzsche, 1990, TI “‘Reason’ in Philosophy” 1)” the eternal return is contrary to the suppression of creativity in the formula that whatever changes, transforms, becomes something new or passes away is an objection. Nietzsche’s hallowed dream is the inversion of that mentality. “And life itself confided this secret to me: Behold, it said, I am that which must always overcome itself” (Nietzsche, 1976, TSZ II “On Self-Overcoming”).

However, another important burden arises with the onus to create, for the creation of ideas also presupposes *evaluation* and *destruction*. Creating new ideas means evaluating the ideas that have already become reified and accepted as universal necessities – that have become staples of being that thus stand in opposition to the world of becoming in eternal return. Nonetheless, Nietzsche will always insist that destroying old ideas is insufficient, for it does nothing to demonstrate a will that has affirmed becoming; that has affirmed *both* creativity and destruction in the eternal return as the pure becoming of life itself. Nietzsche’s aggressiveness in asserting the necessity of destroying past ideas *only by creating new ones* is

an important element in his opposition to a theological structuring of the world in particular. When he seems to be shouting that, “We can destroy only as creators!” (Nietzsche, 1974, GS §58), one simply *cannot* abstract these claims from Nietzsche’s belief that theological ideas have dominated philosophy. The will to create stands opposed to historical ideas that resemble being insofar as they proclaim themselves universally, eternally true and aim to remain fixed - such as the Judeo-Christian imperative to “Love the LORD your God and keep his requirements, his decrees, his laws and his commands always” (Deuteronomy 11:1, The New King James Version). That is why in referring to the will to create, Nietzsche states unequivocally, “This will lured me away from God and gods; for what would there be to create if gods – existed!” (1992, EH “Why I Write Such Good Books” 8). The eternal return further overcomes theology by creating ideas that presuppose their own future destruction in the name of the same creative will that spawns ideas in the first place.

3.7 THE ETHICALITY OF STRONG AND WEAK TYPES

Might this thought of destroying past ideas make one rather uneasy? In particular, the eternal return’s emphasis on contingency and subjective creativity obviously presupposes the denial of objective representations of morality, which could also seem to imply a grave threat to the very preservation of a species. We have already talked of will to power not seeking out external sources of power as its goal (see pages 60-61 of this essay). Even so, destroying the transcendental necessity of morality might seem to permit too much in the individual who creates freely for oneself – adultery, deception, violence and perhaps countless other acts of a vicious and ultimately destructive kind. Does a Nietzschean world imply the most extreme

vulnerability of persons to the rationalized cruelty and brutality of the cruelest and most brutal among us?

While Nietzsche is notorious for loving the noble classes of ancient societies, a closer examination of what he actually regards and celebrates as noble ought to do much to alleviate concerns of a possible future world of moral chaos. Nietzsche's enthusiasm for nobility is not some insipid class-worship, and neither is it a callous celebration of their acts of cruelty upon members of oppressed classes.¹⁷ What Nietzsche praises in the noble man is what he perceives as a joyous self-affirmation that bestows upon *itself* the right to create values. "The noble type of man feels *himself* to be the determiner of values, he does not need to be approved of, he judges 'what harms me is harmful in itself', he knows himself to be that which in general first accords honour to things, he *creates values*" (Nietzsche, 2003, BGE §260). This noble type of value-making that Nietzsche calls master morality is always in contradistinction to the slave type of morality that conforms to established values while denying its will to power as creator. "In no way accustomed to positing values himself, he also accorded himself no other value than that which his master accorded him" (Ibid., §261). Contrary to the slave, the noble designates a type who affirms its own values' origins of subjective authorship as a sufficient basis of authority, and we have seen that only such a type is capable of affirming the creativity and destruction inherent in the eternal return. By contrast, the only creativity Nietzsche sees in the weak classes is in their original denial and

¹⁷ Nietzsche is not in any sort of denial or ignorance about the fact that ruling nobles were often monstrous, merciless killers. "We can imagine them returning from an orgy of murder, arson, rape, and torture, jubilant and at peace with themselves as though they had committed a fraternity prank – convinced, moreover, that the poets for a long time to come will have something to sing about and to praise" (Nietzsche, 1990, GM I 11).

negation of their other when the ancient slave classes, following the condemnatory moral language of Judaism, first began to ontologize their masters by defining them as evil beings. “But you noble and mighty ones of the earth will be, to all eternity, the evil, the cruel, the avaricious, the godless, and thus the cursed and damned!” (Nietzsche, 1990, GM I 7). Contrary to the values of the nobles, values that grow out of self-affirmation, even the creativity of Judaic values were limited to the extent that such morality just expressed a “[n]o to an “outside,” an “other,” a non-self.” Nietzsche continues, “that *no* is its creative act” (Ibid., I 10). Such hateful negation of the other, which Nietzsche terms *ressentiment*, does not therefore affirm creativity as such and cannot therefore affirm the eternal return. Already we can see that Nietzsche’s emphasis on nobility is not about glorifying classism, oppression or acts of any vicious sort.

This characterization of the noble type as an individualistic author of his own ideas might still seem though to suggest that relations with others could be frightening, as if a noble type would feel free to appropriate or subjugate the other in every such relation per his whims. The ever astute Nietzsche carefully specifies otherwise when discussing a noble type’s relation to members of lower classes (instead of just the slaves, we can also imagine relations between noble types and Heidegger’s lower ontological category of the “fleeting” type constituted by the thought of eternal return). Nietzsche concedes that in all such unequal relations, “It is here that pity and the like can have a place” (2003, BGE §260). Rather than reject any notion of ethical relations *tout court*, Nietzsche merely opposes the ubiquitous normalization *of* and widespread conformity *to* slavish moral values. Such opposition comes

as no surprise. We have already detailed that Heidegger's Nietzsche diagnoses nihilism as the founding value of Western thought, and also that he opposes any such concepts that seem to be further (though more elusive) expressions of that value. Nietzsche argues that nihilism undergirds slave morality not *just* in its attempt to stipulate universality and transcendental necessity to moral values, but also to the extent that the perceived necessity of values such as pity and humility – values that define a good man as one who is also harmless - are at bottom qualities deemed practical by the weak types for enduring the horrible suffering of existence (Ibid.). Conformity to such values means internalizing the attitude of the weak, contemptuous slave who cannot affirm any will to create. Nietzsche similarly argues this point in *On the Genealogy of Morals*. He claims that the dominated slaves of ancient times were not capable of direct action against their powerful masters who considered that to be aristocratic meant to be good, strong, happy, and beautiful, and who subsequently regarded the plebeian classes as pitiable, weak, miserable, and ugly. The Judaic priests inverted this value system through their concept of good and evil, so that it now signified that to be weak, suffering, ugly, poor, etc. suddenly meant also to be good while all that was noble was associated with evil – this provided a spiritual form of revenge that remained entirely abstract but no less reflected the hatred of the otherwise helpless slave classes against their oppressors and the world that had frustrated them. All in all, slave values began by valorizing qualities that originally reflected hatred of an other and of existence (Nietzsche, 1990, GM I 10). One might say then that Nietzsche is merely exposing that which *seems* ethical but is really just nihilistic for its attempt to stultify becoming, and for its veiled expression of its hatred *in* and *of* life.

In another important passage, Nietzsche describes further qualities of a strong or noble type that would seem to further countervail any notion of unrestrained or normalized cruelty and brutality in the world of eternal return:

To be incapable of taking one's enemies, one's accidents, even one's misdeeds seriously for very long – that is the sign of strong full natures in who there is an excess of the power to form, to mold, to recuperate and to forget (a good example of this in modern times is Mirabeau, who had no memory for insults and vile actions done him and was unable to forgive simply because he – forgot). Such a man shakes off with a single shrug many vermin that eat deep into others; here alone genuine 'love of one's enemies' is possible – supposing it to be possible at all on earth. How much reverence has a noble man for his enemies! – and such reverence is a bridge to love (Ibid., I 10).

Here Nietzsche opines that a surplus of strength correlates to a capability for forgetting. It is not a forgetting done from a stupid or incapable mind. A strong person, in Nietzsche's estimation, is one whose own abundance of power (to create), whose abundance of joy is synonymous with their ability to quickly overcome perceived transgressions against them. It is another feature that separates the strong from the weak, as the weak are further characterized by a "suppressed hatred, impotent vindictiveness" (Ibid.) that results from their *ressentiment*. Nietzsche is arguing that for one who has affirmed their will to power as a creator, a joyous and affirmative love of life and self completely appropriates all of the psychological energy that might otherwise be directed toward a prolonged hatred and internalized vindictiveness against others. How many of the world's most heinous actions are predicated on a festering loathing, a virulent *hatred* that rises from one's darkest thoughts to take action? How many cases of methodical torture sessions, sophisticated murder plots, or patiently engineered hate crimes seem to imply not just the determining power of reified ideas, but also of an *inability* to forget?

3.8 ETERNAL RETURN AND THE ETHICAL RELATION TO THE OTHER

One might still feel the need to object that even if we accept the preceding accounts of master and slave morality, the eternal return is bereft of any implicit *substantive* ethical relation to the other. The eternal return, it could be argued, is too atomistic in its reductive emphasis on the individual's experience of decision-making and creativity. This too, I think, would be unwarranted. It is obvious by now that affirming the eternal return entails a deeply personal experience. Even so, in affirming the eternal return as the tragic age, it is still therefore *our shared* tragic age. It is our shared history, for all its nihilism, bloodshed, sad mistakes and atrocious blunders that is ours together to bear, and the ground upon which we must stand to affirm life in all its terrifying *and* beautiful features. It is likewise the cosmological ineradicability of nihilism in a circular and goal-less existence that is necessarily shared by all people in the eternal return even if Nietzsche believes only a select few will be capable of joyously affirming its consequences. All of this already implies a logical space for compassion toward the other – a basis for receiving the other rather than disregarding the other as wholly alien or wholly separate from ourselves.

Rather surprisingly, Nietzsche's further analysis of Christianity as an historical phenomenon further implies the possibility of an ethical relation to the other. Nietzsche believes that the creative, imposing instincts of the affirmative nobles we looked at were eventually stifled and completely gave way to the slave type of morality as Judeo-Christian thought began to dominate. "They were forced to think, deduce, calculate, weigh cause and effect – unhappy people, reduced to their weakest, most fallible organ, their consciousness!"

(Ibid., II 16). Nietzsche posits an interesting consequence as a result when he singles out Christianity in particular for its emphasis on interiority and what he calls its popularized notion of a *bad conscience*. Under the influence of Christianity's concept of original sin, one who expresses *ressentiment* by ascribing an ontological identity of evil to an external enemy finally learns to redirect that sense of hatred at oneself too. A sentiment of "The so-called strong and powerful - *the evil and damned*- are to blame for my suffering!" becomes "Alas, I am to blame as well! God forgive me – I am a sinner! Man is a sinner!" The bad conscience gives rise, Nietzsche thinks, to a guilt-ridden pain over the mere fact of existing, and the pain subsequently supplements the guilt of existing and justifies itself as deserved and necessary on the basis *of* this guilt (Ibid.).

Nietzsche obviously bemoans Christianity and theological thought in general for the resulting nihilism that he believes has exerted an overwhelming influence on human societies, but he is not straightforwardly hateful of these religious propagators as one might guess. In a shocking turn, Nietzsche concludes that our history of nihilism, with its emphasis on interiority through conscientious deliberation and guilt, is actually to be thanked for turning the human subject inward. This inward turn is responsible for making the historical subject incomparably more contemplative, self-reflexive, complex and interesting. "Human history would be a dull and stupid thing without the intelligence furnished by its impotents" (Ibid., I 7). Far from conveying mere hatred for these seeming lowest of the low and thereby precluding any ethical relations with their present-day counterparts, the aggressive atheist Nietzsche is practically reverent. Nietzsche never relents in his claims that nihilism should be

defeated, but he is suggesting here that perhaps it can be looked at as a fortuitous event in our collective history provided we can overcome its latest incarnations. The present-day embodiments of nihilism, by extension, are not sub-human or thing-like objects to be dismissed. Nietzsche recognizes their value even though he proposes a different type of viewpoint about life.

Finally, the very purpose of the character of Zarathustra is ethical at its core. That Zarathustra ever leaves his solitude to attempt to share his wisdom with the people implies the ethical significance of creating life-affirming values – they are intended to in some way benefit people as a whole. “Behold, I am weary of my wisdom, like a bee that has gathered too much honey; I need hands outstretched to receive it” (Nietzsche, 1976, TSZ Prologue 1). Eternal return is not simply about creating personal values so that one may smile every day while the rest of the world sinks in its nihilism or burns to ashes. One who has affirmed eternal return has the potential to influence society by propagating life-affirming values, however contingent they are recognized to be, that can cultivate a greater and healthier love of life writ large. The end result, Nietzsche thinks, could be ethically significant for everyone. “And learning better to feel joy, we learn best not to hurt others or to plan hurts for them” (Nietzsche, 1976, TSZ II “On the Pitying”). Nietzsche’s hope is that this, in turn, may help teach certain others to learn to do the same. “Let your gift-giving love and your knowledge serve the meaning of the earth” (Nietzsche, 1976, TSZ I “On the Gift-Giving Virtue”). The eternal return seeks to beget creative individualism, certainly, but not egoistic self-absorption.

3.9 ETERNAL RETURN AND THE JOYOUS BURDEN OF OVERCOMING A HISTORY OF GODS

If one *still* feels fear at this juncture, that is not at all necessarily an objection. For all his passion about creating, Nietzsche never claims that it will help us overcome history unscathed. He recognizes the *necessity* of terror for a creative voyage into unknown territories for *us*, the descendants of this “polluted stream” called Man (Nietzsche, 1976, TSZ Prologue 3), for whom Nietzsche believes the dominance of religions like Christianity has long led to the loss of the will to create and a desperate need for values from external sources like God (1974, GS §347). Although he insists on those select few who could will the eternal return and share with him the sentiment “I feel only my will’s delight in begetting and becoming” (Ibid., 1992, EH “Why I Write Such Good Books” 8), the destruction of so many ideas in the name of becoming still encompasses a burden that Nietzsche is all too keen to recognize, and one which *cannot* be alleviated fully. It is, alas, perhaps the greatest weight for anyone who is to affirm the eternal return. “We have abolished the real world: what is left? The apparent world perhaps? ... But no! *With the real world we have also abolished the apparent world!*” (Ibid., 1990, TI “History of an Error”). The creation of an atheist world that overcomes millennia of theological ideas entails not merely the destruction of past ideas, but rather it effaces everything we have come to know and proclaim the world to be. It uproots us from our normalized world of values and practices from which our senses of identity and stability in the world are internalized. Even with everything we have mentioned about strong and weak types and ethical relations, if we are the byproducts of over two thousand years of a theologically conditioned philosophy, we are in no position to strongly predict what the more

exact features of future humankind would look like if such an extensive and profound heritage were gradually replaced. What would it be replaced *by*? What would life be like in such a world where ideas were understood to be extensions of creative wills rather than reflections of truth? Moreover, if nihilism has hitherto been such a strong determinant of our identities, what could become of us in lieu of any degree of its absence? What would become of collective societies? Because such knowledge would presuppose a vantage point beyond our historico-culturally conditioned perspectives, the anticipated ramifications extend beyond the parameters of our collective capabilities of sophisticated understanding. We cannot speak but superficially of what our world would be if we cannot now take on the role of the very “we,” the very collectivity, that would be constituted in and through such a world. The thought therefore presupposes that we become other to ourselves. The *terror* of the thought is not just in its unknowability, but the unknowability that it must make of us.

Even amidst such terror, a Nietzschean philosophy would finally betray itself if it did not confront such burdens with *joy* rather than bitterness or resignation. “What happiness even in weariness, in the old illness, in the convalescent’s relapses!” (Nietzsche, 1996, HAH Preface 5). To become a person capable of these burdens of the eternal return means *embracing* “Joy in the destruction . . . and at the sight of its progressive ruin . . . Joy in what is coming and lies in the future, *which triumphs over existing things, however good*” (Nietzsche quoted in Arendt, 1978, p. 163, emphasis added). Against the nihilism he perceived in his own time, whereby he sensed that “We no longer see anything these days that aspires to grow greater; instead, we have a suspicion that things will continue to go downhill” (Nietzsche, 1990, GM

II 12), Nietzsche is prescribing *joy* in the endlessness of becoming in eternal return, even amidst the uncertainty (and thus fear) it may engender as it eradicates ideas that we've long associated with our identities.

3.10 CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is not unreasonable to finally ask why *anyone* should embark on such an uncertain and possibly terrifying journey at all. Even if our own age is as nihilistic as Nietzsche felt his to be (or worse), why not simply give up and wearily suffer the world as it is? As a reminder, that is exactly what Nietzsche believes nihilism leads many to finally do. "Verily, we have become too weary even to die" (1976, TSZ II "The Soothsayer").

Ultimately, there is no philosophy that can make a love of life *necessary* as a starting point for opposing a theological vision of existence – even *if* one feels along with Nietzsche that theology is antithetical to life and breeds nihilism. To rationally ascertain the *necessity* of loving life (and rejecting the world of Being) would not be a type of love that Nietzsche could endorse. It would be conditional on the apprehension of a universal truth that would therefore be set *against* life (a return of the two-world doctrine upon which Nietzsche alleges that a certain type of truth is predicated). Nietzsche's prescribed love of life, rather, is in the end just a choice¹⁸. Nietzsche is offering us his *means* of choosing it, his means of affirming life, but it is us who need to make that choice for ourselves. Nietzsche himself certainly does not envision that all people can or will do so, as he makes clear here:

To ordinary human beings, finally-the vast majority who exist for service and the general advantage, and may exist only for that-religion give an inestimable contentment with their situation and

¹⁸ It is a choice insofar as one can choose to commit to a love of life through the eternal return. Obviously, the *feeling* of loving life is much less of a choice if it is one at all.

type....Perhaps nothing in Christianity and Buddhism is as venerable as their art of teaching even the lowest how to pace themselves through piety in an illusory higher order and thus to maintain their contentment with the real order, in which their life is hard enough-and precisely this hardness is necessary. [2003, BGE §61]

No matter how many people may follow Nietzsche's method to love life and thereby overcome nihilism, for some people a form of theology will continue to serve their interests; the dream of higher orders of existence, truth as correct representation, or enduring moral rules will be a comfort, a necessity, or both.

For those of us, however, who feel in our heart of hearts that we wish to "remain faithful to the earth" (Nietzsche, 1976, TSZ Prologue 3), our reading of Nietzsche will prove essential. If one feels along with Nietzsche that, "Life is at an end where the 'kingdom of God' *begins*" (1990, TI "Morality as Anti-Nature"), might it not at least possibly be at a sweet new beginning where the kingdom *burns*? If we fail to read Nietzsche's philosophy as the most daring and powerful atheism yet, if we fail to embrace the eternal return as the new horizon that sweeps clear the ashes of dead gods, it will mean needing to confess in the end that Nietzsche is dead – and we have killed him.

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