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Why “All Joy Wills Eternity” for Nietzsche

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Joy of a certain kind has an important affective role in demonstrating the overcoming of nihilism for Nietzsche. In this chapter I explore how one might arrive at a point where they too can give voice to Zarathustra’s proclamation that “all joy wills eternity.” There are consistent references to eternity and infinitude in passages of Nietzsche’s discussing nihilism. This is most obviously borne out in Nietzsche scholarship with reference to discussions of eternal recurrence. But eternal recurrence does not have a monopoly for denoting Nietzsche’s employment of the motifs of eternity and infinitude. Eternal recurrence and its affirmation, I argue, is only a kind of end point for a process of overcoming nihilism.¹

Nietzsche doesn’t offer any hard distinction between the two concepts, which obviously intertwine in many senses. My concern here is the manner in which Nietzsche employs these motifs to track three different stages related to nihilism. The first stage demonstrates an affective response of initial disorientation, which aims to engender a realization by the “marketplace atheists” that humanity must undergo the phenomenon of nihilism. The second stage documents an active confrontation with this phenomenon, which in turn offers deeper, more terrifying yet also more positive consequences of this realization, ones proffering new forms of freedom. The third stage is the constructive use to which Nietzsche sets these motifs in the service of life-affirmation, of which eternal recurrence plays an integral part. I examine several important passages using these motifs in Nietzsche’s mature writings, particularly from *The Gay Science* (GS) and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Z), to claim that they inform a developmental process concerning the realization of nihilism and its overcoming.

First, I establish context by discussing Nietzsche’s claim that humans are meaning-seeking animals. This bears upon an ambiguity Nietzsche demonstrates about Christianity, amid all of his claims that it denies life. This relates to the so-called problem of meaning as it is identified at various points in the mature works. Though most prominent in the third essay of *On the Genealogy of Morality* (GM), it elsewhere underscores the problem of nihilism.

I then demonstrate how Nietzsche frames the crisis of meaning by invoking the motifs of the eternal and the infinite. I argue that his use of these motifs tracks his conception of nihilism as a developmental phenomenon. Analysis of key passages from GS and Z will demonstrate that these motifs accord with each of three broad stages.

The first stage looks at the “infinite nothing” associated with the death of God. This indicates the affective disorientation that comes as an initial reaction to the first exposure to nihilism in GS 125. The second stage looks at Nietzsche’s claims about the infinitude of potential interpretations as an acknowledgement of a new “horizon.” Here, infinity tracks the promise that might be available through some humans recognizing their new freedom to experiment with values. Awe is possible in response to this openness, but not exaltation—the “sea” is open but may not be bright, Nietzsche writes. The third stage affectively delineates arriving at a new form of life-affirmation—Nietzsche’s ascription of eternal recurrence, and a joy in “willing eternity.” Eternity and infinity in this third context denote the affirmative praxis of the self-legislator, who creates their own values. A sense of eternity is “incorporated,” as an internal measure of life-affirmation. It is in this context that Zarathustra identifies a specific sort of joy as the proper disposition toward eternity, as a recognition of having overcome nihilism. I conclude by claiming that the motifs of eternity and infinitude’s employment at each of these three stages mirrors the substance of the “Three Metamorphoses of the Spirit” section in Z.

1. Christianity as Expressing the Impulse toward Human Meaning

Nietzsche’s critical stance toward Christianity is one of the most obvious aspects of his work. It is for good reason that he is offered up as the representative atheist bogeyman in many a philosophy of religion seminar. Nietzsche’s various criticisms of Christianity are diverse in tenor. Sometimes the critique takes a more anthropological inclination. For example, in *Dawn* (D), Nietzsche draws the claim that the fruitfulness of Christianity in “saints and desert solitaries” does nothing to prove itself, owing to its role in filling Jerusalem’s “vast madhouses for abortive saints” (D 14). Sometimes these criticisms are focused on Christianity’s negative effects; sometimes they are directed toward the values Christianity inherently expresses. Indeed, these two aspects of Nietzsche’s critique often feature within the same passage and are often run so closely together that they get conflated.² For example, in the closing section of *The Antichrist* (A), Nietzsche both describes Christianity as the “the greatest corruption conceivable” that “has not left anything untouched by its corruption,” as well as expressing “an art of self-violation, a will to lie at any cost, a disgust, a hatred of all good and honest instincts!” (A 62).³

Similar versions of these criticisms appear throughout Nietzsche’s works. Their prominence, however, does not preclude Nietzsche’s later works from wishing to explore the impulses that drive humans toward religious belief. This exploration is not a staple throughout each of the periodic shifts that take place in Nietzsche’s works. It doesn’t seem present during the so-called positivist phase, for example. The Nietzsche of *Human, All Too Human* (HH) often speaks as if the kind of impulses toward the transcendent, which motivate the adoption of Christianity in the first instance, are something contingent and possible to dismiss, and that it would be right to dismiss them. Nietzsche approvingly echoes his one-time closest friend

Paul Rée, of “taking an axe to the root of metaphysical need” about religion and the impulses that motivate it (HH 37).⁴

But a shift occurs for Nietzsche by the early 1880s. Thereafter, he is no longer best read as dismissing all of the impulses which motivate the religious disposition. Indeed, some of Nietzsche’s most famous pronouncements in the mature works wouldn’t make sense, if taking an axe to this root remained either possible or effective for him. The vacuum left in the wake of religious belief is one Nietzsche takes seriously. The death of God demands a compensatory response, rather than refutation alone settling the matter. From GS on, Nietzsche considers humans to be the animals possessing a will to meaning, arguably innately so, of which Christianity is a nihilistic expression. There is a dimension of Nietzsche’s critique against the “will to lie at any cost” built into Christianity. But more central is a focus on how the normative injunctions of Christianity poorly fit with human instincts. Christianity demands unwieldy psychic repressions and obstructs human self-cultivation by means of the free expression of our deeply engrained drives.⁵ This is not to mean Nietzsche is undermining the importance of the search itself. On a more nuanced reading, Nietzsche’s works from the 1880s onward explore the problem of meaning and its status as a feature of human motivation. This concern forms the backbone argument, in particular, of the third essay of GM. There, Nietzsche analyses how the values in-built to the Christian belief system arose and came to be sustained, in relation to those psychological needs they aim to fulfill. The Christian schema was adopted for the reasons of providing a meaning to suffering, justifying it. In this sense, particular human impulses were positioned within a framework of meaning, even if that resulted in denying their expression.

It is not for nothing that the “shadow of God” is so lingering for Nietzsche (GS 108). Human life has been provided an entire interpretive framework of meaning by adopting Christianity. A particular standard of value has been provided for two millennia, with a metaphysical story to support it. Despite Nietzsche’s contention that Christian belief is itself a form of nihilism (i.e., that it is antithetical to the particular values the adoption of which Nietzsche considers genuinely life-affirming), GM III argues that a nihilistic standard of value, as evinced in the ‘will to nothingness’ of the ascetic ideal, has been preferred to no standard of value (‘no will’) at all (GM III 28).⁶ This “will” expresses a particular answer to this search for meaning. Despite his contention that it is a life-denying expression, it has served as the only game in town in this justificatory search for two millennia.⁷

Part of what makes Nietzsche’s critique of Christianity more interesting than the garden variety atheism (including arguably his own in HH) is his emphasis on its far-reaching consequences. If the metaphysical claims that buttress Christian belief are no longer acceptable, then there’s no way to sustain the Christian brand of morality, of the kind he sees as pervasive in Western life. Nietzsche is not just casting off Christianity but is being honest about the consequences of its demise, and the ramifications of what humanity will have to work through, as a result. As he says later in *Twilight of the Idols* (TI), “when you give up Christian faith, you pull the rug out from under your right to Christian morality as well,” and that Christian morality “has truth only if God is the truth,—it stands or falls along with belief in God” (TI Skirmishes 5).

2. Nietzsche's Use of the Motifs of Infinitude and Eternity

Christian belief has offered a network of conceptual and affective relations between human impulses and provided justifications for them. This is done via injunctions stemming from Christianity's metaphysical commitments, specifically the Judeo-Christian conception of God, which is a conception bound up with the attribute of infinitude: infinite goodness, infinite wisdom, infinite power, and an infinite ground. These attributes are discussed by many in diverse philosophical contexts, from Schelling to Tillich, and many points in between.⁸ Each use of these associations gains traction from a common grasp of the Christian tradition's conceptual apparatus.

Likewise, eternity is intrinsic to the Judeo-Christian concept of God. Just as God is taken to be an infinite ground, so too is he an eternal ground (Rom. 1:20). But the most prominent Biblical verses discussing eternity focus on the eternal life guaranteed by accepting Salvation (cf. Jn 3:16; 5:11, 24; 6:51; and 10:27–28). A passage from the Old Testament too states God has “set eternity in the human heart” (Eccl. 3:11).⁹ The inverse of this sentiment has the consequence of eternal punishment, which comes from unrighteous deeds or from rejection of God (cf. *Thess.* 1:9; *Mt.* 25:46).

This foray gives the requisite context for why Nietzsche employs these concepts of infinity and eternity, in passages where he discusses nihilism at its various stages. A significant reason for his doing so is that the Judeo-Christian tradition has established a familiar heritage to these concepts. Nietzsche in his own way sees his own project as tied to recognizing and indeed encouraging the demise of this tradition. Thus, it is fitting that he utilizes the conceptual heritage of these motifs in his own idiosyncratic manner.

This Judeo-Christian backdrop is familiar to the readership, which Nietzsche can exploit to radically revise the concepts involved in what he argues it means to affirm a life. As Brian Leiter has argued in another context, employing a term from Charles Stevenson, Nietzsche frequently uses “persuasive definitions” in service of similar purposes.¹⁰ While Leiter identifies concepts such as “soul,” “power,” “will,” and “freedom” for this (Leiter 2019: 152), something like this also holds true for Nietzsche's invocation of eternity and infinitude.¹¹

Nietzsche uses these motifs to assess the developmental stages of nihilism and plot the terrain of the affective dispositions coinciding with them. The sense of magnitude they are meant to instill in each stage denotes a range of dispositions, to accord with the development of a revised conception of life-affirmation, *through* nihilism, rather than merely avoiding it. Nietzsche uses them at various stages to both describe and facilitate a range of affects—first, a sense of deep initial disorientation; then, a sense of awe at the possibilities that nihilism exposes as possible within the human scope; and finally, a positive sense of exaltation, with the affirmation of life being magnified by association with eternity and infinitude.¹²

It is again worth reiterating that there are good reasons for thinking that Nietzsche offers no explicit conceptual delineation between “eternal” and “infinite” in the texts I explore throughout this chapter. He appears to use each of the motifs to similar ends, and though he sometimes appears to identify the infinite more in relation to

perspectives, he usually conflates the content of the two concepts. Conceptions of the eternal are framed as something unending and limitless in time within the tradition of cosmology, while conceptions of the infinite are usually considered as various forms of innumerability or boundlessness, in relation to space, time and quantity, often in contrast to human temporality. But Nietzsche uses them with no great exclusivity from each other. What matters is that Nietzsche utilises each motif, sometimes both together, to denote an affectively loaded sense of scope and magnitude. A good example of this comes in one of the unpublished notes Nietzsche describes as having been “thrown onto paper” in August 1881 (EH Books Z 1), after first being confronted by the great stone at Lake Silvaplana. One of the notes reads,

5. The new *heavy weight: the eternal recurrence of the same*. Infinite importance of our knowing, erring, our habits, ways of living for all that is to come. What shall we do with the rest of our lives—we who have spent the majority of our lives in the most profound ignorance? We shall *teach the doctrine*—it is the most powerful means of *incorporating* it in ourselves. Our kind of beatitude, as teachers of the greatest doctrine. (KGW V 2. 11[141])

I discuss the specific ways eternal recurrence instantiates these motifs in Section 5, but this note demonstrates Nietzsche is not sticking to a commonplace use of these concepts, while exploiting their Judeo-Christian heritage. Instead, he carves out space to employ them for his own uses, and to demonstrate their role in fostering a new disposition of life-affirmation, for “our kind of beatitude.”

Whether Nietzsche is entitled to equivocate eternity and infinity in this way is beside the point. I simply point out that he does so. Perhaps this interchange is intentional on Nietzsche’s part: perhaps it is the case that for him, any firm distinction is lost as a result of nihilism. A consequence of the death of God is the death of the possibility of the absolutely eternal, and the possibility of comprehending infinitude independently of the context of human experience. As such, I shall argue that in these passages, Nietzsche uses the terms “eternal” and “infinite” pretty much interchangeably. Whether this interchange is erroneous or not, I maintain that it is his reasons for using these concepts in this way that are more interesting.

3. Plunging into an Infinite Nothing: The Death of God

Nietzsche stuffs the “death of God” passage chock-full with Christian imagery. The madman of the GS 125 passage is in the first instance seeking God, employing the same rhetoric as injunctions found in both the Old and New Testament, as evinced in 1 Chr. 22:19, to “set your mind and heart to seek the Lord your God.” Then, the madman changes rhetorical tack and proclaims God’s death. The effects of this are then described by the madman in many affectively loaded metaphors: the wiping away of the horizon, the unchaining of the sun, and the need for bright lanterns in the morning—rhetoric emphasizing the catastrophe that the death of God is for the post-Christian, secular sensibilities of modern European society.

It is notable that Nietzsche has the madman ask his onlookers—representative of the atheistic Germans of the nineteenth-century “marketplace” of ideas—if they have strayed into an “infinite nothing.” This infinite nothing is described as a continual plunging in any and all directions, suggesting an affective sense of heightened disorientation, to accompany the cognitive inertia that follows from the end of God’s being believed. This disorientation offers a rhetorical juxtaposition, between God’s provision of an infinite ground and this infinite nothing once we become aware of God’s death. Some, most prominently Bernard Reginster, have argued that the disorientation suggested in this passage is itself the phenomenon of nihilism.¹³ But it likelier suggests the disorientation is that affective state that facilitates a journey into and through nihilism, into recognizing its multifaceted aspects, and becoming more aware of how it has seeped into the dominant ideological frameworks of Europe over the past two millennia. I develop this point further, below.

Returning to the death of God passage: when he is ignored by the astonished and confused atheists in the marketplace, the madman forces his way into a number of churches, and therein strikes up “his *requiem aeternam deo*” (GS 125), the eternal requiem for the old Christian God. This has the rhetorical effect of demonstrating the magnitude of the crisis that the madman pronounces—God remains dead, eternally.

In response to this crisis, the madman asks, must we become Gods ourselves, to become worthy of His death? This passage in Nietzsche has long been emphasized as important for any positive, post-Christian enterprise he might proffer. Martin Heidegger, in his notorious Rectoral Address, described Nietzsche as a “great passionate seeker after God” (Heidegger [1933] 1990: 7). There is an important double entendre here. As well as being a seeker for a new kind of redemption after Christianity ceases to provide meaning, the description also tracks something like a fervent religiosity in Nietzsche’s search.¹⁴ But what exactly does this claim of becoming akin to Gods ourselves amount to? It has commonly and rightly been taken to involve values—their experimentation and creation. However, there might also be a level at which the assumption of the same status of a God, “becoming a god oneself,” is to provide one’s own ground, just as God (infinitely) did before his “death.” Alternatively, it may be an injunction to do without a ground: this would fit Nietzsche’s claims elsewhere about shirking the spirit of gravity, and with the imagery of birds escaping their cages. Maybe this is a difference in terminology and it is wholly possible to reconcile these two points. Either way, it is within this context that Nietzsche moves to using the motifs of infinity and eternity in a more positive fashion.

4. The Promise of Nihilism, In the Horizon of the Infinite

The death of God passage at GS 125 is often taken in isolation as the summa of Nietzsche’s claims about nihilism. But is a bad habit of a lot of Nietzsche scholarship to take passages out of their intended context. With the exception, arguably, of GM, it is GS above all other works of Nietzsche’s where the context and ordering of passages matters most. When taken within its wider context, GS 125 is importantly caveated

by the passage that precedes it. Immediately before this passage, at GS 124, Nietzsche returns to speculations made at the very end of D 575 when he writes the following:

In the horizon of the infinite.—We have forsaken the land and gone to sea! We have destroyed the bridge behind us—more so, we have demolished the land behind us! Now, little ship, look out! Beside you is the ocean; it is true, it does not always roar, and at times it lies there like silk and gold and dreams of goodness. But there will be hours when you realize it is infinite and that there is nothing more awesome than infinity. Oh, the poor bird that has felt free and now strikes against the walls of this cage! Woe, when homesickness for the land overcomes you, as if there had been more *freedom* there – and there is no more ‘land’! (GS 124; underlining mine)

Nietzsche sets the passages up in succession, so that GS 124 might act to contextualize the nihilistic pronouncement in GS 125, for those of the proper disposition. Read alone, the “death of God” offers a destructive pronouncement of a coming crisis and without fleshing out how the imperative of being alike to Gods ourselves might work. But read in the context of GS 124, it reads as a necessary inroad, the undertaking required to begin the development through nihilism. God’s death is a stage, the first stage of this development.¹⁵

Two things are interesting in this context. The first is that the metaphor of the sea is obviously meant to delineate the recognition of being *in* nihilism. The second is that although the sea is said to perhaps sometimes “roar,” and Nietzsche gives heed to the “little boat,” there is nothing to suggest that this voyage remains an intrinsically disoriented one. Indeed, the disorientation was something felt on the “land,” which the recognition of nihilism has now destroyed. This gives further credence to the notion that the disorientation of the “infinite nothing” was an affect that got the ball rolling. But we should beware of thinking that it is disorientation that encapsulates Nietzsche’s fundamental claims about the phenomenon of nihilism.¹⁶

What we find in GS 124 is a disposition of awe at the possibilities available to those who manage to cast off the axiological tenets of Christianity. This is most often narrowly framed as a rejection of Christian morality, and for good reason, since it is this that Nietzsche talks of the most. But it is broader than this—it is a rejection of the motivational norms that Christianity argues ought to determine human behavior. The disposition spoken of in GS 124 is one of an adventurer or inquirer, who has followed Nietzsche in this rejection (cf. GS 344). Its adoption involves new possibilities and a specific sense of freedom to pursue them. This is not the same as an exercise in full-blooded value creation or self-legislation, which Nietzsche takes to be a mature development available to some out of this disposition. What is significant here is his revision of the idea of the infinite with its own positive valence in this passage. It explicitly contrasts with the motif of the “infinite nothing” in the passage following it, at GS 125. But though the motif is here revised to fit a positive purpose, infinitude is again used to denote a great magnitude, to highlight the significance of one’s change of disposition.

While the crisis of the death of God is considered a turning point in Nietzsche’s oeuvre that instigates a central concern of his later works, this important context has

to my knowledge been overlooked in the secondary literature. Nietzsche's placement of these two passages demonstrates his concern with the prospect of offering tools for actively confronting nihilism, by reframing the motif of the infinite into one of positive valence. GS 124 enjoins his desired readers to embrace the fear and awe that this new "infinite" freedom induces, as a means of facing nihilism diagnosed by the madman, in the immediately ensuing passage at GS 125. Built into this is the link between Nietzsche's imagery of the horizon, infinitude, and the availability of new perspectives on or interpretations of life. A revision of our relation to this motif is one that facilitates recognizing that our hitherto held interpretations of life are no longer the only game in town, which causes terror and awe. Yet integral to that is the potential to foster a shift to a more affirmative disposition. Although Nietzsche does not use the term "perspectives" explicitly in GS 124, he does so in a section that similarly discusses this theme. In the fifth book added to GS in 1887, he supplements these motifs already present in the 1882 edition. Giving passage 374 the heading, "Our New Infinite," he writes,

How far the perspective character of existence extends, or indeed whether existence has any other character than this ... it is a hopeless curiosity that wants to know what other kinds of intellects and perspectives there *might* be. ... I should think that today we are at least far from the ridiculous immodesty that would be involved in decreeing from our corner that perspectives are permitted only from this corner. Rather, the world has once again become "infinite" to us: insofar as we cannot dismiss the possibility that it includes infinite interpretations. Once more the great horror seizes us—but who again would desire immediately to deify in the old manner *this* monster of an unknown world? And to worship from this time on the unknown thing as the "unknown one" in future? Alas, too many ungodly possibilities of interpretation are included in this unknown; too much devilry, stupidity and foolishness of interpretation,—our own human, all too human interpretation itself, which we know. (GS 374)

Here Nietzsche shifts tack, away from conceiving of the infinite in terms of God's grounding. GS 374 reconceives the infinite in terms of the multiplicity of human interpretations and the competing ways in which one might evaluate life. He discusses the lack of an absolute, singular, and monolithic perspective on values. The "great horror" that arises in us is the new recognition of this potential infinitude of human interpretations—as if one were disposed to view it as the "infinite nothing" of GS 125. But Nietzsche immediately counters the notion of returning to the Christian value system as being unthinkable. We are already *within* nihilism: the death of God is a Rubicon of values. He identifies this "monster of an unknown world" as something that doesn't lend itself to the narrow prism through which the Christian perspective might frame it. There are "too many ungodly possibilities" requisite in interpreting the world in this new sense—our perspectives can no longer be trammelled by Christian-moral constraints.

Nietzsche suggests that overcoming the death of God involves drawing upon a multiplicity of interpretations and assessing their aptitude for the promotion of genuine flourishing, rather than resorting back to the prior, "deified" conceptions of the infinite.¹⁷ These new perspectives are the lanterns in the morning, of the kind the madman claims

are needed in GS 125. The metaphor of the sea as offering a “freedom” is not contrasted with the land having been left—rather, for Nietzsche, there is no more “land” (GS 124). The land was the ground that nihilism swept up when God was pronounced dead.

This metaphor from the passage in Book Three of the 1882 edition is utilized again at passage 343 from 1887’s Book Five. There, Nietzsche writes of the sea being open, even if it is not bright. This freedom offered by the sea is the reason for “our cheerfulness” at the advent of God’s death. But more significantly, Nietzsche invokes awe in the face of the sense of infinitude offered by this open sea one passage before the madman’s discussing the prospect of an “infinite nothing” (GS 125). It is in this context that the passage at GS 343 describes “horizon” alongside the open sea. Rather than, for example, Heidegger’s quasi-idealistic usage of the term “horizon” to show the limits of human meaning, Nietzsche uses it as what happens when a hitherto limiting boundary is thrown open, as a result of engaging with the practical consequences of nihilism. A horizon can show us not only the going down of the sun but also its rising. Nietzsche, no doubt cognizant of this double meaning, aims to encapsulate that just as one value system passes into dusk, we open up the possibility of a new, ascendant value system, or systems. It is in this respect that the scope of human meaning is expanded, as a result of casting the old boundary aside. This exacts as a cost the grounding to human meaning as its price, in some sense, as that which was provided by the Judeo-Christian god. But in another sense, Nietzsche wants to abandon thinking of a ground of human meaning in the manner conceived by this old Judeo-Christian framework. This gets to the heart of his discussion of the bird as a poor animal, whose conception of freedom is limited to “this cage.” Nietzsche at GS 124 uses the imagery of the bird to refer to those who misapprehend their capacity for freedom while labouring under Christian morality. Not only did this old morality offer a false sense of freedom, but there can also be no return to it. That doesn’t mean getting rid of freedom. Nietzsche explicitly invokes again the motif of infinity to describe this new sense of freedom, in a poem, “Towards New Seas,” from *The Songs of Prince Vogelfrei* passage added in 1887 to the close of the book.¹⁸ Without plan, Nietzsche’s “ship” heads out into the vast open sea. Nietzsche writes, “Only *your* eye—monstrously, Stares at me, infinity!” A question remains about who Nietzsche is addressing when he uses the inclusive “our” in “our new infinite” (GS 374). The rhetoric around these passages suggests Nietzsche realized that GS 125 would be read as a deep, irresolvable crisis to most. It would only be those predisposed with the requisite favourable conditions who might come to possess a flourishing affective response to it.¹⁹ It is the demandingness of this injunction of becoming alike to gods ourselves which carries over to Nietzsche’s most studied use of the motifs of eternity and infinity.

5. The Possibility for Joy through Willing the Eternal Recurrence

The most commonly cited passage from Nietzsche’s involving these motifs is GS 341, the first positive invocation of eternal recurrence. Up until now, infinity and eternity have been used to first expose the disorientation recognized at the advent of nihilism,

and then to denote a kind of awe at the openness that active engagements with nihilism present. How eternal recurrence differs from these two uses will be the focus of this section. If a "new infinite" involves rethinking our interpretation of life's meaning, and that a measure of the life-affirmation of this interpretation would be Nietzsche's test for successfully overcoming nihilism, there is no stronger example of such a test as the thought that he considered to be his most fundamental.²⁰

GS 341 offers eternal recurrence as an existentially significant hypothetical test. It is employed as a measure of whether the individual in question's disposition towards life could be one of full-blooded affirmation. Confronting someone with the thought of eternal recurrence is supposed to act as a gauge for the strength of the interpretation, that which evaluatively guides the actions of that individual. Setting aside the myriad interpretive questions surrounding the status and successfulness of eternal recurrence in its context, with eternal recurrence, these central motifs are employed to probe whether one might be able to justifiably embody a joyous disposition to life, as a final consequence of engaging with nihilism.

The hypothesis, as Nietzsche presents it at GS 341, invokes several examples of the eternal and the infinite. The thought centrally involves the prospect of eternally repeating one's life. Nietzsche speaks of the "eternal hourglass of existence," which "will ever be turned over again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!" When the positive response to the eternal recurrence is couched in the language of divinity ("Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you have answered: 'You are a God, and never did I hear anything so divine!'"), the passage closes with the question of how well disposed to life one would have to be "to long for nothing more fervently than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal."

Through eternal recurrence, one's value-interpretation of life is measured. But the manner in which Nietzsche views eternal recurrence as a thought to be "incorporated" by the would-be life affirmer is also important. Reconsidering the Lake Silvaplana notes from August 1881, eternal recurrence is framed in terms of the "infinite importance of our knowing, erring, our habits, ways of living for all that is to come," as well as how we might find the best way of "incorporating [eternal recurrence] in ourselves" (KGW V 2.11[141]).

Much more needs to be said of the metaphor of incorporation and how Nietzsche uses it more broadly.²¹ But its application here shows a kind of internalization of one's own meaning. In one sense, this returns to a form of the value scheme featured, in a more primitive fashion, in the nobles of GM I. It is "slavish," by contrast, to always seek meaning in what is external to oneself. But whereas the nobles were unreflectively expressing their value-commitments, the affirmer of eternal recurrence is a cognitive and affective alignment to the proposition, "what if this all occurred eternally?" It is possible to will eternal recurrence by virtue of having incorporated it into oneself. Now, this runs the risk of sounding like an appeal to the transcendent to affirm life. Perhaps this is superficially true about even the passages discussed earlier, denoting the awe in the horizon of the infinite. If so, this would clash with Nietzsche's wish elsewhere to naturalize the impulses associated with appeals to the transcendent, as they are in religious belief (BGE 230). But incorporation is used here as a way of making eternity immanent. Rather than

God, whom it is claimed “set[s] eternity in the human heart” (Eccl. 3:11), Nietzsche does not see eternal recurrence as securing an exalted perspective upon life at the expense of the immanent. The eternal recurrence confronts the individual with the injunction to see immanent phenomena as imbued with eternal significance (TI Ancients 4–5). To again invoke Leiter’s idea that Nietzsche is using these motifs as what Stevenson calls “persuasive definitions,” what value these motifs had on earlier transcendent models have been *revalued*. It may be argued that Nietzsche’s developmental story aims to revalue eternity and infinity, by inverting the notion that they invoke some otherworldly beyond. Rather, they are affective tools to heighten one’s relation to this world, while avoiding metaphysics in the fulfillment of a basic human need. By Nietzsche’s lights, Judeo-Christian theodicy—which claims this world is finite, while the world beyond is eternal and infinite—got it exactly the wrong way round. Nietzsche is flipping that on its head. Christianity and Christians are finite; the world, so perceived by the experimenter, and then the value-creating life-affirmer, is eternal and infinite.

Here Nietzsche does something arguably similar to the sentiment encapsulated in the opening stanza of William Blake’s “Auguries of Innocence”:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour

To have incorporated an eternal perspective on the immanent as such would lend itself to being able to joyously will it so. Being able to describe the eternal recurrence as nothing matched in its divinity expresses its own kind of exalted disposition, which Nietzsche ties to a form of joy. This seems rather more than the commonplace variety of joy that can be felt at a football game result, or the feeling that follows the laughter at a joke’s punch line. Consistent with the earlier claims about Nietzsche’s “persuasive definitions” in how he employs certain concepts, arguably this is at work in his talk of this form of joy, too. It is this joy which is the appropriate affect once one can totally affirm their disposition towards life. Nietzsche sees it as the response arrived at after overcoming nihilism, by means of longing the eternal confirmation and seal of the immanent world (GS 341). There remains a further interpretive question as to whether Nietzsche views this disposition of joy as a fundamentally epiphenomenal state, through which we might recognize one’s status as a genuine affirmer; or whether the joy itself is efficacious in promoting this life-affirming disposition, by virtue of willing eternity; or whether it may be both. As how Nietzsche arguably sees *ressentiment* as both a product and a cause of psychic corrosion, this special affective joy might be positioned as, inversely, a stimulant to affirm life, as well as a state arising from that stimulation. Whatever the case, this joyful willing of eternity delineates a special kind of affect, as well as perhaps the willing of eternity being the target of this affect.²²

In a piece of characteristically bad poetry in Z by Nietzsche, the repetition of the motif of eternity is held up by Zarathustra as something both appetitively desired and

loved: "Oh, how could I not be ardent for Eternity, and for the marriage-ring of rings—the ring of the recurrence? ... I love thee, O Eternity! For I love thee, O Eternity!" (Z III Seven Seals). Zarathustra is willing not the incipience of "the ring of recurrence" but an immersion into it, since his disposition runs in joyful consonance with it. It is in "On the Vision and the Riddle" that the shepherd (inferably a version of Zarathustra himself) is described as becoming an overjoyed, transfigured being who laughed as "never on earth laughed a man" (Z III Riddle).

Whether or not this would ultimately collapse back into a kind of transcendent perspective for Nietzsche is a matter of interpretive debate.²³ One thing in Nietzsche's favour on this front is that his reconceptions of the eternal and the infinite make no appeal to Providence and its consolations. As he writes at GS 109, "When will we have completely de-deified nature? When may we begin to *naturalize* humanity with a pure, newly discovered, newly redeemed nature?" In line with this, eternal recurrence is intended to redeem life by means of giving a new, exalted meaning to it. But this meaning is secured by means of being able to joyfully will the eternal recurrence of the immanent, rather than by falling back into the nihilistic baggage of Christianity.²⁴ Indeed, the confrontation with nihilism has led to this new means of life-affirmation, as a consequential boon unavailable beforehand. Nihilism, then, has instrumentally facilitated a new kind of meaning to life, by means of eternal recurrence.

In a famous passage in *Beyond Good and Evil* (BGE), Nietzsche speaks of the process to undertake thinking pessimism in its depths. Only by going one step beyond Arthur Schopenhauer, in a deepening of pessimism, to overcome morality can one arrive at an "opposite ideal." The most world-negating perspective thus allows one to arrive at

the ideal of the most high-spirited, lively, world-affirming human being who has learned not just to accept and go along with what was and what is, but who wants it again *just as it is and was* through all eternity, insatiably shouting *da capo*, not just to himself but to the whole play and performance, and not just to a performance, but rather, fundamentally, to the one who needs precisely this performance—and makes it necessary: because again and again he needs himself—and makes himself necessary—What? And wouldn't this then be—*circulus vitiosus deus*? (BGE 56)

This last notion of a God being a "vicious circle" confirms the intended similarity here with the eternal recurrence motif. But it also tracks the developmental process through nihilism, so as to overcome it. Notable is Nietzsche's claim that morality's overcoming is something which inhibited Schopenhauer from undertaking this process. This passage ties together the notion that nihilism is developmental, and that its final stage includes a desire for viewing a life as willable in an eternal magnitude.²⁵

Conclusion

This chapter has examined three ways Nietzsche uses the motifs of eternity and infinity to track three developmental stages of nihilism's inception and its overcoming. In Z, Nietzsche offers another passage where he talks of three stages of development: the

“Three Metamorphoses of the Spirit.” There is little explicit textual evidence to support the claim that these two developmental processes are the same. But there is great conceptual overlap—enough, I argue, to draw a link.

The first stage of the “infinite nothing” describes a disposition of disorientation, in reaction to the death of God. Built into GS 125 is the idea that those marketplace atheists remain Christian in their morality. Schopenhauer falls into this camp, just as he remained unable to think pessimism in its depths in BGE 56. This camp is therefore confronted with a crisis of meaning while remaining burdened by an inability to freely develop their own disposition towards nihilism—the camel, the first metamorphosis of spirit.

For those who start to unburden themselves, the prospect of an infinite horizon comes to the fore (GS 124, 343, 371). This horizon is characterized by a new sense of freedom to experiment with values and combat the old morality which hitherto constrained that freedom. The lion, the second metamorphosis of spirit, is described as capturing its own freedom, and gaining its own lordship from the wilderness of its own perspective. It combats the great dragon “Thou-shalt” through its will. Those who undertake the new perspectival experimentation amidst infinite interpretations are metaphorically captured as the lion, destructive of the old morality and experimental in its wake.

However, Zarathustra is clear that the lion is not yet a creator of values. Rather, it facilitates the freedom that constitutes the conditions for creativity at a later stage. Nietzsche’s allusions to the great dragon and later the eternal recurrence as a sleeping, dormant *Wurm* bear affinity with Wagner’s Siegfried in combat with Fafner in his guise as the lizard-like serpent-worm, or *Schlangenwurm*.²⁶ But note that whereas Siegfried slays Fafner, the lion metamorphosis can only combat but not slay the great dragon by means of his freedom. Extending the comparison, this is because Siegfried wields the sword named *Nothung*, or “Child Born of Need.” Whereas the one in awe of the infinite that is opened up after the death of God could experiment with values and interpretations, the affirmer of eternal recurrence is a self-legislator, a genuine creator. This final use of the motif of eternity, the joyful disposition toward the eternal recurrence, is synonymous with the value creating child, the third metamorphosis. Nietzsche describes the child as “innocence ... and forgetfulness, a new beginning, a game, a self-rolling wheel ... a holy Yea. Aye, for the game of creating ... there is needed a holy Yea unto life: its *own* will willeth now the spirit” (Z I Metamorphoses).²⁷

What of the kind of joy embodied by the affirmer of eternal recurrence? In the penultimate passage before the “Epilogue” from GS V, Nietzsche invokes the image of a coming “spirit that plays naively, i.e. not deliberately but from overflowing abundance and power, with everything that was hitherto called holy, good, untouchable, divine” (GS 382). Harkening to the great task of overcoming nihilism, Nietzsche continues, “It is perhaps only with it that *the great seriousness* really emerges; that the real question mark is posed for the first time; that the destiny of the soul changes; the hand of the clock moves forward.” Invoking imagery of sailing and seas, these “argonauts of the ideal” embark on a great journey, one Nietzsche thinks has consequences for all humanity. Through this journey, one sets out to traverse enough perspectives upon life to be able to arrive at an interpretation of

this life which one could desire as eternally recurring. Nietzsche hopes the eternal recurrence thought will provide this “eternal confirmation and seal” (GS 341) for all actions, as Zarathustra proclaims in his Roundelay, “*alle Lust will Ewigheit*,” or “all joy wills eternity.”²⁸

Notes

1. It might count as one end point among others, for Nietzsche. In the fourth book of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, some evidence suggests that eternal recurrence is Zarathustra's own idiosyncratic means of achieving life-affirmation. See Johnson (2019: 189–91). However, Nietzsche elsewhere refers to eternal recurrence as the fundamental thought of *Zarathustra the text*, not just Zarathustra the figure (EH Books Zarathustra 1). Nietzsche also refers to himself as the teacher of the eternal recurrence (TI Ancients 5).
2. Huddleston (2015) delineates the important difference between these, and why the negative effects of Christianity alone are insufficient to explain the grounds for Nietzsche's critique.
3. There is an underappreciated aspect of Nietzsche's claims about Christianity that demonstrate how it might facilitate kinds of instrumentally positive consequences—see Huddleston (2015) again, Huddleston (2019: 60–70), and Neuhouser (2014).
4. Nietzsche quotes this passage again at EH Books HH 6, where after a decade, he arguably offers some critical distance from its sentiment.
5. See Elliott (2020: esp. 73–7) for a detailed discussion of this and how it squares with Nietzsche's claims about the possibility to remove and eliminate certain other drives in the service of self-cultivation. While never being goods in themselves, I, however, also take it that Nietzsche sees repressions as having instrumentally led to the formation of new, interesting, and unforeseeable aspects of human psychology. This is most prescient in GM II. The life-affirming speculations Nietzsche offers there as a result of the formation of these aspects remains an understudied topic in Nietzsche scholarship.
6. Whether “no will” at all, construed as the complete absence of a will to meaning, is even possible is contentious, since Nietzsche's closest apparent candidate, the “last man” figure, still possesses a meaning, albeit a narrow, parochial one (Z P 5).
7. Although Nietzsche is obviously aware of the fact that other cultures have had ideals, Judeo-Christianity is novel in offering a kind of justificatory ideal in its answer to the will to meaning, rather than an embodied affirmation. He thinks the virtues of Greco-Roman culture (for one) were primarily *expressed* by its adherents, rather than conscientiously extolled.
8. In a move away from what he took to be the unacceptable determinism of Spinozism, Schelling claims that that which makes the world intelligible and grounded “is not God seen absolutely, i.e. insofar as He exists; for it is only the ground of His existence, it is *nature* in God; an essence which is inseparable from God, but different from Him” (1856–61 I/7: 358, as quoted in Bowie 1993: 95). The idea of God as the ‘ground of Being’ is a central concept in Tillich's work; Cornelius de Deugd (1968) provided a treatment of this concept in Tillich, in relation to Spinozism.
9. Tom Hanauer helpfully observed that the original Hebrew commonly translated here as “eternity” (*olam*) could also be interpreted as “world.” In Hebrew, if you conjoin the word “for” and “world,” you get “eternity” (*le'olam*) but the more accurate translation would be “forever.” “Eternity” is usually translated from the Hebrew *net'zach*, which

interestingly shares the root for the Hebrew word for “victory”: the eternal is the victorious. I wonder what Nietzsche with his philologist’s cap on would have made of that.

10. As Stevenson puts it, “a ‘persuasive’ definition is one which gives a new conceptual meaning to a familiar word without substantially changing its emotive meaning, and which is used with the conscious or unconscious purpose of changing, by this means, the direction of people’s interests” (1938: 331).
11. Similarly, it would repay further consideration to think of Nietzsche as utilizing the heritage of concepts in a manner akin to Gricean implicatures: a kind of productive misleading of the reader, by articulating familiar concepts to conversationally imply new, rhetorically subversive meanings to them. Cf. Grice (1989).
12. Dirk R. Johnson has intimated that eternity’s scope is broader than just eternal recurrence, for Nietzsche. In his account of Z, he writes that the eternal recurrence “is less crucial to the text as a whole than the feeling of eternity that the work attempts to convey” (2019: 175). Johnson’s account also rightly notes Nietzsche’s “strategy of intimate, delicate persuasion” (2019: 175) to engage his ideal readers, similar points by Stevenson and Grice made above. However, Johnson’s discussion fails to sufficiently explain how eternity functions, either as something that informs a disposition Zarathustra arrives at, as something distinct from the usual claims made about eternal recurrence as a regulative thought-experiment, or as a general motif used by Nietzsche. Though drafts of this chapter were produced before Johnson’s piece appeared, one of my intentions here is to clearly explicate this point, among others, and provide context for the philosophical significance of Nietzsche’s use of this motif, in addition to infinity.
13. Reginster (2006) provides the most prominent account of nihilism’s features as disorientation and despair, though some argue that it doesn’t adequately attend the affective dimension of nihilism: see Gemes (2008) and Creasy (2020). I take the disorientation at GS 125 as possessing an affective character: our affects are jumbled up, owing to how our feelings do not cohere with the madman’s revelation of God’s death. Indeed, that we do not feel we know what we ought to feel about our newly realized malaise may comprise a meta-affectual quandary.
14. Cf. Heller (1988: 11).
15. Some might argue that following the linear ordering of the passages themselves would be neater, and thus, the condition described in GS 124 precedes the condition described in GS 125. However, Nietzsche’s linear ordering of texts frequently breaks with the developmental stages of various ideals they have in focus. GM II 2 is a helpful counterexample here: the sovereign individual denotes the developmental culmination into a new and refined ideal, before Nietzsche tells the story through the rest of GM II of the sickness that made this exemplar of greater health possible. Nietzsche offers the often-cryptic image of the Overman early in the preface to Z, but does not expound upon it until later in the book. We also get intimations of eternal recurrence far earlier than any concrete analysis of what affirming it amounts to or would require of us. In other words, GS 124 and 125 are best understood like those places where Nietzsche asserts an ideal *before* explaining how it comes to pass. Thanks to James Mollison for pressing this alternative.
16. What gives GS 125 its force is that those in the marketplace, including some of those who might count as candidates for Nietzschean ideals, have no idea what has just hit them—they were totally unprepared. Would the death of God be that shocking to one already in the process of realizing their engagement with nihilism, construed as

re-engagement with values, as in GS 124? Viewing it so would likely undermine what gives the death of God passage its critical dimension, since value experimentation is only possible after feeling the full shocking force of GS 125.

17. Cf. also BGE 211 and GM III 12.
18. In his translation of GS Walter Kaufmann points out that this poem echoes the motifs of GS 124.
19. There are residual questions about these conditions under which one might be so disposed. To put some questions for Nietzsche on the table; is this a conscious effort to become better disposed? Is it wholly or largely unconscious? Is it something we can make a habit of, to engrain into ourselves? Is the fostering of such a disposition completely unavailable to some? If so, how tenable is his task of experimenting with values, as facilitating human flourishing, if only a few superlative cases might be able to even come close to it? What about the rest of us? These important questions are beyond the scope of this paper but should be pressing to any discussion of what might broadly be called Nietzsche's positive ethical account.
20. EH Books Z 1.
21. See Elliott (2021) for a discussion of incorporation in the context of Nietzsche's claims about the psychological faculty of active forgetting.
22. Whether Nietzsche can account for the difference between what might be called "proximate willing" of events close to one's life (e.g., the success that follows turning down one job to secure another, etc.) versus "distant willing" things that we have a hard time making any connection at all with one's life (e.g. the extinction or flourishing of a bug in some far-flung ecosystem, whose existence I know nothing of) is another story. Sometimes he intimates that there is no real distinction between them, as all things are connected. This difficult matter cannot be answered here.
23. May helpfully considers whether Nietzsche remains in thrall to an ideology of life-denial by seeking to justify life through total affirmation, rather than overcoming the need to do so (2011: 86–98). There are other problems with practical injunctions of eternal recurrence, including the notion of the creative will turning an "it was" into a "thus I willed it" (Z II Redemption), as one intractably grounded in a form of self-deception, rather than honesty about one's life. I address this problem in a forthcoming paper.
24. We can reasonably question whether all forms of Christianity are precluded from something like the Nietzschean picture here. Romantic poetry such as Wordsworth's "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey" (1798) arguably illustrates this, where the joyful mood he describes feeling towards the immanence of Nature is no doubt inspired by his own Christian belief.
25. BGE 56 notably conceives of eternal recurrence as an ideal which a life-affirming individual can will more stably, rather than just for a single tremendous moment, as implied at GS 341. Although Z III Vision frontloads the imagery of the "Moment," Zarathustra there suggests that recognition of this moment will make lasting changes to one's soul. See too the aforementioned injunction to "incorporate" eternal recurrence, which suggests more than some momentary change.
26. See Loeb (2010: 148–52). Nietzsche's emulation of Wagner's imagery of the *Schlangenwurm* was the same imagery that inspired one of Schopenhauer's objections to Wagner's *Ring*, in his copy of the book sent to him by Wagner, which he read over the winter of 1854–5. Pencil in hand, he was prone to mocking Wagner's stylistic choices and strange phrasings in the margins.

27. See Loeb (2010: 220): “Zarathustra begins by predicting a culminating spiritual metamorphosis into a child’s creative freedom whereby the will wills its own will, and Zarathustra’s later speeches show how eternal recurrence is the key to this metamorphosis.”
28. Drafts of this chapter were presented at the British Society for Philosophy of Religion (2017), the Friedrich Nietzsche Society (2017), and as a keynote at the Religion & Culture conference in Warsaw (2018). I am grateful to Jessica Berry, Eva Cybulska, Samuel Hughes, Paul Kirkland, T. J. Mawson, Michael McNeal, Allison Merrick, William Parkhurst, Russell Re Manning, Mikołaj Ślawkowski-Rode, and Ralph Weir for their comments. I am also indebted to Tom Hanauer and James Mollison for detailed feedback on this chapter.

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