

Eternal Recurrence and Nihilism: Adding Weight to the Unbearable Lightness of Action

(Version 2.4)

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1. Introduction

I have argued elsewhere for ascribing an error theory about all normative and evaluative judgements to Nietzsche.¹ Such a nihilism brings with it a puzzle: how could we—or at least the select few of us being addressed by Nietzsche—continue in the face of this nihilism? This is a philosophical puzzle and so, defeasibly, an interpretive puzzle. If there is no theory it would make sense for Nietzsche to have about how the select few could go on, then this is some evidence against the proposed interpretation of him as a nihilist. I defended the interpretation by arguing that Nietzsche's declarations about creating values point to a practice of generating honest evaluative illusions.² Such honest evaluative illusions are tricky things, though, and, precisely because they are honest, one might worry that they lack the motivational power of genuine evaluative belief. Can they truly play the role that evaluative beliefs play in our psychological economies? I suspect that Nietzsche does not want the honest illusions to play exactly the role that evaluative beliefs played. The cheerfulness, the playfulness, the lightness

¹ Nadeem J. Z. Hussain, "Honest Illusion: Valuing for Nietzsche's Free Spirits", in *Nietzsche and Morality*, ed. Brian Leiter and Neil Sinhababu (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007).

² Again, Hussain, "Honest Illusion".

that Nietzsche hopes for are, I have suggested, a function of the shift from belief to pretence, from illusion to honest illusion. The question, nonetheless, is whether the resulting picture is too light. Can I go through life *merely acting*, as a critic might put it? My suggestion in this essay will be that the thought of eternal recurrence is meant to add weight to the lightness of acting—“acting”, obviously, in both the here relevant senses of the word.

The secondary literature on Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence is rather extensive. I will try to pick my way gingerly through this literature engaging with it, I hope, at just the right, few, select moments. For the most part, I will presume as background the long history of debates in the secondary literature and will simply join in at what I take to be the current stage of the dialectic. As should already be clear, I will be trying to provide some support for a variant of the traditional interpretive strand that takes the thought of eternal recurrence to function as a so-called “decision criterion”: the thought of eternal recurrence combats nihilism by adding weight or significance to our actions.³ As he puts it in the *Gay Science*: “The question in each and ever thing, ‘Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?’ would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight” (*GS* 341).⁴ The suggestion of a decision criterion comes out even more clearly in a letter to his friend Franz Overbeck, written when Nietzsche was working on *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the work whose “fundamental conception” is, according to Nietzsche, “the idea of the eternal recurrence” (*EH* “Books” Z:1). Nietzsche writes: “The question with everything that you want to do: ‘is it such that I want to do it innumerable times?’—that is the

³ I borrow the expression “decision criterion” from Maudemarie Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 248.

⁴ In citing Nietzsche’s texts I have basically followed the guidelines of the North American Nietzsche Society; I use the following standard English title acronyms: *The Antichrist* (*A*), *Beyond Good and Evil* (*BGE*), *Ecce Homo* (*EH*), *Gay Science* (*GS*), *On the Genealogy of Morals* (*GM*), *Human, All Too Human* (*HH*), *Twilight of the Idols* (*TI*), *Will to Power* (*WP*), *Zarathustra* (*Z*). References to *Z* and *TI* list abbreviated chapter title and section number. The translations, where available, are listed in the bibliography. All other translations are mine. Roman numerals refer to major parts or chapters. Arabic numerals refer to sections. For the German text I refer to the *Kritische Studienausgabe* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1980) (*KGW*) and *Kritische Gesamtausgabe: Werke* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1967-1978) (*KSA*). For Nietzsche’s correspondence I refer to *Sämtliche Briefe : Kritische Studienausgabe in 8 Bänden* (München: de Gruyter, 1986) (*KSB*).

greatest gravity".⁵ As we shall see, the label "decision criterion" will not quite make sense for what I will be suggesting; nonetheless, I take myself to be working in the spirit of those, like Georg Simmel, Karl Löwith, Bernd Magnus, and Ivan Soll, who have seen something like a decision criterion in Nietzsche's discussions of the eternal recurrence.⁶

On the other hand, I will be disagreeing with Maudemarie Clark who insists that the thought of eternal recurrence can "add weight or significance to our decisions" *only* if it "is or may be true".⁷ Therefore, she argues, interpreting Nietzsche as proposing a decision criterion would require interpreting him as being concerned with the truth of a recurrence cosmology. However, the arguments in the *Nachlass* are "wanting on a number of different counts" and, particularly troublesome for Clark, are "of an *a priori* nature".⁸ Indeed these do not make it into

⁵ Nietzsche to Overbeck, 10 March 1884, quoted in Karl Löwith, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Eternal Recurrence of the Same* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 87. My thanks to Nicholas Stang for pressing for more textual evidence for the decision-criterion reading as opposed to alternative readings of eternal recurrence. See, however, my claim at the end of this section that when it comes to interpreting Nietzsche on eternal recurrence the bar of textual evidence is perforce set low.

⁶ Georg Simmel, *Schopenhauer and Nietzsche* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986), 170-72; Löwith, *Nietzsche's Philosophy* and Ivan Soll, "Reflections on Recurrence: A Reexamination of Nietzsche's Doctrine, *Die Ewige Wiederkehr Des Gleichen*", in *Nietzsche: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Robert C. Solomon (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1973). See also Lawrence J. Hatab, *Nietzsche's Life Sentence: Coming to Terms with Eternal Recurrence* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), 121. Magnus grants that there is "much to be said" for such an interpretation and that it "captures and expresses a powerful insight; an insight which can no doubt be supported by reference to Nietzsche's texts" (Bernd Magnus, *Nietzsche's Existential Imperative* (Bloomington & London: Indiana University Press, 1978), 139, 42). He even writes that "eternal recurrence intensifies the dynamics of choice, because whatever I choose to be, that I *shall* be for infinite recurrences" but he has reservations and fundamentally pushes a different "existential" interpretation (Magnus, *Existential Imperative*, 157, 41-42; see below for a discussion of the existential interpretation). Magnus places Walter Kaufmann on this list too (Magnus, *Existential Imperative*, 139 n. 31), but this just seems to be a mistake (see Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, 4 ed. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1974), 322-25).

⁷ Clark, *Nietzsche*, 252.

⁸ Clark, *Nietzsche*, 246-47. For traditional worries about the proofs, see Simmel, *Schopenhauer and Nietzsche*, 172-74 and Arthur C. Danto, *Nietzsche as Philosopher* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), 206. For concerns about those worries, and additional worries, see Magnus, *Existential Imperative*, 91-110. See also Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 143-44. Magnus wonders

publication and when he introduces the doctrine in the *Gay Science* he does it “without mentioning the cosmology”.⁹ The aphorism asks us what our reaction would be *if* a demon came and told us of eternal recurrence; it does not argue for the truth of eternal recurrence. Clark concludes that the thought of eternal recurrence cannot be interpreted as a decision criterion.

She takes herself to present an alternative, one that takes the connection to nihilism seriously, but that avoids having to interpret Nietzsche as committed to defending eternal recurrence as a scientific theory:

We can avoid [...] making Nietzsche’s doctrine ultimately dependent on cosmological support if we interpret his doctrine of recurrence as the ideal of affirming eternal recurrence. We can also explain why Nietzsche considered it so important. Magnus seems correct to focus on the importance of eternal recurrence for combating nihilism, but it is the ideal of affirming eternal recurrence, not the recurrence cosmology, even in mythical form, to which that role belongs.¹⁰

The doctrine of eternal recurrence is “an ideal for human beings: to become the kind of person who, in the situation described, would consider the demon’s message divine”.¹¹ “[O]ur hypothetical reaction to the demon’s message ... reflect[s] our actual attitude towards ourselves and our lives”.¹²

whether the passages in the *Nachlass* are meant to be proofs (see Magnus, *Existential Imperative*, 74-86).

⁹ Clark, *Nietzsche*, 248. These puzzles have been raised by many others. See, for example, Alexander Nehamas, “The Eternal Recurrence”, *Philosophical Review* 89 (1980): 333 and Nehamas, *Nietzsche*, 142-14.

¹⁰ Clark, *Nietzsche*, 252.

¹¹ Clark, *Nietzsche*, 248.

¹² Clark, *Nietzsche*, 251. This is what gets classified as an “existential” reading in Hatab, *Nietzsche’s Life Sentence*, 118-20. Others to include in this category: Richard Schacht, *Nietzsche* (London: Routledge, 1983), 253-66; Nehamas, *Nietzsche*, 159-65; Kathleen Marie Higgins, *Nietzsche’s Zarathustra* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), 163; and John Richardson, *Nietzsche’s System* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 71-72, 138-39, 283. I would include Magnus, *Existential Imperative*, 140, 42-54; I think the difference between his interpretation and Clarke’s is smaller than she makes it out to be (Clark, *Nietzsche*, 249-51). Kaufmann may also belong on this list (see Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 320-24).

Now, I will not deny the importance of the ideal of affirming eternal recurrence, as Clark understands it, and its role in combating nihilism, and I hope that nothing I will say will be in tension with that claim.¹³ My aim, rather, is to defend the idea that in fact the thought of eternal recurrence can add weight to our decisions even if we know it is not true and even if we know that it is not really possible. I thus want to preserve what I take to be the correct version of the insight of the older readings of eternal recurrence and add it to what we learn from taking seriously the idea of an ideal of affirming eternal recurrence.¹⁴ Indeed, I intend to use Clark's own strategies for defending the coherence of taking the affirmation of eternal recurrence as an ideal in order to defend taking the thought of eternal recurrence as adding weight to decisions.

A couple more points about historiographical strategy: Nietzsche's comments on eternal recurrence are, one has to say, not that expansive: a couple of slogans about the doctrine and its potential effects tend to be repeated with much rhetorical force but without much elaboration on the mechanisms by which the thought of eternal recurrence is supposed to achieve its effects.¹⁵ On the other hand, the apparent importance of eternal recurrence to Nietzsche's own conception of his work can hardly be overstated. Furthermore, it must also be said, the claims he makes on behalf of the doctrine of eternal recurrence can seem, to put the matter bluntly, quite outrageous.¹⁶ Such a situation warrants, I suggest, a greater degree of creative reconstruction of what Nietzsche might have been thinking than would otherwise be

¹³ Assessing the relationship to Nehamas's account is more complicated and I will have to postpone that task for later.

¹⁴ I will also not address the question of whether the reading suggested here is compatible with the cosmological reading mostly because such a reading no longer finds many defenders.

¹⁵ Cf. Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 323 and Magnus, *Existential Imperative*, 75.

¹⁶ Thus, though Soll interprets Nietzsche as claiming that the thought of eternal recurrence would provide some kind of decision criteria, he at the same time thinks Nietzsche is clearly wrong about this (Soll, "Reflections", 342). As always, philosophical implausibility—particularly apparent total philosophical implausibility—puts pressure on any interpretation. Cf. Nehamas, "The Eternal Recurrence": 331 and Nehamas, *Nietzsche*, 141-42.

justified. My reconstruction attempts to take the edge off the charges of outrageousness—and thus, as always, to add some support to the proposed interpretation *qua* interpretation—by finding partners in crime for Nietzsche: I turn to contemporary theories that I suggest appeal to moral-psychological features quite similar to those Nietzsche is, according to my interpretation, appealing to. This does not show that Nietzsche is right, of course, but it does defend the view against charges of interpretive uncharity. Finally, I will have to grant that even my interpretation will not quite be able to make complete sense of all that Nietzsche says, or implies, about eternal recurrence. Here, my strategy will be twofold. First, as I have already indicated, the interpretation I am proposing is meant to be conciliatory—in several of the senses of that word—by providing an interpretation for one role that the thought of eternal recurrence can play while allowing it to still play the roles others have suggested. This allows for a division of labour where some of what Nietzsche claims for eternal recurrence will be accounted for by these other non-competing interpretations. In the end, a piece of textual implication or two will still stick in our collective craw, but there I plead good company: none of the other interpretations, or so I shall argue, do any better.

2. Willing and Evaluating

Now in order to see the way in which the thought of eternal recurrence adds weight in action, we need to have before us Nietzsche's account of what is involved in acting and his account of the consequences that nihilism has for our ability to act given this story of action. Nietzsche has the plausible thought that evaluative and normative judgements have come to play a central role in our psychological economies.¹⁷ Indeed, the overwhelming importance for Nietzsche of the task of creating new values and revaluing existing ones would make no sense

¹⁷ For the many different ways in which this is true see, for example, GS 1, 335; *TI* "Morality" 5; *WP* 256, 259-260.

if this were not the case.¹⁸ Evaluative judgements, as I shall argue, play a crucial role in keeping us on track—they are needed in order for us not to be wantons, in order for us to have wills. It is also part of Nietzsche’s picture, I believe, that we have in some sense, become addicted to having evaluative judgements around. And some particular evaluative judgements, for example the judgement that “life is worth living”, there is a “reason for life”, “existence has a purpose” play particularly central roles in the kinds of creatures we have become (GS 1). Simply removing such judgements from our current psychological economies would cause severe disruptions. All this creates a problem if indeed theoretical nihilism—an error theory about evaluative judgements—is true. Theoretical nihilism threatens to lead to passive nihilism, to the weariness and exhaustion that the removal of the strong tonic of value judgements leaves behind (WP 23).¹⁹

As noted above already, I have suggested elsewhere that creating honest illusions that something is valuable can be a way out of this that does not require the perhaps impossible task of simply forgetting that theoretical nihilism is true. Here I will neither defend nor rely on that claim explicitly. Instead, I will present an interpretation of the doctrine of eternal recurrence that can buttress that solution, but that, nonetheless, can stand on its own as a way of responding to the challenge of theoretical nihilism.

To see the specific point at which the thought of eternal recurrence can play its role, though, we need to look at what would be left of our psychologies if we simply made no evaluative judgements (and no simulacra in the form of honest illusions of value either). I will argue, first, that, for Nietzsche, the problem this would generate is that there would be no

¹⁸ See, for example, GS 55, 335; Z P:9, Z:1 “On the Three Metamorphoses”, “On the Thousand and One Goals”. Z:2 “On Self-Overcoming”; BGE 203, 211; TIP; A 13; EH “Destiny” 1-2; WP 972, 979, 999.

¹⁹ Cf. Magnus, *Existential Imperative*, 11-12, 137-38, 44. There are various other reactions that can occur to theoretical nihilism, but this is one crucial one and the one I will focus on in this essay.

willing and, second, that the thought of eternal recurrence is particularly useful for solving precisely this problem.

The view about willing, and the consequent impact nihilism will have on it, comes out when we consider a range of texts on the will. First, recall that for Nietzsche the “*sovereign individual* ... free again from the morality of custom, autonomous and supramoral [*übersittliche*]” is “the man who has his own independent, protracted will, who *is permitted to promise*” (*GM II:2*).²⁰ The capacities that constitute our ability to keep promises also constitute, Nietzsche suggests, what it is to have a free will—what it is to be this “being who has become free ... this lord of the *free will*” (*GM II:2*). What is required in order for a creature to be able to make promises is described as follows:

[I]t is thus by no means simply a passive no-longer-being-able-to-get-rid-of the impression once it has been inscribed, not simply indigestion from a once-pledged word over which one cannot regain control, but rather an active no-longer-wanting-to-get-rid-of, a willing on and on of something one has once willed, a true *memory of the will*: so that a world of new strange things, circumstances, even acts of the will may be placed without reservation between the original “I want,” “I will do,” and the actual discharge of the will, its *act*, without this long chain of the will breaking. (*GM II:1*)²¹

As Nietzsche emphasises, this ability presupposes a lot. It presupposes an ability to keep track of the causal order of the world, and, more importantly for our purposes, it presupposes that man has learnt “to decide with certainty what is the goal and what the means to it” (*GM II:1*).

²⁰ “... den Menschen des eignen unabhängigen langen Willens, der *versprechen darf*” (*GM II:2*). Here and elsewhere, I have tried to combine the best of both of the translations of *GM* listed in the bibliography.

²¹ “Somit keineswegs bloss ein passives Nicht-wieder-los-werden-können des einmal eingeritzten Eindrucks, nicht bloss die Indigestion an einem ein Mal verpfändeten Wort, mit dem man nicht wieder fertig wird, sondern ein aktives Nicht-wieder-los-werden-wollen, ein Fort- und Fortwollen des ein Mal Gewollten, ein eigentliches *Gedächtniss des Willens*: so dass zwischen das ursprüngliche „ich will“ „ich werde thun“ und die eigentliche Entladung des Willens, seinen Akt, unbedenklich eine Welt von neuen fremden Dingen, Umständen, selbst Willensakten dazwischengelegt werden darf, ohne dass diese lange Kette des Willens springt” (*GM II:1*).

To be able to have goals is thus at the centre of what it is to be this kind of creature that has a will.²²

Notice that what Nietzsche is impressed by in the this “being who has become free ... this lord of the *free* will, this sovereign” who has the “proud knowledge of the extraordinary privilege of *responsibility*”—I quote all this just to emphasize the clearly positive evaluation that Nietzsche is giving—is precisely the fact that this being is not, to put it in perhaps more familiar terms, a wanton. That is, it is not a creature swayed by every passing desire and thus unable to commit itself over time—commit in some sense or the other that we will need to elucidate. Indeed, for Nietzsche, not being a wanton is the first thing that makes us interesting—and it is a prerequisite for everything else of interest we did become and could become.²³

Now what not being a wanton requires is deciding with certainty, to settle with confidence, “mit Sicherheit ansetzen”, what the goal is. However, this ability to settle on goals is closely

²² I take this picture to represent his more mature view of agency and thus to differ from the simpler vector model of *D* 109. It does not require denying that the self is still essentially driven by drives.

²³ Nietzsche writes that one of the tests for determining whether someone is of Zarathustra’s “kind and kin” is to test “whether he is the master of a long will” (*Z*:3 “Involuntary Bliss”).

I am here stepping around some existing debates about Nietzsche on agency and the will. I have defended the claim that Nietzsche does allow for both agency and the will in Nadeem J. Z. Hussain, “Creating Values: Appropriating Nietzsche for a Fictionalist Theory of Value” (Ph.D. diss., The University of Michigan, 1999). There I also suggested that Nietzsche’s account could be modeled by using Michael Bratman’s account of the self as a hierarchical structure of policies, plans, or intentions since these share many, if not all, of the features of Nietzsche’s drives (for Bratman’s account, see, for example, Michael E. Bratman, “Reflection, Planning, and Temporally Extended Agency”, *The Philosophical Review* 109, no. 1 (2000)). My older interpretation would need to be augmented by some of what I say here to yield what I think is the correct view.

I am mostly in agreement with Ken Gemes’s position, though I would defend the claim that agency and the will come in degrees (see Ken Gemes, “Nietzsche on Free Will, Autonomy and the Sovereign Individual”, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 106, no. 1 (2006); for the issue of degrees see his p. 331 n. 12). I am presumably in some disagreement with Leiter’s position on Nietzsche and the will, though I suspect, in the ongoing conciliatory spirit of this essay, that most of what I say here could actually be slotted into the kind of view he seems to want to defend (see Brian Leiter, “The Paradox of Fatalism and Self-Creation in Nietzsche”, in *Willing and Nothingness: Schopenhauer as Nietzsche's Educator*, ed. Christopher Janaway (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998)).

connected to the making of evaluative and normative judgements. This connection comes out in both what Nietzsche would consider the healthy cases and the pathological ones. I will focus on the healthy cases here.

First notice that even in the initial healthy case we have been discussing from *GM II:2*, we have a conscience already:

The proud knowledge of the extraordinary privilege of *responsibility*, the consciousness of this rare freedom, this power over oneself and fate, has sunk into his lowest depth and has become instinct, the dominant instinct:—what will he call it, this dominant instinct, assuming that he feels the need to have a word for it? But there is no doubt: this sovereign human being calls it his *conscience* ... (*GM II:2*)

But what is a conscience if it is not the sense that such and such is the right thing to do, perhaps because I have so promised but at least because I so once willed, and that to waver from the right path would be wrong? This interpretation of Nietzsche's use of "conscience"—as involving normative judgments—gets confirmed, I suggest, when we turn to Nietzsche's comments on the will in *Beyond Good and Evil*. As Nietzsche puts it there, "inherent in every will" is the "unconditional *evaluation* that 'this and nothing else is necessary now'" (*BGE* 19).²⁴ It is an "unconditional *evaluation* [unbedingte Werthschätzung]" and that should not come as a surprise since the necessity referred to in "this and nothing else is necessary now" is surely what we might now call rational necessity—or perhaps less controversially: normative necessity. That is, whatever is the "necessity" we are expressing when we express what Donald Davidson called the "all-out or unconditional judgement" in favour of an action.²⁵

²⁴ "Willing": means willing an end. 'An end' includes an evaluation" (*WP* 260).

²⁵ Donald Davidson, "Intending", in *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 98-99.

This interpretation of Nietzsche's use of "conscience" is, I think, compatible with a range of interpretations about how the story of the generation of the conscience is connected to the story of the emergence of the "bad conscience". I tend to agree with Brian Leiter that the story of the "bad conscience" presupposes that the conscience already exists (Brian Leiter, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Nietzsche on Morality* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 229-30). If that is right, and I am right that the conscience already involves normative and evaluative judgments, then the reading here proposed is, however, in tension with Christine Korsgaard's reading of Nietzsche in her *Sources of Normativity* since she claims that the experience of guilt is at "the origin of normative thought" (Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of*

3. Nihilism and the Will

But now we can see why nihilism is so dangerous. Nihilism is the thought, justified or not, of “goal-lessness” as Nietzsche puts it (WP 25). As I have tried to argue elsewhere, Nietzsche is a nihilist in the sense that he does think that all evaluative and normative judgements are false.²⁶ This is why, as he puts it, “‘goal-lessness as such’ is the principle of” his faith (WP 25).²⁷ But thoughts of goal-lessness will conflict with and thus undermine precisely the unconditional evaluation at the heart of willing. If one had this picture, then it is easy to see that weakness of will—wantonness—could be the result.²⁸ Indeed, this is clearly why Nietzsche expresses surprise that he himself—in his work as a philosopher—has pursued goal-lessness with such “energy and radicalism” (WP 25). Wantonness may not be the only result—this may only be the case in what Nietzsche sometimes called “*passive nihilism*” (WP 22). Nonetheless it is a real problem.

It is made worse by, or the worst forms are the result of, “the old habit of supposing that the goal must be put up, given, demanded *from outside*—by some *superhuman authority*” (WP 20). However, even when one has

unlearned faith in that, one still follows the old habit and seeks *another* authority that can *speak unconditionally* and *command* goals and tasks. The authority of *conscience* now steps up front (the more emancipated one is from theology, the more imperativistic morality becomes) to compensate for the loss of a *personal* authority. Or the authority of *reasons*. Or the *social instinct* (the herd). Or *history* One wants to get around the will, the willing of a goal, the risk of positing a goal *for oneself* ...

One says to oneself:

Normativity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 158). Cf. Mathias Risse, “The Second Treatise in on the Genealogy of Morality: Nietzsche on the Origin of the Bad Conscience”, *European Journal of Philosophy* 9, no. 1 (2001): 78 n. 24.

For the suggestion that the conscience emerges after the bad conscience, see Risse, “Second Treatise”: 73 n. 8. Even in this case, we still need to know how having a conscience is compatible with accepting nihilism.

²⁶ Hussain, “Honest Illusion”.

²⁷ Cf. KSA 13:11[327], 12:9[35].

²⁸ Equating weakness of will with wantonness requires a prior acceptance of Nietzsche’s replacement of the distinction of free and unfree wills with the distinction between strong and weak wills (BGE 21). Cf. Gemes, “Nietzsche on Free Will”, . My thanks to Reid Blackman for drawing my attention to this.

1. a definite goal is not necessary at all,
2. cannot possibly be anticipated.

Just now when the greatest strength of will would be necessary, it is weakest and least confident. (*WP* 20).²⁹

Instead, as Nietzsche puts it, all the “intuitive evaluations” come forward in order, in sequence, as though they could provide one with the “directives” that one otherwise no longer has. We demand an answer to the question “what for?” from various sources: conscience, the drive to happiness, the social instinct, reason. But of course none of them can answer our question, none of them can give us the directive we need (*KSA* 12:9[43]). Our drive to truth undermines the pretensions of the relevant evaluative judgements in turn and in whole.³⁰

²⁹ In *D I:9*, entitled “*Concept of morality of custom*”, Nietzsche emphasizes that the need for a superhuman authority is part of all moralities including moralities of custom: “[M]orality is nothing other (therefore *no more!*) than obedience to customs, of whatever kind they may be; customs, however, are the *traditional* way of behaving and evaluating. ... What is tradition? A higher authority which one obeys, not because it commands what is *useful* to us, but because it *commands*.—What distinguishes this feeling in the presence of tradition from the feeling of fear in general? It is fear in the presence of a higher intellect which here commands, of an incomprehensible, indefinite power, of something more than personal—there is *superstition* in this fear”.

³⁰ “Die Frage des Nihilismus „wozu?“ geht von der bisherigen Gewöhnung aus, vermöge deren das Ziel von außen her gestellt, gegeben, gefordert schien nämlich durch irgend eine *übermenschliche Autorität*. Nachdem man verlernt hat an diese zu glauben, sucht man doch noch nach alter Gewöhnung eine *andere Autorität*, welche *unbedingt zu reden wüßte*, Ziele und Aufgaben *befehlen könnte*. Die Autorität des *Gewissens* tritt jetzt in erste Linie (je mehr emancipiert von der Theologie, um so imperativischer wird die *Moral*); als Schadenersatz für eine *persönliche* Autorität. Oder die Autorität der *Vernunft*. Oder der *socialen Instinkt* (die Heerde). Oder die *Historie* mit einem immanenten Geiste, welche ihr Ziel in sich hat und der man sich *überlassen kann*. Man möchte *herumkommen* um den Willen, um das *Wollen* eines Zieles, um das Risiko, sich selbst ein Ziel zu geben; man möchte die Verantwortung abwälzen (man würde den *Fatalismus* acceptieren) Endlich: *Glück*, und, mit einiger Tartüfferie, das *Glück der Meisten* individuelle Ziele und deren Widerstreit kollektive Ziele im Kampf mit individuellen *Jedermann* wird Partei dabei, auch die *Philosophen*. Man sagt sich 1) ein bestimmtes Ziel ist gar nicht nöthig

2) ist gar nicht möglich vorherzusehen

Gerade jetzt, wo der *Wille* in der *höchsten Kraft* nöthig wäre, ist er am *schwächsten* und *kleinmüthigsten*.

Absolutes Mißtrauen gegen die organisatorische Kraft des Willens fürs Ganze.

Zeit, wo alle „intuitiven Wertschätzungen“ der Reihe nach in den Vordergrund treten, als ob man von ihnen die *Direktiven* bekommen könne, die man sonst nicht mehr hat.

„wozu?“ die Antwort wird verlangt vom

- 1) Gewissen
- 2) Trieb zum Glück
- 3) „socialen Instinkt“ (Heerde)

The fundamental problem posed by nihilism is thus how to avoid being a wanton—how to manage to have a will *at all*—without having to really believe in one of the relevant evaluative claims. How can I manage to form something very much like the unconditional evaluation that Nietzsche claimed was essential to willing? Notice that in the story of nihilism we have given so far it is not as though all desires, drives and instincts have somehow disappeared. The problem is rather that there is no dominating desire or drive, and, in some cases, the desires and drives are in general rather weak. This was not a problem when we could rely on the availability of certain evaluative judgements—whatever their source—that could then be, or be the sources, of the unconditional evaluation around which a willing could crystallize.

4. Adding Weight to Action

I suspect, as I have suggested already, that Nietzsche wants to propose a range of compatible, and indeed mutually supporting, solutions to this problem. One solution, as I have argued elsewhere, is that of creating honest illusions of value: honest illusions that indeed some things are valuable in themselves and that they do give us “directives”, to use Nietzsche’s term.³¹ However, once we have seen how deep the problem of nihilism goes, we may be even more worried than otherwise about whether the story of honest illusions can do the work. I will focus on these worries in order to work our way to the specific role that I want to suggest the thought of eternal recurrence can play.

One can well imagine, a hydraulic view, so to speak, of the motivational power of honest illusions. Let me explain. Start with a straightforward pretence—as opposed to an illusion. Imagine that I am pretending for some child that I just love broccoli, when, as in fact is the

4) Vernunft („Geist“)

nur um nicht *wollen* zu müssen, sich selbst da „Wozu“ setzen zu müssen.

5) endlich: *Fatalismus*, „es giebt keine Antwort“ aber „es geht *irgend wohin*“, „es ist unmöglich ein wozu? zu wollen“, mit *Ergebung* ... oder *Revolte* ... Agnosticismus in Hinsicht auf das Ziel

6) endlich *Verneinung* als *Wozu* des Lebens; Leben als etwas, das sich als unwerth *begreift* und endlich *aufhebt*“ (KSA 12:9[43]; parts of this passage are in WP 20).

³¹ Hussain, "Honest Illusion".

case, I quite dislike it. As part of this pretence I eat it and, ipso facto, have sufficient motivation to do so—motivation I would not have, I would say, were I not engaging in the pretence. Now I can imagine someone making the following argument. The real motivation, our objector says, for my pretending to like broccoli is, say, my desire that this child eat his or her broccoli. It is the strength of this desire that is being channelled through the pretence—thus the hydraulic metaphor—and so, the objector concludes, it is not as though a pretence can add any motivational power to the existing motivational states. The motivations within a pretence derive all their strength from my motivations for engaging in the pretence. When the child seems highly motivated to run away from the tree stump he is pretending is a bear, that is only because he is highly motivated, for whatever reason, to play this particular game in the first place. The claim then is naturally extended to honest illusions.

Now honest illusions are different from mere pretences—think of the difference between using the appropriate goggles and gloves to look at a manipulable 3D image—the honest illusion—produced by a Silicon Graphics VisionStation that generates massively scaled up models of the structures of proteins and just pretending that you have a large model of a protein structure in front of you while looking at the blank wall in your office. Though intuitively there is this difference between an honest illusion and a straight pretence—as we might call it—I have no developed story of this difference that I can appeal to in my answer to the objector. Though I suspect that this difference will make a difference, I think we should reject the objector’s view even for the case of straight pretences. Certainly it is hard to see how the objector could mount a conceptual argument for the hydraulic view let alone insist that the conceptual argument is so obvious that it constrains our interpretations of Nietzsche. In all likelihood, our objector would have to present the hydraulic view as a claim about the contingent nature of our psychologies. As far as anecdotal evidence goes, the claims seem unsupported to me and even if empirical research might succeed in making the claim precise enough—more on that in a moment—to test it and go on to verify it, it is hard to see, again, that such an empirical truth is so obvious that it should constrain our interpretation of Nietzsche.

I alluded to needed further precision in the hydraulic claim for a reason. There does seem to be a weak version, or variant, of the hydraulic theory that, though still a claim about our contingent psychologies, might seem quite plausible. This is the claim that one needs to at least start with strong *enough* motivations in order for honest illusions to add anything to them. And the problem, one might well think, with nihilism is that it will have sapped the motivations to a level below this, whatever this level is. It would thus be useful if we had a motivation amplifier, so to speak, that was independent of, but could work in conjunction with, honest illusions of the evaluative.

Here, now not surprisingly, is where I think that thoughts of eternal recurrence can play a role—not that I want, as I have said, to rule out other roles that thoughts of eternal recurrence can play. Allow me to work my way to what I think is an intuitive picture. Imagine that there I am at some junior-faculty happy-hour mostly just to be polite and collegial. I don't really want a drink, but it's hard to be at a happy hour without one. As I consider the options I find myself with some very weak desire for a Martini and some very weak desire for a beer. Neither is that strong and I find myself wantonly leaning—only slightly of course—one way and then another. Now there are two different kinds of things that I sometimes find myself doing at such moments. One is of course to actually think more about what it is like to drink a Martini or a beer. The other thing, though, is, putting it bluntly, to fantasize. There is the Martini mood where one plays the decadent, sophisticate, ex-pat of some Third-World aristocracy and then there is the down-to-earth, honest, careful thinker drinking his simple beer bemused, but in an alienated sort of way, by the pretentious, self-conscious, ambitious, star-status-seeking young academics around him. Depending which fantasy grabs hold—which depends in part on what props in the surrounding the game can draw on—harder to play the sophisticate game in sneakers and wearing a baseball cap—the desire for the Martini or the beer is strengthened, or, if one insists, supported. One doesn't even have to keep playing the game, so to speak. The private imaginings may well be enough to tilt one determinately to the Martini even though one knows perfectly well that in fact one will proceed to have the kind of conversations that the down-to-earth, honest, careful thinker would have.

Notice, crucially, that one does not need the *belief* that one will be either of these things in order, or so I claim, to have the relevant impact on one's desires. Of course, such games of make-believe—as I have already emphasized—are easier when there are props available. This just pushes towards games of make-believe that are, to use the magical-realism expression, at a slight angle to reality. Furthermore, it may well be true that such games rely on the power of other desires in the psyche which would not otherwise be immediately relevant to the choice between Martini and beer. They are thus a way of bringing to bear further motivational states in a way that would not be licensed by some more standard conception of instrumental reasoning aimed at desire satisfaction.

The thought of eternal recurrence is a very particular game of make-believe designed to deal with the general sapping of motivational strength from our desires.³² It is a way of amplifying our desires in order, so to speak, to detect, or perhaps even create, differences between them. As I said, I mean the interpretation of eternal recurrence presented here to be essentially conciliatory and this is one of the moments at which this comes out clearly. Recall that in defending her interpretation of the doctrine of eternal recurrence, Maudemarie Clark “compare[s] Nietzsche’s question—would you be willing to live this same life eternally?—to a question people do in fact ask each other: if you had to do it all over, would you marry me again?”³³ Now, as Clark emphasized, we have to “incorporate an unrealistic or uncritical model of recurrence”: “one must be willing to ‘play the game,’ to imagine eternal recurrence in an uncritical or preanalytical manner, suspending all doubts concerning its truth or conceivability”.³⁴ Think of that everyday marriage question. It involves something odd: “you, knowing what you do now, going through an experience identical to one in which you knew

³² Because it is make-believe, or the generation of an honest illusion, it avoids the problems that Magnus raises for the alternative suggestion that one *believe* eternal recurrence “as if” it were true (Magnus, *Existential Imperative*, 141-41. See Hussain, "Honest Illusion" for further discussion.

³³ Clark, *Nietzsche*, 269.

³⁴ Clark, *Nietzsche*, 268 and 70

much less”.³⁵ But, as Clark, emphasizes it does seem quite intuitive to think that the response of a couple to such a question does “reflect their true feelings about having married each other once”.³⁶ And focussing immediately on raising worries about the question expresses certain feelings too.

However, I want to use this idea of true feelings or attitudes being revealed by such questions more generally than, I think, Clark wants to. I think one can ask the same question prospectively. There are I am, trying to figure out whether to marry Miss Price or Miss Crawford. As the names are meant to suggest, this probably requires shifting me back to a nineteenth-century context, or over to Pakistan—or somewhere else appropriately patriarchal and sexist—for this quite to make sense. But imagine the family pressure and the two women with whom I’ve spent time at various social events—all well chaperoned of course. And now the question is being pressed—perhaps I have spent too much time with one of them and the question can no longer be allowed to remain open. Imagining what it would be like to marry each one brings that particular desire to the fore, but perhaps the desires are both too low and too evenly balanced for me to be able to detect the difference. But now I imagine marrying Mary again and again and again and again and now the thought of seeing her again and again and again, evening after evening, with her ever-so-charming smile and fashionable wit but her fundamentally superficial and vain social graces begins to grate—that charming smile seems to lose its charm. On the other hand, when I imagine marrying Fanny again and again, the awkwardness of her shyness begins to pale in comparison with her thoughtfulness, her sincerity, and her self-reflective clarity. The thought experiment of imagining marrying the

³⁵ Clark, *Nietzsche*, 269.

³⁶ Clark, *Nietzsche*, 269

person again and again and again has revealed, to use Clark's locution, my true feelings, my true attitudes, my true desires.³⁷

As Clark grants, one does have to play the game uncritically. As she points out:

I can only imagine recurrence as it would appear to a continuing consciousness for whom the cycles of world history were temporally distinguishable—a consciousness whose existence is [actually] ruled out by the eternal recurrence of lives identical in each cycle.³⁸

We have to rely on the fact that it is

natural to conflate this continuing consciousness with my own individual consciousness and therefore, even if I recognized the absence of memory links, to imagine recurrences of my life as continuous with, thus adding to the experienced content (joy or suffering, e.g.) of my present life.³⁹

I would change this last bit just slightly. Talk of “present life” is already too “realistic”. We are imagining this grand continuing consciousness as the one doing the choosing of whom to marry.

The real difference with Clark, I take it, is that I see no reason why we cannot, as I said, do such an imagining at the moment of choice and use it to figure out our “true” desires. It is in the light of this that I think we can make sense of passage like the following:

My teaching says: Live in such a way that you must *desire* to live again; this is the task—you will live again *in any case!* He for whom striving gives the highest feeling, let him strive; he for whom rest gives the highest feeling, let him rest; he for whom ordering, following, and obeying gives the highest feeling, let him obey. Only *provided* that he *becomes aware of what* gives him the highest feeling and that *no means* toward it are avoided or feared. *Eternity* is at stake. (KSA 9:11[163])⁴⁰

³⁷ I myself am nervous about the adjective “true” here since it suggests a pre-existing determinate structure that is merely revealed. I suspect, and I am quite confident Nietzsche would assert, that the psychological stories are usually more complicated.

³⁸ Clark, *Nietzsche*, 269.

³⁹ Clark, *Nietzsche*, 270.

⁴⁰ For a different reading of this passage, see Hatab, *Nietzsche's Life Sentence*, 122. He wants to argue against what he calls normative readings; however, he seems to assume that any such normative reading would involve a “selective normative measure” that would restrict us to a limited range of acceptable lives and thus be incompatible with the fact that Nietzsche supports “multiple possibilities of life projects” (122). As should be clear, the reading defended in this essay, whether, in the end, one wants to call it a normative reading or not, allows for an extremely wide range of life projects.

However, just putting it in terms of figuring out our true desires does not quite get at all that the thought of eternal recurrence can do. It is not just that the amplification process allows you now to see which desire is in fact the stronger one. Notice how I set up the case. I set it up as a case where both desires are in fact weak. Playing the game of eternal recurrence is also like the games we discussed earlier in the Martini and beer case: it is the kind of game that adds motivational force. You not only come to see that the desire to marry Fanny is stronger—weak though it still may be—but you get up enough motivational force to actually propose. One way of thinking of it is this: you are summing up the motivational force of a series of desires, the desire for how things go in world W_1 , the desire for how things go in W_2 and so on. We might think of these as real desires being recruited by the game, but we might also think they are imaginary desires—indeed, I suspect, it will be more plausible to think of them as imaginary desires. Just as the boy chased by nine horribly vicious, but imaginary, monsters who will be rewarded with five beautiful, but imaginary, princesses if he escapes with the priceless treasure of Zambar will run faster (be more motivated to run) than the same child whose only getting away from one monster, so I will be more motivated to marry Laura than I would otherwise be.

5. Interlude: Partners in Crime

Now that I have started talking about monsters and princesses, the account probably just seems too far-fetched. I don't think so of course, but I will try to meet that challenge, in part, by arguing now that the strategy being ascribed to Nietzsche is actually surprisingly similar to the strategy used by some contemporary, reductive naturalist realists about evaluations. Notice something crucial to the above stories. I was presupposing Nietzsche's nihilism. We had to focus on desires precisely because we could not simply ask what would otherwise be the obvious question to ask, namely, which marriage is *better*. Better for whom we would also then have to ask and answer of course. But all of that was irrelevant because of the nihilism. With nihilism in play, all we had were the agent's motivational states, non-evaluative beliefs, and possible non-evaluative imaginings (recall that we bracketed the story of evaluative imaginings

in the hopes of showing how thoughts of eternal recurrence could independently buttress the story of honest illusions).

Now many a reductive naturalist realist is in a very similar predicament. What she wants is to build evaluative facts out of the materials already used by the natural sciences. For various familiar reasons (whether they are good ones is another matter) these materials usually include desires and beliefs with non-evaluative content. What needs to be explained, though, is what the content of evaluative beliefs, for example the belief that x is good, comes to. Now notice that if the belief that x is good were just the belief that I desire x , then there would not be enough distance between my evaluative beliefs and my desires for the evaluative beliefs to play the role we expect them too, namely, to put pressure on my existing desires—to shape and direct them. What we want is for it to be possible that I desire, say, A more than B but believe that B is better than A . With this thought in mind, the naturalist reductive realist attempts to put distance between evaluative beliefs and my current desires by taking the evaluative beliefs to be beliefs about what desires I *would* have in certain conditions. As long as these conditions are spelled out in non-evaluative terms, then we have a reduction of the evaluative to the non-evaluative. To adapt an expression of Gideon Rosen's, my evaluative belief just turns out to be a belief about a fact of modal psychology.⁴¹ But what are these conditions? Well, a standard condition is full information. The intuition is fairly simple. I may desire the clear liquid in the glass in front of me, but if I knew that it was turpentine, then, in those conditions, I *would* desire not to drink it. So when someone says to me that drinking that clear liquid is bad, all that that evaluative language means is that I would desire not to have that liquid were I fully informed. Now, in order for this to be a reductive story, it is crucial to understand what *cannot* be meant by full information. The view cannot be that full information is important because when I am fully informed I come to see the independently constituted evaluative facts. That

⁴¹ Gideon Rosen, "Objectivity and Modern Idealism: What Is the Question?" in *Philosophy in Mind: The Place of Philosophy in the Study of Mind*, ed. Michaelis Michael and John O'Leary-Hawthorne (Dordrecht Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995), 300.

would hardly be a form of reductive realism. For the reductive realist, evaluative facts just are facts about what desires we would have in certain circumstances.

But why pick the circumstance of full information? Well, to cut some long stories short, part of the reason is that it turns out to be a matter of psychological fact that we do find ourselves being motivationally affected when we have beliefs about what we would desire in certain circumstances.⁴² The naturalist realist uses this fact about our psychological economies to show that beliefs about what we would desire in certain circumstances can play the role of beliefs about what is good or bad. Evaluative beliefs and evaluative facts are thus constructed out of just the thinnest of materials: mostly our non-evaluative beliefs and our non-evaluative desires.

For my purposes, I want to emphasize two similarities and one dissimilarity between this reductive realist view and the view I want to ascribe to Nietzsche. The first similarity is that Nietzsche, at least on my reading, is working with the same relatively thin ontological materials as the reductive realist.⁴³ Nietzsche faces the same problem. How do we get some kind of distance on our occurrent desires? How do we add something to the psychological economy that can affect the existing balance or imbalance of desires? The second similarity is that both appeal to a certain perspective on the situation of choice that the actual agent could never realize, namely, in one case, the perspective of the agent with full information and, in the other, what Clark called the “continuing consciousness” that surveyed “temporally distinguishable” cycles of history. And both appeal, or so I claim, to the psychological pull that thoughts about what would be wanted from such a perspective have for us here and now.

⁴² Cf. Peter Railton, "Facts and Values", in *Facts, Values, and Norms: Essays toward a Morality of Consequence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); originally published *Philosophical Topics* 14 (1986): 5-31, 52-54 and Alexander Miller, *An Introduction to Contemporary Metaethics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), 191.

⁴³ Cf. Bernard Williams, "Nietzsche's Minimalist Moral Psychology", *European Journal of Philosophy* 1, no. 1 (1993).

It is important not to misunderstand the nature of these similarities. For the naturalist realist, many evaluative beliefs can be true precisely because their content turns out to be naturalistically respectable. Nietzsche, on the error-theoretic interpretation I am here presuming, does not think that the content of evaluative beliefs can be made respectable in this manner.⁴⁴ Thus Nietzsche and the naturalist realist disagree radically on the correct metaethical account of evaluative judgements. I have brought in the naturalist realist only to highlight a very particular feature of their strategy, namely, that they look for beliefs with naturalistic content that can play the motivational role of evaluative beliefs. Of course, the realist then, again avoiding some complexities for now, identifies these beliefs. Thus, for example, believing that something is desirable just is believing that one would want oneself to want it were one fully informed. Nietzsche cannot accept the realist's metaethics on pain of losing his error theory. The point, rather, is that Nietzsche relies on similar *psychological* claims about the psychological pull, as I put it, that thoughts about what we would want from certain imaginary perspectives have for us here and now. The suggestion then is that the psychological claims being attributed by my interpretation to Nietzsche cannot be so outrageous that they run afoul of the principle of interpretive charity, if, indeed, we are willing to ascribe quite similar psychological claims to our naturalist realist contemporaries. The strategy, recall, is finding partners in (similar) crime.⁴⁵

Now for some other dissimilarities. The full information reductive realist faces a series of puzzles that Nietzsche does not face precisely because the realist is a realist. For Nietzsche, as I have portrayed him, the eternal recurrence thought involves a pretence, a game, and, like most such games, the rules are flexible. That is not to say that they are intentionally made up by me. My Martini-sophisticate game has endless variations but I, on occasion, fall into one of them.

⁴⁴ For a defense of ascribing an error theory to Nietzsche and some suggestions for what his metaethical theory might be, see Hussain, "Honest Illusion".

⁴⁵ My thanks to John Deigh for showing me that I need to prevent misunderstanding at this point.

All that matters is that I imagine that the “continuing consciousness” leans one way rather than another. The realist, however, needs for it to be the case that there is a fact of the matter of what my fully-informed self would desire. And this creates problems precisely because it threatens to force us out of the “uncritical or preanalytical” mode that Clark recommended for the eternal recurrence test. Consider the kind of worry David Sobel gives for such accounts. Part of full information would be knowing, experientially, both what it is like to be “an Amish person who does not know what other options society holds for her” and to know the life of a wild libertine. However:

Attempting to give the idealized agent direct experience with what it would be like to be such an Amish person, while this agent has the knowledge of what it would be like to live many significantly different sorts of lives, will in many case be impossible.⁴⁶

Or what could it be to compare the experience of two first kisses in order to see which one wants more for one’s dear not-so-fully-informed self?⁴⁷

⁴⁶ David Sobel, “Full Information Accounts of Well-Being”, *Ethics* 104, no. 4 (1994): 801.

⁴⁷ Sobel, “Full Information Accounts”: 801-02.

Does it matter that the realist relies on the belief that I would want to ϕ from perspective *P* and that Nietzsche, according to the interpretation being defend here, is asking us to imagine what we would want? I do not think it does for two reasons. First, the realist does rely in the first instance on the psychological impact of a certain act of imagination. The realist then goes on to claim that this act of imagining is constituted by a belief about what we would want in certain circumstances. It is not clear to me, though, that the power of the act of imagination in such cases does require ascribing a belief to the imaginer. I suspect that examples like Sobel’s actually bring this to the fore. His examples remind us that the counterfactual situations we are imagining may well not be possible. If our imaginings were just a matter of having certain beliefs about such situations, then his examples should make these imaginings go away. At least we should show the usual symptoms of being caught with contradictory beliefs. However, I do not think that is our response to his examples. Imagining what I would want were I fully informed continues to feel like a powerful way of assessing my situation from a distance and Sobel’s objections seem intuitively to be beside the point (of the imaginings, though, not perhaps of the realist theory). It is like being told that you cannot imagine looking down on yourself watching yourself work because there cannot be two of you. This suggests, *pace* the realist, that the imaginings he began by appealing to are not obviously constituted by beliefs. Rather they are the kind of imaginings we engage in make-believe and have the similar tolerance for logical inconsistencies of certain kinds. Thus, if anything, the psychological claim Nietzsche is appealing to is less problematic than the psychological claim the realist is appealing to.

Second, I suspect that generally if a belief that *P* has motivational impact thanks to various background dispositions and motivational states, then making-believe that *P* will have a similar motivational impact. Thus the standing desire to avoid bears combines with the belief that

Furthermore, the realist has to get it right on the extension of our current evaluative predicates. In other words, the realist needs to have a “success theory” rather than an “error theory” of our current evaluative discourse. Thus the facts about what our fully-informed selves would want us to want have to match, roughly, what we on reflection tend to think is good for us—reflecting just in the manner we normally reflect on such normative matters, whatever that is.

Nietzsche does not inherit these problems precisely because, as I interpret him, he is not a realist. On the other hand, he can very much adopt the rest of the realist’s strategy for seeing how we could add something to a simply psychology of non-evaluative desires and beliefs that could play the role—or something very like the role—that evaluative beliefs are supposed to play and thus show how, even in a disenchanted world without evaluative facts, an agent has more to go on than just the weak desires she is left with once the strong tonic of evaluative judgements has been removed from her system.

6. Adding More Weight to Action: Eternal Recurrence and the Will

I hope to have shown that the story I have told shows how the thought of eternal recurrence can help with weak desires. But I began by placing a lot of emphasis on the will and the crucial role that evaluations play in the will. How, though, does the thought of eternal recurrence help us with getting a strong will? Well, if one has managed to really strengthen one desire quite determinately such that that desire stays around and continues to push forcefully in its direction, then one has, in effect, something like a strong will. I suspect, however, that Nietzsche shares our picture of our desires. Our desires come and go. The wanton tends to shift directions precisely because our desires come and go and reverse their strengths. We have, in Nietzsche’s picture, come a long way from our ancestors that did not have a will, but I

there is a bear in front of one to lead to the action of running away. A game of make-believing that there is a bear in front of me can then also lead to a similar action of running away. (Again, whether there need to be real desires or whether we should allow for imaginary desires to be sufficient is something I will here leave open).

surmise that Nietzsche thinks of the will as being added to a substratum that continues in us. And that substratum is a “partly obtuse, partly flighty mind, attuned only to the passing moment” (*GM II:3*). Without the will, without our conscience, we would again be “slaves of momentary affect and desire” (*GM II:3*). My suggestion, then, is that Nietzsche’s picture is very like one of the dominant contemporary pictures in the philosophy of action. Affects and desires tend to be momentary or at least unreliable. The will is added to this mess of flighty desires to ensure direction and order—to ensure that if we chose to go in a direction once—and often this is taken to be the result of some original desire—then we will continue in that direction even if conflicting desires occasionally gain momentary advantage over the original desire. The will is supposed to help us with such preference reversals.

Of course, I have worked my way to talk of preference reversals for a specific dialectical reason. I want to suggest that it is illuminating in this context to be reminded of George Ainslie’s theory of preference reversals and his “mechanism for will power”.⁴⁸ Ainslie thought that succumbing to temptation, weakness of will, was the result of preference reversals and that preference reversals were to be explained by the deeply bowed nature of our discount functions, the way in which we discount the utility of some future good just in virtue of the amount of time between now and when we would have the good. Here is Michael Bratman’s compact summary of the Ainslie view:⁴⁹

Suppose I am a pianist who plays nightly at a club. Each night before my performance, I eat dinner with a friend, one who fancies good wines. Each night my friend offers me a fine wine with dinner, and—as I also love good wine—each night I am tempted to drink it. But I know that when I drink alcohol, my piano playing afterward suffers. And when I

⁴⁸ George Ainslie, *Picoeconomics: The Interaction of Successive Motivational States within the Individual* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 144. My thanks to Michael Bratman for first bringing Ainslie to my attention. Ainslie’s descriptions of agents as being composed of populations, marketplaces, and factions of competing motivational states or interests seems *prima facie* quite similar to Nietzsche’s description of the self as a social structure of drives and affects. Cf. George Ainslie, *Breakdown of Will* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 40-44, 61-64 and *BGE* 6, 12, and 19.

⁴⁹ Ainslie’s newer presentation of his view in *Breakdown* is easier to read than the original in *Picoeconomics*. For Ainslie’s description of Bratman’s example, see Ainslie, *Breakdown*, 81-82.

reflect in a calm moment, it is clear to me that superior piano playing in my evening performance is more important to me than the pleasures of wine with dinner.⁵⁰

And these calm moments occur both before and after I drink wine with dinner. Now temporal discounting by itself does not explain such temporary reversals: “if that discount rate is linear or exponential, and if at dinner I really do prefer to drink the wine, then I will prefer at breakfast that I drink wine at dinner”.⁵¹ However if the function is “sufficiently bowed” then, though “[f]rom temporally far away, I prefer superior piano playing to wine at dinner ... at some time before dinner the utility curves may cross; there may be a reversal of preference. This reversal, however, is temporary; at some time after dinner, I again prefer superior piano playing to the wine. If I have drunk the wine, I will then regret it” (see Figure 1).⁵²

⁵⁰ Michael E. Bratman, "Planning and Temptation", in *Faces of Intention: Selected Essays on Intention and Agency* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); originally published Larry May, Marilyn Friedman, and Andy Clark (eds.), *Mind and Morals: Essays on Ethics and Cognitive Science* (Cambridge: Bradford/MIT, 1995), pp. 293-310, 38. Talk of importance is nothing other than talk of preferences—there need be no violation of the nihilism requirement here.

⁵¹ Bratman, "Planning and Temptation", 39.

⁵² Bratman, "Planning and Temptation", 40. The curves in the figure are not exactly curves of hyperbolic functions, but the general point should still be clear. See, for a more detailed statement of the view and more diagrams, Ainslie, *Breakdown*, 30-32.

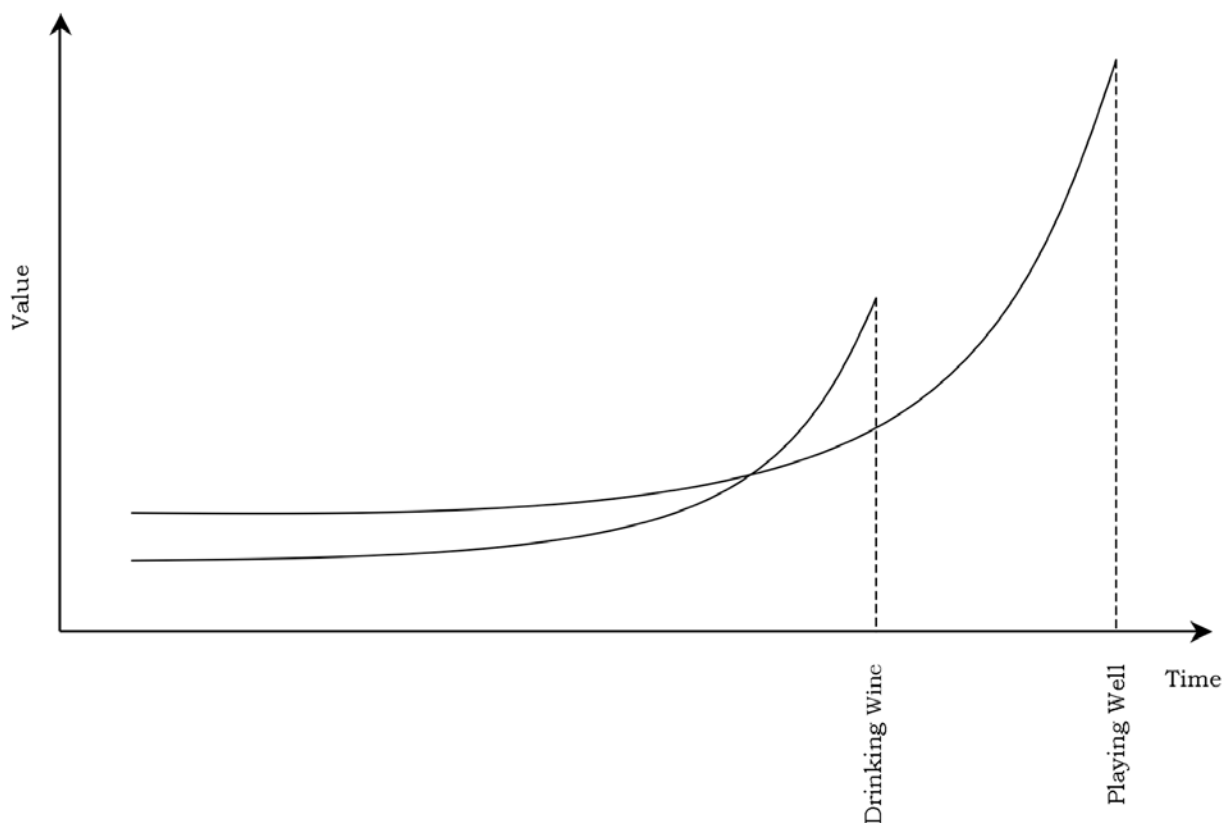


Figure 1.

I think this is a good model of at least part of the flightiness of our minds—part of our slavishness to the momentary to use Nietzsche’s terms. Now what is interesting is what Ainslie thinks is our, as he puts it “mechanism for will power”.⁵³ Again, here is Bratman’s summary:

- When I compare at dinner
- (a) drinking the wine now
- with
- (b) not drinking now and, as a result, playing well later tonight,
- I prefer (a). But since I know I will be in a similar situation on many (let us say, thirty) future occasions, I can also compare the following sequences of actions, present and future:
- (c) my drinking the wine each of the next thirty occasions
- and

⁵³ Ainslie, *Picoeconomics*, 144.

d) my refraining from drinking on each of those occasions. On natural assumptions, at dinner on day 1 I will prefer (d)—the sequence of nondrinkings—over (c)—the sequence of drinkings; and I will have this preference even while, at dinner, I prefer (a)—drinking now—to (b)—not drinking now. This is because at dinner on day 1 I am still far enough away from dinner the next twenty-nine nights for my preferences concerning wine versus piano on those nights still to rank piano over wine.⁵⁴

That last thought is the key to the solution. You are using the distance in time from the other events to overcome, so to speak, the closeness in time to the event now. In order to do that one has to think of the choice as between (c) and (d) and not as between (a) and (b).⁵⁵

Now for Bratman the worry is that since I am not *actually* choosing the whole series on day 1, the question becomes why it is *rational* for me to have (a) take on the expected utility of (c) and (b) take on the expected utility of (d). As he puts it “it is one thing to explain what is to be achieved by willpower, another to explain how it is rationally achieved”.⁵⁶ Ainslie’s strategy is to argue that if I choose (a), then I can *expect* that I will choose (a) on succeeding nights and the same for (b). It is these expectations that connect the series of choices and allow “(a) to take on the expected utility of (c)”.⁵⁷ What is distinctive about the strategy is that all we need add to the motivational system is such an expectation. We do not need some special kind of mental state,

⁵⁴ Bratman, "Planning and Temptation", 40-41.

⁵⁵ For Ainslie’s discussion of how such summation works, see Ainslie, *Breakdown*, 82-84. Cf. Robert Nozick, *The Nature of Rationality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 17-24, 26. For a slightly different suggestion about how to overcome preference reversals which could also be seen as something that the thought of eternal recurrence—like other “ideal”-observer accounts—could implement, see Nozick’s discussion at p. 25.

⁵⁶ Bratman, "Planning and Temptation", 50.

⁵⁷ The quotation is from Bratman, "Planning and Temptation", 43. For Ainslie’s own statement of the position, see Ainslie, *Picoeconomics*, 150-62 and Ainslie, *Breakdown*, 87-88. For further elaboration and defense of this general strategy, see Nozick, *Rationality*, 19-24. Nozick’s discussion of “symbolic utility” (26) makes his overall position more complicated than Ainslie’s. I suspect that if there is something to symbolic utility, then this too is a temptation-avoidance technique that will be recruited by the thought of eternal recurrence.

like an intention, or some special faculty of the will.⁵⁸ Neither do we need evaluative judgements.⁵⁹

Bratman argues that such a “conservative” account will not give us a “*rational* mechanism”.⁶⁰ But analogously with our treatment of worries about reductive naturalist realism, we can skip these concerns here, since, given Nietzsche’s nihilism, worrying about whether the effects are achieved *rationally* is not relevant. If we can regard ourselves as choosing the whole series, and have that pretence engage our motivations—as I have argued pretences can—then we have a version of Ainslie’s mechanism for will power even if it is not one that is rational.⁶¹ As Ainslie puts it: “The will is created by the perception of ... choices as precedents for similar choices in the future”—though he means “perception” in a different sense, of course.⁶²

What is essential for Nietzsche’s purposes is that we have something to play the role that the unconditional evaluative judgement plays in his account of the will. What we have is the thought of eternal recurrence, the pretence that we are not choosing between (a) and (b) but rather that we are choosing between the likes of (c) and (d). And like a will, it can be demanding. There is many a temptation that I would like to succumb to that this thought will

⁵⁸ This is why Bratman calls Ainslie’s strategy “conservative” (Bratman, “Planning and Temptation”, 42-43).

⁵⁹ Ainslie, *Breakdown*, 107-16 himself gives what seems to be, in essence, an error-theoretic or fictionalist account of evaluative judgements. For problems with accounts like his, see Nadeem J. Z. Hussain, “The Return of Moral Fictionalism”, *Philosophical Perspectives* 18, no. 1 (2004).

⁶⁰ Bratman, “Planning and Temptation”, 44-50 (my emphasis). Bratman grants, that Ainslie may not be concerned purely with rational strategies (Bratman, “Planning and Temptation”, 40 n. 9). For Ainslie’s response, see Ainslie, *Breakdown*, 93-94, 99. I am not sure Ainslie quite understands the concerns Bratman has (see for example, his discussion, of Gregory Kavka’s Toxin Puzzle (125-129)). Nozick’s position is harder to pin down (Nozick, *Rationality*, 19-24, 26).

⁶¹ For a defense of the use of the locution “regarding ... as” for these purposes, see Hussain, “Honest Illusion”.

⁶² Ainslie, *Picoeconomics*, 161. I think, however, that the illusion sense of “perception” would not be completely against the spirit of much of what Ainslie thinks; see, for example, Ainslie, *Breakdown*, 107-16, 94-95

prevent me from succumbing to—or so I take Nietzsche as claiming. The puzzle for the honest nihilist was how to commit himself to a goal when he accepts, as Nietzsche puts it, goallessness. I can now use my existing desires and the thought of eternal recurrence to create goals in effect by strengthening, in an ongoing manner, certain desires or drives over others.⁶³

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⁶³ I would like to thank Maudemarie Clark, Stanley Corngold, David Dudrick, Tristram McPherson, Bernard Reginster, Mathias Risse, Tamsin Shaw, Nicholas Stang, and other members of an audience at a conference on Nietzsche and Morality at The University Center for Human Values, Princeton University for their helpful questions and comments.

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