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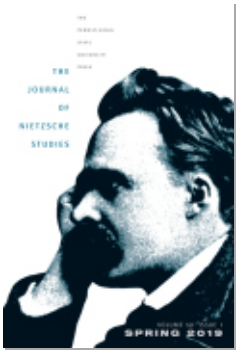

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# Loving the Eternal Recurrence

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*Abstract*: We explore how one might respond emotionally to the eternal recurrence. Zarathustra himself serves as our central case study. First we clarify the idea of eternal recurrence and its role in Nietzsche's philosophy, explaining why the eternal recurrence has the emotional consequences Nietzsche describes when he first introduces the idea in *The Gay Science*. Then we describe Zarathustra's emotional journey from horror at the eternal recurrence to loving it, in the sections from "On Great Events" to "The Seven Seals, or: The Yes and Amen Song."

*Keywords*: Zarathustra, eternal recurrence, emotion, time

## Introducing the Eternal Recurrence

According to the doctrine of the eternal recurrence, physical events will repeat themselves in an endless cycle, so everyone will live the same lives again and again for eternity. The first published discussion of the eternal recurrence, in *GS*, lays out the idea and the emotional responses one might have to it:

> What if some day or night a demon were to steal into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: "This life as you now live it and have lived it you will have to live once again and innumerable times again; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unspeakably small or great in your life must return to you, all in the same succession and sequence—even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself.

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> The eternal hourglass of existence is turned over again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!" Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: "You are a god, and never have I heard anything more divine." If this thought gained power over you, as you are it would transform and possibly crush you; the question in each and every thing, "Do you want this again and innumerable times again?" would lie on your actions as the heaviest weight! Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to long for nothing more fervently than for this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal? (*GS* 341)[1]

A central plot element of *Z* concerns the title character's emotional journey after the idea of the eternal recurrence emerges in his mind. Initially, the idea strikes Zarathustra with such horror that he cannot bring himself even to speak of it. By the climactic moment of the book, he has overcome his horror and declares his love for eternity in song, seven times over.

This article explores how one might respond emotionally to the eternal recurrence, using Zarathustra himself as our central case study. The first three sections clarify the idea and its role in Nietzsche's philosophy, explaining why the eternal recurrence has the emotional consequences Nietzsche describes in the *GS* passage above. The next four sections describe Zarathustra's emotional journey from horror at the eternal recurrence to loving it, from "On Great Events" to "The Seven Seals, or: The Yes and Amen Song."

The eternal recurrence also appears in Part IV of *Z*, where a version of the idea is enthusiastically accepted by the higher men who visit Zarathustra's cave. But as Zarathustra's emotional journey is depicted in richer detail than theirs, we will focus on Zarathustra's story in Parts II and III. Material from Part IV will be discussed when it helps us understand previous sections.

## Emotions toward Eternity

Why does the eternal recurrence have the extreme emotional consequences described above? The idea that the eternal recurrence could be either the "most abysmal thought" (*Z* III: "On the Vision and the Riddle" 2) or "the

highest formula of affirmation that is at all attainable" (*EH* "Books: *Z*" 1) recurs through Nietzsche's writings. It may seem strange for an idea to be either so wonderful or so terrible, leaving no possibility of an intermediate response. To explain why the idea has this sort of significance, we should consider how our passions lead us to respond emotionally to the infinite levels of satisfaction or dissatisfaction that the eternal recurrence provides.

Passions—which we will treat as a general category encompassing desires and aversions—cause emotional responses to representations of their objects. If one desires that something happen, mental representations of it will be pleasant.[2] The greater the magnitude of one's desire-satisfaction, the greater the pleasure. Athletes' desires for victory cause them pleasure when they come to believe that victory is likely or daydream about victory. The greater the victory, the greater the pleasure will be, so that daydreams about winning the championship will produce greater pleasure than daydreams about winning an ordinary game. Meanwhile, if one is averse to some event, mental representations of its coming about will be unpleasant. An aversion to oppressive political regimes will cause displeasure when one has mental representations of such regimes. The greater the oppression one represents mentally, the greater one's displeasure will be.

To consider the eternal recurrence is to consider getting the objects of your desires and aversions, to an infinitely greater degree than one mortal life could provide. The former athlete who basks in the glory of having won one championship faces the prospect of winning championship after championship for the rest of eternity as victory recurs again and again. The moment of victory will recur in its fresh and beautiful glory again and again as the universe recurs. And the foe of the oppressive regime faces the prospect of the regime's eternally recurring existence. Its oppression mars not only the present moment, but an infinite set of moments, recurring for eternity as the cosmos brings the regime back to power over and over again. No wonder, then, that the eternal recurrence causes such powerful emotional responses. Perhaps if the human mind were more capable of grasping infinities, our emotional reactions would be even greater.

Nietzsche describes one's response to the eternal recurrence as a test of how well-disposed one is to oneself and to life. If being well-disposed toward something is desiring it as it is, contemplating the eternal recurrence is indeed a good test. Rather than getting only a "single serving" of the life you desire, so to speak, you get infinite servings, which will seem just as new and exciting to you each time. What good news! But if you are

ill-disposed toward yourself and life, feeling aversion rather than desire, you face the prospect of recurring again and again, a self-hating self in a hated existence. One can get the same response to a smaller degree just from contemplating one's own life, without thinking of the eternal recurrence. The effect of the eternal recurrence is to magnify what one thinks about, and thus to magnify the emotional impact of one's thoughts.

The eternal recurrence strongly resembles Nietzsche's notion of *amor fati*. Much like someone uplifted by the eternal recurrence, someone who experiences *amor fati* loves the world as it is: "My formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati*: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely to bear what is necessary, still less conceal it [. . .] but *love* it" (*EH* "Clever" 10). The psychological disposition that would lead one to love the eternal recurrence would also lead one to experience *amor fati*—love for one's life as it is.

One might also respond negatively to the eternal recurrence because of a sense that it traps one in a meaningless existence. Some Christians might think of heaven primarily as the transcendent good outcome that gives meaning and purpose to decisions in earthly life.[3] Political activists might see their purpose as being to create a future unmarred by oppression. Such people might see the eternal recurrence as depriving their lives of meaning because it makes these outcomes unattainable. One will keep coming into existence on Earth rather than ascending finally to heaven, and eternally recurring oppression will forever mar the future. Unable to achieve the outcomes that bestow meaning upon their lives, these people might regard eternally recurring meaningless existence with horror. We will discuss this type of negative response to the eternal recurrence at greater length when we see how it appears in *Z*. As we will see, a soothsayer whose appearance coincides with first and last appearances of the eternal recurrence in that book expresses a vision of human existence as weary, meaningless, and inescapable even through death. Zarathustra's challenge is to show why his vision is wrong.

## A Cosmological Thesis with Attitudinal Significance

Scholarly debate about the eternal recurrence divides interpretations into three categories: as cosmological, attitudinal, or normative.[4] Cosmological interpretations treat the eternal recurrence as a fact about the physical

nature of our universe—that the same events will recur endlessly for all of time. Attitudinal interpretations treat the eternal recurrence as a thought experiment that reveals something important about our attitudes—a test for how emotionally healthy or well-disposed toward life we are. Normative interpretations treat the eternal recurrence as a standard for judging our decisions—perhaps as a moral rule telling us to do only those things we could will universally over time. This threefold division between interpretations of the eternal recurrence is influential in the literature. As normative interpretations have few contemporary adherents, we set them aside here.

While the threefold division seems clear enough, it is marred by an unfortunate ambiguity. Are these three options meant to categorize what the term "eternal recurrence" refers to, and thus what the eternal recurrence is? Or are they meant to categorize the significance of the idea of the eternal recurrence in Nietzsche's philosophy? It is possible to offer a cosmological answer to the first question and an attitudinal answer to the second question. In other words, one might hold that "the eternal recurrence" refers to a cosmological possibility—namely, that the same events will recur endlessly for all of time. That possibility is what we mean when we talk about the eternal recurrence. But one might also hold that Nietzsche's point in discussing the eternal recurrence is not to argue that it will actually happen, but to test whether one has a healthy attitude toward life. Those with healthy attitudes will respond positively toward the cosmological possibility that is the eternal recurrence, while those with unhealthy attitudes will respond negatively. Whether the doctrine is true or not, someone ill-disposed to life will hope that it is false and feel great displeasure if convinced of it, while someone well-disposed to life will hope that it is true and feel great pleasure if convinced of it.

This is our view. We see the doctrine of the eternal recurrence as a cosmological thesis that Nietzsche is interested in not because he believes it is true, but for its attitudinal significance. Understanding the eternal recurrence itself as a cosmological possibility lets us concede an important point to early cosmological interpreter Karl Löwith, who writes that the eternal recurrence "would neither shake nor modify man if the believer were not certain, regarding the event, that some such thing will actually occur."[5] Löwith may put this too strongly in requiring full-blown certainty, but he is right to say that a good attitudinal test would require some epistemic or imaginative engagement with the cosmological thesis itself. It is hard to understand what is going on in the attitudinal test if one does not engage

mentally with the cosmological idea of the universe repeating itself again and again.

Evidence against a fully cosmological interpretation comes from the presentation of the eternal recurrence in the published works. Nietzsche does not write about it as if he were confident that it is a cosmological truth. In the *GS* passage where it first appears, it is presented not as the way the universe actually is, but as a hypothetical possibility suggested by a demon. As we will soon discuss, some considerations suggesting that it is a cosmological truth are presented in *Z*. But it is not clear that Zarathustra himself is convinced, and the role of the arguments may be merely to get him to consider it as a possibility. Moreover, even if it is a cosmological truth in the fictional world of *Z*, it might not be a cosmological truth in our universe.

Fully cosmological interpretations often draw textual support from unpublished notes collected in *The Will to Power*. Nietzsche offers an interesting argument that it will come about. Matter in the universe

> must pass through a calculable number of combinations. In infinite time, every possible combination would at some time or another be realized; more: it would be realized an infinite number of times. And since between every combination and its next recurrence all other possible combinations would have to take place, and each of these combinations conditions the entire sequence of combinations in the same series, a circular movement of absolutely identical series is thus demonstrated: the world as a circular movement that has already repeated itself infinitely often and plays its game in infinitum. (*KSA* 13:14[188], p. 376)[6]

Here Nietzsche writes more confidently about the eternal recurrence as a cosmological truth about the actual world and does not couch it in a hypothetical or fictional scenario with elements of fantasy. If we were more confident in *The Will to Power* as a source for Nietzsche's considered views, we might be drawn to a more fully cosmological interpretation. But it seems to us that the most likely reason why this proof of the eternal recurrence shows up only in the unpublished notes is that Nietzsche did not have sufficient confidence in it to make it public.

In fact, there are good reasons not to conclude from these cosmological considerations that one's life will recur eternally. There might be an infinite number of future arrangements of matter, perhaps if the universe

expands forever, or if space is continuous rather than discrete. The present configuration of matter might not recur even if it only can come in a finite set of configurations, if some of the matter undergoes irreversible changes, or if the universe enters an eternally recurring cycle later on that does not include its current state. Thoughts like these might have convinced Nietzsche not to be confident in the eternal recurrence as a truth about our world.

Doubts about whether the eternal recurrence is true of the actual world may be among the reasons why Nietzsche presents his most extended discussion of the eternal recurrence in *Z*. The world of *Z* is his fictional creation. It departs from reality in including talking animals, prophetic dreams, and other elements of fantasy that would be out of place in a work of nonfiction, or even realistic fiction. Nietzsche is free to stipulate that the eternal recurrence will take place in this fantastic world, or at least stipulate that the world is set up so that it is a plausible hypothesis.

The rest of this article explores Zarathustra's journey through that world, and in particular his emotional journey as his initial horror at the idea of the eternal recurrence turns into love of eternity. Especially where the eternal recurrence is concerned, we agree with the many interpreters who see the plot and narrative structure of the book as essential to its meaning.[7] There is considerable scholarly controversy about how Zarathustra thinks of the eternal recurrence at various points in the narrative, and even about which sections involve Zarathustra engaging with the eternal recurrence at all. There is no way to tell the story of how Zarathustra's emotional responses develop without taking a stand on these interpretive questions. At the same time, understanding Zarathustra's emotions helps us answer interpretive questions. Some passages that scholars find perplexing can be easily understood if we bear in mind how Zarathustra feels about the eternal recurrence at the time, and how this affects his interactions with other characters. So the only way to proceed is by telling Zarathustra's story, to which we now turn.

## The Initial Vision: "On Great Events" and "The Soothsayer"

Our tale begins with "On Great Events," which foreshadows the initial emergence of the idea of eternal recurrence in Zarathustra's mind. A figure who looks like Zarathustra is seen flying through the air, saying, "It is time! It is high time!" The section ends with Zarathustra explaining that the figure was his "shadow" (not his literal shadow, but a separate character

introduced in Part IV) and asking, "High time for *what*?" Evidence for an answer appears in the middle of the section, where Zarathustra argues with a "fire hound" about what sorts of events determine the direction of history. While the fire hound regards violent events like wars and revolutions as driving history, Zarathustra replies that intellectual events such as the conception of new values have a greater role: "the greatest events—they are not our loudest but our stillest hours." The section as a whole, then, seems to announce that it is high time for the emergence of an idea that will significantly reshape our values. And this is what we see in the following section, where the idea of the eternal recurrence first emerges into Zarathustra's mind, in a symbolic dream.

This section, called "The Soothsayer," opens with a soothsayer's grim prophecy: "I saw a great sadness descend upon mankind." Humans have come to see existence as meaningless and depressing, saying, "All is empty, all is the same, all has been!" There is no possibility of escaping from it even through death: "Verily, we have become too weary even to die. We are still waking and living on—in tombs." While Zarathustra is not yet in a position explicitly to realize this, the soothsayer's prophecy represents a negative reaction one might have to the eternal recurrence: that it deprives one's life of meaning by denying the teleological satisfactions of an afterlife or any other grand and final historical goal. If this is how one sees the eternal recurrence, one sees oneself as trapped in meaningless cycles of endless life from which death is no permanent escape. While Zarathustra cannot yet understand the eschatological significance of the prophecy, it upsets him. He stops eating and drinking for three days, and then falls into a deep sleep.

The middle of the section tells of Zarathustra's dream, which he describes to his disciples after waking, and which constitutes the initial emergence of the idea of eternal recurrence into his mind. In the dream, he is a "night watchman and guardian of tombs upon the lonely mountain castle of death." The tombs contain "Life that had been overcome," and the castle has the "odor of dusty eternities." Zarathustra is viewing human life from the perspective of the vast eons after everyone has died and before recurrence brings everyone back again. He notes the vastness of time that the cosmology of eternal recurrence places between periods of human existence: "Thus time passed and crawled, if time still existed—how should I know?" As a night watchman, he has keys to the gate of the castle, and tries to open it. The gate opens not because of his efforts, but because of a natural force—a "roaring wind." As the cosmology of eternal recurrence includes

vast periods without human agents, it requires natural forces to explain the return of life-supporting conditions and life itself. The wind bursts open one of the coffins, a symbolic overcoming of death that releases life into the world again. What comes out of the coffin has all the madly chaotic energy of life. Zarathustra hears "a thousandfold laughter," and witnesses "a thousand grimaces of children, angels, owls, fools, and butterflies as big as children." Zarathustra cries out in horror, and he wakes from his sleep.

When he explains the dream to his disciples, one of them offers a triumphalist interpretation: it represents Zarathustra's victory over his enemies. Rather than agreeing with the interpretation, Zarathustra sits silently until being lifted to his feet by his disciples, whereupon he suggests that they eat. The phrase "Thus spoke Zarathustra" then appears, as it does at the end of most sections of the book. But here it does not conclude the section. This sentence follows: "But then he looked a long time into the face of the disciple who had played the dream interpreter and he shook his head." Obviously, Zarathustra rejects the disciple's interpretation of the dream. What is less obvious, and suggested by the placement of his rejection after "Thus spoke Zarathustra," is that a thought he cannot bring himself to speak of is starting to emerge into his mind. This is the thought of the eternal recurrence, the real topic of his dream.

The story of the soothsayer itself suggests treating "The Soothsayer" as the first appearance of the eternal recurrence in *Z*. At the beginning of Part IV, he appears again and visits Zarathustra's cave. After echoing the words of Zarathustra's shadow, "it is high time!," he challenges Zarathustra to a sort of emotional duel in which he will try to depress Zarathustra by convincing him of the worthlessness of everything ("The Cry of Distress"). Zarathustra takes up the challenge and replies that he will raise the soothsayer to cheerfulness, telling him that at the end of the day "you yourself shall dance to my songs as my dancing bear." We witness Zarathustra's victory in "The Drunken Song." That night, "the old soothsayer was dancing with joy; and even if, as some of the chroniclers think, he was full of sweet wine, he was certainly still fuller of the sweetness of life and he had renounced all weariness." What inspires him to dance is the idea of the eternal recurrence itself, as joyously proclaimed by another of Zarathustra's dinner guests. Interpreting Zarathustra's dream as being about the eternal recurrence unifies the soothsayer's story. It was the soothsayer whose dark prophecy brought the idea of the eternal recurrence upon Zarathustra, and whose

vision of eternal meaninglessness and misery made it seem terrible. In the end, Zarathustra not only overcomes his own negative emotional responses to the eternal recurrence, but leads the soothsayer to do the same.

There is considerable interpretive controversy over where the eternal recurrence first appears in *Z*. Laurence Lampert, Stanley Rosen, and T. K. Seung think the eternal recurrence emerges in Zarathustra's mind only in later sections.[8] Seung, in particular, takes "On the Vision and the Riddle" in Part III to be "the original source for the vision of eternal recurrence."[9] We disagree with their implied view that the eternal recurrence has not yet emerged in Zarathustra's mind in "The Soothsayer." The foreshadowing in "On Great Events," the soothsayer's story arc, and the way death, time, and rebirth are connected in Zarathustra's dream seem to us to be conclusive textual evidence that the dream is the first appearance. We agree instead with Robert Gooding-Williams and Lawrence Hatab that this is indeed what the dream is about.[10] We have a smaller disagreement with Gooding-Williams's view that sections prior to "On Great Events" also suggest eternal recurrence, as earlier sections contain less evidence for such an interpretation than the dream does. This leaves us closest to Hatab's view. We agree with his contention that the soothsayer's grim prophecy expresses the idea "that life not only can but apparently will seem meaningless in the face of the eternal repetition of identical events."[11]

What was Nietzsche's purpose in writing about the eternal recurrence in this way? One might wonder why he would discuss an idea he took to be so important in a way that confuses scholars even about *when* he is discussing it. We think it is not enough simply to say that *Z* is written that way. When Nietzsche writes in a distinctive manner, scholars really should try to explain what goals they believe he is trying to achieve in that specific instance.

In our view, one of Nietzsche's goals is to provide a detailed psychological study of how one might respond to the eternal recurrence. He wants to show us how Zarathustra feels about the idea even in its early and unclear stages of emergence in his mind. So he distinguishes the steps that make up Zarathustra's response, presenting them in a sort of psychological slow motion for us to observe. Having Zarathustra first encounter the eternal recurrence in a dream allows Nietzsche to depict a natural emotional response to it that might strike one even before one could express it in words. We can respond to things emotionally even before we have words

or concepts for them—image and metaphor can be enough to move us. In a work written largely from a protagonist's perspective, this can leave readers uncertain about what the protagonist is responding to emotionally. Even the protagonist could not tell you. It is telling that when the eternal recurrence is first presented, as the bursting open of a coffin after the wind throws open the gates of death's castle, Zarathustra's first response is not a feeling of triumph over mortality or joy in life. It's horror.

## Grasping the Horror: "On Redemption" through "The Wanderer"

While commentators disagree about whether the eternal recurrence appears to Zarathustra in some implicit form in previous sections, "On Redemption" is generally and rightly agreed to display Zarathustra's first experience of thinking explicitly about the eternal recurrence. Zarathustra's interlocutor in the section is a hunchback, who describes himself as someone who "has too much behind him"—a metaphor for the way bad past events continue to burden us. Occasioned by the presence of this interlocutor, and unrestrained by contemporary ideas of sensitivity toward the disabled, Zarathustra expounds on what bothers him most about the past—the wretchedness of the misshapen people in it. He says, "This is what is terrible for my eyes, that I find man in ruins and scattered as over a battlefield or a butcher-field. And when my eyes flee from the now to the past, they always find the same: fragments and limbs and dreadful accidents—but no human beings."

Even if Zarathustra is disturbed by different features of the past than we are, we can understand his frustration at being unable to change what has already happened:

> Will—that is the name of the liberator and joy-bringer; thus I taught you, my friends. But now learn this too: the will itself is still a prisoner. Willing liberates; but what is it that puts even the liberator himself in fetters? "It was"—that is the name of the will's gnashing of teeth and most secret melancholy. Powerless against what has been done, he is an angry spectator of all that is past. The will cannot will backwards; and that he cannot break time and time's covetousness, that is the will's loneliest melancholy. (*Z* IV: "On Redemption")

Nothing can be done to change past events. This is especially frustrating for a philosophy that emphasizes passionate and creative acts of will, as Nietzsche's philosophy does. While bad future events can often be averted through passionate and creative acts of willing, this is impossible with the past. This leaves the will an "angry spectator" with regard to the unchanging and unhappy past. The resulting emotional turmoil leads people toward foolish actions and generally negative attitudes toward existence itself.

Zarathustra describes our negative reaction to bad events in the past as animated by the "spirit of revenge." This is an unusual way to understand negative reactions to past events not caused by any human action. Vengeful feelings are reactive attitudes that aim at agents rather than inanimate objects or events. But here Zarathustra describes the negative attitudes as being "against time and its 'it was,'" rather than against any person. What would end these negative emotional reactions is also described, to some extent, as if time were a human agent: "reconciliation with time and something higher than any reconciliation" (*Z* IV: "On Redemption"). People reconcile with other people, not with impersonal features of reality like time. This is an early instance of a phenomenon we see again in Zarathustra's discussions of eternal recurrence: Zarathustra personifies impersonal features of reality like time itself, treating reactive attitudes toward them as appropriate. Later, life and eternity will be represented in the same way.

Zarathustra starts explaining what such a reconciliation would involve: the will must learn to "will backwards." With that, he "suddenly stopped and looked altogether like one who has received a severe shock" (*Z* IV: "On Redemption"). This seems to be the moment at which the idea of eternal recurrence finally comes together explicitly in his mind. Embracing the eternal recurrence would involve a sort of willing backward, insofar as it involves wanting the past as the future. So it would involve wanting the bad events of the past to recur eternally. This is what reconciliation would consist in. But if the past is bad enough that one regards it with the powerless fury of an angry spectator, how could one want it over and over again for eternity? This vision—of the awful past recurring eternally—strikes Zarathustra so forcefully that he cannot continue. Like "The Soothsayer," "On Redemption" includes a "Thus spoke Zarathustra" before the section is finished, again indicating that there is something Zarathustra cannot say. The hunchback recognizes this, asking at the end of the section, "Why does Zarathustra speak otherwise to his pupils than to himself?"

One might interpret "On Redemption" in ways that require a deeper connection to the metaphysics of will to power, mentioned in this section. While it is no doubt possible to draw these connections, doing so is not essential to our interpretation. The section can be understood simply in terms of how we feel about bad things in the past, and how our bad feelings are magnified at the thought of having them happen infinitely many times.

Zarathustra does not speak in public for the next three sections: "On Human Prudence," "The Stillest Hour," and "The Wanderer." He parts from his disciples, returns to his cave, and journeys onward. The idea of the eternal recurrence—and with it the entire awfulness of the past happening again and again—is too terrible for him to even discuss with others, or even think about explicitly to himself. Our clearest picture of his internal conflict comes in his conversation with what he calls "*my stillest hour*: that is the name of my awesome mistress" (*Z* IV: "The Stillest Hour"). We have seen this name before, in "On Great Events," as a term for times when revolutionary ideas arrive. As with time in the last section, the stillest hour is anthropomorphized, this time as a woman who tells Zarathustra, "You know it, Zarathustra, but you do not say it!" He answers, "Yes, I know it, but I do not want to say it!" The revolutionary idea of eternal recurrence is in his mind, but it strikes him with so much horror that he cannot even express it to others.

What would it be like explicitly to grasp the idea that all the bad things in history would repeat themselves for the rest of eternity? What Nietzsche depicts through Zarathustra's story is that it is so terrible that one would not even be able to bring oneself to speak of it to others. This is consistent with our account of how emotions respond to infinite magnitudes of bad events. Infinite magnitudes of things to which we are averse generate extremely intense negative responses, limited only by our human inability to fully grasp the infinite. This is the prospect that strikes Zarathustra in "On Redemption." The following three sections serve largely to depict how devastating the emotional impact of such a realization would be.

## Expressing the Idea: "On the Vision and the Riddle"

When Zarathustra finally is able to speak of the eternal recurrence to others, he does so by describing a dreamlike vision. He is climbing a mountain carrying a dwarf whom he describes as "the spirit of gravity, my devil and

archenemy."[12] The dwarf taunts him as he climbs: "You threw yourself up high, but every stone that is thrown must fall." The heavy dwarf—the spirit of gravity—is literally and metaphorically trying to bring him down. This characterization of the dwarf matches his metaphor for horror at the eternal recurrence in *GS* 341: "the heaviest weight." Nietzsche describes at length how Zarathustra summons up his "courage" before responding to the dwarf. Why would courage be needed here? On our interpretation, Zarathustra needs courage to face up to the idea of the eternal recurrence. Doing so is no small task, as it involves infinite magnitudes of the things he hates.

Zarathustra proceeds to describe the cosmology of eternal recurrence in symbolic terms. Next to a gateway on the mountain, he says,

> From this gateway, Moment, a long, eternal lane leads backward: behind us lies an eternity. Must not whatever can walk have walked on this lane before? Must not whatever can happen have happened, have been done, have passed by before? And if everything has been there before—what do you think, dwarf, of this moment? Must not this gateway too have been there before? And are not all things knotted together so firmly that this moment draws after it all that is to come? Therefore itself too? For whatever can walk in this long lane out there too, it must walk once more.

This is the cosmology of the notebook fragment we referred to earlier (*KSA* 13:14[188], p. 376), but described in more poetic language. Zarathustra has finally summoned up the courage to think through the idea of the eternal recurrence, and to speak of it to others as he relates his vision. Zarathustra draws the conclusion of the cosmological argument: "must we not eternally return?"

There is considerable interpretive debate about whether the eternal recurrence requires us to conceive of time as linear or circular.[13] Zarathustra presents a linear metaphor with his image of the gateway, while the dwarf says to him, "All truth is crooked; time itself is a circle." We see focus on this issue as a mistake, as both conceptions of time are equivalent for purposes of understanding the eternal recurrence. The same set of recurring events can be represented either as a circle or as an infinitely repeating line. To turn linear time into circular time, wind up the timeline into a circle. To turn circular time into linear time, unwind the time-circle into a line. While circular time, in allowing the same moment to be repeated, might

seem like a better picture, repetition of the same moment is also possible in linear time, if things can exist at various points with periods of nonexistence between them. High tide or rising oceans can make it the case that an island ceases to exist, but at low tide or when the ocean falls, the same island exists again.[14] If the same island can recur as the oceans rise and fall, the same person should be able to recur in a linear timeline with eternal recurrence.

So how should we interpret the dwarf's remark that time is a circle, and Zarathustra's reply, "You spirit of gravity [. . .] do not make things too easy for yourself"? While this may seem like part of an argument about whether time is linear or circular, we instead see the dwarf's remark simply as an attempt to hurt Zarathustra by throwing the painful truth of eternal recurrence at him. As we have established, it is an idea Zarathustra regards with horror, and the dwarf wants to bring Zarathustra down. So as Zarathustra begins working his way through the cosmological argument, the dwarf throws the fully horrifying conclusion at him, hoping to emotionally destroy him. But Zarathustra's courage does not fail him. He withstands the dwarf's attack, rebukes the dwarf, and derives the conclusion himself.

Here Zarathustra has finally come to believe in the eternal recurrence. He still regards it, or the consequence that bad things will recur eternally, as an "abysmal thought." This is what Zarathustra calls it when he returns to it several sections later. So our story will skip forward to that point.

## Loving Eternity: "The Convalescent" to "The Seven Seals"

After he returns to the cave, Zarathustra confronts the idea of the eternal recurrence again: "I, Zarathustra, the advocate of life, the advocate of suffering, the advocate of the circle; I summon you, my most abysmal thought!" As Zarathustra engages with the thought of the eternal recurrence, he is overcome by nausea. He falls into a coma, and lies on the floor of his cave for seven days. The psychological dynamics of what happens as he lies there are unclear. But what seems to be happening is that Zarathustra's positive and negative dispositions toward life, his desires and aversions, are fighting against each other. His subsequent attitudes toward the eternal recurrence show that his positive dispositions have won.

When Zarathustra recovers, he finds himself surrounded by his animals, who have found food for him and tell him how beautiful the world

around him is. They proceed to proclaim the eternal recurrence poetically: "Everything dies, everything blossoms again; eternally runs the year of being" (*Z* IV: "The Convalescent"). Zarathustra is pleased with them and praises them, though with some surprise that they can accept the idea so much more easily than he could. He explains what it was that made it so hard for him: "The great disgust with *man* [. . .] And the eternal recurrence even of the smallest—that was my disgust with all existence. Alas! Nausea! Nausea! Nausea!" (*Z* IV: "The Convalescent"). Here he exhibits the same disgust with human wretchedness that appeared in "On Redemption." The animals proclaim the eternal recurrence again in elegant poetry, imagining how Zarathustra might proclaim it on his deathbed. Zarathustra does not reply, but lies on the cave floor conversing with his soul.

While there is some controversy about whether the animals accurately characterize the eternal recurrence, we hold that they do. As Loeb explains, the animals "are unable to understand why this new teaching should have caused him such pain, nausea, and sickness."[15] While Loeb explains this reaction in terms of the animals' lack of memory, it may simply be that they are not disposed to feel nausea at the recurrence of the small man. Lacking this aversive disposition would make them better disposed to life than Zarathustra himself is. The way Zarathustra responds to their proclamations of the eternal recurrence expresses his awareness of this. His main criticism of them is that while his embrace of the eternal recurrence was achieved only through great suffering, they turn it into a "a hurdy-gurdy song." The metaphor here refers to a simple type of folk music, to be contrasted with the grand drama through which Zarathustra has gone.

The section following Zarathustra's conversation with his soul is "The Other Dancing Song." In the first half, the emotional complexity of Zarathustra's relationship with life—here given a female personification—becomes clear. He insults her; she slaps him. The point seems to be to emphasize the complexity of Nietzsche's attitudes toward life. He has both the desires for life that lead him toward falling in love with Eternity, and the aversions that make the eternal recurrence an abysmal thought. But in the second part of the section, they are reconciled. Life tells Zarathustra sadly that he wants to leave her soon—a reminder of Zarathustra's mortality. Zarathustra responds by whispering something in her ear, to which she replies, "You know that, O Zarathustra? Nobody knows that." We interpret Zarathustra's whisper as being about the truth of the eternal recurrence—perhaps, that he will return to her again and again eternally. Life replies that

Zarathustra cannot really know that his life will recur. His final remark, "But then life was dearer to me than all my wisdom ever was" may express how he loves life so much that nonrational processes are driving him to believe in the eternal recurrence, despite whatever flaws it might have as a cosmological theory. The last part of the section poetically expresses the idea of the eternal recurrence and the emotional roots of accepting it. It consists of twelve bell strikes at midnight with a single line between each pair. Four of them run as follows: "The world is deep / deeper than day had been aware / Deep is its woe / Joy—deeper yet than agony." The hidden depth of the world is that it recurs eternally, and the greater depth of joy than agony is the more positive emotional response to it that is magnified by the eternal recurrence.

Part III ends with "The Seven Seals, or: The Yes and Amen Song," a seven-part declaration of Zarathustra's love for Eternity. (As eternity here is just life over and over again, loving life and believing in the eternal recurrence is loving eternity.) Each of the seven parts describes something Zarathustra enjoys about his life. First is his role as a prophetic figure "who shall one day kindle the light of the future." Second is his great battle with religion, which often has him "jubilating where old gods lie buried." Third is joy in creative action, where he has often "laughed the laughter of creative lightning." Fourth is the joy of seeing stark evaluative oppositions come together in a grand unity where he pours "fire to spirit, and joy to pain, and the most wicked to the most gracious."[16] Fifth is his freedom to explore new ideas with the courage of a mariner sailing into uncharted waters: "The coast has vanished, now the last chain has fallen from me." Sixth is the joy of being able to experience life in a light and humorous way where he jumps "with both feet into golden-emerald delight." The seventh and last can simply be described as living like a bird, free and able to sing: "[B]ird-wisdom speaks thus: 'Behold, there is no above, no below. Throw yourself around, out, back, you who are light! Sing!'"

Zarathustra describes each of these seven joys to explain why he embraces the eternal recurrence. The section thus consists of seven conditionals of the form: If I have this joy, "how should I not lust after eternity and after the nuptial ring of rings, the ring of recurrence?" And each of the seven parts ends, "*For I love you, O eternity!*" These joys elevate Zarathustra more than the recurrence of the small man depresses him. And this is why he sings of eternity. She will give him these joys not only for one lifetime, but infinitely and forever.

## NOTES

1. Translations cited in this article include *The Gay Science*, trans. J. Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. W. Kaufmann (New York: Viking, 1954); *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 1974); *Ecce Homo*, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967); *The Will to Power*, trans. W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968).

2. See Timothy Schroeder, *Three Faces of Desire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) and Neil Sinhababu, *Humean Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

3. A potential further cause of strong emotional responses to the eternal recurrence has to do with its displacement of heavenly bliss and hellish torment in the Christian afterlife. Those who expected eternal bliss in heaven would likely be disappointed to learn that they instead face an endless cycle of rebirth into the same earthly life. Those who expected eternal torment in hell, on the other hand, might be greatly relieved. But Nietzsche does not focus heavily on this implication of the eternal recurrence, perhaps expecting his core audience already to have given up belief in the Christian afterlife. Moreover, the emotional response he describes in *GS* is neither disappointment at failing to get something wonderful, nor relief at having avoided something horrible.

4. Bernd Magnus, *Nietzsche's Existential Imperative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 140–42, and T. K. Seung, *Nietzsche's Epic of the Soul: Thus Spake Zarathustra* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005), describe the eternal recurrence this way. Early proponents of cosmological interpretations include Georg Simmel, *Schopenhauer und Nietzsche* (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1907) and Karl Löwith, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Eternal Recurrence of the Same* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1997), with Linda Williams and Joseph Palenick, "Re-evaluating Nietzsche's Cosmology of Eternal Recurrence," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 42 (2004): 393–409, and Paul S. Loeb, "The Gateway-Augenblick," in *Nietzsche's* Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: Before Sunrise*, ed. J. Luchte (London: Continuum, 2008), 91–108 and "Eternal Recurrence," in *The Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche*, ed. K. Gemes and J. Richardson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 645–71, more recently defending cosmological readings. Objections to cosmological readings come from Arthur Danto, *Nietzsche as Philosopher* (New York: Macmillan, 1965) and "The Eternal Recurrence," in *Nietzsche: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. R. C. Solomon (New York: Anchor Press, 1973), 316–21, and Arnold Zuboff, "Nietzsche and Eternal Recurrence," in Solomon, *Nietzsche*, 343–57.

5. Löwith, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, 88.

6. Translated as *The Will to Power* §1066.

7. Laurence Lampert, *Nietzsche's Teaching: An Interpretation of* Thus Spoke Zarathustra (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986); Kathleen M. Higgins, *Nietzsche's Zarathustra* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987);

Stanley Rosen, *The Mask of Enlightenment: Nietzsche's Zarathustra* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Robert Gooding-Williams, *Zarathustra's Dionysian Modernism* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001); T. K. Seung, *Nietzsche's Epic of the Soul*; Lawrence Hatab, *Nietzsche's Life Sentence: Coming to Terms with Eternal Recurrence* (New York: Routledge, 2005); and Paul S. Loeb, "Gateway-Augenblick."

8. Lampert, *Nietzsche's Teaching*; Rosen, *Mask of Enlightenment*; Seung, *Nietzsche's Epic of the Soul*.

9. Seung, *Nietzsche's Epic of the Soul*, 130.

10. Gooding-Williams, *Zarathustra's Dionysian Modernism*; Hatab, *Nietzsche's Life Sentence*.

11. Hatab, *Nietzsche's Life Sentence*, 68.

12. All quotations from this section of the article are from *Z* III: "On the Vision and the Riddle."

13. Robin Small, *Time and Becoming in Nietzsche's Thought* (London: Continuum, 2010).

14. Daniel Korman, *Ordinary Objects* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

15. Paul S. Loeb, *The Death of Nietzsche's Zarathustra* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 52n.

16. Zarathustra's synthesizing ability is highlighted by Nietzsche in *EH*: "in him all opposites are blended into a new unity" (*EH* "Books: *Z*" 6).