

Joyful Transhumanism: Love and Eternal Recurrence  
in Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*

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## 1. Introduction: Toward a Joyful Transhumanism

Many have noticed that there are some affinities between the contemporary transhumanist movement and Nietzsche's philosophy of the *Übermensch* or the *Superhuman*.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps Sorgner (2017a, b, c, d)<sup>2</sup> is the commentator who has done the most to defend the view that these affinities are real and that they run deep. He believes that Nietzsche and the transhumanists share important similarities in fundamental principles and aims, and, particularly, in their belief in the enhancement of humanity by the overcoming of human limitations. While for Nietzsche this enhancement was to be achieved through cultural education, given the structural analogy between education and technology, Sorgner concludes that Nietzsche probably would not have opposed the transhumanist goal of using technological enhancement in order to realize the superhuman (Sorgner 2017b: 42-3).

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<sup>1</sup> I'll follow Loeb's and Tinsley's (2019) translation of *Übermensch* as *Superhuman*. However, unlike them, I am not inclined to read the superhuman as the conception of a new superior species that can replace humanity. I interpret the superhuman as the ideal of a new spiritually superior type of human. In my view, we can think of the ideal as entreating us to develop the sort of profound spiritual qualities that would put a human being to shame, so that, much in the same way as today we would feel ashamed of perceiving in ourselves comportments that remind us of the spiritual limitations of being an ape, so too we would feel ashamed of discovering in ourselves comportments that remind us of the spiritual limitations of being human (*Z.I. 'Prologue' 3*). Exploring these issues further is a topic for a different essay, but among the things this spiritual labor of enhancement might require is the overcoming of the default moral qualities that generally typify humankind, such as guilt, and, perhaps, compassion. In what follows, I provide an example of what the overcoming of guilt might entail. In my reading, the overcoming of these spiritual limitations doesn't constitute a radical break with our humanity culminating in a new species. This is partly because—as I argued in Zamosc (2015b)—among the things that eternal recurrence might teach us is that the ideal of the superhuman is only imperfectly realizable.

<sup>2</sup> The debate is usefully collected in Tuncel (2017a).

While I don't have qualms with the transhumanist aspiration to employ technological means to break human cognitive, emotional, or physical limitations in order to develop capacities that greatly exceed the maximum attainable by any currently living person (Bostrom 2008), I am skeptical about whether such a policy of enhancement would capture what Nietzsche meant by the superhuman, and—like some scholars—I suspect that Nietzsche probably would've been a critic of much of the transhumanist movement, like he was of the modern science of his time (e.g. Ansell-Pearson 1997; Skowron 2013; Babich 2017). Nietzsche's criticisms of science, however, were not meant as an indictment of all science, for he thought we could become practitioners of a more joyful science. Similarly, the transhumanist movement could benefit from a fresh philosophical rapprochement with Nietzsche's philosophy so as to secure a joyful version of itself.

In this essay, I contend that securing such joyful transhumanism requires coming to terms with *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, which Nietzsche considered his most important book. In particular, following Loeb (2017), I'll argue that transhumanists cannot productively claim affinity to Nietzsche's philosophy until they incorporate the doctrine of eternal recurrence, which some of them are reluctant to do: e.g. More (2017). Sorgner himself, while conceding that transhumanists may benefit from taking eternal recurrence seriously, insists that the doctrine isn't really necessary for achieving the movement's goals (Sorgner 2017c: 164). In the ensuing analysis, I hope to prove him wrong on that score.

My argument will proceed as follows: in section 2, I discuss some of the ways in which *Zarathustra* calls attention to the worry of confusing the superhuman with a false kind of transcendence. Section 3, outlines *Zarathustra*'s diagnosis of why this danger exists and how the doctrine of eternal recurrence might prevent it, thereby guaranteeing that the superhuman ideal—or any ideal that might be reasonably integrated into its orbit—won't be suspect. However, against Loeb, I suggest in section 4 that the solution doesn't consist in the acquisition of a new skill, but rather in cultivating a love of life that allows us to affirmatively embrace our tragic destiny of always remaining transitional creatures. Finally, in section 5, I argue that *Zarathustra* is a propaedeutic to the art of love of life and, thus, that it's unlikely that its pedagogical purpose can be achieved through technological interventions like those envisioned by transhumanists.

## 2. The Broken Wings of False Transcendence

From the start, *Zarathustra* warns its readers against confusing the superhuman ideal with false or sickly versions of it. The prologue's tightrope scene prefigures this theme: "man is a rope fastened between animal and superhuman—a rope over an abyss", *Zarathustra* tells us, just a few moments before the tightrope walker steps into the scene to metaphorically enact the very transition from animality to superhumanity being mentioned (Z.I 'Prologue', 4-6; translation modified).<sup>3</sup> His movement along the rope, however, is abruptly interrupted midpoint by the jester who, in his rush to get to the other side, leaps over him, making him fall toward the crowd and his eventual death. The import of the episode is hard to miss: humanity needs to transition to superhumanity but rushing or making a mockery of the whole process will result in our and the ideal's perdition.

Other chapters pick up this theme. In "On the Hinterworldly", *Zarathustra* himself admits to having pursued problematic projects of transcendence in the past, like those commonly championed by hinterworldly people, and suggests that suffering and impotence are the reasons behind these transcendental miscarriages. Indeed, prefiguring the theme of "On the Despisers of the Body", *Zarathustra* suggests that hinterworldly people are dissatisfied with their own body and would like to "jump out of their skin"; and, in language that strongly recalls the jester's hasty attempt to reach the end of the rope in one lethal jump, he claims that it's "weariness that wants its ultimate with one great leap, with a death leap; a poor unknowing weariness that no longer even wants to will: that created all gods and hinterworlds" (Z.I, 'Hinterworldly').

In the chapter "On the Tree on the Mountain", echoes of this leaping jester-like figure appear to hover over the noble youngster who confesses to being weary of the heights and ashamed of all his climbing, for he "often skip[s] steps when [he] climbs" (Z.I, 'Tree'). His jester-like hastiness frustrates his efforts at rising, like the tree, "high beyond humans and animals". *Zarathustra* suggests that it's his spirit's lack of freedom that's responsible for his failures and warns that his weariness can lead him to become—much like the prologue's jester—"a mocker, an annihilator" (Ibid.). This possibility seems related, again, to contempt for the body. *Zarathustra*

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<sup>3</sup> I'll use the Cambridge edition of Nietzsche's works, indicating translation alterations in parenthesis.

reintroduces the metaphor of the broken wings used to characterize the transcendental poeticizing of hinterworldly humans in his exhortation to the youngster not to follow the path of those nobles who lost their heroic soul and became libertines. They said: “spirit is lust too” and, in doing so, “the wings of their spirit broke, and now it crawls around and soils what it gnaws” (Z.I, ‘Tree’). Since contempt for the body is responsible for fracturing the wings of the hinterworldly, presumably the same is true for the libertine.

This reading can be confirmed if we reflect further on the resonances between the claim that spirit is also lust and the overall naturalist and reductionist tendency of the “awakened and knowing one” in “On the Despisers of the Body”, who has expressed the conviction that: “body I am through and through and nothing besides, and soul is just a word for something on the body” (Z.I, ‘Despisers’). For the knowing person, the conceptual categories of the soul, such as “spirit”, “ego”, and the like, are really epiphenomenal manifestations of the body, and its instruments and tools, for, as Zarathustra puts it, “the creative body created spirit for itself as the hand of its will” (Ibid.). The initial reductionist remark of the “awakened one who knows”, however, is actually contraposed to the child’s claim that: “body am I and soul”; which was followed by Zarathustra’s rhetorical question: “And why should one not speak like children?” (Ibid.). The question invites readers to endorse the child’s perspective, making it ambiguous whether Zarathustra really means to wholeheartedly sanction the beliefs of the awakened and knowing person. This suspicion is compounded by the fact that, as we know from an earlier speech, the child is the ultimate transformation of the spirit in its path to liberation and self-overcoming (Z.I, ‘Metamorphoses’). Our reflections on the plight of the noble youngster throw some unexpected light on this situation (which has been the subject of some debate in the literature)<sup>4</sup> and confirm that Zarathustra is in fact aligning himself with the child’s position. For consider that the metaphor of the broken wings that was mentioned in conjunction with the impulse to despise the body, contrasts with the metamorphosed child-spirit and its fully-abled “butterfly wings” that’s the subject of “On the Three Metamorphoses”.

If Zarathustra is endorsing the child’s position, then his contraposing it to the remark of the one who is “awake and knows” is presumably meant to signal that this latter character is in danger

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<sup>4</sup> Gerhardt (2006); Riccardi (2015); Daigle (2011).

of becoming one of those despisers of the body that are the real subject matter of his speech, if he has not already become one. Indeed, some of the language in Zarathustra's speech appears to indicate that the knowing person is on the verge of despising his body. Take this way of addressing the knowing person: "Your self laughs at your ego and its proud leaps. 'What are these leaps and flights of thought to me?' It says to itself" (Z.I, 'Despisers'). It's hard not to hear in this laughter, a *jester-like contempt*, an impulse to *humiliate* the pride of the ego (also that of his "spirit" and "sense" that had been called "vain"), which—by the knowing one's own admission—is just the body itself, hence, *an impulse of the body to despise itself*. My suggestion is not that the language confirms that the awakened one despises his body, but that it shows that he is already well on his way to doing so. Another point to consider is that, in Zarathustra's universe, being "awake" is not univocally positive. Among the reasons that Zarathustra singles to explain the noble youngster's disgust and weariness at his own climbing, is the fact that his seeking has made him "sleep-deprived and over-awake" (Z.I, 'Tree'). Later, in the soothsayer's divination we'll encounter a similar idea: "we have already become too weary to die", the soothsayer will say, "*now we continue to wake and we live on—in burial chambers!*" (Z.II, 'Soothsayer'; emphasis added). Being awake is, thus, not necessarily a blessing for the "one who knows", and Zarathustra's seeming endorsement of the child's position might be read as implying that—to fulfill the self's longstanding desire to "create beyond itself"—the creative body better adopt the *daydreaming* attitude of the child who, in truly transfigured fashion, turns the spirit, not so much into the hands, as into *the wings of his will* (Z.I, 'Despisers'). The lesson seems to be that we can avoid turning Zarathustra's ideal of superhumanity into a destructive mockery of itself only when we learn to dream in active mode, while awake, and *spiritualize our body* by giving it wings.

### 3. Eternal Recurrence and the Will's Liberation

Let this suffice to demonstrate the book's concern with alerting the reader to the dangers of turning Zarathustra's superhuman ideal into a buffoonish caricature of itself. Given these repeated warnings, it's not surprising that critics of the modern transhumanist project have argued that transhumanists fall prey to the very dangers Zarathustra worries about and instantiate false transcendences.

Both Babich (2017) and Ansell-Pearson (1997), for instance, suggest that modern transhumanism is a form of the ascetic ideal, which Nietzsche considers inimical to life insofar as it seeks to produce an “improved humanity” that’s really no more than a weakened and flattened out version of ourselves (GM III.21). Babich, moreover, calls attention to the fact that there are oppressive, totalitarian and oligarchic tendencies animating much of the transhumanist movement (Babich 2017: 109-112). Following similar lines of reasoning, both Tuncel and Woodward, argue that, by seeking to eliminate suffering, transhumanism alienates itself from any recognizable Nietzschean project of transcendence which will necessarily include pain and suffering as essential components (Tuncel 2017b: 226-9; Woodward 2017: 239-40). Yet others, like Skowron, attempt to show that the transhumanist ideals of developing a happy, healthy and—if possible—immortal life, are ones that Nietzsche more readily equates with the Last Man and, certainly, not of the sort that the superhuman would instantiate (Skowron 2013: 258-9; 270-3). Even those, like Bamford, who adopt more neutral, perhaps even favorable, positions with respect to technological enhancement, raise concerns about the values animating much of these efforts. For Nietzsche, traditional morality is likely to stupefy not promote the self-overcoming of humanity. Thus, Bamford suggests that transhumanists would benefit from taking more seriously Nietzsche’s critique of the morality of compassion that seems to frame most of their assumptions about what type of moral enhancements ought to be pursued (Bamford 2017: 215-18).

I broadly agree with much of what these and other commentators have said concerning the relation between Nietzsche’s philosophy and contemporary transhumanism. However, I also agree with some things Sorgner says in reply to critics. Sorgner correctly notes that there are no necessary connections between transhumanism and the kind of problematic positions with which these interpreters appear to want to saddle the movement (Sorgner 2017c: 141; 150-154). In fact, there’s a rich debate concerning the aims and methods, as well as the general political and ethical orientation of transhumanism.<sup>5</sup> If there’s something that unites this diversity of views, it’s the idea that we should employ technology to break the limits of our humanity and significantly alter our lives. Beyond this very general statement of intent, however, participants in the movement answer the question of how to carry out their mission in accordance with the overarching narratives they respectively favor, concerning what human beings should become and what type of life it’s best to

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<sup>5</sup> Ranisch and Sorgner (2014) discuss some of these issues.

lead. Still, as Sorgner points out, there may be some general tendencies that are discernible. For instance, most transhumanists appear to be naturalists, who reject metaphysical dualisms and uphold a strict this-worldly understanding of reality in which minds are thoroughly embodied. Sorgner often uses these perceived commonalities to defend his own version of Nietzschean transhumanism against criticisms. Accordingly, he argues that, since most transhumanists are naturalists, they cannot be in the grips of the ascetic ideal, which aims at otherworldly goals and aspires to an immaterial personal immortality that's simply incompatible with a naturalistic stance (Sorgner 2017c: 152, 157-8; 2017d: 251).

One could, of course, quibble with some of these claims. After all, from a Nietzschean point of view, whether or not transhumanism instantiates the ascetic ideal will depend wholly on what one understands this ideal to mean in Nietzsche's philosophy, which is a thorny question. Thus, instead of engaging in a tug-of-war for the right to call the transhumanist movement an ally or an enemy of Nietzschean philosophy, I believe that we would be better served by considering some of the ways in which Nietzsche's ideas could help advance the debate along more productive paths. And it's here, I think, that *Zarathustra* can prove useful to stir the discussion further in the right direction.

I began by calling attention to the manner in which Nietzsche's book alerts us to the difficulties involved in ensuring that the pursuit of the superhuman is genuine and salutary. Assuming that *Zarathustra's* worries are warranted, and that the transhumanist project of technological enhancement is not incompatible with the superhuman, then presumably the same difficulties he worries about would be operative in evaluating whether transhumanism constitutes an instance of false or sickly transcendence. Notice that here an appeal to perceived commonalities within the movement will simply not do. Even if naturalism is representative of transhumanism as a whole, on its own, this feature won't guarantee the purity of any transcendent effort. That was *Zarathustra's* point in warning the youngster about being overly awake and vigilant, in the manner of those knowing people who trust too much in their naturalistic beliefs about the materiality of their ego and the thoroughly embodied conceptions of their spirit. Those conceptions and beliefs can end up diverting our transcendent efforts into projects that, in reality, break the wings of our spirit and, instead of contributing to its growth beyond the human, merely turn it into a more

sophisticated version of its very human-all-too-human animal self: i.e. into a libertine. Libertinism, then, is actually a veiled, unconfessed *hatred of the body and the earth*, posing as if it were a celebration of those things; it attempts to pass abandonment of the spirit to its bodily pleasures for a love of earth and the body, when, in fact, it expresses a weary hatred of those things and their immanent, but also transcendent, possibilities.

This kind of danger should be especially salient to transhumanists who often seem moved by motives that resemble those that worry Zarathustra. Not only are some transhumanists, like Kurzweil (2005), constantly inveighing against what they perceive to be romanticized notions of death and our biological limits, but they seem eager to promote an enhancement that sounds just like technologically enabled libertinism. The goal is to furnish our animal self with more fanciful body-gadgets and abilities that will enable it to pursue its earthly pleasures in heretofore unimagined ways. Against such “crawling” libertinisms with broken wings masquerading as genuine transcendent projects, Nietzsche contraposes what, in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, he will call that “cheerful asceticism of an animal become fledged and divine, who rather than repose in life, floats above it” (GM III.8; translation modified). Such positive asceticism is *the great promise* that’s contained in the image of the genuine philosopher that’s capable of utilizing the most dangerous things, like all ascetic practices, not as bridges to nothingness, but as *bridges to independence and freedom* instead (GM II.16, III.7, 10-11). But how is this great promise to be realized, if as Nietzsche also suggests, until now genuine philosophers had to creep about in the multiple guises of that “gloomy caterpillar form” of the ascetic priest (GM III.10); so that even analytic, continental, naturalist, transcendental, or the like, types of modern scientists and scholars today continue—often in secret, unacknowledged ways—to incarnate the weary, overly awake, hating disposition toward life and the body that’s responsible for derailing all our efforts at growing beyond the animal and the human?

Fortunately for us—and perhaps also for transhumanists—Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra* is also concerned with providing a cure for these problems so as to ensure that our transcendent efforts don’t flounder. Indeed, by Nietzsche’s own admission, the story is constructed around the doctrine of eternal recurrence, which constitutes the basic conception of the book as a whole (EH, ‘Books’ Z 1). This doctrine is inextricably connected to the superhuman because it’s the thought that, when

confronted and affirmatively overcome, allows Zarathustra to evade the sort of weariness that could spoil his superhuman ideal in the ways described. Loeb is, therefore, correct when he complains about the transhumanist strategy of cherry-picking Nietzsche's thoughts while dismissing the philosophical connections that he himself established between those thoughts, on the hermeneutically uncharitable assumption that he must have been confused about their relation (Loeb 2017: 85-6).<sup>6</sup> If transhumanists find Nietzsche's philosophy sufficiently valuable to appropriate his idea of superhumanity and claim him as ally, then perhaps they should take more seriously Nietzsche's suggestion that eternal recurrence is an essential component of his philosophical project. Doing so should lead them to conclude, as Loeb suggests, "that eternal recurrence is actually *required* for there to be any transhumanist progress in the first place" (Loeb 2017: 91). My reasons for agreeing with Loeb's observation, however, are importantly different from the ones he gives. To appreciate this difference, let me describe in a little more detail the place that eternal recurrence occupies in Zarathustra's story.

Book two begins by warning its readers—yet again—about the dangers confronting Zarathustra's teaching of the superhuman, which his enemies threaten to distort (Z.II, 'Mirror'). Thus, in the following speech "On the Blessed Isles", Zarathustra tries to articulate again what he takes to be the importance of his teaching. Among the things we can surmise from his speech is that the superhuman is a conjecture that represents the highest fruit and version of the creative will. Since Zarathustra suggests in this chapter that his teachings are like ripe figs that fall from the tree to his friends and brothers, this is one of the ways in which Nietzsche connects Zarathustra's teaching of superhumanity both to his early philosophy and to the works that came after *Zarathustra*. In the *Untimely Meditations*, Nietzsche had suggested that the way to justify life was to pursue the cultural project of procreating the genius, "the highest fruit of life" (UM III.3). By the time we reach the *Genealogy*, the free personality that's the genius has metamorphosed into that of the sovereign individual, who is a master of a free will, and the *ripest fruit* that's promised as the final product of the cultural labor of humankind on itself; a fruit and a promise that's described as the paradoxical task that nature appears to have set itself in the case of the human animal, but that seems, as of yet, unfulfilled (see GM II.1 & 2). Zarathustra's attempt to redirect humankind toward the superhuman can be read as an attempt to truly fulfil the task and to finally realize the great

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Skowron 2013: 269-70.

promise of freedom that's contained, still in chrysalis form, in the creative will of the human being.<sup>7</sup> That creative will, after all, as Zarathustra insists, is a liberator and joy-bringer that can redeem us from the suffering that's required to chisel out of the stone of humankind the, for now, beautiful sleeping image of the superhuman child with butterfly wings (Z.II, 'Blessed').

As the events of book two unfold, however, we discover that the creative will cannot really fulfill its destiny of being liberator and redeemer, because it itself is a prisoner of the past, which it regards as an *unmovable stone* against which it gnashes its teeth in impotent melancholy (Z.II, 'Redemption'). In prior work, I've argued that the chapter "On Redemption" where this theme is developed, outlines two basic forms of the will's impotence: a *retrospective* and a *prospective* kind of impotence (Zamosc 2015b). The former usually manifests itself in the experience of so-called negative affective responses like guilt and shame. The recollection of past deeds that turned out badly, especially those in the execution of which we failed to live up to some moral expectation we had of ourselves, can be the source of great anguish that lingers on in the present and even threatens to spill over and blot our future. This is why Zarathustra claims that the most secret melancholy of the will is that it cannot break time or will backwards (Z.II, 'Redemption'). A reverse causation or a "backward-willing" seems like the perfect solution since it would allow us to alter the past and make it more agreeable to our conscience, by literally erasing or modifying our causal role in bringing about the events that now torment us. The second form of impotence mentioned consists in a prospective powerlessness that manifests itself in our incapacity to stop the rapacious passage of time and to prevent the present and the future from becoming the past. Thus, the melancholic misery we experience with this kind of impotence will express itself in things like longing and nostalgia for our bygone days, as well as in the anxious anticipation of aging, in which we expect to be subjected to the unrelentless process of going kerflooey; to say nothing of our fear at the prospect of that ultimate demise which will be our death. Here, again, a kind of backward-willing might seem like a perfect remedy insofar as it might "rewind the clock", so to speak, and reverse or stop the greedy advancement of time which appears to be robbing us of precious moments with every turn of the dial.

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<sup>7</sup> Acampora (2006) and Loeb (2006) argue against identifying the sovereign individual with Nietzsche's/Zarathustra's ideal. In Zamosc (2012), I defend the view that it is Nietzsche's ideal.

Since the perfect solution to both forms of impotence seems to lie outside its jurisdiction, given that it seems impossible to move the stone that's the past and change it by willing backwards, Zarathustra suggests that the will is forced to devise a different remedy for its misery, which quickly turns into anger. This remedy consists in venting its incapacity to change the past into punitive acts of vengeance against everything that's capable of suffering, including itself, in the hope that this might expiate the leaden feeling produced by the past and finally alleviate it. Zarathustra calls this solution a futile and insane "madness," because "no deed can be annihilated; how could it be undone through punishment?" (Ibid.).<sup>8</sup> Indeed, realizing that the past cannot be undone by producing harm, should lead us to conclude that our melancholic ill-will toward the past will never really stop weighing on us, save on that moment when we ourselves cease to be, at which point the solution would come too late and be most unwelcomed. It's perhaps for this reason that Zarathustra claims that the will's vindictive attitude against the past ultimately crystalizes in a "fable of madness" that recommends, as final solution, the attempt to transform the creative will into a "not-willing", on the assumption that willing itself is inherently evil and the source of all misery (Ibid.). This insane, nihilistic, will-denying solution is an expression of what we may call the "sinful conscience" that lies at the center of the ascetic ideal and of all ascetic religions, like Christianity and Buddhism, and that's also championed in Schopenhauer's pessimistic philosophy.

This nihilistic attitude had been introduced just moments before by the soothsayer who predicted that the earth was destined to become an infertile land populated by walking-dead humans who tout the fatalistic doctrine: "everything is empty, everything is the same, everything was" (Z.II, 'Soothsayer'). Thus, what stands in the way of Zarathustra's teaching of the superhuman is the very real threat that the future of humankind will get irretrievably lodged in the direction of these nihilistic attitudes and doctrines of will-denial that have their origin in the creative will's powerlessness with respect to the past. Eternal recurrence, then, is the thought that will allow Zarathustra to avoid this outcome and dislodge the will from its current trajectory towards the sinful, nihilistic denial of itself.<sup>9</sup> Importantly—given his concluding remarks—if eternal recurrence allows Zarathustra to redeem his creative will from its impotence with respect to the past, it must

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<sup>8</sup> Loeb thinks "madness" doesn't reveal what the will's powerlessness consist in (Loeb 2010: 178-9; n.9). But, since the will is susceptible to this "madness", presumably the solutions it affords indicate what's on the will's mind. On my reading: principally guilt/regret for past events it cannot alter. Cf. WS 323.

<sup>9</sup> In his convalescent speech Zarathustra relates eternal recurrence to the soothsayer's saying; and, in the next speech, he suggests that he liberated his soul by *strangling the strangler called sin* (Z.III, 'Longing'; 'Convalescent' 2).

do so by teaching it not just reconciliation with time but *something higher than all reconciliation*, which—Zarathustra implies—would be equivalent to teaching the will to will backwards (Z.II, ‘Redemption’).

#### 4. Love’s Backward-Willing

For Loeb, this something higher than all reconciliation is a new skill he calls prospective memory: the ability to actually will backwards by influencing the past from the vantage point of the present and the future (Loeb 2010: 173-206; 2017: 92-3). This ability requires the knowledge and truth of cosmological recurrence, in which every event will repeat itself in exactly the same order for all eternity, but—importantly—it doesn’t give Zarathustra the capacity to alter the past, since, by his own admission, the past is unchangeable (Loeb 2010: 178-9; 188-9). Still, Loeb insists that prospective memory constitutes a real power over time because it allows the will to *influence* the past’s determination of the present and impose its creative design on an open-ended future, thereby overcoming the soothsayer’s prophecy that everything will always be the same (2017: 91; 2010: 155). As I understand it, the idea is that, from its present moment, the will can implant memories into its past younger versions that will enable it to see itself as actually helping to produce those life-moments that it was indeed causally implicated in producing, particularly those moments that it wants eternally returned to it. On Loeb’s reading, this new recognition, that’s retroactively enabled from the present through subconscious mechanisms, lessens the creative will’s feeling of impotence toward the past, because it allows it to recognize what was done as done in that way and not otherwise, precisely *because of* its present creative willing (Loeb 2010: 179). Thus, Loeb suggest, backward-willing allows Zarathustra to become the artist creator of his own life by enabling him to *intentionally unify* the fragmented, accidental aspects of his past, making them necessary to his perfected future self (Loeb 2010: 189).

This is the aspect that’s most difficult to understand about Loeb’s insightful and highly thought-provoking reading, and—admittedly—I am not sure that I fully grasp how the past is supposed to be *influenced* by the present self’s new mnemonic power, where that influence is not to be understood in, what I take to be, the usual, straightforward sense of a causal power to alter events; in this case, to alter the events of the past. Regardless, given that Loeb admits that such a

retrospective influence cannot change the past, it seems to me that the solution it affords to the will's predicament—as outlined above—won't be fully satisfactory and might even make matters worse. In particular, I think that this kind of backward-willing doesn't really help the creative will to cope with its *retrospective powerlessness*. For, pace Loeb, the problem of retrospective powerlessness is not that the will cannot regard itself “as having now had any creative effect or influence on [its] past” (Loeb 2010: 179). Instead, the problem is that the will cannot really erase the causal contribution that it actually made on the past and that now has come back to torment it. At least, I think that this is the more natural way to read Zarathustra's suggestion that the will is “impotent against that which has been” and that “it is an evil spectator of everything past” (Z.II, ‘Redemption’; translation modified). What the will cannot do is stop seeing itself as evil contributor of what it has actually done.<sup>10</sup> Precisely its very real influence, back then, on the past having come to be what it already has become, is what the will feels bad about and would like to change. But what's already done cannot be undone. Notice that in the context of this problem, learning that the will has the ability to somehow influence its past actions from its present or future self by inserting subconscious messages into its past self's mind through its newly discovered mnemonic power, will simply add insult to injury. Our dissatisfaction with our past actions would become more tormenting, if we became aware of our ability to send ourselves messages into that past in order to issue proper warnings and advices to our older selves. After all, whatever advice that ability may be able to encode into the past is—by hypothesis—*causally ineffective* in altering the regrettable outcome that now torments us; our ability to perceive the presence of this causally ineffectual advice would only serve to twist the knife that's already stabbing us.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> For Nietzsche, evil is associated with the production of harm (GM I.10-11). This indicates that the will's recollection of the past is hurtful, which normally signals that guilt or regret is involved. This explains why “sinfulness” (the real target of Nietzsche's critique; Zamosc 2012) will quickly become the main issue.

<sup>11</sup> Loeb would say that Zarathustra's present power to influence the past ensures that he doesn't feel guilty about his past or wants to change it, because he has perfected his life by introducing unity and meaning into it, so there's no knife that's stabbing him. But if—in the moment he is encountering eternal recurrence—Zarathustra doesn't experience retrospective powerlessness in the form of guilt, then he is not really mirroring the will's problem with the past—as outlined above—, and his overcoming of eternal recurrence will not help the human will deal with its guilt and overcome its impotence. If, on the other hand, Zarathustra experiences guilt when he encounters eternal recurrence, then the question is how backward-willing unity into his life without altering or changing the cause of the guilt he is feeling (i.e. the actual past he now regrets), would nonetheless allow him to get rid of that guilt (i.e. to now stop feeling it). One advantage of the solution I'll offer below consists in recognizing that guilt is not eradicated at all, precisely because the past which causes it is not being altered. Instead, the guilt is overcome or surpassed by love, which allows the will to continue feeling guilty but, at the same time, to move forward from its guilt in an affirmative manner (i.e. to not transform guilt into sin).

Despite my problem with Loeb's interpretation of what backward-willing entails, I think that he is correct in arguing that it cannot involve altering the past, as some commentators assume.<sup>12</sup> He is also right in registering dissatisfaction with interpretations, such as that of Nehamas (1985: 160), that see backward-willing as a kind of metaphorical or psychological operation whereby one retrospectively *re-describes* one's past in an affirming manner, thereby "changing" it so that it becomes new and different from what it was (Loeb 2010: 187-8).<sup>13</sup> As Loeb notes, Zarathustra denies that the past can be changed *in any way*. Thus, we need to understand backward-willing in a manner that doesn't entail any actual alteration of the past whether metaphorically or literally. In my view, *love* is the way out of this predicament.

The kind of volitional engagement that's involved in love could help us understand how to relate to something, like the past, in new, intentionally rich ways without needing to change it. Love involves a conative form of valuation for the beloved that can motivate us to do all sorts of things, but that need not motivate us to do anything in particular: we can care for the thing we love, or we can actively seek to promote its interests, but we can also just be in awe of it, without doing anything other than valuing it for what it is. Importantly, the objects of our love can be things we don't have to endorse blankly or wholeheartedly. You can deeply love members of your family that you can't stand to be in the same room with, because of their political views, or their religious values, or what have you. Nietzsche himself, who had to personally contend with this sort of thing, since he had a sister and a mother that he couldn't stand, writes in *The Gay Science* that one shouldn't assume that people who had to experience severe pain and illness in their lives are necessarily incapable of being well-disposed toward life for: "love of life is still possible—only one loves differently. It is like the love for a woman who gives us doubts" (GS, Preface.3: p.7). A sentiment that's made even more poignant in Zarathustra's confession that: "At bottom I love only life—and verily, most when I hate it!" (Z.II, 'Dance').<sup>14</sup>

Trying to make sense of these phenomenological aspects of love, Velleman argues that what's essential to love is that "it disarms our emotional defenses toward an object in response to

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<sup>12</sup> E.g. Gooding-Williams, 2001: 219-268; Pippin, 1988: 55; Lampert, 1986: 148.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Higgins 1987: 187-88; Clark 1990: 255-60; White 1997: 114-5; Strong 2000: 235-37; Richardson 2006: 224-225.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Z.III, 'Longing'; Z.I, 'Women'; BGE 216.

its incomparable value as a self-existent end” (Velleman 2006: 99). It strikes me that this definition captures something important that might help us understand why love could serve as model for the kind of backward-willing that Zarathustra claims to have learned through his experience of eternal recurrence. If the past were to become the object of our love, then what we would love would be a self-existent end, one that’s not to be brought about or produced by our willing since it already is. Thus, when we love the past, we don’t really seek to change it. Yet, in being as it is and unchangeable, the past—by commanding our loving attention—makes us vulnerable, in the sense of lowering our emotional defenses with respect to it, so that we can be affected by it in new ways that can unleash in us different motivational responses. A loving disposition toward the past is a willing, and a willingness, to allow oneself to be emotionally touched and motivationally aroused by whatever commands our loving affection for the past.

Let me now integrate these considerations into the problem of liberating the creative will from its impotent and hateful regard for the past. My claim is that the thing that’s higher than all reconciliation with time and that Zarathustra learns through his encounter with eternal recurrence is love for the past. The creative will needs to liberate itself from its hatred of the past that threatens to break its wings and that weighs it down, making it crawl around, soiling what it gnaws with gnashing teeth of impotence. Indeed, this hatred has become a spirit of revenge (and a spirit of gravity) that now prevents the will from moving forward, anchoring it—in impotent regard—to the past, and tempting it to transform itself into a not-willing-anymore. Transmuting this hatred into love allows the creative will to relate itself to the past (hence, to will backwards) with different eyes, releasing it from its anchor of hatred, and enabling it to fly-off into the future with newly restored wings. In my view, love of the past is a kind of backward-willing with a forward intent. The thing in the past that lowers our emotional defenses, which had been raised by our hatred, is the thing that then propels us forward, or at the very least, that we carry forward as we get on with our lives. This “carrying forward” will continue to have the past in sight, or at least *that in it which commands our love*. What’s interesting about this emotional alchemy of transmuting hatred into love is that developing a loving disposition to the past need not imply that one stops hating it. What it does imply is that one’s hatred has been overcome by one’s love, which now extends itself over the past in a sufficiently ample emotional tent to be able to encompass and surpass one’s hatred through a surfeit of positive emotion. The reason this is possible is that what commands one’s love of the

past—propelling one forward into the future—need not be the same thing that makes one hate the past.

I haven't really said what about the past commands our love, nor have I explained how eternal recurrence could be implicated in our falling in love with it. Although here I cannot fully delve into this question, let me conclude this section by registering where I think the answer lies. In my preliminary approximation to the very thorny problem of eternal recurrence, I argued that it can be understood as a parable about the (pro)creative will itself, the will to power, which is the fundamental engine of all life that's constantly resurrected and returns to its self-same life in all its transitory transformations through the stream of time and becoming (Zamosc 2015b).<sup>15</sup> Among the things that confrontation with this thought teaches Zarathustra is that the human being will never cease to be a mere transit or *bridge*, destined to find itself still human-all-too-human in all its attempts at growing “high beyond humans and animals” (Z.I, ‘Tree’; Z.III, ‘Convalescent’ 2). But, while initially this thought might make us weary and afraid that all our creative efforts are in vain, it can also—when properly incorporated into our lives—teach us to love our transitional destiny of forever remaining mere bridges to the superhuman. If it does, what we would've learned to love, through this process, is the creative will to power itself, of which we are self-conscious surrogates while we remain in existence. Thus, on my reading, love of the past is really love of what in the past was creative will to power, which will recur eternally in the stream of time.

Since the will to power is just the engine of all life, love of the past is also equivalent to love of life; love of that aspect in the past that's not gone because it's essential and unburiable—because, as Nietzsche puts it, referring to his own past in *Eccce Homo*, “whatever was life in it has been saved, is immortal” (EH, ‘Epigraph’; translation modified). This love liberates the creative will from its powerlessness with respect to the past, affording it the freedom to fulfill its redemptive function, which Zarathustra at one point describes thus: “All ‘it was’ is a fragment, a riddle, a grisly accident—until the creating will says to it: ‘But thus I willed it’. Until the creative will says to it: ‘But thus I will it! Thus shall I will it!’” (Z.II, ‘Redemption’; translation modified). What I interpret the

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<sup>15</sup> My solution to the problem of backward willing doesn't depend on the truth of cosmological recurrence because love of life is achieved by thinking about what's true in the parable, namely, that what literally recurs eternally the same is the operations of the will to power itself, rather than its particular expressions which are finite and, perhaps, unrepeatable. Still, my interpretation can incorporate desire for this latter kind of cosmological recurrence as *confirmation* that one has indeed already achieved love of life (GS 341).

will to will here, in these three temporal modes of past, present, and future, is *itself: its creative activity of being a (pro)creative will*. Of course, in willing its creative activity and self across and through time, the will is subject to the accidental nature of becoming, which can manifest itself in the fact that the particulars of its creative activity may be something that it could come to regret. We don't have absolute control of our creative willing, and this means that we might feel dissatisfied by its results. By reflecting on what's eternal in its own nature (by thinking through the thought of eternal recurrence) the creative will can learn to achieve reconciliation with its shortcomings, to let go of the past; but it can also achieve something higher than all "letting go", namely *love*, which allows it to overcome its past shortcomings by carrying forward that which is still lovable in them: itself.

Love of the past or love of life is, therefore, a form of self-love.<sup>16</sup> But, importantly, it's not a narrowly egoistic one. What one loves, after all, is that aspect of oneself that's also in everything else that is, or was, or will be in existence. Moreover, because human beings are self-conscious surrogates of the creative will to power, in our particular case our self-love involves the recognition of this self-conscious surrogacy, this *humanity*, in each other. Through this love, then, we learn that we are not alone.<sup>17</sup> In my view, this is why Zarathustra uses the metaphor of the "rainbow bridge" in his convalescent speech when referring to eternal recurrence and the love of life it enables. This theme had been prefigured by some of Zarathustra's earlier remarks. In the Prologue he had said: "I shall join the creators, the harvesters the celebrators: I shall show them the rainbow and all the steps to the superhuman" (Z.I, 'Prologue' 9; translation modified); and in an important moment in the second book we had read: "For *that mankind be redeemed from revenge*: that to me is the bridge to the highest hope and a rainbow after long thunderstorms" (Z.I, 'Tarantulas'). Now convalescing, after confronting eternal recurrence, he tells his animals that each human being is a world in itself and that we all seem eternally separated from each other, despite the fact that, in reality, we are also most similar to each other. The gap that separates us, then, is really tiny and yet the most difficult to bridge. We can, nonetheless, bridge this gap with the help of Zarathustra's poetic words that seek to communicate his newly learned love of life. Hence his claim that "with

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<sup>16</sup> It heeds, thereby, Zarathustra's teaching that "whoever wants to become light and a bird must love himself"; a lesson that, significantly—given the issue of moving the *unmovable stone* that's the past—, follows the claim that "whoever one day teaches humans to fly, will have shifted all boundary stones" (Z III, 'Gravity' 2).

<sup>17</sup> This love enables, then, Zarathustra's neighborly love which consists in loving your neighbor as you love yourself (Z.III, 'Virtue' 3).

sounds our love dances on colorful rainbows” (Z.III, ‘Convalescent’ 2). The love of life that we learn through eternal recurrence is an ecumenical love that connects us to each other, through its rainbow bridges, by means of the mutual recognition that it commands in us of what’s the same in all of us: the creative will itself and its ability to self-overcome. By connecting us to each other, this love enables us to pursue the ideal of the superhuman: i.e., the ennoblement and elevation of that aspect of ourselves that’s unburiable, even if we ourselves are not. We’ll perish, but our love will live on in others who, inspired and invigorated by our efforts, can keep on pushing, keep on climbing, high above the human and the animal.<sup>18</sup>

## 5. Conclusion: Humanity’s Murmuration

The association of rainbow bridges to eternal recurrence is accompanied by the idea that a kind of artistic engineering is required to build these ties of humanly and superhumanly love. Zarathustra’s poetic words concerning eternal recurrence, and the sounds of love with which he hopes to teach us how to dance on the tightrope that hangs over the abyss of our deep woe, are *illusory* and *lying* words (Z.III, ‘Convalescent’ 2).<sup>19</sup> With these artistic instruments a kind of performative experience is built into the book, so that—as commentators have noted—Zarathustra enacts the experience of thinking through and incorporating eternal recurrence himself. I’ll follow those who suggest that these various stylistic and artistic tropes have some kind of didactic function.<sup>20</sup> Nietzsche intended *Zarathustra* as a propaedeutic to the art of loving life. The artistic elements are there to make Zarathustra’s teachings, particularly, that of eternal recurrence, the object of an active willing on the part of the reader, rather than a mere passive exercise of detached intellectual spectatorship. Accordingly—and against Stegmaier’s (2013) suggestion that they are meant to liberate the teacher—the poetic, sometimes apparently contradictory, aspects of the book liberate *the learner* by challenging him to appropriate the book’s lessons with his body *and soul*.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Nietzsche praises solitude and is critical of herd mentality, but his goal always includes building a higher, nobler community (Z.I. ‘Bestowing’ 2; Cf. UM III.5, UM IV.4). While love of humanity facilitates that project, it shouldn’t be confused with impotent Christian love of humanity (BGE 104; Z.I, ‘Neighbor’; GM I.8, 14-15). The Nietzschean love of humanity is *for the sake of the superhuman*, which is the “higher tendency” that gives this love the “subtlety and ambergris” that will allow us to fly higher than any person has ever flown (BGE 60).

<sup>19</sup> Although this touches on the thorny issue of falsification, I’ll bracket the problem and focus instead on how the artistic elements mentioned advance *Zarathustra*’ pedagogical function. Hatab (2018) tries to articulate a positive notion of falsification in *Zarathustra*.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Stegmaier 2013; Skowron 2004.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Zamosc 2015a: 265-6, n.42

Nietzsche considered *Zarathustra* his most important book because with it he wanted to gift humankind the type of artistic experience that, in his youth, he had argued Greek tragedy afforded its audiences: a transfiguring experience that, once incorporated, injects you back into the world with a renewed sense of purpose; the purpose of augmenting nature by attempting to live an ennobled existence that can embellish not just your own egoistic life, but humankind itself. The thought of eternal recurrence figures prominently in this pedagogical exercise and organizes the book as a whole.

Thus, on my view, eternal recurrence is required for there to be any transhumanist progress, not because this doctrine teaches us the type of control over time that would be needed to take charge of our own evolutionary process—as Loeb believes (Loeb 2017: 95-6)—but, rather, because it teaches us the kind of love for our humanity that will enable us to pursue its highest hope: the ideal of the superhuman. To learn this sort of love is to make ourselves vulnerable to the fact that we can't have absolute control over the contingencies of nature; it's to reconcile ourselves to the notion that our efforts at self-overcoming might fall prey to the vicissitudes of time and becoming in such a way that we might come to regret them.<sup>22</sup> But through our love, we can achieve something higher than all reconciliation by learning to move on and carry forward the commanding affection we have for the free creative will that we incarnate and that's the same in all of us. This love teaches us to take joy and comfort in human freedom itself and its effects, even its tragic ones. While our love doesn't eradicate our hatred for the past, it provides a force field that keeps the gnawing worm of guilt, sin, and resentment from spoiling the fruit of our volitional faculties, so that, like the convalescent Zarathustra after his encounter with eternal recurrence, we too can enjoy the pleasant smell of the rosy apple of our creative freedom (Z.III, 'Convalescent' 2; 'Longing').

Learning this kind of love seems especially urgent for a movement like the transhumanist, which often seems on the brink of being consumed by its darker side. Some of the most visible voices within transhumanism are libertarian ideologues that subscribe to an exacerbated egocentric ethics, in which anything that stands in the way of their narrow vision of personal aggrandizement

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<sup>22</sup> This love promotes the ethical program of thinking mortal thoughts that Nussbaum recommends as corrective against godlike transhumanism (Nussbaum 1990: 389).

through technologically enabled godlike capabilities ought to be destroyed. Against this kind of unfettered individualism and its myopic negative freedoms, Zarathustra teaches the love that doesn't free us from intervention by others, but actually opens us up to each other's hearts, connecting us through our mutual recognition of what's eternal, universal, and the same in all of us: the self-conscious, intentional, creative will to power itself. This uniting and unifying love doesn't just make us hostage to fortune, but liberates us from it, by allowing us to recognize that we are not alone. It's the kind of love with which we can grow the spiritual wings needed to dance in that dance floor for the divine dice throws of time and becoming that Zarathustra calls the sky-chance, and also the sky-innocence, the sky-mischief (Z.III, 'Sunrise').

And here I detect an important disanalogy between the educational experience that *Zarathustra* affords, and technological interventions like those envisioned by transhumanists. Genuine pedagogical interventions of the kind that *Zarathustra* aspires to be are liberatory in the sense that they require the active participation of the learner, who must freely incorporate the lessons that are imparted to him through his own efforts, thereby intensifying the very freedom that's being summoned to accomplish this learning. The same need not be true of all technological interventions. Taking a pill can, of course, sometimes enhance our freedom, when it helps remove psychological or physiological barriers to it. But it can also rob us of our sense of freedom by making us feel that we have surrendered it to an external force. To me this danger looms somewhat more menacingly in the case of love.<sup>23</sup> Realizing that our love is not really sustained by our own efforts but is instead the product of a pill, or some other technological device, might raise the suspicion that our love is not genuine but artificially produced. There's thus an advantage in pursuing the pedagogical program Nietzsche intended in writing *Zarathustra*. By incorporating the book's lessons, we can truly enhance our sense of freedom instead of diminishing it. We can also learn to love life in a way that can more reliably rescue us from the spirit of revenge that threatens to consume us, even if we are unaware of it. For, at the same time that this love makes us vulnerable to time and to each other, it also connects us and gives us the strength needed to continue climbing in the direction of the superhuman in the knowledge that, despite our limitations, our efforts will live on in the loving regard of those that will succeed us.

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<sup>23</sup> Nyholm (2015) usefully discusses some of the ways in which enhancement-sustained love attachments can be less desirable than the intrinsic good of love.

Murmuration is that well-known phenomenon by means of which a flock of birds is able to fly through the sky in swooping, intricate, ever-changing, and harmonious patterns. Nietzsche's hope in writing *Zarathustra* was to create an artistic work of joyful science and philosophy that could free us to pursue the superhuman ideal that gives a new meaning and direction to the earth, by teaching us the commanding love that will coordinate the murmuration of our hearts.<sup>24</sup>

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