

NIETZSCHE'S FUNCTIONAL DISAGREEMENT WITH STOICISM: ETERNAL RECURRENCE, ETHICAL NATURALISM, AND TELEOLOGY

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Abstract

Several scholars align Nietzsche's philosophy with Stoicism because of their naturalist approaches to ethics and doctrines of eternal recurrence. Yet this alignment is difficult to reconcile with Nietzsche's criticisms of Stoicism's ethical ideal of living according to nature by dispassionately accepting fate—so much so that some conclude that Nietzsche's rebuke of Stoicism undermines his own philosophical project. I argue that affinities between Nietzsche and Stoicism belie deeper disagreement about teleology, which, in turn, yields different understandings of nature and human flourishing, so that Nietzsche's objections to Stoicism support his commitments to ethical naturalism and to affirming life's eternal recurrence.

Keywords: Nietzsche, Stoicism, eternal recurrence, ethical naturalism, teleology, passion

In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche situates his idea of eternal recurrence within the history of philosophy:

The doctrine of the “eternal return,” which is to say the unconditional and infinitely repeated cycle of all things—this is Zarathustra's doctrine, but ultimately it is nothing Heraclitus couldn't have said too. At least the Stoics have traces of it, and they have inherited almost all of their fundamental ideas from Heraclitus. (EH, *Birth of Tragedy*, 3)¹

These remarks show why scholars seek to illuminate Nietzsche's eternal recurrence by comparing it to the Stoic doctrine of the same name. Nuño Nabias, for example, writes that “the Eternal Recurrence

was already envisaged in Antiquity, by none other than the school of the Portico. . . . What Nietzsche had considered his supreme idea can be understood . . . as the conclusion of a ‘Stoic Programme’” (2006, 93). Other scholars are less adamant. Michael Ure, for example, claims that Nietzsche’s “eternal recurrence [is] implicitly indebted to and express[es] a type of Stoicism” (2016, 296), and Thomas Brobjer merely finds “a close kinship with Stoic thinking” in Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence (2003, 429). Such variations notwithstanding, the tendency to align Nietzsche’s eternal return with the Stoic doctrine of cyclical recurrence is common (see Magnus 1978, 57; Hadot 2001, 144–45; Elveton 2004, 194; Groff 2004, 159; Long 2006, 281–82; Ure 2009, 73–75). Bolstering this alignment is the fact that Nietzsche and the Stoics share broadly naturalist approaches to ethics, seeking to make ethics consonant with our best understanding of nature (see Groff 2004, 142, 152; Nabias 2006, 85–86; Armstrong 2013, 7; Mollison 2019, 96). The coupling of these striking similarities invites the conclusion that, for Nietzsche and the Stoics, the eternal recurrence promotes a shared ethical aspiration to live according to nature.

Problems emerge, however, because Nietzsche denounces Stoicism’s ethical ideal in a well-known passage of *Beyond Good and Evil*: “So you want to *live* ‘according to nature?’ Oh, you noble Stoics, what a fraud is in this phrase! . . . Living—isn’t that wanting specifically to be something other than this nature?” (BGE 9). This criticism of Stoicism’s aspiration to live according to nature is hard to reconcile with Nietzsche’s own attempt “to translate humanity back into nature” (BGE 230; see also GS 109). The tension between these positions leads Nabias to conclude that “in the moment that [Nietzsche] jeers at the Stoic ideal of complete absorption of human will in the cosmic dynamism of each happening, he betrays the basis of his own ethic of immanence” (2006, 86; see also 97). When Nietzsche castigates Stoicism for its project of living according to nature, he seems to undermine his own naturalist approach to ethics.

Another problem is that Nietzsche censures Stoic therapy for failing to value passion and suffering. *The Gay Science* chastises those who have “*lied* to us about the unhappiness of passionate people” and then asks whether life is “really so painful and burdensome that it would be advantageous for us to trade it for a fossilized Stoic way of life?” (GS 326). Nietzsche also insists that suffering can be valuable, that “the path to one’s own heaven always leads through the voluptuousness of own’s own hell” (GS 338), thus distancing himself from Stoicism by celebrating passion and valuing suffering. Yet it is unclear how these views cohere with Nietzsche’s goal of affirming life’s eternal recurrence, as this seems to require a dispassionate acceptance of misfortune. This incongruity leads Ure to conclude that “Nietzsche cannot consistently

uphold his version of the eternal recurrence if he thinks that the passions are integral to the good life” because “we can only succeed in willing the eternal recurrence of the same by adopting precisely the Stoic attitude of indifference” that Nietzsche rejects (2009, 79–80; see also Ure 2016, 296). Nietzsche’s criticism of Stoicism also seems to undermine his ethical aspiration of affirming the eternal recurrence.

I argue that resemblances between Nietzsche’s and Stoicism’s doctrines of eternal recurrence, as well as affinities between their naturalistic ethical approaches, belie deeper disagreement about teleology. Others have noted this disagreement in passing (Hadot 2001, 145; Elveton 2004, 193–95; Groff 2004, 152; Sellars 2006, 167; Ure 2009, 75; Rutherford 2011, 520) but have not appreciated its full force.² Whereas the Stoic commitment to teleology leads both to understanding nature as an organic unity governed by divine rationality and also to defining virtue as fulfilling a final human aim of rational self-discipline, denial of teleology leads Nietzsche to understand nature as purposeless and to consider passion necessary for greatness. Disagreement about matters of teleology thus constrains similarities between Nietzsche and the Stoics on eternal recurrence, revealing differences in the cosmological outlooks that they ask us to accept and in the ethical aims that they seek to promote. Moreover, attending to this teleological disagreement allows us to avoid concluding that Nietzsche undermines his own ethical project by criticizing Stoicism.

After examining the teleological underpinnings of Stoic cosmology and ethics to show how their cosmological doctrine of eternal recurrence promotes Stoicism’s ethical aim, I’ll discuss how Nietzsche’s denial of teleology informs his cosmology and ethics and how affirming the eternal recurrence supports the aim of his ethics. As for Nietzsche’s consistency with Stoicism on living according to nature and promoting passion and suffering, what solves these two problems is attending to his nonteleological notions of nature and of human flourishing. I conclude that Nietzsche’s disagreement with the Stoics about teleology restricts affinities between their naturalist ethical doctrines and their doctrines of eternal recurrence. Unlike the Stoics, Nietzsche challenges us to live so passionately that suffering and a lack of transcendent purpose cease to be objections to affirming life’s eternal recurrence.

1. STOICISM’S TELEOLOGICAL NATURALISM

1.1 Stoicism’s Teleological Cosmology

Stoic cosmology occupied a middle ground between Aristotelian and Epicurean worldviews. Like Aristotle, the Stoics understood nature as ordered by a teleological principle of divine rationality (Long and Sedley

1987, 200).³ They expressed this teleological principle in a ubiquitous causal order and called it “fate” (Long and Sedley 1987, 331, 340–43; Gould 1974, 17–18). Like Epicureans, however, they maintained that causal relations occur only among bodies. From their view of fate followed a kind of materialism, so that even gods and souls are corporeal (Long and Sedley 1987, 273–74; Long 2006, 258–59). Seeking this middle ground between Aristotelian teleology and Epicurean materialism led Stoics to understand the cosmos as biological or organic and to put divine reason in the same relation with the world that souls have with bodies (Long 2006, 259).

Although many ancient thinkers mentioned a great year when celestial bodies return to their initial positions, the Stoics were unique in associating this event with global conflagration (*ekpurôsis*: Long 2006, 263–64). One background for their ekpyrotic cosmology was a teaching of Heraclitus—that the origin (*archê*) of everything is fire (White 2003, 133–34; Long 2006, 267–68). But Stoics worked out their conception of fire as a first principle in much more detail. All physical processes take place between two extreme states: fire condenses matter to *produce* the world’s various elements, but then it *consumes* these elements completely in a periodic conflagration (Long 2006, 265–66). Finding it hard to reconcile observations of constant change and decay with Aristotle’s claim that the world has no beginning, Stoics sought to explain changes in the world by situating them between extreme states of a cosmic fire that never stops burning but increases and diminishes locally and periodically. But by interpreting the undying fire as a rational (*logikos*) first principle, Stoics also explained natural order and design better than Epicureans, who denied that the world is governed by a rational aim or end (*telos*).

If Stoics were right about world conflagration, a question remained: why does the *same* world recur after each ekpyrosis? Heraclitus supplied the makings of an answer in fragments that treat fire not merely as a physical element but also as an active first principle that precedes and governs the world of elements (White 2003, 129–34; Long 2006, 268). Since fire is identical with divine reason (Sandbach 1989, 73–74), it is not only a ubiquitous causal principle immanent in the world but also a *transcendent* principle that precedes and produces the world (White 2003, 137–38; Long 2006, 273–74). The same reasons (eternal existence, endless good, and unlimited power) that explain why divinity produces the world in the first place ensure that exactly the same world recurs after each conflagration (Long and Sedley 1987, 311–12). The Stoic commitment to eternal divine rationality in a framework of causal determinism entails the recurrence of exactly this world and no other.

1.2 Stoicism's Naturalist Ethics

The teleology in Stoic cosmology also informed the school's ethics. Within a cosmic organic unity, each part of nature functions to serve the whole, and flourishing is the fulfillment of this functioning (Long and Sedley 1987, 364–68). Specifically human flourishing, or virtue, is the perfecting of reason (*logos*), the functioning specific to humans among nondivine beings (Long and Sedley 1987, 383–85). Their own flourishing requires humans to understand nature's rational order as well as humanity's place in it and to live according to this understanding by accepting only accurate impressions, desiring only what is rational, and acting only on rational desires.

Stoicism is famous for holding that virtue is the *only* good and that virtue is *entirely* self-sufficient (Long and Sedley 1987, 357–59; Lesses 1989, 96–102; Brennan 2003, 263–64). Stoics consider virtue the only good because, unlike such alleged goods as wealth or fame, which might be abused, virtue always benefits the virtuous person. Virtue is self-sufficient because nothing can *force* assent to misleading impressions, to desires unbecoming human nature, or to actions in pursuit of irrational desires. Should forces outside human control impede the life of reason, reason itself remains unaffected. This view of virtue as unconditioned, unconstrained, and uniquely good led Stoics to classify everything other than virtue as an “indifferent” (*adiaphoron*) that lacks value. Granted, some adiaphora, like health or wealth are *preferable* to others, but even such preferred objects of action are neither necessary for virtue nor constitutive of it.⁴

Treating virtue as the *only* good explains the Stoic demand that we *fully* extirpate the passions. In their monistic psychology, the soul is *entirely* rational, and *all* motivations are kinds of belief or judgment (Long and Sedley 1987, 321–22). In this framework, passions are cognitive, evaluative judgments (Long and Sedley 1987, 420–23; Brennan 2003, 269–74). More specifically, they are evaluative judgements that mistake an indifferent for an object which is virtuous or is needed for virtue (Long and Sedley 1987, 420; Brennan 2003, 264). Passionate judgements harm the soul immediately, making it less rational by valuing things other than reason. Hence, the Stoic demand that passions be extirpated completely. The virtuous person—the sage—is dispassionate but also the happiest person, trusting an internal and immutable source of value (Long and Sedley 1987, 357–59). While Stoics maintained a formidably high standard for sagehood, they sometimes put Socrates forward as approximately a sage because even misfortune as extreme as a death sentence did not harm his rational self-discipline.

1.3 Eternal Recurrence and Stoic Ethics

The Stoics did not understand only cosmology on a biological model. As Diogenes Laertius reports, they understood philosophy itself in such terms—with logic as the bones and sinews, ethics as the flesh, and cosmology as the soul of the philosophical animal (DL VII 40, quoted in White 2003, 124).⁵ This intriguing image of philosophy as an organic unity invites the expectation that Stoicism’s cosmological doctrine of eternal recurrence somehow works in concert with their ethical views. In one sense, the harmony between these parts of Stoicism is obvious: the virtuous person, as the happiest, will readily embrace life’s eternal recurrence. On closer examination, though, Diogenes Laertius’s image reverses this order. If *cosmology* is the philosophical organism’s *soul*, then eternal recurrence, as a key cosmological doctrine, should come first and promote—as a secondary benefit—Stoicism’s ethical aim of living according to nature by cultivating reason.

Marcus Aurelius confirmed the expectation that cosmology precedes morality when relieving himself of the fear of death. He treated consolation about death as an effect and recognizing eternal recurrence as its cause:

No one loses another life than this which he is living nor lives any other life than this which he is losing. . . . Always remember, then, . . . that everything everlastingly is of the same kind and cyclically recurrent, and it makes no difference whether one should see the same things for a hundred years or for two hundred or for an infinite time. (*Med.* 2.14; quoted in Long 2006, 280–81)

Although Marcus wanted to eliminate a particular passion—the irrational fear of death’s inevitability—he attributed a general consoling effect to the sage’s confidence in eternal recurrence. Contemplating this *cosmological* doctrine, which brings home the futility and irrationality of resisting fate, promotes Stoicism’s *ethical* aim of accepting nature’s providential order. Reflecting on eternal recurrence may also fortify us against misfortune: no matter what ills we face, we’ve faced them countless times before and will face them again, endlessly. By facing the fact of eternal recurrence, we can appreciate the irrationality of wishing that fate was otherwise and focus instead on what we can control—namely, educating ourselves in reason to accept fate.

Eternal recurrence is more than a resource for consolation, though. The doctrine also shows how to transcend attachment to indifferent particulars by identifying our will with the rational providence that governs nature. Meditations by Marcus Aurelius are instructive again. Reflecting on virtue, he writes about “the rational soul” that “makes a circuit of the whole world, both the void which surrounds it and its

shape; it extends itself out into the infinity of time and encompasses the periodic rebirth of the whole” (*Med.* 11.1, in Long 2006, 281). The philosophical emperor suggests that accepting eternal recurrence not only promotes virtue but also defines it. Such acceptance does not just fortify us against fated hardships; it also helps us transcend attachment to narrow, individual concerns and accept fate as a whole (see Hadot 2001, chap. 6).⁶ In both cases, affirming recurrence promotes the Stoic ethical aim of living in accord with nature. But in the latter case, by transcending petty particulars, we identify what is best for us with what is best in nature as a whole. What permits Stoicism to close the gap between an individual’s will and the order of the cosmos is commitment to teleology. We can identify our will with cosmic providence because divine rationality pervades the whole universe—ourselves included. Stoicism’s commitment to teleology was no isolated afterthought: teleology governs the cosmos where everything recurs eternally and regulates the ethical ideal promoted by eternal recurrence.

2. NIETZSCHE’S NONTELEOLOGICAL NATURALISM

2.1 Nietzsche’s Nonteleological Cosmology

After stating that his doctrine of eternal return “is nothing Heraclitus couldn’t have said,” Nietzsche indicates that Stoicism had merely “traces” of his idea (EH, *Birth of Tragedy*, 3). We can unpack this qualification by turning to Nietzsche’s early lecture notes on *The Pre-Platonic Philosophers*. Nietzsche says that Heraclitus’s “eternally living fire” offers “a purely aesthetic view of the world. We must exclude even more any moralistic tendencies to think teleologically” (PPP, 70). In similar terms he describes what Heraclitus said about world conflagration: “rejection of any teleological view of the world reaches its zenith here” (PPP, 72–73). Shortly after this, in *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, he charges Stoics with neglecting Heraclitus’s denial of teleology: “the Stoics re-interpreted him on a shallow level, dragging down his basically esthetic perception of cosmic play to signify a vulgar consideration for the world’s useful ends, especially those which benefit the human race. His physics became, in their hands, a crude optimism” (PTAG, 65). Despite sharing Stoicism’s view of Heraclitean fire as a ubiquitous and immanent principle, Nietzsche denies that fire should be understood teleologically (see also Cox 1999, 184–93; Acampora 2013, 96–98). Resonances of this denial continue through Nietzsche’s last works, where he champions Heraclitus for insisting on the primacy of becoming and change over being and stasis (TI, “Reason,” 2) and imputes cryptomoral motives to other philosophers for asserting the contrary (TI, “Reason,” 4–5). Nietzsche’s alignment of eternal recurrence with Stoicism is thus less simple than it seems. In fact, he

contends that the Stoics misunderstood Heraclitus by interpreting his fire as a teleological principle.

Nietzsche's denial of teleological interpretations of becoming informs his cosmology. This is evident from the following passage, which criticizes organicist understandings of nature. The passage is especially important because Stoicism teaches such a cosmology:

Let us beware of thinking that the world is a living being. . . . We know roughly what the organic is; are we then supposed to reinterpret what is inexpressibly derivative, late, rare, accidental . . . as something essential, common, and eternal, as those people do who call the universe an organism? . . . The astral order in which we live is an exception; this order and the considerable duration that is conditioned by it have again made possible the exception of exceptions: the development of the organic. The total character of the world, by contrast, is for all eternity chaos, not in the sense of a lack of necessity but of a lack of order, organization, form, beauty, wisdom, and whatever else our aesthetic anthropomorphisms are called. Judged from the vantage point of our reason, the unsuccessful attempts are by far the rule; the exceptions are not the secret aim, and the whole musical mechanism repeats eternally its tune, which must never be called a melody. . . . Once you know that there are no purposes, you also know that there is no accident; for only against a world of purposes does the word "accident" have a meaning. . . . When will all these shadows of god no longer darken us? When will we have completely de-deified nature? (GS 109)

Nietzsche presents empirical evidence to show that chaos—more than regular movement and organic life—is the rule in the cosmos. Then he explains why philosophers mistakenly attribute purpose to the universe: their errors are anthropomorphic. The passage's conclusion ties such anthropomorphic judgments to theological commitments, presumably because the claim that the universe satisfies some pre-existing purpose presupposes a divinity *outside* the cosmos. But after the death of God—which I will take as a given, for Nietzsche—we lack the reliable cosmic framework needed to make heads or tails of the claim that the universe has an aim (also see GS 125). The cosmos, says Nietzsche, has no purpose.

The passage just quoted also alludes to eternal recurrence in the image of "the whole musical mechanism [that] repeats eternally its tune." Hedging against the anthropomorphism of this image, Nietzsche insists that the tune "must never be called a melody" (GS 109). By intimating the eternal recurrence amid his description of nature as purposeless, Nietzsche indicates that, in his view, eternal recurrence unfolds in a nonteleological cosmos. This is unsurprising. Notwithstanding his early flirtation with the position that artists and philosophers of genius are

nature's final aim (UM III.7), Nietzsche rejects teleological judgments from his middle period through his last works. Sometimes he argues that belief in final causes results from ignorance about vast and contingent causal networks that produce some outcome (HH I.2; D 122; GM II.12, III.26; TI, "Reason," 4). At other times he argues that our experience of purposive action confuses an *occasion* for discharging some impulse with an intended *goal* (GS 360; D 119, 539) and suggests that we project this error onto natural occurrences (TI, "Errors," 3). He also argues that the belief in purposive action derives from a *moral* need to hold individuals accountable for their deeds (GM I.13; TI, "Errors," 6–7), which expands until we interpret nature itself as purposive (TI, "Errors," 8). These arguments plainly establish Nietzsche's rejection of teleology. And while one might worry that his more metaphysically inclined reflections on the will to power entail a kind of teleology, this controverted reading of the will to power (cf. BGE 36) still falls short of Stoicism's view that *divine rationality* is a *transcendent* telos that precedes the empirical world. This contrast is confirmed in a note written soon after *Zarathustra*: "Let us think this thought in its most terrible form: existence as it is, without meaning or goal, yet inevitably recurring without any finale into nothingness: 'eternal recurrence'" (KSA 12:5[71], my translation). Nietzsche's eternal recurrence unfolds in a godless and irrational cosmos that serves no transcendent aim (see also KSA 11:36[15], 38[12]; 13:14[188]).⁷

2.2 Nietzsche's Naturalist Ethics

Nietzsche seeks to make ethics consonant with our best understanding of nature, but the details of his naturalism are contentious. Nonetheless, whatever else Nietzsche's naturalism may require, it prohibits appeals to supernatural entities and explanations—including and especially God. This constraint quickly distinguishes Nietzsche's ethical naturalism from Stoicism's. He cannot abide Stoicism's account of value as defined by satisfying the proper function bestowed upon each part of nature in accord with divine reason. Consistent with his nonteleological cosmology, on which "order, organization, form, beauty, wisdom" and so on are "anthropomorphisms" (GS 109), Nietzsche maintains that "whatever has *value* in the present world has it not in itself, according to its nature—nature is always value-less—but has rather been given, granted value, and *we* are the givers and granters!" (GS 301; italics in original here and throughout). Far from being subject-independent facts about the world, values—for Nietzsche—reflect "states of the soul" (D 210), such that "a person's valuations reveal something about the *structure* of his soul" (BGE 268; see also HH I.4, 16; GS 335; Z I, "Thousand"; BGE 108; TI, "Improving," 1).

And Nietzsche's account of the soul contrasts with Stoicism's position. Against Stoicism's monistic view of the soul as comprised entirely of reason, Nietzsche analyzes the soul as "a society constructed out of drives and affects" (BGE 12). While several increasingly technical accounts of Nietzsche's drive psychology can be had, four uncontentious points suffice for this discussion. First, Nietzsche thinks that drives evaluate aims that they characteristically pursue and thereby induce corresponding affective orientations (HH I.32; D 119; GS 335; BGE 187, 230). A drive to nourishment, for example, values sustenance and associates positive affects with eating. Second, no pre-existing order obtains among the drives. Rather, "each drive craves mastery" over the others (BGE 6; see also D 109). Coupled with the first point, this means that values vary in individuals with the organization of their drives (D 210; GS 335; Z I, "Thousand"; BGE 108, 187, 268). Third, whereas Stoicism understands passions as cognitive judgments that mistakenly attribute value to indifferents (*adiaphora*), Nietzsche understands passions as drives that successfully master others, such that "the highest and strongest drives erupt in passion" (BGE 202; see also D 502; BGE 198). Finally, Nietzsche denies that reason *opposes* drives and passions. He refers to "the drive to truth" (GS 110) as well as "a passion for truthfulness" (HH I.237) and worries that "our *drive to knowledge* . . . has transformed into a passion which shrinks at no sacrifice" (D 429; see also GS 3, 123; BGE 210). While these passages imply that reason is a *distinct* drive capable of becoming a passion, Nietzsche suggests elsewhere that reason is merely an *effect* of a given drive's dominance (D 109; GS 1, 333). Of self-proclaimed lovers of wisdom, he declares, "I do not believe that a 'drive for knowledge' is the father of philosophy, but that another drive, here as elsewhere used knowledge . . . merely as a tool" (BGE 6; see also BGE 158). Regardless of whether reason is a distinct drive or a product of dominant drives, the contrast with Stoicism is clear. Nietzsche rejects Stoicism's monistic view of the soul and endorses an account of the soul as comprised of competing drives, the strongest of which are passions. He also rejects Stoicism's view of reason as *opposed* to passion, whether because reason can become a passion or because reason is produced by passions. Nietzsche's view of human psychology could hardly be less Stoic.⁸

Nietzsche's claim that values reflect our drives, coupled with his pluralist account of humans' psycho-physiological conditions, underwrites his infamous rejection of universal moral prescriptions (D 108; GS 335; BGE 154, 187, 198; GM, "Preface," 6; TI, "Anti-Nature," 6). Consequently, he cannot advance a first-order, determinate account of flourishing that holds universally. Instead, he offers a formal definition of flourishing, or greatness, as "being noble . . . [being] just as multiple as whole, just

as wide as full” (BGE 212). The first criterion of greatness is clarified by Nietzsche’s description of the noble in these terms: “*he determines value, . . . he knows that he is the one who gives honor to things in the first place, he creates values*” (BGE 260; see also BGE 211, 261; GM I.10–11). Nobles derive values from themselves—more specifically, from their drives—rather than from the external world.⁹ The second criterion is clarified by Nietzsche’s praise of Goethe: “what he wanted was *totality*; he fought against the separation of reason, sensibility, feeling, will . . . [and] disciplined himself to wholeness” (TI, “Skirmishes,” 49). Greatness thus requires fashioning one’s drives into a unity. But there are different ways of achieving this. A dominant drive might unify an individual either by *repressing* its competitors or else by *incorporating* other drives so that these serve the dominant drive’s aim. In a simplistic example, an intellectual drive might dominate an erotic drive through repression, producing a life of celibate scholarship, or through incorporation, leading to romantic partners selected for their intellectual traits. Nietzsche’s description of greatness as “just as multiple as whole” suggests the latter kind of organization. A third feature of greatness can be added to these. Nietzsche claims that “a great human being is . . . necessarily wasteful and extravagant: its greatness is in *giving itself away* . . . The instinct for self-preservation gets disconnected . . . overwhelming pressure of the out-flowing forces does not allow for any sort of oversight or caution” (TI, “Skirmishes,” 44; see also BGE 200; TI, “Anti-Nature,” 3, and “Skirmishes,” 24). Nietzschean flourishing thus requires *creating* values, rather than deriving values from the external world; it requires fashioning one’s drives into an *incorporated unity*; and it requires *overcoming self-preservation*. Each of these criteria demands a dominant drive, an overriding passion. Little wonder, then, that Zarathustra announces: “Once you had passions and named them evil. But now you have only your virtues: they grew out of your passions” (Z I, “Passions”). Passion is necessary for Nietzschean greatness.

We can now appreciate Nietzsche’s censure of Stoic virtue. He does not deny that Stoic therapy can achieve dispassionate, rational self-discipline. What he denies is that this therapy should be universalized. Sometimes his argument is historical and sociological. Even though “Stoicism may well be advisable for those with whom fate improvises and who live in violent times” (GS 306), the late moderns of Nietzsche’s era have no need for such a “radical cure”: “things are *not bad enough* for us that they have to be bad for us in the Stoic style!” (GS 326). Elsewhere, his argument is psychological, describing dispassionate, self-discipline as “that indifference and stone column coldness which the Stoics prescribed and applied as a cure for the feverish idiocy of the affects” (BGE 198; see also GS 306). On this diagnosis, Stoic virtue is

symptomatic of an affective oversensitivity that blocks incorporation of one's drives into a unity. This objection peaks in Nietzsche's rebuke of Socrates, scorned for the very traits that led Stoics to consider him almost a sage: "the most glaring daylight, rationality at any cost, a cold, bright, cautious, conscious life without instinct, opposed to instinct, was itself just a sickness . . . and in no way a return to "virtue," to "health," to happiness. . . . To *have* to fight the instincts—that is the formula for decadence" (TI, "Socrates," 11; only second ellipsis in original). The trouble with the Stoics, then, is that "they generalize what should not be generalized" and "speak unconditionally" (BGE 198). By prescribing the extreme cure of extirpating the passions entirely and for everyone, Stoicism impedes flourishing for the greatest individuals who might yoke their drives together and pursue their highest values passionately.

2.3 Eternal Recurrence and Nietzsche's Ethics

The Gay Science preserves Nietzsche's best-known expression of the eternal recurrence:

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 . . . must return to you in the same succession . . ." If this thought gained power over you, as you are it would transform and possibly crush you. . . . 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)

This key passage makes several relevant points. First, the possibility that the eternal recurrence could "crush" us suggests the absence of an objective and pre-existing cosmic teleology. If we knew that all is safeguarded by divine providence, the thought of eternal recurrence *couldn't* crush us. Second, Nietzsche's turn to "how well disposed" one is suggests that he aims to transform our evaluative outlook. Since the demon's message, *ex hypothesi*, precludes changes in the *object* affirmed, Nietzsche's concern must rest on the affirmer's disposition. Third, Nietzsche's description of the hoped-for disposition as one in which we "*long for nothing more fervently*" than for life's recurrence suggests that we cannot merely accept fate but must affirm it passionately. Lastly, such passionate affirmation must not shrink from the recurrence of "every pain."¹⁰

To see how Nietzsche's eternal recurrence promotes greatness, we can observe his claim that "value judgements on life, for or against, can ultimately never be true: they have value only as symptoms" (TI, "Socrates," 2). Our ability to affirm life's eternal recurrence turns less

on life's objective features than on *us*. Indeed, Nietzsche's view that nature lacks *intrinsic* value, coupled with the way his eternal recurrence forecloses values that *transcend* nature, prompts the realization that *we* must imbue life with value to affirm the eternal recurrence. Affirming eternal recurrence thus requires nobility. Furthermore, to affirm life's eternal recurrence passionately, a dominating passion must produce our highest values. But if our passion dominates through repression, we will struggle to affirm portions of life dedicated to our subordinate drives. Affirming the eternal recurrence of all of life thus requires organizing our drives into an incorporated unity. Finally, if we are to affirm the recurrence of "every pain," then pain mustn't be an objection to life's recurrence. Affirming eternal recurrence thus requires that a dominant passion overpowers concern with self-preservation. The affirmation of Nietzsche's eternal recurrence requires greatness.¹¹

Nietzsche's eternal return is more demanding than that of Stoicism. Far from eliminating suffering, Nietzsche stresses that "every pain" recurs (GS 341). Nor does Nietzsche's eternal recurrence allow us to transcend our individual concerns by identifying our will with divine providence. By his lights, the underbelly of such optimism is a negative disposition *against* life, which is chaotic, destructive, and purposeless. If the Stoics must resort to this use of eternal recurrence, it is because, like Socrates, they view life as a disease (GS 340; TI, "Socrates," 12). Nietzsche's eternal recurrence champions "*tragic wisdom*," not crude optimism, because it requires "affirmation of passing away *and destruction*" (EH, *Birth of Tragedy*, 3).¹² Far from encouraging us to dissolve our passions in divine reason, Nietzsche challenges us to live passionately enough to saturate life with value. A chasm separates Nietzsche's aims in affirming life's eternal recurrence from what the Stoics proposed.

3. NIETZSCHE CONTRA STOICISM: NATURALISM, PASSION, AND SUFFERING

Nietzsche's disagreement with Stoicism about teleology points to other divergences between their understandings of nature and human flourishing. These dislocations allow Nietzsche to criticize both the Stoic project of living according to nature and their ideal of dispassionate self-discipline—and *without* undermining his own commitments to ethical naturalism and eternal recurrence. Two worries already discussed about the consistency of Nietzsche's position are relevant.

The first concerns Nietzsche's rebuke of Stoicism's attempt to live according to nature. Because this seems to be at odds with Nietzsche's naturalistic ethics, Nabias concludes that "in his criticism of Stoicism . . . Nietzsche is criticizing his very own foundations, betraying himself in

order to abjure what, at the most profoundest point of his programme for an ethic of immanence, still resonates with his secret dialogue with the Stoic doctrine” (2006, 97; see also 86). The tension detected here doesn’t run deep, however. The alleged inconsistency is resolved by clarifying the object of Nietzsche’s criticism: his target is Stoicism’s teleological understanding of nature, not its naturalist ethics. This reading is supported by the text immediately following Nietzsche’s charge that the Stoic attempt to “live ‘according to nature’” was “a fraud”:

Imagine something like nature, profligate [and] indifferent without measure, without purpose. . . . How *could* you live according to this indifference? Living—isn’t that wanting specifically to be something other than this nature? . . . Assuming your imperative to “live according to nature” basically amounts to “living according to life”—well how could you *not*? . . . In fact, something quite different is going on: while pretending with delight to read the canon of your law in nature, you want the opposite. . . . Your pride wants to dictate and annex your morals and ideals onto nature. . . . For all your love of truth, you have forced yourselves so long, so persistently, and with such hypnotic rigidity to have a *false*, namely Stoic, view of nature, that you can no longer see it any other way. (BGE 9)

Nietzsche confronts Stoicism with a dilemma derived from its definition of virtue as “living according to nature.” *Either* this dictum requires embracing nature as irrational and chaotic, in which case it lacks the normative content that Stoics attribute to it, *or else* virtue requires living in accord with reason, and then Stoicism misunderstands nature as governed by divine rationality. Nietzsche impales the Stoics on the dilemma’s second horn: because they ignore the anthropomorphism in their teleological principles, they fail to notice that they project human norms onto nature. *Pace* Nabias, this objection doesn’t undermine Nietzsche’s immanent and naturalist approach to ethics. On the contrary, it charges Stoicism with smuggling transcendent principles into naturalism by taking nature to be governed by divine reason. Hence, attending to Nietzsche’s rejection of teleology eliminates the charge of inconsistency.

The second worry concerns Nietzsche’s positive evaluation of passion and suffering. Ure, seeing no way to affirm the recurrence of passion, and of the suffering that follows passion, without a psychological contradiction, concludes that “despite Nietzsche’s hopes, it [the eternal return] does *not* show us how it is possible to will the return of the same without adopting the kind of value reorientation that is central to the Stoic achievement of equanimity” (2009, 78; see also 79–80). Worrisome cases of passion and suffering are separable, however; for Nietzsche they are not coextensive, as they are for the Stoics.

Two beliefs convince Stoics that passions must be extirpated fully: that reason and passion are opposed and that rationality is the only good. Rejecting either belief is enough to allow passion in a life worthy of the eternal recurrence. Nietzsche rejects both. He allows that reason can become a passion (HH I.237; D 429; GS 3, 110, 123; BGE 210) or perhaps be produced by passions (D 109; GS 1, 333; BGE 6, 158). More important: he denies that living by rational self-discipline makes for a flourishing life. Indeed, he considers such a life symptomatic of an inability to integrate one's drives into an incorporated unity (TI, "Socrates," 4, 9–11; "Anti-Nature," 1–2). Moreover, because the integrating requires a dominant drive, and because passions just are drives that dominate (BGE 198, 201), Nietzsche concludes that greatness requires living passionately. We should thus be wary of Nussbaum's reference to "Nietzsche's acceptance of the full Stoic position regarding the extirpation of the passions" (1994, 154) and of her claim that "Nietzsche's project . . . is to bring about a revival of Stoic values" (140). *Pace* Nussbaum, Nietzsche asks whether we are passionate enough to create values that align with our natures and to affirm life's eternal recurrence.

Living passionately is not the same as suffering, which—if eternal recurrence is to be affirmed—must also be accounted for as one of life's recurring features. One means of affirming suffering's eternal recurrence is if suffering contributes to some greater good. Ure rejects this resolution and contends that affirming the eternal return "requires us to want all such events, *regardless* of whether they ultimately serve some larger project; to want the eternal recurrence of pain and suffering *simpliciter*" (Ure 2009, 78–79). Granted, Zarathustra's declaration that "joy wants . . . recurrence, wants everything eternally the same" to the point that joy "thirsts for pain" (Z IV, "Sleepwalker," 9, 11) suggests that Nietzsche is after something stronger than merely valuing suffering as a regrettable means to some end. But this does not require valuing suffering *simpliciter*. For if suffering is *necessary* for or *constitutive* of some valued end, then suffering ceases to be regrettable. In such cases, we cannot affirm the end valued without also affirming suffering.

Nietzsche's mature works repeatedly describe suffering's value in these terms. Against Stoic therapy, he suggests that "pleasure and displeasure are so intertwined that whoever *wants* as much as possible of one *must* also have as much as possible of the other," such that avoiding pain diminishes our capacity for joy (GS 12; see also GS, "Preface," 3, 338). If "the discipline of suffering . . . has been the sole cause of every enhancement in humanity" (BGE 225; see also BGE 44), as Nietzsche suggests, then we can see why he insists that "to consider all forms of *distress* as objections, as things that need to be done *away* with, is the *niaiserie par excellence*, . . . almost as stupid as the desire to get rid

of bad weather,” for “in the great economy of the whole, the horrors of reality” may be “incalculably more necessary than that form of petty happiness called ‘goodness’” (EH, “Destiny,” 4; see also EH, *Zarathustra*, 3). If suffering is necessary for, or perhaps constitutive of, our greatest joys and achievements, then removing suffering would mar the value of life as whole. This response is bolstered by Nietzsche’s views about the complexity of the psyche and his contention that “once you know that there are no purposes, you also know that there is no accident; for only against a world of purposes does the word ‘accident’ have a meaning” (GS 109). These features of Nietzsche’s thought suggest that we are not in a position to determine which instances of suffering could be removed without diminishing life’s value. If life as a whole is worth affirming eternally, so is the suffering which figures in it.

While it is possible to affirm life’s eternal recurrence by viewing suffering as necessary to, or perhaps constitutive of, other valued ends, this response might be too deferential. For in his most triumphantly affirmative moments, Nietzsche dispenses entirely with cost-benefit analyses about pain and pleasure. Zarathustra’s disappointment with the last humans who remain content with happiness is well known (Z, “Prologue,” 5), and, when asked if he is happy, Zarathustra answers, “What does happiness matter! . . . I strive for my work” (Z IV, “Honey Sacrifice,”; see also Z IV, “Sign”). In his own voice, Nietzsche claims “hedonism, pessimism, utilitarianism, eudaemonism: these are all ways of thinking that measure the value of things according to *pleasure* and *pain*, which is to say according to incidental states and trivialities.” He goes on: “Well-being as you understand it—that is no goal; it looks to us like an *end!*—a condition that immediately renders people ridiculous and despicable” (BGE 225; see also GS 338). Ultimately, our all-too-human fixation on avoiding suffering signals that we are not yet *great enough* to affirm life’s totality. However, far from endorsing Stoic apathy, the indifference to suffering that Nietzsche celebrates expresses *overflowing passion* for life. Nietzsche can thus maintain his goal of affirming the eternal recurrence while admonishing Stoicism’s pursuit of a dispassionate life free of suffering.

CONCLUSION

Nietzsche’s philosophy aligns with Stoic thought insofar as both teach eternal recurrence and naturalistic ethics, while using eternal recurrence to promote their different ethical aims. Plainly, such resemblances alone won’t be enough to reconcile Nietzsche’s criticisms of Stoicism with his own philosophical project. But his disagreement about teleology shows how to clear up apparent inconsistencies between his modern philosophy

and these ancients. The disagreement underwrites Nietzsche's rebuke of the Stoic injunction to live according to nature and his rejection of the ethical ideal most closely identified with Stoicism: dispassionate, rational self-discipline.

Since Nietzsche repudiated Stoic ethical cosmology so ferociously—"what a fraud" (BGE 9)—it's no surprise that aligning him with these ancient moralists can only be a restricted convergence. They have different, sometimes contrary, understandings of nature, human flourishing, and eternal recurrence. They differ in what they affirm by accepting eternal recurrence: Stoics accept nature as regulated by a transcendent telos of divine reason, but the nature that Nietzsche affirms has no purpose. They also differ in what they intend to achieve by affirming eternal recurrence. Stoics encourage people to accept rationality as divine and identify with it, while Nietzsche urges them to create values that answer to their highest passions to make an endlessly repeated life worth living. These two understandings and applications of eternal recurrence are not just different: they're *mutually exclusive*. Nietzsche's eternal recurrence presents an ethical challenge that no Stoic could have met.¹³

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NOTES

1. The following abbreviations cite Nietzsche's writings. BGE = *Beyond Good and Evil*; D = *Daybreak*; EH = *Ecce Homo*; HH = *Human, All Too Human*; KSA = *Kritische Studienausgabe*; GM = *On the Genealogy of Morality*; GS = *The Gay Science*; PPP = *The Pre-Platonic Philosophers*; PTAG = *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*; TI = *Twilight of the Idols*; UM = *Untimely Meditations*; and Z = *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Roman numerals indicate major divisions, section names when these are helpful. Arabic numerals refer to sections, rather than pages, except when citing PPP and PTAG.

2. Mollison (2019) emphasizes Nietzsche's teleological disagreement with Stoicism but does not consider how this implicates their respective understandings of flourishing and eternal recurrence, as this article will.

3. Long and Sedley's commentary (1987) refers to the best primary sources of Stoic doctrine, also reproduced in their volume.

4. Whether preferred indifferents have instrumental value is controversial, but *if* they have instrumental value, they are nevertheless not *necessary* for virtue (Long and Sedley 1987, 357–58; Lesses 1989, 114–15; Brennan 2003, 263–64).

5. On Nietzsche's early study of Diogenes Laertius, see Barnes (1986).

6. Sellars (2006, 164): hardening against fate is “Human Stoicism,” but identifying with fate is “Cosmic Stoicism.”

7. In light of the available myriad readings of Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence, one might worry that not every interpretation is nonteleological. Brief review of the most common interpretations mitigates this concern. Those who interpret the doctrine as a descriptive, cosmological claim take it to be motivated by secular discoveries about thermodynamics during Nietzsche’s time (D’Iorio 2011, 19–30) or to be scientifically unprovable but nonetheless formulated in response to the death of God in a way that precludes attributing a final aim to nature (Löwith 1997, 187–89; Loeb 2010, 228–37). Similarly, those who interpret the eternal recurrence as a hypothesis designed to test our outlook on life maintain that it prohibits any pre-existing or transcendent justification for life (Magnus 1978, 138–43; Nehamas 1985, 144–45; Clark 1990, 271–73; Hatab 2005, 61–63). Likewise, those who interpret the eternal return as an ontological thesis contend that it precludes attributing a final aim to the cosmos (Deleuze 1983, 48–49; Heidegger 1984, 82–97, 109–10). Without closely examining these interpretations, much less their multitudinous competitors, we can observe broad consensus that Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence precludes the rational, divine, and transcendent teleology that characterizes Stoicism.

8. As Nietzsche individuates drives by their characteristic aims, I doubt whether he can reject teleology *in toto*. Still, this is a far cry from Stoic teleology. Nietzsche does not posit a cosmic telos that *transcends* the empirical world. Nor does his account of drives amount to a *rational* or *divine* telos. Furthermore, drives’ end-directedness does not license a *universal* aim that all should pursue, as Nietzsche thinks drives’ organizations vary across individuals. These divergences certify Nietzsche’s break with the teleology that characterizes Stoic cosmology and ethics.

9. As drives naturally bestow value upon their aims, Nietzsche’s notion of value creation coheres with his naturalism. All values are created—but nobles create their *own* values instead of allowing values to be imposed upon them.

10. I take these observations to hold for cosmological, hypothetical, and ontological interpretations of GS 341. While a hypothetical reading needn’t assume that the point about the absence of a cosmic telos is factual, this tracks Nietzsche’s cosmology.

11. Eternal recurrence affirmation also satisfies Nietzsche’s other “formula for human greatness”—“*amor fati*: . . . Not just to tolerate necessity . . . but to love it” (EH, “Clever,” 10). I opted against relying on this formula because, first, it obscures, rather than clarifies, Nietzsche’s contrast with Stoicism; second, it isn’t especially illuminating to claim that the eternal recurrence promotes greatness because greatness consists in *amor fati*; and third, the eternal recurrence may be more demanding than *amor fati*. Nietzsche’s description of *amor fati* as a disposition in which “*looking away* [is our] only negation” (GS 276) suggests that *amor fati* may not require affirming *every part* of life. Nevertheless, if recurrence affirmation and *amor fati* are coextensive, the eternal recurrence still promotes Nietzsche’s ethical aim.

12. Of Nietzsche's eternal recurrence, Peter Groff asks, "Joyful affirmation of all generation and destruction, for its own sake, willed over and over again, eternally—what could be more Stoic than that?" (2004, 159). With deference to Groff, it would be more Stoic to accept destruction, not "for its own sake" but as necessitated by divine rationality, which is eternal and indestructible.

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