Fate, Joy, and the Beauty of the Absurd:
An Interpretation of Nietzsche on the Eternal Recurrence

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Abstract—In this paper I examine a fairly popular interpretation of Nietzsche’s idea of the eternal recurrence—one offered by, for instance, Alexander Nehamas (1985) and R. Lanier Anderson (2005). Such an interpretation understands the notion of the eternal recurrence to be inexorably linked to Nietzsche’s notion of redemption and sees both these ideas as thoroughly rooted in personal biography. I first raise a number of objections regarding the internal coherency of such interpretations. Then I proceed to provide a careful analysis of some of the major passages from Nietzsche’s texts that have generally been taken to suggest such an interpretation. What a close reading of these passages show, I argue, is that the eternal recurrence has little, except incidental, connection with biography as well as little, except incidental, connection with redemption. The eternal recurrence, I maintain, is intended to bring out a certain feature of life in general—a feature that actually rules out the possibility of redemption, as it has hitherto been understood. Finally, I conclude by offering a preliminary interpretation of the positive reaction to the eternal recurrence based on the structure of Nietzschean joy.

Introduction

Not unlike the demon who first articulates the idea, the eternal recurrence has itself long proved a bogeyman for interpreters of Nietzsche. At best, the idea seems hopelessly enigmatic and therefore hardly worth the praise Nietzsche bestowed upon it; at worst, it has been seen as committing Nietzsche to outright incoherency. It seems then that Nietzsche would really have done well for his philosophical reputation to dispense slightly with his trademark incomprehensibility when discussing the eternal recurrence. But, of course, Nietzsche never cared much about his reputation. Part of the problem with interpreting the idea is that it is difficult to find a suitable point of departure. The recurrence seems to share so much with so many of Nietzsche’s other ideas (redemption, *amor fati*, and the will to power just to name a few) but is entirely silent on whether or not those connections are merely illusory. Furthermore, the fact that Nietzsche considered the eternal recurrence his most important idea suggests that it might very well have some bearing on nearly everything else he says.

So, where then do we start? It may be useful to consider what was the mission of Nietzsche’s philosophy in general. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, at least, he tells us that part of his task is, “to translate man back into nature…to see to it that man stands before man…with intrepid Oedipus eyes and sealed Odysseus ears, deaf to the siren songs of old metaphysical bird
catchers who have been piping at him all too long, ‘you are more, you are higher, you are of
different origin” (BGE, 230; Cf., HC)! Of course, such naturalism was nothing new, even—or
perhaps especially—in the late 19th Century. But Nietzsche questions whether or not our
metaphysical suppositions have caught up with our naturalism. Nor is he wholly wrong to do so.
Even today we are hardly skeptical when Hegel describes man’s consciousness as “This lapse
from natural unity…the wonderful division of the spirit against itself,” and goes on to
emphatically pronounce that, “No such inward disunion is found in nature: natural things do
nothing wicked.”¹ Such a belief that man has the ability to separate himself from the natural,
that he is, as it were, the naturally unnatural being, was endorsed by many ostensibly naturalistic
philosophers in the 19th Century (and perhaps not only in the 19th Century!) not only by Hegel
but also by his opponents, most notably Schopenhauer.² If man is unique and separable from
nature, if he stands in some way over and above the natural order, then philosophers have
thought he must be subject to some unique ideal, that he must be the direction of some special
purpose—Hegel thought this ideal was that of absolute freedom; Schopenhauer, that of absolute
morality and the silencing of the will. But if more and more we discover the belief in our
inimitability to be unfounded, Nietzsche asks “does it make sense at all to retain our convictions
in those ideals, when the original grounding for them is considered untenable? Should we not,
perhaps, search for some new ideal—one more in tune with our naturalist understanding of the
world—or simply eschew ideals entirely?” The tension between these two options is, as we shall
see, something with which Nietzsche would grapple for his entire philosophical career.
Ultimately, however, Nietzsche comes down decidedly on the side of the former, and does so
with the idea of the eternal recurrence. Accordingly, he calls the idea “the ideal of the most

University Press, 2nd edn, 1892, §24 addition
high-spirited, alive, and world-affirming human being” (*BGE*, 56, my emphasis) and the opposite of the Schopenhauerian. As we shall see, such an “ideal” does nothing to motivate the sort of practical evaluative test, or “guiding maxim”, of our lives as so many interpreters have hitherto thought; rather, what it does is “idealize” life itself by exaggerating certain features of our own biographies thereby testing whether life itself is something we can affirm. We should therefore interpret the eternal recurrence as an ideal of life, and living *in general*—an ideal that espouses and exploits a particularly important existential feature of ourselves as Nietzsche sees us. In light of these considerations we should turn to the current interpretations of the idea and assess their adequacy.

**I: Inadequacies of Current Interpretations**

The best interpretations of the eternal recurrence are Nehamas’ (1985) and Anderson’s (2005). Both think of the eternal recurrence as a practical test designed to assess our satisfaction with our lives thus motivating the retroactive sort of redemption discussed by Nietzsche in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (II, “On Redemption”). Nehamas and Anderson alike understand redemption as a “creative” process whereby I “make use” of unpleasant features of my life—e.g., past suffering, disappointment, failure, etc.—to motivate myself to loftier more meaningful goals. If said process is successful, “I transform myself into a new kind of person.”

Since “the significance of the past lies in its relationship to the future,” and “since the future is yet to come, neither the significance of the past nor its nature is yet settled.” So, both interpreters make sense of Zarathustra’s puzzling claims that the will must learn to will backwards; for, if I transform myself into a person who can affirm his past suffering, then in

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3 Other notable interpretations include Clark (1990) and Reginster (2006). Reginster’s interpretation is discussed below in footnote 14.


5 Nehamas, Alexander. *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, 160-61
altering the past’s significance I have altered its nature and therefore, in a sense, willed backwards. As Anderson’s interpretation is more recent and is similar to Nehamas’ on nearly all major points (save those of the essentialist metaphysics Nehamas attributes to Nietzsche) it will best serve my purposes of formulating a new interpretation to focus on critiquing the former.

Like Nehamas, Anderson focuses his interpretation around what Nietzsche says about redemption. According to Anderson, the thought of the eternal recurrence is intended to be a guiding maxim in helping me avoid “serious disharmony between my values and my actual life.” By considering my life as recurring ad infinitum in exactly the same way I am, Anderson thinks, forced to accept each and every feature, event, action, etc. in that life as being essential to it: “In projecting my entire life imaginatively into the future, the thought experiment induces me to consider it—all of it—with the same motivated (e.g., anxious, hopeful) care I normally reserve for my future self, thereby genuinely engaging my practical values in the assessment of my life.” Therefore, if my past is constituted by certain reprehensible—or just simply unpleasant—events, I should be motivated, qua recurrence, to the sort of redemptive willing backwards whereby I can alter the significance of my past (think former U.S. President Jimmy Carter).

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6 Anderson, R. Lanier. *Nietzsche on Redemption and Transfiguration*, 239
7 It is not entirely clear why Anderson believes each and every single event must, on his interpretation, be seen as absolutely essential to a life. Apparently he thinks the eternal recurrence takes this form in order to prevent the thinker from “cheating” in his assessment of his life by leaving out some truly reprehensible features of that life (199). But he gives us no account of why leaving out such features ought to be considered cheating. If we posses a belief in some robust modality or freedom it may certainly be fair, given these beliefs, to consider many events and actions as unessential to our being. Apparently, the eternal recurrence rules out such considerations; but Anderson owes us an explanation of precisely why this is so, and why Nietzsche thinks this makes it a particularly good evaluative tool. Nehamas does offer just such an account (Cf., *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, Ch. 3) in the form of an essentialist metaphysics whereby every action and event in one’s life actually *is* essential to who that person’s life. I am not interested in defending Nehamas’ metaphysical interpretation of Nietzsche since such a strict metaphysical picture strikes me as fairly un-Nietzschean. As will be clear later, Nietzsche has other reasons for thinking the eternal recurrence is an appropriate means of evaluating one’s life. Anderson’s justification on this point, however, remains far too minimal.
8 *Ibid*, 237
Only if a person has engaged in such self-assessment and taken the proper practical measures necessary in order to reaffirm that life can said person “will” the eternal recurrence.\(^9\)

This interpretation (and those like it) raises a host of problems. First and foremost, it should be clear that Anderson’s claim that “in order for an agent to affirm recurrence, the events of her life must escape condemnation under the values she endorses, since those are the ones engaged in the thought experiment”\(^10\) is at odds with Nietzsche’s philosophy. It is, of course, well known that Nietzsche specifically singles out certain systems of values (specifically, asceticism) denoting them as particularly life denying. Presumably, the eternal recurrence is intended precisely to rule out the possibility of giving our lives meaning through such asceticism. Nietzsche explicitly says that “the means of enduring [the eternal recurrence]…[is] the revaluation of all values” \((WP, 1059)\). If Nietzsche questions the validity of affirming life ascetically, he also questions the very possibility of so doing. Nietzsche seems to believe that ascetic actions can never really be affirmed since they themselves issue from the very thing they condemn, namely, the will to power. Nietzsche tells us, “such a self-contradiction as the ascetic appears to represent, ‘life against life,’ is, physiologically considered and not merely physiologically, a simple absurdity” \((GM, III 13)\). So despite its appeal, Anderson’s example of Jimmy Carter’s “redemption” turns out to be useless, since Carter certainly holds, and moreover achieves his supposed redemption through the realization of, deeply ascetic values. But presumably, the eternal recurrence must be structurally incompatible with asceticism per se. On Anderson’s story, any life will appear justified just so long as it accords with the specific values of the person thinking of the eternal recurrence—the parts of that life that do not accord with said

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\(^9\) Note that talk of “willing the eternal recurrence” is noticeably vague. First of all, the phrase is meaningless unless we first possess a grasp of what Nietzsche means by “the will”. Second, interpreters should give an account of what “willing” something as strange as the eternal recurrence would even look like; certainly, it is not just like willing my foot to move.

\(^10\) *Nietzsche on Truth, Illusion, and Redemption*, 199
values must therefore be redeemed, presumably by reference to later actions that are in accord with those values. But the evident possibility that such redemption can be achieved ascetically shows this interpretation to be misguided.

Moreover, there is also something ascetic about seeing reprehensible events as justified only in relation to events we can affirm for their own sake. Nietzsche’s claim is much stronger; he tells us:

It is part of this state [a Dionysian affirmation of life] to perceive not merely the necessity of those sides of existence hitherto denied, but their desirability; and not their desirability merely in relation to the sides hitherto affirmed, but for their own sake, as the more powerful, more fruitful, truer sides of existence, in which its will finds clearer expression (WP, 1041, my emphasis; Cf., 708).

It is true that Anderson claims that redemption is only possible if there remain reprehensible features to be redeemed. Like Raphael’s Transfiguration—which is beautiful not in spite of but partially because of the contorted epileptic boy and the disconnectedness of its upper and lower halves—in order for a life to be redeemed, Anderson says, “the subject must remain the same in an important respect, so that she remains to be redeemed.” But this only acknowledges the necessity of “those sides of existence hitherto denied,” which Nietzsche makes clear is only the first, most superficial, step in changing our evaluations of existence. Essentially, Anderson still sees those sides of existence as merely a means to an end—that end being his conception of redemption. This means-to-end relationship conceals a deep asceticism. One of the major reasons for the development of asceticism, given in Nietzsche’s On the Genealogy of Morals, is that it was needed as a justification of suffering. The ascetic ideal “placed all suffering under the perspective of guilt” (GM, III, 28; Cf., 15, 16) and thereby recast it as something meaningful. Because man was considered inherently guilty, suffering became seen as the only means to his

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11 Hereafter my emphases appear in boldface while Nietzsche’s appear in, as they do in the texts, italics.

12 Redemption and Transfiguration, 251
ultimate redemption. Anderson and Nehamas’ interpretations of Nietzschean redemption, however, commit Nietzsche to this very same ascetic view of suffering, something a proper interpretation must presumably do everything to avoid.

Anderson again runs afoul when he suggests that, “if the recurrence to be imagined is eternal, then I can never look forward to a time when I can pretend to be thoroughly ‘finished’ with an event,”\textsuperscript{13} hence inducing me to consider my entire life “with the same motivated (e.g., anxious, hopeful) care I normally reserve for my future self, thereby genuinely engaging my practical values in the assessment of my life.”\textsuperscript{14} This seems wrong. For, it is necessitated by Nietzsche’s formulation of the eternal recurrence (at least, as it is currently understood) that we do not experience each recurrent life continuously with this our present life. But the very reason I take the attitude I do towards my direct future is that I will certainly experience it as my future directly. Hence, the recurrence as Anderson formulates it seems, in fact, to do nothing to motivate this anxious reaction towards my past. Accordingly, the correct interpretation of the eternal recurrence must also explicitly demonstrate that proper experience of future recurrences is in no way an essential feature of the idea.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, without the possibility of direct experience, Anderson’s interpretation in no way accounts for what exactly the idea of the eternal recurrence adds for the thinker who is positively disposed thereto. That is, why does the thought of the eternal recurrence cause the life-affirming soul “to crave nothing more fervently” (GS, 341), as Nietzsche puts it? The question has been sidestepped by nearly every interpreter. Accordingly, when most interpreters talk about the positive reaction to the idea they all resort to talk such as “willing the eternal recurrence” or “affirming recurrence” without giving the slightest bit of

\textsuperscript{13} Truth, Illusion, and Redemption, 198
\textsuperscript{14} Redemption and Transfiguration, 237
attention to what such “willing” or “affirming” even means. Why should the life affirming person “will” the eternal recurrence at all if he only needs it as an evaluative tool for assessing his life? Why not, having already become satisfied with the way he lives, simply react with another sort of (cheerful?) indifference to its prospect? The question is indeed a difficult one, seeing as the idea must presumably add enough to provoke the joyous reaction while not adding too much to cause despair in the supposed life-affirming person who knows it, *qua* mere thought experiment, to be wholly untrue. Nevertheless, any successful interpretation of the eternal recurrence must provide at least a preliminary account of the possibility of such a reaction. In order to further highlight the inadequacies of such interpretations and to seek a new approach to the eternal recurrence we must now turn to Nietzsche’s texts.

**II: The Texts and Their Evidence**

Nietzsche often writes in an intentionally opaque manner allowing for the possibility of manifold interpretations of the same passages. What often results from this distinctive style is that, as we look deeper and deeper into a certain section, new meanings come to the fore, new connections emerge, and what we had previously considered to be meaningful begins to dissolve. Nowhere is this phenomenon more prominent than in those passages where Nietzsche mentions the eternal recurrence. It is therefore surprising, and quite suspicious, that these passages have hitherto received rather similar interpretations. With Nietzsche, consensus may rarely suggest we are on the right track. What is perhaps particularly peculiar is that interpreters have all generally read section 341, from *The Gay Science*, in roughly the same manner and as the definitive articulation of the idea. Considering that this is the first communication of the idea, we might expect that later mentions might in fact give us more insight, not less. Nevertheless, we should examine said section closely:
The Greatest Weight.— What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you 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 more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence—even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!”

Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: “You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine.” If this thought gained possession of you, it would change you as you are or perhaps crush you. The question in each and everything, “do you want this once more and innumerable times more?” would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight. Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to crave nothing more fervently than this ultimate confirmation and seal? (GS, 341)

As suggested above, this passage has generally been read, in conjunction with certain passages from Zarathustra, as an imperative to reflect on our personal biographies—precisely and down to their finest details—and to assess whether or not, in light of this reflection, we are pleased with our lives. This “being pleased” takes different forms depending on interpretation, but commonly involves using the eternal recurrence as a motivation towards Nietzschean redemption, which, as discussed above, has usually been understood as the justification of all our past actions and experiences through current/future missions. Whether or not this conception of redemption is what Nietzsche had in mind will be addressed later.

It should first be observed that there is nothing in this passage that explicitly suggests any involvement with Nietzsche’s notion of redemption. For reasons to be explored later it may indeed be fair to read section 341 in such a light (albeit in a different way than hitherto has been supposed); but it is by no means clear, as it has been taken to be, that the primary means of
accepting the eternal recurrence comes through redemption. Nietzsche only asks us to become “well disposed” to ourselves and to life without the slightest suggestion of how this disposition is to be achieved. But, more specifically, it is not even clear that the passage is about biography *per se*, as Anderson and Nehamas have supposed. Notice that the demon says, “this life as you now live it and have lived it” (*Ibid*, my emphasis); these words do not clearly suggest that what is to be affirmed in affirming the eternal recurrence is an exact or precise biography. They could be read this way, but they are decidedly ambiguous. An alternate reading, however, would suggest that what is to be affirmed is a particular *feature* of life itself. Later in the passage this reading seems more likely correct: here, Nietzsche’s guiding question is, “how well disposed would you have to become to *yourself* and to *life*” (*Ibid*, my emphasis) to desire the eternal recurrence? Affirming the eternal recurrence not only involves the affirmation of ourselves but of life.

‘Life’ often appears in Nietzsche as personified suggesting the thematization not of a particular life’s biography but of the underlying structure of life and living beings in general.15 Accordingly, when life is under discussion what is said about it always concerns its general features. For instance, Nietzsche tells us, “Life—that is: continually shedding something that wants to die...being cruel and inexorable against everything about us that is growing old and weak—and not only about *us*” (*GS*, 26), and that “this is the most powerful magic of life: it is covered by a veil interwoven with gold, a veil of beautiful possibilities, sparkling with promise,

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15 Even more broadly, Heidegger tells us that Nietzsche uses the word ‘life’ with “the same breadth of meaning as ‘world’” (Heidegger, Martin. *Nietzsche*, Vol. 2, 3). So a careful analysis (like the one offered by Heidegger) of the German and how Nietzsche uses it reveals that Nietzsche does not use ‘life’ [Leben] to refer to my or your particular biography—it would be quite strange if all that ‘world’ [die Welt] meant was the succession of all my experiences. Moreover, Heidegger also notes that Nietzsche uses the words ‘existence’ [Dasein] and ‘life’ interchangeably (*Ibid*). Unlike Heidegger, however, Nietzsche does not use the word ‘existence’ to refer merely to the kind of being that belongs to humans. Existence, insofar as it is shared by all human beings (and all beings in general for that matter) is something that transcends the individual. Hence, ‘life’ must refer to a set of features shared by all things in general. So, becoming well disposed towards life means the same as becoming well disposed towards existence—something that is essentially the same regardless of case—and not towards my particular biography.
resistance, bashfulness, mockery, pity, and seduction. Yes, life is a woman” (GS, 339; Cf., Z, II, “The Dancing Song; III, “The Other Dancing Song”). 16 What do all these features amount to? Elsewhere Nietzsche tells us: “life itself,” he says, “is will to power” (BGE, 13, my emphasis). He also frequently tells us that the world is the will to power (Cf. BGE, 36; WP, 1067) suggesting a threefold equation where life, will to power, and world are all equivalent. ‘Life’, therefore, is almost always discussed in general terms that pick out features, which are shared in common by all living (and perhaps not only living) beings. But rarely, if ever, is life itself discussed in relation to personal biographies. So, if in affirming the eternal recurrence we must become well disposed towards life, it seems that Nietzsche is suggesting that we must become well disposed towards a certain feature of existence in general.

It might be pointed out that other parts of GS 341 do suggest that the thought of the eternal recurrence entails the exact repetition of the thinker’s biography. We need not concede that this damages the point that what is to be affirmed is essentially a feature of existence; nor need we conclude that the biographical reading is not integral to the thought. We must only observe that what the thought is saliently about and what the thought is meant to affirm are not necessarily the same. In fact, the texts suggest that they are not. As we shall see, just because the eternal recurrence requires that we think about the repetition of our biographies does not necessarily mean that affirming life is not something over and above affirming that personal biography. It is, in fact, just this. The biographical structure of the thought of the eternal recurrence brings out a certain feature of life in general, and it is that which we are called upon

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16 It is important to note that GS, 339, where Nietzsche first personifies life as a woman, is separated from the first proclamation of the eternal recurrence by only one section. In Zarathustra too, “The Other Dancing Song” finds Zarathustra talking to life in the form of a pretty girl and directly precedes “The Seven Seals” where Zarathustra is first able to “lust after the nuptial ring of rings, the ring of recurrence.” These strong organizational parallels alone, I think, conclusively demonstrate that GS 341 does not call on us to affirm our personal biographies per se, but to affirm the nature of life in general.
to affirm. As will be shown later, in light of the ability to achieve such an affirmation of life in general, the specific features of one’s own biography do not much matter.

But, if a close reading of the text has indeed shown that the means of affirming the eternal recurrence is not essentially biographical, what will this interpretation have to say about redemption? Must it not ignore this important idea, which is so obviously about personal biography and so obviously married to the idea of eternal recurrence, hence proving itself fatally flawed? In address to the latter of these questions, we must concede that interpreters have indeed had good reason to believe that redemption and eternal recurrence share an important connection: both ideas share strong temporal qualities; both deal with the dichotomy of “nausea” at existence and the affirmation of that existence; and Nietzsche ends the relevant section of *Zarathustra* by telling us that, after his discussion of redemption, “Zarathustra suddenly stopped and looked altogether like one who has received a severe shock [presumably, interpreters suggest, because he has just been lead to the thought of the recurrence]” (Z, II “On Redemption”)17 and then follows two sections later (Z, II “The Stillest Hour”) with clear indications that Zarathustra has been distressfully pondering the eternal recurrence.

Nevertheless, a close examination of the text of *Zarathustra* reveals that the connection may be weaker than was previously supposed. First, note that the conceptions of redemption advanced in Nietzsche’s texts have little to do with a person’s biography. The first part of the section “On Redemption”, in which Zarathustra speaks to the hunchback and his followers of the so-called “inverse cripples,” who have “too little of everything and too much of one thing,” may indeed suggest that Nietzsche has single human lives in mind. But when Zarathustra turns to

17 In his commentary on this section, Kaufmann tells us that Zarathustra’s reflections “lead up to, but stop short of, Nietzsche’s notion of the eternal recurrence.” Anderson too says “at the end of ‘On Redemption,’ after the speech to his disciples, Zarathustra stops in cold horror…Clearly, he has just refused to articulate the Doctrine of Recurrence” (*Redemption and Transfiguration*, 234).
speak to his disciples the tone is different, and indeed the subject matter is different too. “Verily, my friends, I walk among men as among the fragments and limbs of men,” Zarathustra preaches, “This is what is terrible for my eyes, that I find man in ruins and scattered as over a battlefield or a butcher-field” (my emphasis). What is at stake here is mankind, men in general, not any particular man or his personal biography. Zarathustra continues, “I walk among men as among the fragments of the future—that future which I envisage. And this is all my creating and striving, that I create and carry into One what is fragment and riddle and dreadful accident…To redeem those who lived in the past and to re-create all ‘it was’ into a ‘thus I willed it’—that alone should I call redemption” (my emphasis). Redemption, as it is here stated, has to do with the whole of human existence. It does not seem to mean, as has been previously supposed, that what is to be redeemed are the actions and events of a single particular life, but that our actions should try to give mankind a definitive mission and narrative—that our lives fit into that narrative and help further its goal. Hence Zarathustra says, “I should not know how to live if I were not also a seer of that which must come. A seer, a willer, a creator, a future himself and a bridge to the future—and alas, also, as it were, a cripple at this bridge: all this is Zarathustra” (Z, II “On Redemption”; Cf. EH, A 4 (d)). Redemption involves creating a higher future out of the “refuse” of the past. But as the future to be created is that of mankind, not of any single man, even the one who does such creating is himself in someway incomplete and thus still a cripple. Redemption, then, cannot be enacted on a single life (although this is not necessarily to say that great redemptive missions do not have any bearing whatsoever on the affirmation of a single life).\(^{18}\) We therefore need not worry about that fact that this interpretation does not deal with the

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\(^{18}\) Interpreters such as Anderson and Nehamas have looked mainly at these passages from Zarathustra when forming their biographical understanding of redemption. In addition to the fact that these passages do not seem to support such a reading it should also be noted that few interpreters have pointed out that the idea of redemption is actually one of Nietzsche’s earliest, dating back to the essays in Untimely Meditations. Here, using
common biographical conception of redemption, for this interpretation is not at all even what Nietzsche has in mind when discussing the idea.

What, then, does redemption have to do with the eternal recurrence? The texts tell us nothing definitive. Rarely, if ever, are the two ideas mentioned in explicit conjunction with each other. The latter references to the eternal recurrence in Zarathustra have more to do with joy than anything else. In the penultimate section of the fourth book references to the recurrence abound but have been largely ignored likely due to their furtive nature. But, while these ending passages may not tell us much of anything substantive, they do speak quite clearly about one thing—the eternal recurrence is about the nature of joy itself and its relation to life in general. Zarathustra says,

All joy wants the eternity of all things...What does joy not want? It is thirstier, more cordial, hungrier, more terrible, more secret than all woe; it wants itself, it bites into itself, the ring’s will strives in it; it wants love, it wants hatred, it is overrich, gives, throws away, begs that one might take it, thanks the taker, it would like to be hated; so rich is joy that it thirsts for woe, for hell, for hatred, for disgrace, for the cripple, for world—this world, oh, you know it (Z, IV “The Drunken Song”, 11)!

Zarathustra’s remarks here about the nature of joy are indeed puzzling and their explication will not be treated until later. But it is clear that these passages are the culmination of Zarathustra’s teachings on the eternal recurrence. Accordingly, any satisfactory interpretation of the idea must pay heed to Zarathustra’s repeated dictum: “all joy wants—eternity” (Ibid, 10; Cf. III, “The Other Dancing Song”). The eternal recurrence is apparently meant to pick out a certain feature

strikingly similar language to that found in Zarathustra, Nietzsche writes, “the men we live among resemble a field over which is scattered the most precious fragments of sculpture where everything calls to us: come, assist, complete, bring together what belongs together, we have an immeasurable longing to become whole” (UM, III 6; Cf. II 1). Here again, redemption has to do with furthering the goal of mankind which, “because it [mankind] can arrive at a conscious awareness of its goal...ought to seek out and create the favorable conditions under which those great redemptive men [artistic geniuses, great philosophers etc.] can come into existence” (Ibid, my emphasis). It is obvious then that redemption deals with the whole course of human existence, past and future.

Reginster (2006, 222-227) has tried to give an account of the recurrence roughly along such lines. Unfortunately his interpretation is highly underdeveloped and solves nearly none of the problems it purports to address. Reginster
of joy, joy that longs for the world, joy at the nature of existence (if ‘world’ and ‘existence’ are indeed equivalents). What an interpretation has to say about redemption, then, will depend upon what it has to say about joy. But it is clear that redemption is only of secondary importance to our interpretation. In fact, as will become clear in section III, the idea of redemption, as proposed in Zarathustra, is actually an idea to which the eternal recurrence is opposed.

So, if the eternal recurrence is not about biography or redemption per se, what is it about? What, according to Nietzsche, is the nature of existence? What is joy? And how does joy do the affirming required in order to “lust after” the eternal recurrence? It is clear from the above passage that Nietzschean joy is peculiar; it apparently desires its own contradiction, woe, as well as its own propagation. But how are we to make sense of this? What does it mean for joy to desire? Why does joy in such a form have the peculiar feature of affirming existence? And what is the grounding for this theory of joy?

These new and pressing questions invite comparison with new passages. The final section of The Will to Power begins to provide some clues. One might suppose that this passage is merely one of Nietzsche’s bad assertions of the cosmological thesis,20 but there is, in fact, little suggests that to “will” the eternal recurrence (whatever that means) is to welcome the finite nature of life (though not its finitude per se). On this conception we understand that joy, considered not merely as a good and pleasurable state but as a state of perfection, is in fact perfect qua impermanence; we understand the ascetic conception of eternity as a state of joyful permanence to be a fable. Hence, to wish for a particular joyful moment to continue for eternity we must wish also for its impermanence. So, Reginster calls the eternal recurrence an ideal of “becoming”. First of all, it is not clear, despite Reginster’s insistence to the contrary, why such a conception of the recurrence involves a revaluation of all our major values. Certainly Nietzsche’s critique of asceticism runs deeper than just a critique on the value of permanence, not to mention the fact that even the terms “being” and “becoming” as well as the opposition between the two remain considerably vague. Moreover, Reginster says precious little about the actual nature and structure of joy itself; without such an explanation, then, it seems absurd that one would want the eternal recurrence of their self-same life just because they may have experienced a few truly joyful moments and also recognize that such moments were necessarily impermanent. Aside from these objections I think the reader can see that Reginster’s interpretation is also open to many of the same objections raised against Anderson and Nehamas earlier.

20 I assume that the relative silence about this illuminating passage is due to just such a premature assumption. Heidegger, at least, seems to have read this passage in this way when he suggests that it shows that the metaphysical truth of the eternal recurrence is the ground for Nietzsche’s theory of the will to power (Nietzsche, Vol. 2, 21). Essentially, according to Heidegger, the eternal recurrence and the will to power are two sides of the same
in this section that invites such an interpretation. We should examine the entire passage slowly and carefully; Nietzsche begins:

And do you know what “the world” is to me? Shall I show it to you in my mirror? This world: a monster of energy, without beginning, without end; a firm, iron magnitude of force that does not grow bigger or smaller, that does not expend itself but only transforms itself; as a whole, of unalterable size, a household without expenses or losses, but likewise without increase or income; enclosed by “nothingness” as by a boundary; not something blurry or wasted, not something endlessly extended, but set in a definite space as a definite force, and not a space that might be “empty” here or there, but rather as force throughout, as a play of forces and waves of forces, at the same time one and many, increasing here and at the same time decreasing there;

So far there is no mention of anything like the eternal recurrence or its cosmological assertion. What we get instead are a number of points about Nietzsche’s naturalistic conception of the world: (1) time is infinite while space is finite. These two theses are used elsewhere in Nietzsche’s notes to formulate the infamously bad argument for the recurrence’s truth, but here this does not seem to be the case. The point is rather (2) that all things in definite space must, to a certain degree, affect one another—everything pushes and pulls, as it were, on everything else. That time is infinite indicates that this process of change and effects is essential and never-ending; existence has no goal, is entirely indifferent, and will never cease to be just what it is (Cf. BGE, 9; WP, 1062). Nietzsche’s description continues, however:

    a sea of forces flowing and rushing together, eternally changing, eternally flooding back, with tremendous years of recurrence, with an ebb and a flood of its forms;

Here, Nietzsche first mentions something that sounds like the eternal recurrence and the fact that he describes “tremendous years of recurrence” may suggest that he does indeed have the cosmological picture in mind. But he goes on to say,

metaphysical coin. Philosopher’s have apparently followed suit and, in rejecting Heidegger, have accordingly dismissed this passage as one Nietzsche himself ultimately rejected.
out of the simplest forms striving toward the most complex, out of the stillest, most rigid, coldest forms toward the hottest, most turbulent, most self-contradictory, and then again returning home to the simple out of this abundance, out of the play of contradictions back to the joy of concord, still affirming itself in this uniformity of its courses and its years, blessing itself as that which must return eternally, as a becoming that knows no satiety, no disgust, no weariness (my emphasis):

We see that the “recurrence” that is here being described is not at all the cosmological hypothesis, nor even the formal doctrine as presented to us in GS 341. Rather, it is the endlessly recurrent “becoming” of life and the very joy in contradiction that Nietzsche has described at the end of Zarathustra. Joy is apparently one state in this endless process. Nietzsche then says,

this, my Dionysian world of the eternally self-creating, the eternally self-destroying, this mystery world of the twofold voluptuous delight, my “beyond good and evil,” without goal, unless the joy of the circle is itself a goal (my emphasis); 21

Nietzsche now vindicates our earlier suppositions. When he tells us that existence is “beyond good and evil” and “without goal” he makes clear that the features of the world this passage is meant to describe are its indifference and its inherent purposelessness, not any actual recurrence of its self-same events. This world, he goes on to say, is

without will, unless the ring feels good will towards itself—do you want a name for this world? A solution for all its riddles? A light for you, too, you best-concealed, strongest, most intrepid, most midnightly men?—This world is the will to power—and nothing besides! And you yourselves are also this will to power—and nothing besides! (WP, 1067)

What is under discussion here, then—this self-contradicting, indifferent, and recurrent feature of existence—is not the eternal recurrence per se, but the will to power, the recurrent structure of

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21 This part of the passage invites comparison with two earlier sections from The Will to Power, 1041 and 1050, wherein Nietzsche discusses his conception of the Dyionisan. He distinguishes it as “an urge” (1050)—a term which, if applied to existence in general, suggests a particular tendency towards certain things. So, when Nietzsche calls the world “my Dionysian world” (WP, 1067) he probably means that existence has the tendency to produce certain features and certain patterns.
which is the underlying motivation for the formal thought of the eternal recurrence as we are given it in *The Gay Science*.

We may now stop and review our conclusions about the nature of the interpretation of the eternal recurrence. We have discovered from closely examining the texts that the now traditional conception of the eternal recurrence as rooted in a biographical form of redemption has little basis. Biographical conceptions of the eternal recurrence and redemption have both showed themselves to be flawed. In fact, what we have found is that what is essential to the eternal recurrence is, not necessarily any personal life *per se*, but joy and its derivative relation to a certain feature of existence common to all beings. Such a feature, roughly sketched, appears to be a constant longing for growth and destruction, the acknowledgement on the part of existence that, as Zarathustra puts it, “What has become perfect, all that is ripe—wants to die….Blessed, blessed be the vintager’s knife! But all that is unripe wants to live” (Z, IV, “The Drunken Song” 9; Cf., *GS*, 26), and the inherent purposelessness of this endless process. It is these features of existence that the thought experiment of the eternal recurrence brings before us and asks us to affirm. As will be shown in the next section, by thinking through the endless and self-same repetition of one’s own biography the underlying existential structure of one’s being is brought saliently before oneself. So, while thinking the thought of the eternal recurrence *does* demand a sort of biographical reflection on the part of the thinker, what is to be affirmed or denied by the thinker is not *his* particular life *per se*, but the underlying structure of all life in general. The endless repetition of personal biography, which *is* necessitated by the thought of the eternal recurrence, is simply a convenient method for revealing this structure. But, in fact, the affirmation of one’s own biography is somewhat incidental to the affirmation of life itself, which is what the eternal recurrence *really* calls us to do.
III: Despair, Fate, and the Absurdity of Existence

If we wish to make an attempt at answering the question of just why exactly one might “crave nothing more fervently” (GS, 341) than the eternal recurrence, it is first best to understand what specifically is the existential structure that the thought experiment reveals and why one might meet said structure with despair. For, if we have a clear grasp of what is terrible in the thought we can better guess how one might oppose that terror. If my interpretation of the texts offered above is correct—if what the eternal recurrence puts before us to affirm is the nature of existence itself—then the negative reaction should accordingly consist of an absolute inability to accept (without despair) some feature of that existence. So, what particular thesis about the nature of existence does the eternal recurrence call us to accept? In accordance with the formulation of the idea in section 341 of *The Gay Science*, if I imagine all the past actions and events in my life, up to the very moment of my thinking through the eternal recurrence, as returning *ad infinitum* “all in the same succession and sequence” (*Ibid*), I notice that my life becomes, so to speak, as if a frieze in which certain aspects of that life, hitherto considered fairly unessential, are brought into high relief while other ostensibly crucial aspects fade, as it were, into the undifferentiated mass of the matrix stone. Of special importance is the fact that all of my actions and the events that have occurred in my life, as well as everything that happens as present passes away into past while I think through the thought, become inscribed, so to speak, in eternity—my entire self is now wholly defined by these self-same occurrences and their

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22 It may be noted that I have not suggested a reading of the thought experiment in which my life has already recurred innumerable times. This is because nothing in GS 341 or in the latter mentions of the idea (BGE 56; TI, X 4, 5) suggests such a reading. When Nietzsche says that this life “as you have lived it” (GS 341) will recur eternally he is clearly referring to the past events in this my “current” life. The pervading presumption that the “backward” recurrence of a life was an essential feature of the idea seems generally to come from certain readings—or misreadings—of some passages in Zarathustra (namely, “On the Vision and the Riddle” and “The Convalescent”) and The Will To Power. Note only that, even if the recurrence entails this other feature, this only strengthens the points I will make.
sequence. So, while taking the thought of the eternal recurrence seriously, it makes no sense for me to consider myself as ever having done otherwise, or, for that matter, to consider anything at all in my life as having ever happened otherwise. Due to our common conceptions about things like freedom and modality, we generally assume that, where we given the chance to repeat our lives, certain features of those lives would likely turn out different. But, since the recurrence to be imagined is one wherein each and everything is exactly the same, these intuitions cannot avail us. Accordingly, in my imagining the eternal recurrence, that which I have generally taken to be essential to my essence, i.e., my (free) will or my conscious self (à la Descartes), begins to evaporate. There is, one might say, no longer any agency left in my actions. Hence, Nietzsche’s decree that the eternal recurrence “would lie upon you actions as the greatest weight” (GS, 341, my emphasis).

Nietzsche’s reasons for rejecting these time-honored philosophical notions come in a relatively unnoticed passage from The Gay Science. Here Nietzsche tells us emphatically, “that consciousness does not really belong to man’s individual existence,” as Descartes and nearly every philosopher after him, up to and including Kant, presumed, “but rather to his social or herd nature” (GS, 354). Nietzsche, in anticipation of Heidegger, observes that consciousness and conscious “willing”, as generally conceived, really have little part in action:

For we could think, feel, will, and remember, and we could also “act” in every sense of that word, and yet none of all this would have to “enter our consciousness” (as one says metaphorically). The whole of life would be possible without, as it were, seeing itself in a mirror. Even now, for that matter, by far the

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23 This reading of the phrase, “the question in each and every thing, ‘Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?’ would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight,” may seem rather counter intuitive. Kundera, for instance, has read this sentence as suggesting that our actions are made to seem overwhelmingly more important by the thought of recurrence: “the myth of the eternal return states that a life which disappears once and for all, which does not return, is like a shadow, without weight” but “in the world of the eternal return the weight of unbearable responsibility lies heavy on every move we make” (The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Ch. 1-2). In a sense this is correct. Our actions do become more important because they alone begin to define us. But this occurs at the expense of the supposed agency behind those actions—our intensions and our ability to do otherwise than we have done—hence making ourselves as agents appear less consequential and less responsible.
greatest portion of our life actually takes place without this mirror effect; and this is true even of our thinking, feeling, and willing life, however offensive this may sound to older philosophers (Ibid; Cf., 11).

Phenomenally, this point seems true; so many, indeed most, of our day-to-day actions are preformed unreflectively, without conscious direction, and in such a manner that being conscious of them might even hinder their execution. To borrow Heidegger’s famous example, when hammering “the less we just stare at the hammer-Thing, and the more we seize hold of it and use it, the more primordial does our relationship to it become, and the more unveiledly is it encountered as that which it is—as equipment.” So, Nietzsche says, “the problem of consciousness (more precisely, of becoming conscious of something) confronts us only when we begin to comprehend how we could dispense with it” (GS, 354).

Since it seems phenomenologically true that we frequently act purposively without any trace of conscious direction, this begs the question of all actions whether or not they are ever related in any strong causal sense to the “willing” of a conscious subject. Nietzsche concludes that they are not:

The will no longer moves anything, hence does not explain anything either—it merely accompanies events; it can also be absent. The so-called motive: another error. Merely a surface phenomenon of consciousness, something alongside the deed that is more likely to cover up the antecedents of the deeds than to represent them (TI, VI 3).

Why might Nietzsche think this? Generally, conceptions of free will “in the superlative metaphysical sense” (BGE, 21), as he puts it, conceive of agents as self-conscious cogitos, standing more or less independent of the rest of the human organism and the world, which actively think, deliberate, and cause (will) themselves to act. If Nietzsche is buying into a roughly Heideggerian phenomenology of action, then this spells grave problems for such a

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24 Being and Time, 69
conception of agency. With such phenomenology in mind, Dreyfus and Kelly, for instance, have argued that,

There is no ego, because if there were an ego there would be a distinction between what the world calls for and what the ego believes the world calls for, and therefore what the ego plans to do on the basis of it. In motor intentional activity there is no distinction between comportment and environment; what the environment solicits, the comporter is immediately motivated to do.\textsuperscript{25}

If indeed there is no ego then free agency, at least as traditionally conceived, is fallacious. Of course, Nietzsche’s “phenomenology”, if it can be called that, is not as worked out or as in depth as Heidegger’s, and Dreyfus and Kelly’s argument is not Nietzsche’s. But his point is fairly similar: bad psychological phenomenology has led the history of philosophy to consider the ego’s role in action to be far more important than it actually is: “Men were considered ‘free’…consequently, every act had to be considered as willed, and the origin of every act had to be considered as lying within the consciousness (and thus the most fundamental counterfeit in psychologicis was made the principle of psychology itself)” (\textit{TI}, VI 7). In reality, however, Nietzsche thinks close observation shows such psychology to be ill founded: “a thought comes when ‘it’ wishes, and not when ‘I’ wish, so that it is a falsification of the facts of the case to say that the subject ‘I’ is the condition of the predicate ‘think’” (\textit{BGE}, 17). If thoughts are the ultimate source of all our actions, as Nietzsche seems to think (Cf., \textit{BGE}, 19), then few, if any, actions are wholly \textit{caused} by our consciousness, and hence our supposed freedom proves much less robust than we have generally taken it to be.

Here Nietzsche’s naturalism (discussed in the introduction) shows itself in full force. If freedom, generally understood, entails that we somehow separate agents from the natural order, and if we are also committed to the belief that said agents are wholly natural beings, it seems we

\textsuperscript{25} Hubert L. Dreyfus and Sean D. Kelly. \textit{Notes on Embodiment in Homer: Reading Homer on moods and action in the light of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty}, 3
have a potentially uneasy marriage. Accordingly, Nietzsche believes genealogy reveals what sort of thing freedom and responsibility actually are. It is not some privileged metaphysical power that defines human beings and separates them from the rest of the natural world, but rather an interpretation of surface phenomena that actually conceals the true function of consciousness. Nietzsche’s considerations here are of a roughly Darwinian sort; if, as phenomenology shows, intentional action does not require conscious direction, consciousness must have been developed to serve some other purpose: “That our actions, thoughts, feelings, and movements enter our own consciousness—at least part of them—that is the result of a ‘must’ that for a terribly long time lorded it over man. As the most endangered animal, he needed help and protection…he needed to learn to express his distress and to make himself understood” (GS, 354). Consequently, Nietzsche hypothesizes that “consciousness has developed only under the pressure of the need for communication” and “really is only a net of communication between human beings” (Ibid; Cf., WP, 524). This “net”, Nietzsche tells us, works by essentially reducing things to rough and uniform outlines so that they can be easily understood and communicated: “consequently…each of us will always succeed in becoming conscious only of what is not individual but ‘average’. Our thoughts themselves are continually governed by the character of consciousness…and translated back into the perspective of the herd” (Ibid). Now, Societies (the herd, as Nietzsche puts it) function, in part, on the basis of individuals being able to make promises (creditor debtor situations presuppose this). Nietzsche takes up this theme in the Genealogy:

To ordain the future in advance in this way, man must first have learned to distinguish necessary events from chance ones, to think causally, to see and anticipate distant eventualities as if they belonged to the present, to decide with certainty what is the goal and what the means to it, and in general be able to calculate and compute. Man himself must first of all have become calculable, regular, necessary, even in his own image of himself, if he is to be able to stand security for his own future, which is what one who makes promises does (GM, II, 1)!
Man became able to do just this by dulling down the phenomenal evidence as his consciousness made things simpler, easier to understand and communicate. He observed what psychological processes seemed to follow in a regular sequence, “explained” this sequence as a causal sequence, and left out, or simply did not become conscious of, the events that did not fit easily into this schema: “here Hume was right; habit (but not that of the individual!)…That which gives the extraordinary firmness to our belief in causality is not the great habit of seeing one occurrence following another but our inability to interpret events otherwise than as events caused by intentions” (WP, 550). So, the fact that our consciousness interprets all of our actions as causal and intentional betrays only that “with the aid…of the social straitjacket, man was actually made calculable” (GM, II, 2), and not that his supposed causal autonomy is an empirically given fact. Like all conscious interpretations, Nietzsche thinks, the idea of autonomous, consciously intentional, and causal action is merely “corruption, falsification, reduction to superficialities, and generalization” (GS, 354; Cf., WP, 523, 526). It is this interpretation of action, however, that Nietzsche thinks originally gave rise to the conception of freedom (Cf., Ibid). Freedom, thus considered, does not really require any ability to do otherwise—(although it purports to) it requires the very opposite! Freedom, therefore, is not some privileged causal power on the part of a sovereign agent who possesses the ability to do otherwise. Rather, Nietzsche says, “Since in the great majority of cases there has been exercise of the will only when…the action…was to be expected, the appearance has translated itself into the feeling, as if there were a necessity of effect” (BGE, 19; Cf., GM, II, 2). We can expect, then, that a good deal of the actions we take to be “freely willed” really have their origin in some deeper instinctual drives. For example, Nietzsche says, “by far the greater part of conscious thinking must still be included among instinctive activities, and that goes even for philosophical
thinking…Behind all logic and its seeming sovereignty of movement, too, there stand valuations or, more clearly, physiological demands for the preservation of a certain type of life” (BGE, 3). In this respect, Nietzsche sees human action as much closer to that of other animals than to that of, say, gods.

If Nietzsche is right then our conscious deliberation plays a far more cursory role in action than we have hitherto supposed. If this be the case then the foundations for moral responsibility begin to crumble. This does not mean that we can never be responsible; we can, and just because many of our actions are not consciously spawned does not mean that they are not “our” actions or that they are not intentional, in the loose sense of that word. It simply means that responsibility is something that does not cut to the core of our being but was “designed” with the utility of society in mind. Still, however, “at the bottom of us, really ‘deep down,’ there is, of course, something unteachable, some granite spiritual fatum, of predetermined decision and answer to predetermined selected questions” (BGE, 231). So, by forcing us to view our lives in a fashion that downplays the importance of the ego, the eternal recurrence demands that we accept Nietzsche’s conclusions about the nature of action without necessarily accepting his arguments. It is easy, then, to see why one might react with horror at the idea of the eternal recurrence if that person is accustomed to viewing the world, as Nietzsche puts it, “under the spell and delusion of morality” (BGE, 56) and thus consoling himself with the thought that all the terrible occurrences in the world and in his life need not have occurred. Many, if not most, of those events will have arisen from some deep “physiological” necessity. Moreover, to those who believe that their actions have distinctive worth due to their own freedom, the eternal recurrence should, if it necessitates the conclusions I have argued it does, make life appear somewhat like a charade. Hence, Nietzsche tells us, “to endure the idea of the recurrence one needs: freedom from
morality; new means against the fact of pain...the enjoyment of all kinds of uncertainty, experimentalism, as a counterweight to this extreme fatalism;...abolition of the ‘will’” (WP, 1060, my emphasis). The eternal recurrence, then, entails a sort of fatalism whereby man is condemned to be just what he has been.

*Vis-à-vis* morality this is certainly a troubling notion, perhaps one worthy of despair. But Nietzsche’s critique of asceticism goes beyond morality proper. And indeed, there is a deeper feature of the recurrence lurking behind the lack of freedom it generates—namely, that all existence is ultimately meaningless. And this is the existential feature that the idea is truly meant to bring out. To see it we must consider the two equally insufficient ways Nietzsche thinks actions have hitherto been evaluated: first, he says, “during the longest part of human history—so-called prehistorical times—the value or disvalue of an action was derived from its consequences” (*BGE*, 32); second, he tells us, “in the last ten thousand years, however, one has reached the point, step by step...where it is no longer the consequences but the origin of an action that one allows to decide its value” (*Ibid*). This latter position was of course held famously by Kant who declared that, “there is no possibility of thinking of anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be regarded as good without qualification, except a good will.”

It is obvious from what has already been said that the grounding for this conception of moral action is ruled out by the eternal recurrence. But what about the former less hard-nosed (and not necessarily moral) conception of action that was once again beginning to be championed around the time Nietzsche was writing, most famously by J.S. Mill?

With a bit of consideration it is clear that the eternal recurrence rules out this method of giving our actions worth too. For, if I imagine all my actions recurring eternally in the same

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26 *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, 393. A similar ethical position was held by Arthur Schopenhauer who held that actions have moral worth only when preformed selflessly.
sequence, all semblances of anything being accomplished by those actions is destroyed. As Heidegger puts it:

What is dark and horrid in the teaching as it is expressed...[is] the fact that if everything recurs all decision and every effort and will to make things better is a matter of indifference; that if everything turns in a circle nothing is worth the trouble; so the result of the teaching is disgust and ultimately the negation of life.²⁷

But what are Nietzsche’s reasons for thinking that seeing all actions as essentially worthless is instrumental in an accurate assessment of our existence? If the eternal recurrence is cosmologically false, as it surely is, then does it not seem that our actions do indeed make a good deal of difference? Nietzsche thinks not. Since, as we saw above, Nietzsche rejects any robust conception of freedom of the will he is committed to the fact that actions do not occur ex nihilio, as it were, through some privileged capacity for choice (Sartre or Kant would have us believe this) but rather stem from some underlying nature of our organism. So, certain actions, although perhaps reprehensible, cannot really be considered unnecessary (moral assessments of action seem to suppose this), for, this Nietzsche thinks, involves a gross misunderstanding of the nature of action, which supposes that an action does not reflect some part of man’s ultimate existential constitution:

To demand of strength that it should not express itself as strength, that it should not be a desire to overcome, a desire to throw down, a desire to become master, a thirst for enemies and resistances and triumphs, is just as absurd as to demand of weakness that it should express itself as strength. A quantum of force is equivalent to a quantum of drive, will, effect—more, it is nothing other than precisely this very driving, willing, effecting, and only owing to the seduction of language (and the fundamental errors of reason petrified in it) which conceives and misconceives all effects as conditioned by something that causes effects, by a “subject,” can it appear otherwise (GM, I 13).

There is not space here to comment in any adequate or illuminating manner on Nietzsche’s complex “theory” of the will to power, which seems to be suggested in this passage. For our

²⁷ Heidegger. Nietzsche, Vol. 2, 3
purposes it will suffice simply to observe that, because all value judgments presuppose the non-necessity of actions, *ergo* free will, should our freedom be removed so too will our ability to impute our actions with value. No actions can actually “achieve” anything because they cannot alter the fundamental underlying structure of existence (be that the will to power or anything else) and make things “better”—they themselves are derivative from that structure! So, absent freedom, the very presence of pain, suffering, inequality, and the actions that cause them, indicates that any ultimate goal or final state that we believe our “worthwhile” actions tend towards—be that an ultimate utilitarian state free from all pain or some Hegelian society of absolute freedom—is, in reality, illusory: “that a state of equilibrium is never reached proves that it is not possible” (*WP*, 1064). It should be clear, then, why, in examining section 1067 of *The Will to Power* above, we discovered that Nietzsche sees the world as engaged in the purposeless and eternal repetition of the same types of processes, forms, and events.

It is obvious that this conception of, as Nietzsche puts it in *The Birth of Tragedy*, “the horror or absurdity of existence” (*BT*, 7) is derivative of his fatalism. It is at this point useful to distinguish between two types of fatalism, one that Nietzsche obviously endorses, the other which he seemingly does not. *Classical fatalism*, as Brian Leiter defines it, “is the view that whatever happens had to happen, but…involves the notion of some sort of non-deterministic, perhaps even non-causal, necessity.” Nietzsche does not hold this view, although a slightly

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28 This is not to suggest that pain, suffering, inequality, and everything derivative of the will to power in the physical sense cannot be largely curtailed. They can and have been. But this does not mean that these states are necessarily eliminated, or even lessened. Rather, these states simply become more insidious and internalized. They may even become greater, and Nietzsche suggests that, “in the days when mankind was not yet ashamed of its cruelty, life on earth was more cheerful than it is now” (*GM*, II, 7). Take, for instance, what Nietzsche says about philosophy: “Philosophy is this tyrannical drive itself, the most spiritual will to power” (*BGE*, 9, my emphasis). Dostoevsky has provided us with at least one great example of such an unexpected hideout of the will to power when the narrator of *Notes From the Underground* tells us, “for me to love meant to tyrannize and preponderize morally” (*TI*, X). Incidentally, Nietzsche garnered great respect for Dostoevsky calling him “the only psychologist…from whom I had anything to learn; he ranks among the most beautiful strokes of fortune in my life” (*TI*, IX 45).

weaker form of this type of fatalism is artificially generated by the thought experiment of the recurrence. But this artificial fatalism is meant to mirror another type of fatalism, let us call it *existential fatalism* for ease of reference, the one which as we have just seen Nietzsche *does* accept. This view is namely, that man is “fated”, in virtue of his existential constitution, to simply be what he is, to never improve or change fundamentally.\(^\text{30}\) This belief constitutes a major front in Nietzsche’s attack on morality:

Let us finally consider how naïve it is altogether to say: “Man *ought* to be such and such!” Reality shows us an enchanting wealth of types, the abundance of a lavish play of forms… The single human being is a piece of fatum from the front and from the rear, one law more, one necessity more for all that is to yet to come and to be. To say to him, “Change yourself!” is to demand that everything be changed, even retroactively (*TI*, V 6; Cf., *TI*, VI 8; *BGE*, 231)

So, by forcing us to accept that none of our actions ultimately achieve anything meaningful, thinking the eternal recurrence demands that we accept our fatalistic constitution and therefore also accept life, which is derivative of that constitution, as inherently *meaningless*. Despair in the face of the eternal recurrence, then, is quite a conceivable reaction to the thought, since taking seriously the recurrence requires us to accept the futility of choice, and hence the absurdity of existence, again without having actually to agree with any of Nietzsche’s arguments.

We might wonder what exactly it is that would constitute a life as meaningful. One common conception of a meaningful existence, one that most all of us would accept, is this: our lives are meaningful if they are purposive and achieve some lasting effect. The impossibility of this conception of meaning seems to be what the soothsayer laments in *Zarathustra*: “And from all the hills it echoed: ‘all is empty, all is the same, all has been!’” Indeed we have harvested: but why did all our fruit turn rotten and brown? What fell down from the evil moon last night? **In vain** was all our work” (*Z*, II “The Soothsayer”, my emphasis). Zarathustra later interprets the

soothsayer’s prophecy thus: “All is the same, nothing is worthwhile, the world is without meaning, knowledge strangles” (Z, IV “The Cry of Distress”, my emphasis). It is this fatalistic absurdity that initially prevents Zarathustra from being able to think through the eternal recurrence; for, although he has long since repudiated traditional morality and a whole host of other commonly held philosophical beliefs, Zarathustra still sees his teachings as a means to further mankind, to help it achieve some objective higher goal—the very sort of dogmatic world conception he has already criticized. After convalescing he tells his animals,

The great disgust with man—this choked me and had crawled into my throat; and what the soothsayer said: ‘all is the same, nothing is worthwhile, knowledge chokes.’… Naked I had once seen both, the greatest man and the smallest man: all-too-similar to each other, even the greatest all-too-human. All-too-small, the greatest!—that was my disgust with man. And the eternal recurrence even of the smallest—this was my disgust with all existence. Alas! Nausea! Nausea! Nausea (Z, III, “The Convalescent”, my emphasis)!

Zarathustra’s nausea, it seems, is the same nausea that Nietzsche thinks the Greeks experienced before their advent of the saving power of tragedy. Both Zarathustra and the Greeks, “have once looked truly into the essence of things, they have gained knowledge, and nausea inhibits action; for their action could not change anything in the eternal nature of things; they feel it to be ridiculous or humiliating that they should be asked to set right a world that is out of joint” (BT, 7, my emphasis). It is no coincidence then that Zarathustra first comes across the thought of the eternal recurrence at the end of his sermon on redemption. But this is not because the idea of redemption itself leads Zarathustra to think of the eternal recurrence, but because the eternal recurrence, as the formalization of the soothsayer’s prophecy, shows Zarathustra that redemption is, in fact, impossible. No higher future can really be created out of the accidents of the past,

31 Note the close parallels in language between this passage and the passage from Zarathustra. It is knowledge that chokes Zarathustra and leads to his nausea just as the Greeks had gained knowledge and this lead to their paralyzing nausea. Also, Zarathustra’s knowledge is apparently about all existence whereas the knowledge of the Greeks is about the eternal nature of things.
because such creation cannot alter the underlying structure of existence—the accidental past and the “higher” future both remain “all-too-similar to each other.” Interpreters have wondered why, at the end of Zarathustra’s speech on redemption, the hunchback poses the decidedly pointed question, “why does Zarathustra speak otherwise to his pupils than to himself?” Clearly, this is because Zarathustra has been pondering the soothsayer’s prophecy, which not coincidentally directly precedes the section, “On Redemption”. After Zarathustra listens to the soothsayer we are told, “the prophecy touched his heart and changed him. He walked about sad and weary; and he became like those of whom the soothsayer had spoken” (Z, II, “The Soothsayer”). And it is clear that by the end of this section, following his disciple’s botched interpretation of his nightmare, Zarathustra has still not overcome his despair in the face of the absurdity of existence. So, Zarathustra receives his “severe shock” because he realizes that, given the truth of the soothsayer’s prophecy, he cannot believe a word of what he has just said about redemption.

To sum up, thinking through the eternal recurrence in the correct manner has a twofold effect: first, by downplaying the importance that choice bears to our actions it commits us to a view of ourselves whereby we artificially appear fated to be just what we have been. This feature corresponds to Nietzsche’s true notion of fatalism whereby we are fated to be just what we are (existentially speaking). This existential fatalism has its roots in Nietzsche’s rejection of free agency, which entails that our actions, pleasant and unpleasant alike, ultimately have their source in our underlying existential structure. Such fatalism entails that our actions are essentially meaningless since they cannot alter “anything in the eternal nature of things” (BT, 7). And this feature is, in turn, brought out by the second aspect of the eternal recurrence whereby everything we accomplish is ultimately undone and then repeated ad infinitum. This reading of
the eternal recurrence both gives us a more plausible reason to despair as well as a better reading of the often-perplexing text of Zarathustra.

**IV: Joy, *Amor Fati*, and the Dionysian Affirmation of Life**

We can now achieve a rough sketch of what the positive reaction to the idea of the eternal recurrence might look like. We have seen that the eternal recurrence emphasizes a sort of existential fatalism that shows existence—at least, existence purposively considered—to be essentially meaningless. This sort of fatalism is apparently what initially chokes Zarathustra, and it is easy to see why it might choke us as well. But, if this is the feature of existence that the eternal recurrence brings before us, it must also be the feature of existence that we must somehow affirm if we are to affirm the eternal recurrence. Quite a tall order! Nevertheless, I venture the supposition that this existential fatalism, derivative as it is from Nietzsche’s “naturalistic” view of man as the will to power, is exactly the fatalism that Nietzsche means to draw attention to with his famous dictum, *amor fati*.

Like that of the eternal recurrence, the first proclamation of this idea comes in *The Gay Science*. Here Nietzsche says, “I want to learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things; then I shall be one of those who makes things beautiful. *Amor fati*: let that be my love henceforth! I do not want to wage war against what is ugly” (*GS*, 276, my emphasis). As we have seen, Nietzsche thinks that a good deal of what is reprehensible (ugly) in man is necessary and not to be avoided simply due to the kind of being man essentially is. Later this point becomes more pronounced:

We, however, *want to become those we are*—human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves. To that end we must become the best learners and discoverers of everything that is **lawful and necessary in the world**: we must become **physicists** in order to be able to be **creators** in this sense (*GS*, 335, my emphasis).
Two modes of affirmation, then, (*amor fati* and self-creation) both rely essentially on understanding what is necessary in life. Notice that Nietzsche does not say that he wants to learn that everything *is* necessary or that we should discover that everything *is* lawful and necessary, but that he wants to “see as beautiful what is necessary” and discover “everything that is lawful and necessary.” Some things certainly are not necessary. So, *amor fati* is not Nietzsche’s plea that we somehow love a world in which each and everything actually is essential, as some have thought. Rather, it calls us to love our underlying existential structure, whereby we recognize that much, but not necessarily all, of what we have generally taken to be unessential in fact *is* essential, unalterable, and derivative of something much deeper.

The trouble with this interpretation is that it does often seem as if Nietzsche has the stronger claim in mind. “My formula for greatness in a human being,” says Nietzsche in *Ecce Homo*, “is *amor fati*: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary, still less conceal it…but love it” (*EH*, “Why I am so Clever”, 10, my emphasis). But notice that it is a matter of wanting (which we might think assumes some lack) not merely recognizing. And again, Nietzsche does not caution us against merely bearing or concealing the fact that *everything* is necessary but only against merely bearing or concealing *what* is necessary. Elsewhere Nietzsche uses almost the same words in reference to the eternal recurrence calling it “the ideal of the most high-spirited, alive, world-affirming human being who has not only come to terms and learned to get along with whatever was and is, but who wants to have *what was and is* repeated into all eternity” (*BGE*, 56). As we have seen the eternal recurrence “idealizes” our existential fatalism by entailing a stronger sort of classical fatalism; this is why Nietzsche calls it an ideal—as an ideal it is, untrue and unattainable, but this does not dissuade us from wanting it (presuming we are properly
predisposed). In like manner, we may assume that *amor fati*, while properly speaking is only a love of our fatalistic constitution, is also an ideal that is achieved through loving the strong sort of classical fatalism that is entailed by the eternal recurrence. Therefore, *amor fati* and the affirmation of the eternal recurrence turn out to be the same thing. Hence Nietzsche says, “Such an experimental philosophy as I live…wants…to cross over to…a Dionysian affirmation of the world as it is, without subtraction, exception, or selection—it wants the eternal circulation…my formula for this is *amor fati*” (WP, 1041). Nietzsche poses this stronger ideal to ensure, not necessarily that we redeem our lives by ensuring that each and every terse fact from our biographies fit together and serve some ultimate mission, but in order to ensure that we are not deluded in purporting to love life, and everything that is essentially entailed in existing as a living being.

But how might one attain such an amorous relation to existence? This is particularly troublesome since the fate that is to be loved is one which entails the utter meaninglessness of existence. How could one possibly love that? Unfortunately, there is no easy formula for this to be found in Nietzsche’s writings. Most likely this is because, as Beatrice Han-Pile has astutely observed, love is not the sort of thing that can actively be willed or reasoned into existence.\(^\text{32}\) Phenomenologically, love is the sort of thing that besets us, something in which we merely find ourselves “as expressed by the locution ‘to fall in love’,” and the best we can do is perhaps to aid in “the development or cultivation of a particular receptivity to such love.”\(^\text{33}\) If *amor fati* is indeed the affirmation of the eternal recurrence, then presumably this state will be achieved through joy, which, as we have seen, is that *which* affirms recurrence. But if love is, as Han-Pile puts it, “mediopassive,” then joy would seem to be the same sort of emotion. So, how then is joy

\(^{32}\) Han-Pile, Beatrice. *Nietzsche and Amor Fati*, 10

\(^{33}\) *Ibid.*, 14
to be achieved, especially when in full realization of the absurdity of our existence? Are these not particularly poor conditions for cultivating a receptivity to joy? Perhaps. But perhaps not quite as poor as we might think. Remember, that joy as Nietzsche conceives it is dynamic, not static—it is apparently built into the joy structure to desire woe and its own end. So, the inability to achieve any final higher state may not be particularly incursive. Nevertheless, an in depth and conclusive answer to these questions is not likely to be expected until we are provided with an exhaustive study of the structure of joy and the will to power, which is of course beyond the scope of this paper. Still, we can offer a few new considerations about joy apart from those discussed in section II that may help us sketch some possible answers: joy must be derivative, like all things, from the underlying existential structure of the world; joy is seen by Nietzsche as a state of perfection (perfection considered as a state which lacks nothing); and joy itself is a moment that achieves a passive form of redemption, which differs from the active biographical form offered by some interpreters.

As to the first of these considerations—in section III we saw that the soothsayer’s prophecy, “all is empty, all is the same, all has been” (Z, II “The Soothsayer”) is troubling and seems true because, given the fact that all of our actions and enterprises are ultimately derivative from the same existential structure underlying ourselves as natural beings as well as the natural world, it appears that nothing we do can alter or improve the world—if, to reverse Kundera’s formula, we recur eternally it is just as if we never existed at all. If we are used to seeing our lives as meaningful because of their supposed purposive or moral substance this idea should cause us to despair. But notice that it is not strictly true that this fact entails that existence is meaningless. ‘Meaningless,’ considered as a reprehensible state, seems to be a value judgment. In other words, to consider something that is without an objectively valid end to be “not worth
it,” as we might say, presupposes a system of values by which we judge the worth of something. But such a value system is the very thing the eternal recurrence rules out, since all such systems rest on condemning certain things—actions, intensions, states, events, etc.—as worse than others. But if all is the same no such judgments can even be made since no comparison is available. The world, Nietzsche says,

is of equivalent value at every moment; the sum of its values always remains the same; in other words, it has no value at all, for anything against which to measure it, and in relation to which the word “value” would have any meaning, is lacking. The total value of the world cannot be evaluated; consequently philosophical pessimism belongs among comical things (WP, 708; Cf., 36; TI, II 2).

This does not mean that we cannot have any values at all; it merely means that no system of values can hold as universally valid since there is no scale based upon objective truths by which we can measure the valuational disparity between certain actions, states, and events.

Joy, therefore, does not need to see the world as inherently meaningful in order to be able to affirm it. Just because the world may be intrinsically without meaning does not necessarily entail that existence is intrinsically meaningless, the latter of these terms taken as a claim expressing a valuational judgment. So the conditions from which joy must emerge are not as insufferable as we might at first think, although they may demand that we give up our convictions about certain ostensibly objective modes of valuation (traditional morality, for example). But, if the world’s inherent lack of meaning does not erect unsurpassable hurdles for the possibility of joy, neither does it seem that this lack of meaning should factor in to the sort of affirmation of life that joy achieves—joy itself simply is that affirmation. If joy is, as suggested in WP 1067, derivative of the will to power (see pages 17-18), and the underlying existential structure of the world is itself that same will to power (see page 11), then joy, in affirming itself,
must implicitly affirm all existence. This affirmation is automatic; no judgments of meaning need be added in order for it to happen.

This point becomes more apparent when we examine our second consideration. The fact that Zarathustra tells us that “Joy…does not want heirs, or children—joy wants itself” (Z, IV, “The Drunken Song”, 9) implies that joy is a state of complete satisfaction—a state of self-sufficiency and perfection. When speaking of joy, Zarathustra exclaims, “just now my world became perfect” (Ibid, 10) and earlier provides us with this riddle: “What has become perfect, all that is ripe—wants to die…But all that suffers wants to live, that it may become ripe and joyous” (Ibid, 9, my emphasis; Cf., “At Noon”). Whatever we might have to say about the peculiar relation between joy and suffering, one thing is at least clear—that ripeness, joy, and perfection, as Nietzsche conceives them, are all one and the same state. We can easily imagine how a joyous moment might be considered a perfect moment; for a moment to be truly joyous, we might suspect, would be for it to be lacking nothing—to be a moment of absolute self-satisfaction and pervasive affirmation of the whole character of existence. If joy affirms itself, thus affirming and calling perfect the underlying existential structure of which it is derivative, even if just for a moment, then it is implicitly an affirmation of everything else as derivative of that very same structure. So, “The question,” Nietzsche says, “is by no means whether we are content with ourselves, but whether we are content with anything at all. If we affirm one single moment, we thus affirm not only ourselves but all existence” (WP, 1032, my emphasis).

Likewise, Zarathustra asks, “have you ever said Yes to a single joy? O my friends, then you have said Yes too all woe. All things are entangled, ensnared, enamored; if you ever wanted one thing twice, if you ever said, ‘You please me, happiness! Abide, moment!’ then you wanted all back…then you loved the world” (Z, IV, “The Drunken Song”, 10). These passages are not, as
Nehamas thought, suggestions that everything in this world is, in fact, inexorably connected to everything else; nor do they simply suggest, as Reginster had assumed, that joy affirms the necessity of its own becoming—this would be far too weak an affirmation to actually motivate a desire for all woe. Rather, they tell us that any affirmation of a part of existence is an implicit affirmation of all existence; for all facets of existence are ultimately derivative of the same will to power. If this will expresses itself sometimes as joy, it must also express itself as pain, woe, and suffering.

This brings us to our third consideration. Notice that in both the above passages Nietzsche refers to joy as a moment of pervasive affirmation. Affirming the eternal recurrence, then, presumably does not, as interpreters have thought, saturate the entire existence of the affirmer; rather, it is only at select moments of joy that one can affirm the eternal recurrence. Remember that when Nietzsche first proclaims the idea he asks us, “have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered [the demon]...‘You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine’” (GS, 341, my emphasis). Likewise, when Zarathustra speaks to the dwarf the idea of the eternal recurrence is visually represented as a pathway passing through a gateway above which is inscribed the word ‘moment,’ and Zarathustra says, “are not all things knotted together so firmly that this moment draws after it all that is to come” (Z, III, “On the Vision and the Riddle”, 2, my emphasis). When Zarathustra tells here, as well as in section 10 of “The Drunken Song”, that all things are “knotted together” we must take this to mean that all things are essentially derivative of the same existential structure. But what is so special about such moments aside from their implicit affirmation of the nature of existence that might provoke such a reaction? I believe a close reading of Nietzsche’s texts suggests that this is when redemption is possible. Nietzsche writes, for instance, “if your soul has trembled with
happiness and sounded like a harp string just once, all eternity was needed to produce this one event—and in this single moment of affirmation all eternity was called good, redeemed, justified, and affirmed” (WP, 1032, my emphasis). Why is this? We may better see if we consider what kind of affirmation joy is.

The answer is clear: perfect joy is an aesthetic affirmation—a state of creative frenzy. Nietzsche tells us, “In this state one enriches everything out of one’s own fullness…transforms things until they mirror his power—until they are reflections of his perfection. This having to transform into perfection is—art” (TI, IX 9, my emphasis). Nietzsche usually equates such “over-fullness,” as he often calls, with the Dionysian state, which is of course a state of aesthetic affirmation: “those who suffer from the over-fullness of life,” he says, “they want Dionysian art and likewise a tragic view of life” and continues, “He that is richest in the fullness of life, the Dionysian god and man, cannot only afford the sight of the terrible and questionable but even the terrible deed and any luxury of destruction, decomposition, and negation” (GS, 370, my emphasis). This vocabulary of over-abundance returns when Zarathustra tells us that joy “is overrich” (Z, IV, “The Drunken Song”, 11; Cf., BT, SC 4). Nietzschean joy, then, is a Dionysian and aesthetic joy, one that enacts a sort of redemption that settles passively over our lives during this moment.

Such redemption should make life appear as beautiful despite—or perhaps even because of—everything ugly and reprehensible in it. Just before his first statement of the eternal recurrence all the above themes are drawn together in what is probably one of Nietzsche’s most beautifully painted passages,

For seeing the ultimate beauties of a work, no knowledge or good will is sufficient; this requires the rarest of lucky accidents…Not only do we have to stand in precisely the right spot in order to see this, but the unveiling must have been accomplished by our own soul because it needed some external expression
and parable…But it is so rare for all of this to coincide that I am inclined to believe that…what does unveil itself for us, *unveils itself for us once only*…I mean to say that the world is **overfull of beautiful things** but nevertheless poor, very poor when it comes to **beautiful moments** and unveilings of these things (*GS*, 339, my emphasis).

The unveiling of what is beautiful in life, here described, fits perfectly the mediopassive character of *amor fati* and joy described above. “No knowledge or good will is sufficient” to bring about this unveiling, which comes as if by a “lucky accident.” Nevertheless, the unveiling must be accomplished “by our own soul.” Presumably, this is because we must cultivate our receptivity to such states, which “may,” as Han-Pile puts it, “come to and through the agent (who has ‘let it’ happen—perhaps…precisely by hoping for it), but…cannot be fully *caused* by the agent.”34 This seems to be just the mode of aesthetic redemption Nietzsche is here describing. At such a moment of Dionysian redemption our lives and all existence should appear as beautiful, despite what is “ugly” in them.

What such beauty might be like is a difficult question and one that this paper does not attempt to answer in full. But for all its difficulty it is not all-too-important of a question. Like love and joy, which are states that come to us passively, so too does what we find to be beautiful simply show up to us as beautiful, perhaps without our being able to articulate just what exactly is beautiful in it. There may indeed be reasons for that beauty, but reason itself has nothing to do with it. One thing is certain, however: namely, that when something appears truly beautiful nothing whatsoever in it appears out of place. Whether, it be a classically heroic statue of Michelangelo’s, a contorted painting of Picasso’s, or any great piece of music—if we consider any of these beautiful then nothing in them will appear lacking, nothing in them detracts from the whole. This is precisely how Nietzsche characterizes the Dionysian state:

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34 *Ibid*, 13
The word “Dionysian” means: an urge to unity, a reaching out beyond personality...across the abyss of transitoriness: a passionate-painful overflowing into darker, fuller, more floating states; and ecstatic affirmation of the total character of life as that which remains the same, just as powerful, just as blissful, through all change; the great pantheistic sharing of joy and sorrow that sanctifies and calls good even the most terrible and questionable qualities of life (WP, 1050).

Although there is something painful about the Dionysian state, when possessed by it we still feel joyous and unified with the whole of being. Although Nietzsche was not fond of transcendental philosophy as a whole, we might say that pain, due to the underlying existential structure of reality, is the necessary condition for the possibility of joy. It is in this feeling of joy that everything appears redeemed. In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche describes the Dionysian state as “intoxicated reality, which likewise does not heed a single unit, but even seeks to destroy the individual and redeem him by a mystic feeling of oneness” (BT, 2; Cf., 7). Thus, redemption is a relatively passive discharge of the Dionysian state of joy. It is not to be enacted actively in expectation of some active ability to affirm.

It might be pointed out, however, that when Nietzsche discusses redemption elsewhere in his works, particularly in *Ecce Homo*, it does indeed seem as though he has this active, perhaps biographical, form of redemption in mind. After all what is it that he is doing in *Ecce Homo* if not this active biographical redemption? Nietzsche even tells us here, “Zarathustra once defines, quite strictly, his task—it is mine too—and there is no mistaking his meaning: he says Yes to the point of justifying of redeeming even all of the past” (EH, “Why I Write Such Good Books”, Z 8), and then quotes from Zarathustra the passage “On Redemption”. He then tells us “man is for him an un-form, a material, an ugly stone that needs a sculptor” (Ibid). Is this not the same method of redemption that was just earlier deemed impossible? The answer is no. First, note that Nietzsche sees Zarathustra’s mission here as one of sculpting—as an aesthetic mission. He
does not suppose the Anderson-Nehamas sort of redemption whereby the significance of past events is *actually* altered by the relation of those events to present and future ones. This sort of redemption, I have argued, is according to Nietzsche not possible. Hence, he tells us, “the present must absolutely **not** be justified by reference to the future, nor the **past by reference to the present**” (*WP*, 708, my emphasis). And, at the beginning of *Ecce Homo* itself, Nietzsche says explicitly, “The last thing I should promise would be to improve mankind” (*EH*, P 2). Also, notice that Zarathustra’s redeeming is said to come simply through saying, “yes,” not through any actual improvement of the nature of things.

So why should we value redemptive missions, or any missions at all for that matter, if they achieve nothing, if existence is ultimately meaningless? The answer, as already suggested, is that while existence may lack any inherent meaning, it can be given *aesthetic* meaning. As we have seen, true aesthetic redemption comes from an automatic discharge of the Dionysian state of joy whereby existence simply shows up to us as beautiful. So what, then, are we to make of this active (Apollinian?) mode of redemption? Remember that Dionysian joy is mediopassive, meaning that although we are not entirely in control of when or if it comes, we can still work to establish favorable conditions for its coming. The active method of redemption must be something like this. If we work to “carry together into One what is fragment and riddle and dreadful accident” (*Z*, II, “On Redemption”) we therefore can make existence appear more beautiful thus making the upwelling of aesthetic joy more probable.\(^{35}\) Hence, Zarathustra tells us, “That life may be good to look at, its play must be well acted; but for that good actors are needed. All the vain are good actors…Therefore I spare the vain, for they are the physicians of my melancholy and keep me attached to life as to a play” (*Z*, II “On Human Prudence”). We

\(^{35}\) What precisely constitutes this beauty, and how precisely it is to be achieved will depend on the individual’s personal “aesthetics” of existence. What constitutes the beautiful for Nietzsche will not necessarily constitute the beautiful for you or I.
must create these good actors and ourselves be these good actors so that life may be “good to look at.” But it remains joy itself that enacts true redemption and actually makes existence appear beautiful; the other mode of redemption is only a gathering of brushes and mixing of pigments, as it were, in preparation for the actual painting. This is essentially the very sort of dual redemption Nietzsche, echoing Zarathustra, seems to suggest at the end of his preface to *Ecce Homo*:

> On this perfect day, when everything is ripening and not only the grape turns brown, the eye of the sun just fell upon my life: I looked back, I looked forward, and never saw so many and such good things at once. It was not for nothing that I buried my forty-fourth year today; I had the right to bury it; whatever was life in it has been saved, is immortal...and so I tell my life to myself (Cf., Z, IV, “At Noon”, “The Drunken Song”).

In light of “this perfect day” all things in Nietzsche’s life appear good. Therefore he tells us about his life, not in order to illustrate how he made it good, but to show how the way he lived it made him ready for his perfect day. But, in fact, Nietzsche’s own personal biography does not much matter; what really matters is the moment of joy that leads him to affirm all existence regardless of what particular situations it has generated.

Notice that this mode of active aesthetic redemption in service of a mediopassive Dionysian redemption does not presuppose that its goal possesses any intrinsic worth—in order to see certain states as aesthetically pleasing and other states as aesthetically unpleasing one does not have to presume that one state possesses more inherent value than another. At least, Nietzsche did not think it does: “the ‘beautiful in itself’ is a figment of the imagination, like all idealism” (*CW*, Epilogue; Cf., *TI*, IX 19). Rather certain things will simply always show up to us as either beautiful or ugly without our necessitating any reason for such appearance. Simply because things may, in fact, be all essentially the same does not necessarily mean we have to value them all accordingly, or value them not at all. This would be the very nihilism Nietzsche’s
philosophy is designed to oppose. Thus he says, “Imagine a being like nature, wasteful beyond measure, indifferent beyond measure, without purposes or consideration...Living—is that not precisely wanting to be other than this nature? Is not living—estimating, preferring, being unjust, being limited, wanting to be different” (BGE, 9)? In like manner he says, “what does all art do? does it not praise? glorify? choose? prefer” (TI, IX 24)? So, if I find some feature of existence particularly displeasing, as I no doubt will, then I ought do my best to make it appear otherwise, but do so with the full knowledge that I really do not change or better anything in the ultimate nature of things.

In sum, then, we have seen that the positive reaction to the eternal recurrence comes through joy, which, as a state of Dionysian creation, transfigures the appearance of existence redeeming it and making it appear beautiful. Since joy affirms itself it implicitly affirms the entire nature of existence of which it is derivative therefore motivating the disposition towards existence Nietzsche calls amor fati. In loving fate, we are called to love our lives exactly as they are, down to the most precise details. But this is a relative matter of indifference since what we truly love is our fatalistic constitution itself, which gave rise to this particular life but also to everything else. One who affirms life, then, cannot possibly react with indifference to the prospect of eternal recurrence for two reasons. First, if in affirming the nature of existence, joy necessarily wills itself, it also implicitly wills its own return. To affirm itself entirely is, as we have seen, to see itself as perfect—as lacking nothing—which is the same as wanting nothing to change, to want to continue for all eternity. But this self-affirmation also is an affirmation of the underlying existential structure of the world, which also demands the existence of all pain and woe and the absence of joy. Hence, the only mode of desiring its own indestructibility is, in essence, for joy to desire the eternal recurrence. Whether or not we have direct conscious access
to subsequent recurrences does not much matter, for the desire for recurrence is not an intellectual one but an implicit and spontaneous one motivated by irrational love. This brings us to the second reason why one might desire the eternal recurrence, which has to do with *amor fati*. As noted earlier, part of what the eternal recurrence does is exaggerate our existential fatalism into a sort of classical fatalism. Part of what classical fatalism does is entail, not only that everything must happen the way that it does, but that it *ought* to happen that way. Viewed in this light, our actions appear, not only as necessarily derivative of our nature of living beings, but as *meaningful* and essential parts of the whole. Hence Nietzsche says, “A certain emperor always bore in mind the transitoriness of all things so as not to take them too seriously and to live at peace among them. To me, on the contrary, everything seems far to valuable to be so fleeting: I seek an eternity for everything: ought one to pour the most precious salves and wines into the sea?—My consolation is that everything that has been is eternal: the sea will cast it up again” (*WP*, 1065). In other words, there is some comfort in “knowing” that we will have everything back eternally.

**Conclusion**

I began this essay with some rumination on what one might call Nietzsche’s naturalism. The question posed there and attributed to Nietzsche was something like the following: “does it make sense to maintain both our belief in man as a natural being while at the same time seeing him as subject to some unique moralistic ideal?” Nietzsche’s answer is, of course, no—he rejects the latter option, at least as it has been traditionally understood. Ideals that seek fundamentally to alter or improve ourselves and the world are simply mendacious; like the rest

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36 Perhaps ‘naturalism’ is a poorly chosen word, which is likely to sit a bit uncomfortably with Nietzsche’s philosophy, since his critique of the natural sciences goes at least as deep as his (more famous) critiques of morality and metaphysics. Nevertheless, his intensions—to “translate man back into nature”—cohere more or less with that word, taken in its broadest sense.
of natural beings, Nietzsche thinks, there is something unalterable in man’s essence, something inseparably tied up with existence as a whole, which once recognized reveals the fallaciousness of so many time-honored philosophical notions. This is not to say that man can have no values at all, or that he can posses no goals. Zarathustra and Nietzsche himself preach just the opposite: “Willing no more and esteeming no more and creating no more—oh, that this great weariness might remain far from me! In knowledge, too, I feel only my will’s joy in begetting and becoming; and if there is innocence in my knowledge, it is because the will to beget is in it” (Z, II, “Upon the Blessed Isles”). Values and goals are as essential to us as anything; but we must adopt new, more reasonable, and hopefully more life-affirming values and undertakings and new and more individual reasons motivating us to these new values and undertakings. Therefore, let us guard against equating Nietzsche’s “naturalism” with the reductivist methodology so common among philosophers today; for, as he says, “an essentially mechanistic world would be an essentially meaningless world” (GS, 373). According to Nietzsche, our lives can indeed have meaning, albeit meaning of a drastically different sort than hitherto conceived. The mechanistic understanding of the world is merely one perspective among many, and one that is “the poorest in meaning” (Ibid). Nietzsche the phenomenologist, Nietzsche the psychologist, Nietzsche the genealogist, and Nietzsche the aesthetician—these are all different personas, different perspectives, of the great thinker whom we know as Nietzsche the philosopher, and each one of them reveals something different about the nature of our existence, something no scientific understanding could reveal. And if they do not necessarily present us with a unified methodology, they all do more or less come together to form a coherent thought experiment in the eternal recurrence. So while the recurrence forces us to accept the more unattractive consequences of a thoroughgoing naturalism it also calls us to view our lives in a new
perspective—in an aesthetic perspective. And in this regard the eternal recurrence might be understood as the opposite of a naturalistic ideal (naturalism understood in the contemporary sense). No one reveals disparity between the scientific and the aesthetic understandings of life more eloquently—or more sarcastically—than Nietzsche himself: “Assuming that one estimated the value of a piece of music according to how much of it could be counted, calculated, and expressed in formulas: how absurd would such a ‘scientific’ estimation of music be! What would one have comprehended, understood, grasped of it? Nothing, really nothing of what is ‘music’ in it” (Ibid)!

This is not to say that the scientific understanding of the world is not valid and useful. Certainly, it is. It is merely to suggest that there are other perspectives that are equally valid and useful, and that the advantages of some may be the drawbacks of others. My interpretation of the eternal recurrence brings out and emphasizes this feature of Nietzsche’s philosophy. To ignore the fact that the eternal recurrence both accentuates and provides the resources to combat an understanding of life which sees existence as inherently meaningless is, I think, to misunderstand the overarching mission of Nietzsche’s philosophy. The objective impossibility of redemption, which is to be conceived of as pertaining not to personal biographies but to the entire course of human existence, is equivalent to the onset of nihilism often prophesied in Nietzsche’s writings. No wonder Nietzsche has Zarathustra say, “I too am a soothsayer” (Z, IV, “The Cry of Distress”). But, while Nietzsche in a sense endorses this nihilism he also believes we have the means to overcome it. Redemption is still possible in an aesthetic sense. But because it is to be achieved aesthetically it is also only subjectively valid. Thus, when Nietzsche seems to endorse, in modified form, the sort of redemption preached by Zarathustra we must not interpret this to be a prescriptive and universally valid mode of redemption. If each of us has our
own aesthetics then so too will each of us have our own redemption. It is not for nothing that Nietzsche writes, “This is my way; where is yours?...For the way—that does not exist” (Z, III, “On the Spirit of Gravity”). But if each of our personal means of redemption are necessarily different and uncertain, one thing, at least, is certain—should we achieve, even for a moment, a state of joy then, regardless of our situation, life will be affirmed eternally.
Works Cited:

*Nietzsche’s works*


*Other Works*


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