

## NIETZSCHE'S TRANSHUMANISM

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I am in broad agreement with Stefan Sorgner's approach to the question of how Nietzsche's concept of the *Übermensch* is related to the contemporary transhumanist movement. I would like to commend Sorgner for focusing attention on this important question, for clearly outlining the various issues that are stake in this question, and for eliciting the interesting responses of Nietzsche scholars and participants in the transhumanist movement. I outlined some of the same issues in my editorial foreword to a special issue of the *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* devoted to Nietzsche's concept of the *Übermensch* (Loeb 2005) and I continue to be interested in thinking about the ways in which Nietzschean considerations may be used to predict, assess, and guide the evolving transhumanist movement.

As I mentioned in my editorial foreword, the single most important divergence between Nietzsche's concept of the *Übermensch* and the contemporary debate about the transhuman (or posthuman) is Nietzsche's link between this concept and his doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same. So I was happy to see Max More bringing up this point in his response to Sorgner's first essay. But I was not satisfied with More's cursory dismissal of this link and of Nietzsche's doctrine. Nor was I satisfied with Sorgner's brief rebuttal in which he argued for the logical separability of Nietzsche's doctrine from his concept of the *Übermensch*. In what follows, then, I will offer my reasons for thinking that the transhumanist movement has something important to learn from Nietzsche's pairing of the *Übermensch* and eternal recurrence. As Sorgner and his respondents show, there are many interesting themes to be explored concerning Nietzsche's relation to transhumanism. But I think this particular issue is the most neglected and

misunderstood, so I will devote my essay to it.

Before I begin, let me make some brief remarks about our respective translations of Nietzsche's term, "*Übermensch*." Like Graham Parkes and Adrian Del Caro in their recent translations of *Zarathustra*, Sorgner modifies Walter Kaufmann's term "overman" into "overhuman" so as to stay faithful to the gender-neutral term, "*Mensch*." But I think that it is time we dispensed with Kaufmann's neologism and thus with this modification as well. Whereas Nietzsche's term, "*Übermensch*," has a related history and a place in the German language prior to his influential use of it, the terms "overman" and "overhuman" have no such history or place in the English language at all.<sup>1</sup> In addition, Nietzsche's substantival term is closely related to the modifying term, "*übermenschlich*," and Nietzsche himself uses the modifying term frequently and in association with his use of the substantival term (Marsden 2005). This modifying term is standardly translated with the English word, "superhuman," so if we want to keep visible this linguistic relation and Nietzsche's association of the two terms, our best option is simply to use the same English word as a translation for his use of the German substantival term. This strategy is certainly wiser than leaving Nietzsche's substantival term untranslated (as in Clancy Martin's recent translation of *Zarathustra*), since all of his associations would then be obscured for the English-speaking reader. Also, the Latinate prefix "super" certainly carries with it many of the

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<sup>1</sup> Kaufmann writes that in his translation of *Zarathustra* "the older term, 'overman,' has been reinstated" (1976: 115). By "older" he does not mean the English term used by previous translators like George Bernard Shaw or Thomas Common (who both chose "Superman"). Instead, he means the archaic English term that referred to a labor foreman, supervisor or overseer. Obviously, this archaic term has nothing to do with Nietzsche's term, which is why I have said that Kaufmann's term is a neologism. Certainly, the meaning of the archaic term does not lend itself at all to the modification, "overhuman," and so this has now become a completely invented English word.

same elevation connotations that are cited by Kaufmann and Parkes as their reason for preferring the Anglo-Saxon prefix “over.” It’s true that, unlike the German modifying and substantival terms, the English modifying and substantival terms are typographically identical. But I think the context in the translated passages easily shows which term is at issue. As additional support for my translation preference, I would note that the word “Superman” was the standard translation of Nietzsche’s substantival term until Kaufmann coined the term “overman” in 1954. I think it is noteworthy that in R.J. Hollingdale, in his 1961 translation of Nietzsche’s book, chose to keep the term “Superman” despite Kaufmann’s arguments against it. Finally, although Del Caro was obliged by editorial constraints to use the word “overhuman” in his recent translation, he expresses his preference for the word “superhuman” in his remarks there and elsewhere (Del Caro 2004: ix; Nietzsche 2006: xli).

So in what follows I will be writing of Nietzsche’s concept of the superhuman. This concept should be distinguished from the related, but different, concepts of the transhuman and the posthuman.<sup>2</sup> I have chosen to entitle this essay, “Nietzsche’s Transhumanism,” in order to indicate the relation of Nietzsche’s concept to the contemporary movement of transhumanism, but also to indicate a philosophical point about Nietzsche’s claim that his protagonist Zarathustra is only a transitional figure on the way to his ultimate goal of creating the superhuman. Since

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<sup>2</sup> As evidence of the distinction Nietzsche might make between the concepts of the posthuman and the superhuman, I would cite his remark at the start of the *Antichrist*: “The problem I thus pose is not what shall succeed [*ablösen*] humankind in the sequence of beings (—the human being is an *end*—): but what type of human being shall be *bred*, shall be *willed*, as one that is of higher worth, worthier of life, more certain of the future. This type that is of higher worth has appeared often enough already: but as a fortunate accident, as an exception, never as *willed*.” (AC § 3; here and in the rest of this essay I have consulted Kaufmann’s translations in Kaufmann 1976)

Nietzsche's book is all about his protagonist Zarathustra, I would say that this is a book about a singular individual who becomes transhuman as part of his effort to envision and facilitate the emergence of the superhuman. Thus, in Nietzsche's usage, and contrary to much of Kaufmann-derived scholarship on this question, the term "superhuman" does not ever refer to any single individual (no matter how special) but only to a future descendant species that will be stronger, healthier and more beautiful than the human species.<sup>3</sup> I was happy to see that Sorgner understands this important definitional issue and I think that this is one reason he is able to make clearer progress in thinking about the relation of Nietzsche's concept to contemporary transhumanism.

Returning now to my topic, I agree with More that eternal recurrence has so far been a Nietzschean idea that is alien to the transhumanist debate and that for this reason we should say that core transhumanist ideas have been inspired very selectively by Nietzsche's thinking. I also agree with More that Nietzsche thought that his doctrine of eternal recurrence was inseparable from his concept of the superhuman. But More does not seem to know why Nietzsche thought this and is therefore not in a position to evaluate Nietzsche's reasons. Instead, he: (1) argues that the doctrine entails a denial of progress that is incompatible with transhumanism, (2) criticizes the doctrine as a bizarre and inherently implausible piece of metaphysics, and (3) offers a hypothesis as to why Nietzsche was nevertheless attached to the doctrine of eternal recurrence.

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<sup>3</sup> See Kaufmann's individualist interpretation in his major study (1974: 307-316), and in the commentary of his students, Schacht (1983: 380-381), Nehamas (1986: 158-159, 222), and Solomon (2006: 130-132, 173-174).

Since More believes that Nietzsche's concept of the superhuman is an inspiration for transhumanism, and since he mentions a possible inconsistency among Nietzsche's ideas, I presume he would want to say as well that Nietzsche's progress-denying doctrine of eternal recurrence is inconsistent with his progress-affirming concept of the superhuman. So actually More is committed to the hermeneutically uncharitable claim that Nietzsche himself was confused and mistaken when he first conceived these two new ideas as joined together. More concludes by suggesting that, because Nietzsche was an opponent of philosophical systems, he could hardly object to transhumanism's picking and choosing from among his thoughts—in this case, choosing his concept of the superhuman and discarding his doctrine of eternal recurrence.

The problem with More's conclusion, as well as with Sorgner's conciliatory rebuttal, is that we can hardly count eternal recurrence as just one of Nietzsche's many thoughts. Pace More, Nietzsche would certainly have objected to any future Nietzschean movement that chose to ignore his doctrine of eternal recurrence. Besides, More is not just picking one of Nietzsche's thoughts and dismissing another one of his thoughts, but rather breaking up a pair of thoughts that Nietzsche conceived together. Further, More is selecting the concept of the superhuman as Nietzsche's most important thought while discarding the concept of eternal recurrence that he admits Nietzsche believed was inseparable from it. He is so supremely confident of Nietzsche's philosophy that he chooses to base a whole movement on it. And yet he is so skeptical of this same philosophy that he dismisses out of hand the idea that Nietzsche himself said was his most

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important discovery ever. So let me address each of the three points above that lead More into this misguided conclusion. I have actually discussed each of them elsewhere (Loeb 2010, 2011, and forthcoming 2012) and much of my argument in those places depends on a detailed exegesis of Nietzsche's writings (especially, of course, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*). Here, then, I will simply attempt briefly to explain the main points of my argument and exegesis as they concern the relation of Nietzsche's thought to transhumanism.

I will begin by quickly refuting More's hypothesis as why Nietzsche was attached to his concept of eternal recurrence despite what More claims is its absurdity and incompatibility with his concept of the superhuman. The reason, he writes, is that Nietzsche saw it "as the ultimate affirmation of the real world as against the Christian (and Platonic) denial of the primacy of the actual, physical reality." This is actually a very common approach to Nietzsche's concept these days. According to most scholars, we can't take seriously his unpublished remarks about the scientific and provable aspects of the cosmological version of this doctrine. But, they argue, we can still appreciate his published presentations as part of a laudatory attempt to formulate an ideal of affirmation that would serve to counter the historically influential Platonic and Christian denials of life and reality.

Actually, however, Nietzsche endorses the scientific aspect of his cosmological thesis in his own voice in *Gay Science* 109, one of his most significant published discussions of philosophical naturalism. He also includes an unconditional assertion of this same cosmological

thesis in what is usually considered his most important published presentation of his doctrine in *Gay Science* 341. He then returns to present precisely this same cosmological thesis at various crucial points in his next book *Zarathustra*, the book he said was his best and most important. Indeed, I have argued in my book, he incorporates this cosmological thesis into the narrative structure of *Zarathustra*, so that the reader is able to follow the eternally recurring life and death of a protagonist who is able to remember and foresee the details of his life's repeating iterations. Nietzsche also includes a proof of this cosmological thesis in the "Vision and Riddle" chapter, arguably one of the key chapters of the entire book. This proof should be taken seriously because it is the distillation and final version of the various provisional arguments that he first outlines in his unpublished notes up that point. Finally, in *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche again declares in his own voice that eternal recurrence is a cosmological thesis that is in some ways akin to the cosmological thesis of Heraclitus and the Stoics.

Even leaving aside all these exegetical omissions, the scholarly approach described above is self-contradictory. For suppose that eternal recurrence is a false account of actual, physical reality. Suppose that eternal recurrence is, in More's words, merely some fantastical piece of metaphysics. In that case, to affirm eternal recurrence, that is, to want the world to eternally recur, would be just as much a denial of actual reality as any Platonic or Christian piece of metaphysics. Or, to put it differently, to want the eternal and identical repetition of one's life when in fact one's life is transitory and finite, would be just as much as denial of life as any Platonic or Christian understanding of life. So these scholars are actually attributing to Nietzsche

an ideal of life-affirmation that they themselves are committed to regarding as life-denying. It doesn't help to object here, as some scholars do, that Nietzsche himself didn't actually believe in eternal recurrence, and that he was simply trying to conceive a theory that would allow us to imagine reality and life as maximally intensified by being repeated identically for all eternity. The only difference is that now these scholars are attributing to Nietzsche himself a self-contradictory ideal of affirming non-recurring life by desiring its recurrence—that is, by wanting it to be other than it actually is. For, again, if actual reality and life are not repeated at all in any way, then this theory would simply be a new fantasy whereby the actual fleetingness and finitude of reality and life would be denied all over again.

It must be the case, then, that Nietzsche's ideal of affirming the eternal recurrence of reality and life only makes sense if these do in fact eternally recur (and, indeed, as he says, necessarily so). And it must be the case as well that any attempt to take seriously Nietzsche's doctrine as an ideal of affirmation has to attempt to understand as well his reasons for claiming the truth, provability, and scientific validity of the cosmological version of eternal recurrence. So let me deal now, very briefly, with More's objections to these claims. Is eternal recurrence a piece of metaphysics? Yes, of course it is, but this is no longer the devastating objection that it used to be under the mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century influence of Heidegger and the later Wittgenstein. Metaphysics is a thriving and respected philosophical discipline today, and careful commentators like John Richardson and Peter Poellner (cited by Sorgner in his own recent monograph on this topic) have persuasively shown that Nietzsche was of course interested in constructing his own

brand of *immanent* metaphysics.

Is eternal recurrence a bizarre piece of metaphysics? Most commentators think so, but here we need to define more closely what is meant by “bizarre”—bizarre as compared to what? This theory doesn't seem any more bizarre than many of the metaphysical theories that are influential today (for example, those of Derek Parfit). Moreover, since eternal recurrence was in fact intended by Nietzsche as a cosmological theory, and since Nietzsche argued for its scientific status, we might want to ask if eternal recurrence is any more bizarre than the kinds of theories that are routinely advanced in current cosmological theory, such as the inflationary universe, quantum foam, and hyper-dimensional string theory. I would say, certainly not, and I would in addition cite the thorough and knowledgeable commentary of scholars like Alistair Moles who long ago argued for the compatibility of eternal recurrence and the currently accepted Standard Big Bang model (Moles 1988, 1990).

Is the problem supposed to be, as some commentators argue (cf. Clark 1990: 247) that Nietzsche advanced mostly a priori considerations in support of his theory? But scholars like Moles and Robin Small have shown Nietzsche was in fact availing himself of the very latest thinking in cosmological theory, such as Friedrich Zöllner's theory of Riemannian curved space (Loeb 2010: 55-56). Indeed, Henri Poincaré, a respected mathematician and physicist, was advancing the same kind of a priori considerations in support of his own eternal recurrence theorem. Besides, we should recall that physicists like Ernst Mach and Einstein both devised

purely a priori thought experiments as means of arriving at their breakthrough relativistic conclusions. Also, that Kurt Gödel advanced purely mathematical solutions to the general relativity field equations that were later endorsed by Einstein as possibly showing a global closed timelike curvature for the cosmos (Loeb 2010: 57; Loeb 2012). And just this year the respected and influential contemporary cosmologist Roger Penrose has cited experimental evidence in support of his a priori mathematical conjecture of conformal cyclic cosmology (Penrose 2010; Penrose and Gurzadyan 2011).

Let me address finally More's charge that eternal recurrence is inherently implausible. Part of what he has in mind here, I think, is that Nietzsche's proofs have seemed lacking to commentators ever since Georg Simmel published his famous refutation. But the studies of more recent and more careful commentators like Moles and Peter Rogers have shown that Simmel's refutation begged the question against Nietzsche's theory (Loeb 2010: 61; see also Sorgner 2007: 70-72). More probably also has in mind a lot of commentary from the last fifty years claiming to show that the concept of eternal recurrence is somehow self-contradictory or conceptually incoherent. But I have argued in detail that all these critiques begin by begging the question and assuming the denial of Nietzsche's theory (Loeb 2010: 11-31; Loeb 2012). In any case, the charges of bizarreness and implausibility are strange coming from one of the founders of a transhumanist movement that has seemed to most outside observers quite bizarre and deeply implausible.

Let me turn now to More's criticism of Nietzsche's connection between his two concepts of eternal recurrence and the superhuman. More is right to say that many Nietzsche scholars have found this connection puzzling and, indeed, for the reason More himself gives, that the superhuman is a progress-affirming concept while eternal recurrence is a progress-denying concept (Loeb 2010: 204-206). But is this right? Is eternal recurrence really opposed to progress? Is it part of Nietzsche's denial of the idea of progress? Although More doesn't explain why he thinks this is the case, his reason is presumably the same as that of the scholars he mentions. Since everything repeats itself identically for all eternity, any future progress we might make in creating a stronger, healthier species will eventually devolve back into the identical situation we find ourselves in now. Eternal recurrence is thus like the myth of Sisyphus: we may expend great effort in pushing the stone up to the peak of the mountain, but the stone will eventually roll back down and then we will have to commence pushing it back up all over again.

Notice, however, that Sisyphus does indeed succeed in getting the stone up to the peak of the mountain, and indeed, that he succeeds in doing so over and over for all eternity. Similarly, if we do succeed in creating a stronger and healthier species, this is an achievement that we will be repeating in just the same way over and over for all eternity. As Ivan Soll noted a long time ago (1973: 335-338), there is therefore nothing in eternal recurrence that precludes the possibility of complete progress and success *within* every cycle of repetition. All that is precluded is some kind of *trans-cyclical* progress. But this is not a problem, since (unlike the myth of Sisyphus) the

end of each cycle also brings with it the end of any consciousness that could witness the devolution of any attained intra-cyclical progress.<sup>4</sup>

Against this response, the objection might be raised now that no stronger, healthier superhuman species could possibly stay at its peak until the very end of any *particular* cycle. But notice that this is no longer an objection to the *eternal recurrence* of such cycles. To return to the Sisyphus analogy, this would be like objecting to the natural force of gravity that causes the stone to fall back down the mountain rather than to the supernatural force that causes this scenario to repeat itself the same way for all eternity.<sup>5</sup> And in fact, Nietzsche shows, it is actually the *traditional* conception of time as linear and non-recurring that causes Zarathustra such deep anxiety and doubt about the lasting significance of his progress in creating the superhuman. Time, he says in his speech on redemption, does not run backwards (*die Zeit nicht zurückläuft*) and the law of time (*Gesetz der Zeit*) is that it must devour its children (*dass sie ihre Kinder fressen muss*). There is always a flux of things (*Fluss der Dinge*) and everything is always passing away (*alles vergeht*). Death and entropy always intervene and so it appears that

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<sup>4</sup> Clark (1990: 271-272) accepts Soll's analysis, but thinks that Nietzsche himself must have believed that eternal recurrence is incompatible with progress in creating the superhuman because he depicts Zarathustra as despairing over the eternal recurrence of the small human. But I have argued in detail (Loeb 2010: 151-157) that Zarathustra's despair actually concerns the possibility that he might not overcome the small human—thus ensuring that the *persisting* small human will eternally recur. And this despair, as I argue below, has its source in Zarathustra's most fundamental worry that, because time is linear and *non-recurring*, his creative will might be impotent in relation to the determining accidental past—a worry that he overcomes by learning to backward-will through circular and recurring time.

<sup>5</sup> Nietzsche uses this same metaphor of gravity when he has the dwarf whisper mockingly to Zarathustra that every stone that is thrown up must fall back down, and that Zarathustra, the philosopher's stone, has thrown himself up high but is now sentenced to being stoned by himself as he falls back down upon himself (Z: 3 "On the Vision and the Riddle" §2).

all our best accomplishments are in vain (*alles ist umsonst*) (Z: 4 “The Greeting”).

Thus, in a complete reversal of the new objection being contemplated, and as Nietzsche mentions several times in his unpublished notes (KSA 10: 4[85]; 10:5[1].160), the discovery of eternal recurrence would actually offer comfort in the face of this nihilistic thought of *intra-cyclical* dissolution—precisely because it guarantees that a peak achievement can be repeated over and over again for all eternity. In Nietzsche’s philosophical narrative, Zarathustra’s anxiety and doubt are only allayed once he realizes that time is actually circular and recurring, for he is then reassured of the eternal significance of creating the superhuman. This is why, I have argued (Loeb 2010: 195-196), Nietzsche shows Zarathustra recovering from the soothsayer’s nihilistic teaching through his own prophetic knowledge of the truth of eternal recurrence. And this is also why, I have argued (Loeb 2010: 186), Nietzsche shows Zarathustra joyfully reconciling himself to the fact of time and entropy as he anticipates the eternal recurrence of each of his life’s peak moments and achievements.

So much, then, for the claim that the thought of eternal recurrence is *opposed* to any transhumanist progress. Let me now articulate a more interesting, and to my knowledge unrecognized, feature of Nietzsche’s thinking—namely, that eternal recurrence is actually *required* for there to be any transhumanist progress in the first place. This has to do, as Nietzsche writes, with Zarathustra attaining something higher than simply reconciling himself to the fact of time and entropy. For let us suppose, as Nietzsche does in Zarathustra’s speech on

redemption, that time does not run backwards and that there is therefore an asymmetric determining relationship between the past and the present. From this it follows, as Zarathustra says, that the will—which is the will to power (*der Wille welcher der Wille zur Macht ist*)—cannot will backwards (*nicht zurück kann der Wille wollen*) and is therefore impotent and an evil-eyed spectator of all that is past (*ohnmächtig gegen Das, was gethan ist - ist er allem Vergangenen ein böser Zuschauer*). As I've argued (Loeb 2010: 178-179, 206), this assertion should not be interpreted to mean the will cannot *change* the past, but only that the will cannot be said to have had any *influence* on the past coming to be what it unchangeably is. But this means that the will is also impotent with respect to the past's determination of the present and is unable to impose its creative design on an open-ended future. Whatever flawed, fragmentary, meaningless, and accidental features belong to the past, these will be imported into the present and future as well, and there is no way that the will can transcend these so as freely to create something of its own that is superior, whole, and meaningful.

As Laurence Lampert so ably explains (1986: 135-151), Zarathustra's speech on redemption is offered by Nietzsche as an explanation of the meaning of his preceding chapter on the soothsayer. Just as the will's impotence with respect to the determining past causes the will to feel the loneliest and most secret melancholy (*Trübsal*), so too the narrator in this preceding chapter recounts a great sadness (*Traurigkeit*) that came over humankind and that made the best men weary of their work. The cause, he says, was the soothsayer's teaching that everything is the same (*Alles ist gleich*) and that everything has been (*Alles war*). What this means, given the

conception of time just outlined above, is that everything in the past inevitably repeats itself and persists into the future—hence the soothsayer's ability to foretell the future.<sup>6</sup> Upon hearing of this teaching, Zarathustra himself experiences overwhelming sadness and melancholy (*Traurigkeit, Triübsal*) and grows weary of his own work. The reason is that his goal of the superhuman requires him to make a decisive break with past human history, to overcome the deficiencies and accidents of the past, and to create something entirely new that has never existed before.

In these two linked chapters, then, Nietzsche shows Zarathustra coming to doubt that he will ever be capable of freely shaping the future so as to realize his goal of creating an entirely new, stronger, and healthier superhuman species. In both these same chapters, however, and in the most important chapters of Part III, Nietzsche also shows Zarathustra overcoming these doubts and, indeed, as a result, transforming himself into a being who is no longer human—that is, into a transhuman, a transitional figure on the way to the superhuman species. The key to Zarathustra's recovery and success lies in his recognition that the foundation of his doubts was a false conception of time as linear and non-recurring. Although I don't have the space to rehearse all the exegetical details here, I have argued (Loeb 2010: 176 ff.) that once Zarathustra awakens his latent knowledge of circular and recurring time in the "Convalescent" chapter, he then learns how to will backward in time precisely as he had foreseen he would do in the "Vision and the

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<sup>6</sup> Seung (2005: 103, 123-124, 131, 180) conflates the intra-cyclical determinism of linear time with the trans-cyclical determinism of circular time and is therefore not able to see how Nietzsche looks to our interaction with the latter as a solution to our problems resulting from the former.

Riddle” chapter (where he had a vision of rescuing his future self from his most abysmal thought). This backward-willing extends into Zarathustra’s presentiment in his speech on redemption that someone has *already* taught him backward-willing and also into his dream in the “Soothsayer” chapter that he is liberated from his entombment in the past by his future redeemed self. As a consequence, Zarathustra is able to create his completely novel, no-longer-human, and child-spirited soul who laughs like no one has ever yet laughed on earth and who is able to exert a creative influence on his unchangeable past that allows him to say to it, “But thus I will it!”<sup>7</sup> In showing that Zarathustra himself becomes transhuman as a result of his newfound wisdom, Nietzsche thus points the way to the future superhuman species that will be stronger and healthier precisely because it will live and thrive in the reality of circular recurring time.

It might seem strange that eternal recurrence provides Nietzsche with the solution to the problem of the determining, accidental, and repeating past. For eternal recurrence is itself the claim that everything in the past is eternally repeated. Indeed, the soothsayer’s teaching that everything is the same would seem to anticipate Zarathustra’s teaching of the eternal recurrence of the same (Gooding-Williams 2001: 202-205; Loeb 2007: 81-83). But the key to understanding the difference is to notice Nietzsche’s vision of the *human interaction* with the eternally repeating cosmos. This is because humans, as he defines them (GM II), are mnemonic animals, meaning that they are able to remember (that is, suspend their forgetting of) the past. In

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<sup>7</sup> In an unpublished note from 1884 (KSA 11:25[7]), Nietzsche has Zarathustra spell out the compatibility of intra-cyclical novelty and trans-cyclical repetition (Loeb 2010: 17, 142; Loeb 2012).

linear and non-recurring time, this means that human beings are haunted, crippled and burdened by the past—indeed, that their acquisition of retrospective memory is precisely what leads them to feel the kind of impotence described by Zarathustra in his speech on redemption. But in circular and recurring time, the past is identical to the future, and so human memory is now also prospective.<sup>8</sup> Or, rather, according to Nietzsche, since eternal recurrence is true, human memory has always been prospective, but human beings have not been strong or healthy enough to allow themselves to suspend their forgetting of their future. This is why Nietzsche imagines a later age in which his protagonist Zarathustra will be strong and healthy enough to awaken his latent knowledge of eternal recurrence and to become a prophet of the future. In all human history so far, memory has always been merely a vehicle whereby the past influenced and shaped the future. But Nietzsche shows his protagonist Zarathustra also being influenced by his memory of the future. Indeed, in the passages mentioned above and others, he shows Zarathustra leaving mnemonic messages to his younger self and thus using his memory as a means whereby his present and future will can creatively influence and shape his unchangeable past so as to be able say to it, “But thus I will it! But thus I shall will it!”. And since Zarathustra is the teacher of disciples who will themselves be able to use their own memory in this same way, his interaction with them allows him to be influenced by a future they remember that is beyond the span of his own lifetime. These disciples, Zarathustra says, will be the ancestors of the superhuman species, and so ultimately there is a paradoxical sense in which Zarathustra’s teaching of the superhuman

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<sup>8</sup> As I argue in Loeb 2010: 14-16, scholars have missed this point because they have imagined that a memory of the last cycle would add something different to the next cycle. But Nietzsche’s point is that the memory is acquired in every cycle, including the last cycle, and that there has never been an original, or first, cycle in which the memory was not yet acquired.

species is retroactively inspired by the actual future emergence of just this species.

This account is very brief and compressed, and I would urge readers to consult my other writings cited above for a much more extensive elaboration of these philosophical and exegetical points. But I think it is sufficient to undermine More's suggestion that Nietzsche confusedly conjoined together his incompatible concepts of eternal recurrence and the superhuman. I think it is also sufficient to undermine Sorgner's weaker suggestion, in response to More, that Nietzsche's two concepts "are not logically inseparable" (2010b: 13). For I have argued that Nietzsche's background discovery of the truth of eternal recurrence is what allowed him to conceive of the possibility, significance, and nature of the superhuman. According to Nietzsche, Zarathustra's initial steps in creating a stronger and healthier species are only possible if his willing backward in circular time allows him to shape the unchangeable past so that his creation is new and intentional. Moreover, Zarathustra's creative achievement can only have lasting significance if eternal recurrence saves it from inevitable entropic dissolution. Finally, this species will be superior to human beings, that is, superhuman, precisely because it will fully utilize this new mnemonic power over time granted by its complete affirmation of the reality of cosmological eternal recurrence. Just as the human animal rose above all other animals through its socially inculcated mnemonic control of the future (GM II §1), so too the superhuman animal will rise above the human animal through its additional recurrence-enabled mnemonic control of the past.

In his other brief discussions of eternal recurrence (2007: 65-74, 143-145; 2009a: 919-922; 2009b: 39-40; 2010b: 3), Sorgner rightly counters the usual scholarly approach I have outlined above when he claims that this doctrine was intended by Nietzsche as a true, metaphysical, scientific and provable theory that drew upon contemporaneous physics and that could be regarded as compatible with contemporary physics. Unfortunately, like most other commentators, Sorgner dismisses the possibility of remembering eternal recurrence (2009a: 919) and is therefore unable to see Nietzsche's vision of the human interaction with this cosmological reality—namely, willing backward in circular time. For this reason, he is not in a position to understand the deep and inseparable connection Nietzsche finds between eternal recurrence and the goal of a superhuman species. According to Sorgner, it is possible to simply disregard Nietzsche's question concerning the meaning of life and thus his meaning-giving ideal of a superhuman affirmation of life's eternal recurrence (2010: 230-231; 2010b: 13). But, he claims, one could still uphold the rest of Nietzsche's claims and see the superhuman as simply a further step in the evolutionary process. Indeed, this is the whole point of Sorgner's first essay on Nietzsche and the transhumanist movement: although transhumanists are influenced by Nietzsche's concept of the superhuman in wanting to take the next step in the evolutionary process, they do not follow Nietzsche in justifying this desire by reference to the question of the meaning of life. Sorgner's unstated implication is that transhumanists might want to learn from Nietzsche about the need to justify human enhancement as part of a general project to affirm this life and this world to the fullest—a project whose success will be determined by our longing for their eternal recurrence.

Sorgner makes a good point here about this deficiency he finds in most transhumanist thought and I agree with him that Nietzsche would have regarded his project as superior in this respect. But the interpretation I have offered above shows, I think, that Sorgner doesn't go far enough in understanding this deficiency. From Nietzsche's perspective, the problem is not that current transhumanists don't justify their quest for the next evolutionary step, but rather that they believe this quest is possible without a reconsideration of our relation to time. As Sorgner points out, the transhumanist goal, like Nietzsche's, is to move from natural selection toward a type of human, intentional, artificial selection (2010b: 2). But transhumanists, unlike Nietzsche, have no way of explaining how such a move is possible. As long as they subscribe to the traditional conception of an asymmetric relation between the determining past and the present, they must concede that we can never escape the influence of our own emergence from the chance-governed, preservation-oriented, herd-promoting forces of natural selection. We might invent ambitious plans to create a new species that is no longer a product of natural selection, but these plans will themselves always be a product of natural selection and therefore fruitless. Moreover, Nietzsche argues at the start of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* that natural selection does not lead to the superhuman, but rather to the last human. This is why critics like Keith Ansell Pearson (1997) have emphasized that Nietzsche would have disparaged many of the current transhumanist goals (such as happiness, longevity, and equality) as belonging to the last human.

Given his concession to More about the logical separability of Nietzsche's two concepts,

it is noteworthy that Sorgner offers an account of Nietzsche's vision of the evolutionary emergence of the superhuman that has nothing to do with eternal recurrence. According to Sorgner (2009b: 37-38; 2010a: 227-230; 2010b: 2), Nietzsche believes that there exist some individual higher human beings (like Goethe) who by accident possess special (non-acquired) capacities that they can actualize and enhance through education. Once enough of these individuals enhance themselves to an extreme, they will reproduce with each other, pass on their special capacities to their descendants, and become still more numerous. According to Sorgner (2009b: 31), Nietzsche has some Lamarckian inclinations, so perhaps he believes that the enhancement of these capacities can also be passed on to the descendants. In any case, eventually an evolutionary step will take place wherein these capacities become essential and then a new species will emerge that has a completely new, different, and higher potential that transcends the fixed limits of the human species.<sup>9</sup>

Now, I don't agree with Sorgner that this is Nietzsche's account, and I am puzzled that he chooses to base such an important part of his discussion on just a single unpublished note (KSA, NF, 13, 316-317). I think he should have focused his interpretive energy instead on Nietzsche's detailed depiction of transhuman emergence in the essential published text, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. But the important point here is Sorgner's admission that chance and accident play a crucial role in his initial postulation of higher human beings who simply exist already with their higher potential. In addition, Sorgner fails to support his implausible contention that somehow

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<sup>9</sup> In Loeb 2010: 138-145, I explain how Nietzsche indicates that it is Zarathustra's disciples, and *not* the higher

the breeding of enhanced higher human beings with certain fixed limits will result in the emergence of a new superhuman species without those same limits (but instead, different and higher fixed limits). So I think that he is committed to admitting the role of chance and accident in this final step as well. Thus, although Sorgner emphasizes the intentional aspect of the intermediate stages in which higher human beings educate themselves and deliberately interbreed, it seems to me that this aspect is undermined by the non-intentional aspects (genetic mutations?) at the start and finish of this alleged evolutionary process. And this failure, I would argue, can be traced back to Sorgner's omission of Nietzsche's bedrock assumption that the traditional conception of time as linear and non-recurring precludes the possibility of human beings taking control of their own evolutionary destiny. According to Nietzsche, I have argued, only backward-willing in circular time allows the future Zarathustra to transform himself into the kind of transhuman who teaches his still stronger disciples to gain even better control of the past, and similarly with these disciples and their descendants, until eventually there emerges a stronger superhuman species whose new and higher capacities are a result of their complete control over time.

Sorgner might object at this point that he does include the concept of backward-willing in his account of Nietzsche's concept of redemption (*Erlösung*, or as he translates it, "salvation"): "What is important concerning salvation on the basis of this concept [of eternal recurrence] is that you experience one moment which you can affirm completely. Once you have had such a

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men, who are the ancestors of the superhuman in virtue of awakening their own latent knowledge of eternal

moment then all other moments *before* and after this one get justified by means of this one moment because all the other moments have been and are necessary in order for that moment to occur” (2009a: 919-920, my italics; see also 2010a: 230-231; 2010b: 10). On Sorgner’s interpretation, humans are given meaning by their goal of creating superhuman individuals who will be able to attain redemption in this fashion and say to their past, “But thus I will it!”. Notice, however, that this interpretation of Nietzsche’s concept does not in any way require the assumption of circular and recurring time. Indeed, this is precisely the same kind of interpretation that is offered by scholars like Alexander Nehamas who think that Nietzsche did not actually believe in the truth of cosmological eternal recurrence. And I have argued (Loeb 2010: 187-189) that this interpretation conflates two different kinds of relations that the past can have to the affirmable present moment: namely, as necessary condition, or as goal. But only the latter relation is the one that Nietzsche has in mind in Zarathustra’s redemption speech, only the latter relation depends upon the reality of circular and recurring time, and only the latter relation is the one that allows Zarathustra literally to shape his past in such a way that its unchangeable core is genuinely affirmable (instead of needing retrospective reinterpretation).

Supposing this discussion has been sufficiently convincing regarding Nietzsche’s pairing of his concepts of eternal recurrence and the superhuman, let me conclude now by returning briefly to the critical point of view expressed by Max More. Given the new interpretation I’ve offered here, transhumanists might wonder why they should worry about Nietzsche’s radical and

metaphysical claim concerning the obstacles to their project posed by the traditional conception of time. And they might wonder as well why they should concern themselves with Nietzsche's obscure and speculative claim to have discovered the way around these obstacles through the ability to will backward in circular time.

In reply to the first question, I would argue that some indirect or covert version of Nietzsche's obstacles drives much of the debate already taking place among transhumanists, and much of the criticism already directed at transhumanism. Outside of objections concerning ethics, politics, and technology, the main criticisms tend to focus on the question whether the transhumanist project is possible at all. And these questions, I would argue, can for the most part be traced back to the conviction that it makes no sense to speak of human beings transcending the determining influence of their past history. Transhumanists aim to show how we human beings can take control of our own evolutionary destiny, but their enhancement plans and preferences would seem inevitably determined and restricted by the chance-governed forces of natural selection from which we first emerged. Sorgner mentions for example the transhumanist hope of circumventing the genetic lottery through genetic engineering (2009b: 34), but won't the values guiding that attempt still be driven in the end by that same lottery? Although Sorgner cites the transhumanist goal of reevaluating our values in light of recent biotechnological advances (2009b: 32), others like Jonathan Glover observe that it is actually the pull of some of our pre-existing values that causes us to abandon or modify some of our other values. According to Glover, therefore, we should think of the idea of reevaluating values more along the lines of Otto

Neurath's analogy: "We are like a sailor who, instead of taking it to pieces in dock, has to rebuild the boat on the open sea, and has to be able to build it anew out of its own best components" (2006: 98).

In reply to the second question above, I would recall Sorgner's observation that transhumanists have not explained why they want to facilitate the emergence of a new superhuman species. Sorgner suggests that they can learn from Nietzsche's insight that such a project of self-directed evolution will give an earthly, immanent meaning to scientifically minded people who can no longer believe in the long-dominant Platonic-Christian worldview (2009b: 38-39). But I have argued above that Zarathustra's redemption speech requires any such meaning to be given through backward-willing in circular time. I also think that Sorgner overlooks the obvious motivation behind a lot of transhumanist ideas—namely, the deep need to gain some measure of control over aging, death, entropy, and the passing of time. From Nietzsche's perspective, all human beings, including the transhumanists, feel impotent with respect to time. So far, he thinks, human beings have sublimated this feeling into what he calls a spirit of revenge and they have devised values and worldviews (like the Platonic-Christian one) that covertly accuse and degrade the conditions of immanent existence. Nietzsche would have certainly regarded the thinking of some transhumanists (most prominently, Ray Kurzweil) as motivated by this spirit of revenge against time, the body, this life, and this world. But I think he also would have argued that behind the transhumanist quest for control over time there lies a secret striving for the solution he found in 1881: backward-willing in circular time. Insofar as transhumanists are also

spurred by will to power and hope to enhance human beings with new powers and abilities, Nietzsche would claim that here too he was ahead of the curve and had discovered a new power over time that could be the foundation for gaining all the other desired abilities. And finally, insofar as transhumanists are driven by the desire to gain new and extensive knowledge about ourselves and the world we live in, Nietzsche would have urged them to look more closely at what he thought was his most important discovery that time is actually circular and recurring. This discovery, he believed, showed that the human animal could acquire a new kind of prospective memory that would lead to the emergence of a new superhuman species able to gain complete autonomy, self-affirmation, and self-knowledge. Should transhumanists like Max More protest the obscure and speculative manner in which Nietzsche presented these supposedly fundamental and history-changing discoveries, we can recall that they themselves were first inspired to found their movement by the extremely obscure and speculative first sentence in Zarathustra's first public speech: "*Ich lehre euch den Übermenschen. Der Mensch ist Etwas, das überwunden werden soll. Was habt ihr gethan, ihn zu überwinden?*"

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