

## Life, Death, and Eternal Recurrence in Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*

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**Abstract:** This paper offers a preliminary interpretation of Nietzsche's doctrine of Eternal Recurrence, according to which the doctrine constitutes a parable that, speaking of what is permanent in life, praises and justifies all that is impermanent. What is permanent, what always recurs, is the will to power or to self-overcoming that is the fundamental engine of all life. The operating mechanism of such a will consists in prompting the living to undergo transformations or transitory deaths, after which this fundamental engine resurrects again and is once more activated. The individual human being, in his capacity as creator, is only a conscious and finite surrogate of this fundamental will. In confronting his abysmal thought of Eternal Recurrence, Zarathustra comes to the realization that the individual human being will never cease to be a mere transit that, while remaining in existence, will have to always return to the moment of his own self-overcoming. This means that the small man in each of us, the man that can be overcome, will always recur, and that even the greatest man we could become will still be too small and human all too human. Although this thought generates disgust with existence, it can also become a source of life-affirmation, when we learn to love our tragic destiny: that of never being able to realize the ideal of superhumanity that is recommended by the book, and, yet, that of eternally striving to realize it.

This paper offers a preliminary approximation to Nietzsche's puzzling doctrine of Eternal Recurrence as it is presented in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. In what follows, I will argue that the doctrine of Eternal Recurrence is best understood as a parable concerning the creative will, the will to power, of which the individual human being, while he is alive, is merely a surrogate. What recurs is the moment of action, which Nietzsche describes poetically as a moment of transitory death and resurrection; a moment that the living agent must repeat eternally *while he remains alive*.

In this way, my interpretation is opposed to the consensus among many commentators (and especially those working within the Anglo-American tradition) that Eternal Recurrence

involves a belief about the circularity of our lives or about their identical repetition.<sup>1</sup> Of course, these same commentators disagree as to the belief's precise status: is it meant to be accepted as literally true, or are we supposed to simply entertain its possibility in order to derive some practical injunction or lesson from it? I want to distance myself from this way of framing the debate, because I suspect that Eternal Recurrence does not really involve a belief in the exact repetition of our lives, at least as far as its presentation in *Zarathustra* is concerned. The only place in the book where Zarathustra himself appears to assert such a belief is in the chapter "On the Vision and the Riddle". Other statements seeming to voice the belief in this way are not uttered by Zarathustra himself, but by his animals, in "The Convalescent", when they attempt to interpret Zarathustra's encounter with the thought of Eternal Recurrence, and it is far from clear whether Zarathustra himself agrees with their interpretation.<sup>2</sup> In fact, he seems to disapprove of it, for he accuses his animals of being buffoons and barrel organs that have made of Eternal Recurrence a mere hurdy-gurdy lyre song (KSA 4, 273-5). This, I take it, is part of the reason why, as his animals themselves in the end recognize, he must fashion *a new lyre* in order to sing about Eternal Recurrence, for the lyre fashioned by his animals is inadequate to the task.

But if "On the Vision and the Riddle" is the only place where Zarathustra appears to speak of Eternal Recurrence as if it involved a belief in the exact repetition of our lives, we should bear in mind that in this chapter Zarathustra, who has been speaking in parables that do

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Danto (1965), Jaspers (1965), Soll (1973), Kaufmann (1974), Strong (1975), Sterling (1977), Magnus (1978) and (1979), Schacht (1983), Nehamas (1985), Simmel (1986), Lampert (1986), Higgins (1987), Clark (1990), Löwith (1997), Gooding-Williams (2001), Seung (2005), Hatab (2005), Loeb (2010).

<sup>2</sup> The dwarf in "On the Vision and the Riddle" also seems to formulate a cyclical version of time, but Zarathustra accuses him of taking things too lightly, and he then addresses him with a series of rhetorical questions that culminate in what, I have said, is the only assertion Zarathustra himself makes that apparently postulates the qualitatively identical repetition of our lives. It is usually assumed that Zarathustra ends up accepting the dwarf's cyclical version of time, even if he appears at first to reject it. Although I am not in agreement with such a reading, I do not wish to designate the dwarf's own interpretation as that of yet another character that also weds the Eternal Recurrence to a belief in the circularity of life, for I am inclined to interpret the character of the dwarf as being a manifestation of Zarathustra himself, an aspect of his self or of his being. See note 5.

not have a literal meaning, tells us that he is recounting a hallucinatory experience or vision that he himself calls a riddle, and which therefore does not carry its real significance on its sleeve. Yet what we find on the sleeve of this vision are precisely Zarathustra's words that, literally, seem to assert as truthful the idea that we must return to our exact same lives after we die, that the road of time is one in which whatever can happen must have already happened many times before, and that he, and the dwarf, and the spider, and the gateway called "Moment" must all have been in this life before, and must therefore eternally return (KSA 4, 200). Thus I judge it prudent to take Zarathustra's words to be metaphorical in nature, perhaps doubly so in the case of this particular chapter. But if that is the case, then how should we interpret what Zarathustra says about Eternal Recurrence?

To answer this question, notice first that Eternal Recurrence has to do with what is eternal in life, that is, it has to do with what is permanent or imperishable in it—what seems to lie outside of time and the stream of becoming. In the chapter "On the Blessed Isles", Zarathustra criticizes other doctrines that also traffic with concepts of eternity, like the concept of God, of the Unmoved, of the Permanent, and so on. He then asserts: "All the permanent—that is merely a parable! And the poets lie too much.—But it is of time and becoming that the best parables should speak: they should be a praise and a justification of all impermanence!" (KSA 4, 110). Since the doctrine of Eternal Recurrence also speaks in the language of permanence, it must be a parable. Yet, because it is one of Zarathustra's own making, it must be of the type that he considers best: a parable that praises and justifies all impermanence. How does it do that? We get an indication of the answer to this question in the same section I just quoted. For there, Zarathustra goes on to claim that

Creation – that is the great redemption from suffering, and life’s becoming light. But in order for the creator to be, suffering is needed and much transformation.

Indeed, there must be much bitter dying in your life, you creators! In that way are you advocates and justifiers of all impermanence.

To be the child who is newly born, the creator must also want to be the mother who gives birth and the pangs of the birth giver (KSA 4, 110-1).

The clue I take from this passage is that Eternal Recurrence is a parable that speaks of the truth stated here: that for creation there must be much bitter dying while one is alive, and that this is the only justification to be found in life. To explore this point, let me schematically state Zarathustra’s words concerning life and the nature of the living.

For Zarathustra all life is will to power, which he warns us is not simply a will to life, but rather a will to self-overcoming. Although it is not altogether clear what exactly this implies, one thing it seems to imply is the idea that what is living wants to perish or “to go under” (KSA 4, 148). Now, obviously, this cannot mean that the will to power is a will to death in the literal sense, for that would make life impossible: no sooner would something be alive than it would take itself out of existence by willing its own death. Being alive involves the risk of permanently dying, but it does not directly involve the will to self-termination. Instead, the mechanism of life involves what I shall call a will to a *transitory death*: all living things want to transform into something new or different from what they are, for the sake of exerting or releasing their power. This transformation implies that one has stopped being what one was, and in that sense, what one was has died; but only in a transient manner, since, as Zarathustra asserts, the will to power is the “unexhausted procreative will of life” (KSA 4, 147). As such, the will to power does not cease, but is reborn out of its own transitory death in order to operate in the same manner as it did before, allowing the living to continue living, that is, transforming until the moment they are

overtaken by their own physical demise and can do so no longer, since then they would have stopped being altogether.

The result of this conception of life is that there can be nothing truly permanent in it; nothing, that is, except the way it itself operates, the will to power, which never changes. This explains why Zarathustra poetically locates the will to power in the heel, and, in a reverse allusion to Achilles, calls it invulnerable and unburiable, and also the shatterer of all tombs (KSA 4, 144-5). Of course, as was mentioned, the will to power is not invulnerable to death as such, since all life does end; but it is invulnerable to its transitory deaths since, like the phoenix bird and like Dionysus, it is reborn again from them to return to its self-same life, in order to repeat the cycle of transitory deaths and resurrections for as long as the surrogate form that embodies it remains alive.<sup>3</sup>

I have claimed that the will to power is the mechanism through which all life operates. But human beings are special incarnations of that will to power, for we are instantiations of life become conscious of itself and of its way of operating. This gives us a unique and extraordinary power, for it allows us to be self-conscious creators who are in control of their actions, and who can guide those actions by goals that they themselves have set.<sup>4</sup> But the ability to be autonomous

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<sup>3</sup> These considerations raise some important questions concerning the notions of individuation of phenomena and the temporal continuity of things that I cannot stop to investigate here. The concept of transitory death that I have attributed to Zarathustra would seem to require some kind of metaphysical permanence of living things in order to make the idea of their transformation intelligible. I have said that what endures is the will to power that each living thing incarnates and that, it seems, allows us to differentiate it from other living beings. But it is not altogether clear what exactly is the metaphysical status of such a will: is it some sort of unique and indivisible entity in the Cartesian fashion; or is it merely an epiphenomenon of something that, in reality, cannot be identified as a unity? Some of the things Nietzsche says in other places suggest that he does not approve of the Cartesian notion and that he thinks of the will as a unity only linguistically, not metaphysically (KSA 5, 32). As I have said, this is not the place to explore such issues. I will simply assume that, given the way he speaks about it, for Zarathustra the will of a living thing is some kind of unity that remains invulnerable to its transitory deaths and that allows the living thing to change and to transform (i.e. to live), and I will set aside the problem of what type of metaphysical outlook this commits us to.

<sup>4</sup> Although Zarathustra never uses the word “autonomy”, I think that many of his discourses clearly (if indirectly) refer to it. Zarathustra speaks of the child and the creator as a first movement and a wheel that moves for itself, and he also claims that the will wants to command itself and to give itself its own laws, or its own good and evil (KSA 4, 31, 80-1, 90, 99, 147, 189, 250, 265, and 348). In all these claims one can very well read references to the ideas of

incarnations of the will to power can become a heavy burden for us, and makes us susceptible to forms of suffering that are unknown to other creatures. Chief among them is our capacity to feel guilty for our actions and, in general, to feel dissatisfied, distressed, or enervated by our past and by life as such. This feeling expresses a type of *retrospective* impotence with respect to the past and its “it was”: the inability to make the past really pass or stop tormenting us. But Zarathustra also thinks that there is a *prospective* version of our impotence that consists in the will’s inability to prevent the present and the future from turning out differently to the past, that is, its inability to stop them, due to the passage of time, from becoming “what was”. These types of suffering can easily degenerate into even more pernicious forms. In “On Redemption”, Zarathustra suggests that our anger and melancholy, our gnashing of teeth at our inability to change the past, leads us to draw an insane conclusion: the conclusion that existence in general and our will in particular are corrupt and inherently reprehensible, and that we therefore deserve to be penalized and to suffer the punishment of finding life to be a heavy burden (KSA 4, 180-1). Similarly, our prospective impotence with regard to the passage of time can degenerate into a kind of cynical and fatalistic attitude toward existence that crystallizes in the thought that nothing is worthwhile, everything is the same, and that knowledge chokes (KSA 4, 172 and 274). I cannot stop here to examine these ideas. Suffice it to say that Zarathustra thinks that the will is eventually driven to postulate a solution to this problem that is equally foolish and insane: that of renouncing its right to be a creative and transformative power by turning itself into a “not-willing”. Zarathustra ends up suggesting that the will itself needs to be cured and liberated from its insanity in order to be able to fulfill the function it is meant to perform for us, that of redeeming us from the suffering we experience as a result of being its self-conscious manifestations (KSA 4, 181).

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self-determination, self-mastery, and self-legislation that are part and parcel of traditional notions of autonomy, like those found in the German Idealist school of philosophy.

Here is where Eternal Recurrence enters the scene. For when Zarathustra summons this abysmal thought, he experiences the same kind of impotence with regard to the past that, in the chapter On Redemption, he had made responsible for the vindictive attitude that makes our will to power turn against itself and attempt to become a not-willing. But Zarathustra is able to avoid this outcome and emerges from the experience with an affirmative attitude toward life (and, thus, toward the will to power itself). This indicates that he has found the way to liberate the will from its gnashing of teeth at the past, and has taught it to will backwards (*Ibid.*). Although here I cannot provide a full analysis of Zarathustra's encounter with Eternal Recurrence, I do want to at least sketch my interpretation of the type of impotence that assaults him, and of how he overcomes it and is able to learn to "will backwards".

After complaining that his animals have made his experience of Eternal Recurrence into a barrel organ song, Zarathustra gives his own version of the despondency that assailed him. He claims that what made him sick with disgust for man and all of existence was his realization that the small man of whom he is weary must eternally recur, and that the greatest man is still small and human all too human (KSA 4, 274). In this description of the problem, Zarathustra gives us a version of each of the two forms of impotence with respect to the "it was" that were mentioned earlier, namely, prospective and retrospective impotence. The former version is found in his realization that he is unable to stop the small man from recurring, for this is just a slight variation of the idea that we are unable to stop the rapacious passage of time, and of preventing all present and all future from becoming the same as the past. Zarathustra has realized that no matter how much transformation and greatness the will achieves, the small man, whom one thought one was leaving behind through an act of self-overcoming, will be discovered once more next to us. This is why Zarathustra says that his realization that the small man must eternally recur turns all that

is living into “musty past” (*Ibid.*). But to understand this is also to recognize our retrospective impotence, for by doing so Zarathustra admits that there can be no self-overcoming that is or has ever been altogether successful. In the human case, all self-overcoming is a striving to become something greater and nobler than one currently is (KSA 4, 146-9). In lamenting that the greatest is still human all too human, Zarathustra expresses his impotence to alter past results and his dissatisfaction with the fact that there is no self-overcoming that has managed to produce something greater and higher than what it in the end produced, namely, a being that is still too small and human all too human. These two types of impotence generate in Zarathustra a disgust with man and with existence that has its origin in the *eternal perspective* from which he views life: he has realized that we are condemned to never be able to transcend our humanity in such a way as to be completely satisfied with what we are.<sup>5</sup> This is harmful and paralyzing because such a perspective can easily lead to the conclusion that no self-overcoming is worth our while, that all acting is futile and a piece of vanity. We can thereby fall prey to the fable of madness that wants to turn our will into a not-willing.

However, Zarathustra does not succumb to his nausea, but is rather able to implement the cure he had foreseen in his earlier vision: that of biting off the head of the snake of disgust that had crawled down his throat and bit itself fast to it (KSA 4, 201). What does Zarathustra’s biting symbolize? I think that there are two main things it symbolizes: the first has to do with the association of the snake’s bite with the pang of conscience that is established elsewhere in the

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<sup>5</sup> In this respect I am in agreement, although for different reasons, with Seung who establishes a relation of identity between the dwarf and Zarathustra himself. For Seung, the former is a manifestation of the latter’s physical self, that is, he represents the natural and passionate side of Zarathustra (Seung 128, 144). In my view, the dwarf represents the small man that every human being, including Zarathustra, carries within and of whom he can never rid himself, even if he tries to elevate himself above him, attempting thereby to erase or replace the small image he has of himself and the low self-esteem he feels. Other commentators also associate the dwarf with the small man, for example, Gooding-Williams 214; Loeb 143, 159.



book (KSA 4, 45-6 and 87-9).<sup>6</sup> If Zarathustra bites the snake in turn, this means that he is applying the same guilt-ridden mechanism of the conscience against this conscience itself.<sup>7</sup> In other words, Zarathustra makes himself feel guilty for letting his impotence with respect to the past foment in him the disgust that afflicts him. But, secondly, in doing so Zarathustra performs an act of will that has a backward orientation: his present biting is directed toward the backward looking glance of his will and conscience that has become stuck in its impotent regard for the past and threatens to impede the will's forward movement (that is, its continued living). This act symbolizes, then, a kind of reconciliatory attitude of acceptance of the past by means of which the will learns to "let go" of what was, and actively wills the past to retreat and to no longer linger on dragging down the present and the future.

In doing all this Zarathustra actually takes advantage of the thought of Eternal Recurrence that, having been summoned by him, had originally caused his illness, and uses it to cure himself. We are condemned to the Eternal Recurrence of what is essential and never changes in life. But this is the will to power itself, the invulnerable aspect of our life that is constantly resurrected in our transitory deaths and going-unders, and that will continue to do so

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<sup>6</sup> Another indication of this association with the bad conscience is given by the relationship between the dwarf and the snake in "On the Vision and the Riddle". As Loeb (2002 and 2010) convincingly argues, when the dwarf of the vision disappears, he transforms into the snake that strangles the shepherd (see also Seung 126-7, who follows Loeb on this point). Zarathustra describes the snake as the heaviest and blackest thing. Before he had associated the dwarf with the spirit of gravity (an association that he later ratifies in KSA 4, 243). If now we recall that during the vision the dwarf is sitting on Zarathustra's shoulder, whispering to him heavy words (KSA 4, 198-9), we can conclude that the dwarf, who turns into the snake, symbolizes the voice of conscience that in the religious imagination is often represented as the voice of an angel of God that sits on our shoulder and exhorts us to resist the temptations that the devil, situated on the opposite shoulder, whispers in our ears. It is interesting to note that Zarathustra has inverted this religious imagery, for, according to him, the dwarf represents the devil that is exhorting him not to engage in self-overcoming, that is, not to follow the footsteps of the god Dionysus, who is the god of the will to power. Contrary, then, to the religious vision, the one who awakens in him the bad conscience is not the god, but the devil. In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche also describes the bad conscience as a type of bite produced by a nagging worm; see KSA 5, 318-9; 397.

<sup>7</sup> In this way, Zarathustra applies the strategy that Nietzsche suggests in the *Genealogy* KSA 5, 335.

while we remain alive.<sup>8</sup> In the human case, the transitioning of deaths and rebirths takes the form of our conscious contempt and opposition to life as we find it in the “moment” of acting, and our attempt to overcome it by creating something better and greater. What Eternal Recurrence teaches us is that this dissatisfaction with and contempt for what is small in life will never go away: after we act, our life will not be better, or new, or similar, but the same in all its essential features, that is, a life in which we will continue to transitorily die many times in order to be reborn again at the moment of acting (KSA 4, 276). To embrace Eternal Recurrence is to love the fate of being incarnations of the will to power that must eternally return to themselves while they remain in existence. This love of fate liberates our will and allows us to pursue the ideal of the *Übermensch* (superhuman) by inoculating us against the fantasy of believing that one day we will transcend our human condition. We will never escape our humanity, which will follow us like a shadow wherever we go.<sup>9</sup> But in attempting to raise ourselves above it, in pursuit of the superhuman, we set for ourselves an eternal, unattainable goal that can give meaning and justification to our fleeting lives, helping us accept our tragic destiny: which is to never fully attain this ideal of superhumanity, and yet, to constantly strive to do so together, and to be

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<sup>8</sup> Perhaps this might be why Zarathustra calls his will his necessity and the turning of all necessity (KSA 4, 99 and 268). For the will is the condition *sine qua non* of our lives, what will always accompany us while we remain alive, and what allows us to act in the world and traverse the road of time and becoming (i.e. live). The play on words that Zarathustra employs by calling his necessity (*Nothwendigkeit*) the turning of all necessity (*die Wende aller Noth*), could be interpreted as a reference to the fact that, as I stated earlier, the will always returns to itself, or spins eternally on itself, while it remains alive or in existence. It is only in that sense that the will is invulnerable and eternal. This is perhaps also the aspect that makes our will free and, therefore, not necessitated to action: for in each of its turnings the will is always a first movement, a wheel that moves itself and that spins on itself; it is the child that is born again at each moment of action and laughs innocently at what was and is already past, playing with the sting of freedom (KSA 4, 31 and 248). The Eternal Recurrence allows the will to recover its innocence and to recognize all of this, reminding it that it is the one that flips necessity over, transforming it into freedom, the one that redeems the past in the present and in the future. In this respect I disagree with Seung who interprets Zarathustra’s words as an indication of his acceptance of the will’s determinism, that is, precisely of the will’s lack of freedom. See Seung 159-160.

<sup>9</sup> Here I disagree with authors like Loeb who believe that the ideal of the superhuman is realizable and that we can successfully escape our human condition.

continuously in the process of *temporarily* achieving it and losing it, until the day of our final goodbye to our lives and to everything we love.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> This essay first appeared in Spanish in the proceedings *VI Jornadas Internacionales Nietzsche y Jornadas Internacionales Derrida*, edited by Mónica B. Cragolini and Noelia Billi and published in Buenos Aires, Argentina in 2012 (ISBN: 978-987-28671-0-2). With permission from the editors I have translated it into English for inclusion in this journal. I want to thank attendants of the Nietzsche portion of the conference entitled, “Cuestiones Biopolíticas: Vida, Sobrevida, Muerte” for their comments on the Spanish version of the paper that I delivered in one of the parallel sessions in October of 2012.

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