

Affirmation, Admirable Overvaluation, and the Eternal Recurrence

“Love is the state in which man sees things most decidedly as they are not.
The power of illusion is at its peak here, as is the power to sweeten and transfigure.”
Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, §23

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I. Introduction

In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche writes with approval of “the ideal of the most high-spirited, alive, and 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, shouting insatiably *da capo*—not only to himself but to the whole play and spectacle...” (BGE, 56). Yet chances are that if one flips to a random page from Nietzsche’s corpus of work, one will find it highly questionable whether he could ever be said to approach this ideal himself. His works are filled with complaints about and assaults on much of “*what was and is*”: morality, Christianity, democracy, Wagnerism, nihilism, Platonism, mediocrity, “Königsbergian Chinadom,” Socratism, German nationalism, Protestantism, *décadence* values, and the blight of the “last man,” to mention a few. This relentless emphasis on all that is wrong with the world can seem deeply ironic coming from someone whose ideal is apparently one of total affirmation and “yes-saying.” We thus appear to have two personas Nietzsche presents, one extremely satisfied, apparently wanting everything to be just as it is, and the other quite dissatisfied, apparently wanting a great many things to be eradicated, improved, or eliminated. Is

this simply an irresolvable tension in Nietzsche? Is the Nietzsche who apparently would welcome the eternal recurrence of all things (“*what was and is* repeated into all eternity” (BGE, 56)) compatible with the Nietzsche who is a fulminating and trenchant critic of various ills of modern culture?

In this paper I broach these issues by investigating Nietzsche’s celebrated and mysterious notion of the eternal recurrence and in particular by considering the evaluative stance—which Nietzsche appears to laud—of *affirming* the eternal recurrence of all things. To this end, I critically discuss several prominent interpretations of the eternal recurrence. Much of the secondary literature has (in my view, sensibly) moved away from interpreting the eternal recurrence as a wild cosmological speculation on Nietzsche’s part. The eternal recurrence, on a now prevalent reading, is offered merely as a thought experiment. But one’s reaction to this thought experiment is nonetheless supposed to be an important gauge of one’s evaluative attitudes and of one’s strength as a person. Nietzsche clearly has admiration for those who “say yes to” or who “affirm” the idea of recurrence. However, a key point of debate, relevant to the affirmation-criticism tension at hand, is then about *the range* of what is to be affirmed. Specifically, is one, in affirming the eternal recurrence, thereby to affirm *each and every thing*? Or is something more moderate called for? How do key interpretations of the eternal recurrence deal with this issue about the range of what is to be affirmed?

One option is to reject the emphasis on affirming each and every element in life and in existence. This is characteristic of the reading I am going to call the *deflationary* approach. This interpretation sees the eternal recurrence as Nietzsche’s imagistic and hyperbolic way of advocating a more modest form of life affirmation that would stop short of the affirmation of

everything. In softening what is demanded of a person when she affirms the eternal recurrence, this reading has the benefit of being in a better position to reconcile the affirmation-criticism tension, by showing how Nietzsche's doctrine of the eternal recurrence is potentially compatible with the deeply critical streak in his work. But this interpretation, its evident appeal notwithstanding, founders on the fact that Nietzsche puts considerable emphasis on the person who affirms the eternal recurrence needing to affirm everything, down to the smallest detail. This aspect of the texts seems to me to be unavoidable.

The other option is to hew to the idea that one actually does need to affirm everything. This is characteristic of the reading I shall call *the vindicatory approach*. This interpretation seeks to render this stance of open-armed affirmation of everything philosophically-attractive by looking for a vindication of why (at least by Nietzsche's lights) this stance should be warranted. To this end, it appeals to Nietzsche's putative metaphysical commitments about personal identity or about the holistic relatedness of all things to underwrite this demanding stance of affirming the recurrence of each and every thing. In what follows, I will argue that this vindicatory approach has problems both philosophical and textual. The philosophical problem is that the Nietzschean metaphysics proffered by advocates of this reading is shaky support for the Nietzschean evaluative stance toward the eternal recurrence. The textual problem is that even if the metaphysics *were* able to provide strong reason for accepting this evaluative stance, the central tension would still be left unresolved—namely, that of reconciling Nietzsche's critical stance with the attitude toward the eternal recurrence of all things that he apparently celebrates.

It seems to me that there is something right and something wrong about the deflationary and the vindicatory strategies respectively, and the reading that I will propose here is a synthesis

of the best elements of the two. We should keep the exacting demand—characteristic of the vindictory strategy—that in affirming the eternal recurrence, one must thereby affirm each and every thing. The texts, I think, clearly point to this requirement. What we should give up, I will be suggesting, is the task of trying to make sense of this position as Nietzsche's *own considered evaluative stance*. Nietzsche certainly does admire the idea of someone so “well-disposed” to themselves and to life that there is at least one exuberant moment in their lives when they would affirm the eternal recurrence of all things. But we should not make the further step of seeing Nietzsche as claiming that every event in a life or in history is *worthy* or *deserving* of this affirmation, even if he admires the (transitory) willingness to affirm it. In this respect, my reading takes a hint from the deflationary strategy, in offering a reading of the eternal recurrence that distances Nietzsche himself from the stance of affirming each and every thing, thus making way, at least in principle, to accommodate the strongly critical streak in his work. The interpretation I offer here, in pulling apart two things that are often yoked together—admiring a person's willingness to affirm all things and all things being worthy of affirmation (by Nietzsche's lights, anyway)—allows for the resolution of the tension between affirmation and criticism by showing how Nietzsche can want a great many things to be different—and nonetheless praise the person who, in a moment of ecstasy, thinks things are worthy of total affirmation.

II. Eternal Recurrence as Cosmology?

The eternal recurrence is usually taken to be one of the cornerstones of Nietzsche's thought. This is in keeping with his own assessment of its seminal importance (EH, “Preface”).

There is, though, persistent disagreement about just what this doctrine is supposed to be, and considerable scholarly energy has been expended on working out Nietzsche's views on the subject. In one of the most famous passages in Nietzsche's *Gay Science*, he invites the reader to consider the following scenario:

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 every thing, "Do you desire 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 eternal confirmation and seal? (GS, 341).

Nietzsche here lauds a certain positive, welcoming reaction to the news that one's life will repeat "once more and innumerable times more." And as we see from elsewhere in Nietzsche's work, this attitude of affirmation he praises is not simply to the news of one's *own life* repeating, but to everything repeating— "*what was and is* repeated into all eternity"—with one's life being salient among those things (BGE, 56). The emphasis on the affirmative attitude itself is clear enough. But *to what* is one supposed to have this attitude? To the eternal recurrence, understood as the

correct cosmological account of how the world actually is? Or is the reaction in response to some supposition (for all Nietzsche knows, a false one) of how the world is—namely, one of eternally recurring cycles? Or to something more moderate and less literal still?

Many are drawn to the first interpretive option—the *cosmological* reading, as we might call it.¹ They have interpreted the eternal recurrence as a claim on Nietzsche's part characterizing the actual course of cosmic history. Qualitatively identical events (at least qualitatively identical with respect to certain non-temporal properties, etc.) actually repeat themselves, so that after one round of the series, the same series will repeat itself again, *ad infinitum*. On this interpretation, Nietzsche is thus trying to determine a person's reaction to how things in fact are. A few people are strong enough to embrace this truth with open arms; most are not.

This cosmological interpretation has come under fire for a number of reasons.² First of all, the only place in Nietzsche's published work where the eternal recurrence is clearly taken to be a cosmological theory is in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (and his subsequent discussion of that book's themes in his autobiography *Ecce Homo*). Extracting Nietzsche's own philosophical view from the dramatic narrative of *Zarathustra* is far from easy. Although Zarathustra's trailing menagerie take the eternal recurrence as a cosmological hypothesis, the views of Zarathustra himself are more difficult to pin down.³ Are the animals correctly understanding Zarathustra, or are they taking his ideas too flat-footedly? After all, even if Zarathustra sometimes seems to give voice to the eternal recurrence as a cosmological hypothesis, it wouldn't follow that the character

¹ Kaufmann (1950), Ch. 11; Danto (1964), Ch. 7; Abel (1998); Loeb (2006).

² For critics of the cosmological reading, see Simmel (1907), p.172-3; Nehamas (1985), Ch.5 ; Clark (1990), Ch. 8; Reginster (2006), Ch. 5

³ Nehamas (1985), Ch. 5 and Clark (1990), Ch. 8 make a good case that the textual evidence from *Zarathustra* is equivocal when it comes to the cosmological reading. Loeb (2013) vigorously disputes this.

endorses this as the literal cosmological truth, given his frequent propensity to speak in a very imagistic and metaphorical way. Moreover, even if Zarathustra did endorse this position as the cosmological truth, it wouldn't follow that Nietzsche's own considered position—as the philosophical author of the text—is the position of *the character* Zarathustra from whom he may well maintain a considerable ironic distance, despite certain intellectual affinities.⁴

Now Nietzsche does in his notebooks attempt to “prove” the eternal recurrence as the correct cosmological theory (WP, 1061-66). But Nietzsche never saw fit to publish these attempted proofs, and a reasonable inference to draw from this fact is that he was never satisfied with their soundness.⁵ And rightly so, for these supposed proofs would seem to be refuted by a simple example.⁶ But the most important point against the cosmological reading is this: the ethical and evaluative use that Nietzsche makes of the “thought” of the eternal recurrence and of one's reaction to it (GS, 341) in his published work does not presuppose the actual cosmological truth of the doctrine. Indeed, if the cosmological hypothesis were true, it might in fact undermine the existential import of it all, since everything forward and backward would presumably be fixed.⁷ Is it just *within* a given cycle that the thought of the eternal recurrence (or the thought of someone who says “yes” to the eternal recurrence) is supposed to “change you as you are”? If this “thought” of recurrence (or, as I prefer, thought of affirmation of it) is to lie on one's choice of actions as the “greatest weight,” there is something decidedly odd about also thinking that the future is fixed by what has happened many times already in the past. Although there is a way for

⁴ Clark (1990); Pippin (1988) more generally emphasizes the distance between Nietzsche himself and his character Zarathustra.

⁵ Nehamas (1985); Clark (1990).

⁶ The classic refutation is in Simmel (1907), p. 172-3.

⁷ Soll (1973), p. 332.

the eternal recurrence cosmology to be squared with an open future, one needs some metaphysical imagination to see how this might be possible.⁸ A more natural and intuitive thought is one of despair that nothing one will do will make any difference.

III. Eternal Recurrence as Thought Experiment

For the reasons outlined in the previous section, many interpreters of Nietzsche have moved away from treating the eternal recurrence as a cosmological hypothesis.⁹ The more cosmologically modest view would thus take Nietzsche not as presenting a theory of cyclical history, but rather as offering a supposition to be used as part of a thought experiment. One is being asked to *imagine* that events repeat themselves, and it is one's reaction to this thought that is then being tested. The point of the thought experiment, like the thought experiment asking what you would wish for if given three wishes from a genie, is to use the scenario as a guide to one's present attitudes and evaluations. That one doesn't, as a matter of fact, *have* three wishes from a genie, or that the events in history don't, as a matter of fact, repeat themselves in the same sequence to eternity, is not relevant to the probative value of the thought experiment.

Yet even reading the eternal recurrence in this way is not without problems. For when one starts thinking carefully about what even the thought experiment, understood in this literal way, is actually asking, it is difficult to find a coherent interpretation of it, especially on the famous presentation given in GS, 341. One basic problem, as several have noted, is this: The thought experiment asks a person to suppose that her life gets repeated "once and innumerable times

⁸ e.g., see Reginster (2006), p. 208.

⁹ e.g., Nehamas (1985); Clark (1990); Anderson (2005); Reginster (2006).

more” (GS, 341). But the life that gets repeated needs to be the same in every detail: “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” (GS, 341). On the most plausible conceptions of personal identity, however, the qualitatively identical lives in different cycles could not, by hypothesis, be the lives of *the same person*. There is no bodily continuity. And more damningly, there can be no psychological continuity among the people in various cycles, lest there be salient differences among them. The memories required for that would render the people in each successive cycle importantly different, which, by hypothesis, they cannot be.¹⁰

Because of these sorts of coherence worries, along with other concerns, Clark, and others following her, have suggested that the thought experiment should be interpreted in a less literal and less realistic fashion, along the lines of the question, “If you had it to do over again, would you marry me?” We of course have some intuitive sense of what this question is asking: It is asking whether you are satisfied with the marriage *you now have*. But one should not take the question too literally, for there is a danger that features of the thought-experimental artifice might cloud the judgment it was initially designed to elicit. If you start thinking that it is a *second* marriage to the same person, or you start wondering about the metaphysics of time travel that could make it possible, and so on, you are just missing the real point of the fundamentally

¹⁰ Soll (1973), p. 335; Reginster (2006), p. 211; Loeb (2006; 2013) has tried to defend Nietzsche on this score.

evaluative question being asked.¹¹ Indeed, if you start quibbling about these details, one might reasonably think you are trying to evade a fairly simple question by occupying yourself with brain teasers and philosophical paradoxes instead.¹² The thought experiment of the eternal recurrence is asking whether one would want, *per impossible*, to relive (not just once, but infinitely many times) a life the same in every detail and whether one would want world history to be repeated, also so as to be the same in every detail as well. On this version of the thought experiment then, what is being queried is instead one's attitudes toward *this* life and world, by way of this oblique and unrealistic device of imagining the eternal recurrence of all things.

As proponents of this interpretation have pointed out, one benefit of this reading is that it makes sense of why Nietzsche does not seem to think that a sort of indifference is a likely reaction to news of the eternal recurrence (even as a hypothesis). If everything that will happen really already has happened innumerable times, why should I care that it will happen many times more? *Que sera, sera*, I might think. Moreover, given my lack of continuity with the similar people in other cycles, why, apart from a sense of sympathetic altruism, should I care about them more than about arbitrary strangers? They are *similar* to me, surely. But given the lack of bodily and psychological continuity, they are no more me than a clone of me is. (Compare: If

¹¹ Likewise, we shouldn't, I believe, make too much of the fact of recurrence *per se*—thinking it particularly salient in the thought experiment that the events repeat (and repeat many times). The point of the thought experiment, on these non-literal readings I am considering, is to gauge our attitudes to things *as they have actually transpired*. The mythic language of “eternity” and of “repetition,” if taken too literally, can cloud the judgments about this life and world it was supposed to elicit. We are thinking too literally, it seems to me, if we hold that the eternal recurrence would be bad on account of something to do with the fact of recurrence itself (e.g., a lack of variety, from the cosmic standpoint). By couching things in terms of eternity, Nietzsche hopes to give a counterpoint to the Christian devaluation of this life and world in favor of an eternal beyond. It is Nietzsche's way of underscoring that this earthly life and world is the only one there is. (For an opposing view, see Loeb (2013)). So too, by couching things in terms of cyclical history and repetition, Nietzsche draws on the imagery of various myths to make his point, not because he believes them literally, or even wants us to take them literally for the purposes of the thought experiment, but because they are appropriately focused on this life and world in their refusal to allow for a redemptive beyond.

¹² Reginster (2006), p. 218.

synchronically there were qualitative duplicates of me in distant galaxies, why should I care so much about them?¹³)

For the reasons I have thus far sketched, it seems that the most philosophically attractive accounts are going to be non-literal glosses on the eternal recurrence, understood as an unrealistic thought experiment and not as a cosmological theory. But I am trying neither definitively to rule out cosmological readings nor to adjudicate between these sorts of thought experiment readings, the ones with more and less literal readings of eternal recurrence respectively. (My own view, as will become clear in Section VI, is a slightly different option still, in that I take the thought experiment to be not just about imagining recurrence (or some non-literal variant), but *also* about imagining an extreme potential reaction to it that Nietzsche is portraying, namely one of total affirmation. We are being invited to envisage a possible person and his exuberant reaction, as much as to envisage the cosmology or the repetition itself.) But my main aim, for now, is to set out what I see as the most attractive interpretative option already on the table, so that we can then turn our attention to a different issue relating to affirmation and develop the account from there.

IV. Global Affirmation and the Deflationary Approach

Regardless of what reading of the eternal recurrence we opt for, it is clear enough what sort of attitude toward the eternal recurrence Nietzsche suggests will be characteristic of the strong individual—namely, one of open-armed affirmation (BGE, 56). The strong human being is one who will not “fall down and gnash [his] teeth” (GS, 341) but one who will answer the demon

¹³ Clark (1990).

who presents this thought-experiment with the celebratory exclamation: “You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine” (GS, 341). The most salient feature of the way Nietzsche couches the eternal recurrence is his apparent insistence that cherry-picking is not going to be allowed. The demon presents a scenario in which *everything* is going to return as part of the eternal recurrence, and he invites one’s reaction to this complete package: “*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 (GS, 341; *emphasis mine*).

Although interpretations of the eternal recurrence tend to focus on Nietzsche’s idea of one’s individual life repeating with no aspect different, he is also interested in the importance of affirming the whole of existence too. The “ideal of the most high-spirited, alive, and world-affirming human being” presented in *Beyond Good and Evil* is of 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, shouting insatiably *da capo*—not only to himself but to the whole play and spectacle...” (BGE, 56). Nietzsche’s “formula for greatness” in a human being, similarly, is: “*amor fati*: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity” (EH, “Clever,” 10). The character Zarathustra suggests, in his imagistic way, that it is because things are all somehow intimately connected that everything comes as this inextricable set: “Have you ever said Yes to a single joy? O my friends, then you said Yes too to *all* woe. All things are entangled, ensnared, enamored; if ever you wanted one thing twice, if ever you said, ‘You please me, happiness! Abide, moment!’ then you wanted *all* back” (TSZ, “The Drunken Song,” 10). It is not just the good aspects of life or of the world on which one is supposed to

render a verdict. Rather, it is to life and to existence *as a whole*. Nietzsche thus celebrates an attitude that we might describe as *global affirmation*.¹⁴

Yet does this mean one must affirm, say, the fact that children are born with crippling diseases, suffer immense pain, and then die at a young age? Recognizing how unpalatable this view would seem to be, readers of Nietzsche have sought to clarify what this global affirmation commits Nietzsche to. Maudemarie Clark stresses that affirmation is compatible with liking the elements affirmed *only* as a part of the whole and not in isolation. This is right, but it of course implicitly acknowledges that Nietzsche *does* see the whole as worthy of affirmation. Clark also notes that we need to distinguish between, on the one hand, being willing to affirm something and, on the other hand, preferring it above all else. It matters, she argues, what the relevant options are. One can be willing to relive one's life in every detail, or for world history to repeat, while still holding that another life or world would be better.¹⁵ This also seems right. But, again, notice that these helpful qualifications of Clark's do not question the *global* character of the affirmation as such that Nietzsche appears to be calling for. One still is called to affirm everything, even if one allows that things are not as good as they might be.

A more radical suggestion to defuse the specifically global character of the affirmation is proposed by Bernard Reginster. His suggestion is that Nietzsche is simply being hyperbolic.¹⁶ According to this interpretation, Nietzsche's real interest, in championing the affirmation of everything, is to get one to affirm the woeful aspects of one's life and of existence along with the

¹⁴ See Nehamas (1985), p. 156 and Magnus (1988). Unlike Nehamas, Magnus does not see Nietzsche as offering an ideal evaluative stance through the eternal recurrence. Affirming everything, according to Magnus, is the inhuman mark of the *Uebermensch*.

¹⁵ Clark (1990).

¹⁶ Reginster (2006), p. 217.

good ones. On Reginster's reading, however, Nietzsche stops short of calling for the affirmation of absolutely everything, even though his rhetoric can suggest otherwise. Now, it is of course part and parcel of Nietzsche's ethics that (some) suffering is an important and indispensable aspect of things, and Nietzsche wants to discourage people from the tempting thought that their lives, or the world, would be better if all the suffering were excised. This reading of Reginster's thus does resonate well with Nietzsche's ethics more generally. Yet if this is what Nietzsche means to convey through the device of the eternal recurrence, why does he, in the most famous presentation of the eternal recurrence, foreground seemingly insignificant aspects of life—the spider, the moonlight, etc.—the sorts of things that, unlike suffering, are not what most people, arachnophobes excepted, would be tempted to avoid? Why not make the instances of suffering prominent in GS 341's catalogue of what will repeat? It is difficult to get away from what the text seems to be pointing to—namely, that in contemplating the thought of eternal recurrence and affirming it, the ideal is one of affirming everything.

One can of course sympathize with the philosophical motivations of this deflationary reading. Nietzsche's view seems very problematic—not just on moralistic grounds, but on broadly Nietzschean grounds, given that there are so many things he finds execrable. I agree with the basic intuition behind it that, on *some* level, Nietzsche himself cannot accept as the proper evaluative stance the one of affirming the eternal recurrence of absolutely everything. Yet that seems to be just what the eternal recurrence, as presented in Nietzsche's texts, is calling for. In Section VI, I put forward a suggestion for how we can accommodate both of these exegetical intuitions. But before turning to my own suggestion, I want to explore another major interpretive option: the vindictory approach. This is the idea that Nietzsche's metaphysics undergirds his

stance of global affirmation, not through any cosmological commitments about repeating cycles, but through an account of self and world. If it turns out that Nietzsche's metaphysics *does* undergird global affirmation in this way, we can explain why it makes good Nietzschean sense to welcome the eternal recurrence of all things. However, in the section to follow, I will be arguing that this approach to the eternal recurrence is problematic on both philosophical and exegetical grounds.

V. The Vindictory Approach

The vindictory approach does not shy away from accepting global affirmation. According to this approach, it is because of Nietzsche's demanding metaphysics of self and world that this extreme evaluative stance is necessary. In particular, it is because of Nietzsche's commitment, first, to the idea that all things are holistically related and, second, to the idea that all properties of a thing are essential to the thing.¹⁷ This reading builds on Nietzsche's paradoxical claim that because there is no essence to a thing, all properties (even the apparently accidental ones) are, in a roundabout way, essential to that thing. R. Lanier Anderson has helpfully described Nietzsche's view as a kind of "inverse superessentialism."¹⁸ For this Nietzschean view is similar, in one respect, to Leibniz's superessentialist claim that all properties of a thing are essential to the thing. But Nietzsche arrives at this conclusion in a very different way. Whereas Leibniz thinks this is the case because all properties follow from the concept (i.e., the essence) of the thing, Nietzsche thinks there is *no* essence of a thing.¹⁹ But, for this very

¹⁷ Nehamas (1985), Ch. 5.

¹⁸ Anderson (2005).

¹⁹ Anderson (2005).

reason, Nietzsche thinks that every feature is necessary to its being the same thing. What might seem accidental features of a thing actually turn out to be, in one sense, “essential” features of it. So too at the macroscopic level with world history. Every feature needs to be the same in order for it to be the very same world. To want a life with any feature different is not to want *this very life*. Similarly, to want a world with *any* feature different is to want a different world.

I want to put aside the exegetical issue about whether Nietzsche should be charitably interpreted as accepting these demanding metaphysical views.²⁰ The textual evidence is considerable, but it is drawn in large part from Nietzsche’s unpublished notebooks.²¹ Let us just suppose for the sake of argument that inverse superessentialism is Nietzsche’s metaphysical view. I will be arguing for two claims in this section: First, this metaphysics does not actually lend as much philosophical support to making sense of global affirmation as it has been thought to do. And second, even if one *were* to vindicate global affirmation through Nietzsche’s metaphysics, one would still leave Nietzsche with a form of blanket affirmation apparently incompatible with the critical streak in his work. Although it is sufficient for the project of this paper to focus on the second claim—to show that the metaphysical strategy will ultimately leave the affirmation-criticism tension unresolved—I want to press my first claim as well, since, if the purported vindication is itself questionable, that provides further indirect evidence that Nietzsche should not charitably be read as trying to vindicate the stance of global affirmation through his metaphysics.

²⁰ See Strawson (2015) for an alternative elaboration of Nietzsche’s central metaphysical commitments.

²¹ There are some references in the published works as well, for example in “The Drunken Song” (10) from near the end of *Zarathustra*. But it is not clear how literally Zarathustra’s parable-laden and imagistic ways of speaking are supposed to be taken.

Why, in willing the eternal recurrence, should I want my life with every feature the same as opposed to a life slightly different from mine, with a few bad features subtracted or a few improvements made? According to the metaphysical strategy's superessentialist doctrine, if I wanted anything other than a life exactly the same in every detail, I would not be wanting *my* life, in the strict superessentialist sense.²² But why should I want my life in this strict sense, rather than a life closely similar to mine, but different in certain respects (maybe with a few bad elements subtracted)? The answer must be this: That I should care about identity *per se* more than mere close similarity. My life consists in precisely this modally-fragile amalgamation of properties, and I care about *it* and not something else. But the next question then is: Why be an identity fetishist in this way, particularly when you think there is no essential core to the self, and particularly when you are skeptical, as Nietzsche is, that the whole notion of identity applies, in a

²² The metaphysical view (see Nehamas (1985), Chs. 5 and 6) about the self draws support from an interesting analogy to literary characters, who might be thought to have all of their properties essentially. Especially if we take up a perspective where we view the text as an already completed whole, then the properties of a given character are, in this sense, fixed. On this external way of looking at things, it is supposed to make little sense to entertain hypotheses about Elizabeth Bennett to the effect that she might have been different than she is, given that she is just constituted by the features she possesses in the finished novel. But there are, I think, a few sensible ways of questioning the analogy and its implications for the question under discussion: First, unless Austen's hand was stayed by deterministic forces, she could have created a character *like* Elizabeth, but with different properties. One could, I suppose, think this slightly different character wouldn't have been Elizabeth; but that rejoinder would just presuppose the demanding superessentialist view of personal identity, rather than drawing independent sustenance from the literary analogy. Second, human beings, unlike literary characters viewed as completed entities, develop in time. We see this if we take up a position *internal* to the fictional world of the literary text and view the characters according to its own temporal logic. After all, unless we assume some sort of extreme fatalism or determinism is true within the fictional world of *Pride and Prejudice*, presumably it is true that she might not have fallen in love with Mr. Darcy. Maybe there are certain novels where the characters *are* supposed to be the puppets of history, or fate, or of the gods, so that whatever happens couldn't have been different than it is. But this would be an unwarranted conclusion to draw about all fictional worlds, simply from an observation about the nature of literature or literary characters. The question of whether counterfactuals involving literary characters can be supported depends a great deal, first, on whether one is taking up a perspective internal or external to the fictional world and, second, on what the metaphysical truths of that fictional world are themselves supposed to be like.

strict way, outside the realm of logic?²³ The vindictory reading doesn't explain the motivation for this extreme focus on identity that underpins its whole approach.

It is surely right that with the thought of the eternal recurrence Nietzsche wants to encourage us to see even the seemingly bad parts of our lives as important elements in the good of the whole. It is a Nietzschean ideal as well to be able to *make something* of apparent disadvantages by turning them to one's advantage. And it is certainly Nietzschean to see the good in unexpected places. But there is a danger here of an undifferentiated attitude toward the apparently bad features in one's life. If one looks upon every element of a life as an essential, and therefore supposedly desirable, feature of that life, this threatens to erase the distinction, in the case of suffering, between suffering that is worthwhile and suffering that is not. It has a curious and ironic affinity with Christian attempts at a theodicy, actually. Take, for example, some bout of food poisoning with no instrumental upshot whatsoever. It is simply a few days wasted. We can go through various tactics to say why even this is part of our lives that we can affirm. But one option, the favored move of the vindictory strategy, is not convincing at all: namely, the option of saying that without the food poisoning, my life wouldn't be *my* life. Even if this superessentialist claim is true, we are left with the following issue: Why could I not prefer a life slightly different from "mine" then, if this is the only difference?

The vindictory strategy could just reiterate that we care (or should care) about identity in the strict sense. But the vindictory strategy's focus on identity *per se* obscures what I think is

²³ Nietzsche seems skeptical about the applicability of this logical notion to much in the real world at all. In his typically radical fashion, Nietzsche suggests in *The Gay Science* that many of the most cherished notions of logic—identity included—are simplifying falsifications (GS, 111). I take it the idea is something like this: Just talking about the self-identity of some abstract variable might be perfectly kosher. But once we start applying these logical notions to messy features in the world, and ask questions about the persistence of macroscopic objects through this logical apparatus of identity, what we end up with is not really identity as such, but a simplifying falsification of it—a sort of "close-enough-for-government-work" identity, as it were.

the better Nietzschean justification for why we should want even some of the seemingly bad features of our lives to repeat. It is because these aspects can potentially contribute to the *value* of the life that we should want a life containing these features. A life without those features, we can say, would be a worse life, because it would lack these particular good-making features. To use an excellent example of R. Lanier Anderson's, consider the case of Jimmy Carter, defeated by Reagan in the 1980 election. In isolation, a defeat is a bad thing. But for Carter, it was a springboard to the most successful post-presidency in American history. Carter became a peacemaker and went on to win the Nobel Prize. Carter's life comes to have a certain narrative structure—one of rising, Phoenix-like, from the ashes, where the defeat is an important step toward his future success. That is arguably a better narrative to have than one where Carter wins the second term, but spends his retirement years playing golf and cutting ribbons.²⁴ But Carter should prefer the life with the defeat *because of the good features it possesses*, not *simply* for the reason that it is *his* life, in the strict sense. When given the option to choose a different life, many people claim that they would want a life entirely free from suffering. The trouble with this attitude is not so much that they are wanting a different life from theirs in the strict sense, but that they are choosing a life that is just less worthwhile and meritorious. It would almost certainly be a bad life by Nietzschean standards; that it wouldn't be *one's own life*, in the sense of every feature being exactly the same, is largely just beside the point.

Now, it might be replied on Nietzsche's behalf that this is all really a forward-looking exhortation. One needs to act in such a way that the features of one's life get redeemed in the life that one goes on to lead. We can redeem the past by what we do in the future. Here the Jimmy

²⁴ Anderson (2005).

Carter example is again instructive. Because Carter goes on to be a great peacemaker, he changes the valence of his 1980 defeat. It becomes the road to his success as a great peacemaker, not the road to his senescence as a failed President. With many salient features in one's life, this ideal makes good sense as an action-guiding directive: It is good to make of one's past something worthy of one's current affirmation. But, again, if one starts taking an undifferentiated attitude toward every aspect of one's past and tries to redeem everything, there is a danger of slipping into a form of Stockholm syndrome. Because I am going to need to affirm these features, I better make it the case that I will, metaphorically (and in some cases, literally) speaking, do best to fall in love with my captor, so even the capture and the subsequent torture are indispensable on the road to the love of my life.²⁵ This attitude does not bespeak a healthy psychology.

So far, we have focused much less on affirming all of history, since the secondary literature has focused on the case of affirming features of a particular life. In keeping with that focus, I have so far used the individual life and its features as the basic test case for the vindicatory strategy. We thus deal, in microcosm, with the same issue that arises when we think about affirming all of existence. In wanting the world with one single feature different, I would not be wanting this very world. Yet why want *this* world and not one very much like it, but better? That I should want *this very* world is a weak answer. Why is this what matters? Again, it can seem a kind of unmotivated identity fetishism.

It is true that at the level of world history, Nietzsche can show us how many apparently disadvantageous things have actually turned out to be advantageous. Nietzsche, to be sure, is able to find the upside of Christianity, morality and many other phenomena he attacks. He

²⁵ Adorno puts a similar point forcefully in *Minima Moralia*, §61. Reginster (2006) raises a related objection, p. 221.

probably wouldn't prefer the world without these. But it is because there are *serious and identifiable benefits* to these phenomena, not because it wouldn't be the very same world without them. Yet what about, say, the Lisbon earthquake? What about children who die young of horrible and painful diseases? Now, to be fair, it doesn't seem Nietzsche lost much sleep over these ills. But, by the same token, can they be justified in terms of *any* values Nietzsche holds? I don't think so. Nietzsche's detractors love to take him to task for his apparently cruel remarks about the *Übermensch*, immoralism, slavery, and so on. One can, with exegetical finesse, render somewhat less shocking what Nietzsche was on about with these topics, especially by pointing to countervailing values that Nietzsche sees as being realized. But if it is really Nietzsche's view that every event in world history is worthy of affirmation, everything else he says in his work pales in comparison to the horror of this monstrous idea. Perhaps he became so tangled in his own metaphysics that he thought he *had* to think this. But as I have tried to show in this section, the idea that all events in world history are a package deal is not just founded on a shaky metaphysical basis, it is ethically disastrous *by Nietzsche's own lights*. It is completely sweeping in drawing no distinctions between what is to be affirmed and what is to be rejected, what is to be loved and what is to be despised. The attitude in fact slips into the kind of indiscriminately loving attitude that Nietzsche ridicules so effectively when it comes to the Christian exhortation to love each and every human being. To call "love" an attitude that one should have toward every single person on earth debases the selectivity of real love. An affirmative attitude that one should have for every single event in history is no less, and probably more, perverse. Does Nietzsche then really accept an extreme secular theodicy, according to which every feature of our world is a feature of the world worthy of affirmation?

It seems completely shocking that he would, and yet, at the same time, his texts *seem* to bear out this commitment. They show Nietzsche is wedded to global affirmation *in some sense*. The demon presenting the thought experiment clearly highlights this aspect that *no* feature can be different. The vindicatory strategy is right to focus on this dimension. Yet the vindicatory strategy wrongly seeks to justify the affirmation of every feature in an individual's life—and indeed global affirmation more generally, as if it is *warranted*. And furthermore, even if the vindicatory strategy *were* able to justify this position of Nietzsche's, there would still be the problem of how to square the affirmative conclusion with Nietzsche's critical streak. In the next section I will present a view that attempts to reconcile these difficulties.

VI. My Alternative

The suggestion that I want to put forward is this: Nietzsche himself should not be understood as accepting global affirmation as the right evaluative attitude for a person to have in the sense that the features of a person's life and world history actually warrant it. But he does think of it as an ideal in another sense: the person is admirable who has at least one exuberant moment in their lives when they would feel this way. The point of the thought experiment, on my reading, is thus to direct the reader's attention to the possibility and desirability of this *admirable (over)reaction itself*, not to vindicate it or even to recommend it as a model attitude for our daily lives.

In other philosophical contexts, it is common to separate the issue of whether an attitude is warranted from the issue of whether it is praiseworthy or admirable to *have* the attitude. In epistemology, this is standard. Take the attitude of belief. Evidence is what provides warrant for

a belief. But there are contexts in which it is arguably practically beneficial, (non-epistemically) admirable, and so on, to hold a belief *not* warranted by the evidence. The mother may be admirable *qua* mother precisely because her fervent belief in her son's innocence is out of touch with her evidence, which points strongly to his guilt. We think of the belief as a reflection of her deep-seated love for her son. She thus either ignores the evidence or sees it through rose-tinted glasses, and it is to some degree admirable that she does so, even if it is epistemically irresponsible of her.²⁶

Although one may agree that the distinction just made is in principle possible and helpful, what further reason is there for thinking that something like this is actually at work in Nietzsche's thinking about the eternal recurrence and one's reaction to it? The most basic reason for accepting this interpretation on offer is that it is the best way of reconciling Nietzsche's competing commitments: The deflationary reading does not make sense of the emphasis Nietzsche puts on global affirmation in his most central presentations of the eternal recurrence. The vindictory reading doesn't give a satisfactory account of why this global affirmation is called for. And even if the vindictory reading were able to do so, it wouldn't be able to reconcile the central tension between global affirmation and Nietzsche's relentlessly critical stance. There is, as I have stressed in the previous section, very strong reason to believe that the attitude of affirming all things just cannot be the one that Nietzsche thinks existence actually warrants. The main advantage of the reading I am offering is that of being able to accommodate these various aspects of Nietzsche's view in a coherent way.

²⁶ Of course, at some point, and depending on the consequences of her holding the belief, it may cease to be admirable. But there would be something very perverse and troublingly inhuman about a mother who simply apportioned her belief to a dispassionate reckoning of the evidence.

In order to render this interpretation more plausible and attractive, let me now discuss a few additional features of it. First, it is worth noting that one will not actually be able to catalogue or to reflect in a serious way on most of the events in one's life, let alone in world history. Nor could one do so exhaustively, with respect to world history, even if one had a lifetime for the task. This is for the simple reason that when it comes to many things in this enormous domain, one simply will not know about them, and in many cases, no evidence at all would be available, even if one did want to know about them and had the time to learn. So too even with events in one's own life, particularly if they have faded from memory. And this all suggests yet another reason for pulling apart the question of whether this transitory affirmation is worthwhile and whether all things actually warrant it: If we took the attitude toward the eternal recurrence to be the one that Nietzsche thinks the events actually warrant, it would be highly epistemically suspect as a judgment anyway, either on his part or on the part of some other person affirming the eternal recurrence. You cannot render an epistemically responsible verdict to the effect that every feature of something is worthy of affirmation unless you know what it is that is being affirmed. (By contrast, of course, it is fairly easy to know that *not* all of life and existence is worthy of affirmation. In order to know this, one simply needs to know that there is at least one feature not worthy of affirmation, and that doesn't require surveying the whole.) Yet it would be very odd for Nietzsche to claim, with good reason, that a globally positive verdict

rendered on existence is *warranted* by the facts, since most of the relevant facts are not available to Nietzsche or to any actual human agent making the judgment.²⁷

Second, we need to consider *when* Nietzsche thinks the affirmation needs to happen. In the famous presentation of the thought experiment, after the demon presents the scenario of everything repeating, Nietzsche then asks in his own voice: “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 where [*einmal einen ungeheuren Augenblick erlebt, wo*] you would have answered him: ‘You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine’” (GS, 341). One potential reading would have it that it is the moment that is *itself* perfect and we would want *that moment* repeated to eternity because of its perfection.²⁸ This, if you will, is the Faustian reading, at least insofar as the moment itself is the potential primary object of affirmation; one likes the moment so much that one wants that moment to recur, and one is willing to take all the rest of existence in order to get it.²⁹ This reading may resonate better with the imagery of parts of

²⁷ In light of these considerations, there is a puzzle about how much of the whole of life or the world one has to have in view to count as (knowingly) affirming *it*, in any substantial and interesting sense. In a fairly trivial way, in order to affirm something, I need nothing more than an attitude toward it, *de re*. But if we are in serious ignorance about the properties of the thing, then the sense in which we are truly affirming *that thing* is just not very full-blooded. In order for the affirmation to count, one will need to have enough of the features of one’s life and of the world in view to count as actually affirming *that*. In order for affirmation to be possible for finite humans, though, it can’t require complete knowledge of all or most of the aspects of existence. Yet exactly how much knowledge is required is tricky to say. And likewise, while some illusion may be necessary, affirmation coming from the completely or substantially deluded person presumably would not count for very much. Nietzsche does not address this issue directly in his discussion of the eternal recurrence. So seeking to present necessary or sufficient conditions for when one has enough of the world in view would be exegetically artificial.

²⁸ Reginster (2006), p. 224-5.

²⁹ One interpretation of the end of Part II of Goethe’s *Faust* is that Faust does not lose the bet with Mephistopheles, because he never finds what he thinks of as the perfect moment. Faust, just before his death, says, “*Zum Augenblicke dürft ich sagen / ‘Verweile doch, du bist so schön.’*” The subjunctive “dürft(e)” indicates, though, that he is not *in fact* asking the moment to tarry [*verweile*], but in essence saying instead-- *would that he could* ask the moment to tarry. In his last words before he dies, he says that he enjoys his highest moment [*höchsten Augenblick*] in the presentiment [*Vorgefühl*] of this great happiness. This all ends up being a point of contention between the Chorus Mysticus, who think that Faust is saved, and Mephistopheles, who maintains that Faust’s soul belongs to him. The Chorus prevails in this debate and Faust, never finally satisfied and always striving, is saved.

Zarathustra (e.g., “On the Vision and the Riddle,” 2). But this is not the only possible reading. In the key passage from *The Gay Science*, the moment is not, I think, what is being affirmed, except indirectly insofar as everything is being affirmed. It is instead marking off *when this affirmation is happening*. Thus, this affirmation needn’t be a stable disposition of character or the attitude it is best to have throughout all of life. It need only be a brief moment of ecstasy.³⁰ And that may well diverge from a more measured judgment.

Now we might accordingly wonder: Given that this affirmation, as described, would be manifested only in certain unusual circumstances, and indeed only be manifested briefly, does it really show anything significant about a person’s character? Might it instead be thought a radical departure from her character? This is a difficult issue.³¹ We don’t of course want it to be merely adventitious that the person would welcome the eternal recurrence, as the committed Schopenhauerian might if some affirmation potion had been slipped into his drink. The affirmation instead needs to be an extension and reflection of the attitude toward existence that the person really has. A more moderate, yet still fundamentally affirmative, attitude toward existence, in one’s more sober moments, is compatible with recognizing a great many faults in existence too. In the moment of exuberant affirmation, one builds on and yet goes very far beyond this more modest affirmative attitude, so as to affirm *everything*. It is not a complete fluke. But it is not one’s normal, everyday stance either.

So we thus have three basic types of person: first, the one who would affirm the eternal recurrence at many or most moments in his life. Such a person is very probably insane or

³⁰ Cp., Young (1992), who also sees this sort of ecstatic dimension in the envisaged reaction, p. 114-15.

³¹ I am grateful to Edward Harcourt for raising this problem.

seriously deluded, and in any event, deeply out of touch with the attitude that life and existence call for. After all, even from a Nietzschean ethical perspective, a great many things would seem to deserve to be condemned. Then we have another person, who while fundamentally affirmative in many ways, does nonetheless sensibly recognize a great many faults in existence. She realizes, correctly, that life and the world have a number of deeply objectionable features, but she nonetheless has such love for *this-worldly* things that she has the spark to go overboard, if only for a moment, and affirm it all, however wrong she herself might regard this wildly overreaching claim in her more reflective moments. The third type of person is just too inhibited, perhaps through an absolutist commitment to the will to truth or to a moralistic reckoning of the horrors of existence, and he thereby lacks the potential for this sort of exuberant outburst. If *he* were to affirm all of existence, we might think of it just as akin to the potion's effect. But with the second type of person, where the groundwork for the attitude, in a less extreme form, is already to be found in her pre-existing attitudes, the outburst makes more sense as an exaggerated reflection of these attitudes.

And what is this underlying attitude? It is not just a matter of having a theoretical belief about the world or uttering the words “yes, again!” in response to the demon. Affirmation is a more full-blooded affective attitude toward one's life and existence.³² Nietzsche brings out this affective dimension by tying this affirmative attitude closely to a kind of love, in particular noting that one's reaction of affirmation toward the eternal recurrence is rooted in *amor fati*—love of fate.³³ But we should, in this connection, recall what Nietzsche thinks of love more

³² In this characterization I agree with May (2011), p. 82.

³³ See Han-Pile (2011) for further discussion of this theme, including a helpful distinction between agapic and erotic love, as well as a consideration of the degree of control the agent has in this love of fate.

generally: It is a state, as he says elsewhere, in which we are often in the grip of illusions: “Love is the state in which man sees things most decidedly as they are not. The power of illusion is at its peak here, as is the power to sweeten and transfigure. In love man endures more, man bears everything” (A, 23). Shaded by these illusions, in loving something one tends often to *overvalue it*, misconstruing or ignoring the evidence about its faults. To love life and the world is to be disposed to value them more than an objective reckoning would warrant. Of course, this is not to say that Nietzsche is a closet Schopenhauerian who really hates life. Nietzsche is no doubt deeply life-affirming and praises those with this attitude. But it is the peculiar power of love that makes one love life and the world more so than they deserve, so much so that one would, in the extreme, exuberantly affirm every aspect of it. There is something admirable about the lover who in a moment of ecstasy thinks that absolutely every feature of the beloved is worthy of being loved. As a judgment applied to most ordinary humans, this is clearly not warranted. And in his more sober moments, the lover may not think this. But there is something admirable about his love being strong enough that it would inspire him to get things wrong in this way.

So, if the response to the thought of eternal recurrence is not delivering a verdict on all of existence that can be trusted as accurate, why is this response of global affirmation nonetheless significant? It has, I am arguing, significance as a sign of the admirability (in one respect anyway) of a person’s character. It is a mark of one’s strength as a person to be able to have this reaction. That a person is able to affirm everything, however fleetingly, says something about her. What Nietzsche says in *Beyond Good and Evil* suggests that, with the thought of the eternal recurrence, he is trying to propose a counter-ideal to the life-negating ascetic ideal. He is trying to put forward a vision of what it would be to live in a way that is diametrically opposed to the

world-denial that he sees as characteristic of Schopenhauer (BGE, 56). The eternal recurrence, on my reading, is thus not a test that everyone needs to pass or a thought-experiment designed to probe at every key juncture whether one is living a life every aspect of which one could affirm. It is an ideal of a certain kind of an admirable (if in some ways mistaken) person.

Given all that I have so far said, though, why think there is reason for celebrating this overvaluing, affirmative attitude? Nietzsche, as I have said, presents it as a marked counterpoint to the sort of life-negation characteristic of the ascetic ideal. That one is able to affirm life in so extreme a fashion is a sign that one has been able to escape the clutches of this sort of life-negating worldview entirely. But it *is* an extreme, and that extremity should not be forgotten. Kaufmann's translation of this passage in fact loses some of the rich ambiguity in the German "*ungeheuer*," a form of which is used to describe the moment of affirmation itself (GS, 341). Kaufmann renders this as "tremendous," but it can also mean monstrous. There is something tremendous, but there is also something monstrous and terrible about this attitude of wanting everything to recur. It may be a worthwhile attitude, fleetingly, for certain great individuals to have, in that it is a signal of their overflowing vitality and love of life, but this doesn't mean that it is the *warranted* attitude, even by Nietzsche's non-moral standards.

The point of the eternal recurrence thought experiment, on my reading, is thus less for us to reflect on the possibility of recurrence *per se* (or something non-literal in the vicinity) than it is to reflect on the possibility of a certain extreme reaction to the news of it. When Nietzsche thus writes, "if this thought gained possession of you..." (GS, 341), and says it will "change you as you are," he is referring, I would suggest, not to the thought of recurrence. He is instead referring to the thought, in the sentence immediately before the one quoted, of *the person* who in the

tremendous moment answers the demon "You are a God...". *That* thought is what Nietzsche wants us to ponder —namely, the thought of this person and her reaction to the demon's news, and it is this thought that changes you or crushes you. For, in the image of this person's affirmation, you see a vision of life affirmation and freedom from *ressentiment* in a particularly extreme form. It is through the thought of this exuberant reaction—*not* the mere thought that things repeat—that you are either inspired toward greater life affirmation, or crushed by the image of a love for life that you could never even dimly approximate. Nietzsche's "eternal confirmation and seal" [*ewigen Bestätigung und Besiegelung*] (GS, 341) language reinforces this interpretation. It is referring to *the attitude* you might come to admire, not directly to a cosmology you would welcome. A confirmation and seal is, after all, something that *a person confers*. Nietzsche wants us to reflect on this full-throated affirmation and note the distance between it and our own likely reaction. We are not called upon to adopt this overvaluing attitude ourselves on an everyday basis, but instead for its image of an ideal to remain with us, lying on our actions "as the greatest weight" (GS, 341).

In a certain way, my own interpretation is in sympathy with the deflationary reading in thinking that Nietzsche himself endorses a more modest ideal than global affirmation, at least when it comes to the issue of what actually warrants affirmation. But my reading diverges from the deflationary reading in maintaining the emphasis on global affirmation as essential to what is involved in affirming the eternal recurrence *per se*. Whereas the deflationary reading sees the eternal recurrence thought experiment as not calling for that global affirmation, I, by contrast, see it as indeed calling for that, at least on the part of the ideal person being envisaged. But I then question whether we should extrapolate from what Nietzsche takes to be an admirable reaction to

the eternal recurrence thought experiment and thereby think we are getting Nietzsche's own considered views about what is worthy of affirmation. Where both the deflationary and the vindictory readings have gone astray is in collapsing these two questions by thinking that the former is a guide to the latter. I have argued that they should be kept separate.

VII. Conclusion

Tom Stern draws attention to what he aptly describes as Nietzsche's "charming habit of getting a bit carried away."³⁴ On the reading I have offered in this paper, a tendency to get carried away is part and parcel of a certain idealized reaction to the eternal recurrence thought experiment. *Only by* getting carried away, and loving existence more than it warrants, can one actually affirm it in its totality. My guiding question has been this: How could Nietzsche possibly celebrate this affirmation of the eternal recurrence, given the critical streak in his work? I have tried to resolve that tension by suggesting that although Nietzsche doesn't think all of existence is worthy of affirmation, he nonetheless thinks that there is something admirable about the transitory willingness to affirm it. Although my primary concern here has been to deal with Nietzsche's texts, and not to consider what was going on in the mind of the historical individual Friedrich Nietzsche, if I were to speculate on his personal intentions, I would guess that he himself got carried away with the idea of the eternal recurrence—and for far longer than just a moment. I suspect that he wrongly thought that this was the way things cosmologically are, and he thought he *had* to want things to recur, if he wasn't going to be resentful towards life. The cosmology, most now think, is an embarrassment, especially his failed proofs for it. More

³⁴ Stern (2011), p. 74.

common, however, has been to try somehow to vindicate, independent of the cosmology, his alleged idea that all of existence warrants our affirmation. But the idea that all of existence warrants our affirmation, if the man Nietzsche indeed thought this, is, it seems to me, no less of an embarrassment to him. It is a strange view, incompatible with some of Nietzsche's most fervently held and far more interesting positions about the ills of Western culture. With Nietzsche of all people, there is not always reason to expect that he will be consistent in his views. And on this topic perhaps he is straightforwardly inconsistent. But my interest is not what was going on in the mind of that very unusual man. My goal here has instead been to present a philosophical reconstruction of Nietzsche's views, guided by the regulative ideal of critical charity, to try to show how the eternal recurrence fits together with the rest of his views. Although the use Nietzsche makes of the eternal recurrence sits uncomfortably with Nietzsche's critical streak, I have tried to suggest a way in which the two might intelligibly be reconciled.³⁵

³⁵ My thanks to Rachel Cristy, Ken Gemes, Sam Hughes, Alexander Nehamas, and Tim Stoll for their helpful comments on this paper, as well as to the participants at the Birkbeck Works-in-Progress Seminar, where I presented this material.

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