



REINTERPRETING THE HIGHEST FORMULA OF AFFIRMATION

NIETZSCHE'S TWO ETERNAL RECURRENCES IN THUS SPOKE ZARATHUSTRA AND THE SELF-OVERCOMING OF NIHILISM

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§ INTRODUCTION: THE APORIAS OF ETERNAL RECURRENCE

The doctrine of eternal recurrence has always been one of the greatest aporias for interpreters of Nietzsche's philosophy. Throughout his lifetime, Nietzsche develops different approaches to the problem of eternal recurrence. In the famous section 341 of *The Joyful Science*, Nietzsche presents eternal recurrence as an imaginary vision of the demon interrogating whether we want to relive our current lives "once more and countless times more" with "nothing new in [them]."¹ Yet in his posthumously collected fragment *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche seems to then conceive eternal recurrence not as a vision or imagination, but rather the "most scientific of all possible hypotheses."²

This disunity in Nietzsche's presentation of the doctrine led some interpreters (Oger 1997; Löwith 1997) to argue that there are inherently two incompatible notions of eternal recurrence — one ethical and one cosmological — in Nietzsche's works. Different

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Joyful Science / Idylls from Messina / Unpublished Fragments from the Period of The Joyful Science (Spring 1881–Summer 1882)*, Trans. Adrian Del Caro,

(Stanford University Press, 2023), 204

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, Trans. Walter Kaufmann and Reginald John Hollingdale, (Vintage Books, 1968), 36.

from these interpreters, who attribute the split between these two notions of eternal recurrence to Nietzsche's change in ideas, I argue that the split is necessary to the doctrine itself. The two notions of eternal recurrence already coexist in Nietzsche's presentation of the doctrine in Part III of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. The duality in the idea of eternal recurrence does not simply point toward an inconsistency in Nietzsche's works. As I try to demonstrate, Nietzsche presents two notions of eternal recurrence because there are two ways of solving the riddle of eternity and moment. These two ways are already evident in the riddle of eternal recurrence itself.

My interpretation will begin with an analysis of the riddle of eternal recurrence in "The Vision and the Riddle." In my interpretation, "The Vision and the Riddle" reveals an inner contradiction between moment and eternity within the framework of linear temporality. Interpreting the tension between moment and eternity as the central problem that Nietzsche wants to resolve, I propose that the riddle of eternal recurrence inherently opens to two possible solutions: one that focuses on the moment (the ethical eternal recurrence) and one that focuses on eternity (the cosmological eternal recurrence). These two solutions to the riddle, further presented by Nietzsche in "The Convalescent," become two opposing ways of formulating the doctrine of eternal recurrence. The tension between the two formulas of eternal recurrence is crucial for Nietzsche's project of overcoming nihilism. As I shall demonstrate, the core of Nietzsche's philosophy lies in correctly balancing these two formulas of eternal recurrence. The overcoming of nihilism requires not only the cosmological equation of eternal recurrence, but also that one actively wills and affirms the cosmological equation in an ethical gesture. In this sense, Nietzsche's philosophy becomes a philosophy in becoming — here, becoming is not only a metaphysical concept; it rather emphasizes how Nietzsche put his own philosophy into motion. This eventually leads to a more nuanced understanding of Nietzsche's project of overcoming nihilism.

§ THE COSMOLOGICAL AND THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL-ETHICAL EQUATION OF ETERNAL RECURRENCE

It is not a new idea to argue that Nietzsche's writings contain two opposing, even contradictory concepts of eternal recurrence. In Karl Löwith's 1935 book *Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, he observed that Nietzsche's teaching of

eternal recurrence contains two opposing equations. As he concisely summarizes, the eternal recurrence concerns “on the one hand, with an ‘ethical gravity’ by means of which human existence that has become goalless obtains a goal again, beyond itself; and on the other hand, with a natural-scientific ‘fact’ in the goalless self-contained existence of the world of forces.”³ Löwith names the former equation of the eternal recurrence (the one that emphasizes the “ethical gravity” of willing the same life) as “anthropological” and the latter equation (emphasizing eternal recurrence as a physical fact) as the “cosmological.”⁴

For Löwith, these two equations of eternal recurrence are intrinsically incompatible. In the cosmological equation, the world is conceived as a constant and “goalless cycle” of becoming, an infinite play of forces with “no beginning and no end.”⁵ But because the world is constituted by a “definite quantity of forces,” the combination of forces must be exhausted in the infinite span of time, turning the world into a “circular movement that has already repeated itself infinitely.”⁶ Eternal recurrence, in this metaphysical-scientific interpretation, becomes a factual statement about the actual “temporal structure of the physical world.”⁷ The anthropological equation, on the other hand, does not concern the actuality of eternal recurrence in the present; rather, it treats eternal recurrence as a possibility in the future. As Löwith argues, the task of the anthropological equation is to transpose the heteronomous imperative “thou shalt” into the self-affirming “I will” that affirms the recurrence of one’s current life.⁸ This transposition creates a “will to rebirth” that seeks to “eternalize” and elevate our ephemeral, momentary life to something that is also to come in the future.⁹ The cosmological equation of eternal recurrence eventually declares the world to be always-already a goalless, self-revolving circular movement. But the anthropological equation presents the reestablishment of a goal on a higher, existential horizon. In Löwith’s words, it posits a “willed goal of a will to eternal-ization” that “liberates from the burden of the past and arises from the will to the future.”¹⁰ Whereas the cosmological equation absorbs past, future, and present into a homogeneous recurrence of the same, the

³ Karl Löwith, *Nietzsche’s Philosophy of the Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, 1st ed, Trans. J. Harvey Lomax, (University of California Press, 1997), 83.

⁴ Löwith, 84, 88.

⁵ Löwith, 89.

⁶ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 549.

⁷ Löwith, 94.

⁸ Löwith, 87.

⁹ Löwith, 86.

¹⁰ Löwith, 87.

anthropological equation opens itself to the future through the active willing of repetition. For Löwith, these two equations of eternal recurrence eventually represent Nietzsche's two different approaches to temporality.

A similar distinction between the two equations of eternal recurrence is also being drawn in Eric Oger's 1997 article "The Eternal Return as Crucial Test." Following Löwith's classification, Oger also proposes that there are two contradictory interpretations of Nietzsche's eternal recurrence: one interpreting eternal recurrence as a cosmological-ontological doctrine, and the other interpreting eternal recurrence as an ethical-deontological doctrine. But unlike Löwith's diagnosis of the duality of eternal recurrence as "a fundamental contradiction of Nietzsche's philosophy," Oger perceives each of the two possible interpretations of eternal recurrence to be limited in itself.¹¹ Different from both the cosmological and the ethical interpretation of eternal recurrence, Oger instead proposes a third interpretation of eternal recurrence, that is, conceiving eternal recurrence as a "crucial test" of one's life.¹² To form this interpretation, Oger retreats to Nietzsche's initial presentation of eternal recurrence in *The Joyful Science*. For Oger, the demon, whispering to ask whether we want to relive our current lives eternally, opens up a "prospective" perspective that points "toward the future."¹³ This ultimately forces the thinker to "test" the value of their current life.¹⁴

Despite Löwith and Oger's convincing analysis of the split between the two doctrines of eternal recurrence, it still remains unclear how this theory of two eternal recurrences could fit into Nietzsche's conception of his works. Both interpreters seem to suggest that Nietzsche himself never had a unified concept of eternal recurrence throughout his writings.¹⁵ However, if it is true that the thought of eternal recurrence is itself disunified, how should we now interpret the role of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in Nietzsche's philosophy, given that, in *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche accounts this book to be based on "the

¹¹ Eric Oger, "The Eternal Return as Crucial Test." *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, no. 14 (1997), 1.

¹² Oger, 7.

¹³ Oger, 11.

¹⁴ Oger, 11.

¹⁵ Oger points out the fact that supporters the ethical interpretation often "goes back to completely different text" than supporters of the cosmological interpretation (4). For Löwith, this division in the idea of eternal recurrence even reflects Nietzsche's conflicting identity between a "natural scientist" and a "founder of a religion" (83).

thought of eternal recurrence”?¹⁶ To me, there are only two ways of resolving this tension between Nietzsche’s account of *Zarathustra* and the theory of two eternal recurrences. Firstly, it could be argued that *Zarathustra* only represents one doctrine of the eternal recurrence, and Nietzsche is simply unaware of the division. Secondly, it could be argued that the concept of eternal recurrence is inherently divided, and this division is already evident in *Zarathustra*. My essay tries to take the latter approach — as I will argue, the duality of eternal recurrence, rather than being a result of an arbitrary change in Nietzsche’s idea, in fact deeply relates to the theme of overcoming nihilism in *Zarathustra*. This requires us to turn to Nietzsche’s first formulation of the doctrine in Part III of the book.

§ THE RIDDLE OF ETERNAL RECURRENCE AS THE PARADOX OF MOMENT AND ETERNITY

The chapter “On the Vision and the Riddle” is Nietzsche’s first formal discussion of eternal recurrence in *Zarathustra*. As Heidegger insightfully observes, the doctrine of eternal recurrence exists initially as a “riddle” — a riddle does not involve proving the argument step by step, but instead demands that “we take a leap” into the “truth of being” that is unconcealed.¹⁷ Just as Zarathustra himself describes, the riddle is exclusively open to the bold researchers [*Versucher*] who love to “guess” but “hate to deduce.”¹⁸ The riddle itself is designed as a philosophical experiment [*Versuch*] rather than a question with a definite answer.

In my interpretation, the riddle of eternal recurrence is composed of two parts that successively present the paradox of moment and eternity. The first part of the riddle concerns the relation between “moment” and “linear time.” As Zarathustra portrays in his speech:

“Behold this gateway, dwarf,” I continued. “It has two faces. Two paths meet here; no one has yet followed either to its end. This long lane stretches back for an eternity. And the long lane out there, that is another eternity. They contradict each other, these paths; they offend each other

¹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner, Twilight of the Idols, The Antichrist, Ecce Homo, Dionysus Dithyrambos, Nietzsche Contra Wagner*, Trans. by Adrian Del Caro, et al. (Stanford university press, 2021), 278.

¹⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche: Volumes Two*. Trans. David Farrell Krell, (Harper, 1993), g37.

¹⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for None and All*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann, (Penguin Books, 1978), 156.

face to face; and it is here at this gateway that they come together. The name of the gateway is inscribed above: 'Moment.' But whoever would follow one of them, on and on, farther and farther-do you believe, dwarf, that these paths contradict each other eternally?"¹⁹

The gate, representing the present "moment," constitutes the meeting point between the two infinitely extending paths of past and future; but at the same time, these two infinitely extending lanes contradict each other, because they are expanding in opposing directions. The contradiction here is apparent: if the two infinitely extending lines are expanding in opposing directions, how is it possible for them to meet at the gateway of the moment? How can we believe that two paths "contradict each other eternally," when it is also true that they come together at a certain point?

To answer this riddle, we must interpret Zarathustra's gesture. Different from the dwarf's simple answer that "time is itself a circle," Zarathustra asks us to focus on the "moment" [*Augenblick*].²⁰ The solution to this riddle lies in the gateway: if it is true that the gateway of moment connects two opposing paths, then the only way it could connect them is by being the origin of their divergence. The moment is not simply a point within the infinitely extending timeline; it is rather the recurring points of rupture where the two lines of past and future break apart. In this sense, Nietzsche completely reverses the ontological priority between moment and time — it is the recurring moment that conditions the eternally expanding line of time, not vice versa. Moment is the point that breaks apart past and future, and precisely through this rupture of the moment, time becomes a line extending to two opposing directions. Without the constant rupture of the moment, time would not appear as a line.

This focus on the "moment," as the solution to the first riddle, immediately brings forth Zarathustra's second riddle. Rather than examining the gateway from the standpoint of the eternally extending lines, Zarathustra now turns to examine the eternal lines from the viewpoint of the gateway itself:

"Behold," I continued, "this moment! From this gateway, Moment, a long, eternal lane leads backward: behind us lies an eternity. Must not whatever can walk have walked on this lane before? Must not whatever can happen have happened, have been done, have passed by before? And if everything has been there before-what do you think, dwarf, of this moment? And are not all things knotted together so

¹⁹ Nietzsche, 157-158.

²⁰ Nietzsche, 158.

firmly that this moment draws after it all that is to come? Therefore, itself too?"²¹

From the point of view of the gateway, "a long, eternal lane leads backward" lies behind the present moment.²² The gateway is connected to the extending path, while also trying to step away from it. But when the backward extending line is "eternal," that is, when we imagine an infinite past that includes all possible instances, then this present moment must also be part of this eternal line. If the past extends eternally, then it is justified to claim that "whatever can happen has happened, has been done, has passed by before."²³ The contradiction is the following: if we interpret moment as the constant rupture that initiates the two infinitely extending paths, then the path that lies behind the gateway must be eternal; but if the path that lies behind the gateway is eternal, then the moment cannot be a true rupture, because the moment must have always-already occurred in the past. The concept of the eternally expanding path cancels the concept of moment. The hypothesis of the second riddle (that the past eternally extends) is now revealed to be contradictory to the solution of the first riddle (that moment is the breaking point of past and future).

The tension between the first and second riddles expresses the contradictory relation between eternity and the moment within the framework of linear temporality. Nietzsche's riddle of eternal recurrence reveals that the concept of moment is incompatible with the eternally extending timeline of past-present-future. In this sense, the problem of eternal recurrence is strictly a problem of temporality. The central concern of *Zarathustra* in Part III now becomes finding a new model of temporality that could solve the riddle without involving any contradiction.

§ THE TWO ETERNAL RECURRENCES IN ZARATHUSTRA

If the riddle of eternal recurrence essentially concerns the contradiction between eternity and moment, then there must exist two immediate approaches to resolving the paradox: 1. Emphasizing the concept of eternity and dissolving all moments into the eternal past; 2. Emphasizing the singularity of the moment and denying the infinitely

²¹ Nietzsche, 158.

²² Nietzsche, 158.

²³ Nietzsche, 158.

extending path of eternity. It is clear that the two approaches are mutually incompatible, precisely because they both attempt to resolve the contradiction by prioritizing one concept over the other.

This interpretive framework corresponds to the structure of Nietzsche's text. In the chapter "On the Vision of The Riddle," we encounter two opposing solutions to the riddle of eternal recurrence — one from the dwarf, and another from the shepherd. Here, the dwarf's solution corresponds exactly to the first way of solving the riddle of eternal recurrence. According to the dwarf, "all truth is crooked; time itself is a circle."²⁴ The dwarf bends the two infinitely extending lines together into a circle. For the dwarf, moment is only an illusion; he simply denounces everything Zarathustra proclaimed about the gateway of moment that joins the eternally extending path as "straight lies."²⁵ In the dwarf's interpretation, everything is eternally unalterable, because the moment never exists. Nothing new emerges from the eternally "crooked," unchanging truth. The dwarf, therefore, presents a metaphysical doctrine of eternal recurrence — a version of eternal recurrence literally speculating that everything recurs eternally in the same manner in the infinite scope of time.

The shepherd's solution creates an immediately contrast to the dwarf. The chapter ends with Zarathustra's vision of a shepherd choked by "a heavy black snake" [*schwarze schwere Schlange*].²⁶ Here, the heaviness [*Schwerigkeit*] of the snake signifies the gravity and also the difficulty (which are both expressed in the German word *Schwerigkeit*) of the riddle of eternal recurrence. In contrast to the dwarf who "[makes] things too easy" for himself, the shepherd's attempt to solve the riddle is to fiercely bite off the head of the snake.²⁷ If the snake represents the indefinitely extending path of time (since the snake is a crawling straight line), then biting off the head of the snake means literally cutting off the beginning of the eternal line. The shepherd's action, therefore, represents the triumph of the moment against eternity: through one single act of biting, the shepherd tears apart the unity of the eternal paths. As Zarathustra praises, the shepherd's laughter after biting off the snake's head is "no human laughter;" the shepherd, through the action of the "moment," conquered the recurrence of eternity and becomes a figure of *Übermensch*.²⁸ In this interpretation, the shepherd's action corresponds

²⁴ Nietzsche, 158.

²⁵ Nietzsche, 158.

²⁶ Nietzsche, 159.

²⁷ Nietzsche, 158.

²⁸ Nietzsche, 160.

to the second solution to the riddle, that is, to overcome eternity with moment and action.

This framework of the two doctrines of eternal recurrence also applies to the structure of the chapter “The Convalescent,” which portrays Zarathustra’s second attempt to summon the “abysmal thought” of eternal recurrence. Just as “On the Vision and the Riddle,” “The Convalescent” introduces a similar opposition between two solutions of eternal recurrence: the animal and Zarathustra.

The animal attempts to resolve the paradox of moment and eternity by reducing the moment to a repeating instance within the eternal ring of being. Heidegger points out that the animal’s description of eternal recurrence — “everything goes, everything comes back; eternally rolls the wheel of being” — is “at bottom identical with the talk of the dwarf.”²⁹ The animal’s claim that “the center is everywhere” and “bent is the path of eternity” also directly corresponds to the dwarf’s belief that time is itself a circle. But different from the dwarf’s mere speculation, the animal introduces a metaphysical justification for the doctrine: “But the knot of causes in which I am entangled recurs and will create me again. I myself belong to the causes of the eternal recurrence.”³⁰ This attempt to ground eternal recurrence in the entanglement of causes clearly relates to Nietzsche’s later conception of “combination of forces” in *The Will to Power*. For the animal, one eternally recurs to the same life through the same “knot of causes,” just as the world infinitely repeats an “absolutely identical series” of combinations in infinite time due to the finitude of forces.³¹ Zarathustra returns to the eternal selfsame life not because he wills such recurrence, but because all the other causes that co-constitute the world’s combination of forces (“this sun,” “this earth,” “this eagle,” “this serpent,” even the “smallest man”) infinitely recreate Zarathustra.³² The animal’s final presentation, therefore, already foreshadows the cosmological eternal recurrence of forces and power.

The animal’s interpretation of eternal recurrence is immediately contrasted with Zarathustra, who now takes on the role of the shepherd by biting off the snake’s head. Zarathustra’s whole speech on the necessity of evilness (that “man needs what is most evil in him for what is best in him”) reiterates the shepherd’s

²⁹ Nietzsche, 217; Heidegger, 54.

³⁰ Nietzsche, 221.

³¹ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 549.

³² Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 221.

prioritization of moment over eternity and the attempt to overcome the burden of eternal recurrence through action. This is why Zarathustra mocks the animals as “buffoons and barrel organs.”³³ Unlike the animals, Zarathustra feels an unbearable “nausea” at the thought that “the small man recurs eternally.”³⁴ Here, the cause of Zarathustra’s nausea is not the thought of eternal recurrence per se, but rather the ethical consequence of such thought. For Zarathustra, to admit eternal recurrence as a natural fact implies justifying the eternal recurrence of the last man. But to justify the eternal recurrence of the last man means that the last man can never be overcome, which consequently indicates that the *Übermensch* could never exist. This leads Zarathustra to argue that humans must consummate their destructive power, even the power of evilness, to become the highest creator — “whatever is most evil is his best power and the hardest stone for the highest creator.”³⁵

Zarathustra’s doctrine of the necessity of evilness is, however, still a negative doctrine to be replaced. His doctrine of evilness, which strives to overcome the eternally recurring small man through an absolute, destructive power of overcoming, still has not overstepped the spirit of the lion pronouncing the “sacred No.”³⁶ As “On the Three Metamorphoses” describes, the spirit of the lion “had been lost to the world” because it could only negate rather than create. Zarathustra’s doctrine of evil resembles the spirit of the lion in its world-destructing tendency: through the consummation of humans’ evilness, Zarathustra subordinates the world under his power. But the animal wants him to affirm the world — as they said to Zarathustra, “world awaits you like a garden.”³⁷ The world awaits to be enjoyed and affirmed. For Zarathustra to recover from the sickness of his devastating negativity, he must learn to “sing and overflow” and become “the teacher of eternal recurrence.”³⁸

The animal’s diagnosis of Zarathustra’s sickness guides him to a higher formula of affirmation. This formula is different from the animal’s because Zarathustra never completely accepts the animal’s doctrine. The chapter ends with Zarathustra’s silence as he turns to “conversing with his soul.”³⁹ Zarathustra’s conversation with his soul in the following chapter, “On the Great Longing,” sublimates his destructive power of evilness into an affirmative desire for singing.

³³ Nietzsche, 220.

³⁴ Nietzsche, 219.

³⁵ Nietzsche, 218.

³⁶ Nietzsche, 27.

³⁷ Nietzsche, 216.

³⁸ Nietzsche, 220.

³⁹ Nietzsche, 221.

This new gesture of singing, rather than negating and overcoming, eventually culminates in Zarathustra's love song to eternity in "The Seven Seals." In each of the seven songs, Zarathustra reaffirms his desire for the "nuptial ring of rings, the ring of recurrence."⁴⁰ The chapter opens with Zarathustra imagining himself as the "soothsayer" trying to pronounce his lightening "Yes" to "a heavy cloud between past and future."⁴¹ In the following songs, Zarathustra, in a Dionysian ecstasy, then imagines himself to drink the "full drafts from that foaming spice and blend-mug in which all things are well blended."⁴² Here, Zarathustra's drinking of the "blend-mug" of things could be interpreted as his affirmation of the world's noumenal unity. Through these poetic imaginations, Zarathustra immerses himself in a creative ecstasy that innocently and unconditionally affirms the world in its eternity. Just as the first imagery of the soothsayer suggests, this affirmation dispels the uncertainty of the "heavy cloud between past and future"; it is a lightening, a purely "sacred Yes," that wills what is eternally to come.⁴³ Zarathustra's ecstasy, therefore, represents the "highest formula of affirmation" — an affirmation that demands one's willful love of what is eternally to come.

The affirmative approach to eternal recurrence overcomes Zarathustra's nausea. With the greatest cheerfulness in his spirit, Zarathustra pours "joy to pain" and "the most wicked to the most gracious."⁴⁴ Here, pouring is a sign of Zarathustra's excessive power. To pour "the most wicked to the most gracious" means to blend these two together — thus he admits that the lowest and the highest man are entangled eternally. His act of poetic affirmation seems to constitute a different formula of eternal recurrence that echoes what Löwith terms the anthropological-ethical equation. This affirmative doctrine of eternal recurrence departs from the animal's cosmological equation: rather than passively admitting recurrence as a metaphysical fact, one is now required to joyfully and affirmatively will eternity at every recurring moment.

It is evident now how the two formulas of eternal recurrence, rather than resulting from Nietzsche's changing conception throughout different works, are actually already present in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. As I have previously demonstrated, the riddle of eternal recurrence inherently brings forth two ways of solving the contradiction between

⁴⁰ Nietzsche, 228.

⁴¹ Nietzsche, 228.

⁴² Nietzsche, 229.

⁴³ Nietzsche, 228.

⁴⁴ Nietzsche, 229.

eternity and moment. These two solutions, being constantly repeated and reformulated throughout the course of Part III, eventually develop into two different equations of eternal recurrence: firstly, a cosmological equation of eternal recurrence of the animal proposing the recurrence of the same world in the entanglement of causes; secondly, an ethical equation of eternal recurrence of Zarathustra that poetically affirms and wills the recurrence of eternity in each moment. What Löwith terms as the cosmological equation and the anthropological equation of eternal recurrence are, therefore, not arbitrarily opposed to each other; they are rather two consecutive formulas that necessarily develop from Nietzsche's formulation of eternal recurrence itself.

§ ETERNAL RECURRENCE AND THE OVERCOMING OF NIHILISM

I shall now turn to how this interpretive framework of the internal duality of eternal recurrence could help rethink a central theme in Nietzsche's philosophy — the overcoming of nihilism. This would require us to turn our attention to the chapter "The Wanderer," which appears right before "On the Vision of the Riddle."

Many interpretations of *Zarathustra* tend to underestimate the role of the chapter "The Wanderer" in Nietzsche's presentation of the doctrine of eternal recurrence. For interpreters like Laurence Lampert, this opening chapter of Part III continues the prominent theme of ascent and descent. The chapter opens with Zarathustra's mountain-climbing to "set off as a wanderer back to his solitude" and ends with Zarathustra's descending again for the "love of mankind."⁴⁵ In this interpretation, Zarathustra's ascent and descent echo the opening of Parts I and II and mark Zarathustra's readiness to face a new task.

Rather than stressing the transitional function of "The Wanderer" in Part III of *Zarathustra*, I tend to interpret "The Wanderer" as a culmination of the philosophical concept of self-overcoming. In my interpretation, Zarathustra's act of mountain-climbing indeed serves as a metaphor for constant self-overcoming — a motif that dominated previous parts of the book. By climbing over the mountain to return to his solitude, Zarathustra not only seeks to overcome his disciples (as is evident in the last chapter of Part II), but also to

⁴⁵ Laurence Lampert, *Nietzsche's Teaching: An Interpretation of Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, (Yale University Press, 1989), 158, 160.

overcome himself and his own teaching. As Zarathustra claims in his own speech: “I am a wanderer and a mountain climber, he said to his heart; I do not like the plains, and it seems I cannot sit still for long.”⁴⁶ Zarathustra cannot “sit still for long”; he is the figure of becoming. He only belongs to the “ridges and peaks” because he always oversteps his own limits and never stays at a static, unchanging “plain” of being.⁴⁷ Zarathustra not only strives to overcome others but also continuously seeks to overcome himself — this is why Zarathustra’s journey alternates between undergoing (to overcome others) and ascending (self-overcoming).

In my interpretation, this radical notion of overcoming expresses a radical form of active nihilism. As the hour speaks to Zarathustra, “You are going your way to greatness: here, nobody shall sneak after you. Your own foot has effaced the path behind you, and over it there is written: impossibility.”⁴⁸ The “path,” which marks the past moments of overcoming, is constantly effaced by one’s own “foot” (the present moment). In this overcoming, Zarathustra “lacks all ladders” and can only “climb on [his] own head.”⁴⁹ As Katharina Grätz commented here, “climbing on one’s own head” is a paradoxical imagery that physically denotes an impossible challenge of self-overcoming [*unmögliche Aufforderung zur Selbstüberwindung*].⁵⁰ This imagery, combined with the metaphor of “lacking a ladder,” indicates that Zarathustra’s overcoming is not a step-by-step transformation, but rather an abstract and endless destruction of what is present-at-hand. For Nietzsche, this radical notion of self-overcoming offers an impossible task. Extreme self-overcoming is like a Hegelian bad infinity, in which every moment is immediately replaced by the next and so on ad infinitum. This vicious cycle of recurring moments turns overcoming into “impossibility” because it can never be completed. In this sense, the radical self-overcoming corresponds to Nietzsche’s description of an “active nihilism,” which is nothing other than “a violent force of destruction.”⁵¹ That is to say, this self-overcoming can only manifest itself as insatiable self-negation and self-destruction.

This problem of active nihilism is crucial to our understanding of the context of eternal recurrence because it ultimately presents

⁴⁶ Nietzsche, 152.

⁴⁷ Nietzsche, 152.

⁴⁸ Nietzsche, 153.

⁴⁹ Nietzsche, 153.

⁵⁰ Katharina Grätz, *Kommentar zu Nietzsches “Also sprach Zarathustra III und IV.” Historischer und kritischer Kommentar zu Friedrich Nietzsches Werken, Band 4.2.* (De Gruyter, 2024), 21.

⁵¹ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 18.

a problem of temporality. If we say that the “path” represents the unity of linear temporality (the line of past-present-future), then self-overcoming, in my interpretation, represents another structure of time constituted by “moments.” In the temporality of overcoming, the instantaneous recurrence of moments replaces the unity of linear time. However, as our previous analysis demonstrates, the temporality of the moment is also empty, homogeneous, and self-negating; it is trapped in the cycle of the recurring new moments. The entire discussion of the active nihilism of self-overcoming lays the groundwork for Nietzsche’s discussion of eternal recurrence — the ever-recurring new moments that are trapped in the impossibility of self-overcoming represent the same dilemma of the gateway of moment in Zarathustra’s riddle. This present moment of overcoming, just as how the gateway of moment has infinitely recurred in the past, must have always-already eternally recurred. But if moment eternally recurs, then the whole series of overcoming is never complete. This contradiction within the temporality of the moment reveals the impossibility of a philosophy of overcoming; it also reveals the impossibility of holding the stance of active nihilism.

If eternal recurrence functions as a problematization of the paradox of self-overcoming, and the philosophy of self-overcoming itself expresses the highest stage of active nihilism, then it necessarily follows that the doctrine of eternal recurrence is also an attempt to transcend the dilemma of active nihilism. In this sense, the two formulas of eternal recurrence are more than solutions to the literal riddle itself. Just as Laurent Lampert points out, “the teaching on eternal return opposes any teaching on the linearity of time that points toward some future eschatological fulfillment of time.”⁵² The teaching of eternal recurrence replaces the philosophy of overcoming (for Lampert, even the philosophy of the *Übermensch*), which is clearly based on a linear concept of temporality. For Nietzsche, the animal’s speech of eternal recurrence “ends Zarathustra’s going under” — this means that the central concern of Zarathustra’s teaching shifts from the philosophy of self-overcoming to the problem of eternal recurrence.⁵³ The two doctrines of eternal recurrence — the cosmological and the ethical — actually express two steps of transcending the philosophical framework of active nihilism.

The two formulas of eternal recurrence, as two essential steps of overcoming nihilism, reexplain what Nietzsche means by the

⁵² Lampert, 258.

⁵³ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 221.

“revaluation of all values” in his later projects. As Nietzsche writes in his notebook as a plan for the book titled *The Eternal Recurrence*, the book will involve: “1. Presentation of the doctrine and its theoretical presuppositions and consequences. 2. Proof of the doctrine. 3. Probable consequences of its being believed (it makes everything break open). a) Means of enduring it; b) Means of disposing of it.”⁵⁴ In Nietzsche’s project, the theoretical presentation and proof of the doctrine of eternal recurrence precedes the “means of enduring” and “disposing” of the doctrine. For Nietzsche, the scientific-metaphysical proof of the fact of eternal recurrence is only a preparation for enduring and disposing of such a doctrine. The center of Nietzsche’s concern is, therefore, never the truthfulness or accuracy of the theory, but how the interpreter could reimagine and relocate one’s own existence under the new vision of the world. In this sense, the ethical equation of eternal recurrence must eventually replace the cosmological equation; it is only in the ethical equation that eternal recurrence could be “endured” rather than “proven.”

This is why Nietzsche associates enduring eternal recurrence with “revaluation of all value.” To endure the fact of eternal recurrence is not a step toward the revaluation of all values; this act of endurance is rather already the process of revaluation itself. Just as Nietzsche writes in another notebook entry, to endure eternal recurrence demands a shift from the expression “everything is merely subjective” to a proud attitude that “it is also our work.”⁵⁵ While the expression “everything is merely subjective” presents a retreat to one’s own subjectivity (just as what we see in the paradox of self-overcoming), the proud claim that “it is also our work” expresses one’s willingness to directly confront reality and acknowledge one’s active role in it. To endure the reality of the world requires not only the creation of new values, but also self-affirmation of our creative role in the revaluation.

This reading of eternal recurrence emancipates Nietzsche’s philosophy from the burden of metaphysics. Heidegger famously claimed that Nietzsche’s metaphysics should be conceived as a “fulfillment of nihilism proper.”⁵⁶ But as we have shown, this claim is problematic because he ignored Nietzsche’s own understanding of how nihilism is to be overcome. Heidegger seems to reduce eternal recurrence to a metaphysical fact. As he writes, “[w]e observe that being, which as such has the fundamental character of will to power,

⁵⁴ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 544-545.

⁵⁵ Nietzsche, 545.

⁵⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche: Volume Four*. Ed. David Farrell Krell. Tran. Frank A. Capuzzi, (Harper, 1993.), 204.

can as a whole only be eternal return of the same.”⁵⁷ The problem is that Heidegger’s interpretation stops at the cosmological equation of eternal recurrence. However, as my previous analysis shows, the cosmological equation of eternal recurrence, rather than being the center of Nietzsche’s philosophy, is indeed only a preparatory step toward the more affirmative equation of eternal recurrence. Only the affirmative, ethical equation of eternal recurrence can overcome nihilism. Exactly because Heidegger still wants to ground Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence in the metaphysics of will to power and forces, he reduces Nietzsche’s philosophy to a continuation of nihilism in Western metaphysics.

The affirmation of eternal recurrence is not a simple subjective claim that adds nothing to the facticity of the doctrine. Through affirming the doctrine, we also poetically recreate the world in a new shape — just as how Zarathustra reimagines the world through poetic imagery in “The Seventh Seals.” In this sense, the problem of eternal recurrence is always more than a cosmological-metaphysical problem. It is never enough to simply acknowledge eternal recurrence as the “most scientific of all possible hypotheses.” The cosmological formula wants to demonstrate the impossibility of overcoming by proving the fact that everything eternally recurs; but this formula never fully overcomes the state of active nihilism because it is still concerned with the problem of truth and falsity. To truly overcome nihilism, one needs not only the knowledge, but also the affirmative will for eternal recurrence. Nietzsche’s philosophy ultimately wants “a Dionysian affirmation of the world as it is, without subtraction, exception, or selection—it wants the eternal circulation: —the same things, the same logic and illogic of entanglements.”⁵⁸ Such Dionysian affirmation could only be attained in the absolute affirmation of the world through one’s active willing of recurrence. Eternal recurrence must eventually culminate in an ethical gesture; only this ethical gesture completes the process of overcoming active nihilism.

§ CONCLUSION: A PHILOSOPHER IN BECOMING

In conclusion, my essay strives to accomplish two tasks: 1. Demonstrating how the two formulas of eternal recurrence are already evident in Part III of *Zarathustra* and revealing how it is inherent to the problem of eternal recurrence; 2. Showing how this two-fold nature

⁵⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche: Volume Three*. Ed. David Farrell Krell. Trans. Joan Stambaugh, David Farrell Krell, and Frank A. Capuzzi, (Harper, 1993.), 210.

⁵⁸ Nietzsche, 536.

of eternal recurrence relates to the overarching theme of Nietzsche's philosophy — the overcoming of nihilism.

To me, Nietzsche is not only a philosopher of becoming, but more importantly, a philosopher in becoming. Becoming is not only a thematic concept of Nietzsche's philosophy; it is rather the very essence of Nietzsche's process of philosophizing. This brings forth a different way of understanding Nietzsche's philosophy of eternal recurrence: rather than obsessing with the validity of Nietzsche's proof or the coherence of Nietzsche's metaphysics of forces, it might be more fruitful to understand the genesis of eternal recurrence in Nietzsche's thinking. Nietzsche's struggle with the problem of eternal recurrence is already what constitutes the movement of overcoming nihilism. In this sense, it is meaningless to think about whether Nietzsche's metaphysics corresponds to the truth. Nietzsche reveals that what ultimately matters is not the doctrine itself but whether one could affirm it in eternity. The problem of eternal recurrence is more than a simple riddle concerning the relation between moment and eternity; as my interpretation intends to demonstrate, the problem rather becomes a meta-philosophical question concerning the thinker's relation to the theory. Nietzsche as the philosopher of philosophizing — this is the figure of Nietzsche that my essay wants to put forward.

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