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The Eternal Return as Sexual Affirmation

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I

Though scholars agree that the doctrine of eternal return occupies a central place in Friedrich Nietzsche's (1844-1900) philosophy,¹ no consensus has yet emerged regarding the precise meaning of this enigmatic notion.² Important readings have been proffered by Martin Heidegger, Karl Löwith, Pierre Klossowski, Alexander Nehemas, and Keith Ansell-Pearson, to name but a few; keeping track of them all has become nearly impossible.³ Although many of these interpretations go in wildly divergent directions, most of them do have one thing in common: they distinguish between two different levels on which the eternal return can be understood. On a purely physical level, the eternal return is seen as a cosmological hypothesis about the temporal cyclicity of existence.⁴ Quite simply, the entire history of the universe repeats itself over and over again, without anything, not even the smallest detail, ever being different. All that happens has already occurred an infinite number of times in previous cycles, and will happen again an infinite number of times in future cycles. One might think of a broken record that skips, playing the same sequence of sounds over and over again. Though not without precedents in philosophy and religion, this cosmological hypothesis has nevertheless been met with considerable scepticism among Nietzsche's adherents and commentators, and it has certainly not come down to posterity as any important contribution in the field of physics or astronomy.⁵ It is scarcely surprising that Nietzsche's attempts to

1 The first version of the present article was written in the spring of 2003, as an M.A. thesis in the History of Ideas, supervised by Professor Thomas Brobjer at Stockholm University. Thanks are due to the editors of the *New German Review* for important input that led to the current, and heavily revised version.

2 Walter Kaufmann, for instance, argues that Nietzsche's "philosophy of power culminates in the dual vision of the overman and the eternal recurrence," and that the philosopher himself believed "that the doctrine of recurrence was the climax of his whole philosophy" (Kaufmann 307). For R. J. Hollingdale, the eternal return constitutes "the crown of [Nietzsche's] philosophy" (Hollingdale 198). Eugen Fink similarly states: "Auf den Gedanken von der Ewigen Wiederkunft gründet Nietzsche alle anderen Hauptmotive seines Denkens" (Fink 114). Maudemarie Clark sums, finally, summarizes this consensus: "Substantial agreement exists that Nietzsche considered the eternal recurrence his most important teaching" (Clark 245).

3 Additional titles of interest are listed in the bibliography.

4 The phrase "cosmological" is used, for instance, by Alexander Nehemas: "The eternal recurrence is most commonly interpreted as a cosmological hypothesis." (Nehemas 332).

5 Kaufmann, who is always closely in touch with so-called common sense, calls it a "most

prove this theory never made it from his notebooks into the published works. For this reason, presumably, Nietzsche scholars have instead been more inclined to try to make sense of the eternal return on a philosophical, or existential, level. Typically, the idea is then understood as a "crucial test" (thus the title of an 1997 essay by Eric Oger in the *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*), establishing whether any given individual is strong enough to justify existence. Whoever comes to the sudden realization that his or her life will be repeated endlessly will allegedly react to this realization with either extreme dejection or elation. The person who overflows with exuberant joy is the truly free spirit, for whom this world is the only world, infinitely desirable; whereas the decadent—or rather Christian—will fall into utter despair as all hopes of an otherworldly kingdom of God are smashed by this nihilistic wisdom. The one crucial aphorism upon which this interpretation largely rests, and which is virtually always cited in discussions of the eternal return, comes at the conclusion of the fourth book in *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*:

Wie, wenn dir eines Tages oder Nachts, ein Dämon in deine einsamste Einsamkeit nachschliche und dir sagte: „Dieses Leben, wie du es jetzt lebst und gelebt hast, wirst du noch einmal und noch unzählige Male leben müssen; und es wird nichts Neues daran sein, sondern jeder Schmerz und jede Lust und jeder Gedanke und Seufzer und alles unsäglich Kleine und Grosse deines Lebens muss dir wiederkommen, und Alles in der selben Reihe und Folge. [...] Die ewige Sanduhr des Daseins wird immer wieder umgedreht – und du mit ihr, Stäubchen vom Staube!“ Würdest du dich nicht niederwerfen und mit den Zähnen knirschen und den Dämon verfluchen, der so redet? Oder hast du einen Augenblick erlebt, wo du ihm antworten würdest: „Du bist ein Gott und nie hörte ich Göttlicheres!“ (KSA 3: 570)⁶

Though scholars have mustered all their ingenuity to provide a satisfying interpretation of this more existential facet of the eternal return, there still remains, I think, something frustratingly bizarre about this strange test. It seems likely that even the most unprejudiced and open-minded individual will react with bewilderment and incredulity upon hearing of the eternal repetition of the universe for the first time. Does it really make sense to assert that this individual will react either with ecstatic

dubious doctrine" (Kaufmann 323), and Keith Ansell-Pearson goes even farther: "Taken literally, as a cosmological hypothesis, the thought of eternal return is absurd" (Ansell-Pearson 111).

6 All references to Nietzsche are from the *Kritische Studienausgabe* of either the *Sämtliche Werke* or the *Sämtliche Briefe*. References will henceforth be given in the main text, according to the following principle: (KSA/KSB volume: page).

joy or utter despair to this insight? Would it not be possible to react instead with utter incomprehension? And how are we to come by this alleged wisdom in the first place? Nietzsche seems to have regarded his attempted scientific proof as inadequate—otherwise, he would surely have made it public. The demon is presumably meant metaphorically; but then, what does it stand for? Many readers will no doubt have experienced moments of “loneliest loneliness,” but it nevertheless seems highly unlikely that they will have felt themselves confronted with the question posed in the above passage at these moments. Or is it a thought experiment, to which one can submit oneself at any given time? If so, I would venture to assert that most individuals would fail to make much sense of it; they would not be able to experience any reaction of either elation or dejection at all. In order to understand

Given the perceived insufficiency of the “conventional” approach, I would like to propose an alternative reading of Nietzsche’s famous doctrine. For even though it was Nietzsche himself who enunciated both the cosmological hypothesis and the crucial test, he also wrote passages that suggest something decidedly different. My thesis is this: the doctrine of eternal recurrence is also the symbol and expression of sexual affirmation. In order to arrive at this end, however, we must first trace the concept back to its intellectual roots: Nietzsche’s mentor and teacher, Arthur Schopenhauer.

II

Nietzsche, as is well known, advocated a genealogical approach to the study of morality; and for our present purposes too, it will be useful to trace what may well have been the origins of the eternal return in the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer, the great pessimist whom Nietzsche at first admired intensely, but later turned vehemently against. According to Schopenhauer, both the world we behold and live in, and the physical creatures we live as, are nothing more than objectifications of an underlying will, which exists beyond space, time, and causality. Nothing else exists beyond this; the existence of any kind of afterlife is denied just as decisively as, and some might say even more persuasively than, it is in Nietzsche’s oeuvre. The world as representation, moreover, is a mirror image of the ceaseless striving that characterizes the world as will. If the will could somehow be sated or silenced, the world as we know it would cease to exist.

For Schopenhauer, human beings are primarily creatures of will, not of reason. This focus on mankind’s biological side made it imperative to confront the issue of sexuality head-on. On this always delicate subject Schopenhauer claims—and surely with some justification—that he is breaking new ground, for even though poets of all times have placed sexual love at the center of their interest, philosophers have not. Plato, it is true, gives the matter considerable attention, but most of what he has to say “hält sich im Gebiete der Mythen, Fabeln und Scherze, betrifft auch

größtentheils nur die Griechische Knabenliebe” (S II: 618).⁷ After Plato—such at least is Schopenhauer’s opinion—virtually all major philosophers have constructed their systems without conceding to sex more than a peripheral significance. For Schopenhauer, on the other hand, sexuality is of truly pivotal importance:

Die Begierde des Geschlechts [trägt] einen von jeder andern sehr verschiedenen Charakter [...]: sie ist nicht nur die stärkste, sondern sogar specifisch von mächtigerer Art als alle andern. Sie wird überall stillschweigend vorausgesetzt, als nothwendig und unausbleiblich, und ist nicht, wie andere Wünsche, Sache des Geschmacks und der Laune. Denn sie ist der Wunsch, welcher selbst das Wesen des Menschen ausmacht. Im Konflikt mit ihr ist kein Motiv so stark, daß es des Sieges gewiß wäre. Sie ist so sehr die Hauptsache, daß für die Entbehrung ihrer Befriedigung keine andern Genüsse entschädigen: [...] Dies Alles aber stimmt damit überein, daß der Geschlechtstrieb der Kern des Willens zum Leben, mithin die Konzentration alles Wollens ist; daher eben ich im Texte die Genitalien den Brennpunkt des Willens genannt habe. Ja, man kann sagen, der Mensch sei konkreter Geschlechtstrieb; da seine Entstehung ein Kopulationsakt und der Wunsch seiner Wünsche ein Kopulationsakt ist, und dieser Trieb allein seine ganze Erscheinung perpetuirt und zusammenhält. (S II: 595p)

Mankind, we know, is not only a vast conglomeration of discrete individuals, but also a biological species (*Gattung*). This species, according to Schopenhauer, is the platonic *Idea of Man* drawn out in time. As an underlying reality, the species is ontically prior to the individuals through which it manifests itself, and by which it is constituted. If there were no individual human beings, there would be no human species: “das Wesen an sich jedes Lebenden [liegt] zunächst in seiner Gattung; diese hat jedoch ihr Daseyn wieder nur in den Individuen” (S II: 592).

Now, the crucial difference between the human species and the individual human being is that the former is not bounded in time as the latter. Each human enters life via birth and exits it through death. Thus, only a limited time-span is allotted each individual. But the human species is not bound by any temporal restrictions; in fact, the *Gattung* “human” is potentially endowed with everlasting life (for the species does exist *in* time—it is the platonic idea of man that exists a-temporally, *outside* of time). The natural way of visualizing this, I suggest, is by a circle or, better yet, rotating wheel. As Schopenhauer argues: “Durchgängig und überall ist das ächte Symbol der Natur der Kreis, weil er das Schema der Wiederkehr ist” (S II:

⁷ All references to Schopenhauer are from *Werke in fünf Bänden*, in the edition by Ludger Lütkehaus, and will henceforth be given only in the main text, according to the following principle: (S volume: page).

553). Indeed, we could regard the human species as a rotating wheel, self-sufficient, unchanging, and in perpetual uniform movement. Humanity is a *perpetuum mobile*.

The drive that powers the perpetual rotation of this wheel, furthermore, is of course the sex drive. The individual human is host to a multitude of drives, cravings, and desires; but the sex drive occupies, as Schopenhauer has already pointed out to us, an altogether special position. Compare it to hunger, for example, which motivates us to seek and consume nourishment. Were we to deny this desire we would perish very speedily. It is clearly essential to our own personal survival. But while hunger can be regarded as nature's way of ensuring the maintenance of the individual, sexual intercourse functions similarly at the level of the species. In fact, sex does not contribute to the subsistence of the individual at all: nobody dies from abstaining from sexual activity. For the person who is sexually active, moreover, the act will yield nothing more than a temporary (and, Schopenhauer would emphasize, very evanescent) gratification of desire. For the species, however, this same fleeting pleasure is vital—or rather, not the pleasure or the act in itself, but what is potentially achieved through it: the creation of a new individual. The sex drive perpetuates the human species by constantly leading to the creation of new individual manifestations. Each human being originates in an act of sexual intercourse; and each human being may one day become a creating parent through the very same act. The species continues to exist via the bond of generation. The human being returns eternally.

The strength of sexual desire—the fact that sometimes no other drive can compete with it, as Schopenhauer pointed out—means that it can on occasion entail the death of the individual who succumbs to it. In some cases, we see the human individual willingly participate in acts that conflict with his or her self-preservation in order to serve a desire that ensures the existence of the species. This can be regarded as a form of sacrifice for something higher,⁸ making it plain that what any

8 Nietzsche would have seen this illustrated at an artistic level in the operas of Wagner. The fathers of Siegfried, Tristan, and Parsifal all die right after the conception of their sons; and the mothers right after, or in connection with, the birth. Nor was this anything that was entirely particular to Wagner, who had at any rate adopted this from his medieval sources. The birth of children is indeed the death of parents. The connection between love and death has long been habitually made in philosophy as well. Ludwig Feuerbach writes in *Gedanken über Tod und Unsterblichkeit*: “Die Liebe wäre nicht vollkommen, wäre kein Tod. [...] [Der Tod ist] die letzte Bewährung der Liebe” (Feuerbach 18). And in *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir states with more scientific rigor (after having referred to Schopenhauer in the same paragraph): “arising from a germ that grew in woman's body, man is himself a carrier of germs, and through the sowing which gives life, it is his own life that is renounced. ‘The birth of children,’ says Hegel, ‘is the death of parents.’ The ejaculation is a promise of death, it is an assertion of the species against the individual” (de Beauvoir 194). Otto Weininger, to give one more arbitrary example, writes in his eccentric and infamous *Geschlecht und Character*: “Alles, was vom Weibe geboren ist, muß auch

living being most ardently strives for is not the continuation of its own life, but the continuation of the species. Indeed, I would suggest that this might quite possibly be the main reason why Nietzsche chooses to call the underlying will that we all embody the “will to power” rather than, as Schopenhauer does, the “will to life”—for this will manifests itself at its strongest exactly when it goes beyond our own individual life, when it embraces our death so that the species might live on. Thus it will be seen that anyone who affirms, says *Yes!* to sexual desire⁹, is also embracing death.

The will, Schopenhauer constantly insists, can never be permanently or finally satisfied. Lack and dissatisfaction, therefore, are constitutive of the human condition. Pleasure only has negative existence: it is the mere absence of pain, which is the natural condition. Dante’s *Inferno* is in fact a true depiction of life on earth. That a world such as this should exist is nothing to be thankful for; it would have been far better if the world did not exist, if we had never been born, as Silenus tells us in *Die Geburt der Tragödie* (KSA 1: 35). An ever-rotating wheel may appear from the outside as a symbol of perfection. But to be trapped inside this wheel is quite another matter. This wheel is nothing but the wheel of Ixion, a burning instrument of torture to which we are all—human beings as well as everything else that lives and breathes—chained. The gratification of our petty desires is only fleeting, and pain and death is omnipresent. And since it is sexual desire that perpetuates our hellish existence, it is scarcely surprising that Schopenhauer paints the libidinal part of us in colors that are anything but flattering:

Der Akt nun aber, durch welchen der Wille sich bejaht und der Mensch entsteht, ist eine Handlung, deren Alle sich im Innersten schämen, die sie daher sorgfältig verbergen, ja, auf welcher betroffenen sie erschrecken, als wären sie bei einem Verbrechen ertappt worden. Es ist eine Handlung, deren man bei kalter Ueberlegung meistens mit Widerwillen, in erhöhter Stimmung mit Abscheu gedenkt. [...] Eine eigenthümliche Betrübniß und Reue folgt ihr auf dem Fuße, ist jedoch am fühlbarsten nach der erstmaligen Vollziehung derselben, überhaupt aber um so deutlicher, je edler der Charakter ist.¹⁰ [...] Aber einzig und allein mittelst der fortwährenden Ausübung einer so beschaffenen Handlung besteht das

sterben. Zeugung, Geburt und Tod stehen in einer unauflöselichen Beziehung.” (Weininger 333).

9 The English verb *to affirm* is not quite as apt as the German *bejahen*. Sexual affirmation, in the present analysis, is tantamount to a willing acceptance of sexual desire. Its opposite is the self-abnegating asceticism Nietzsche saw embodied in Christianity.

10 Simone de Beauvoir writes in *The Second Sex*: “Throughout literature it is common to show a young man upset to the point of nausea after his first coition; and if in actuality such a reaction is very rare, it is not by chance that it is so often described” (de Beauvoir 200).

Menschengeschlecht.– Hätte nun der Optimismus Recht, wäre unser Daseyn das dankbar zu erkennende Geschenk höchster, von Weisheit geleiteter Güte, und demnach an sich selbst preiswürdig, rühmlich und erfreulich; da müßte doch wahrlich der Akt, welcher es perpetuirt, eine ganz andere Physiognomie tragen. Ist hingegen dieses Daseyn eine Art Fehltritt, oder Irrweg; ist es das Werk eines ursprünglich blinden Willens, dessen glücklichste Etwicklung die ist, daß er zu sich selbst komme, um sich selbst aufzuheben; so muß der jenes Daseyn perpetuierende Akt gerade so aussehen, wie er aussieht. (S II: 662p)

Though this merciless condemnation may seem like an idiosyncrasy today, it is worth keeping in mind that similar attitudes have in fact been typical throughout history. Deprecation of sex was partly institutionalized by the Christian church, and has also served as an important pillar of misogyny. Even so, many readers of Schopenhauer have suspected that ultimately, this extreme aversion must have had its origins in the troubled personal psychology of its author. For Nietzsche, this supposition was in fact crucial, as becomes apparent in a critique of Schopenhauer's aesthetics in *Zur Genealogie der Moral*:

Über wenig Dinge redet Schopenhauer so sicher wie über die Wirkung der ästhetischen Contemplation: er sagt ihr nach, dass sie gerade der *geschlechtlichen* "Interessiertheit" entgegenwirke, ähnlich also wie Lupulin und Kampher, er ist nie müde geworden, *dieses* Loskommen vom "Willen" als den grossen Vorzug und Nutzen des ästhetischen Zustandes zu verherrlichen. Ja man möchte versucht sein zu fragen, ob nicht seine Grundconzeption von "Willen und Vorstellung", der Gedanke, dass es eine Erlösung vom "Willen" einzig durch die "Vorstellung" geben könne, aus einer Verallgemeinerung jener Sexual-Erfahrung ihren Ursprung genommen habe. (KSA 5: 347p)

Nietzsche regards the tormenting storm and stress of sensuality as Schopenhauer's most fundamental experience, against which he cunningly devised his system as a protecting bulwark. His entire pessimistic philosophy, indeed, can be understood as the attempt by a tormented youngster to come to terms with his own sexuality. So essential does Nietzsche deem this aspect that he even jestingly proposes that Schopenhauer's *magnum opus* be rechristened "die Welt als Geschlechts-Trieb und Beschaulichkeit" (KSA 12: 44). Nietzsche had in fact himself been in his youth when he first came under the spell of *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, and it seems safe to assume that to a significant degree, it was this deep strand of asceti-

cism that appealed to him so.¹¹ Nor did Nietzsche's subsequent disillusionment with his perhaps only philosophical love come about through any rigorous critique of the technical details of Schopenhauer's system; instead, it was this culminating imperative of quietism that Nietzsche came to reject so forcefully. Sudden attacks on the decadent pessimism of Schopenhauer variegated the pages of Nietzsche's works. Schopenhauer had been a great philosopher—but he had said *No!* to life, and that was unforgivable.

III

My contention is that Nietzsche took over from Schopenhauer this basic notion of an eternal return of life through the affirmation of the sex drive. There is one crucial difference, however: Nietzsche jettisoned Schopenhauer's pessimism, and instead celebrated the eternal return as "diese höchste Formel der Bejahung, die überhaupt erreicht werden kann" (KSA 6: 335). Existence is no longer endless night—it is *eternal delight*.

I base this contention particularly on one specific passage from Nietzsche's writings: a passage that forms the germ out of which this whole essay has grown. It takes its starting-point in a discussion of the secret that lay behind the flourishing of culture in ancient Greece:

Denn erst in den dionysischen Mysterien, in der Psychologie des dionysischen Zustands spricht sich die *Grundthatsache* des hellenischen Instinkts aus – sein „Wille zum Leben“. Was verbürgte sich der Hellene mit diesen Mysterien? Das *ewige* Leben, die *ewige Wiederkehr* des Lebens; die Zukunft in der Vergangenheit verheissen und geweiht¹²; das triumphierende Ja zum Leben über Tod

11 Nietzsche wrote in a letter to Erwin Rohde: "Mir behagt an Wagner, was mir an Schopenhauer behagt, die ethische Luft, der faustische Duft, Kreuz, Tod und Gruft" (KSB 2, 322). Thomas Mann, who went through a similar infatuation with Schopenhauer in his youth, concurs in this assessment: "Die Willenstribe dieses Menschen, besonders seine Sexualität, müssen überaus stark und gefährlich gewesen sein, torturierend wie die mythologischen Bilder, mit denen er die Fron des Willens beschreibt, – sie müssen der Gewalt seines Erkenntnisstriebes, seiner klaren und mächtigen Geistigkeit auf eine so widerstreitende Weise entsprochen haben, daß eine furchtbar radikale Zweiheit und Zerrissenheit der Erfahrung und tiefstes Erlösungsverlangen, die geistige Verneinung des Lebens selbst, die Beschuldigung seines An-Sich als böse, irrsällig und schuldhaft das in einem hohen Sinn groteske Ergebnis war." (Mann 574).

12 The meaning of this phrase—"die Zukunft in der *Vergangenheit* verheissen und geweiht" (emphasis added)—seems nebulous to me. How can there be a promise of the future in the past? But if we consult the preliminary sketch Nietzsche made for this passage the obscurity is cleared away. For in this we read: "die Zukunft in der *Zeugung* verheissen

und Wandel hinaus; das *wahre* Leben als das Gesamt-Fortleben durch die Zeugung, durch die Mysterien der Geschlechtlichkeit. Den Griechen war deshalb das *geschlechtliche* Symbol das ehrwürdige Symbol an sich, der eigentliche Tiefsinn innerhalb der ganzen antiken Frömmigkeit. Alles Einzelne im Akte der Zeugung, der Schwangerschaft, der Geburt erweckte die höchsten und feierlichsten Gefühle. In der Mysterienlehre ist der *Schmerz* heilig gesprochen: die „Wehen der Gebälerin“ heiligen den Schmerz überhaupt, – alles Werden und Wachsen, alles Zukunft-Verbürgende *bedingt* den Schmerz... Damit es die ewige Lust des Schaffens giebt, damit der Wille zum Leben sich ewig selbst bejaht, muss es auch ewig die „Qual der Gebälerin“ geben... Dies alles bedeutet das Wort Dionysos: ich kenne keine höhere Symbolik als diese *griechische* Symbolik, die der Dionysien. In ihr ist der tiefste Instinkt des Lebens, der zur Zukunft des Lebens, zur Ewigkeit des Lebens, religiös empfunden, – der Weg selbst zum Leben, die Zeugung, als der *heilige* Weg...¹³ Erst das Christentum, mit seinem Ressentiment *gegen* das Leben auf dem Grunde, hat aus der Geschlechtlichkeit etwas unreines gemacht: es warf *Koth* auf den Anfang, auf die Voraussetzung unseres Lebens... [...] Und damit berühre ich wieder die Stelle, von der ich einstmals ausgieng – die „Geburt der Tragödie“ war meine erste Umwerthung aller Werthe: damit stelle ich mich wieder auf den Boden zurück, aus dem mein Wollen, mein *Können* wächst – ich, der letzte Jünger des Philosophen Dionysos, – ich, der Lehrer der *ewigen Wiederkunft*... (KSA 6: 159f; my emphasis of *ewige Wiederkehr* and *ewigen Wiederkunft*)

This vehement eruption of pathos, at once furious and enthusiastic, concludes (if we except a quotation from *Zarathustra*, tacked on to the end as a sort of postlude) Nietzsche's last published book, *Götzen-Dämmerung*. What further accentuates the importance of this passage is that Nietzsche would later quote from it extensively in *Ecce homo* (KSA 6: 312), something he would scarcely have done had he considered it to be of only slight or negligible consequence.

und geweiht“ (KSA 13: 628, emphasis added). But why, then, did Nietzsche alter this if he thereby weakened his argument? I suspect the answer is a fairly trivial one. The word “Zeugung” is used later in the same sentence, and Nietzsche wanted to vary his vocabulary. Nietzsche the writer took precedence over Nietzsche the philosopher.

13 Compare with the following remark from an 1887 notebook: “Der Akt der Zeugung ist das Geheimniß an sich in allen nicht-asketischen Religionen: eine Art Symbol der Vollendung und der geheimnißvollen Absicht, der Zukunft (Wiedergeburt, Unsterblichkeit)” (KSA 12: 331).

It seems to me an undeniable fact that the fundamental thought articulated in this passage constitutes a solid bridge from the philosophy of Schopenhauer to that of Nietzsche. The “ewige Wiederkehr” is here invoked in a context that can leave no doubt about this being a consequence of sexual affirmation. Nietzsche also ends the passage by identifying himself as the “Lehrer der ewigen Wiederkunft,” clearly suggesting that it was this teaching that was just outlined: “das *wahre* Leben als das Gesamt-Fortleben durch die Zeugung.” In this interpretation, what returns eternally is life itself, and not the particular constellations of it at any given moment. It is not the *same*, but rather the *similar* that is constantly repeated.¹⁴ The final annihilation of the individual is embraced as a precondition for the life of the species, which gives birth to a never-ending stream of new individuals.

IV

Nietzsche is, I think, largely correct in his assessment of *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, both with regard to its content, and to its importance in his philosophical development. This strange treatise, an altogether unconventional work for an aspiring young academic, was indeed a first attempt at a reevaluation of traditional values. As Nietzsche goes on to explain in *Götzen-Dämmerung*:

Die Psychologie des Orgasmus als eines überströmenden Lebens- und Kraftgefühls, innerhalb dessen selbst der Schmerz noch als Stimulans wirkt, gab mir den Schlüssel zum Begriff des *tragischen* Gefühls[.] [...] Die Tragödie ist so fern davon, Etwas für den Pessimismus der Hellenen im Sinne Schopenhauer's zu beweisen, dass sie vielmehr als dessen entscheidende Ablehnung und *Gegen-Instanz* zu gelten hat. Das Jasagen zum Leben selbst noch in seinen fremdesten und härtesten Problemen; der Wille zum Leben, im *Opfer* seiner höchsten Typen der eignen Unerschöpflichkeit frohwerdend – *das* nannte ich dionysisch, *das* errieth ich als die Brücke zur Psychologie des *tragischen* Dichters. *Nicht* um von Schrecken und Mitleiden loszukommen, [...] sondern um, über Schrecken und Mitleid hinaus, die ewige Lust des Werdens *selbst zu sein*, – jene Lust, die auch noch die *Lust am Vernichten* in sich schliesst. (KSA 6: 160)

Culminating in affirmation and ecstasy, tragedy, according to Nietzsche, does not at all lead to resignation, which is what Schopenhauer had taught. Instead, tragedy

14 While the translation of *Wiederkehr* or *Wiederkunft* as “return” or “recurrence” presents no obstacles (it is clear that Nietzsche made no distinction between the two synonyms; hence there is no need for us to make one either), the rendering of *des Gleichen* as “of the same” is at least potentially misleading, since it can also mean “of the like.” And it makes a very important difference if it what returns is identical, or if it is merely similar.

is a jubilant ritual sacrifice that is also a celebration of life—not the life of individuals, but of the species. By gladly giving over the “highest types” to death, the eternal fecundity of the underlying will—of which all individual human beings are but ephemeral manifestations—asserts itself. Though existence is still nasty, brutish, and short, the pessimistic wisdom of Silenus—“Das Allerbeste ist für dich gänzlich un-erreichbar: nicht geboren zu sein, nicht zu *sein*, *nichts* zu sein. Das Zweitbeste aber ist für dich – bald zu sterben” (KSA 1: 35)—is overcome, and life is affirmed in spite of all its hardships. Throughout *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, the description of how the Greeks experienced their dramatic art is consistently erotic in nature:

Auch die dionysische Kunst will uns von der ewigen Lust des Daseins überzeugen: nur sollen wir diese Lust nicht in den Erscheinungen, sondern hinter den Erscheinungen suchen. Wir sollen erkennen, wie alles, was entsteht, zum leidvollen Untergange bereit sein muss,¹⁵ wir werden gezwungen, in die Schrecken der Individualexistenz hineinzublicken – und sollen doch nicht erstarren: ein metaphysischer Trost reißt uns momentan aus dem Getriebe der Wandelgestalten heraus. Wir sind wirklich in kurzen Augenblicken das Urwesen selbst und fühlen dessen unbändige Daseinsgier und Daseinslust; der Kampf, die Qual, die Vernichtung der Erscheinungen dünkt uns jetzt wie nothwendig, bei dem Uebermass von unzähligen, sich in's Leben drängenden und stossenden Daseinsformen, bei der überschwänglichen Fruchtbarkeit des Weltwillens; wir werden von dem wüthenden Stachel dieser Qualen in demselben Augenblicke durchbohrt, wo wir gleichsam mit der unermesslichen Urlust am Dasein eins geworden sind und wo wir die Unzerstörbarkeit und Ewigkeit dieser Lust in dionysischer Entzückung ahnen. Trotz Furcht und Mitleid sind wir die glücklich-Lebendigen, nicht als Individuen, sondern als das *eine* Lebendige, mit dessen Zeugungslust wir verschmolzen sind. (KSA 1: 109)

Just like Schopenhauer, Nietzsche holds that aesthetic contemplation liberates the subject from the shackles of individuality; but in contrast to Schopenhauer, this liberation is not achieved through the momentary cessation of willing, but instead through the complete coalescence with the “Zeugungslust” of “das Urwesen selbst,”¹⁶ an experience that is apparently accompanied by a state of “dionysischer

15 Compare with Wagner’s words in an epistolary exposition of the general philosophy of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*: “Wir müssen *sterben* lernen, und zwar *sterben*, im vollständigsten Sinne des Wortes; die Furcht vor dem Ende ist der Quell aller Lieblosigkeit, und sie erzeugt sich nur da, wo selbst bereits die Liebe erleicht” (Wagner 264).

16 Elsewhere, this entity is called “das Ur-Eine” (KSA 1: 38), a concept obviously taken

Entzückung.” The “metaphysical comfort” that this experience proffers is the intuitive knowledge that the human species lives on through the never-ending birth of new individuals, even though each one of these individuals is condemned to death. The hero of Greek drama, Nietzsche further argues, is always an embodiment of the god Dionysus: “[mit] Sicherheit darf behauptet werden, dass niemals bis auf Euripides Dionysus aufgehört hat, der tragische Held zu sein, sondern dass alle die berühmten Figuren der griechischen Bühne Prometheus, Oedipus u. s. w. nur Masken jenes ursprünglichen Helden Dionysus sind“ (KSA 1: 71). What is significant about Dionysus is that he is sacrificed in the fall only to be reborn the subsequent spring. Hence Dionysus returns eternally.¹⁷ Similar to Christ, the hero of tragedy is resurrected; though not in order to transcend this existence, but to live and die *in perpetuum*.

V

About ten years after *Die Geburt der Tragödie* was published, Nietzsche wrote the one work with which the eternal return is most closely associated: *Also sprach Zarathustra*. The immediate biographical background is formed by the then thirty-seven-year-old retired university professor’s abortive love affair with Lou Andreas-Salomé, the brilliantly eccentric *femme fatale* who would later befriend Rainer Maria Rilke as well. Nietzsche clearly wanted to sleep with the beautiful Russian, and proposed to her twice. Although a kiss is sometimes said to have occurred, Nietzsche was steadfastly rejected, the pain of which plunged him into the darkest of depressions. Unable to cope with the humiliation, he wrote vitriolic letters heckling the young woman as “[d]iese dürre schmutzige übelriechende Äffin mit ihren falschen Brüsten” (KSB 6: 402). There are clear indications that Nietzsche contemplated suicide; in fact, his own mother even called her only surviving son “eine Schande für das Grab des Vaters” (Janz 153). Only when the inspiration to write *Zarathustra* came to him did Nietzsche’s mood turn from utter despair to sudden elation, in which the muck of the Salome affair was transformed into spiritual gold. The biographical roots of this work, consequently, are largely of an erotic nature. *Zarathustra* allowed Nietzsche to triumph over the most acute case of sexual frustration he ever experienced.

The chapter on *Zarathustra* in Nietzsche’s hilariously unorthodox autobiog-

from the thought of Schopenhauer and Wagner. It is clearly identical to Schopenhauer’s will, and also, I submit, to Nietzsche’s later notion of the will to power.

17 Another quote reinforces this same point: “Die metaphysische Freude am Tragischen ist eine Uebersetzung der instinctiv unbewussten dionysischen Weisheit in die Sprache des Bildes: der Held, die höchste Willenserscheinung, wird zu unserer Lust verneint, weil er doch nur Erscheinung ist, und das ewige Leben des Willens durch seine Vernichtung nicht berührt wird.” (KSA 1: 108).

raphy *Ecce homo* begins by tracing the history of “Die Grundconzeption des Werks, der *Ewige-Wiederkunfts-Gedanke*, diese höchste Formel der Bejahung, die überhaupt erreicht werden kann” (KSA 6: 335).¹⁸ It is evident, moreover, that the proclamation of the eternal return at the conclusion of book three of *Zarathustra* constitutes the climax of the work. In support of the reading pursued in the present essay, therefore, the manner in which the doctrine is presented here is of considerable importance.

Indeed, there is much in *Zarathustra* to suggest that the vision of eternal return as an endless continuation of life brought about through the affirmation of sexual desire applies in this work as well. Here, for instance, is how the idea is first introduced:

Alles geht, Alles kommt zurück; ewig rollt das Rad des Seins. Alles stirbt, alles blüht wieder auf, ewig läuft das Jahr des Seins.

Alles bricht, Alles wird neu gefügt; ewig baut sich das gleiche Haus des Seins. Alles scheidet, Alles grüsst sich wieder; ewig bleibt sich treu der Ring des Seins.

In jedem Nu beginnt das Sein; um jedes Hier rollt sich die Kugel Dort. Die Mitte ist überall. Krumm ist der Pfad der Ewigkeit. (KSA 4: 272p)

It is surely natural to assume here that what returns with the rotation of “das Rad des Seins” is life in general, and not the selfsame individual human beings in a cosmic cycle of exact identity. Two pages later, Zarathustra learns from his animals what his “Schicksal” is: “siehe, *du bist der Lehrer der ewigen Wiederkunft*” (KSA 4: 275). That he learns this from animals may well suggest that his insight was triggered by the conspicuous absence in animals of that state of mind that has tortured mankind at least since the emergence of Christianity: shame, the bad conscience, self-consciousness (Nietzsche famously traces the genealogy of “Schuld” and “schlechtes Gewissen” in *Zur Genealogie der Moral* [KSA 5: 291pp]). An animal could never carry out a thought experiment; it could never imagine how it would react if it found out that it had to relive life an infinite number of times; but an animal could also never stifle, negate one of its own desires, which is what human beings do all the time.

Scholars have often commented on “the overheated and strained heterosexual imagery of *Zarathustra*.” (Kaufmann 34). The metaphors are frequently phallic, with arrows being shot—“bereit zu mir selber und zu meinem verborgensten Willen: ein Bogen brünstig nach seinem Pfeile, ein Pfeil brünstig nach seinem Sterne” (KSA 4: 269)—or spears being thrown (KSA 4: 107). Overflowing wellsprings and

18 Nietzsche claims that the thought came to him as an apparition during a walk along the shores of Lake Silvaplana, sometime in August 1881 (KSA 6: 335).

cups likewise abound.¹⁹ In addition, the overarching trajectory of the action forms a steady movement earthwards, penetrating to the centre of all life. Zarathustra declares his love for those “die sich der Erde opfern, dass die Erde einst des Übermenschen werde” (KSA 4: 17); and it is his desire “unter[zu]gehen, wie die Menschen es nennen” (KSA 4: 12) that impels him to leave his solitude in the mountains and go preach and live among humans again. As Zarathustra explains: “Lieben und Unter-gehn: das reimt sich seit Ewigkeiten. Wille zur Liebe: das ist, willig auch sein zum Tode.” (KSA 4: 157). It is scarcely coincidental that the scene where Zarathustra summons his “abgründlichsten Gedanken” (KSA 4: 271) is closely modelled on the sky-god Wotan’s encounter with Erda in the third act of *Siegfried* (as history would have it, moreover, it was the third act of *Siegfried* that Wagner was working on when Nietzsche came to visit him in Tribschen for the first time). Not surprisingly, therefore, the climactic proclamation of the eternal return has aspects of a symbolic marriage. Zarathustra culminates in two strange songs at the very end of book three, and they are both intensely erotic in nature. The first one concludes, “Doch alle Lust will Ewigkeit –, [...] will tiefe, tiefe Ewigkeit!” (KSA 4: 286). “Lust,” after all, is a word we tend to associate rather strongly with sexual pleasure; and the emphasis on depth again accentuates the movement downward, into the earth. As we have already seen, moreover, “Ewigkeit” is indeed what is potentially attained through sexual pleasure. The second song is a roundelay in seven stanzas, each of which concludes with the following refrain:

oh wie sollte ich nicht nach der Ewigkeit brünstig sein und nach dem
hochzeitlichen Ring der Ringe, – dem Ring der Wiederkunft!

Nie noch fand ich das Weib, von dem ich Kinder mochte, es sei denn
dieses Weib, das ich liebe: den ich liebe dich, oh Ewigkeit!

Denn ich liebe dich, oh Ewigkeit! (KSA 4: 287)

This is the formula for the joyful acceptance of the eternal return; and if we apply this to the thought experiment that was outlined in *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, we are bound to be more than a little puzzled. The language is intensely erotic, and a Freudian critic would have no difficulty in suggesting a hidden meaning of the “Ring” for which the subject is “brünstig.” Apparently, experiencing the truth of the eternal return can be expressed by the subject’s declaration of love for a “you.”

The climactic nature that Nietzsche ascribes to the acceptance of the eter-

19 We read, for instance: “Meine ungeduldige Liebe fließt über in Strömen, abwärts, nach Aufgang und Niedergang.” (KSA 4: 106). And: “Und auch meine Seele ist ein springender Brunnen. [...] Eine Begierde nach Liebe ist in mir, die redet selber die Sprache der Liebe.” (KSA 4: 136).

nal return has its obvious analogue in sexuality. In his sketches for *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche wrote: “Unsterblich ist der Augenblick, wo ich die Wiederkunft zeugte. Um dieses Augenblicks willen *ertrage* ich die Wiederkunft” (KSA 10: 210). Immortality is attained, conceived in an instant—just as a new human life is; and it is the subject, the “I,” that sires (*zeugen*) the eternal return—just as a father does his child. It is the experience of this creative moment, moreover, through which the eternal return (which is to say, existence as such) is justified. Schopenhauer may have been right in saying that constant craving marks our quotidian existence; but it is the more sparing moments when desire is fulfilled in sexual intercourse that redeem all of life’s pains and frustrations.

Another feature of the eternal return that may suggest a sexual dimension is its close proximity to feelings of disgust. Before the eternal return is affirmed, it first presents itself to Zarathustra as the “abgründlichste Gedanke,” in which the otherwise enticing depth of nature is transformed into a horrifying void or bottomless pit. The prophet goes on to describe this harrowing experience, which turned an attractively feminine earth into a vision of sallow horror: “Zur Höhle wandelte sich mir die Menschen-Erde, ihre Brust sank hinein, alles Lebendige ward mir Menschen-Moder und Knochen” (KSA 4: 274). As his animals go on to explain, however, this was a necessary step towards the attainment of the eternal return: “Dass du als der Erste diese Lehre lehren musst, – wie sollte diess grosse Schicksal nicht auch deine grösste Gefahr und Krankheit sein!” (KSA 4: 275p). The reference to an “illness” again makes it tempting to invoke the biography of the work’s author, since Nietzsche may well have suspected he had at some point in his life contracted syphilis.²⁰ A strange passage from *Ecce homo* can also be read as a veiled allusion to sexual disgust:

Wenn ich den tiefsten Gegensatz zu mir suche, die unausrechenbare Gemeinheit der Instinkte, so finde ich immer meine Mutter und Schwester, – mit solcher canaille mich verwandt zu glauben wäre eine Lästerung auf meine Göttlichkeit. [...] Aber ich bekenne, dass der tiefste Einwand gegen die ‚ewige Wiederkunft‘, mein eigentlich *abgründlicher* Gedanke, immer Mutter und Schwester sind. (KSA 6: 268)

It is of course true that Nietzsche’s revulsion of his mother and sister might constitute a powerful reason for why the eternal return of the same life (the cosmological hypothesis) would be greeted with horror. All the same, it is surely striking that he would see the deepest objection to his life-affirming credo in the two women who were undoubtedly the closest and most important to him in his whole life; whom to desire, however, was sternly forbidden by the horror of incest.

20 “Ach, Ekel! Ekel! Ekel! — — Also sprach Zarathustra und seufzte und schauderte; den er erinnerte sich seiner Krankheit.” (KSA 4: 275).

VI

Before turning to a more general conclusion of our discussion, there is one other aspect of the eternal return that Nietzsche returns to often in his notebooks, and that could arguably support the reading I pursue in the present essay. Apparently, the doctrine of eternal return will also function as a principle of natural selection, weeding out the weaklings from the human species: “immer mehr wird *dieser* Gedanke siegen – und die nicht daran Glaubenden müssen ihrer Natur nach endlich *aussterben!*” (KSA 9: 573).²¹ Does it really make sense to assert that belief or disbelief in a would-be scientific hypothesis concerning the cyclic nature of the universe could decide who is successful in the struggle for survival—or struggle for power, as Nietzsche no doubt would have it? On the other hand, any ethnic group that completely renounced sexual desire would indeed die out. In the following two passages, the argument becomes borderline eugenicist:

Ich mache die große Probe: *wer hält den Gedanken der ewigen Wiederkunft aus?* – Wer zu vernichten ist mit dem Satz „es giebt keine Erlösung“, der soll aussterben. Ich will *Kriege*, bei denen die Lebensmuthigen die Anderen vertreiben: diese Frage soll alle Bande auflösen und die Weltmüden *hinaustreiben* – ihr sollt sie ausstoßen, mit jeder Verachtung überschütten, oder in Irrenhäuser sperren, sie zur Verzweiflung treiben usw. (KSA 11: 85)

And:

Meine Philosophie bringt den siegreichen Gedanken, an welchem zuletzt jede andere Denkweise zu Grunde geht. Es ist der große *züchtende* Gedanke: die Rassen, welche ihn nicht ertragen, sind verurtheilt; die, welche ihn als größte Wohlthat empfinden, sind zur Herrschaft ausersehn. (KSA 11: 250)

There is a widespread tendency in today’s scholarship on Nietzsche to read his frequent speculations about breeding—*Zucht* und *Züchtung*—metaphorically, claiming they have nothing to do with any notions of racial cleansing. Yet the language here is remarkably concrete;²² and if we read these passages from the perspective pur-

21 Another note reads: “An Stelle von Metaphysik und Religion *die ewige Wiederkunftslehre* (diese als Mittel der Züchtung und Auswahl)” (KSA 12: 342p). Also compare: “Die körperliche Stärke soll auf der Seite des größten Gedankens sein – so lange muß Krieg sein zwischen den verschiedenen Gedanken!” (KSA 10: 516).

22 In another notebook entry, Nietzsche is even more explicit: “Die Gesellschaft, als Großmandatar des Lebens, hat jedes verfehlte Leben *vor* dem Leben selber zu

sued in this essay, this line of reasoning makes perfect sense. Degenerate races that have begun to fear the perhaps all-too-natural pleasures of sexual reproduction, and like Schopenhauer think of the act itself “mit Widerwillen, in erhöhter Stimmung mit Abscheu,” will inevitably perish. Only those races that are strong and vigorous enough to affirm the sex drive will continue to thrive: “Die Geschlechts-Liebe als Wettkampf um das Princip im Werden, Kommenden.” (KSA 10: 515).

The notion that the eternal recurrence will function as a regulatory principle in world history is surely difficult to reconcile with the supra-historical perspective supplied by the cosmological hypothesis. Writes Nietzsche: “Die Lehre der Wiederkehr ist der *Wendepunkt der Geschichte*” (KSA 10: 515). If the cosmological hypothesis were valid, that would mean that the human species would eventually have to die out, since we know—as did Nietzsche—that the human species once evolved from lower stages of animal life. In my reading, on the other hand, the human species could potentially live forever, as long as it affirms the sex drive.²³

VII

It is crucial to note that the interpretation presented in this article lays no claim to full validity. When judged against the passage from *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, or the often confused ruminations in Nietzsche’s notebooks over how the finite amount of matter and energy in the universe coupled with infinite time is bound to produce any given physical constellation of matter and energy again at some time, my reading is clearly erroneous, if not absurd. In *Zarathustra*, some passages are similarly unequivocal in presenting the eternal return as a cosmological hypothesis:

Siehe, wir wissen, was du lehrst: dass alle Dinge ewig wiederkehren und wir selber mit, und dass wir schon ewige Male dagewesen sind, und alle Dinge mit uns. [...]

Ich komme wieder, mit dieser Sonne, mit dieser Erde, mit diesem Adler, mit dieser Schlange – *nicht* zu einem neuen Leben oder besseren Leben

verantworten, – sie hat es auch zu büßen: folglich *soll* sie es verhindern. Die Gesellschaft *soll* in zahlreichen Fällen der Zeugung vorbeugen: sie darf hierzu, ohne Rücksicht auf Herkunft, Rang und Geist, die härtesten Zwangs-Maßregeln, Freiheits-Entziehungen, unter Umständen Castrationen in Bereitschaft halten. – Das Bibel-Verbot ‘du sollst nicht tödten!’ ist eine Naivetät im Vergleich zum Ernst des Lebens-Verbots an die *décadents*: ‘ihr sollt nicht zeugen!’ [...] Das Leben selbst erkennt keine Solidarität, kein ‘gleiches Recht’ zwischen gesunden und entartenden Theilen eines Organismus an: letztere muß man *ausschneiden* – oder das Ganze geht zugrunde.” (KSA 13: 599p)

23 The requirement would be that their natural habitat remained forever intact, which we know is not the case—the earth will one day be swallowed up by the sun.

oder ähnlichen Leben:

– ich komme ewig wieder zu diesem gleichen und selbigen Leben, im Grössten und auch im Kleinsten, dass ich wieder aller Dinge ewige Wiederkunft lehre, – (KSA 4: 276)

Does not this conclusively refute the reading of eternal return as sexual affirmation? Yet conversely, it is the interpretation pursued in this essay that is, as we have seen, very clearly enunciated at the end of *Götzen-Dämmerung*. This contradiction is a problem only if we assume, as we are probably naturally inclined to, that Nietzsche was at all times perfectly in the clear on what he intended his doctrine to mean. In view of the sprawling nature of Nietzsche's oeuvre, however, which has resisted easy classification for more than a hundred years now, it seems eminently plausible that this might in fact not have been the case. Always averse to system building, Nietzsche revised and rethought his positions throughout his writing career. Significantly, the discussion of tragedy in *Götzen-Dämmerung* and *Ecce homo* is just such an attempt to reappraise the thoughts he had expressed almost twenty years prior in his first published work. The exact phrase "eternal return" had not occurred in *Die Geburt der Tragödie*; yet to the older Nietzsche, armed with the hindsight provided by his subsequent philosophical development, it nevertheless seems clear that this was in fact the underlying thought of the work. Already in 1883, in fact, Nietzsche had regarded the eternal return as the key with which he had unlocked the secret of the Greeks: "*Ich habe das Griechenthum entdeckt: sie glaubten an die ewige Wiederkunft! Das ist der Mysterien-Glaube!*" (KSA 10: 340). If we take this claim seriously, as I think we should, it would mean that the roots of the eternal return are indeed to be found in this imaginative treatise on tragedy's rise in ancient Greece, with its defiant affirmation of existence even in the face of unspeakable hardships and pain. What I suspect then happened as Nietzsche was working on *Zarathustra*, was that this fundamental attitude of exuberant acceptance of ever-returning life morphed into a much less persuasive theory of cosmic repetition, which he then chose to name the "die ewige Wiederkunft des Gleichen" (KSA 9: 494). As this second reading gained prominence, it almost completely usurped the phrase "eternal return." The earlier idea of eternal recurrence as sexual affirmation began to blur in the shadows; yet it never completely disappeared, and we often sense it lingering in the background even when Nietzsche is ostensibly talking about the cosmological hypothesis. Towards the end of Nietzsche's writing career, moreover, it began to reassert itself again as the more powerful reading, as we have witnessed in the long excerpt from *Götzen-Dämmerung*.

Sometimes, one can almost observe how Nietzsche switches from the first to the second reading in one and the same passage:

Man muß vergehen wollen, um wieder entstehen zu können – von einem Tage zum anderen. *Verwandlung* durch hundert Seelen – das sei dein Leben, dein Schicksal:

Und dann zuletzt: diese ganze Reihe noch einmal wollen! (KSA 12: 213)

The necessity of embracing death, we saw, was crucial for the full affirmation of sexual love; but then the last sentence invokes the cosmological hypothesis again, added here almost as an afterthought.

It is also conceivable, I think, that Nietzsche was largely unaware of how these different readings pulled the eternal return in two contrasting directions. In *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, he was hesitant to make the transition from the cosmic sexuality of the “Ur-Eine,” to the natural sexuality of the human species. The eroticism largely remained on the level of imagery. Though we tend to imagine Nietzsche as an utterly fearless thinker who would say whatever truth required him to say, it can scarcely be taken for granted that he had overcome all of his inhibitions. It is worth reflecting that my proposed reading of the eternal return as sexual affirmation is in essence so simple that one may well be loath to treat it entirely seriously as the culminating credo of one of Europe’s greatest philosophers. In my reading, the “highest formula of affirmation that can be achieved” is simply the unrestrained experience of sexual pleasure; and to embrace this experience, and the obliteration of individuality it entails, is nothing less than the apex of philosophical wisdom. If this really was, at some level, what Nietzsche meant with the eternal return (and it would, incidentally, be the exact opposite of what Schopenhauer advocated, and what Nietzsche thought that Wagner advocated) we can easily understand if he was reluctant to spell it out quite so bluntly, and so instead was driven to veil it in poetic hyperbole. Friends and acquaintances of Nietzsche recalled how there was something almost uncanny in the way that the revered philosopher told them about the eternal return. Resa von Schirnhofer, for instance, wrote: “Es lag etwas Bizarres, ja Unheimliches in der Art, wie mir Nietzsche die ‚ewige Wiederkehr des Gleichen‘, die ungeheure Tragweite dieser Idee mitteilte” (Janz 2, 280). A Freudian reading of the eternal return’s emergence inevitably suggests itself: Nietzsche repressed his own innermost desire for the eternal return as sexual affirmation; but it rose again in sublimated form, as the cosmological hypothesis. Yet the life-affirming ecstasy that Nietzsche associates with his teaching can only be adequately explained if we understand what the cosmological hypothesis was designed to hide. This would mean, then, that Nietzsche never quite understood the doctrine in which his own philosophy was supposed to culminate.

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