

NIETZSCHE'S ETERNAL RECURRENCE AS UNTIMELINESS

by

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## ABSTRACT

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The idea of the eternal recurrence is central to Nietzsche's later teachings. In this paper, I argue that the life-transformative effects Nietzsche is aiming at with the eternal recurrence parallel the life-transformative effects he has already construed with the notion of "untimeliness" in his earlier writings. My interpretive thesis is mainly supported by the following claim: in both modes one repeatedly experiences the time of her life as a *whole*. That is, one lives her life in such a way that there is nothing to look forward or nothing to look backwards outside of the present life simply because life, as it is now, has meaning and as such it is affirmable in its own terms. In relation to the secondary literature, my interpretation resolves an issue that has drawn the attention of a few interpreters: how should we make sense of the eternal recurrence in a non-cosmological context?

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To Zac, my beloved “person”

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<sup>1</sup> It means: from the bottom of my heart, I deeply express my gratitude for everything that Prof. Bristow has done for me.

## Introduction

The idea of the eternal recurrence is central to Nietzsche's teachings.<sup>2</sup> The concept first appeared in *The Gay Science* – a book that marks the transition between his middle and later writings. In this text, Nietzsche presents the eternal recurrence in a mysterious aphorism<sup>3</sup>: the life that eternally recurs is the life that one has lived so far with all its events repeating, over and over again, in the same order and sequence. No less enigmatically, in the same passage, Nietzsche suggests that each of us should crave for that eternally recurrent life.

The eternal recurrence is further developed in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* – a book that Nietzsche sees as his highest achievement.<sup>4</sup> This book is composed of four parts, the first three of which were published immediately following the publication of *The Gay Science*.<sup>5</sup> It is with this work that the eternal recurrence seems to gain the official status of doctrine: Zarathustra, the main character of the book, lives and teaches the eternal recurrence.

Interestingly enough, the eternal recurrence seems to be relatively absent from Nietzsche's later published works. However, we have proof that the doctrine has always been alive in his thoughts. In his auto-biographical *Ecce Homo*, he situates the eternal recurrence as the “highest formula of affirmation that is at all attainable”.<sup>6</sup> This formula of affirmation is, in his own words, “the fundamental conception” of *Zarathustra*.<sup>7</sup>

Interpretations of the eternal recurrence vary widely. However, to my knowledge they mostly converge on one thing: they bypass his earlier, pre-*Gay Science* works. This paper is an attempt to

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<sup>2</sup> In *Twilight of the Idols*, the last work Nietzsche himself published, he says in *What I Owe to the Ancients* 5 “I, the last disciple of the philosopher Dionysus – I, the teacher of the eternal recurrence.”

<sup>3</sup> Aphorism 341. See the original text in the next page.

<sup>4</sup> *Ecce Homo*, Preface 4.

<sup>5</sup> *The Gay Science* was published in 1882. *Zarathustra I* was published in August 1883, *Zarathustra II* in late 1883/early 1884 and *Zarathustra III* in April 1884. *Zarathustra IV* was published one year later (May 1885).

<sup>6</sup> *Ecce Homo*, Thus Spoke Zarathustra 1

<sup>7</sup> Idem

respond to that gap in the literature. Here, I interpret the eternal recurrence using Nietzsche's early writings from the period of *Untimely Meditations*.

In this paper, I argue that the life-transformative effects Nietzsche is aiming at with the eternal recurrence parallel the life-transformative effects he has already construed with the notion of "untimeliness". Roughly, this parallelism is as follows. The doctrine of the eternal recurrence calls for a change in the way we usually inhabit our lives through time. In the *Untimely Meditations* Nietzsche already articulates this change as a change from the timely to the untimely mode of existence.

To argue for a parallelism between those two modes of inhabiting one's life, i.e. the eternally recurrent mode and the untimely mode, I argue for a parallelism between the *experience of the time of one's life* in those two modes. My interpretive thesis is mainly supported by the following: in both modes one repeatedly experiences the time of one's life as a *whole*. That is, one lives her life in such a way that there is nothing to look forward or nothing to look backwards outside of the present life simply because life, as it is now, has meaning and as such it is affirmable in its own terms.

The rest of the paper is structured in three parts. In section 1, I motivate the themes of time and life in the eternal recurrence. In section 2, I critically assess two traditional interpretations that hinge around these themes: the scientific-cosmological and thought-experiment readings. In section 3, I argue and provide textual support for my interpretive thesis. In relation to the secondary literature, my interpretation resolves an issue that has drawn the attention of a few interpreters: how should we make sense of the eternal recurrence in a non-cosmological context?

## 1. Time and Life in the Eternal Recurrence: a first pass

A good place to start an interpretation of the eternal recurrence (ER) is to return to the first text where Nietzsche explicitly articulates it.<sup>8</sup> So here is the aforementioned *Gay Science* aphorism:

*The greatest weight* - What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: "This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence - even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!"

Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: "You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine." If this thought gained possession of you, it would change you as you are or perhaps crush you. The question in each and every thing, "Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?" would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight. Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life *to crave nothing more fervently* than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal? (*Gay Science*, 341)

In the first paragraph, Nietzsche makes use of *time* to draw a sharp contrast between two kinds of lives: the life that we normally think we have and the life announced by the demon. Most of us, quite naturally, think about our lives as progressing towards a goal, or a succession of goals, in time. For instance, in college, we think about our lives after we graduate. As professionals, we look forward to retirement. Moreover, many of us also think of our present lives as provisional for an eternal blessed afterlife. For those, life on earth is meaningful exactly because it advances towards a sublime goal. In any case, we seem to experience the time of our lives as a *moving forward*.

In ER though, the demon is challenging us to re-think this manner of inhabiting time. First note that there *is no afterlife*. There is just life, as it is now and always has been; a life that keeps incessantly returning as *present wholeness*. Moreover, Nietzsche insists on one *craving* for the eternal repetition of one's whole life ("the ultimate eternal confirmation and seal"). Crucially, note that that is

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<sup>8</sup> This first articulation is, in Nietzsche's view, a decent statement of the eternal recurrence. In *Ecce Homo III Thus Spoke Zarathustra* 1, he explicitly points out that this passage offers "the basic idea [eternal recurrence] of Zarathustra."

incompatible with the previous thought of inhabiting life in a forward-looking manner. In ER, it is not possible to look forward or outside of one's present life. One's "having-been-ness", that is, the life that one has lived so far, will be eternally repeating – so the demon says.

Last, note that Nietzsche's challenge is not a theoretical challenge at all. As he clearly states in the second paragraph, the thought of one repeatedly experiencing one's life as whole should be taken as the "greatest weight upon your actions". That is, Nietzsche claims that a proper understanding of ER will impact the way we live our lives right now.

Nietzsche is a very careful writer.<sup>9</sup> I also assume that he is a systematic thinker in spite of his apparent aversion to systematizations.<sup>10</sup> So in this paper, the fundamental interpretative challenge is to integrate his thoughts on life and time in ER. At face value though, that integration is far from obvious. To begin with, Nietzsche challenges us to inhabit our lives in an eternally recurrent manner. But why, in the first place, would we take that as a challenge? What kind of criticism are we open to when we think of our existence as a moving forward in time? In this paper, I want initially to gear my interpretation of ER towards these questions. But before doing so, I would like to critically assess two traditional interpretations that hinge around those themes as well.

## **2. Two Traditional Interpretations of the Eternal Recurrence**

In this section, I discuss two standard interpretations of ER: the scientific-cosmological and the thought-experiment reading. The former interprets ER as a scientific theory about cosmic events, whereas the latter does so as a test of life-affirmation. My view, however, is that both approaches are not satisfactory. The first interpretation, though it correctly shows that ER does not make any sense as a theory about the universe, should be dismissed on the basis that it relies solely on a non-

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<sup>9</sup> This is a mark of Nietzsche's writings since his first book *The Birth of Tragedy*. See Burnham and Jesinghausen on p.28-36 for a careful analysis of Nietzsche's very first sentence in this book.

<sup>10</sup> See Reginster on the resolution of the apparent conflict between Nietzsche's systematicity as a thinker and his aversion to systematization.

representative passage of Nietzsche's thoughts on ER. The second interpretation, the thought-experiment approach, has the merit of construing ER around the issue of life-affirmation - an unquestionable Nietzschean motif. Nevertheless, I argue that this reading should also be challenged insofar as it stands on a misconception of the eternally recurrent life, and as such, it cannot properly deal with Nietzsche's concept of life-affirmation.

## 2.1 The Scientific-Cosmological Interpretation

The scientific-cosmological approach construes Nietzsche's ER as a scientific hypothesis about the nature of the universe.<sup>11</sup> Roughly, the idea is that everything that has happened in the history of universe so far would be an instance of something that would recur, in the same order as it occurred in the past, in a cycle that repeats infinitely many times. According to this interpretation, Nietzsche uses ER to articulate a very bold scientific claim about the nature of the physical universe. Support for this reading is found in a few passages in which Nietzsche presents considerations in favor of eternal recurrence as a scientific cosmological hypothesis. Most significantly, in the following passage:

If the world may be thought of as a certain definite quantity of force and as a certain definite number of centres of force - and every other representation remains indefinite and therefore useless - it follows that, in the great dice game of existence, it must pass through a calculable number of combinations. In infinite time every possible combination would at some time or another be realized; more, it would be realized an infinite number of times. And since between every combination and its next "recurrence" all other possible combinations would have to take place, and each of these combinations conditions the entire sequence of combinations in the same series, a circular movement of absolutely identical series is thus demonstrated: the world as circular movement that has already repeated itself infinitely open and plays its game in infinitum. (*Will to Power* 1066).

In the first sentence, Nietzsche lays down the dynamics of the universe as a cosmic process that occurs among finite elements ("the centres of force") in "infinite time". With these premises in hand,

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<sup>11</sup> The cosmological interpretation appeared in 1907 in Simmel's *Schopenhauer and Nietzsche*, 25 years after the publication of *The Gay Science*.

in the last line, he concludes that every possible combination of elements will be *repeated* an infinite number of times in “a circular movement of absolutely identical series.”

However, from those premises Nietzsche’s recurrence of the same does not follow as a conclusion of this argument. Indeed, contrary to what has been stated in the second and third lines of the passage, the realization of all possible combinations of cosmic events does not determine (“condition”) the order of occurrence of the next sequence of events – even if the number of combinations is finite.

To make this point clearer, let’s represent Nietzsche’s idea of a universe governed by finite power centers as an urn with numbered balls {1, 2, 3, 4} coupled with a random selection mechanism.<sup>12</sup> This mechanism would pick one ball at a time and return it to the urn before the selection of the next ball. Now add to this universe “infinite time”, i.e. let the random selection mechanism run eternally. Since there are exactly four balls, we know that each ball has a non-zero probability of recurring at some point in time. So the repetition of certain events, for instance, balls #2 and #4, are possible in an infinite series such as (1, 3, 2, 4, 4, 4, 2, ...). However, there is no reason to expect that the realization of events {3,4,1,2} in this order will determine the next sequence of events as (3,4,1,2). That is, the sequence (3, 4, 1, 2; 1, 2, 3, 4; ...) has non-zero probability of occurrence.

The scientific-cosmological approach portrays Nietzsche’s ER as a mistaken and uninteresting theory. However, it is as easy to dismiss Nietzsche’s ER as a cogent cosmological theory as it is to dismiss it as a cosmological theory in the first place. Indeed, the cosmological interpreters, by choosing to read ER against one passage that is decontextualized from Nietzsche’s corpus, have also chosen to read it in a way that is pretty much extraneous to Nietzsche’s overall philosophy – a

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<sup>12</sup> My formulation of the scientific-cosmological interpretation is along the lines of Goldberg’s reading of Soll’s interpretation. This “probabilistic” reading is suggested by Nietzsche’s usage of terms such as “great dice game”, “calculable number of combinations”. An alternative reading of this passage is offered by Simmel. He interprets ER as a deterministic theory of events. But this reading construes ER as an incoherent and uninteresting theory as well.

philosophy that is guided by questions about our existence and about the way we lead our lives. In other words, the cosmological interpreters can only offer an uncharitable interpretation since a charitable one would have to show how ER is interwoven with those Nietzschean themes.<sup>13</sup>

## 2.2 Clark's thought-experiment approach

Maudemarie Clark's book *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy* (NTP) has, among many merits, the one of offering a charitable interpretation of ER on the terms previously discussed. Not only does Clark offer an interpretation that is completely independent from cosmological considerations, but also she does so by centering her interpretation around the issue of life-affirmation – a theme that is part and parcel of Nietzsche's philosophy. More precisely, she sees the recurrent cosmology as a means that Nietzsche uses to articulate the ideal of a life-affirming person. The ideal person would embrace the challenge that the demon poses in the aphorism. The following passage describes her motivation to approach the demon's challenge as a kind of thought-experiment or test:

Nietzsche refers to them [the consequences of accepting the cosmology as a possibility] in the passage [the 341 aphorism], but only to formulate a test of affirmation of life. He asks how we would react or what the psychological consequences would be, if a demon sneaking into our "loneliest loneliness" proclaimed the eternal recurrence. The quoted phrase suggests a situation of vulnerability to suggestions one would otherwise dismiss, a situation in which critical powers are at the minimum. (NTP, p. 251)

The thought experiment or test is supposed to capture uncritical and psychological reactions to the demon's announcement that one's life will eternally recur. The reactions are *psychological* insofar as those are emotional reactions that Nietzsche clearly wants to provoke in the readers: joy or despair. The reactions are *uncritical* because they are not responses to rational considerations about the truth or conceivability of ER. Indeed, the emotional state of the person who encounters

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<sup>13</sup> The cosmological interpreters are Simmel and Danto. Apart from them, most scholars agree that ER should not be interpreted as a cosmological theory. To name a few: Magnus, Nehamas, Clark, Reginster, Hatab and Goldberg.

the demon is vulnerable, that is, she is extremely lonely.<sup>14</sup> In such a state, this person would probably set those sort of considerations aside.

Clark's interpretation of ER as a test of life-affirmation is essentially the following. How would you react to the demon's question "do you desire this [life] once more and innumerable times more?" Either you will experience it as a "tremendous moment" or you will "throw yourself down" and "gnash your teeth" in despair. In the first case, you have passed the life-affirmation test. Otherwise, you are a life-denier.

In order to explicate the kind of life-affirmation test that Nietzsche is proposing, Clark compares the demon's question with the unrealistic question that married couples sometimes ask each other to verify their feelings: "if you had to do it all over, would you do it again?"<sup>15</sup> Her point is that we seem to make use of this question in our everyday lives without getting bogged down in its unrealism. In this case, the unrealism stems from a strange model of repeated choice: "you, knowing what you do know now going through an experience identical to one in in which you knew much less"<sup>16</sup>.

This unrealism I read as the following. One is supposed to reaffirm the same choice even though, strictly speaking, the "sameness" of the *choice* or *the point of view of the agent* who is making the choice cannot be preserved. Surely, when spouses ask each other question "if you had to do it all over, would you do it again?", they are not puzzled at all by the fact that it is not actually possible to choose over again the exact same choice, since their choice is in the past and it is irrevocably made. Nor are they puzzled by the idea that even if (*per impossibile*) they could go back to the very moment where they had that very choice to make, they wouldn't know what they know now, regarding the consequences of their choice. That is, even though in this (impossible) situation the

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<sup>14</sup> See the text "into your loneliest loneliness".

<sup>15</sup> NTP, p. 269

<sup>16</sup> NTP, p. 269

“sameness” of choice would be kept somehow, the perspective through which we would assess it would change.

But despite this lack of realism, the question is definitely intelligible. The challenger and challenged partners both know that it is about the kind of attitude one has towards their relationship. The unrealistic scenario is just a means through which they can sincerely reveal their feelings. For instance, an attitude that is affirmative is an attitude of explicit saying "yes, I would choose to undergo everything “again” just to be now with you, even though I will not be able to reassess the “again” from the same point of view or reaffirm the choice in the same conditions that I once did.”

Turning to the demon’s question, Clark makes a similar point: given that we cannot make sense of ER as a cosmological theory, there must be some sort of unrealism presupposed by the question. Setting aside for the moment what kind of unrealistic model of repeated choice Nietzsche articulates in ER,<sup>17</sup> it seems reasonable to assume that it plays the same functional role that the unrealistic model in the marriage’s question does, namely: that of revealing our underlying attitude<sup>18</sup>. Hence, given its parallelism with the marriage question, we should grant intelligibility to the demon’s challenge as well.

### **2.3 Evaluating Clark’s thought-experiment reading**

Notwithstanding the intuitive appeal of Clark’s interpretation of ER as life-affirmation test, we should be critical of Clark’s move of essentially articulating it as a thought-experiment. In this section, I argue that this reading is mistaken insofar as it stands on an equivocated conception of Nietzsche’s eternally recurrent life. I develop my argument in three steps. First, I discuss a possible

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<sup>17</sup> I will show in section 2.3.3 that the kind unrealistic model of repeated choice implicit in the demon’s question is quite different from the one implicit in the marriage test-question.

<sup>18</sup> But of course, as much as one can refuse to play the marriage testing game, one can refuse to play the demon’s testing game as well. Such a refusal though, should not be taken as a reaction to an unintelligible question. Rather, it simply shows evasion. See NTP, p. 269.

counter-example to the life-affirmation test.<sup>19</sup> Next, I go over Clark's characterization of ER's model of unrealistic repeated choice. Then, I point to two mistaken implicit premises in the argument that justifies that characterization.

### 2.3.1 A counterexample to Clark's test

The Christian deeply believes that there is an afterlife. This afterlife is the center of gravity of his existence. So all he does, thinks, desires in his earthly life are reverberations from that deep belief. And if he can't live in this way, he sees no point in going on with his earthly life all. In other words, the thought that he will be reunited with God is what will give meaning to his existence.

However, Nietzsche is highly critical of the Christian way of inhabiting life. Life for him is just the life that we have right now – the earthly life. The afterlife is just a Beyond, a nothingness. Or as he says in his mature phase: “if one shifts the center of gravity of life out of life into the ‘Beyond’ – into nothingness – one has deprived life of its center of gravity.”<sup>20</sup> That is, Nietzsche sees the Christian mode of inhabiting life as life-denying.

In terms of Clark's life-affirmation test, the previous analysis has the following implication. If her interpretation of ER is adequate, then the Christian must fail this test. That is, the Christian's uncritical reaction to the demon's question should be of despair since he is a Nietzschean life-denier. But interestingly enough, posing the demon's question to the Christian is not a trivial task at all. For one thing, it is not clear how he would understand the “eternal life” in the demon's question: “would you be willing to live this same life eternally?”

Indeed, the *eternal* in the afterlife is by no means equivalent to the *eternal* in ER. For Nietzsche, *the eternal* is enmeshed with the time of one's life whereas for the Christian, *the eternal* is outside the scope of the time of one's life on earth. However, this difference should not be a

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<sup>19</sup> This counterexample is based on Reginster's analysis of Clark's interpretation. See Reginster's *The affirmation of life* p. 218-219.

<sup>20</sup> *The Anti-Christ* 43.

problem for Clark's life-affirmation test. After all, as we saw, the test is based on an unrealistic model of repeated choices. So our task is to gloss this model in a way that could capture his disposition of living his earthly life again and again. Note that that will only be possible, if the Christian accepts setting aside his traditional way of thinking about eternity.

So here is my version of the marriage-test question to the Christian that will do the job. From now on, Christian, you will live your life as it is and it always has been, a *finite* number of times. The exact moment of this transition will not be disclosed to you though. However, I can guarantee that you will make this transition to your afterlife. Taking into consideration those conditions, now I ask you: would you be willing to live your earthly life a *finite* number of times, again and again, in the same order and sequence, without knowing when you will transition to the eternal afterlife?

Before we discuss the Christian's possible reactions to this question, let me briefly explain why I modeled the unrealism through a model of repeated choices in which the number of choices is unknowingly finite. My idea here was to propose a scenario that would not alter the significance of the afterlife for the Christian. Indeed, given that the number of times that the Christian will choose to re-live his life is finite, then he will know that at a point in time he will be reunited with God - even without knowing exactly when. Moreover, I have chosen to keep him unaware of the moment of this transition in order to guarantee that he will experience that perspective *as if it were always the first time*. So on those conditions, irrespective of the lifecycle that he might find himself in, he would always hold on to the *same* prospect of being reunited with God at a future point in his existence.

The above thought has the following consequence. As long as he holds on to that prospect, the Christian would grant that his entire existence is worthwhile notwithstanding all the difficulties and miseries that he would have to endure again and again at each subsequent cycle of his earthly life. In other words, I have chosen this kind of model because it guarantees that the Christian will say "Yes!" at every opportunity to choose to live his life again and again. So Clark's test does not

seem to pass the test of capturing the full sense of Nietzsche's idea of life-affirmation. In section 3.3, I offer a way of understanding ER as a Nietzschean response to Christianity. But before doing so, let's figure out what is going on with the unrealistic model of repeated choices that Clark is relying on.

### 2.3.2 Clark's unrealistic model of repeated choices

In her book Clark offers us an interesting discussion of the idea of a life that eternally repeats. As she says: if my life eternally recurs "[it] must recur at the same time and place as my present life relative to everything else in its cycle of cosmic history, or the lives would not be qualitatively identical."<sup>21</sup> However, if my lives are qualitatively identical, Clark remarks, it will be quite hard to make sense of the recurrent life as a succession of life-cycles. Indeed, if those life-cycles are identical in every respect then they must be numerically one. But then this sort of answer corners Nietzsche's ER from a different angle: what sense can we make of his insistence of one living one's own life *again and again*? Clark's proposal is to differentiate the life-cycles only with respect to their temporal position.

But now the latter interpretative move leads the following problem. If my recurrent life evolves as a succession of identical life-cycles in which I live and die, then there cannot be any psychological connections between the selves of those cycles. Otherwise the life-cycles will not be solely differentiated with respect to their temporal position – a requirement that needs to be satisfied to keep the idea of re-occurrence of a life.<sup>22</sup> E.g. if I am born, I become a teenager, I get married during at my *n-th* cosmic lifecycle, then I cannot remember that I have been born, became a teenager and got married at the previous *(n-1)-th*, *(n-2)-th*, ...*(n-1000)-th* cosmic life-cycles as well.

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<sup>21</sup> NTP, p.267

<sup>22</sup> Idem, p.267-268

But now this proposal opens up a series of objections. First, the above could be read as implying that the collection of lives that eternally recurs cannot be called “mine”. Indeed, in ER my sense of ownership of life is apparently lost since my life is temporally constituted by the lives of my doppelgänger who are psychologically disconnected from each other and from myself. This kind of consequence is at odds with a theory that is supposed to be about *myself* and *my life*.

However, in Nietzsche’s defense, someone could argue that that collection of lives is *mine* in a very loose sense. After all, despite of the lack of psychological continuity between those lives, *I* might care about the lives of *my* doppelgänger as much as *I* might care about the lives of my friends (let’s say). So there might still be some *thin* sense of ownership of life. But unfortunately, this move will not solve the deeper issue that is at stake. That is, that kind of ascription of ownership of life will not do the job of repairing the damage of lack psychological continuity to ER. The reason is the following.

In the second paragraph of the aphorism, Nietzsche seems to suggest that the belief in the eternal repetition of *my* life will have “weight” upon my actions right now. However, notwithstanding the fact that *I* can call my life mine in that very thin sense, without psychological continuity the repetitions of my whole life will still lose significance, simply because there cannot be a recognition of the *again*. Hence *I* would simply be indifferent to the prospect of my life eternally repeating.<sup>23</sup>

Note that at this point, our interpretation of Nietzsche’s ER faces the following dilemma: either we assume that *I* can recognize the *again of my recurrent life* or not. The latter option, i.e. the close-text reading has the advantage of not distorting Nietzsche’s presentation of ER in the aphorism.<sup>24</sup> However, this option also brings the huge disadvantage of portraying ER as a thought-

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<sup>23</sup> That objection was first made by Soll. See his article “Reflections on Recurrence: an examination of Nietzsche’s doctrine” on p. 339.

<sup>24</sup> NTP, p.270

experiment that cannot function as such, since I will be indifferent to it. So under this horn of the dilemma, Nietzsche's ER would be cashed out as an incoherent and uninteresting theory.

However, if we grant the assumption that I can recognize the *again* in the eternal recurrence of my life, then we would not have to attribute to Nietzsche such an uncharitable interpretation. This reading is *unrealistic* insofar it demands a condition, namely, the recognition of the *again*, that is exactly ruled out by a close-text reading of ER. So that is why we need to impose *an unrealistic model of repeated choices*. This last step closes Clark's construal of Nietzsche's ER as a model of unrealistic choice.

### 2.3.3 A diagnosis of what goes wrong with Clark's unrealistic model of repeated choices

The basic assumption underlying the objection that there can be no psychological continuity in ER is the fact that the recurrent life amounts to a collection of unconnected identical life-cycles, i.e. the lives of my doppelgängers. In its turn, this lack of connection is due to the fact that those lives are temporally distinct since they are immersed in distinct cosmic cycles. However, contrary to what Clark has implicitly assumed, I argue that *time in the recurrent life is not to be imagined as an infinite number of cosmic cycles succeeding each other in some absolute linear time*.<sup>25</sup>

To begin with, note that in ER, Nietzsche is rejecting the view that time is like a container into which things and events maybe placed.<sup>26</sup> To put it succinctly, he is rejecting the notion of *absolute time*.<sup>27</sup> This reading is textually supported by the first paragraph of the aphorism. There, the demon explicitly says that the "moment" in which he is speaking must return to me. That is, *time itself recurs*. This interpretation is confirmed with Nietzsche's usage of the image of the hourglass. The time of our lives is created at each moment that the hourglass turns, destroyed at each moment it

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<sup>25</sup> I am relying on Loeb's objection to Clark's interpretation.

<sup>26</sup> I am spelling out the view of "Absolutism with Respect to Time". See *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* section 2 of the entry: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/time/>

<sup>27</sup> See Loeb, p.182

stops and re-created at the very moment that the it turns over again. In ER, Nietzsche wants to say, the time of one's existence is just a series of those moments.

Nietzsche's construal of time brings an important implication for one's experience of time in one's recurrent life. In ER, I do not experience the time of my life as linear, i.e. in terms of past, present and future. However, that is not to say that I experience time as circular as well. Indeed, circular time means that there is a time that is both future and past with respect to the present time. Setting aside the awkwardness of talking about time in this way, the thing to note is that circular time still presupposes a differentiation of points on the temporal circle. This differentiation, in its turn, presupposes an extra cyclic vantage point from which we can grasp the whole in some way.<sup>28</sup> However, this extra cyclic vantage point does exist in the recurrent life.

Indeed, when the hourglass turns and the time of my life runs with it, there is no outside perspective through which I can experience those turns. I am just "a speck of dust" in the hourglass, as Nietzsche says in the aphorism. So instead of thinking about the experience of recurrent time as a succession of circles or spirals occurring on a timeline, it would be more helpful to think of Nietzsche's concept of time as "moebiuslike slinky" figure.<sup>29</sup>

Moreover, contrary to Clark's second implicit assumption that the recurrent life is a temporally distinct collection of life-cycles, Nietzsche's recurrent life amounts to a single finite cycle that is not experienced as bounded. Indeed, if the recurrent cosmic cycles are by definition identical but cannot stand in a linear succession, then they must be numerically one. Intuitively, this single finite cycle is unbounded because there is no extra cyclic vantage point to mark the beginning or the end of the recurrent life. In section 3.2, when I discuss my own interpretation of ER, I will be able

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<sup>28</sup> See Hatab, p.73

<sup>29</sup> Hatab has offered this helpful image of Nietzsche's recurrent time.

to gloss this characterization of the recurrent life in terms of the experience of time in the untimely life.

### 3. Time and Life in the *Untimely Meditations*

In introducing ER, I have highlighted the fact that Nietzsche is gesturing at some sort of distinction between ways of inhabiting life. To explore this contrast, my proposal is to turn to Nietzsche's earlier writings - a venue that has not been much explored in the literature. I am particularly interested in his writings from the period of his *Untimely Meditations* - published (UM) and unpublished (UMU).<sup>30</sup>

In order to motivate my interpretation of ER in light of UM, allow me first to make some remarks on Nietzsche's usage of the terms *timely* and *untimely* in these writings. In English, "(un)timely" roughly means "(in)opportune". However, that is not quite the manner that Nietzsche employs those terms in these writings. To get on board with what he is doing, my suggestion is to think of the word "untimely" in terms of its usage and origin in German language. This sort of analysis is justified on the basis that Nietzsche sees our use of language as highly intertwined with the genealogy of our philosophical views.<sup>31</sup>

More specifically, in UM, I interpret Nietzsche as constructing a new philosophical vocabulary in order to shake off our traditional ways of thinking about our relation to time. The articulation of that vocabulary begins with his playing on the word "untimely". In spoken German, untimely also means *old-fashioned, dated or behind the times*, since "un-zeitgemäß" is the antonym of "zeitgemäß" - a term that denotes "modern", "contemporary" or "up-to-date." But if we dig deeper down into the etymology of the word "zeitgemäß", we get a further sense of what Nietzsche means by

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<sup>30</sup> The textual evidence that I will primarily rely on is the third *Untimely Meditation - Schopenhauer as Educator* (UM, III) and to *Unpublished Writings from the period of Unfashionable Observations* (UMU). Less often, I will refer to the second and fourth *Meditations* as well.

<sup>31</sup> See for instance Nietzsche's genealogical analysis of the "good" and "bad" in his *Genealogy of Morals* first essay, section 3.

“untimely”. To be untimely is also *not to conform to time*. That reading comes from decomposing untimely in “Zeit”, i.e. *time itself*, and “gemäß” (conformable).<sup>32</sup>

In the remainder of this section, I develop an interpretation of the untimely that will explore the Nietzschean idea of non-conforming to time. That is, the idea that we should inhabit the time of our lives differently. The argumentative line of my interpretation is as follows. In section 3.1, I develop the untimely temporal model as a response to the timely manner of experiencing time. In section 3.2, I argue that the untimely way of experiencing time roughly corresponds to the way of experiencing time in ER. In section 3.3, I further explore the untimely temporal model as a Nietzschean reaction to the Christian way of inhabiting time. Along those sections, I will provide support for the parallelism thesis. That is, the thesis that Nietzsche’s call for a change to ER mode of existence has already been articulated as a change from the timely to the untimely mode.

### **3.1 The untimely as a reaction to the timely temporal model**

The timely life is the experience of life in our modern times. In this mode of existence, one lets the standard of one’s times govern one’s way of inhabiting life. The two compartments that constitute this inhabiting are existential dishonesty and laziness. As we will see, Nietzsche construes modern’s man experience of time as haste. But before explaining that construal, let me first review the existential attitudes that support that mode of inhabitation.

Modern man is lazy insofar as he “thinks and acts like a member of a herd”<sup>33</sup>. This kind of attitude is not without reason though. Our times are such that it is not that easy to be oneself. Most often, there are non-trivial social costs associated with this sort of attitude. Or as Nietzsche says “for the singular [non-timely] man... life withholds almost everything – cheerfulness, security, ease,

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<sup>32</sup> For example, Nietzsche clearly plays with the ambiguity of the word Zeit “this age” and as “the time” in the following passage on UM III, p.146: “Thus Schopenhauer strove from this early youth against the false, idle, and unworthy mother, his age [Zeit], and by as it were expelling her from him, he healed and purified his being and rediscovered himself in the health and purity native to him. ...[W]hen he had conquered his age in himself he beheld with astonished eyes the genius in himself. The secret of his being was not revealed to him, the intention of that stepmother time [Zeit] to conceal his genius from him was frustrated..”

<sup>33</sup> UM III, p.143

honour.”<sup>34</sup> Existential laziness, in its turn, usually comes along with existential dishonesty. When one is dishonest one puts on the many-sided social masks to inhabit one’s life – there are a plethora of those in our times. The men of these times, Nietzsche says, “strut about in a hundred masquerades” as “youths, men, greybeards, fathers, citizens, priests, officials, merchants” in a way that they are only mindful of their “collective comedy”, but “not at all of themselves”.<sup>35</sup>

The two compartments that constitute the timely way of inhabiting life are clearly expressed in terms of the relation with the time of our modern lives. As members of the herd, we do not want to think about ourselves. That tendency is reinforced when we put on our many-sided masks in order to act in the theater of life. That is, when we cling to the professional, scholar or social masks, “more ardently and thoughtlessly than necessary”, we experience our existence in haste since we are running away from ourselves:

[W]e hasten to give our heart to the state, to money-making, to sociability or science merely so as no longer to possess it ourselves, how we labour at our daily work more ardently and thoughtlessly than is necessary to sustain our life because to us it is even more necessary not to have leisure to stop and think. Haste is universal because everyone is in flight from himself. (UM III, p.158)

As an alternative to this way of experiencing life, Nietzsche proposes the untimely mode of existence. As a reaction to the herd-like attitude, Nietzsche urges us to lead our lives “boldly” notwithstanding the social costs.<sup>36</sup> And as a reaction to existential dishonesty, Nietzsche incites us to take off the many-sided masks that we are used to putting on. In this key passage Nietzsche defines the untimely existence in terms of existential honesty:

[T]o be untimely ... [is] to be simple and honest in thought and life...[F]or men have become so complex and many-sided they are bound to become dishonest whenever they speak at all, make assertions and try to act in accordance with them. (UM III, p.133)

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<sup>34</sup> “Most [timely men] find this something unendurable, because they are, as aforesaid, lazy, and because a chain of toil and burdens is suspended from this uniqueness. There can be no doubt that, for the singular [untimely] man who encumbers himself with this chain, life withholds almost everything - cheerfulness, security, ease, honour.” UM III, p.143

<sup>35</sup> UM III, p.154-155

<sup>36</sup> See the first quote on the next page of this paper.

In light of this initial construal of the timely and the untimely modes of existence, it is not hard to guess that the untimely experience of time will be the Nietzschean response to the timely haste. However, from what I have presented so far the kind of opposition between those modes of inhabiting time is still quite murky. The reason, I suggest, is that we have not dug down deep enough into the essence of the timely life. So let's do it.

Modern man's flight from himself is ultimately a response to the trauma of recognizing his finitude. As Nietzsche emphasizes, our existence is transient. That is, "whatever happens we are bound to lose our lives."<sup>37</sup> Even worse, there is no meaning in that transience at all. We have come into existence for no reason and we will come out for no reason as well. That is, "the fact we live precisely today, when we had all infinite time in which to come to existence" is "inexplicable" says Nietzsche.<sup>38</sup>

As an alternative way of dealing with the trauma of our finitude, Nietzsche urges us to be untimely. That is to say, he urges us to engage with life in an honest and self-legislating manner in order to give meaning to that senseless ephemeral existence. Otherwise, we will be simply endorsing the idea that our lives resemble "a mindless act of chance". Below is the key passage that Nietzsche articulates the untimely life as a reaction to the timely attitude in relation to our finitude:

[T]he fact of our existing at all in this here-and-now must be the strongest incentive to live according to our own laws and standards: the inexplicable fact we live precisely today, when we had all infinite time in which to come to existence, that we possess only a shortlived today in which to demonstrate why and to what end we came into existence now and at no other time. We are responsible to ourselves for our own existence; consequently we want to be the true helmsman of this existence and refuse to allow our existence to resemble a mindless act of chance. One has to take a somewhat bold and dangerous line with this existence: especially as, whatever happens, we are bound to lose it. Why go on clinging to this clod of earth, this way of life, why pay heed to what your neighbour says? (UM III, p.128)

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<sup>37</sup> Idem

<sup>38</sup> See the next quote.

From the text it is clear that unless we change from the timely to the untimely mode, we will not be dealing with the problem of finding meaning in our lives. Each person, Nietzsche emphasizes, “has to answer his own question as to how and what end life is lived.”<sup>39</sup> Once those fundamental questions about one’s existence have been answered, one has become untimely. In this mode of existence, Nietzsche says, the experience of the time of one’s life is quite distinct. In what follows, I present a passage in which Nietzsche clearly articulates this distinctness:

[The untimely man] recognizes in every experienced period of time, in every day, in every hour why we live at all: so that for him the world is complete and has arrived at its culmination in every individual moment. (UMU, p.288)<sup>40</sup>

So in the untimely relation to time, there is nothing to look forward or nothing to look backwards. One is existentially centered at the present precisely because one understands the meaning of her own life. Or as Nietzsche says in these writings several times: “[in the untimely mode] what could ten *more* years teach that the *past* ten were unable to teach!”<sup>41</sup> (my emphasis). So at every moment of one’s person life, one repeatedly experiences one’s life as temporally complete because the whole is present at each moment.

### 3.2 The eternally recurrent experience of time as the untimely experience

Interestingly enough, the previous passage nicely squares with Nietzsche’s image of an hourglass turning over and over again to represent one’s recurrent existence in ER aphorism. This suggests that our experience of time in the untimely mode matches with the experience of time in the recurrent life. And I argue that in fact, this is case. That is, *in both texts Nietzsche is challenging us to inhabit our lives in the very same manner*. In UM Nietzsche urges us to be the helmsman of our lives. That is the existential task that needs to be undertaken to deal with the trauma of our finitude.

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<sup>39</sup> UM II, p.65

<sup>40</sup> Nietzsche has also articulated this thought in his published writings, though the repetition of life is not as much emphasized as it is in this particular unpublished passage. In UM II, p.66 he writes: “the suprahistorical [untimely] man ... sees no salvation in the process ...rather, [for him] the world is complete and reaches its finality at each and every moment.”

<sup>41</sup> UM II, p.66

In being oneself, one will be in position to answer the question as to how and what end her life is lived. That is, she will be in position to affirm life because she has found out its meaning.

In ER, Nietzsche makes the same point about inhabiting life through a different image. In this text, life is the eternal repeated life. Here, the existential task is initially expressed through Nietzsche's demand that we should crave for the recurrent repetitions of life – the “greatest weight upon our actions”. With the help of his earlier writings, we can make sense of the idea of repetitions of one's life. In the following passage, Nietzsche seems to suggest that the repetitions of an animal's life-cycles echo on us as repetitions of a life that appears to be temporally complete:

Consider the cattle, grazing as they pass you by: they do not know what is meant by yesterday or today, they leap about, eat, rest, digest, leap about again, and so from morn till night and from day to day, fettered to the moment and its pleasure or displeasure, and thus neither melancholy nor bored. This is a hard sight for man to see; for, though he thinks himself better than the animals because he is human, he cannot help envying them their happiness - what they have, a life neither bored nor painful, is precisely what he wants, yet he cannot have it because he refuses to be like an animal.(UM, p.60)

In a parallel fashion, in the untimely life, one wakes up, goes to work, comes home, eats dinner, goes to sleep, wakes up again, without feeling “sullen” nor “bored” in the repeated life.<sup>42</sup> In the same text, Nietzsche complements this characterization with the image of a child is absorbed in her playing. The life of a child, he says, entirely disappears at the present moment just “as one number entirely disappears into another without remainder.”<sup>43</sup> So to crave for the eternally repetitions of one's life could be interpreted as a craving for the happiness associated with the repetitions of one's untimely life.

Moreover, I can neither look backwards nor forward in time so as to become aware of the passage of time in terms of future or past life-cycles. Actually, my own perspective cannot show any such elapsed time.<sup>44</sup> On the contrary, at each moment of my existence, I just find myself in the

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<sup>42</sup> UMU, p.286 and UM II p.60. In both passages Nietzsche portrays the repetition of someone's life through the repetition of an animal's life – a repetition that we “desire” (UMU) and “envy” (UM II).

<sup>43</sup> UMU, p.287

<sup>44</sup> Loeb, p.182

present cycle of life. I am immersed in an eternal having-been-ness since I do not experience my temporal existence as having an absolute beginning or end. That is, I experience every repetition as a single unbounded cycle.

Moreover, the eternally (untimely) recurrent life is the affirmable life. To begin with, the untimely human being does not “flee from those questions that every moment of solitude forces on them – those questions about the whence? the how? and the whither?”<sup>45</sup> That is, the untimely human being not only decides to face those questions, but she also does so exclusively in terms of her present existence. In other words, in the untimely life there is not a past or a future life that one could refer to make sense of her present life. As such, the recurrent life is affirmable on its own terms because one does not search for the meaning of life outside of her current life.

### **3.3 The untimely mode as a reaction to the Christian mode of inhabiting life**

In order to get a further understanding of the untimely way of inhabiting life, it is worthwhile to compare it with the Christian model of inhabiting life. Interestingly enough, the Christian and the untimely man share the same grounds on a basic existential fact: both are aware of the senseless transience of the human existence. That is, both do not hide that basic existential fact from themselves – as the timely man does. The Christian, in particular, is acutely aware of that senseless transience precisely because he compares it with God’s eternity.

However, the Christian copes with the trauma of our finitude very differently from the untimely man. Rather than engaging with life as it is, the Here-and-Now, the Christian man gives meaning to his life in terms of the Beyond. All he does, thinks, desires, everything hinges around the promise of an eternal after-life. The promised transition from this life to the eternal one will be

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<sup>45</sup> UMU, p.182

experienced as the single most important event in his life. So his inhabitation of time is *forward* – a forwardness that will reach a climax in a *once-and-for-all* manner.

Contrary to the untimely man, a human being “who sees no salvation in the process”<sup>46</sup>, the Christian man makes sense of his existence as a process that advances towards a future sublime goal so as to counterbalance the misery of his having-been-ness. This inhabitation of time is forward because one is unsatisfied with one’s present existence. In the following passage, Nietzsche expresses the opposition between the untimely and Christian modes of experiencing their time:

To enlighten someone about the meaning of life on earth – that is one aim. To make someone, and along with him countless future generations, hold onto earthly life (whereby it is necessary to withhold from him the first observation) that is the second aim.(...) In the case of the second [aim], the past actually is supposed to be viewed only pessimistically – namely, in order to make the present relatively more tolerable. (...) [The pessimistic view of past] will support the belief that happiness can be attained by means of further progress. (UMU, p.232-233)

Interestingly, this passage also gestures at the idea that the experience of time in the inhabitation of a Christian life is a once-and-for-all experience. Indeed, all the suffering that the Christian has accumulated in his having-been-ness, or what Nietzsche has spelled out here as a pessimistic view of the past, will support the Christian belief that happiness can be attained by further progress: a progress towards the moment that he will reach the other side of the mountain – the afterlife.<sup>47</sup> Crucially, this belief also implies that the meaning of life will only be deciphered at the very moment of its suppression. Hence, the Christian experiences the time of his life as evolving to an absolute end.

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<sup>46</sup> UM II, p.66

<sup>47</sup> “[H]appiness is waiting just the other side of the mountain we are approaching”. UMU, p. 288

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have defended an existential interpretation of ER textually supported by Nietzsche's earlier writings. My interpretative thesis is the following. The life-transformative effects Nietzsche is aiming at with the eternal recurrence parallel the life-transformative effects he has already construed with the notion of "untimeliness". More precisely, I have argued that to eternally recur is to be untimely, that is, it is to experience one's life as a present wholeness at every moment of one's existence. In so being, one is able to find happiness in the repetitions of one's own life. I have also argued that in this mode of existence, one is existentially centered at the present because one understands the meaning of her own life. Hence, the eternally recurrent (untimely) life is affirmable in its own terms. Last, I have glossed the eternally recurrent (untimely) experience of time as an alternative temporal model that Nietzsche is offering us to counterweigh the two dominant models, namely: the timely and Christian models. In the former I experience my life in haste, whereas in the latter I experience it in a forward and once-and-for-all manner.

In relation to the cosmological and psychological readings, my interpretation has the following advantages. It not only frees the recurrence from an unwanted scientific reading, as Clark's interpretation does, but it does so by being faithful to Nietzsche's conception of the eternally recurrent life. More precisely, contrary to Clark's, I have argued that the eternally recurrent life should not be understood as a collection of lives that stand in linear succession in time. Once we drop that construal, the worry that I should be indifferent to the eternal recurrence of my life drops as well, and as such, there is no need of relying on an unrealistic model of repetitions to make sense of Nietzsche's ER.

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