

# Oglethorpe Journal of Undergraduate Research

---

Volume 8 | Issue 1

Article 3

---

7-1-2018

## "A Self-Propelling Wheel": Prefigured Recurrence in Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*

Jared R. McSwain

*Oglethorpe University*, jaredmcswain@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/ojur>



Part of the [Continental Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Esthetics Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

McSwain, Jared R. (2018) "'A Self-Propelling Wheel": Prefigured Recurrence in Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*," *Oglethorpe Journal of Undergraduate Research*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/ojur/vol8/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Oglethorpe Journal of Undergraduate Research by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu).

---

# "A Self-Propelling Wheel": Prefigured Recurrence in Nietzsche's The Birth of Tragedy

## **Cover Page Footnote**

I would like to thank Dr. Terry, and Dr. Bujak for all their help seeing this project to completion. Also, I would like to thank Dr. Belcher for tolerating my paper topic in good faith, and a special thanks to Dr. Printz-Whooley for always challenging me whether for this project, in the classroom or in life.

Although the exact meaning of Friedrich Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal recurrence is widely contested, at its most basic level the doctrine asks us to consider how we feel about our lives. What do we make of our past? How do we feel about our present? Are there missed opportunities, deep regrets, or unhealthy habits of the mind that we have adopted over time? Do we find moments of despair that unwillingly define our personal narratives? Nietzsche sees such consideration as an opportunity to evaluate how we feel about our lives and how we might begin to live differently. Literally speaking, the doctrine asks us to consider how would we feel if we were to relive our lives—full of the greatest to the most mundane details—eternally. Our answer to this question reveals our psychological state as well as the values we adopt. Written toward the end of his career, in *Twilight of the Idols* (*TI*) Nietzsche identifies himself as “the prophet of eternal recurrence” whose doctrine contains the means of “saying... Yea to life”—that is, the state where we would openly accept eternal recurrence (*TI* 120). In this same passage, he speaks of the capability of the doctrine to reconcile the individual with life’s “most strange and terrible problems” so that the “will to life” may begin “rejoicing” through an acquaintance with “its own inexhaustibleness” (*TI* 120). But how the doctrine produces this effect is left unsaid. In what follows, I will argue for a more complete reading of the doctrine based on a two-step process where a figurative weight of eternity can be applied to one’s life that has been broken down and considered through three distinct stages of recurrence. As such, I find an existential imperative within the doctrine that says that if we act *as if* eternal recurrence is true then we move through the stages of recurrence whereby we cultivate an attitude of acceptance and creation that allows us to overcome the state of inertia induced by the suffering of existence.<sup>1</sup>

However, this reading alone lacks proper context. Nietzsche also identifies himself as the “last disciple of the philosopher Dionysus,” a detail which has received little attention in the scholarship (*TI* 120). He clarifies that he began this discipleship in “*Birth of Tragedy*...[his] first transvaluation of all values” (*TI* 120). I maintain that we ought to take these claims seriously and re-read the doctrine of eternal recurrence in light of the aesthetics of Dionysus given in *The Birth of Tragedy* (*BT*) and likewise look for the ways in which *BT* motivates the doctrine. In other words, I want to show how the doctrine seems to follow naturally from Nietzsche’s discipleship of Dionysian philosophy. As such, I find that *BT* outlines the decline of values in Western society when confronted with

---

<sup>1</sup> The word “overcome” has particular connotations for Nietzsche, especially regarding suffering. Whereas commonsense definitions of “overcome” involves something like “get over” or “go beyond,” Nietzsche’s usage involves a “going under” as much as it involves a “going over.” Nietzsche’s overcoming requires a working through and total acceptance of the suffering of existence before one can move on to acts of creation.

the problem of pessimism. Nietzsche first locates this decline in the death of Greek tragic art, which cultivates a spectator mindset. This spectator mindset spirals into greater decadent and life-denying tendencies cultivated by Platonic-Christian philosophy. Nietzsche maintains that such philosophy fails to address the problem posed by pessimism and thus finds motivation for the doctrine.

Through eternal recurrence, Nietzsche formulates a means by which we can overcome pessimism through a direct acquaintance with it. Like Greek tragic art, a serious consideration of eternal recurrence leads us to directly confront the pain of existence parallel to the Dionysian aesthetic impulse in tragic art. Ultimately, I argue that *BT* describes the conditions that necessitate the doctrine as well as provides the aesthetics of Dionysus that inform our understanding of the kind of attitude we ought to adopt to be reconciled with our past and move onward to a state of creation through which we can create new values.

### **Apollonian-Dionysian Duality**

An analysis of the Apollonian-Dionysian duality in *BT* leads us to understand the aesthetics of Dionysus as a reconciliatory and creative force. This analysis nuances a figurative interpretation of eternal recurrence and illuminates the decline of the impulse in Greek tragic art and Western thought that leads to a pessimistic state of crisis. In the 1886 preface to *BT*, Nietzsche articulates the question which motivates his work: “The Greeks and pessimistic art? The Greeks: this most beautiful and accomplished, this thoroughly sane, universally envied species of man... Greek art: how did it function, how *could* it?” (*BT* 3). In this question, Nietzsche characterizes the Greek mode of existence as the *ideal* mode of existence insofar as they show an acquaintance with pessimism and a vital aesthetic relationship with it in the medium of tragic art. However, he also shows a disbelief or awe of this capability, which esteems the Greeks as “beautiful and accomplished” compared to other civilizations’ relationship with pessimism. As such, he wants to know what it is about the Greeks that allowed them to have this particularly vital stance toward pessimism: how could they aestheticize meaninglessness? In order to address this question, I want to first establish Nietzsche’s overall conception of tragedy as a means of confronting the meaninglessness and pain of existence which, in turn, leads to the aestheticization of life. Nietzsche identifies such an aestheticizing with the vitality which distinguishes the Greek in both their art and their way of life.

Central to this view is the claim that “art owes its continuous evolution to the Apollonian-Dionysiac duality” (*BT* 19). By Apollonian and Dionysian, Nietzsche means the “antithetical artistic tendencies or impulses” operating as the “*only* genuine art impulses” (Silk and Stern 80, italics added). Nietzsche fails to explicate the origin of these concepts—or, how they are the only art impulses—in *BT*, but in later works, he characterizes them as “the bridge leading to the psychology of the tragic poet” (*TI* 120). Such a characterization suggests that the

Apollonian and Dionysian are projections of the human mind insofar as they are aesthetic tendencies requiring an aestheticizing mind. In a sense, then, the “Apollonian” and “Dionysian” are the particular psychological states motivating the artist. These psychological states have bearing on the external world insofar as they can be conditioned by an experience of reality or they can later condition human perception of reality. The former reinforces the conception of these impulses as psychological states as the artist experiences something, reacts to it, and thus finds inspiration for their work. The latter introduces a rather novel claim about the nature of art that it can be experienced and used to further shape experiences of reality. Thus, once conjured by the artist, the Apollonian and Dionysian are, in another sense, external to individuals. Though the Apollonian and Dionysian originate in the mind, now individuals may be affected by Apollonian or Dionysian art or by experiences they learn to identify as Apollonian or Dionysian. This distinction forms the basis for Nietzsche’s grand metaphysical claim that “it is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally justified” insofar as individuals can constitute the world through the Apollonian or Dionysian or influence other interpretations of the world thereby (*BT* 52).

These psychological states are further described as “the separate art realms of *dream* and *intoxication*” which highlights their antithesis and duality (*BT* 19). In the former, the dream realm is the breeding ground of “poetic creation” where “an apprehension of form... [and] all shapes” is made possible, albeit with a “residual sensation” of illusion. There is still the awareness of being in a dream as illusions pass before the mind (*BT* 20). In part, this residual feeling is a result of the limits of human knowledge. In “Fundamental Metaphors,” Michael Grenke rightly points out that, like Kant, Nietzsche gives an account of “experience of perception [as] mediated by forms imposed in things by humans themselves” (Grenke 5). In “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense” (*TL*), Nietzsche identifies this mediation as the workings of the human intellect, which is “aimless and arbitrary” (*TL* 79). Therefore, any use of the human intellect is, in this sense, an immersion in “illusions and dream images” even in waking life (*TL* 80). What more, this residual feeling arises from the artificial fairness or “perfection” of the dream illusions. Compared with the “imperfectly understood waking reality”—the reality onto which other, lackluster illusions are imposed—this dream world seems “lucent” and full of “pleasant images” (*BT* 21). On one hand, the Apollonian can be identified as one of the “plastic energies” as the individual is not only removed from a direct encounter with whatever is captured in the dream image, but the dream image itself can only be perceived in this final manufactured form (*BT* 35). On the other hand, the Apollonian can also be identified with “healing powers during the interval of sleep” as it is through dreams that the body sleeps and rests (*BT* 21). Moreover, these two attributes work together insofar as

the perfection of the dream world offers an escape from the otherwise imperfect waking reality. No wonder then that Nietzsche finds the most apt embodiment of this aesthetic impulse in Apollo, “the soothsaying god...the god of light”; his “sunlike” eyes distinguish the forms and shapes which pass before our eyes and thereby make things intelligible in the dream realm, all the while restoring our bodies (*BT* 21). Such intelligibility is indicative of “the *principium individuationis*,” or the principle of individuation (*BT* 22). To illustrate this point, Nietzsche takes the example of a man caught in the middle of a raging tempest: “Even as on an immense, raging sea, assailed by huge wave crests, a man sits in a little rowboat trusting his frail craft, so, amidst the furious torments of this world, the individual sits tranquilly, supported by the [principle of individuation] and relying on it” (*BT* 22). If this scenario is situated in the dream realm, the man caught in the storm might take pleasure in the fact that this is, in fact, a dream: as Nietzsche suggests, “Imagine that many persons have reassured themselves amidst the perils of dreams by calling out, ‘It is a dream! I want it to go on’” (*BT* 21). But if it is situated beyond the dream realm—i.e., in the world proper—the man caught in the storm might take solace in his ability to discern the “huge wave crests” and “rowboat,” or, his capacity of intelligibility through individuation (*BT* 21). At least, in this sense, the man does not experience the brute, “furious torments” of nature as unintelligible (*BT* 21). Thus, with the principle of individuation, the Apollonian displays its ontological power as both a psychological state and an external aesthetic phenomenon: things in both the dream world and waking reality can be made intelligible, packaged, and presented to the individual in determined form.

As for the Dionysian, the realm of intoxication becomes more of an analogy than a single physiological state. Whereas the dream realm is a literal state that one enters (e.g., I sleep, I dream, I awake and take the residue of the dream state into the world of things), the realm of intoxication is indeterminate and may seize the individual at any turn. The term “intoxication” signals a family of expository terms and phrases: “rapture,” “stirrings,” “influence of narcotic potions,” “joy,” the singing of “hymns,” “powerful approach of spring,” “rite” (*BT* 22-23). The realm of intoxication speaks more to the art of a general movement, an emotion, a seizure of the individual rather than any one state or realm. Already, then, by its very description, the Dionysian is antithetical to the Apollonian insofar as it eludes the principle of individuation that would clearly define it in a fixed, singular way. This antithesis is heightened when Nietzsche claims that intoxication first arises from a failure of Apollonian illusions. As “doubt” is introduced into “the cognitive modes of experience” there is, indeed, a “shattering of the [principle of individuation]” (*BT* 22). The occasion giving rise to doubt might be empirical, i.e., I see something that my illusions cannot account for; it might be psychological, i.e., I falter in my certainty and therein the raw

force of nature slips in; it might be a byproduct of the illusions themselves, i.e., illusions are limited in their ability to capture phenomena. Nietzsche is not clear on the matter, but he maintains that once individuation fails, a “tremendous awe” takes hold and produces “the vision of mystical Oneness” (*BT* 23). While the Apollonian allows for an individuation of phenomena through intelligibility, the Dionysian *is* the state induced when the individual confronts the barrage of unintelligible phenomena. The “closest analogy [to this latter realm] is furnished by physical intoxication”: just as my faculty of reason and judgment maintain order in my normal waking reality, the influence of “narcotic potions” or the wellspring of vitality felt with the “approach of spring” can move me to become insensible, giddy, and move with “Dionysiac rapture” (*BT* 22).

The latter description marks a shift in language from terror to bliss which reveals the reconciliatory and creative power of Dionysus. “So stirred the individual forgets himself completely” so that he may join with “ever increasing crowds” of likewise un-individuated people and begin “singing and dancing from place to place” (*BT* 22). Ontologically, lacking the ability of individuation, the individual unifies and merges into a larger body of intoxicants. The larger body still lacks the power of individuation. Thus, it increases in magnitude and finally dissolves into “nature itself,” which “rises again to celebrate the reconciliation with her prodigal son, man” (*BT* 23). To return to the earlier example, then, in the state of intoxication, the man on the rowboat no longer distinguishes himself from the storm. Rather, the waves rise and join him in a unified whole and the man basks in the rapture of nature. Man and storm form complete, un-individuated phenomenon. With this merger, “the vision of the mystical Oneness” of existence is revealed: there really is no true metaphysical distinction between the individual and surrounding phenomena. Both the man and the storm form the aesthetic phenomena of life (*BT* 23). Thus, the Dionysian reconciles the individual through merging and dissolution and, finally, ends in a creative force which likewise may continue to merge, dissolve, and thereby form new phenomena.

When the Dionysian is identified with bliss, its true tension with itself and the Apollonian becomes all the more clear. In one sense, the Dionysian is terrifying: the raw experience of existence is confronted without any cognizing faculties. In another sense, the Dionysian is, indeed, blissful: the individual moves closer to the experience of all things and thus is harmonized with them.

Alternatively, in another sense, the Apollonian is illuminating: it clearly defines the form of things thus allowing for cognition and understanding. In another sense, the Apollonian is obscuring: as it individuates, it divorces objects and thus makes them strange. Therefore, within each impulse, there is an initial tension. This inner tension is mirrored in the outer tension, which in turns characterizes the duality. Taken together, the Apollonian restricts the Dionysian and eliminates the necessary fear of raw experience; simultaneously, the Apollonian prevents a

unification of the individual with nature. The Dionysian forces an experience of tremendous awe of sheer phenomena; simultaneously, the Dionysian eliminates individuality so that it is unclear in what sense an individual may remain an affected individual. Thus, the Apollonian and Dionysian contain their own respective duality that is then mirrored in the harmonizing of the two impulses. But neither force overcomes the other insofar as they are both *human* aesthetic impulses, which is exemplified in the innovations of Greek art.

The particular innovations of the dithyrambic satyr chorus and the tragic hero signify how the Apollonian and Dionysian form a unity out of this inner and outer duality. To turn first to the satyr chorus, Nietzsche maintains that tragedy springs “out of the tragic chorus,” which in turn is composed of “the satyr, as the Dionysiac chorist” (*BT* 47-50). Therefore, if the satyr embodies both the Apollonian and Dionysian, then tragic art necessarily embodies the Apollonian and the Dionysian. Superficially, the satyr appears as “an enthusiastic reveler...a compassionate companion re-enacting the sufferings of the god [Dionysus]; a prophet of wisdom born out of nature’s womb; a symbol of sexual omnipotence...sublime and divine” (*BT* 52). Though this characterization sounds like the satyr is solely a Dionysian innovation, it also contains elements of the Apollonian. The satyr is a mythic image pulled down from the heavens and made intelligible before the audience; though its appearance may invoke thoughts of nature, sexual potency, and jubilee, it is, in fact, artifice. However, the satyr is not image alone but is simultaneously musical artifice—it is a *chorus*. Underpinning the notion of *chorist* is Nietzsche’s quasi-metaphysical account that music “manifests itself as *will*,” or, rather, it “*appears* as the will” (*BT* 45). Music itself is quintessentially the aesthetic expression of the Apollonian-Dionysian duality: the musician must “employ the whole register of emotions, from the whisper of love to the roar of frenzy; moved to talk of music in Apollonian similitudes, he must first comprehend the whole range of nature” (*BT* 45). The sheer movement and affect of music finds its only analog in the will, which is first and foremost a Dionysian force that seizes man with a tremendous awe. But the form of that music is still Apollonian: it is encased in structured notes, chords, and melodies. Thus, the satyr chorus engages in music-making and thereby channels the Apollonian while also having this further aesthetic capability of the Dionysian wherein man is brought closer to nature both in appearance and affect; the Apollonian and Dionysian are unified. As such, as the tragic is born out of the satyr chorus, and the satyr chorus is fundamentally Apollonian and Dionysian, tragedy likewise must be both Apollonian and Dionysian.

However, the satyr chorus merely conditions the arrival of the tragic hero, which stands as the fully embodied image of the Apollonian and Dionysian. Note that the purpose of the satyr chorus is to “excite the mood of listeners [so] that when the tragic hero appeared they would behold not the awkwardly masked man

but a figure born of their own rapt vision” (*BT* 58). As the ancient audiences revel along in the musical will of the satyr chorus, they are conditioned to nature, the joy, the suffering, and so on. However, when Oedipus, Prometheus, or Orestes steps out on stage, the crowd perceives this hero along with the conditioned phenomena: the audience can now engage with the tragic hero as they have engaged with the satyr chorus—that is, on the level of the will. This analysis shows the ingeniousness and interdependence of the innovations of Attic tragedy. Without something like the satyr chorus to move the audience into the emotion sphere of the tragic mood, the literal appearance of the tragic hero on the stage—inevitably bound by the Apollonian form of masks, garb, general appearance—would indeed be awkward (or, worse, comedic, satirical, sheer buffoonery) and thereby diminish the intended tragic effect. More importantly, the tragic hero would be *solely* masked in the Apollonian. It would lack the emotional thrust necessary to engage the audience in the tragic will; it would stand solely as artifice. With the intelligibility of its Apollonian form on the stage and its intelligible, eloquent speech coupled with the phenomenal flow of Dionysian will conditioned by the satyr, the tragic hero can then reveal tragic knowledge that confronts the audience with “the unvarnished expression of the truth” (*BT* 61).

The expression of truth via the tragic hero moves the audience closer to the “essence of things” whereby the audience can then understand, reconcile, and thereby overcome pessimism (*BT* 60). As the Dionysian has been conditioned on the stage via the satyr chorus, any utterance of the tragic hero will be a development of the Dionysian. Thus, through this conditioning the audience is “forced to recognize real beings in the figures on the stage” as the tragic hero appears—this is a real individual experiencing real things that likewise can affect the spectator (*BT* 57). However, that status of “spectator” is also transformed insofar as these figures appear real: the stage has been transformed into life along with all its pain and misery experienced by the tragic hero, and, like the music of the satyr chorus, the audience is transported along with this tragic will. With the power of Apollonian intelligibility, the tragic hero can now enunciate and clearly articulate the “horror or absurdity of existence” (*BT* 60). Such a performance not only communicates the possibility of such horror via intelligible communication, it also actualizes it as the audience moves along with the suffering tragic hero now fully experiencing the pangs of existence; the suffering of the tragic hero becomes real and thereby communicates the suffering of existence.

In this dual communication of both the possibility of the tragic and the experience of the tragic, the tragic hero also fulfills the power of tragic art by which “art saves” through a reconciliation with pessimism and a creative overcoming of it (*BT* 59). Now affected by the reality of the suffering of the tragic hero, the audience likewise suffers with him and attains that same divine “knowledge” of life (*BT* 60). This knowledge is that of the extent of suffering

humans are subject to; it is a knowledge of the inability for humans to avoid pain and suffering despite our efforts through the use of reason, imposed structures, predictions, and intelligibility. As such, it becomes clear why this art must then be tragic: only the tragic art presents the audience with the suffering of the tragic hero whereby they can then understand that suffering. This account seems to confirm Aristotle's analysis of tragedy as essentially cathartic where an experience of "incidents arousing pity and fear" through art conditions better equips the audience to experience those emotions in the world (Aristotle 2320). But this catharsis has a further reach for Nietzsche. Here, catharsis is more accurately described as reconciliation as it is through tragic awareness that the audience confronts the suffering of existence. Though art initially aims at imitating life, tragic art places the audience in proximity of suffering whereby they too can experience it as a matter of fact. What more, dramatic actualization provides the audience with an opportunity to overcome that pessimism through a further aesthetic creation. Recall that the primary effect of the Dionysian is intoxication and rapture: now faced with the horrors of existence, the individual may descend into the depths of that horror and thereby form a new chorus. The meaning of the "mystical vision of the Oneness of existence" becomes clear: the individual may choose to dissolve into suffering and dance along with the other phenomena of life (most readily embodied in the tragic chorus) (*BT* 23). In that possibility of reconciliation and creation, I find an answer to the question posed in the preface to *BT*. Greek pessimistic art is made possible through the union of the Apollonian and Dionysian impulses—the duality of dreams and intoxication—and this aesthetic phenomenon moves the audience closer to the mystical oneness of existence. This movement is cultivated by a conditioning of the tragic will via the satyr chorus and the appearance of the tragic hero which actualizes that tragic will. In that performance, the audience becomes reconciled with the pain and suffering of existence and joins with the chorus to form out of that pain a new state of song and dance. Thus, with tragic art leading to Dionysian vitality, Grecian society directly confronted, became reconciled with, and overcame the awareness of pessimism.

### The Decline of Greek Art and Socratic Influence

Contrary to this vitality, Nietzsche marks a decline in tragic art with the aesthetic innovations of Euripides and the philosophical influence of Socrates. I argue that these developments cultivate a passive spectator mindset that prefigures the decadence and life-denying tendencies of Western philosophy, which will motivate the formulation of the doctrine of eternal recurrence. Before actually delving into how Euripides engages with the "death struggle of tragedy" Nietzsche addresses the poet directly: "And because you had abandoned Dionysus, Apollo abandoned you" (*BT* 76, 75). This critique reiterates just how

strongly the Apollonian is tied to the Dionysian. Moreover, this comment prefigures the greater argument Nietzsche anticipates, the “immense void” that will be left in the wake of the decline (*BT* 75). If Euripides forsakes the Dionysian, he forsakes the Apollonian. Without the Dionysian and Apollonian, there is no art. Without art, man cannot be reconciled with life. Without reconciliation with life, man will not know how to respond to the paralysis induced by pessimism. Without knowing how to respond to pessimism, man will despair. Finally, in despair, society will suffer from a lack of vitality.

Euripides’ chief innovation is deceptively simple: he “brought the *spectator* onto the stage” (*BT* 77). The italicizing of the word “spectator” suggests that already Nietzsche thinks of Euripides’ innovation not as a direct merger of the audience with the events of the play but the development of a particular kind of figure that can be isolated as *spectator*. As such, this merger of audience with stage will not be the same merger caused by the satyr chorus inspired by the Dionysian impulse. Rather, this merge will be superficial, devoid of the true fruit of “the gardens of music” in exchange for “only copied, masked music” (*BT* 75). Nietzsche reiterates this language of “masked” throughout his description of Euripides’ aesthetics, suggesting a sense of removal or artificiality (*BT* 75-77). On the one hand, this description develops the notion that Euripides’ art is an art without the Dionysian; it can only be Apollonian forms, figures, and shapes on the stage, mere masks of emotion *without* the emotion of the Dionysian. On the other hand, by Nietzsche’s earlier qualification, this description suggests that Euripides’ art is even more artificial insofar as it cannot have the Apollonian without the Dionysian. Thus, Euripides’ art is a sort of play of bastardized imitations; even its representations through the Apollonian are, in fact, counterfeit. This talk of masks becomes especially pertinent when elaborating on Euripides’ use of character. For Nietzsche, the heroes of the Euripidean stage “have only copied, masked passions and speak only copied mask speeches” so that they lack the same reconciliatory power of the earlier tragic hero (*BT* 76). But Nietzsche sees the situation as even more grave because Euripides perverts the notion of the hero all together through this initial placement of the spectator on the stage. The hero is replaced by the “everyday man” so that the “spectator now actually saw and heard his double on the stage, and he rejoiced that he could talk so well” (*BT* 77).<sup>2</sup> The spectator subverts the hero and dominates the representation of life on the stage. However, the actual spectator is still removed from this image of “his double”; the spectator is still firmly distanced as a spectator wherein he can listen to his double “talk so well” (*BT* 77). More insidiously, then, the only power of the Euripidean stage is to play with this

---

<sup>2</sup> This notion of the everyday man replacing the tragic hero prefigures Nietzsche’s critique of the herd mentality explored throughout *GS*, *Z*, and *GM*.

“mask of reality” until the spectator really believes he perceives himself on the stage and thus “learns...how to speak oneself” from the image on the stage (*BT* 77). Thus, the full meaning of *spectator* becomes clear: on the Euripidean stage, the Dionysian is removed to shift the focus entirely onto the Apollonian. The spectator is not moved by any greater aesthetic will but remains firmly removed from the events of the play. Moreover, as the spectator sees his own image on the stage, he is mesmerized by this mask of reality and assumes the passive role of recipient—how different from the active individual dissolving and participating in the Dionysian phenomena of the older tragedy! And in this passive role, the spectator cannot even speak: he merely listens to his self-image on the stage and learns to speak by him. Ultimately, then, Euripides’ placement of the spectator on the stage ironically reinforces the status of the spectator, a passive role which does not participate in the greater aesthetic movement but remains dumb and dull.

In actuality this innovation is born out of a misunderstanding and recourse to a strictly anti-Dionysian strain of philosophical thinking. In “the works of Aeschylus and Sophocles” Euripides encounters the “mysterious depth, an infinite background” of Dionysus (*BT* 75). Though Euripides readily sees the “clearest figure” of Apollo in the images of Aeschylus and Sophocles (one thinks of the masks, the characters, the discourse that readily delighted Greek audiences), he cannot make sense of the “comet’s tail” trailing the lucid figure “which seemed to point to something uncertain, something that could not be wholly elucidated”—namely, the Dionysian (*BT* 75). However, as Euripides is still an artist, he must find a solution to the aesthetic problem posed by the Dionysian and thus attempts to “rebuild the drama on a foundation of non-Dionysiac art, custom, and philosophy” (*BT* 76). Formally, this means that the art will “no longer be begotten by music” (*BT* 77). Philosophically, this means a commitment *exclusively* to the pseudo-Apollonian. All that remains on the stage are those masks of reality, thus identifying the “beautiful” with *exclusively* the “sensible” (*BT* 79). However, this identification is not truly Apollonian so much as it is anti-Dionysian. Recall that without the Dionysian, art cannot also contain the Apollonian. Thus, the Euripidean art is left with the mere *devices* of the Apollonian, namely the literal forms and images on the stage. As such, this is more of an intellectual appeal on behalf of Euripides, one that *by definition* does not contain either the Dionysian or the true Apollonian. Ultimately, then, Euripides’ art requires very different “deity” for aesthetic justification: the “newborn demon, called *Socrates*” (*BT* 82).

Like Euripides, Socrates cannot make sense of older tragedy and thus overhauls the initial aesthetic impulses to make way for his system of rationality, which only further solidifies the spectator mindset throughout society. To overcome the mystery of Dionysus, Socrates privileges what he takes to be the opposite tendency, a “prestige of knowledge and conscious intelligence” (*BT* 83). This would have the effect of removing the Dionysian out of art all together,

which leaves Greek art “entirely destroyed” (*BT* 89). But recall that this also would remove the Apollonian such that, in effect, “Socratism condemns existing art” (*BT* 87). Thus, really, Socrates’ move isn’t simply to venerate the Apollonian over the Dionysian. Rather, it is to change to consideration of values from the aesthetic to the rational such that “knowledge alone makes men virtuous,” or man is reconciled not through art but through reason. Really, then, the Apollonian is “disguised as logical schematism” as Socrates enforces strict logic and reason to better discern intelligible things and ameliorate the state of affairs. As such, reason becomes the key for overcoming pessimism by the Socratic account.

Such veneration of knowledge, so-called truth, and reason obviously does not sit well with Nietzsche. His earlier work, *TL*, gives an account of “how aimless and arbitrary the human intellect” is: “There were eternities during which it did not exist. And when it is all over with the human intellect, nothing will have happened. For this intellect has no additional mission which would lead it beyond human life” (*TL* 79). Not only is Nietzsche’s disenchantment with reason evidenced in this passage, but also there is a metaphysical deflation of the human mind. Human reason is reduced to a means of “preserving the individual”; it is taken down from the realm of virtue and beauty and identified with nature (*TL* 80). Obviously, this conflicts with the Socratic account: whereas wisdom is that which allows humans to aspire beyond a state of ignorance or unintelligibility, for Nietzsche wisdom is merely a faculty of ignorant and unintelligible nature. There is no metaphysical insight to be had. Moreover, “the art of dissimulation”—that is, the art of cultivating intellect—is in fact identified as “deception, flattering, lying, deluding, talking behind the back, hiding behind convention, playing a role for others and oneself... [a deep immersion] in illusions and dream images” (*TL* 80). Therefore, for Nietzsche, Socratic wisdom is reducible to “play on words, a grammatical seduction, or an audacious generalization” (*BGE* 31). And such a play on words is a far cry from the reconciliatory powers of Greek tragic art. The individual is left suspended in this world of language and falsities rather than actually engaging with the suffering of life or the “apparent” world at all. Thus, not only is the basis of Socratic truth faulty, it further cultivates that same semblance of removal, or the spectator state, seen in the Euripidean tragedy.

Nonetheless, Nietzsche sees a greater danger of cultivating decadent and life-denying values through Socratic wisdom. Evans rightly argues that for Nietzsche “a decadent [is] one who is misled by a single... drive into psychological, moral, and physiological decline through the worship of ideas that are nihilistic and inimical to life” (Evans 342). In Socrates, I find such a decadent: his reaction to worship reason ultimately leads to a degeneracy of life that, in fact, maintains the initial degeneracy he tried to “remedy” in the first place (*TI* 14). But beyond the critique offered in *TL*, if I can prove that Socrates’ remedy is, in fact, in error, then I can claim that it is a dogma. And if it can be shown that Socrates’

veneration of reason is, in fact, a dogma, then I can rightly claim that he is decadent on the grounds that he clings to his remedy despite its falsity. Moreover, I will take this critique further by satisfying the condition that reason is to be identified with an idea that is “nihilistic and inimical to life” so that it may be truly said to be decadent and life-denying (Evans 342).

The Socratic formulation that “Reason = Virtue = Happiness” errs in that it seeks to assess the “*value of life*” rather than “assigning *value to* [Socrates’ own] *life*” (*TI* 12, Evans 342). First, I start from the epistemic constraint that “judgements and valuations of life...cannot be true” insofar as “their only value lies in the fact that they are symptoms” (*TI* 10). In other words, judgments and valuations of life are, in fact, metaphysically stunted because there is no vantage point on life by which life can be evaluated; individuals are a “contending party” in life and thus cannot be “a judge” of it (*TI* 10). Therefore, it may be said that “*the value of life cannot be estimated*”; at best, one can only speak to the value of their individual life (or, more realistically, some fraction of it). This accords with the epistemology offered in *TL*: our reasoned evaluations of our subjective lives hold insofar as they are limited to our subjective lives. These valuations can never aspire to something beyond.

Accordingly, in the Socratic formulation, there is an overreaching of evaluation. Socrates can be read as “symptomatic” for his own life—more of a projection than a proper evaluation, at that (Evans 342). And what might produce the symptoms that leads Socrates to venerate reason? The world-weariness Socrates experiences is not being able to understand and thereby reconcile with the suffering of existence. Nietzsche revisits one episode in particular to highlight the world-weariness of Socrates: his famous last words of the *Phaedo*: “O Crito, I owe Asclepius a rooster” (GS 272). In *TI* this becomes: “To live—means to be ill a long while: I owe a cock to the god Asclepius” (*TI* 9). As noted by Kaufmann, Evans, Stern et. al. Asclepius is the god of medicine. Nietzsche claims that these famous last words are tantamount to Socrates proclaiming, “O Crito, *life is a disease*” (GS 272). In other words, “sacrificing the rooster [to Asclepius] is what you do when you get *better*. Getting better from the sickness that is life *means leaving it*” (Stern 81). However, the actual intent of the last words is ambiguous. It is not contestable that Socrates sees death as a cure for life; but, in doing so, has he inadvertently rejected the whole project of promoting reason? Stern offers an illuminating commentary on this: “Socrates repeatedly denigrates this-worldly values. He is in a good position to do so, after all, having just proved the immortality of the soul” (Stern 80). It is not that Socrates contradicts his entire project in denying life; rather, it shows that Socrates conceives of reason as, in fact, other-worldly. Nietzsche parodies this view: ““We must already once have lived in a higher world, we must have been divine, for we possess reason!” (*TI* 22). And thus Socratic philosophy can be identified with the first great epoch in

Nietzsche's "The History of An Error": "1. The true world, attainable to the sage, the pious and the man of virtue, —he lives in it, *he is it*" (*TI* 24). Here, Socrates is the sage, the pious, and the man of virtue in that he practices reason. Reason allows him to access virtue, which entails happiness. Thus construed, reason is the means by which to access "the true world" (*TI* 24). The illness suffered, then, is not necessarily life in and of itself but life as identified with *lack of reason*. The cure for this illness is death, which is identified with reason as it is diametrically opposed to this untrue world i.e., the world that holds us back from attaining pure reason, virtue, and happiness. And this analysis makes sense in light of the commonplace understanding of Socrates: one must practice reason in order to orient their soul toward the Heaven of the Forms as opposed to remaining ignorant and at the level of the body. And, yet, recall that this evaluation of life *cannot* be an evaluation of all lives, though, this is exactly what Socrates wants it to be. Socrates has attempted to create value for life overall, namely by positing another world to aspire to through the use of reason. But in doing so, he has merely conjured up a moral edict that, in fact, cannot stand as such. At best, Socrates can only evaluate his own life i.e., create his own values. But here he has promoted "the instinct of degeneration itself: it says: 'Perish!'" in order to obtain the cure wherein we too can offer a rooster to Asclepius (*TI* 31). Thus, in this final weariness, that initial spectator-state transforms into a life lived according to reason and thus requires a rejection of life (in order to properly transcend the limits of the body). And, really, this amounts to the ultimate spectator state: Socrates aspires to be distanced from life to the extremity of departing from it all together wherein he might have a vantage point to properly assess it.

This analysis shows Socrates' veneration of reason to be dogmatic in that it poses as an evaluation of life when such a value cannot be estimated. Furthermore, I have shown that this dogma is produced by Socrates' own world-weariness in that he sees reason as other-worldly and life itself as a mere impediment to that other-world. Thus, I conclude that Socrates is decadent insofar as he relies on a particular drive—namely, his inability to understand the Dionysian—to promote reason even though it leads him to deny life. Ultimately, then, Nietzsche is right to "[recognize] Socrates and Plato as symptoms of decline, as instruments of disintegration": Socrates promotes a decadent ideology that in fact proliferates a degeneration, leads to a decline in Greek art, and promotes a philosophy of life-denial which leads to the crisis of pessimism (*TI* 10).

However, the scope of this decline is still unpronounced. I turn to Platonism to show the scope of the problem of Socrates. It is not difficult to equate the philosophy of Socrates with Platonism. After all, really, Plato takes up the "old moral problem" of "reason" versus unintelligibility and merely refines it through the Forms (*BGE* 114). However, Plato's contribution is to take the

philosophy of Socrates and present it in the “new genre” of “Platonic dialogue” (*BT* 87). This “mixture of all the available styles and forms...hovered between narrative, lyric, drama, between prose and poetry” and thereby broke “through the old law of stylistic unity” (*BT* 87). On the one hand, this new form is the vessel through which “the shipwrecked older poetry saved itself” (*BT* 87). On the other hand, this new form is still guided by the “helmsman Socrates” and, in fact, exemplifies the very “total chaos within” wherein “Reason is just his means of keeping that chaos at bay” (*BT* 87, Nehemas 139). Platonic dialogue form proliferates Socratic philosophy whilst embodying the very chaos resulting in the Socratic denial of life i.e., the necessity of reason. The greatest effect of Platonism is even more pronounced in its evolution: “Plato...wanted at the expenditure of all his strength...to prove to himself that reason and instinct move of themselves toward *one* goal, towards the good, towards ‘God’; and since Plato all theologians and philosophers have followed the same path” (*BGE* 114). In other words, Plato preserves his masters teachings and thereby cultivates the paradigm shift from Greek aestheticism to Idealism (and with it, the development of Western metaphysics, the paradigm of reason as the primary tool of the philosopher, the mistake of making false estimates of the value of life, etc.). From this paradigm follows “Platonism for ‘the people,’” the next great epoch in the great error of humanity: Christianity.

### **The Death of God: Critique of Christianity and Pessimism**

In Christianity, Nietzsche finds the worst aspects of Socratic philosophy fulfilled: a robust account of morality that proliferates “declining...enfeebled...exhausted...condemned” values (*TI* 31). It seems redundant to speak directly about Nietzsche’s critique of Christianity. Nearly all his works feature some disparaging remarks on the religion, and there are at least three volumes solely dedicated to direct attacks, namely *Daybreak*, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, and *The Antichrist*. Alternatively, I want to emphasize the quality of values inherent in Christianity i.e., those that are life-denying, such that they mark a continued decline in vitality following Platonism. What more, since Nietzsche accepts that Christianity is the predominant ideology of Western society, Western society can now be situated in this state of decline which motivates the formulation of the doctrine of eternal recurrence.

Christianity is analogous to Platonism in that it is equally dogmatic. I have already argued for the views of Socrates as essentially dogmatic; the joint force of Socrates and Plato rest their philosophy on an assumption of knowledge, truth, and reason that is ultimately unfounded. And so the general critique for dogmatism is that it presents “not simply a view but [a so-called] accurate description of the real world which forces its own acceptance and makes an unconditional claim on everyone’s assent”—that is, the dogma “commands

universal assent” simply by claiming to be some greater philosophy of the *actual* world, namely a world which itself is subordinate the otherworld of the Heaven of the Forms accessible by reason, and so on (Nehamas 32, 34). Nietzsche locates an equally dogmatic philosophy in “the Christian teaching, which is, and wants to be, *only moral*” (*BT*, Kaufmann 23). This designation as “*only moral*” holds great interpretive weight for Nietzsche. Recall that Nietzsche’s major philosophical work is to go “beyond good and evil” insofar as he sees all “customary value-sentiments” as “false judgements” based on the “fictions of logic” (*BGE* 36). As a moral philosophy, then, Christianity simply will not do for Nietzsche; it too stems from the dogma of reason founded in the philosophy of Socrates and Plato. And this seems evident enough: in the Christian worldview, the Platonic quest for knowledge becomes the quest for understanding of God; the dialectics of Socrates becomes the dialectics of good and evil, of heaven and hell. While this may seem over-generalizing or equivocal, fundamentally, Christianity is philosophy done in a way Nietzsche argues strictly against—that is, it “commands universal assent” by claiming special knowledge of the world as is, namely a world in a fallen state requiring the grace of God for salvation (Nehamas 34).

More importantly, the analogy between Christianity and Platonism holds in that both advocate life-denying philosophies based in other-worldliness. It’s worth noting that Nietzsche claims that he “never failed to sense a *hostility to life*” present in Christianity,” a suspicion that can be inferred from the “careful and hostile silence” with which it is treated in *BT* (*BT* 23). In the same way that Socrates would attempt to ameliorate life on the grounds of its sickness—that is, its status as unintelligible—Christianity would ameliorate life because it “must continually and inevitably be in the wrong, because life *is* something essentially amoral” (*BT*, Kaufmann 23). As Christa Davis Acampora rightly points out, first off, such a philosophy “springs from a fundamentally pessimistic worldview”—that is, the world is in a state of decline or suffering, it requires divine intervention (of knowledge or God) for salvation (Acampora 31). Moreover, then, “to seek the obliteration of suffering... is at the same time to seek the destruction of life” (Acampora 31). This desire to destroy life can perhaps best be seen in the denigration of physical life—the life of the body and bodily pleasures—throughout Platonic and Judeo-Christian literature. The individual must transcend the desires of their body to orient their soul with the good, and the Son of Christ must sacrifice literal body on the Cross to transcend into the heavenly body (with mankind to follow his spiritual lead). Furthermore, this life-denial is presented in the positing of other, supposedly better worlds. As Nietzsche outlines in “How the ‘True World’ Ultimately Became a Fable” there is a movement from the Platonic view that “the true world” of knowledge is “attainable to the sage, the pious man and the man of virtue” insofar as reason may be used to attain it (*TI* 24). This evolves ever-so slightly into the Christian view that “the true world is unattainable

for the moment, is promised to the sage, to the pious man and to the man of virtue (“to the sinner who repents”)” (*TI* 24). Both views denigrate life for a supposed “true world” and in doing so “negates, judges, and damns art” (*TI* 24, *BT*, Kaufmann 23). It is evident, then, that Christianity (along with Platonism, of course) spells out “a will to negate life” in stark contradiction to the Greek “saying of Yea to life” (*BT*, Kaufmann 23, *TI* 120). Whereas Greek art would reconcile us to this life (to the mysteries of the pain and beauty of this existence), Christianity would reject such an art in lieu of moral tenants, which, again, for Nietzsche are untenable in the first place. And as Christianity is “Platonism for ‘the people’” (or, “Platonism for the masses,” as it is often translated), the wide-reaching effects of Christianity for Western society are obvious enough (*BGE* 32). “Morality” as developed from Christianity “*is...today herd-animal morality*”—people proclaim to know “what is good and evil” despite these erroneous foundations (*BGE* 124-125). This morality is founded on an essentially pessimistic and life-denying philosophy antithetical to the vitality exhibited first among the Greeks. “The Christian resolve to find the world ugly and bad has made the world ugly and bad,” and Western society has inherited that worldview (*GS* 185).

Ironically, this same confrontation with pessimism is what motivates Nietzsche’s own formulation of eternal recurrence. First off, there is the well-documented awakening Nietzsche felt upon first encountering the great pessimistic works of Arthur Schopenhauer. And the very language of the necessary pain of existence throughout *BT* and *TI* suggests that Nietzsche maintains “suffering is a fundamental condition of life” (Acampora 31). What more, in *BGE* Nietzsche admits his project is, in part, to “think pessimism through to the bottom and to redeem it” (*BGE* 82). But what is Nietzsche to redeem pessimism from? For one, Nietzsche wants to redeem pessimism from the bad solutions posed by Socratic and Christian ideology. I have just shown how Platonism and Christianity posit illusory, decadent, dogmatic life-denying philosophies. Accordingly, they lead to a decline in vitality, or a rejection of this life in attempting to ameliorate the suffering. More importantly, Nietzsche wants to redeem philosophy from the loss of meaning and values. Again, consider the extent to which Platonism and Christianity has influenced the values of Western society. I agree with Heidegger’s analysis:

Two thousand years’ worth of tradition have made them habitual for our ways of representing things. Such habituation remains definitive even when we are far from thinking about Plato’s original philosophy, and also when the Christian faith has expired, leaving in place notions that are utterly conformable to reasons, notions of an “almighty” ruler of the universe and a “providence”...Nietzsche posits these modes of thoughts as the

fundamental earmark of Western thinking as such and of the entire history of Western thought (Heidegger 7).

Thus, in overturning the Platonic and Christian solutions to pessimism, Nietzsche is effectively overturning nearly the whole of Western thought, and most certainly the thought of “the people” (or the masses) (*BGE* 32). Therefore, in order to reconcile his rebuttal of the two dominant solutions to pessimism while retaining his own pessimistic stance, Nietzsche offers a new solution by which we can create meaning in the world. Consider all that is lost in the refutation of the Socratic and the Christian: we can longer use reason to learn about and thereby aspire to the good; we no longer have the means to distinguish between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ solely on the basis of knowledge; we lack the metaphysical underpinnings, the greater cosmological scheme, by which we validate our existence in the light of God; we no longer have the surefire moral judgements by which we can act for ‘good’ or ‘evil; we lose our means of judging things as valuable; and, we lose our means of giving meaning to our lives. Nietzsche anticipates this loss of meaning in his portrayal of the death of god:

“Whither is God?” he cried; “I will tell you. *We have killed him* — you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying, as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? Do we not need to light lanterns in the morning? Do we hear nothing as yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods, too, decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him....How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers?... Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?” (*GS* 181-182).

This isn’t an antichristian tirade so much as it an acknowledgement of disillusionment, of bewilderment, and of deep anxiety. The question is not whether god is dead. Nietzsche himself has already refuted the major tents of religious faith and believes that in modernity there are only “those who [do] not believe in God” in any meaningful sense and the “tombs and sepulchers” represented by the impotent church. Rather, Nietzsche is concerned with *what we are left to do* in the fallout of the death of god: “How shall we comfort ourselves,” how might we “clean ourselves” of the death of god, “what festivals” or “games

shall we invent” to restore our vigor, and what spiritual apparatus will allow us to “become gods” to properly account for our movement away from the metaphysical positions inherent in a belief in god (*GS* 181-182)? While we are left to sort through these questions, we cannot help but acknowledge that existence has “become cold,” that we lack a certain “sun” to revolve around and give us our cause, that we seem to be aimlessly “straying, as though an infinite nothing” (*GS* 181-182). This characterization is tantamount to a state of crisis: we have lost the former source of our values and the former means by which we could create meaning in the world which. More importantly, these values were, indeed, our solutions to suffering. We are left with a certain void, a certain baseline of pessimism “that life, can never give real satisfaction and hence is *not worthy* of our affection” and that our old values (Platonism, Christianity, etc.) can no longer account for (*BT* 24). Yet, this juncture offers the exact circumstances for humanity to, indeed, “become gods” through a new reinvention of the spirit (*GS* 181). With the death of god, we can go beyond good and evil and address pessimism without the old intellectual hang-ups of Western metaphysics. Therefore, I read Nietzsche’s *affirmative philosophy*—that which is produced *from* a critique of Socrates and Christianity—as posing an alternative to the problem of pessimism.

### Eternal Recurrence

I argue that Nietzsche’s doctrine of eternal recurrence offers a means by which we arrive at an affirmative philosophy that enables us to create new values.<sup>3</sup> To give us a sort of baseline account of the doctrine, I turn to its first utterance:

*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, and you with it, speck of dust!”

Would you throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: “You

---

<sup>3</sup> Gilles Deleuze rightly points out that “Nietzsche’s most general production is the introductions of the concepts of...value into philosophy” (Deleuze 1). Nietzsche has always chiefly been concerned with the origin of modern values and how we can formulate new values (in part, the inspiration behind his use of genealogical critique).

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 confirmation and seal? (GS 273-274)

Here, the doctrine is given as a thought-experiment—a sublime “What, if”—that places us in a world of strange figures and strange ideas. A demon seizes us and forces us to inhabit a world of circularity as we live a life determined by how we “now live” and how we “have lived it” (GS 273). This raises questions about our capability to overcome this cosmological order. We might ask ourselves, “What sort of potential do we *actually* possess to change our lives in light of eternal recurrence?” But note the conditional language of “what, if,” and “would” (GS 273). Such phrasing seems to speak more to a potential world than the actual world. Nietzsche is not explicitly stating, “This is how the world *is*,” but he asks how we might react *if* the world were like this. As such, we might restate his question, “How will we feel when first hearing the thought of eternal recurrence?” This line of questioning opens new concerns. If we take the thought seriously, are we supposed to live our lives *as if* eternal recurrence truly is how the world is; or, are we supposed to use the doctrine to examine our lives? What sort of life would this look like, and is there any positive account given by the doctrine? A later characterization of the doctrine put it in dramatically deterministic terms: “I come again...*not* to a new life or a better life or a similar life: I come back eternally to this same, selfsame life, in what is greatest as in what is the smallest, to teach again the eternal recurrence of all things” (Z 333). Again, there is a renewed emphasis on the repetition of life *exactly as it is*, in an unaffected or unchanged manner. This seems to problematize the emphasis of GS on potentiality rather than actuality. Here, what *actually is* is exactly what will be repeated. Moreover, Z seems to elaborate on this idea that “what is greatest as in what is the smallest” (Z 333). This is not a consideration of the generalized, ambiguous *everything* of the GS but the particulars of our lives anchored to the self. This selfsameness provides a more specific scope for the doctrine, namely one where even the most mundane details of our existence hold a sort of existential weight.

The tension between these two accounts of eternal recurrence highlights some of the interpretive issues that arise when considering the doctrine. In the literature, the major interpretations construe eternal recurrence either as a cosmological doctrine (a more literal reading), a normative doctrine (a figurative reading), or as a mere frivolous utterance. While the latter conclusion takes the

doctrine in unreasonably bad faith, I find that the former interpretations either lack coherence or fail to address the placement of the doctrine in Nietzsche's overall system of thought. As such, I adopt a quasi-normative reading of the doctrine influenced by the work of Kofman, Higgins, Magnus, and Dienstag where I emphasize the doctrine as strictly a metaphorical account. I find that eternal recurrence contains the figurative image and embodiment of the kind of psychological process we must undergo in order to properly assess the totality of our lives whereby we can begin to overcome suffering and move onward to value creation. In this way, the doctrine becomes analogous to Greek art analyzed in *BT* insofar as the doctrine can reconcile us with the suffering of existence whereby we can move onward to a stage of creation. The result is a solution to the problem of pessimism through an adoption of an attitude identified as "*Dionysian pessimism*" (*GS* 331). Such an attitude does not attempt to evade pessimism in the intellectually unhygienic way of Platonism and Christianity but rather accepts it as a spring-board for activity. In this way, the strength of Nietzsche's doctrine becomes clear: eternal recurrence allows us to move beyond the mere spectator state induced by Western philosophy (along with its decadent and life-denying tendency) to actually engage with the suffering of existence and make something of it.

I start by affirming the often-stated view that the cosmological reading of eternal recurrence does not hold insofar as it is ultimately incoherent. In the major works, Nietzsche does not anywhere indicate a literal reading of the doctrine. In *GS* the doctrine is a sublime "what if"; in *Z* the doctrine is bound to the fictional utterances of Zarathustra and his animals; and, in *BGE* the doctrine is identified in passing with the historical development of pessimism and as an "ideal" (Heidegger 64). However, in his scattered notes (later compiled as *The Will to Power*), Nietzsche does claim that eternal recurrence is "the most *scientific* of all possible hypothesis" (*WTP* 36).<sup>4</sup> Moreover, in aphorism 1066, Nietzsche speculates that "there is a limited quantity of force...time is infinite...[and] space is finite" (Williams and Palencik 394-395). However, this aphorism has been given significant treatment in the literature (notably, Danto, Magnus, and even

---

<sup>4</sup> Aside from the contentious nature of unpublished material (not to mention its treatment by Nietzsche's sister), I feel that the scholarship has failed to acknowledge the potential for irony in this passage. First off, it is redundant to speak of Nietzsche skepticism toward *Wissenschaft*, so much so that one could argue that he goes further to critique systematic knowledge than he does Christianity (though an adequate treatment of this critique is beyond the limits of this paper). So, with the presence of a word like "scientific," I have good reasons to be suspicious of any positive claims Nietzsche might make. Moreover, I have better reason to read this as Nietzsche being ironic. He leads up to this proclamation with a historical tracking of the development of pessimism (akin to the passage 56 in *BGE*), though he forgoes his typical genealogical method. Thus, Nietzsche derives eternal recurrence in a quick, superficial, and systematic manner analogous to *Wissenschaft*, a result that he normally would outright reject.

Williams and Palencik), and has often been dismissed as “exceedingly garbled” insofar as it relies on “no attempt at argument or [coherent] proof” (Danto 187, 186). The proof given in 1066 seems more speculative than definitive: Danto works it out to yield a mere analogy to the “frequency theory of probability” or a theory “contrary to the Second Law of Thermodynamics” (Danto 187, 190). Magnus finds that the proof ends where “Nietzsche is simply wrong” insofar as “a finite sum of energy does not entail a finite number of energy states,” not to mention all the ambiguities behind the occurrences of time and the legitimacy of identicals (Magnus 85). And Williams and Palencik compound this view by highlighting the failure of the proof to derive occurrences that are “absolutely identical,” which is necessary for a true recurrence of a selfsame life (395). As such, no coherent account of eternal recurrence has been derived from the cosmological reading, and every other presentation of the doctrine suggests approaching the doctrine in a different light.

I also dismiss a traditional normative approach to the doctrine on similar grounds. For one, it has been long understood that Nietzsche is patently *opposed* to traditional normativity.<sup>5</sup> The first section of Z displays Nietzsche’s diatribe where normativity takes the form of a “great dragon...sparkling like gold...on every scale shines a golden ‘thou shalt’” that confronts “the spirit of the lion” who wishes to be “master in his own desert” (Z 138-139). Here the dragon embodies the “values, thousands of years old” that one might aspire to (Z 139). Nietzsche does not privilege any one of these “thou shalts” that adorn the dragon. Rather, they must all be confronted and overcome by the spirit of the lion (Z 138). The collective danger of these values is that they impede the individual desire to will (Z 138). This collective must be overcome in order for the spirit of the lion to transform into the spirit of “I will” (Z 139). So construed, normativity is a mere impediment to the greater transformation that will be undergone by the individual. Normativity does not enable an individual to actualize their full potential; rather, it stands as a ferocious, glittering obstacle. And it is not clear how the doctrine could overcome such an obstacle insofar as its normative content is underdetermined. Recall the conditional language of “What, if” and “would” in GS; there’s no explicit “must” or “ought” to be found (GS 273-274).

Alternatively, I read this conditional language as signifying a non-traditional normative account of eternal recurrence that goes beyond the mere contest of “thou shalts.” The very conditional nature of the language does not suggest a specific prescriptive “thou shalt” but invites us to consider *what would happen if* we were to engage with the content of the doctrine. As such, I argue for

---

<sup>5</sup> By “traditional” I have in mind Deontological, Utilitarian, or Divine Command theories where an individual submits to an external, universalized law, mirrored by the “thou shalts” of the great dragon.

a figurative reading where we consider eternal recurrence *as if* it were true. This wouldn't be a commitment to the reality of eternal recurrence, and, again, it wouldn't be a commitment to any one prescriptive claim. Rather, taken as a general metaphor, I argue that the doctrine moves us to consider our attitude toward our own existence, including all the suffering posed by pessimism. Such a commitment leads to a sort of co-authoring of the doctrine: whatever changes or values are derived from the doctrine will be a synthesis its figurative content along with the specific life-content and psychological attitude brought by the individual. Subsequently, the individual can derive their own "existential imperative" whereby they can begin to overcome the suffering of their lives and cultivate a specifically Dionysian attitude (Magnus 111).

### **Figurative Content**

Before arriving at this imperative, I will examine the linguistic and epistemological significance of metaphor in Nietzsche's system of thought. In an early writing, "The Philosopher," he goes so far as to claim, "There is no 'real' expression and *no real knowing apart from metaphor*," and counts "time, space, and causality" among the "*metaphors of knowledge*" (P 50, 47). Moreover, in "On Truth an Lies in a Nonmoral Sense" (TL) Nietzsche makes the further claim that words themselves are metaphorical: "What is a word? It is the copy in sound of a nerve stimulus...a nerve stimulus is transferred into an image: first metaphor. The image, in turn, is imitated in a sound: second metaphor. And each time there is a complete overleaping of one sphere, right into the middle of an entirely new and different one." (TL 81-83). This passage not only reveals the systematic process by which language-metaphors are formed—there is a physiological and vocal process that later becomes associated with a particular image—but it also illuminates Nietzsche's conception of metaphor as a "complete overleaping" of spheres (TL 83). Breazeale rightly points out that this conception is consistent with the etymology of the Greek word itself, which is derived from a verb meaning "to carry over," "to carry across," or "to transfer" (xxix). Thus, there is a two-fold conception of metaphor: all language is a kind of metaphor, where any proposition or language-based claim can only ever be metaphorical, and the mechanism of metaphor carries one concept over to another. Breazeale qualifies the latter mechanism: "The reason that all knowledge involves metaphor is that knowing is supposed to be 'the adequate expression of an object in the subject'" (xxix). Thus, metaphor also bridges object and subject; it places the object in the subject. As such, it seems the use of metaphor is *inevitable* for Nietzsche: so long as language is used there is the practice of metaphor wherein this bridging occurs. Moreover, metaphor might supersede the mere rhetorical or linguistic and take a more ontological status in Nietzsche's account. Take for instance his description of the Apollonian and the Dionysian as "not...purely conceptual" but "plausible

*embodiments*" of the Greek "mystical doctrines of art" (*BT* 19). Recall that Grecian art (in particular, the Apollonian-Dionysiac duality) is Nietzsche's *ideal* aesthetic framework—it is that which he ultimately hopes to revive. If the Greeks saw Apollo and Dionysus as metaphors or symbolic images embodying the greater aesthetic principles, then obviously Nietzsche would want to adopt this framework—it leads to his ideal aesthetic life. Kofman expands on this: "Metaphor must be understood here not as a rhetorical figure, but as a 'substitutive' image which the poet really perceives in place of the idea" (Kofman 8). Thus, ontologically, metaphors can stand in place of the objects they refer to; they *embody* the content of the concept they represent and thus affect the world.

However, all of this conceptual framework fails to speak to the effect of metaphor on the individual. When we are placed in the world of the demon, or we are invited to reconsider our selfsame life, we are not being asked an intellectual question—that is, our rational minds are not being engaged so much as our intuition or feelings. "How would you feel if..." Nietzsche asks; he cares about our *physical* and *psychological* response, e.g., "Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth" (Higgins and Solomon 204, *GS* 274). The metaphor most aptly suits this form of engagement because it presents the world *as if* eternal recurrence were true. Nietzsche's thoughts on language, knowledge, and his general skepticism toward rationality or truth contextualize his conception of metaphor as ontologically viable, but the greater effect of metaphor justifies its usage. Simply, it is better at engaging our feelings. It forces us to directly confront the affective experience linked to the greater philosophical idea.

With this justification, I turn to the figurative content of eternal recurrence via its original presentation in *GS*. The metaphor begins clearly enough: "some day or night" refers to *any* moment in our lives—which are, indeed, enclosed by days and nights—as to add a sense of urgency to our total life (*GS* 273). It is not as if we will be faced with eternal recurrence at any *particular* time where we may be disposed to react in a *particular* way. Rather, we must be prepared to confront eternal recurrence at any point in our lives. From here we are introduced to "a demon" who has the ability to "steal after [us] into [our] loneliest loneliness" (*GS* 273). But it's not immediately clear what this demon stands in place of. It could represent a literal arbiter of our lives, a kind of deity, though that would run counter to Nietzsche's criticism of otherworldly thought. Perhaps then the demon might be a sort of pagan symbol for chance, the mere means of interruption. This makes sense given the randomness with which we will be faced with eternal recurrence; it is just *by chance* that we are faced with the doctrine. And in *Z* Nietzsche speaks of chance as "Over all things...the heaven chance... 'By chance'—that is the most ancient nobility of the world" (*Z* 278). It is inherently opposed to "Purpose" and "'rationality'" and carries with it "freedom and heavenly cheer" (*Z* 278). Such praise might seem opposed to the fact that the

demon has the potential to “crush” us, but the demon also has the potential to move us to “*crave nothing more fervently*” than this situation (GS 273-274). However, Zarathustra’s characterization of chance is a little too grandiose compared with this demon. Chance takes a more active role in manipulating Zarathustra: it “conceals [its] stars,” it doesn’t “speak,” it “[proclaims its] wisdom to [Zarathustra],” it shares his “grief,” and shares his “sun” (Z 276). But the demon of eternal recurrence merely confronts us with the doctrine. The demon itself takes no action toward eternal recurrence; it merely examines us and vanishes. Even though the demon might resemble chance with its randomness and domination, ultimately, it does not play an active role compared to the content of the doctrine itself. As such, the demon is a mere ambiguity (perhaps borne out of Nietzsche’s infamous poetics) to be discarded from the greater metaphorical content of the doctrine.

The content of the doctrine remains: ““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” (GS 273). Again, waking life is repeated exactly as it is. But this *cannot* be a literal repetition; after all, I want to read this metaphorically. Rather, it must be a sort of counterfactual, a life imagined *as if* it were to be repeated. Thus, the metaphor here transfers the concept of an eternally repeated life into our actual, finite lives: this is what is supposed to be the *embodiment* of our lives. But what effect does this metaphor have? The aphorism teaches us what to consider:

Would you throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: “You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine.”... Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life *to crave nothing more fervently* than this ultimate confirmation and seal? (GS 273-274)

Would this metaphorical existence be one of pain and resentment? Or, would something of our actual life be transferred over that would make us praise the demon who has enlightened us to this existence? Ultimately, then, this interplay between our actual life and our figurative life is what Nietzsche is interested in.

As Higgins and Solomon rightly point out, “The metaphor of *weight* here becomes an important piece of the puzzle” (Higgins and Solomon 204). After all, it is the very first metaphor given in the doctrine. It appears again in the passage: “[eternal recurrence] would lie upon [our] actions as the greatest weight” (GS 274). It suggests that by taking the situation seriously this figurative existence can inform our actual existence, serving as a sort of weight upon our actions. In light

of the doctrine, we can no longer act as if our actions are mere occurrences without metaphysical weight. Rather, a serious consideration of the doctrine would mean that our actions *solely* determine our ontology; any action we take will be that which literally defines our life for eternity. Hence, the greatest weight becomes a metaphor about the metaphor: once we act *as if* eternal recurrence *is* real, it *becomes* real in the sense that it becomes the standard by which we evaluate our actions. Moreover, the weight of each action—that is, our psychological reaction to their recurrence—will allow us to assess the values entailed by those actions and the sort of attitudes they cultivate within us. This reading then begins to reveal a kind of normativity. Even though we are not necessarily committed to taking the doctrine seriously, Nietzsche claims that we *can* take the doctrine seriously and thereby add a certain metaphysical weight to our actions.

### **Stages of Recurrence**

But what that weight looks like, what the “*visual and conceptual representation*” offered by eternal recurrence is remains uncertain (Magnus 142). I concede that GS does not offer a complete image of eternal recurrence but must be complimented with an analysis of Z, the text whose “basic idea” is a continuation of “the penultimate section of the fourth book” of GS—that is, the first utterance of eternal recurrence (EH 296). In articulating the figurative content of the doctrine, I adopt Kathleen Higgins strategy in her treatment of the “On the Three Metamorphoses” section of Z. This section offers a clearer image of the process we would undergo if we take eternal recurrence seriously. By Higgins’ account, eternal recurrence can be articulated in three distinct stages of transformation whereby we learn “how the spirit becomes a camel; and the camel, a lion; and the lion, finally, a child” (Z 137). Accordingly, the doctrine of eternal recurrence is expanded to resemble our ever-changing feelings toward our lives and the various stages of maturity we might undergo as we examine each aspect of our lives. In each of these stages, the individual applies the immediate doctrine (the cyclical utterance of GS) to their lives to assess what sort of states and attitudes they would adopt if they were to repeat a particular stage eternally. Like my stated view, Higgins sees the metaphor of transformation as offering a real understanding of “the inner dynamics involved in value creation” (Higgins 50). Each of the three metaphorical stages corresponds to a literal past, present, and future of the individual where the metaphorical weight of eternal recurrence is applied. Taken through each metaphorical cycle within eternal recurrence—what I call “stages of recurrence”—the individual can overcome “the repetition of harmful patterns” and end in a state whereby they can be reconciled with the totality of their lives and move onward to a state of creation which can be identified with an affirmative philosophy (Higgins 50). This is a state not unlike the immersion that occurs in Dionsyan revelry, and this will contribute to a

merging of the aesthetics of *BT* with this later aesthetics of eternal recurrence. Thus, the figurative content of eternal recurrence is a synthesis of the metaphorical weight of our actions and their values along with the recurring stages that our spirit must undergo to be led to a total evaluation of our lives.

The stages of recurrence are as follows: first, the spirit asks, “What is difficult?” and assumes the stage of the camel to load itself with burdens (Z 138). But this bearing of burdens is void of positive content as the camel merely loads itself with existential questions: “What is most difficult...that I may take it upon myself and exult in my strength? Is it not humbling oneself to wound one’s haughtiness? Letting one’s folly shine to mock one’s wisdom? Or is it this...Or is it this...Or is it this...” (Z 138). The camel never answers any of these questions so long as it is locked in a state of burdened contemplation. The spirit must “speed into the...*loneliest* desert” to begin the second transformation: “here the spirit becomes a lion who would conquer his freedom and be master in his own desert” (Z 138). However, to conquer his freedom and thereby truly become his own master, the lion must “[seek] out his last master: he wants to fight him...the great dragon” (Z 138). As seen above, this great dragon is the embodiment of “Thou shalt” and it is only through vanquishing this dragon that the spirit can begin to affirm “I will” (Z 139). But all the lion can ever do is fight with the great dragon of values: the spirit must undergo a final transformation “to create new values” (Z 139). Hence the child:

What can the child do that even the lion could not do?... The child is innocence and forgetting, a new beginning, a game, a self-propelled wheel, a first movement, a sacred “Yes.” For the game of creation, my brothers, a sacred “Yes” is needed: the spirit now wills his own will, and he who had been lost to the world now conquers his own world. (Z 139)

Thus, the stages of recurrence end with the individual assuming the status of the self-propelled wheel capable of affirming “Yes” to life.

As concerns the values of the individual, the camel stage is associated with those that are “ascetic, life-denying values,” as well as that of “reverence” necessary in later stages to create new values (Higgins 52). Like the ascetic, the camel is left alone to bear the burden of repeated questioning: there is no resolve but only the continual mediation. This questioning is full of temptation, hunger, deafness, repulsion, despising, fear, and difficulty (Z 138). As such, its attitude can be identified with life-denial. The camel cannot alleviate itself of its burdens. Rather, it merely waits with all the questions on its back and despairs of life. However, the necessity of this stage is derived from its sense of reverence: “What is most difficult, O heroes...that I may take it upon myself and exult in my strength? Is it not humbling to oneself to wound one’s haughtiness? Letting one’s folly shine to mock wisdom?” (Z 138). The camel appeals to those who have

carried such burdens before and shows humility by questioning even its haughtiness and wisdom. As such, the camel stage contains both the recognition of the past as well as the beginnings of reconciliation with it. The camel not only wants to carry that which has been carried by past heroes but wishes to do so with an acknowledgement of its own past full of moments of humility, haughtiness, folly, and wisdom. But in choosing to bear these burdens—in choosing to tether itself to the past through a relentless questioning—the camel “restricts one’s vision, encourages hostility toward what is new, and ‘knows only how to *preserve* life, not engender it’” (Higgins 53). As such, if the individual were to recur in this stage eternally, they would only ever bear the burden of their existence and make nothing of it. We think of all our choices, all the consequences of our actions, and those things which have defined and composed our lives. Though this is inevitably a painful and thereby cathartic consideration—we come to fathom all our suffering, our pains, our regrets—we are merely left in a state of contemplation. We are left searching for that “tremendous moment” that would compel us to seek out “the ultimate confirmation and seal” of eternal recurrence (GS 273-274). But even if we find such a moment to motivate our, “Yes,” we are stuck with the trappings of this stage. We merely define ourselves relative to our past despite our potential to propel ourselves into the future

The lion stage moves the spirit closer to the engendering of life through a cultivation of aggression toward that which impedes the will. The lion actively combats the burden of the camel; it can push all these burdens off onto the symbol of the gold-scaled dragon and begin “to negate precisely the claims that were treasured in the camel phase” (Higgins 52). As such, the spirit is no longer weighed down by the burden of individuation—that is, the burden of *every* judgement involved in that selfsame life. These burdens formerly are projected onto the great dragon whereby the spirit can antagonize all imposing values equally through a divine “No” (Z 139). Ironically, though this is the battle cry of freedom, the lion stage is still insufficient for the creation of new values. The lion is “absorbed in the project of negating what [past] values, the lion as much as the camel is defined by [its past]” (Higgins 53). The lion cannot truly be free so long as it is stuck in this battle with the past; it still orients itself according to the influence of the past and defines itself “in terms of exactly those contents” (Higgins 53). Even though the individual is now moved to an active consideration of their past and present, they define themselves only in terms of that past and present. If the individual were to recur in this stage eternally, they could never arrive at an actual feeling toward their lives insofar as they are consumed in the act of rigorously investigating and thereby rejecting it. Ultimately, then, the lion stage ends in a sort of nihilism that leaves the individual denying life.

With the coming of the child stage, the spirit finally arrives at an attitude of “*great health*” insofar as “a child is not a being that completely rejects [that

which has come before]" (Higgins 53, *EH* 298). Though the child is essentially separated from the past in that it is, after all, a child, it may still "[take] its bearings from what its elders teach it" and thereby use the past for its own creation of new values. In other words, the child is no longer defined in terms of the past, as the lion, but rather accepts and uses the past in the figuration of the present and future. The child is most apt for this final stage in that the spirit can then have a certain childlike wonder going forward as it continues to face hardships in life—it possesses the capacity to take any burden or imposition, weigh it, and shape it as it sees fit. Thus, there is a sense of play with one's life. Though this might seem to deflate any sense of existential weight that our actions have going forward, really, it is a seizure of that weight and a sort of rapturous acceptance of it as fodder for creation. In other words, the weight remains, but the spirit now can take the weight and shape it as it wills with a sacred "Yes." It is only this stage which completes the doctrine of eternal recurrence insofar as it is a full consideration of one's total life. With its creative and curious potential, the individual in the child stage is not limited to any one mode of consideration of their past, present, and future. As such, the individual can accept the past while moving beyond it. All the pain of our past still informs our decisions, it can now be taken up like a plaything and molded into whatever we desire. We can begin to cultivate the attitude of Dionysian pessimism where we go forward and create using the totality of our lives. We have undergone the full transformation of the spirit by applying the weight of eternal recurrence.

### **Existential Imperative and Dionysian Pessimism through *BT***

What more, I claim that from this metaphor of eternal recurrence, we find an imperative by which we can live a more vital life. Recall that the whole motivation for the doctrine of eternal recurrence is Nietzsche's disavowal of Western philosophy and its failure to overcome the problem of pessimism as prefigured in *BT*. As such, the attitude resulting from the doctrine must address this problem. However, insofar as this is a quasi-normative account, the resulting answer will not be a dogmatic "thou shalt" but an existential imperative whereby the individual can overcome pessimism if they take the doctrine seriously. I instead argue that the attitude cultivated in the child stage of recurrence allows the individual to overcome pessimism through a reconciliation with the *suffering* of existence that leads to a state of creation. In this way, the attitude mirrors the Dionysian aesthetics expounded in *BT* whereby it can be rightly called "Dionysian pessimism."<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Recall that the presence of the Dionysian necessitates the presence of the Apollonian. However, here the emphasis is on the Dionysian insofar as it reconciles the individual with suffering and moves them to a state of creation. The Apollonian is not our focus insofar as it simply shapes up our image of reality and makes things beautiful. The assumption here is that humans do not typically have adverse reactions or form unhealthy attitudes in light of beautiful things (fairly so).

The quasi-normative existential imperative has three major components: value evaluation, a confrontation with pessimism, and the resulting attitude of Dionysian pessimism. The first major component consists of a direct confrontation of our values through the weight of eternal recurrence. Values determine what actions we deem worthy and unworthy as well as the attitudes we have in response to events. As Magnus puts it, “attitudes toward life are to be read as symptoms of the condition of the person having the attitude” where values are those conditions producing the attitude (Magnus 142). Given the weight of eternity posed by the doctrine, our actions no longer become superfluous or contingent but represent what values we deem “worthy of infinity” (Magnus 143). If we respond to the doctrine in anguish—whether we take it merely as a painful burden, like the camel, or with a spirit of antagonism, like the lion—than we must be assenting to “harmful” or unhealthy values insofar as we have an attitude of despair or anger leading to actions borne out of these attitudes (Higgins 50). Alternatively, if we respond to the doctrine with the joy of a child than we must be cultivating those values which truly befit our lives. Consequently, the stages of recurrence allow us to assess what kind of values we assent to in terms of their actual *value* to us—would we choose these values eternally? And by this account, the adequacy of the stages model becomes clear. Our values change throughout the different stages of our lives. We might not always assent to the same values at the same time. But insofar as our lives are a totality of these changing values, we must still confront what values we have lived by and what values we are living by. Only then can the imperative begin to take hold: live by the values by which you would want to live eternally. Such an edict breaks with traditional normative claims insofar as its scope is as wide as the participating individuals and their chosen values. There is no particular set of values prescribed but merely those that correspond with the spirit of the child in the face of eternal recurrence.

The ultimate test for these values is to overcome an eternity of pessimism. Recall that the motivation for the doctrine is what Nietzsche sees as a failure of Western philosophy to address pessimism. The Platonic-Christian model is to build an alternative life (one that denies *this* life) rather than confront the actual suffering of this life. The Schopenhauerean model is to reject life and limit the potential for suffering in doing so. But Nietzsche’s doctrine poses the possibility of an “endless suffering” such that “the will to eternal recurrence” is a total acceptance of that suffering (Dienstag 934). On the one hand, this illustrates the logic of the doctrine in relation to pessimism. Unlike traditional Western philosophy, the doctrine does not posit eternity to escape suffering but develops eternity *as* suffering in order to confront it: nothing is going to change, *life will always be suffering*. Note that this does not commit Nietzsche to *life as only*

---

Rather, it is suffering which poses a problem for humanity insofar as we evade, reject, and form unhealthy habits in light of it (hence, the problematic state of inertia, paralysis, spectatorship, etc.).

suffering insofar as the doctrine is still a figuration. But it does apply the weight of eternity to suffering as to eliminate the possibility of avoidance. Rather, the imperative resulting from the doctrine is a *possible response* when confronting an eternity of suffering. Just as one might evade suffering by denying life (or escape it all together by positing *another* life), one may also embrace suffering.

Moreover, this embrace does not have to lead to a “passive nihilism” entailed by Socratic despair of life where we might envision an individual lamenting, “There will always be some suffering. My actions cannot ameliorate suffering. I cannot go on” (Magnus 140). In the same vain, the individual can assess what sort of values correspond with the actions and attitudes worthy of infinity and pursue the cultivation of those actions and attitudes. Thus, Nietzsche’s anecdote for pessimism develops an alternative imperative that has been neglected by Western philosophy: rather than avoidance or inaction, act so as to *crave nothing more than* eternity even if that eternity is one of suffering.

Finally, then, the sort of attitude that would crave a possible eternity of suffering is the attitude of Dionysian pessimism. This attitude reconciles the individual with suffering and thereby allows them to create in light of that suffering. Really, this claim follows from the first two components of the imperative. Insofar as the stages of recurrence allow the individual to assess their values, ultimately, the stages end with an ability “to create new values” as the individual “now wills his own will” (Z 139). Accordingly, the evaluation of values is a condition of creation. If we seriously consider the doctrine by which we arrive at the imperative, we fulfill the imperative by the act of value-creation. Though borne out of the backward-looking assessment, this action is exclusively forward-willing as it is neither a mere consideration or antagonistic nay saying. Thus, the fulfillment of the imperative must be a creative act if the individual has truly overcome their past and present values. But this creativity can only come after a total acceptance of suffering insofar as it is every joy *and* every pain which must be considered in true eternal recurrence. Again, as the individual moves through the stages of recurrence, they must finally overcome the possibility of an *eternity of each and every thing*, including whatever suffering they have faced. Ultimately, then, Nietzsche’s existential imperative declares that we ought to use the doctrine of eternal recurrence to assess our values, reconcile ourselves to the suffering of life, and thereby overcome that suffering through a cultivation of values that correspond to an attitude of Dionysian pessimism—that is, creativity in the face of formlessness.

However, how this attitude is precisely a *Dionysian* attitude can only be understood through the aesthetics of *BT*. Most obviously, we can parallel the historical importance of the doctrine with the Greek tragic art of *BT*. In the same way that Nietzsche sees Greek tragic art as a “pessimism of strength” likewise can Dionysian pessimism be identified as both embrace and create in light of suffering

(*BT* 17). In *BT* Nietzsche marks a decline with the loss of Greek art—that is, an inherently pessimistic art. This decline, then, can be identified with a tendency to evade or reject pessimism. Such a rejection leads to an enfeebled art dominated by the spectator mindset that removes the audience from an actual acquaintance with life (including all its suffering). This spectator mindset is doubled-over with the rationalism of Socrates, which only advances with through Platonism and Christianity. And in the state of crisis after the death of God (and the failure of Western philosophy overall to account for a pessimistic reality), only an aesthetic device equal to Greek tragic art can revitalize the individual and enable them to move beyond their unhealthy attitudes and values. Eternal recurrence is that device and, as such, Dionysian pessimism is the restorative attitude equal to the attitude cultivated by Greek tragic art. For Nietzsche, they are the two grand solutions to the problem of pessimism. And in this historical analogy, then, the aesthetics of *BT* can be transplanted to the attitude of Dionysian pessimism insofar as they both overcome suffering in the same manner.

Chiefly, both the Dionysian of Greek tragic art and the attitude of Dionysian pessimism respond to the suffering of existence with *activity*. This activity can be understood in contrast to the inactivity cultivated by an evasion or rejection of suffering. The Greek tragic art of *BT* is opposed to the spectator mindset of Euripides' theatre and Socratic philosophy. The former is identified as a vitalizing art whereas the latter are identified with decline. However, it is the Dionysian impulse of that tragic art which eliminates the possibility of spectatorship. Recall that the Dionysian is cultivated through the satyr chorus so that the tragic will conditions the audience into a state of tragic reverie. And with the advent of the tragic hero, the audience aligns with the suffering on the stage and thus participates in the total aesthetic phenomena of the tragic art. The Apollonian secures the intelligibility of this phenomena through its stricture of forms (whether that be music, mask, or individuals). But the Dionysian eliminates spectatorship by dissolving the audience into the aesthetic phenomena of the tragedy. Likewise, the attitude of Dionysian pessimism is cultivated through the various stages of eternal recurrence, which demand that the individual apply the weight of eternity to their actions, attitude and values. The doctrine leads no room for spectatorship insofar as it demands a consideration of the totality of life: the individual actively undergoes recurrence when evaluating their life. Moreover, the doctrine's form—that is, metaphor—requires the same subsuming of the individual. The literal content of the life of an individual must be placed within the figurative content of the doctrine in order for activity to begin. The end result of that subsuming is one of activity: the spirit is transformed through the stages until it ends with the activity of value-creation. Thus, neither the Dionysian of *BT* nor the attitude of Dionysian pessimism permit inactivity insofar as they seize the individual and transform them into activity.

As that activity is identified as intoxication and dance in *BT*, the attitude of Dionysian pessimism likewise involves intoxication and dance. First, there is the initial intoxication of pain one experiences when bearing the totality of their lives under the weight of eternity—that is, an eternity potentially full of suffering. Moreover, there is the intoxication one cultivates through the stages of recurrence that ends in creation. This state is most aptly described as an intoxication of creativity, a reverie at the prospect of an eternity of self-willing. And that self-willing may be understood as dance through the lens of the result of tragedy in *BT*. The tragic dance of *BT* builds as we are “stirred” and we move closer to “nature itself” (as we, indeed, examine *what is* and how we feel about it) (*BT* 22). What more, this dance is the dance of rapture in light of tragic awareness. As it is through the stages of recurrence that the individual now attains this tragic knowledge, this dance becomes the act of constant creation, or self-willing, for the spirit in the child stage. It is at this stage that the individual has been reconciled with an eternity of suffering whereby “there may be eternal joy in creating...that the will to life might say Yea to itself in all eternity” (*TI* 119). Such an attitude is one of constant activity, constant aesthetic movement, analogous only to dance, a frenzy of aesthetic phenomena that affirms rather than denies life.

Yet, the Dionysian of *BT* is also characterized by an element of forgetfulness which nuances this attitude. Such a characteristic seems at odds with the initial doctrine: how might we reconcile a total consideration of one’s life in relation to eternity whilst also forgetting oneself? More importantly, how are we to arrive at an attitude wherein we take material from our past life and incorporate it as creative material if we have forgotten that material in the first place? Perhaps we might take our cue from a later passage of *BT* wherein the Dionysian is that which “[finds] an even higher satisfaction in the annihilation of concrete semblances” (*BT* 142). Here the forgetfulness function is spoken of in terms of how it relates to Apollonian illusions, or those “semblances” which have stood as “concrete” fixtures in our lives (*BT* 142). Really, then, Dionysian forgetfulness is more of that initial destructive power we see most accurately in the lion stage wherein we do combat the various “Thou shalts” which have formerly ruled our lives. On the one hand, we forget these values in order to move past them; in the act of forgetfulness we deny whatever former weight they may have had for our lives. On the other hand, there is a further step of forgetfulness in forgetting these concrete semblances as solely opposed to our lives. In other words, we must further forget that these concrete semblances are only our enemies wherein we can appropriately use them as creative material in the future.

Taken together, then, these three characteristics of intoxication, dancing, and forgetfulness characterize an attitude toward pessimism that can most aptly be called Dionysian. Through the Dionysian movement we come closer to the state of nature. What this really means, however, is that through a confrontation of

every pain and every joy of our lives in eternal recurrence, we begin to see the absolute necessity of suffering in life—that it is, in fact, *nature*. Hence, we begin to see the vitality implicit in Greek tragic art: “the infliction of pain [is] experienced as joy while a sense of supreme triumph [elicits] cries of anguish from the heart” on stage through the tragic hero wherein the Greeks are moved to face their own pain and anguish (*BT* 27). But as we move from merely bearing the suffering of life, to fighting against that which seems to contribute to the suffering of life, to the final stage of acceptance and creation *in light of* that suffering, the “horror of existence [fades] away in enchantment” (*BT* 145). We, in fact, crave to return to this selfsame life *because it is suffering*: it is still the ground on which we can create new values, it is still the grounds of the experience of vital life. As such, we indeed become “[members] of a higher community” wherein the “tiger and panther lie down and caress [our] feet” (*BT* 23, 124). On the one hand, we become a part of a higher community insofar as we can adequately address pessimism *unlike* the base communities of the life-denying philosophers (Socrates and Christianity). On the other hand, this is the mystic oneness of existence spoken of; this is the union of humanity with *what is the case*: suffering! And suffering becomes a mere loving part of the phenomena of life: we assume the role of Zarathustra surrounded by all things of crying, laughing, “glowing and strong as a morning sun that comes out of dark mountains” (*Z* 327). It is this role that the Greek audience assumed under the influence of tragic art, that decayed into a spectator state under the influence of the Euripidean theatre and the philosophy of Socrates, that turned to life-denial decadence at the hands of Platonism and Christianity, and that was revised through the doctrine of eternal recurrence posed by Nietzsche. In this sense, then, Nietzsche truly becomes “the last disciple of the philosopher Dionysus...the prophet of eternal recurrence” (*TI* 120). Through an understanding of his teachings—in particular, the framing and aesthetics of *BT*—we can overcome the otherwise debilitating, inactive state of pessimism and, instead, become a “self-propelled wheel” who affirms life through Dionysian creation into the future (*Z* 139).

## Abbreviations

<i>Beyond Good and Evil</i>	(BGE)
<i>The Birth of Tragedy</i>	(BT)
<i>The Gay Science</i>	(GS)
“On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense”	(TL)
“The Philosopher”	(P)
<i>Thus Spoke Zarathustra</i>	(Z)
<i>Twilight of the Idols</i>	(TI)
<i>Ecce Homo</i>	(EH)
<i>The Will to Power</i>	(WTP)

Note:

Titles are typed out for first usage. Every subsequent reference is abbreviated as above.

### Works Cited

- Acampora, Christa Davis. "Nietzsche Contra Homer, Socrates, and Paul." *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, vol. 24, 2002, pp. 25-53.
- Aristotle. *Poetics. The Complete Works of Aristotle*. Translated by Jonathan Barnes, vol. 2, Princeton UP, 1984, pp. 2316-40.
- Breazeale, Daniel. *Philosophy and Truth*. Humanities Press International, 1993.
- Danto, Arthur C. *Nietzsche as Philosopher*. Columbia UP, 2005.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Nietzsche and Philosophy*. Translated by Hugh Tomlinson, Columbia UP, 1983.
- Dienstag, Joshua Foa. "Nietzsche's Dionysian Pessimism." *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 95, no. 4, 2001, pp. 923-37.
- Evan, Daw-Nay. "Socrates as Nietzsche's Decadent in *Twilight of the Idols*." *Philosophy and Literature*, vol. 34, 2010, pp. 340-47.
- Gooding-Williams, Robert. "Ruminations and Rejoinders: Eternal Recurrence, Nietzsche's Noble Plato, and the Existentialist Zarathustra." *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, no. 34, 2007, pp. 96-112.
- Grenke, Michael W. "Fundamental Metaphors." Midwest Political Science Association, 64<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference, 20 April 2006, Palmer House Hilton, Chicago, IL. Conference Presentation.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Nietzsche*. Translated by David Farrell Krell. HarperCollins, 1991.
- Higgins, Kathleen Marie. "Zarathustra's Midlife Crisis: A Response to Gooding-Williams." *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, no. 34, 2007, pp. 47-60.
- Kaufmann, Walter. "Nietzsche's Admiration for Socrates." *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 9, no. 4, 1948, pp. 472-91.
- Kofman, Sarah. *Nietzsche and Metaphor*. Translated by Duncan Large. Stanford U P, 1993.
- Magnus, Bernd. *Nietzsche's Existential Imperative*. Indiana UP, 1978.
- Nehamas, Alexander. *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault*. U of California P, 2000.
- . *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*. Harvard UP, 1985.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Beyond Good and Evil*. Translated by R.J. Hollingdale. Introduction by Michael Tanner. Penguin, 2003.
- . *The Birth of Tragedy and the Case of Wagner*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. Vintage, 1967.
- . *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals*. Translated by Francis Golffing. Anchor, 1956.
- . *Ecce Homo*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. Vintage, 1969.
- . *The Gay Science*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. Vintage, 1974.
- . "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense." *Philosophy and Truth*. Translated

- by Daniel Breazeale. Humanities Press International, 1993, pp. 77-97.
- . "The Philosopher." *Philosophy and Truth*. Translated by Daniel Breazeale. Humanities Press International, 1993, pp. 2-58.
- . *Thus Spoke Zarathustra. The Portable Nietzsche*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann, Vintage, 1965, pp. 103-439.
- . *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann, Modern Library 1995.
- . *Twilight of the Idols*. Translated by Anthony M. Ludovici. Russell & Russell, 1964.
- . *The Will to Power*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale. Vintage, 1968.
- Silk, M.S. and J.P. Stern. *Nietzsche on Tragedy*. Cambridge U P, 1981.
- Stern, Tom. "Back to the Future: Eternal Recurrence and the Death of Socrates." *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, vol. 41, 2011, pp. 72-83.
- Williams, Linda L. and Joseph T. Palencik. "Re-evaluating Nietzsche's Cosmology of Eternal Recurrence." *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 42, 2004, pp. 393-409.