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Abhandlung

Gideon Baker

The Pure Sky and the Eternal Return: Zarathustra's Affirmative Atheism

Abstract: Zarathustra initially describes churches as the stale caves of world-denying priests. However, following his encounter with the eternal return of the same, Zarathustra overcomes this resentful atheism. The pure sky that Zarathustra desires above all else, a sky emptied of the gods, is not visible *again* through the holes in ruined church roofs, but really *thanks to* these holes. The pure sky is an image of the world liberated from the teleological time of theistic providence, indeed even from the divine necessity that pantheism attributes to the world. Yet for all that it is god-less, the pure sky is acknowledged to be a gift of the same metaphysical-Christian history of God that it only seems to negate: the sky's pure eye peers through holes in church roofs. Zarathustra, though an "old atheist," can now love "even churches." I call this Zarathustra's affirmative atheism. I also link affirmative atheism to the conception of eternal recurrence as a self-abolishing anti-teaching. In the eternal return, Zarathustra's atheism is finally indistinguishable from a history of churches and therefore negates itself. But although it is not a new teaching, affirmative atheism points to something novel. This is an atheism that can no longer be taught in doctrines but must be lived as fate.

Keywords: Eternal Return of the Same, Atheism, Pantheism, Providence, Affirmation

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Introduction¹

“You *could not bear* the one who saw you – who saw you always and through and through, you ugliest man! You took revenge on this witness!” (Z IV, The Ugliest Human Being)²

As we can see from Zarathustra’s riposte to the ugliest human being, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883–85) Nietzsche includes the death of God in the same long history of *ressentiment* that created God. For it was morals, born of resentment at life, that made God necessary in the first place (A 25). A striking implication of this thought is that announcing that God is dead appears, paradoxically, to breathe new life into him. Atheism and theism are complicit in the same naysaying approach to life. A new, yes-saying, atheism is needed, but what could *a*-theism say yes to? To say yes to the death of God remains resentful. The challenge facing Nietzsche in *Zarathustra* is somehow to affirm the God that died, yet to do so in the name of this life rather than the next. In what follows I will call this Zarathustra’s affirmative atheism and describe it as an atheism that can only be lived as fate.

Affirmative atheism, then, is very different from atheism as it is usually understood.³ Zarathustra, though claiming to be the most godless (Z IV, Retired), is in no doubt that conventional atheism, as the murder of God, is the work of the “ugliest human being.” This ugliest one is capable only of rejecting God: “He always saw *me*: I wanted revenge on such a witness – or to no longer live myself” (Z IV, The Ugliest Human Being).⁴ Of course, this negative atheism is hardly inapplicable to Nietzsche’s treatment of God elsewhere in his writings. Indeed, in *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887), Nietzsche admits to such an atheism, an “unconditional, honest atheism” which is only the last phase of the ascetic ideal and its faith in truth (GM III 27). However, in *Ecce Homo* (1888), Nietzsche finally describes his atheism as unconnected to truth altogether: “I have no sense of atheism as a result, and even less as an event: for me it is an instinct” (EH, Why I am so Clever 1). Perhaps Nietzsche learned

¹ I am indebted to two anonymous reviewers for their instructive comments on earlier drafts.

² In this paper I cite: *Human, All Too Human*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, Cambridge 1986; *Daybreak*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, Cambridge 1997; *The Gay Science*, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff, Cambridge 2001; *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Adrian Del Caro, Cambridge 2006; *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Judith Norman, Cambridge 2002; *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Carol Diethe, Cambridge 2006; *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols*, trans. Judith Norman, Cambridge 2005; *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, trans. Kate Sturge, Cambridge 2003.

³ David Berman, “Nietzsche’s Three Phases of Atheism,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 5.3 (1988), 273–86, and Robin Alice Roth, “Nietzsche’s Use of Atheism,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 31.1 (1991), 51–64, also argue that Nietzsche’s atheism is not what it seems. My argument differs from Berman’s inasmuch as Berman finds nothing in Zarathustra’s atheism beyond God being exposed as a lie. My argument also differs from Roth’s emphasis on Nietzsche substituting God for Dionysus. In sum, both Berman and Roth find Nietzsche’s atheism to be less than affirmative.

⁴ Zarathustra is also accused of this piety by the old pope (Z IV, Retired).

from Zarathustra's affirmative atheism, which, given that it is no longer anything that can be taught, can only be instinctive.⁵

Zarathustra's affirmative atheism is inseparable from the thought of the eternal return of the same that transforms him. Eternal recurrence, as an image of the world freed from the teleological time of divine providence, is visible only *in* the pure sky, a sky empty of God. But this pure sky is acknowledged as itself a gift of the metaphysical-Christian history that it only seems to negate: the sky's pure eye peers *through* holes in church roofs (Z III, The Seven Seals). The seemingly binary terms of God-Overman that Zarathustra taught earlier – “Once people said God when they gazed upon distant seas; but now I have taught you to say: overman” (Z II, On the Blessed Isles) – are thereby overcome. Zarathustra is now he in whom “all oppositions are combined into a new unity” (EH, Z 6; Z III, The Seven Seals). Zarathustra becomes capable of loving “even churches” (Z III, The Seven Seals).

That broken church roofs are the very condition for the pure sky to appear *as* pure (namely empty) is why Zarathustra's affirmation of churches is not merely a subset of the universal affirmation called for by the revelation of recurrence. To be sure, since all things are “knotted together” (Z III, On the Vision and the Riddle) in the eternal return, “to want to reject anything at all means rejecting everything. A reprehensible action means a reprehended world” (Nachlass 1888, 14[31], KSA 13.234). But saying yes even to churches is more than just a logical consequence of universal affirmation. This is not only because affirming churches is the hardest thing for Zarathustra, the atheist, to do. More fundamentally, Zarathustra's affirmations are enabled not only by the vision of the eternal return, but by that which makes this vision possible. For the eternal return is itself destined by the dawning awareness that the providential order by which the past is sublated by the future has departed. Everything returns precisely *because* there is no longer a divine plan. The revelation of eternal recurrence, then, has a history. It is a gift of the dead God. To repeat: the eternal return that blesses all things (even churches) by making them recur shows itself in a sky freed from providence; and this pure sky appears only when church roofs collapse. Indeed, eternal recurrence is only the coming of a sky emptied of providence that dawns when God dies.

Before turning to these themes in detail, it is important first to reflect on the relationship of Nietzsche to Zarathustra. The question of Zarathustra's atheism is not the same as, even if it is not separable from, Nietzsche's atheism. After all, Nietzsche does not claim to be identical to his “son” Zarathustra, who “*overtook me*” (EH, Z 8).⁶

⁵ Zarathustra was “für mich gebaut, mir Muth zu machen” (Letter to Malwida von Meysenbug, End of March 1884, no. 498, KSB 6.490).

⁶ “Glaube ja nicht, daß mein Sohn Zarathustra meine Meinungen ausspricht” (Letter to Elisabeth Nietzsche, May 7, 1885, no. 600, KSB 7.48). “Nietzsche is not Zarathustra, but the questioner who attempts in thought to grasp Zarathustra's nature” (Martin Heidegger, “Who is Nietzsche's Zarathustra?”, trans. Bernd Magnus, *The Review of Metaphysics* 20.3 (1967), 411–31: 416).

Neither is *Zarathustra* to be read like Nietzsche's other works, standing "entirely on its own" in an "azure solitude" (EH, Z 6).

Reading *Zarathustra*

Claus Zittel has argued that it is necessary to take seriously that *Zarathustra* is a poetic work, which in turn invalidates conventional philosophical reading strategies.⁷ Central to an appropriately literary reading, in Zittel's view, is that the form of *Zarathustra* must be related strictly to its content. Since the form of the text is parody, its content must also be seen in this light.⁸ *Zarathustra*, a parody of a prophet, ends up in self-parody: his "teachings" are better understood as the end of all teaching. "It is not a prophet speaking here," warns Nietzsche (EH, Preface 4).

Clearly a parodic anti-teaching still says something, but what does it say? The parody of teaching points to the place of teaching itself, not to what is taught. It shows rather than instructs. Zittel argues that *Zarathustra*, as a work of "poetic nihilism," performs the collapse of the highest values in narrative form (since parody is the best reflection in the aesthetic field of the self-abolishing character of nihilism).⁹ The figure of "self-abolition" (*Selbstaufhebung*) is a basic feature of the poetic practice of the text.¹⁰ I argue that this self-negation is at one and the same time the affirmation of a history that *Zarathustra* cannot be considered apart from: abolishing himself, *Zarathustra* in the very same gesture affirms the past that he is scattered in.¹¹ This, to echo Zittel, is the performance of affirmation rather than its teaching.¹²

7 Claus Zittel, *Das ästhetische Kalkül von Friedrich Nietzsches "Also sprach Zarathustra"*, Würzburg 2000.

8 "Jedes Wort meines *Zarathustra* ist ja siegreicher Hohn und mehr als Hohn über die Ideale dieser Zeit" (Letter to Elisabeth Nietzsche, August 29, 1883, no. 459, KSB 6.439).

9 Zittel, *Das ästhetische Kalkül*, 151.

10 Zittel, *Das ästhetische Kalkül*, 9.

11 As Werner Stegmaier points out, in the poem "*Oh Mensch! Gieb Acht!*" (which *Zarathustra* also provides a detailed commentary on in "The Sleepwalker Song" near the end of Part Four), *Zarathustra* says nothing of his famous "teachings," but only of the depth of the world. The eternity that lust wants is not a doctrine of recurrence but a "deep, deep eternity" into which one sinks as into the deepest sleep (Werner Stegmaier, "*Oh Mensch! Gieb Acht!* Kontextuelle Interpretation des Mitternachts-Liedes aus *Also sprach Zarathustra*," *Nietzsche-Studien* 42 (2013), 85–115: 96 and 106). This reading contains echoes of Gadamer's argument for the importance of *Zarathustra* teaching his soul to sing. *Zarathustra*'s animals encourage him to stop speaking and instead to sing (Z III, The Convalescent). The refrain "Sing! Speak no more!" is taken up by *Zarathustra* himself at the end of Part Three. Singing does not cling to the past and so is liberated from the spirit of revenge: "I sing and mock all pitying" (Z III, On the Mount of Olives) (Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Das Drama *Zarathustras*," *Nietzsche-Studien* 15 (1986), 1–15).

12 Contra Peter Berkowitz's claim that the adoption of the eternal return is the result of *Zarathustra*'s *ressentiment* at time's "it was" (seeing that he cannot will backwards, *Zarathustra* is tempted

Werner Stegmaier shares Zittel's view that eternal recurrence is the deliberately "failed doctrine" of a Zarathustra whom Nietzsche intends to fail as a teacher too. Zarathustra's seeming "doctrines" are better understood as "anti-doctrines" that encourage us "to abstain from all doctrines."¹³ Stegmaier admits that this is less clearly the case for the eternal return than it is for the "teaching" of the overman. Nevertheless, eternal return appears as an exemplary case of an anti-teaching (*Anti-Lehre*) inasmuch as, if true, it cannot be taught: "If everything returns as it is, I cannot know and therefore I cannot teach that it returns."¹⁴ As does Zittel, Stegmaier focuses on the nihilistic intent of anti-concepts that are not supposed to communicate doctrines but to collapse them. However, once again this nihilistic method does not exclude the constructive use of anti-concepts as signs, signs which encourage the *doing* of what they are showing.¹⁵ The paradoxical unteachability of the "teaching" of eternal return points to a life without doctrines. All I have is the moment, which can only be lived.¹⁶ In keeping with this view, "affirmative atheism" suggests a stand towards the death of God that replaces doctrinal, or metaphysical, atheism with atheism as a way of life.

Zarathustra begins with a statement of doctrinal atheism par excellence:

I beseech you, my brothers, *remain faithful to the earth* and do not believe those who speak to you of extra-terrestrial hopes! [...] Once the sacrilege against God was the greatest sacrilege, but God died, and then all these desecrators died. Now to desecrate the earth is the most terrible thing, and to esteem the bowls of the unfathomable higher than the meaning of the earth! (Z, Prologue 3)¹⁷

But as the narrative progresses, something starts to shift. Is it enough merely to denigrate the true world and to replace it with what the metaphysicians and Christians have labeled the "false" one? Might it be necessary to affirm even the true world? Indeed, reflecting back on *Zarathustra* in *Ecce Homo* (EH, Z 6), Nietzsche writes that a key question is how Zarathustra, "someone who to an unprecedented degree says no and *does* no to everything everyone has said yes to so far, – how somebody like this can nevertheless be the opposite of a no-saying spirit ..." This is the Zarathustra that loves "even churches."

by the Dwarf's fable of recurrence in which even the past bows to the present), "affirmative atheism" understands the eternal return of the same not as the resentful apotheosis of willing but as the will's affirmation of its dissolution in time (Peter Berkowitz, *Nietzsche: The Ethics of an Immoralist*, Cambridge, MA 1995).

13 Werner Stegmaier, "Nietzsche's Doctrines, Nietzsche's Signs," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 31 (2006), 20–41: 21, 36–7.

14 Stegmaier, "Nietzsche's Doctrines, Nietzsche's Signs", 37. See also Stegmaier, "Oh Mensch! Gieb Acht!", 88.

15 Stegmaier, "Nietzsche's Doctrines, Nietzsche's Signs", 36.

16 Stegmaier, "Nietzsche's Doctrines, Nietzsche's Signs", 37.

17 Of *Zarathustra*, Part One, Nietzsche writes to Overbeck: "Seit Voltaire gab es kein solches *Atten- at gegen das Christenthum*" (August 26, 1883, no. 458, KSB 6.438).

Churches

If I ever sat jubilating where old gods lie buried, blessing the world, loving the world, next to the monuments of ancient world maligners [*Welt-Verleumder*] –
 – because I love even churches and God’s graves once the sky’s pure eye gazes through their broken roofs; gladly do I sit like grass and red poppies on broken churches – (Z III, The Seven Seals).

How is Zarathustra able to love churches, those temples of the despicable world-maligners? After all, Zarathustra has already given us his low opinion of churches: “Oh look at these huts that the priests built themselves! Churches they call their sweet-smelling caves. Oh how repulsive is this falsified light, this stale air! Here, where the soul to its height – is denied flight!” (Z II, On Priests) Churches are stuffy abodes of sickly-sweet otherworldliness, an otherworldliness that, despite its talk of the beyond, keeps its worshipers rooted to the ground. Churches, like states, are good only for the weak and the suffering who cannot stand the bright light of an open sky (Z II, On Great Events).

Laurence Lampert has argued that *Zarathustra* sees Nietzsche continuing in the vein of earlier work in showing that the “task of precise, joyful inquiry into earth and sky was interrupted by the advent of Christianity.”¹⁸ On this reading, Zarathustra can celebrate, in the spirit of *schadenfreude*, once churches have become ruins. Indeed, this seems to be the sense of the same metaphor when it appears earlier, back where Zarathustra is denouncing churches as “sweet smelling caves”:

Who created such caves and stairs of penitence? Were they not those who wanted to hide and were ashamed beneath the pure sky?

And only when the pure sky peeks again through broken ceilings and down upon grass and red poppy and broken walls – only then will I turn my heart again to the sites of this God [*Und erst wenn der reine Himmel wieder durch zerbrochne Decken blickt, und hinab auf Gras und rothen Mohn an zerbrochnen Mauern, – will ich den Stätten dieses Gottes wieder mein Herz zuwenden*] (Z II, On Priests).¹⁹

In this earlier appearance of the church roofs metaphor, the crucial term is “again” (*wieder*). Zarathustra implies that, previously visible in all its God-free emptiness, the pure sky was then covered over by church roofs, only now to reappear with their collapse. Zarathustra will celebrate the second coming of the pure, empty sky; he will celebrate that the history of the error that is churches has finally been overcome.

¹⁸ Laurence Lampert, *Nietzsche’s Teaching: An Interpretation of Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, New Haven, CT 1986, 85.

¹⁹ There are two unpublished notes giving different variations of this image from the summer of 1883. The second is particularly resentful, describing the churches of “your God” and finishing with: “*Wie hätte ich es ertragen, wenn ich nicht den Übermenschen mehr liebte als euch!*” (Nachlass 1883, 13[3], KSA 10.447).

Even the language is resentful: “only when” (*erst wenn*) church roofs are broken will Zarathustra turn his heart from naysaying.

Is Zarathustra's relation to churches really reducible to such a resentful gesture? Even at the start of his journey, before he has caught sight of the eternal return, Zarathustra is well aware that naysaying is not the answer to otherworldliness, which rather requires creators of new worlds (Z I, On the Flies in the Marketplace). Indeed, later in Part Two (On Great Events), Zarathustra makes precisely this point in relation to churches. Warning how the “overthrowers of statues” risk breathing new life into that which they tear down (“It will yet thank you for overthrowing it”), Zarathustra continues: “But this advice I give to kings and churches and to all that is feeble with age and feeble in virtue – just let yourselves be overthrown! So that you might come to life again, and to you – virtue!” Zarathustra is not yet a lover of churches (after all, this advice is a warning to avoid breathing new life into them), but he is well aware that saying no to churches is not enough.

With these reflections in mind, the second appearance of church roofs takes on a heightened significance:

because I love even churches and God's graves once the sky's pure eye gazes through their broken roofs; gladly do I sit like grass and red poppies on broken churches [*denn selbst Kirchen und Gottes-Gräber liebe ich, wenn der Himmel erst reinen Auges durch ihre zerbrochenen Decken blickt; gern sitze ich gleich Gras und rothem Mohne auf zerbrochnen Kirchen*] (Z III, The Seven Seals).

Where earlier a naysaying Zarathustra had been celebrating the collapse of churches, here the “once” (*wenn*) is affirmative. Zarathustra is no longer jubilating that the history of the error has finally been overcome, but the history of that error itself. Zarathustra loves “even churches” because it is *thanks to* their ruin that the sky's “pure eye” is able to gaze at him through the missing tiles on their roofs. Even the language is more affirmative: in place of the “only when,” Zarathustra “gladly” (*gern*) receives the light from the pure sky. Zarathustra immediately goes on to proclaim: “Oh how then could I not lust for eternity and for the nuptial ring of rings – the one of recurrence!” Even churches must return.

The clear implication, then, is that it is the thought of eternal return (which first appears in between the two iterations of church roofs) that allows Zarathustra to overcome the still redemptive, and therefore linear, temporality in which the blue sky is restored to its rightful place upon the collapse of church roofs (with the *ressentiment* at the past that this implies).

The Eternal Return

Reflecting on *Zarathustra* in *Ecce Homo*, “the thought of eternal return” is immediately identified by Nietzsche as the “basic idea” of the work (EH, Z 1). This idea is “the highest possible formula of affirmation” and Zarathustra is “the eternal yes to all things” (EH, Z 1, 6). “Zarathustra rigorously determines his task – it is mine as well –, and there can be no mistake about what he *means*: he is *affirmative* to the point of justification, to the point of salvation, even for everything past” (EH, Z 8). That the “meaning” of eternal return – in itself meaning-less – is indiscriminate affirmation is not an easy thing for Zarathustra to accept, however. To this point he has been “someone who to an unprecedented degree says no.”

Nietzsche himself, in his published works at least, does not affirm the eternal return, leaving it to Zarathustra to grapple with this “most abysmal thought” (Z III, The Convalescent).²⁰ For Peter Berkowitz, this is because, surviving “Zarathustra’s perilous attempt to command great things and master eternity,” Nietzsche learns the humbling lesson of his *Zarathustra* “thought experiment.”²¹ But Nietzsche’s gloss in *Ecce Homo* (EH, BGE 1) is the very opposite of Berkowitz’s analysis: having solved “the yea-saying part of my task” in *Zarathustra*, “it was time for the no-saying, *no-doing* half.”

Given that even churches must return, the revelation of eternal return has a shattering effect on Zarathustra. Part Two draws to an end with Zarathustra hearing a soothsayer speaking of the return and the “prophecy went straight to his heart and transformed him” (Z II, The Soothsayer). Despite being immediately changed by it, a “deeply upset” Zarathustra is not yet capable of bearing it: “The now and the past on earth – alas, my friends – that is what is most unbearable to *me*” (Z II, On Redemption).²²

In Robert Pippin’s view: “In his resolution to free himself from the last men and proclaim the *Übermensch* as an act of will, Zarathustra had assumed he could free himself from time and face only the future.”²³ And yet for all that he balks at it, Zarathustra is now in no doubt that redemption of the past is the only redemption worthy of the name: “To redeem [*erlösen*] those who are the past and to recreate all ‘it was’ into ‘thus I willed it!’ – only that would I call redemption!” (Z II, On Redemption) For Berkowitz, Zarathustra seizes on the eternal return for the sake of willing, because it

²⁰ “Muth zum *Tra gen jenes Gedankens! Denn ich bin noch weit davon entfernt, ihn aussprechen und darstellen zu können*” (Letter to Franz Overbeck, March 8, 1884, no. 494, KSB 6.484).

²¹ Berkowitz, *The Ethics of an Immoralist*, 227, 262.

²² See also Z II, The Stillest Hour, where Zarathustra is terrorized by this new thought, which he cannot speak.

²³ Robert B. Pippin, “Irony and Affirmation in Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*,” in Michael Allen Gillespie / Tracy B. Strong (eds.), *Nietzsche’s New Seas: Exploration in Philosophy, Aesthetics and Politics*, Chicago 1998, 45–71: 53.

seems “to empower the will to command past and future by mastering the moment.”²⁴ For if all things are connected, “then mastery of any moment would result in mastery of the whole.”²⁵ But to master time by way of seizing the moment would be tantamount to willing time away. And as Berkowitz himself points out, if everything is indeed “knotted together,” then the freedom of the will is illusory in any case.²⁶

Is Zarathustra really unaware of this? Surely the eternal return goes to the other extreme, demanding not the will's mastery of time but its submission *to* it. In which case the eternal return is proposed not for the sake of willing but for the sake of living. For how is it possible to live that which one seeks to overcome? Contrary to Christian redemption, which redeems *from* time into eternity, the eternal return redeems time itself by eternalizing it: “Was *that* life? Well then! One More Time!” (Z III, On the Vision and the Riddle) This sentiment seems in conflict with Berkowitz's claim that “the eternal return must be understood as a reactive thought, a reflection of weakness, indeed the brainstorm and child of the spirit of revenge.”²⁷ Berkowitz sees the eternal return as Zarathustra's attempt at his *own* redemption; but if it is rather time, namely living, that is to be redeemed, then Zarathustra's “failure” is indeed a success.²⁸ For what could be less resentful at time than finding true willing to be that which would not change a thing?

Willing what has been in its entirety, Zarathustra abandons the distinction between himself and his world, namely any subjectivity, and is consigned without remainder to living. Indeed, according to Heidegger, Zarathustra's fundamental experience, one “which stifles [his] self-assurance and arrogance from the very outset,” is this humbling encounter with a time in which he is utterly dispersed.²⁹

24 Berkowitz, *The Ethics of an Immoralist*, 193, 263. The view that the eternal return concerns Zarathustra seeking “power over time” is also Loeb's (Paul S. Loeb, *The Death of Zarathustra*, Cambridge 2010, 9). Karl Löwith, to the contrary, recognizes that “the real difficulty consists in bringing the vision of the eternally revolving world into harmony with the purposeful willing of the man of the future” (Karl Löwith, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, trans. J. Harvey Lomax, Berkeley, CA 1997, 69). This is echoed in Klossowski: “How could the re-willing of the past be creative? To adhere to the Return is also to admit that *only forgetting* enabled us to undertake old creations as new creations” (Pierre Klossowski, *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*, trans. Daniel W. Smith, London 2005, 53). Heidegger's initial reading (from 1937) of Nietzsche's eternal recurrence, which emphasizes the “collision” (*Zusammenstoß*) between past and future in which the moment of decision is privileged, seems an instance of this forgetting (Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. II, trans. David Farrell Krell, San Francisco, CA 1991).

25 Berkowitz, *The Ethics of an Immoralist*, 198.

26 Berkowitz, *The Ethics of an Immoralist*, 199.

27 Berkowitz, *The Ethics of an Immoralist*, 207.

28 Berkowitz, *The Ethics of an Immoralist*, 264.

29 Heidegger, “Who is Nietzsche's Zarathustra?”, 414. Unlike this 1953 essay, Heidegger's two previous readings of Nietzsche's eternal recurrence (from 1939 and 1940) depend upon Nietzsche's notebooks and the more cosmological version of recurrence elaborated there (especially the thought that a finite amount of force cannot be endlessly creative). This leads Heidegger, in these earlier lectures,

Then it spoke to me again without voice: “What do you matter, Zarathustra? Speak your word and break!” –

And I answered: “Alas, is it my word? Who am I? I am waiting for one more worthy; I am not worthy even of breaking under it.”

Then it spoke to me again without voice: “What do you matter? You are not yet humble enough for me. Humility has the toughest hide.” (Z II, The Stillest Hour)

In keeping with one who seeks to master not time but *resentment* at time, Zarathustra must find out if he is capable of biting off the head of the snake that was choking him as he contemplated the eternal return (Z III, The Convalescent): “Bite off the head! Bite down!” – Thus it cried out of me, my dread [*Grauen*], my hatred, my nausea, my pity, all my good and bad cried out of me with one shout” (Z III, On the Vision and the Riddle). What enables Zarathustra to bite down is not his will as something outside of or above the snake that symbolizes eternal return; rather, his dread, hatred, nausea and pity, indeed all his good *and* bad, is what tells him to bite.³⁰ Contrary to Gilles Deleuze’s reading of recurrence as the selection only of active forces (the same in what returns is difference), Zarathustra ceases to choke on the vision of the eternal return at the behest of *all* the forces that constitute him in that moment, even those that are reactive.³¹ Selection, by contrast, remains resentful at the past.

Deleuze, who persists with the idea that eternal return is a doctrine, has Zarathustra overcome his initial understanding of eternal return as the return of the same.³² But just as the small man must return if the overman is to be possible – “Eternally he returns, the human of whom you are weary, the small human being” (Z III, The Convalescent) – Zarathustra’s discovery of his love of churches also suggests that even reactive forces must be affirmed. This is consistent with Zarathustra’s declaration, near the very end, that joy, refusing to suffer from life and so no longer wanting anything but itself, “wants everything eternally the same” (Z IV, The Sleepwalker Song). If living rather than judging is what the eternal return is good for, then the cut that matters is not that between active and passive forces, but between the affirmation or negation of all the forces that constitute a life.

As Joel Westerdale points out, this all-inclusive affirmation applies also to Nietzsche’s choice of Zarathustra as his “teacher” of recurrence. Zarathustra is not presented as the overcoming but as the *destiny* of the historical Zarathustra: “Nietzsche overcomes the potential resentment against Zoroaster and his moral world

to a diagnosis of eternal recurrence as the utterly metaphysical “self-recapitulation of the identical” (Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. III, trans. David Farrell Krell, San Francisco, CA 1991, 165). In the 1953 essay, by contrast, the focus on Zarathustra leads Heidegger to highlight the destruction of identity implied by the eternal return.

³⁰ As Melanie Shepherd, “Affirmation and Mortal Life,” *Philosophy Today* 55.1 (2011), 22–36, argues: “active and reactive forces cannot be easily separated where life is concerned.”

³¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson, London 1983.

³² Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 65.

order by acknowledging him and his cataclysmic error as necessary antecedents to Zarathustra.”³³ This is in keeping with the preparatory “For *that mankind be redeemed from revenge*: that to me is the bridge to the highest hope and a rainbow after long thunderstorms,” delivered shortly before the announcement of the eternal return (Z II, On the Tarantulas).

The Pure Sky

Given that what gazes through broken church roofs is “the sky’s pure eye,” it is important to recall the significance of the pure sky in *Zarathustra*. The pure sky makes its appearance in the first of the church roof scenes, when it “peeks again” at those innocents who no longer want to hide from it in guilty caves. Following on from the second, more affirmative, church roofs scene, the pure sky achieves its full significance later, in Zarathustra’s speech “Before Sunrise.”

Keith Ansell-Pearson discusses the pure sky in *Zarathustra* in connection with chance.³⁴ He connects this chance to the eternal return as that thought which liberates the moment from the weight of the past, enabling a new, more innocent, relation to what has been: “The sky is pure precisely because it has been purified of the metaphysics of morality”:

What is the significance of this insight into chance and the pure sky? I suggest it is this: that time in its be-coming is innocent in the sense that it exists without ulterior purpose or exterior design. Nietzsche’s fundamental teaching consists in liberating the human being from the weight of time, that is, from the oppression and curse of its law of perpetual perishing, a law that encourages the human being to feel afflicted by life and to cry out that all is in vain.³⁵

Is Zarathustra’s pure sky purified of the past? In the first appearance of church roofs this is accurate; in the second it seems no longer to be the case. By this point Zarathustra has encountered the eternal return and a purified sky now seems like *ressentiment* at time’s “it was” (Z II, On Redemption). Liberation from the past is meaningful only on the assumption of a linear time. The pure sky is not purified but emptied of the gods. The pure sky symbolizes chance, but chance that has arrived in its turn, not one that has been restored to its privileged place. This is a history rather than a metaphysics.

³³ Joel P. Westerdale, “Zarathustra’s Preposterous History,” *Nietzsche-Studien* 35 (2008), 47–69: 49 and 68.

³⁴ See Keith Ansell-Pearson, “The Eternal Return of the Overhuman: The Weightiest Knowledge and the Abyss of Light,” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 30 (Autumn 2005), 1–21.

³⁵ Ansell-Pearson, “The Eternal Return of the Overhuman”, 16.

For all that it cannot take pride of place in the eternal return, there is no doubting Zarathustra's preference for the pure sky and his struggle to affirm its opposite: the spirit of gravity. Zarathustra's is "the bird's way" and he describes himself in the strongest terms as the "truly, deadly enemy, arch-enemy, ancient enemy!" of the spirit that works against his rising up like an eagle (Z III, On the Spirit of Gravity 1). It is this spirit of gravity that created "compulsion, statute, necessity and consequence and purpose and will and good and evil" (Z III, On Old and New Tablets 2). These things are the heavy, earth-bound "boundary stones [*Grenzsteine*]" that hem humans in (Z III, On the Spirit of Gravity 2). Whoever it is that "one day teaches humans to fly" will have shifted all such barriers, indeed the "stones themselves will fly into the air." This teacher of flight, one who can make not only humans but even their very boundaries take flight, "will christen the earth anew – as 'the light one'."³⁶

In Z III, On the Vision and the Riddle, the spirit of gravity is named as the dwarf who drips lead into Zarathustra's ear, which form "lead-drop thoughts [*Bleitropfen-Gedanken*]" in his brain. The dwarf would keep Zarathustra fixed to the ground, too weighed-down with heavy thoughts to soar upwards with and towards his pure sky. Yet Zarathustra's love for the pure sky is such that the base spirit of gravity represented by the dwarf is in some ways preferable to those clouds that would obscure its purity. While the dwarf must take some credit for opposing the pure sky, clouds are more insidious:

And whom did I hate more than drifting clouds and everything that stains you? And I hated even my own hatred because it stained you!

I grudge these drifting clouds, these creeping predator-cats; they take from you and me what we have in common – our awesome infinite saying of Yes and Amen (Z III, Before Sunrise).

Clouds first appear in Z II, On Poets, as the "kingdom of the clouds" where the cock-and-bull stories of the gods as told by the poets are set. The heavenly beyond of the Platonists and Christians is associated with clouds of illusion where no clear vision can be had. Yet should even clouds be condemned? The pure sky is unadulterated affirmation; every condemnation clips the wings of those who would soar in it, plunging them back towards the ground of negativity like the souls told of in Plato's *Phaedrus*.

Zarathustra does not want to condemn clouds, but neither does he want to see them. Zarathustra's desire for the pure sky means that he would prefer to "sit in a

³⁶ For humans to take flight, "the spirit must no longer lie around the soul" (Z III, On the Spirit of Gravity 2). This spirit is not itself the spirit of gravity but "is the spirit of gravity's doing." In other words, it is the conception of the soul as spirit that is the problem here. The soul that takes flight, unlike in Platonism, must be conceived as other than spirit. Immaterial spirit, formerly associated with lightness, must be seen for what it is: the heavy weight that turns human souls into the souls of camels and other earth-bound beasts of burden.

barrel,” namely be shut off from the sky entirely, than to have it “stained by drifting clouds” (Z III, Before Sunrise). There seems to be a veiled reference to the ancient Cynic, Diogenes, here; after all, Diogenes, who legend has living in a barrel, was the great nay-sayer of Antiquity. Clouds, inasmuch as they neither bless the sky nor curse it, are neither amen-sayers nor nay-sayers but merely the “middle-men” (*Mittler*) that take the place of those Christians judged lukewarm in the old religion.³⁷ Better, like a latter-day Diogenes, to say no to the sky than to be a cloudy “middle-man” incapable of either a yes or a no: “For I would rather have din and thunder and stormy cursing than this deliberate, dubious cat calm; and even among humans the ones I hate most are the soft steppers and half-and-halves and dubious, dawdling drift-clouds” (Z II, On Poets).

The pure sky is affirmation rather than negation: “Truly it is a blessing and no blasphemy when I teach: ‘Over all things stands the sky accident, the sky innocence, the sky chance, the sky mischief’” (Z III, Before Sunrise). There is no divine plan, and knowledge of this is enough: “This freedom and cheerfulness of the sky I placed like an azure bell over all things when I taught that over them and through them no ‘eternal will’ – wills.”³⁸ The eternal return is eternity without purpose or design, without willing – the pure sky, empty of all gods.

Contrary to his inability to affirm clouds, Zarathustra admits that the spirit of gravity, ugly as it is, must be acknowledged as the constitutive other of the pure sky that he desires. A dialectic of height and depth is at work. The freedom of the open sky requires its opposite: what would soaring be if one couldn’t also sink? “For must there not exist something over which one dances, dances away? Must not, for the sake of the light and the lightest – moles and heavy dwarves exist? –” (Z III, On Old and New Tablets 2)³⁹ What would a sky empty of God *be* without the crumbling monuments to the dead God to remember him by? There can be no godless ones without first gods.

³⁷ “I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm – neither hot nor cold – I am about to spit you out of my mouth” (Rev. 3:15–6).

³⁸ For a discussion of the significance of the azure bell, see T. K. Seung, *Nietzsche's Epic of the Soul: Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Lanham, MD 2005, 135–6.

³⁹ “Step by step, Zarathustra becomes unhappier *and* happier, and he attains his highest happiness only when the greatest need reaches him, too. [...] ‘Peak and abyss’ become one for him in the ‘abyss of light’ of ‘Before Sunrise’” (Löwith, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, 58 and 72).

Before Sunrise

Shortly after the eternal return is set out in Z III, On the Vision and the Riddle, Zarathustra delivers a hymn to the pure sky.⁴⁰ Hiding himself in the purity of this heavenly abyss, Zarathustra finds his innocence, since the wisdom of the sky is that it says nothing: “You do not speak; *thus* you make your wisdom known to me” (Z III, Before Sunrise). Free from all command, Zarathustra is placed above good and evil and out of reach of any judgment: “For all things are baptized at the well of eternity and beyond good and evil; good and evil themselves, however, are only shadows in between and damp glooms and drift-clouds.”

What is the pure sky that Zarathustra hides himself in? It is the sky before sunrise. The night sky, bedecked with stars, has departed while the sun, the “great star” of the Prologue, has yet to rise; when it does, it will command the sky with its brilliance.⁴¹ Only now is the sky emptied of the heavenly bodies that have inspired worshipful awe since ancient times. And yet, unlike the Ancients, it is precisely this empty sky that calls forth Zarathustra’s praise: “Oh sky above me, you pure, you deep one! You abyss of light! Gazing at you I shudder with godlike desires.”

It is significant that Zarathustra describes the pure sky as inducing god-like awe. Commentary has focused on the pure sky offering a god’s-eye perspective from above the clouds that weigh heavily on humanity, but not on it acting as if a god.⁴² Yet Zarathustra says of this pure sky: “you came to me beautiful, veiled in your beauty.” The pure sky both veils the gods but also comes *as* veiled to Zarathustra. It is not inconsistent that the pre-dawn sky is both what comes to Zarathustra and also what fills him with godlike desire, a desire which implies lack. The pure sky’s arrival does not take the form of presence but of an increase in desire which the absence of God arouses. The empty pre-dawn sky is god-like only inasmuch as it induces godlike desire in Zarathustra who gazes on it.⁴³ This would explain the mirror imagery of the pure sky’s height being at the same time the sky-gazer’s depth. Similarly, the “purity” (*Reinheit*) of the pure sky is only the innocence that Zarathustra finds there rather than anything present in itself.

“But you blush [*erröthest*]? Did I speak the unspeakable? Did I blaspheme when I wanted to bless you?” Zarathustra wonders whether praising the pure sky, namely the absence of the gods, might lead to the pure sky being mistaken for a god that is

⁴⁰ As Lampert, *Nietzsche’s Teaching*, 173, points out, echoing Eugen Fink, this is one of the very few speeches that makes Zarathustra’s mission explicit; it is therefore “of the highest significance.”

⁴¹ Lampert, *Nietzsche’s Teaching*, 173.

⁴² Although Lampert’s discussion of “Before Sunrise” recognizes that, in its use of religious language, this speech is a “hymn to the sky” (Lampert, *Nietzsche’s Teaching*, 173–80).

⁴³ “‘Revelation’ is granted to [Zarathustra] not by the heavenly bodies or ‘gods,’ but precisely by the open light that dims them” (Lampert, *Nietzsche’s Teaching*, 174).

present. The pure sky is present only as an empty sky.⁴⁴ With the rising of the sun (and this dawning is the pure sky's blush), Zarathustra and his pure sky must go their separate ways: "Oh sky above me, you bashful, you glowing one! Oh you my happiness before sunrise! The day is coming, and so let us part now!" Zarathustra and his pure sky are separated with the promise of being reunited at the dawning of the new day that is the eternal return.

Although the pure sky is really only the "shudder" (*schaudere*) of godlike desire that a vision of the god-less sky induces, nonetheless its coming has changed Zarathustra:

Together we learned everything; together we learned to climb up to ourselves by climbing over ourselves, and to smile cloudlessly:
– smile down cloudlessly from bright eyes and from a distance of miles, when beneath us pressure and purpose and guilt steam like rain (Z III, Before Sunrise).

Pressure and purpose, those inclement elements also known as the spirit of gravity, can be summarized under the heading of providence. Zarathustra will dispel these dark clouds by restoring the truth of purposelessness: "'By chance' – that is the oldest nobility in the world, I gave it back to all things, I redeemed them from their servitude under purpose." It is because the sky is entirely empty that, in another mirror effect, the depth of the world is fathomless: "The world is deep – and deeper than the day has ever grasped."

That the purity of the pure sky is its emptiness, the void of purpose, is also expressed in the form of a refusal of the Stoic cosmos, governed as it is by law or reason: "Oh sky above me, you pure, you exalted [*Hoher*] one! This your purity is to me now, that there is no eternal spider and spider web of reason." Indeed, as Lampert notes, Zarathustra's pure sky of possibility is not only a refutation of ancient providence but also of its afterlife in the principle of sufficient reason.⁴⁵ The pure sky is above the very principle of ground or grounding – the ancient *and* modern faith that nothing happens without a reason. The circle of eternal recurrence refers only to itself. There is no reason, no direction, no providence at work because there is no outside to the "ring of rings." What could a circle aim at? For as Heraclitus observed, "beginning and end in a circle's circumference are common"?⁴⁶

The pure sky of the eternal return is all that Zarathustra desires:

And if I wandered alone – for *whom* did my soul thirst in nights and on wrong paths? And if I climbed mountains, *whom* did I ever seek if not you on mountains?

⁴⁴ "Zarathustra's speech to the heavens vindicates the heavens but only as emptied of heavenly bodies" (Lampert, *Nietzsche's Teaching*, 177).

⁴⁵ Lampert, *Nietzsche's Teaching*, 180.

⁴⁶ Fragment 103. I am using G. S. Kirk's translation in *Heraclitus: The Cosmic Fragments*, Cambridge 1954.

And all my wandering and mountain climbing: they were only a necessity and a help to the help-
less one – the only thing my will wants is to fly, *to fly* into you!

Zarathustra desires the pure sky, but the pure sky is not a god. Zarathustra is an
atheist, as Nietzsche reiterates in a note from mid 1888:

Zarathustra goes so far as to confess: “I would believe only in a god who could *dance*” –
To repeat: how many gods are still possible! – Zarathustra himself, to be sure, is merely an old
atheist: he believes neither in old nor in new gods. Zarathustra says he *would*; but Zarathustra
will not [*wird nicht*] – Do not misunderstand him (Nachlass 1888, 17[4], KSA 13.526).

If Zarathustra *were* to believe in a god, it would be one that danced; but he will not
believe in any god. To think so would be to misunderstand him. Zarathustra’s worship
of the pure sky is an affirmation of a-theism, of a sky *empty* of the gods: “I am he,
godless Zarathustra, who speaks: who is more godless than I”? (Z IV, Retired)

Anti-Pantheism

Indeed, nor do I like those for whom each thing is good and this world seems the very best. Such
types I call the all-complacent (Z III, On the Spirit of Gravity 2).

Since it is *a*-theistic, Zarathustra’s praise of the pure sky must be carefully distin-
guished from *pantheistic* world-worship. Contra Spinoza, nature is not God. To be
sure, pantheism seems the obvious response to those world-maligning metaphysi-
cians who have committed “the worst, most prolonged, and most dangerous of
all errors to this day” (BGE, Preface). But in the *Lenzer Heide* notes from 1886 on
“European Nihilism,” Nietzsche explicitly links his thought of the eternal return to
anti-pantheism: “an opposite to pantheism is being sought” (Nachlass 1886/87, 5[71],
KSA 12.213). This is the distance between Nietzsche and the Stoics, whose World Soul
remains a god.⁴⁷ It is also his difference from Spinoza.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ As Michael Ure, “Nietzsche’s Free Spirit Trilogy and Stoic Therapy,” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 38 (2009), 60–84, has shown, Nietzsche’s difference from Stoicism, at least in Nietzsche’s own understanding, can be dated to the beginning of his mature period (specifically to GS).

⁴⁸ This is not to deny that Spinoza and Nietzsche also *share* differences with Stoicism, particularly when it comes to the role of the passions, as Aurelia Armstrong, “The Passions, Power, and Practical Philosophy: Spinoza and Nietzsche Contra the Stoics,” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 44.1 (2013), 6–24, has demonstrated.

Although Nietzsche knew Spinoza mostly from secondary sources,⁴⁹ it is clearly Spinoza's notion that God/Nature is infinite that is under attack in a note from June-July 1885, around the same time that Nietzsche completed *Zarathustra* (Nachlass 1885, 36[15], KSA 11.556).⁵⁰ To impose a faculty for “*eternal novelty*” upon a field of “finite, determinate force” like the world, is to continue to assume a “divine, creative force.” But a limited quantum of force cannot endlessly recreate itself. At some point it must fall back into one of its “earlier shapes.” The eternal return implied by the “cyclical course” of the world is less a positive doctrine than the only thing thought allows once we have expunged divinity from our conception of world.⁵¹ Anything else

is still the old religious way of thinking and wishing, a kind of longing to believe that in *some way or other* the world does, after all, resemble the beloved old, infinite, boundlessly creative God – that in some way or other ‘the old God still lives’ – that longing of Spinoza’s expressed in the words ‘deus sive natura’ (he even felt ‘natura sive deus’) (Nachlass 1885, 36[15], KSA 11.556).

But didn't Spinoza reject providence? After all, Spinoza's world is immediately necessary, knowing nothing of a divine plan. So insistent is Spinoza about this that he claims that *all* the prejudices that he seeks to expose are built on the idea of providence, namely, “that God himself directs all things to some certain end.”⁵² To the contrary: “Nature has no end set before it, and all final causes are nothing but human fictions.”⁵³ Nietzsche notes that removing purpose from the world's process does not prevent Spinoza from affirming that process. This is because something within that purposeless process is nonetheless being achieved “at every moment of it – and always the same thing”: “Spinoza attained an affirmative stance like this insofar as every moment has a *logical* necessity: and with his fundamental instinct for logic he felt a sense of triumph about the world's being constituted thus” (Nachlass 1886/87, 5[71], KSA 12.214). Differently from Spinoza, Nietzsche wants a form of world-affirmation in which the purposelessness of the world is not seen as purposeful or necessary: “the old habit of thinking about all events in terms of goals, and about the world in terms of a guiding, creating God, is so powerful that the thinker is hard-pressed not to think of the goallessness of the world as, again, an intention” (Nachlass 1885, 36[15], KSA 11.556).

A necessary world is still a purposeful one. Nietzsche seeks to be harder on himself: “Let us here remove the two popular concepts ‘necessity’ and ‘law’: the

⁴⁹ Andreas Urs Sommer, “Nietzsche's Readings on Spinoza: A Contextualist Study,” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 43.2 (2012), 156–84.

⁵⁰ Spinoza, *Ethics* I, Definition 6: “By God I understand a being absolutely infinite” (trans. Edwin Curley, London 1996).

⁵¹ See also Nachlass 1886/87, 5[71], KSA 12.214.

⁵² Spinoza, *Ethics* I, Appendix.

⁵³ Spinoza, *Ethics* I, Appendix.

first puts a false compulsion, the second a false freedom into the world” (Nachlass 1888, 14[79], KSA 13.257). As Zarathustra suggests, necessity is only the play of chance; freedom, meanwhile, is merely necessity playing “blissfully with the string of freedom” (Z III, On Old and New Tablets 2). There is nothing necessary *in* what flows from necessity; nor is there any freedom *from* the free play of necessity. This is what eternal recurrence tries to think: what is repeated, eternally, as fate is not for all that divine. Saying yes to the eternal return is not world worship. The pure sky is not the world and nor is it a god.

Such pantheism was Spinoza’s temptation: ridding himself of the moral order of the world only “so as to have ‘God’ remain, *a world that holds its ground in the face of reason*” (Nachlass 1885/86, 2[131], KSA 12.131). Spinoza still needed the world to be rational even if not rationally ordained, seeking to save the God of reason by emphasizing “what remains eternally the same” (Nachlass 1887, 9[26], KSA 12.348). Nietzsche, by contrast, wants a world-description that can do justice to “the value of the shortest and most fleeting, the seductive flash of gold on the belly of the snake *vita*.” Spinoza may have got rid of its good and evil, but he could not let go of the world’s flawlessness: “by reality and perfection I understand the same thing.”⁵⁴

Spinoza does, however, overcome the notion of cosmic harmony: “Men have been so mad as to believe that God is pleased by harmony. Indeed, there are philosophers who have persuaded themselves that the motions of the heavens produce a harmony.”⁵⁵ Spinoza singles out the Pythagorean “harmony of the spheres” here: the veneration of the good order of the celestial bodies downplays the apparently less ordered terrestrial sphere and makes it appear to lack something when in fact it is just as necessary. But while he no longer needs harmony, and the notion of a transcendent God that this harmonization requires, Spinoza’s *conatus* (self-preservation) nonetheless still posits some goal for beings as a whole that is lacking. Despite all his efforts to avoid providence, Spinoza’s is still a teleological conception of world (BGE 13).

All images of world until Zarathustra’s vision of the eternal return have denied its “*ungodly* possibilities,” its “devilry, stupidity” and “foolishness” (GS 374). The world of the pantheists remains a providential order even when, as in Spinoza, providence is redescribed as necessity. For the necessity of the world still posits a goal, albeit one that has always already been achieved. The world that is to be loved, contra pantheism, is not necessary as such, but everything that has ever taken place in it is the unalterable fate of the one that affirms it. Zarathustra’s praise of the pure sky, a sky emptied of gods, is not pantheism but affirmative atheism.

⁵⁴ Spinoza, *Ethics* II, Definition 6; see also *Ethics* IV, Preface.

⁵⁵ Spinoza, *Ethics* I, Appendix III.

Affirmative Atheism

To overcome everything Christian through something supra-Christian, and not merely to put it aside (Nachlass 1885, 41[7], KSA 11.682).

Zarathustra has been read by Stanley Rosen as an all-out attack on an exhausted Christian culture, its “doctrine” of the eternal return acting “to validate the repudiation of Platonism and Christianity.”⁵⁶ Kathleen Higgins concurs that the eternal return unpicks Christian temporality by undermining the teleological time necessary for both guilt and redemption to make sense.⁵⁷ But the eternal return could never be a matter of simple negation; the *aporia* of eternal recurrence is that it blesses even churches by causing them to return. To be sure, as Walter Kaufmann put it, the eternal return is the “antithesis [...] of any faith in another world.”⁵⁸ But this is in the sense that to reject anything past, even the dingy huts of the otherworldly ones, is to wish another world and thereby to fall prey to otherworldliness. Zarathustra’s affirmative atheism is therefore in accordance with the understanding of the eternal return as a self-negating anti-teaching: on the surface a doctrinal rejection of metaphysical-Christian teleological time, it turns out to be nothing of the sort. For how can one reject what one wills to return eternally?

Zarathustra does not find such unstinting affirmation easy to accomplish. Nor is it easy for him to lay down his role as a teacher and to practice the self-abolition that eternal recurrence effects. Even after his encounter with the thought of eternal return, Zarathustra claims: “This freedom and cheerfulness of the sky I placed like an azure bell over all things when I taught that over them and through them no ‘eternal will’ – wills” (Z III, Before Sunrise, emphasis added). Zarathustra claims for his own teaching the coming of the pure sky, as if he had willed it into existence. Zarathustra struggles to rid himself of the old, vengeful, way of thinking in which the will wills other than what has been. He still seeks comfort in doctrines rather than having the courage to live.

Even in Part Four, in his encounter with the old pope, Zarathustra remains resentful at the God that died: “Away with such a god! Rather no god, rather meet destiny [*Schicksal*] on one’s own, rather be a fool, rather be a god oneself!” (Z IV, Retired) The old pope, who earlier had realized that he is more godless than Zarathustra (“The one who loved and possessed him most has now also lost him most”), seizes on this spirit of revenge, recognizing the ascetic faith in truth that lies behind it: “Is it not your very piousness that no longer allows you to believe in a god?” But rising to replace this atheism that only reproduces asceticism, Zarathustra is beginning to affirm his

56 Stanley Rosen, *The Mask of Enlightenment: Nietzsche’s Zarathustra*, New Haven, CT 2004, 183.

57 Kathleen Marie Higgins, *Nietzsche’s Zarathustra*, Lanham, MD 2010, 119.

58 Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, Princeton, NJ 1950, 321.

godlessness as a gift of the God that died. The old pope, sensing this, continues: “In your proximity, even though you claim to be the most godless man, I detect a secret, sacred and sweet aroma of *long blessings*” (emphasis added).

God cannot be overcome through pronouncing him dead. The death of God is rather something that must be lived. This means that the history of churches that is Zarathustra’s fate be put to a new use. Churches are transfigured from an error that, being past, has passed out of usability, into present possibility. This reading of fate as something that must be lived is somewhat different from other studies that emphasize the role of fate in eternal recurrence. Take, for example, Alexander Nehamas’s defense of a “weaker view” of the eternal return in which “in every moment, is implicit everything that has occurred in the past and everything that will occur in the future.”⁵⁹ Here the emphasis is placed on the eternity in eternal return, on the totality of time: the co-implication of the moment and of all time means that nothing that has taken place is contingent, no matter that it was not necessary as such.⁶⁰ Pierre Klossowski, similarly, observes that re-willing the moment as a moment of the eternal return is to know that this moment is both entirely fortuitous and that its “very fortuity implies the necessity of the integral return of the whole series.”⁶¹ Once again, the moment is interpreted on the basis of eternity.

On both Nehamas’ and Klossowski’s readings, then, the history of the present moment is inescapable, but there is little sense that this moment can be lived. To be sure, the transposition of accident into fate, of the moment into eternity, is the essence of *amor fati*: “that one wants nothing to be other than it is; not in the future, not in the past, not in all eternity” (EH, *Why I Am So Clever* 10). But when this same idea is expressed by Zarathustra, the emphasis is less on eternity and more on the “now” of living:

The time has passed in which accidents [*Zufälle*] could still befall me, and what *could* fall to me now that is not already my own?

It merely returns, it finally comes home to me – my own self and everything in it that has long been abroad and scattered among all things and accidents (Z III, *The Wanderer*).

Zarathustra can “love even churches” because, far from being past, they constitute his present.

Immediately after the second appearance of church roofs, we are plunged once more into the repeated refrain of eternal recurrence that distinguishes Z III, *The Seven Seals*: “Oh how then could I not lust for eternity and for the nuptial ring of rings – the ring of recurrence!” The emphasis seems to have shifted from the moment back to eternity. But at the climax of this refrain, which completes Part Three of *Zarathustra*, we

⁵⁹ Alexander Nehamas, “The Eternal Recurrence,” *The Philosophical Review* 89.3 (1980), 331–56: 338.

⁶⁰ Nehamas, “The Eternal Recurrence”, 338.

⁶¹ Klossowski, *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*, 46.

are referred once again to the living of a life: "If ever I spread silent skies above me and flew into my own sky with my own wings: If I playfully swam in deep expanses of light, and my freedom's bird-wisdom came." The pure sky, empty of gods, is an opportunity for Zarathustra to spread his own wings in what is really his own sky. Having been scattered in eternity, he is now gathered together in the moment which he lives, playfully.

Affirmative Atheism as Self-Abolition or Fate

Nietzsche confirms Zarathustra's affirmative atheism one last time in the section of *Twilight of the Idols* (1889) titled "How the 'True World' finally became a Fable." Instructively, this section has the subtitle "*The history of an error.*" Describing the various steps by which the true world of the metaphysicians (also known as God) ceased to be taken as true, Nietzsche gets to the stage where the true world is finally seen to be a lie. Being the stage when free spirits are let loose, surely this is the moment of Zarathustra's entry? "The 'true world' – an idea that is of no further use, not even as an obligation, – now an obsolete, superfluous idea, *consequently* a refuted idea: let's get rid of it!" (TI, World) But if Zarathustra were to arise now, then he would be synonymous with a linear, redemptive time by which the error of Christian-metaphysical history is overcome once and for all. Sure enough, there is another stage to come, beyond even free spirits, and *this* is Zarathustra's moment: "The true world is gone: which world is left? The illusory one, perhaps? ... But no! *we got rid of the illusory world along with the true one!* (Noon; moment of shortest shadow; end of longest error; high point of humanity; INCIPIT ZARATHUSTRA)."

It is highly significant that Zarathustra's arising is mentioned only now, in the stage that appears only *after* the last stage by which the lie is revealed. The teaching that the true world is not true, a teaching that remains resentful at time's "it was," is not the final stage by which the true world is overcome, but really only the penultimate stage.⁶² With Zarathustra's appearance in this final stage that is really the first of a new series, it is no longer a case of teaching anything. We here encounter the first "yes" after a whole history of "nos." It is the *history of an error* itself that has led to Zarathustra's rising; a fateful history of churches that he cannot be considered apart from. The thought of eternal return, as an anti-teaching, defeats all prophetic pretensions to a metaphysical outside. Its self-abolishing effect is the abolition of any difference between self and world, between Zarathustra and the history of churches that he has learned to love.

A compelling vignette of this self-negating and yet affirmative anti-teaching is found in the imagery of poppies that appears whenever churches are discussed in

⁶² The claim that the true world is not true also continues to assume a true world.

Zarathustra. In the first, still resentful, claim that churches need to collapse before Zarathustra will turn his heart towards them, the pure sky shines “down upon grass and red poppy and broken walls.” Yet in the second, affirmative, vision of churches, Zarathustra states: “gladly do I sit like grass and red poppies on broken churches.” Zarathustra no longer thinks of himself as *looking on* as the sky shines on grass and poppies; now he is *like* the sky lit grass and poppies themselves. Zarathustra’s gladness is indissolubly linked with the places where churches once stood.

It is important to note that poppies have from the beginning been connected (Z I, On the Teachers of Virtue) with the narcotic wisdom peddled by the teachers of virtue. Zarathustra, by contrast, likes

to lie here where the children play, by the crumbling wall, beneath thistles and red poppies.
I am still a scholar to the children and also to the thistles and the red poppies. They are innocent, even in their spite.
But to the sheep I am no longer a scholar (Z II, On Scholars).

Poppies, then, as well as appearing wherever there are churches, are joined explicitly to Zarathustra’s rejection of the teaching of wisdom and of sheep-like followers. In the ruins of churches, Zarathustra has teachings only for children, thistles and poppies, all of which, being innocent, have no need of them. The death of God is something to be lived.

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