The Eternal Return of the Overhuman:  
*The Weightiest Knowledge and the Abyss of Light*

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The overhuman lies close to my heart, *it* is my paramount and sole concern—and not the human: *not* the neighbour, not the poorest, not the most ailing, not the best.

—Z:4 “Of the Higher Man” 3

In the long run, it is not a question of the human at all: it is to be overcome.

—KSA 10: 24[16], 1883–84

The purpose of this essay is to provide a reading of Nietzsche’s first sketch of the thought of the eternal return of the same in order to illuminate some crucial, if often neglected, aspects of his figuration of the Übermensch, which I prefer to translate as ‘overhuman’. This sketch from August 1881, which has consequences for our reading of some crucial parts of Nietzsche’s oeuvre, foregrounds the specific set of problems that inform Nietzsche’s conception of a new, postmetaphysical humanity and that gets played out in *The Gay Science* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. It is possible to identify in Nietzsche’s texts several configurations of the overhuman. I will focus on the following two. The first is the figuration we find at work in the free-spirit trilogy (1878–82), where the overhuman denotes the change in the human that is called for with respect to the new tasks that confront modern humanity, such as the incorporation of truth and knowledge (*GS* 110), the purification of our opinions and valuations (*HH* 34, *GS* 335), and the renunciation of the first and last things of metaphysics (*HH* chapter 1, *GS* 285). The second is the figuration we find in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883–85), where the overhuman denotes the human being that stands in a new temporal relation to existence and the earth (the first figuration continues to be fully at work in the text). When Nietzsche posits the overhuman as the ‘meaning’ (*Sinn*, sense and direction) of the earth, he has in mind a post-metaphysical human being. The extraordinary nature of this being is what we encounter in Nietzsche’s first sketch of the thought of eternal return.1

The Weightiest Knowledge

The doctrine of the eternal return of the same is always bound up in Nietzsche with the fundamental problems that need to be addressed concerning the fate of
modern human beings. We see this clearly at work in the first sketch he com-
piled of the thought, which occurs in the notebook known as “M III, 1,” and
which runs as follows:

*The Return (Wiederkunft) of the Same.*

Outline.

1. The incorporation of the fundamental errors.
2. The incorporation of the passions.
3. The incorporation of knowledge and of renunciatory knowledge. (Passion
   of knowledge)
4. The innocent one. The individual as experiment. The alleviation of life,
   abasement, enfeeblement—transition (Übergang).
5. The heavy new burden: the eternal return of the same. Infinite importance
   of our knowing, erring, habits, ways of living for all that is to come. What
   shall we do with the rest of our lives—we who have spent the majority of
   our lives in the most profound ignorance? We shall teach the teaching—it
   is the most powerful means of incorporating (einzuvorleiben) it in ourselves.
   Our kind of blessedness (Seligkeit), as teachers of the greatest teaching.

   Early August 1881 in Sils-Maria,

6,000 feet above sea level and much higher above all human things!—

On 4) Philosophy of Indifference (Gleichgültigkeit). What used to be the strongest
stimulus now has a quite different effect: it is seen as just a game and accepted
(the passions and labours), rejected on principle as a life of untruth, but aesthet-
eically enjoyed and cultivated as form and stimulus; we adopt a child’s attitude
towards what used to constitute the seriousness of existence. The seriousness
of our striving, though, is to understand everything as becoming, to deny ourselves
as individuals, to look into the world through as many eyes as possible, to live in
drives and activities so as to create eyes for ourselves, temporarily abandoning
ourselves to life so as to rest our eye on it temporarily afterwards: to maintain the
drives as the foundation of all knowing, but to know at what point they become
the enemies of knowing: in sum, to wait and see how far knowledge and truth
can be incorporated—and to what extent a transformation of man occurs when
he finally lives only so as to know. This is a consequence of the passion of
knowledge: there is no way of ensuring its existence except by preserving as well
the sources and powers of knowledge, the errors and passions; from the conflict
between them it draws its sustaining strength. What will this life look like from
the point of view of its sum total of well-being? A children’s game under the gaze
of the wise man, with power over the latter and the former conditions—and over
death, if such a thing is not possible. But now comes the weightiest knowledge
(Erkenntnis), one which prompts the terrible reconsideration of all forms of life:
an absolute surplus of pleasure must be demonstrable, or else we must choose to
destroy ourselves with regard to humanity as a means of destroying humanity.
Just this: we have to put the past—our past and that of all humanity—on the scales
and also outweigh it—no! this piece of human history will and must repeat (wiederholen) itself eternally; we can leave that out of account, we have no influence over it: even if it afflicts our fellow-feeling and biases us against life in general. If we are not to be overwhelmed by it, our compassion must not be great. Indifference needs to have worked away deep inside us, and enjoyment in contemplation, too. Even the misery of future humanity must not concern us. But the question is whether we still want to live: and how?\(^2\)

As Heidegger noted, commenting on this sketch in his lecture course devoted to the thought, eternal return is mentioned only in the outline or projection for book five and nothing substantive is said about it. Rather, the key word in the sketch is ‘incorporation’, which I shall examine shortly.\(^3\) The movement of thought at work in this sketch is twofold: a stress is placed on the incorporation of truth and knowledge as the distinctive task of modern humanity, as that which will mark it out; and the disclosure that our historical singularity will repeat itself and do so eternally. The disclosure of the eternal return of the same places a specific burden on us: we are to experience the “infinite importance” of our knowing, erring, habits, and ways of life for all that is now to come (the thought seems to concern our futural present and to do so at its deepest level), and we are not to feel overwhelmed by this insight. In short, what appears to be at work in the sketch is both a knowledge or memory and a forgetting of the eternal return: it is the thought that provides us with both an insight into the importance of our singularity (it holds and gathers within itself that which is ‘to-come’ and we feel the weight or burden of this), and yet we are to recognize that we can have no influence on the eternal repetition of this singularity (we are not to be crushed by this insight).\(^4\) The task, then, is to become equal to the event that now befalls us, that of outweighing and being superior to all that has preceded us with regard to the fundamental questions of existence that are now our concern. It is clear that a highly complex and difficult act of incorporation is now demanded of modern human beings.

Nietzsche’s appeal to a principle of ‘indifference’—as that which must have worked its way deeply into us—refers us back to the decision he had made in the opening chapter of *Human, All Too Human* with respect to the first and last things. Nietzsche provides the clearest account of his postmetaphysical position in aphorism 16 of *The Wanderer and His Shadow* entitled “where indifference is needed” (*Worin Gleichgültigkeit noth thut*). Here he states that the impulse to want certainties in the domain of the first and last things is a “religious after-shoot” and is to be approached as “a hidden and only apparently sceptical species of the ‘metaphysical need.’” He insists that a “full and excellent human life” can be led without these certainties. What is needed is knowledge of the origin of the “calamitous weightiness” mankind has for so long accorded to these things. A history of ethical and religious sensations and concepts, such as guilt and punishment, will provide us with the knowledge we now require. The new
“lovers of knowledge” will practice indifference against the claims of both faith and knowledge in the domain of the last things (What is the purpose of man? What is his fate after death? How can he be reconciled with God? and so on).

In later writings Nietzsche will stress the importance of the task of purification (Reinigung) with respect to our overcoming of the metaphysics of morality and the morality of metaphysics. Our task as moderns is to limit ourselves to the purification of our questions and values and “to the creation of our new tables what is good”; in this way we will “stop brooding about the ‘moral value of our actions’” (GS 335). This positing of a ‘limit’ is bound up with the truth and knowledge that we are now to incorporate (if we can). In GS 335, this knowledge is called ‘physics’, and Nietzsche writes in praise of it by appealing to the supra-moral virtue that ‘compels’ (zwingt) us to it, namely, probity (Redlichkeit), and that gains its voice from the superior form of conscience that Nietzsche names as the “intellectual conscience.” It is superior to the moral conscience simply because it acknowledges that we do not as yet have an adequate knowledge of our actions and valuations (this is why he encourages us to stop “brooding” over their moral value). It is this kind of thinking that lies behind Nietzsche’s stress on the innocence of becoming. In a draft version of the final sections of “The Four Great Errors” in TI, for example, we encounter Nietzsche positioning himself as a ‘halcyonian’ who works with all his might to purify psychology, morality, social institutions and sanctions, and so on, of the concepts of guilt and punishment, that is, of the entire metaphysics of morality (KSA 13: 15[30]; WP 765).

Let me attend to the issue that is the center of the 1881 sketch on the return of the same, that of incorporation. David Farrell Krell has argued that the emergence of incorporation in Nietzsche’s thinking at this time is the direct result of his reading work in the natural sciences, notably physiology, and especially Wilhelm Roux’s text of 1881, The Struggle of Parts in the Organism. However, while Nietzsche did indeed read Roux at this time, and then several times again in the 1880s, the notion of incorporation comes from the deepest concerns of his own thinking. It is a notion that figures in Nietzsche from his earliest published writings. It plays an important role, for example, in his thinking on the uses and disadvantages of history for life. Indeed, in the opening section of this meditation, Nietzsche situates incorporation in the same context of problems that come to inform his presentation of eternal return in 1881, including: the regulation of knowledge, the importance of forgetting, determining the time of memory and of forgetting within the economy of the living (Nietzsche speaks of being able to forget and to remember at the right time), and so on. As Nietzsche writes: “this is a universal law: a living thing can be healthy, strong and fruitful only when bounded by a horizon” (HL 1). The living power of a human being, a people, and a culture is a plastic power, and what constitutes this plasticity are the processes and activities of assimilation, incorporation, and digestion. Nietzsche writes: “I mean by plastic power (die plastische Kraft) the capacity
to develop out of oneself in one’s one way, to transform (umzubilden) and incorporate (einzuverleiben) into oneself what is past and foreign, to heal wounds, to replace what has been lost, to recreate broken moulds” (ibid.). This suggests that when it comes to eternal return it is a question for Nietzsche of knowing how to live the thought, which is always a task of incorporation. In the 1881 sketch, Nietzsche seems to be proposing that we should not live the thought ‘historically’ (for we would be overburdened by a knowledge of history), but rather decisively and effectively. Only in this way can we ensure that eternal return stands in the service not of pure knowledge but of life. The key point can be stated as follows: our ‘willing’ of the eternal return is to take place in the context of the incorporation of truth and knowledge that is now our task.

Like the English word ‘incorporation’, *Einverleibung* means literally a taking into the body, and on the level of human existence it denotes a complex practice of spiritual ingestion. Nietzsche makes it clear in his essay on history that to incorporate means ingesting what is foreign and alien and, as such, it means transforming ourselves and what we take ourselves to be and to be capable of. It means, then, enriching our power. In the later Nietzsche, incorporation becomes increasingly thought in terms of the will to power, conceived as a ‘will’ to grow through the extension of power and the assimilation of alien forces (*KSA* 13: 14[192], *WP* 728; see also *BGE* 230). As Heidegger notes, whatever is incorporated effectively makes the body, and our own embodiment, steadfast and secure. It is, he says, “the juice that feeds our energies,” and that which “determines us in the future.” To incorporate the thought of eternal return would mean that “it becomes our fundamental stance towards beings as a whole, pervading every single thought as such and from the outset.” Although Heidegger hesitates over expressing the eternal return as a practical thought, since he thinks this will distract attention away from its fundamental ontological significance, I think there are good reasons for going with the thought on this level. Only when we approach it on this level do we gain the insight we need into its connection with the task of incorporation. The human being will now ask itself the classical question of judgment “do I want this again and again?” on the basis of the incorporation of truth and knowledge (for example, the knowledge offered by ‘physics’ through methods of sharpened or refined observation and self-observation; in short, the whole ‘conscience’ of method, *BGE* 36). This is the practical and ‘ethical’ work to which Nietzsche puts the experiment of eternal return in *GS* 341. A draft sketch of this aphorism from 1881 makes his intellectual concern clear. Here Nietzsche presents it as the “thought of thoughts,” offering it as a response to a well-known philosophical problem: to what extent are we free in what we do or is everything predetermined? The task of the return of the same is that of gaining a degree of power over our actions: “Thought and belief are a weight pressing down on me as much as and even more than any other weight. You say that food, a location, air, society transform and condition
you: well your opinions do so even more, since it is they that determine your choice of food, dwelling, air, society. If you incorporate this thought within you, amongst your other thoughts, it will transform you. The question in everything that you will: ‘am I certain I want to do it an infinite number of times?’ will become for you the heaviest weight” (KS4 9: 11[143]).

What exactly is the incorporation Nietzsche has in mind with respect to truth and knowledge? And just what does he intend by ‘truth’? In The Gay Science, Nietzsche makes significant use of incorporation in a long aphorism devoted to truth and knowledge, precisely the issue that is at the center of the 1881 sketch on the eternal return. In this aphorism on the “origin of knowledge” (Ursprung der Erkenntniss), Nietzsche provides an evolutionary account of the emergence of truth, aiming to show that today we exist in a situation where knowledge itself has now become “a part of life” (GS 110). A preoccupation with truth actually appeared late in the evolution of human life and was for a long time to be “the weakest form of knowledge” on account of the fact that humans found it hard to endure it as a practice of living. In the story Nietzsche is telling in this aphorism, this was owing to the fact that for the greater part of its evolutionary history the human animal has survived, prospered even, by incorporating a set of “basic errors” that became for it a set of “erroneous articles of faith,” such as that there are identical and equal things, that things are what we immediately take them to be, that the will is free, and so on. All the higher functions of our organism, including sense perception and all kinds of sensation, have worked with these basic errors and incorporated them. Moreover, these propositions concerning self and world established themselves as the norm according to which ‘true’ and ‘untrue’ could be determined. Truth, then, at least initially and during this highly formative period of human evolution, operates in the context of the incorporated errors. In the section that immediately comes after GS 110, he presents a quasi-Darwinian account of the origins and development of our basic ways of thinking. For example, to be able to think all the time in terms of identity proves helpful in the struggle for survival since it means things in the environment can be recognized and acted upon with speed and quickness. To see only a perpetual becoming everywhere would be disastrous for the evolution of a species of animal. As Nietzsche points out, “the beings who did not see exactly had a head start over those who saw everything ‘in a flux’” (GS 111). What has so far determined the strength or power of knowledge is not its degree of truth, as we might suppose, but rather its “character as a condition of life” (and the conditions of life include error, see GS 121). Wherever life and knowledge came into conflict, denial and doubt were taken to be expressions of madness. Where a more truthful humanity has sought to come into being—Nietzsche mentions the school of the Eleatics (Parmenides and his disciples such as Zeno)—it has arrived at ‘truth’ only by deceiving itself about its own states, for example, positing a fictitious impersonality and an unchanging duration. In the
process it misunderstood the nature of the knower and lived in denial of the impulses that inform knowledge. Although these human beings cultivated honesty and skepticism, it was these which led to their downfall since their ways of living and judging were seen to be also dependent on the primeval impulses and basic errors of sentient existence.

A subtle kind of skepticism comes into being when two contradictory propositions about the world appeared to be applicable to life, simply because both proved compatible with the basic errors and an argument could be put forward about the degrees of utility for life. The same was true, Nietzsche notes, where new propositions came into being that were neither useful nor harmful to life. Such a situation creates room for the expression of an intellectual play impulse. Gradually the human brain becomes full of antinomical judgments and convictions to the point where a “lust for power” manifests itself in this tangle of knowledge. It is in this context that knowledge and a striving for truth come to inform what we take to be our innermost needs and desires: “all ‘evil’ instincts were subordinated to knowledge, employed in her service, and acquired the splendour of what is permitted, honoured, and useful” (GS 110). With this stage in our evolution we find ourselves in a new situation in which the quest for knowledge and the striving for the true have taken their rightful place among others as being considered among the most fundamental needs, and to the point where we now have techniques and disciplines of scrutiny, of denial, and of suspicion. Nietzsche brings the aphorism to a close by saying that the thinker today is “the being in whom the drive to truth and those life-preserving errors are fighting their first battle.” Such a battle is now taking place because the striving for the true has also shown itself to be a life-preserving and life-enhancing power. In order to make further progress with truth, it is necessary to conduct an experiment. Nietzsche’s question is: “To what extent can truth stand (verträgt) incorporation?”

The meaning of Nietzsche’s questioning is not self-evident and demands interpretation. He appears to leave open the result of the experiment that is to be conducted, as well as the precise nature of the fundamental question he has posed. What kind of ‘truth’ is it that stands outside incorporation and that now challenges us in the manner of incorporation? What is the precise nature and status of this ‘truth’? Clearly, it is neither the articles of faith of primeval humanity nor the truth of refined truth-seekers such as the Eleatics. I think there are two possible candidates for ‘truth’ here and I believe Nietzsche has both in mind. The first is ‘truth’ conceived as a set of practices of truthfulness, such as doubt, suspicion, critical distance, subjecting all things to scrutiny, and so on; the second is a ‘truth’ that has now been exposed and brought to the fore by science, notably evolutionary theory. This is the knowledge that all things are implicated in a perpetual and eternal flux and that gives rise to the essential ‘truth’ of a scientific humanity: we are not what we take ourselves to be either as moral agents or as thinking subjects.
It is clear that Nietzsche thinks there are limits to our incorporation. These limits are that the new incorporation of truth and knowledge will necessarily put to the test. In note 162 of the “M III, 1” notebook, Nietzsche states that the organs of a living system work in favor of error, and therefore the “ultimate truth” (die letzte Wahrheit) of the flux of things cannot stand incorporation. This is the challenge that now presents itself to us moderns conceived, as Nietzsche puts it in the opening sentence of the Genealogy of Morals, as knowers who are unknown to ourselves. Can we incorporate as a ‘truth’ that which hitherto humanity has not been able to incorporate and, moreover, which as an inability has positively facilitated its evolution? Humanity has cultivated itself on the basis of a set of fundamental errors and this has involved the development of certain kinds of sensation and perception in which the changes in things go unperceived and all kinds of influences are not felt. In addition, a certain mode of judging and valuing has been cultivated, one that affirms rather than suspends judgment, that errs and fabricates things rather than waits, and that passes judgment rather than strives to be just (GS 111). In short, Nietzsche reaches the conclusion that our knowledge amounts to a humanization of things; we perfect an image of ‘becoming’ for ourselves but do not see beyond or behind this image. We have done this, for example, by diagramming reality in a specific manner, such as through “lines, planes, bodies, atoms, divisible time spans, divisible spaces” (GS 112). Nietzsche’s suggestion is that there is another kind of ‘becoming’, and knowledge of it now challenges our humanness and motivates him to ask after its possible incorporation. As he makes clear in the sketch from 1881, modern human beings must now do what previous humans have been unable to do: “to wait and see how far truth and knowledge can be incorporated.”

Nietzsche speaks of “the seriousness of our striving” as one of understanding everything as implicated in becoming and denying ourselves as individuals. The challenge he presents is that of learning “to live in drives,” as that through which we come to see, and to uphold this mode of living as a foundation of all our knowing; but then to cultivate at the same time the superior knowledge that will enable us to discern at what point the drives become the enemies of knowing. For Nietzsche it is necessary to acknowledge the fact that our drive to knowledge has its presuppositions in the conditions of life that include error (KSA 9:11[162]). This is clearly stated in GS 121: “We have arranged for ourselves a world in which we are able to live—by positing bodies, lines, planes, causes and effects, motion and rest, form and content; without these articles of faith no one could endure living! But that does not prove them” (see also GS 112). Hitherto human beings have incorporated only basic errors that are rooted in the conditions of adaptive existence. The question now posed for us is whether we can learn to incorporate truth in the two senses indicated above. Nietzsche insists that the significance of this struggle between our drive for knowledge and truth, on the one hand, and our dependence on error and illusion, on the other, is that
it poses for us now the ultimate question concerning the conditions of life and necessitates the experiment of incorporation he calls for. The incorporation of truth will not be like previous incorporations undertaken by humanity. This is because the human being will have to change its evolved nature and conditions of existence if it is to prove equal to the experiment. Henceforth we will have to measure up to that which exceeds us and this requires that we call into question all previous attempts at measuring, including the prejudices of the human and those of the philosophers. Implicit in Nietzsche’s argument is the suggestion that we will have to become overhuman in order to prove equal to our task. New habits and modes of living are called for. Do we want to become the ones that we are? We are knowers unknown to ourselves; we are not what we take ourselves to be; and we now know this. Can all of this now be incorporated to the point where we would become transformed human beings? This, and this alone, is the fundamental concern or care of the thought of eternal return.

Nietzsche’s figuration of our becoming overhuman is typically intricate and nuanced. We need refined and delicate ears to hear him effectively. The suggestion is not that we will incorporate truth and knowledge in any immediate or direct manner and as if it constituted a new metaphysical truth for us. Rather, we will develop and cultivate a more refined sense of becoming and the eternal flux. It is in this way that we will incorporate it. Several notes from the “M III, 1” notebook provide insight into the kind of things that are at stake for Nietzsche. In note 156, for example, he indicates that a fundamental rethinking of the individual is required and away from the coarse ‘error’ of the species; the individual struggles for its existence, for its new taste, and for its relative singular position in relation to all things. It despises the general taste and wants to rule supreme. But the notion of the individual also has its error, a more refined one to be sure, and its nature must be intensified: it discovers that it itself is something wandering and has a taste that changes; in the smallest moment it is something other than in the next and its conditions of existence are that of a host of individuals. Nietzsche declares: “the infinitely small moment is the highest reality and truth, a lightning-image that emerges from the eternal river (ein Blitzbild aus dem ewigen Flusse)” (KSA 9: 11[156]). Nietzsche concludes this note by reflecting on what we learn from this and argues that all pleasure-taking knowledge (geniessende Erkenntniss) rests on the coarse error of the species, the finer error of the individual, and the finest error of the creative moment. This concern with gaining an adequate knowledge of the individual that can do justice to its essential fluidity is what is at work in Nietzsche’s engagements with biology (Darwinism), psychology, metaphysics (for example TI “Errors” 8), and physics (for example, GS 335 “Long live physics!”). In note 162 Nietzsche construes something of a vicious circle in which “life is the condition of knowing” and “error is the condition of the living” at its deepest level. It is thus necessary to love and cultivate error as it is the womb (Mutterschoss) of our knowing. And
it is for this reason that art can be prized as the activity that cultivates illusions (compare *GS* 107 on our ultimate gratitude to art). We exist in a double bind; advancing life for the sake of knowledge (our probity demands that we be honest with ourselves as knowers) and promoting illusion for the sake of life (we are to become artists and poets of our lives). Nietzsche then states that the “fundamental condition” of the whole passion of knowledge is to grant existence an “aesthetic meaning,” that is, to “increase our taste for it.” What we discover in this play of life is a night and a day, the ebb and flow of our desiring knowledge and our desiring error. Ruled absolutely by one of these desires the human and its capacities would perish. In note 229 Nietzsche states that only by adapting to the living errors can the “initially dead truth” be brought to life. In note 325 he spells out what is to be the task of science (*Wissenschaft*): “Not to ask the question how error is possible, but how a kind of truth is at all possible in spite of the fundamental untruth in knowing.”

The ‘truth’ that we are now to attempt to incorporate is not taken by Nietzsche to denote an absolute or unconditional truth. As Nietzsche sees it, our task is to become better known to ourselves by developing better descriptions. The new knowledge that is in the process of being developed, which is a knowledge of the unfamiliar and the strange and that involves making strangers of ourselves (see *GS* 355), will have an impact on psychology, on the study of history, on social institutions, on our habits, and so on. The question now posed for us is whether we can learn to incorporate truth *in this sense.*

The sketch from 1881 gives us valuable insight into the wider set of problems that informed Nietzsche’s articulation of eternal return. Modern human beings can learn to practice indifference with respect to the first and last things of traditional metaphysics. In the 1881 sketch indifference is aimed not at these first and last things but at the eternal repetition of the different ages or epochs of human history, including our own. The possible future misery of humanity—that it may regress, that it may be wiped out or suffer in some way we cannot foretell—is not our concern. Our concern is with ourselves (we idealists of knowledge and godless anti-metaphysicians, as Nietzsche defines us in the *Genealogy*), and with whether we moderns, who exist largely in order to know, wish to live and how. In the first published presentation of the eternal return in *GS* 341, Nietzsche’s aim is to provide us with a means to discover how we can test our desire to live and the manner in which this testing and recognition might be practiced (“do you want to do this again and again?”). Clearly, what is at play in Nietzsche’s 1881 sketch is what is often in evidence in many of his presentations, published and unpublished, of the teaching. This is what we can call its fundamental antinomy: on the one hand, the recognition of the infinite importance of what we now do with respect to our knowing, erring, and modes of living, and, on the other hand, the knowledge that all has happened innumerable times before and all will happen innumerable times again and again in the future.
The 1881 sketch shows Nietzsche negotiating this complication and demonstrating the fateful burden of the thought.

The thought of eternal return works in the context of Nietzsche’s conception of the economy of life and spirit, as well as his figuration of the evolutionary fate of the human animal, including questions concerning the future incorporation of truth and knowledge. As Mazzini Montinari pointed out, the eternal return of the same can only be thought in terms of its reciprocal relation to the passion for knowledge that has now taken its root in us and to the point where we are this passion.10 In a note from the beginning of 1884, Nietzsche remarks that ours is an epoch of experiments (Versuche). He proposes “the great test (die grosse Probe),” and asks, “who can endure the eternal return (Wiederkunft)? Whoever is crushed by the proposition, ‘there is no redemption’, should die out” (KSA 11: 25[290]). In a later note from 1884, Nietzsche calls eternal return “the hardest thought” (der schwerste Gedanke) and stresses that it can only be endured through a revaluation of all values. He adds: “No longer joy in certainty but in uncertainty; no longer ‘cause and effect’ but the continually creative; no longer will to preservation but power; no longer the humble expression, ‘everything is merely subjective’, but ‘it is also our work!—Let us be proud of it!’” (KSA 11: 26 [284]; WP 1059). Moreover, in another note from this period, Nietzsche states that to endure the thought of return one needs freedom from morality (der Moral), new means against the fact of pain, enjoyment of all kinds of uncertainty, and experimentalism. It is this “greatest elevation (Erhöhung) of the consciousness of strength (Kraft) of human beings” that comes into being as the overhuman is created (KSA 11: 26 [283]; WP 1060). In short, we can say that this most demanding and exacting of thoughts is to become our ownmost possibility (eternal return is the ultimate thought of the possible).11 At the same time a surplus of pleasure and desire with respect to life and our love of it must accompany the affirmation of this ultimate possible.12 This is not just any ‘possible’ or possibility, but one that gains its effectiveness (Wirklichkeit) from the incorporation of truth and knowledge as Nietzsche conceives it. At work in the thought of eternal return is nothing less than the promise of a new kind of human being coming into existence, one that stands in a new relation to the earth. The possibility of a new earth and new people is precisely what we encounter in the visions and riddles of Zarathustra.

The Abyss of Light

All of the themes so far covered—incorporation, digestion, experimentalism, and the need to become equal to the thought of eternal return—are played out in the drama of Zarathustra’s Übergang and Untergang. In Part Three of the book it is disclosed that Zarathustra “picks up” the word ‘overhuman’ in a particular place and along a specific way (“Of Old and New Law-Tables” 3). It is in the
context of his fundamental encounter with the dwarf, the spirit of gravity, that
Zarathustra conceives the overhuman. This is the spirit who has created “com-
pulsion, dogma, necessity and consequence and purpose and will and good and
evil,” and whose cry of lament is the perpetual and immovable refrain “all is in
vain.” It is the refrain of a metaphysics that has not learned the lessons of incor-
poration and digestion. It is to this spirit that Zarathustra relates the “abysmal
thought” of the eternal return in the parable of the gateway (Z:3 “Of the Vision
and the Riddle”) and in his duel with him he teaches the overhuman, “that the
human is something that must be overcome”: “For must there not exist that which
is danced upon, danced across? Must there not be moles and heavy dwarfs—for
the sake of the light and the lightest?” (Z:3 “On Old and New Law-Tables” 2).
Here I wish to draw attention to just a few of the teachings in the book that are
apposite to a comprehension of Nietzsche’s figuration of the overhuman.

The task of incorporation is at work throughout Thus Spoke Zarathustra. In
section 16 of “Old and New Law-Tables,” Zarathustra declares “the spirit is a
stomach!” (this conception of spirit is taken up again and pursued in BGE 230).
This claim about spirit is developed in the context of Zarathustra’s encounter
with the law-table hung up by the world-weary and the preachers of death which
teaches that nothing is worth while and that all wisdom makes one weary (the
allusion is clearly to the spirit of Schopenhauer). Such spirits have “learned badly
and the best things not at all, they have learned everything too early and too fast:
they have eaten badly.” This stress on learning how to eat well—the art of liv-
ing conceived as an art of digestion—is one that Zarathustra makes in the pre-
ceding discourse, which is focused on “The Spirit of Gravity.” Here Nietzsche
addresses the spirit of gravity as he always does, namely, his arch-enemy and
mortal enemy. The one who seeks to teach human beings how to fly “will have
moved all boundary-stones,” and such stones will themselves fly into the air as
the earth is baptized anew “as ‘the weightless.’” Zarathustra seeks to show that
the weightiness that existence has for the spirit of gravity stems from its sub-
jection to metaphysics. This metaphysics consists in holding that there exists a
good for all and an evil for all. This spirit has an optimistic will to knowledge
that seeks to incorporate everything:

Truly, I dislike also those who call everything good and this world the best of all.
I call such people the all-contented.

All-contentedness that knows how to taste everything: that is not the best taste!
I honour the obstinate, fastidious tongues and stomachs that have learned to say
‘I’ and ‘Yes’ and ‘No’.

But to chew and digest everything—that is to have a really swinish nature! Always
to say Yea—only the ass and those like him have learned that. (Z:3 “Of the Spirit
of Gravity” 2)
In contrast to the taste of the spirit of gravity, Zarathustra indicates that his taste is that of the free spirit that knows how to keep its energy and enthusiasm in bounds (the free spirit is presented in these terms in the foreword to the *Anti-Christ*): “All my going has been an attempting (*Versuchen*) and a questioning— and truly, one has to *learn* how to answer such questioning! That however—is to my taste” (ibid).

Nietzsche clearly thinks that the conception of the overhuman is one that it is possible for us to incorporate and digest. In “On the Blissful Islands,” Zarathustra addresses “the will to truth” as a free spirit, while in “Of Immaculate Perception” he takes to task those who seek to practice pure or disinterested knowledge. The “will to truth” can only become meaningful when it concerns the ‘humanly-conceivable’ and the ‘humanly-palpable’, even if none of this is self-evident or axiomatic. The ‘overhuman’ concerns that which exists in some sense beyond ourselves, that is, it concerns the distant. However, unlike previous gazing upon distant seas which ended up giving us ‘God’, our new gazing upon such seas will not reach out for such a metaphysical resolution of the aims and ends of our willing and desiring: “God is a supposition; but I want your supposing to reach no further than your creating will. Could you *create* a god? So be silent about all gods! But you could surely create the overhuman [. . .] God is a supposition: but I want your supposing to be bounded by conceivability” (*Z*:2 “On the Blissful Islands”). God is a thought that makes everything that is straight crooked and everything that stands giddy; time vanishes and everything that is transitory—that is, all that exists—is declared to be a lie. When we try to conceive God as that which is one, perfect, unmoved, sufficient, and intransitory, we undergo giddiness and vertigo; moreover, our stomach feels sick. In opposition to this metaphysics of being and time Zarathustra proposes that we devote our intellectual energies to focusing on a different image:

the best images and parables should speak of time and becoming: they should be a eulogy and a justification of all transitoriness.

Creation—that is the great redemption from suffering, and life’s easement. But that the creator may exist, that itself requires suffering and much transformation. (ibid.)

“Of Old and New Law-Tables” is a crucially important discourse in the book as it is the place where Zarathustra makes clear that liberation consists in freeing ourselves from the metaphysics of morality and the morality of metaphysics: compulsion, dogma or statute, and the metaphysical categories (necessity and purpose, good and evil, etc.). In short, the innocence of becoming, of time as such, is to be restored, and where time *qua* transience is conceived as the moment that both gathers and splits up the past and future. This curious ‘moment’ (*Augenblick*) is the event.
In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* Nietzsche presents the eternal return in terms of the event of the moment. It is in these terms, for example, that Zarathustra confronts the dwarf with the thought in “Of the Vision and the Riddle,” in which the encounter with the ‘gateway’ proves to be decisive:

> “Behold this gateway (*Thorweg*), dwarf!” I went on: “it has two aspects. Two paths come together here: no one has ever reached their end.”
> “This long lane behind us: it goes on for an eternity. And that long lane ahead of us—that is another eternity.”
> “They contradict each other, these paths: they abut on one another: and it is here at this gateway that they come together.” The name of the gateway is written above it: ‘Moment’.
> “But if one were to follow them further and ever further and further: do you think, dwarf, that these paths would eternally contradict each other?” (Z:3 “Of the Vision and Riddle” 2).

As is well known, the dwarf’s response to this teaching of the moment, which consists in stating that everything straight lies since all truth is crooked and time itself is a circle, leaves Zarathustra exasperated and he scolds the dwarf for receiving the insight too lightly. The spirit of gravity, we might say, has the wrong kind of innocence concerning the thought of eternal return (the innocence of the optimist). He does not experience the weight of the thought that concerns the eternal return of the moment as the same. It does not matter how far one goes along the two lanes, whether the lane that lies behind or the lanes that lies ahead, the character of the moment will always be encountered as the same. Zarathustra provides the decisive insight when he declares: “Are not all things bound fast together in such a way that this moment draws after it all future things? *Therefore*—draws itself too? [. . .] all things that *can* run *must* also run once again forward along this lane.” It is in this discourse that the antinomy of the thought of return once again manifests itself. It has been ably expressed by Jaspers: “It takes the form of asserting both that the will expresses the freedom to *bring forth what is yet to come*, and that the will itself is after all the cycle that *simply repeats what has been.*”13 The eternal contradiction or opposition can only be dissolved by thinking the eternal return of the moment as a singularity. Alenka Zupancic’s recent contribution to our appreciation of Nietzsche as a thinker of the event is helpful here: “Nietzsche’s ‘eternity’ refers not to the endless circling of time, but to those rare moments when this circularity *appears*, becomes tangible for us in the encounter of two temporalities—the encounter that distinguishes the event as such . . . the event is always an encounter of the future and the past, something that affects the past as well as the future.”14 Nietzsche’s ‘moment’ is not the point we typically place on the line of time (from where do these points and this line draw their givenness?),
and that would stretch from here to eternity in two opposite directions. The time of return is not conclusive but inaugural: “it inaugurates the very split that leads to it.” As Eugen Fink notes, the eternal return shifts the firm characteristics of our ordinary understanding of time: “The thought of the eternal return sublates the difference between past and future or better it imbibes the past with the open possibilities of the future and the future with the determinations of the past.”

The image of the circle of time posited by the spirit of gravity is unable to grasp the deep well and abyss of time. Only this image can give us the moment as one of ‘eternity’, the duration of which is not to be thought in terms of our ordinary linear conception of time (as chronological succession, for example). Rather, it is a moment that inaugurates itself and that, as such, desires itself and to the point of desiring its eternal return. For Zarathustra it even has the appearance of the dis-appearance of time:

Soft! Soft! Has the world not just become perfect? What has happened to me? As a delicate breeze, unseen, dances upon the smooth sea, light, light as a feather: thus does sleep dance upon me [. . .]

What has happened to me? Listen! Has time flown away? Do I not fall? Have I not fallen—listen! into the well of eternity? [. . .]

When, well of eternity! serene and terrible noontide abyss! when will you drink my soul back into yourself? (Z:4 “At Noontide”)

In “The Intoxicated Song,” Zarathustra asks after his experience of timeless time: where has it fled? Has he not sunk into deep wells where the world is asleep? Only when he experiences this silent time of death can he say that the hour approaches: “who shall be master of the world? [. . .] O man, you higher man, attend! This discourse is for delicate ears, for your ears—what does deep midnight’s voice contend?” The “dead time” is a curious timeless time, and is what Deleuze calls the event that can be thought as un entre-temps or meanwhile: “the meanwhile is not part of the eternal, but neither is it part of time—it belongs to becoming. The meanwhile, the event, is always a dead time; it is there where nothing takes place.” Deleuze likens this curious event to the immensity of an empty time in which we see it as both that which is still to come and that which has already happened, “in the strange indifference of an intellectual intuition.” Although nothing happens here, or at this moment, everything changes. For Deleuze, the dignity of the event can only be lived in terms of amor fati, or being equal to the events and singularities that befall us.

Let me pursue the thought of the innocence of time and becoming with reference to one particular discourse in Thus Spoke Zarathustra that plays an especially important role in the story of Zarathustra’s becoming the one that he is.
In “Before Sunrise” Zarathustra proclaims:

Truly, it is a blessing and not a blasphemy when I teach: “Above all things stands the heaven of accident, the heaven of innocence (Unschuld), the heaven of chance, the heaven of wantonness.”

‘Lord Chance’—he is the world’s oldest nobility, which I have given back to all things; I have released them from servitude under purpose (Zweck).

I set this freedom and celestial cheerfulness (Himmels-Heiterkeit) over all things like an azure bell when I taught that no ‘eternal will’ acts over and through them.

Zarathustra does not deny the need for “a little reason” and “a little wisdom”; however, what all things reveal to him is that they prefer to “dance on the feet of chance.”

The purification of our valuations and opinions that Nietzsche calls for in GS 335 is also expressed in this discourse where Zarathustra confronts the sky above him as a sky that is pure and deep, an “abyss of light.” The sky comes to him “before the sun,” it is mute over the raging sea below, and it comes “veiled in its beauty.” It is in the purity of the sky that Zarathustra chooses to lose himself and declares that this is his ‘innocence’. The sky is pure precisely because it has been purified of the metaphysics of morality: “O sky above me, you pure, lofty sky! This is now your purity to me, that there is no eternal reason-spider and spider’s web in you.”

To Zarathustra the sky appears as a “dance floor for divine chances”; it is “a god’s table for divine dice and dicers!” (see also Z:3 “On the Mount of Olives”).

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. Time can only be liberated through insight into the innocence of the moment, which for this reason can be called ‘eternity’. Conceived as eternity, the moment is freed from the burden of the metaphysics of time. This insight is in evidence in Nietzsche’s thinking of the eternal return of the same in GS 341 and the whole of Zarathustra. In GS 341, time is presented as an affliction that makes us gnash our teeth. That this is what is being presented is made explicit in the crucially important and pivotal discourse entitled “Of Redemption” in TSZ: “Has the will become its own redeemer and bringer of joy? Has it unlearned the spirit of revenge and all teeth-gnashing?” GS 341 depicts for us a scene of darkness and death (“this spider,” “this moonlight”) that is then repeated in “Of the Vision and the Riddle” in TSZ. What the spirit of gravity cannot grasp is the teaching on time that Zarathustra’s vision and the riddle confronts him with. The gaze of the spirit is focused on the circle and not on that which makes the circle come into being or appear as such. The eternal return of the same is the definition of that which comes in a manner that is innocent and wanton: the singularity of time always comes the same. There is
no contradiction between the singularity of things and their eternal return simply because what comes back is the innocence of becoming (the moment liberated from the woe of time’s pastness): when one wants “deep deep eternity” as the deepest joy, one wants nothing other than this innocence: “The origin of all good things is thousandfold—all good, wanton things spring for joy into existence: how should they do that—once only?” (Z:3 “On the Mount of Olives”).

For Nietzsche, this is the only way we can learn how to become well disposed toward ourselves and toward life—“to want nothing more ardently than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal.” This is the secret of Nietzsche’s doctrine of redemption (Erlösung)—the moment of eternity frees the will from the affliction of the pastness of time and time reconstitutes itself in terms of the desire of the will which is a desire for innocence. “The will that is the will to power must will something higher than any reconciliation—but how shall that happen? Who has taught it to will backwards, too?” (Z:2 “Of Redemption”).

For Deleuze, a Nietzschean-inspired ethics can be extracted from these insights into innocence. This consists in being equal to the event of a life once existence has been stripped of the metaphysics of morality. What the eternal return gives us, as its sweet and terrible gift, is *amor fati*, the innocence of becoming, and the heaven of chance. Deleuze writes: “Either ethics makes no sense at all, or this is what it means . . . not to be unworthy of what happens to us. To grasp whatever happens as unjust and unwarranted (it is always someone else’s fault) is, on the contrary, what renders our sores repugnant—veritable *ressentiment*, resentment of the event. There is no other ill will . . . *amor fati* is one with the struggle of free human beings.”

This is an ethics of superabundant energy, of the energy of life freed from the burden of metaphysics and the judgment of God. It is an ethics of *joy*: “All joy wants the eternity of all things [. . .] it wants *itself*; it bites into *itself*; the will of the ring wrestles within it [. . .] wants deep, deep, deep eternity!” (Z:4 “The Intoxicated Song” 11).

**Concluding Thoughts**

The *Übermensch* is frequently said to be a self-contradictory notion on Nietzsche’s part, one that he is not entitled to. This is because the thought is seen to fall prey to what Nietzsche’s philosophy is seeking to uncover at work in the history of Western metaphysics and religion and combat, notably an attitude of revenge toward life, including human life. Maudemarie Clark, for example, has argued that the overhuman repeats the same pattern that we find in the case of the ascetic ideal, in which human life is accorded value only to the extent that it is a means to something that brings about its negation. Daniel Conway has argued that Nietzsche’s conception of a ‘modernity-crushing’ overhuman “betrays a nihilistic commitment to the deficiency of the human condition” and is best seen as
simply part of the “dreamy, utopian” Nietzsche.\(^{22}\) He further argues that we “cheat” ourselves if we understand Nietzsche’s call for a revaluation of values as directed to a world-historical overhumanity. These commentators have wrestled with Nietzsche’s experiment and present critical thoughts concerning the overhuman that any conscientious reader of Nietzsche needs also to wrestle with and work though. However, the conception of the overhuman that I have identified as being at work in the free-spirit trilogy and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and which is highlighted in a highly dramatic manner in the 1881 sketch, shows that these criticisms not only lack purchase but are fundamentally misguided. The “ears” of these commentators are not attuned to what Nietzsche is attempting to show and teach us.

In Nietzsche, no appeal is made to a suprahistorical standard or measure of something we can call “human life.” The “human condition” is not deficient for any metaphysical or extrahistorical reason. Moreover, the overhuman does not simply concern itself with the human condition; rather, it is Nietzsche’s response to the event that has befallen humanity (the death of God and the advent of nihilism, the need now to perform the revaluation of all values, and so on). In other words, the overhuman is rooted in the deepest concerns of Nietzsche’s philosophy and bound up with the various tasks that this philosophy—conceived as tasks that constitute something we can call a *Nietzschean* philosophy—is aiming to promote. Treating Nietzsche’s doctrines in abstract and ahistorical terms has the result that they are degraded to eccentricities and idle curiosities and cannot serve as fundamental teachings. Nietzschean thought is an attempt to be equal to what constitutes the event of our modernity, and it is this that motivates and informs the call for an over-humanity. The overhuman meaning of the earth is not to be fashioned *ex nihilo* but out of our knowledge of man, of what he has become and of what he may still become of him as the yet undetermined animal (*BGE* 62); at the same time, creating the overhuman takes the risk of the decision (that of giving meaning, see *Z*:1 “Of the Gift-giving Virtue”). The overhuman is now to become the meaning of the earth in the sense that our becoming equal to the demands of our modernity requires the coming into existence of a new (post-metaphysical) people (*Z*:3 “Of Old and New Law-Tables,” especially 25).

Eugen Fink has, I believe, provided the decisive insight that helps us grasp what is, ultimately, at work in Nietzsche’s thinking of the eternal return of the overhuman. It is what I would call the *return of our historical singularity*. Fink argues that Nietzsche’s revolution is to conceive of time as eternal in positing transience as permanence and singularity as recurrence. This means that recurrence is not opposed to singularity but rather eternalizes it, giving it a concrete existence and an infinite dimension.\(^{23}\) Nietzsche situates his teaching of the overhuman in the specific historical context of the possible coming into being of a postmetaphysical people. Nietzsche’s teaching places the stress on the singularity of this event within human history and its eternal repetition. We moderns are to feel the weight of this and not be oppressed by it.
Midday or noontide is Nietzsche’s symbol for eternity that symbolizes both the moment of the occurrence of the eternal return and the decision that is to be made concerning the future “mastery” of the earth. Why does Zarathustra chas-tise the dwarf for treating the thought too lightly? (Z:3 “Of the Vision and the Riddle” 2). Where the dwarf goes wrong is in fixing his gaze on the circle and losing site of the singularity of the moment that makes the circle appear. The moment calls the future into being and redeems the past, and it is this moment that heralds the eternal return of the same. The dwarf does not experience the urgency of this insight. The eternal circulation of all things is marked by a set of singular becomings and events, including our overhuman becoming and event. The eternal recurrence of the same entails the return of singularities, including the singularity that is to prove so decisive for the future of the human. Now we can hear Nietzsche’s voice and conscience when he writes: “He who has grown wise concerning old origins, behold, he will at last seek new springs of the future and new origins [. . .] it will not be long before new peoples shall arise and new springs rush down into new depths [. . .] He who discovered the country of ‘Man’ also discovered the country of ‘Human Future’” (Z:3 “Of Old and New Law-Tables” 25, 28).

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Editions of Nietzsche Used


I have often modified the available translations in my citations:


Notes

1. As is well known, Nietzsche uses two terms, sometimes interchangeably, for his teaching: die ewige Wiederkunft (from the verb kommen, to come) and die ewige Wiederkehr (from the verb kehren, to turn). In the first 1881 sketch, Nietzsche presents the teaching as one of Wiederkunft; in the “Lenzer Heide” notebook on European nihilism of 1887, it is given first as one of Wiederkehr and then as Wiederkunft. The difference also operates in the presentation in Twilight of the Idols, “What I Owe to the Ancients,” sections 4 and 5. In his translation of TI, Duncan Large follows Walter Kaufmann and translates the two expressions as “eternal return” and “eternal
recurrence,” respectively (R. J. Hollingdale’s translation of the text translates both as “eternal recurrence”). However, there appears to be no consensus on this issue among translators. Joan Stambaugh, for example, translates *Wiederkunft* as *return* and *Wiederkehr* as *recurrence*, and conceives the difference as follows: where ‘return’ stresses a going back and a completion of movement, ‘recurrence’ stresses another occurrence and the beginning of a movement, with recurrence being closer in meaning to repetition than return. She makes the further contentious claim that when he is addressing the nihilistic form of the thought Nietzsche uses the term *Wiederkehr* (which she translates as ‘recurrence’) and reserves *Wiederkunft* (which she translates as ‘return’) for its more positive form. Although I am not convinced that this is what is at play in the doubling of *Wiederkehr* and *Wiederkunft* we encounter in Nietzsche, it is an issue well worth chewing over. It can be noted, however, that in *Ecce Homo*, where Nietzsche names eternal return as the highest formula of affirmation attainable, he uses the word *Wiederkunft* for his thought. When Zarathustra’s animals declare that Zarathustra’s destiny (*Schicksal*) is to be and to become the teacher of the teaching, the term used in the text is *ewige Wiederkunft* (Z:3 “The Convalescent” 2). In a private communication, Andreas Sommer has pointed out to me that whereas *Wiederkehr* is a possible equivalent for *Rückkehr* (return), *Wiederkunft* is not such a synonym but rather is a word from Christian eschatology (it is the word used in German when speaking of the “Second Coming” of Christ, as Nietzsche is well aware, see *AC* 41). In this essay I have chosen to refer to Nietzsche’s thought as “eternal return” for the most part. For Stambaugh’s argument, see Nietzsche’s Thought of Eternal Return (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1972), 30ff., and more recently, “All Joy Wants Eternity,” Nietzsche-Studien 33 (2004): 335–42.

2. KSA 9: 11[141]. The first complete translation of this sketch will appear in K. Ansell Pearson and Duncan Large, eds., The Nietzsche Reader (Oxford & Malden, MA: Basil Blackwell, 2005). The translation, which I have slightly modified, is by Duncan Large and copyright resides with the editors. It should not be used without permission of the editors. Heidegger quotes only the first part of the sketch (points 1–5) in his reading of it in his lecture course. David Krell translates several parts of the sketch without providing a complete translation in his highly instructive reading of Nietzsche’s “Notebook M III 1.” See Martin Heidegger, Nietzsche. Volume Two; The Eternal Recurrence of the Same, trans. David Farrell Krell (New York, Harper and Row, 1984), 74–75; and David Farrell Krell, Infectious Nietzsche (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 158–77, see esp. 162–64. My debt to the exegetical work of Heidegger and Krell is duly acknowledged.


5. See editor’s note to Heidegger, Nietzsche: Volume Two, 75.


7. Of course, we can appreciate that for a thinker like Heidegger this amounts to living in an authentic ‘historical’ (geschichtlich) manner; however, my reading simply seeks to be in accord with the sense Nietzsche gives the historical and the unhistorical (das Unhistorische/das Historisch) in his second untimely meditation: “Cheerfulness, the good conscience, the joyful deed, confidence in the future—all of them depend [. . .] on the existence of a line dividing the
bright and the discernible from the unilluminable and dark; as on one’s being just as able to forget at the right time as to remember at the right time; on the possession of a powerful instinct for sensing when it is necessary to feel historically and when unhistorically” (HL 1).


9. See also Z:2 “Of the Way of the Creator”: “Can you furnish yourself with your own good and evil and hang up your own will above yourself as a law? Can you be judge of yourself and avenger of your law? It is terrible to be alone and the judge and avenger of one’s own law. It is to be like a star thrown forth into empty space and into the icy breath of solitude.”


11. Very few readers of Nietzsche have been able to appreciate eternal return on this level. See Heidegger, Nietzsche. Volume Two, 129–30, 148–49; and Stambaugh, Nietzsche’s Thought of Eternal Return, 37ff., 62–63.

12. That our love of life is no longer a simple or straightforward affair is made clear by Nietzsche in the preface to the second edition of The Gay Science.


18. As Fink noted, this discourse “is of the utmost importance,” Nietzsche’s Philosophy, 79. See also the excellent reading of it in Laurence Lampert, Nietzsche’s Teaching: An Interpretation of “Thus Spoke Zarathustra” (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 173–80.

19. The enigma of the “once only” is presented by Nietzsche in volume 1 of Human, All Too Human (586) and The Gay Science (339). I have sought to bring its character to light in a chapter devoted to it in my recent book, How to Read Nietzsche (London: Granta Press, 2005).


21. Maudemarie Clark, Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 273. Clark’s concern with Nietzsche’s overhuman ‘ideal’ is whether it expresses a need for revenge and so remains bound up with the (metaphysical) spirit Nietzsche’s thinking seeks to overcome. See esp. 275–77.


23. Eugen Fink, Nietzsche’s Philosophy, 91.