



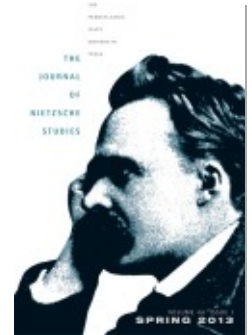
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Back to the Future: Eternal Recurrence and the Death of Socrates

TOM STERN

One sense in which *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* might indeed be a book “for none” is that none of us can agree what it says. But in the last few decades it seems that certain questions have achieved some recognition as questions that the Zarathustra commentator might want to answer. These questions look something like this: Is it really Nietzsche’s most philosophically significant book (as he sometimes claims)? How does it fit together with his other books? Is part IV an embarrassing addition or a central and indispensable conclusion to the book? Is there a coherent conception of the *Übermensch*? Does Nietzsche consider the latter desirable or even possible? Does Zarathustra? What is the Eternal Recurrence—a cosmological doctrine or a thought experiment (or something else)? How does the *Übermensch* (apparently associated with progress) fit together with the Eternal Recurrence (apparently associated with the impossibility of meaningful progress)?

The answers to these questions may depend on the answers to deeper questions about how one approaches Nietzsche in general. Do we think of him as the kind of philosopher who buries faintly perceptible clues deep within his works (even those written years apart), which only the bravest and boldest Nietzsche scholars are able to pick out and reassemble? Do we think that the unpublished notes form a kind of “subconscious” in relation to the “conscious” published works, such that scholars can casually dip into the former to reveal what Nietzsche was *really* thinking in the latter? Do we view Nietzsche as a philosopher who changed his mind frequently about important issues or as a philosopher who had one (very complicated) idea and spent his working life trying to express it? In other words, in Isaiah Berlin’s terms, was he a hedgehog (that is, he does one thing very well) or a fox (he does many things fairly well)? Berlin, incidentally, thought hedgehog.¹

The connections between answers to the second set of questions and answers to the first set of questions may or may not be obvious. If you think that Nietzsche was, broadly speaking, a consistent philosopher with a single message, then the fact that the *Übermensch* and the Eternal Recurrence virtually drop out of his writing after *Z* becomes a matter of significant intrigue. If they seem so important here, then why not there? Perhaps they really *are* somehow “present” in the later works, but we need a special interpretation to see why. And so

on. If you think of him as changing his mind, then you might just think that he got interested in other things and moved on. The same basic question may also motivate one's attitude to the unpublished notes. If Nietzsche, hedgehog-like, struggles to reveal his one great insight, then the notes and the published works are both simply evidence of that one great struggle. But if we see Nietzsche, like the fox, chasing after different goals in different ways, adapting and changing his mind, then perhaps what he chooses to publish takes on a kind of significance that it otherwise might not. It might matter *when* he said it and whether or not he finalized it for publication. This then feeds into the Zarathustra questions: much of Nietzsche's writing about the Eternal Recurrence shows up in unpublished notes. These are the only place in which Nietzsche toys with an explicit "proof" of Eternal Recurrence. To some, this must hold the key to understanding *Z*. To others, it is an interesting piece of trivia. After all, if he had a proof, why didn't he publish it? Or (for those who think that traces of the proof are found in *Z*) why did he choose to publish it as part of an obscure dialogue between an ancient Persian prophet and a crippled, talking half-dwarf half-mole? Was his claim that he was only to be understood years later an oblique reference to the fact that the answers were in his diaries? Similarly for the significance of his remarks about the importance of *Z*, even if he claims in one place that it's his most important book, should we treat this as an oracular proclamation or the offhand comment of a philosopher who regularly falls prey to the charming habit of getting a bit carried away?

It often seems to some as though accepting the (fox-like) deflationary answers to these questions admits to a kind of failure on Nietzsche's part—as if people are only worth talking to when they have one big idea. I confess to taking the opposite view: namely, that Nietzsche (and perhaps this goes for the rest of us, too) is at his most interesting when trying out new things, turning on his older views, reworking them, adapting them. *Flip-flopping* is not a derogatory term for a philosopher. The invitation to read Nietzsche as a philosopher who first of all figures it all out and then expresses this "it" in a series of rather cryptic messages hidden away in his obscurest books (and notes) strikes me as the philosophical equivalent of an invitation to visit King Ubu's pocket.

I began by listing some questions that commentators seem to agree are the important ones to answer in relation to *Z*. It is with admiration, therefore, that I note that Paul S. Loeb's *The Death of Nietzsche's Zarathustra* attempts to answer every single one. Not only that. There are two further aspects to admire. First, that he does so while addressing all the while a third cluster of problems that beset the Zarathustra commentator—namely, the immense constellation of references to other works. From the opening pages of the book, it is clear that Nietzsche is aiming at, not to mention competing with, the two great traditions: the Greek and the Christian. He also uses Zarathustra as an attempt to predate them—to get back to something *before* Socrates and Christ, to undermine them. Readers

will be grateful to Loeb for the way that he sets out some of these connections (and he could hardly be expected to set them all out). Particularly noteworthy are the remarks connecting the famous and confusing “moment” described in the Zarathustra/dwarf conversation with the Faustian “moment” (see Z III “On the Vision and the Riddle”).² The latter alludes to the deal Faust makes, according to which Mephistopheles is freed from Faust’s service just when Faust gets attached to any particular “moment.” When this in fact occurs, Faust describes it as his “highest moment.” That there is a significant exegetical connection between Zarathustra’s attempt to affirm the eternal moment and Faust’s wager seems to me to be beyond doubt.³ Loeb’s book is full of such insights.

The second cause for admiration regarding the way that Loeb answers the first set of questions is that as well as setting himself the task of answering all of them, he does so in almost every case by taking the path of *greatest* resistance. Roughly, looking back to my initial set of questions, Loeb wants to answer them like this: yes; perfectly; the latter; yes; both; yes; the former; perfectly. So that is a yes to the cosmological doctrine of Eternal Recurrence, a yes to the pre-eminence of *Z*, and a yes to the perfect compatibility of the Eternal Recurrence and the *Übermensch*. In part, as I have suggested, this may relate to Loeb’s implicit answers to the second set of questions I mentioned—those answers being yes, yes, yes. The commitment to a unified thought in Nietzsche’s later work would make it harder to accept conflict between Eternal Recurrence and the *Übermensch*—two apparently central Nietzschean notions. And why would Nietzsche say that *Z* is the most important book if that weren’t the case? Or (in the unpublished notes) that there might be a cosmological proof of the Eternal Recurrence if that weren’t the case?

Nonetheless, answering the first set of questions in the way that Loeb does requires some impressive interpretative work. For example, interpreting *Z* without part IV is much easier: for a start, the writing is obscure even by the standards of this obscure work. More importantly, the very end of part III looks like a very good end to the whole book (as Loeb admits).⁴ Zarathustra expresses his love for eternity. This fits perfectly, say, with those interpretations that see Zarathustra as learning about Eternal Recurrence somewhere at the end of part II or the beginning of part III and spending most of part III getting to grips with that terrible thought. Finally, at the end, he does. Except it doesn’t end there. A more satisfying reading would certainly explain why that is. Loeb’s interpretation is new and interesting: in a sense, the book *does* end at part III. That sense is chronological. The action of part IV takes place *before* that of part III and must be read in that light. So Zarathustra’s final confirmation of eternity (end of part III) *does* come after he leaves his cave, glowing and strong, waiting for the arrival of his children (end of part IV). The further claim is that Zarathustra actually dies between parts III and IV. This is backed up in Loeb’s interpretation with reference to both the (tragic) Greek and Christian (gospel) traditions—namely, of a kind

of coda part that involves a resurrection at the end.⁵ Of course, Zarathustra is not literally resurrected, but he is shown in a past time, and given the (cosmically true) Eternal Recurrence of all things, what is in the past is also in a sense in the future too. The move from part III to part IV takes us back to the future, or forward to the past, or both. Hence, a typically Nietzschean resurrection story that is a marriage of different traditions: something old (Greek, tragic), something new (the doctrine of Eternal Recurrence), and something borrowed (from John's gospel), all of which culminates in the opening of book 4, with Zarathustra's animals asking him about his "sky-blue lake of happiness" (Z IV "The Honey Sacrifice").

In case the reader is wondering how he or she might possibly have missed this obvious solution to the part IV problem, I simply note that it does not sit very well with, among other things, the opening sentence of part IV: "— And again moons and years passed over Zarathustra's soul and he took no notice of it; but his hair had turned white" (Z IV "The Honey Sacrifice"). It is not hard to read this as indicating that a long time has elapsed (indeed, it is hard not to), in the pedestrian sense of Zarathustra *getting older* (rather than in the sense that it passes toward the next great cycle of recurrence). Interpretations like those Loeb provides are not really the kinds of things that one can refute with one reference, so readers should consult his book for the extensive arguments he provides.

Perhaps I should add one more cause for admiration in Loeb's writings. It is not just that he thinks that there is one central notion in Nietzsche, which gives the hardest answers to those questions. He thinks that he has found that central notion. The introduction to Loeb's book is called "The Clue to the Riddles." Riddles have solutions—or, in this case, one solution. That is the *Grundconception* of the Eternal Recurrence. For Loeb, once the Eternal Recurrence is correctly understood, everything else—really, everything—falls into place. Loeb's interpretation therefore stands or falls with his version of the Eternal Recurrence. The remainder of this piece amounts to an attempt to push that interpretation in places where it may need closer attention.

Although a full exposition of Loeb's Eternal Recurrence would be impossible here, we can begin to grasp one key element rather quickly. One big mistake in other interpretations, he thinks, is to imagine the Eternal Recurrence on a linear or, perhaps better, iterative model. That is, we think that one instantiation occurs at T1, and then reoccurs identically at T2, and then reoccurs identically at T3, and so on. For Loeb, the mistake here is to think that the world can recur without *time itself* recurring. The idea of the T2 recurrence taking place *after* the T1 recurrence presupposes an overall temporal structure, in which one iteration can happen before or after another. In fact, if *everything* recurs, then one occurrence doesn't take place *after* another. One is reminded here of some of the early church arguments about the creation of the world. What was God doing before he created the world? One answer (as in Augustine's *Confessions*): well there wasn't a "before," because he created time when he created the world.

Loeb clearly thinks that this revision solves one of the key problems associated with the Eternal Recurrence—namely, the determinism (or “who cares?”) problem. Starting with the assumption that finding out about the Eternal Recurrence is meant to have a significant effect on one’s decision making, the problem goes like this: Eternal Recurrence entails that I have lived my self-same life countless times before. So I have found out about the Eternal Recurrence countless times before. And either this discovery changed my life or it didn’t. As for which, there is nothing I can *do about it* now. Loeb gives a quotation from Ridley, which puts the point rather well: “If I passed the test I passed, if I failed I failed, and I’ll go on doing whichever I did infinitely many more times, without it changing a thing. The thought of the Eternal Recurrence, then, should be a matter of complete indifference.”⁶ Loeb’s response to this is familiar from compatibilist arguments in the free will versus determinism debates: “[T]here is no contradiction in supposing that the revelation of my life’s Eternal Recurrence could leave me to overturn my life now so as to spare no means in searching out and doing whatever gives me the highest feeling. ‘Fated’ change—or change that must agree exactly with innumerable corresponding changes in the past—is still change.”⁷

Well, yes, one finds oneself thinking—but it is still *fated*. Ridley does not say that you cannot change in relation to how you were before you found out; he says that you cannot change in relation to how you changed last time around. For Loeb, the fact that it was always “you” who changed yourself in the past makes the fact that you cannot change any differently this time around a matter of indifference. It is still you changing, after all. In fact, using his new concept of Eternal Recurrence, Loeb sometimes suggests that it does not make sense to think of a previous “you” in the past making the decision at all.⁸ To do so would fall back on the linear model he already rejected. There was no you before, because there was no before at all. I cannot really see how this moves the debate forward, given that Loeb still freely admits that each time you (and time itself) restart, you do in fact do the very same things (even if doing so is not *determined by* what you did “the time before,” because there is not a time before). For Ridley, the fact that *at no point in any of this* was there ever any possibility of responding to the news of Eternal Recurrence any differently makes the news itself a matter of indifference. After all, it is not as though Loeb thinks that, when time restarts, things might actually turn out differently.

Which side of this debate you end up siding with may depend upon what you think a “choice” or a “change” is. One might think that a choice implies exactly the kind of open future that is denied by either Loeb’s or the standard (linear, iterative) version of Eternal Recurrence. There is little doubt that this is how most nonphilosophers would think about a choice. Or one might think that a choice is just the product of some (perhaps deliberative) psychological processes—hence it makes sense to think of myself choosing in exactly the same

way each time around. My response is twofold: first, to side instinctively with Ridley; second, to think that the debate itself rather misses the point. As I said at the start of this discussion, prevalent throughout Loeb's analysis of the determinism problem (and that of the many other commentators he mentions along the way) is the assumption that what is important about Eternal Recurrence is the effect it might have on the *choices* we make or, more broadly, the effect it might have on the individual once that particular individual has found out about it. Here I am, going about my day, when along comes a demon and tells me about the Eternal Recurrence. What do I *do* in response? How are my *decisions* affected? What *choices* do I make as a result? It is, according to this view, the individual way in which I in fact respond to this news that determines whether or not I have the appropriate attitude, worldview, and so on. Hence the obsession with the significance of the determinism necessitated by the demon's message. Nietzsche wants us to think about what choices we would make in the context of a new piece of information, which (for Ridley) negates any significance in those "choices." For Loeb, on the other hand, that we *can* make choices in the context of the Eternal Recurrence will turn out to be significant for Zarathustra's "courageous decision" to talk about Eternal Recurrence.⁹

I do not actually think Nietzsche cared about what *choices* you would make in response to the news of the Eternal Recurrence. Recall, to begin with, the glorious skepticism Nietzsche presents, early and late in his writing, about the notion of a deliberative action in general. Often (maybe mostly, maybe even always) we just do things and then invent the reasons afterward. This occurs on an everyday level, but recall that it also occurs when it comes to bigger-picture attitudes and worldviews. Christianity is a kind of disease, Nietzsche says. Socratic philosophy is an expression of mental decadence. You cannot refute these things with arguments. Or with demonic cosmology.

Instead, what Nietzsche is asking us to consider is, in general, the *kind* of person for whom this news would be good or bad. Who, if told about Eternal Recurrence, would feel frustrated? Well, not Greek heroes like Achilles. Speaking from Hades, he tells Odysseus that he would prefer to work as a slave to a nobody than to be the lord of all the dead below.¹⁰ Better a worm up there (on Earth), than a king down here (in Hades). For Achilles, being alive forever in this (our) life would be better than being king in the next world. What about Plato? Notice that these remarks of Achilles are precisely the quotes he (via Socrates) hysterically tries to ban in *The Republic*.¹¹ The guardians should think of human life as insignificant and of death as leading to something better. So the Eternal Recurrence would be bad news for them, because it denies this possibility—the possibility of something better after you die. There is nothing better after you die; there is just the same thing again and again. For Christians, of course, Satan is the lord of this world, and Jesus is the lord of the next. So finding out that you are stuck in this one means finding out that you are stuck with Satan forever. This is the

direct opposite of Achilles's message—Achilles, recall, explicitly rejects playing the Jesus role of Lord of the Next World. Referring back to Loeb's Faust insight, this division may help to explain why Faust falls on the affirmative side of the line. Recall what he says as he enters the pact: "Aus dieser Erde quillen meine Freuden."¹² So Eternal Recurrence is good news for Faust, then.

This kind of typology has nothing to do with individual choice, and it completely sidesteps the determinism problem. We are not interested in what some particular person would in fact *do* if he or she came to believe in Eternal Recurrence. We just want to know, when it comes to major worldviews, which side those worldviews seem to be on. In *Z*, Zarathustra calls a certain group of people the "hinterworldly" (*ZI* "Of the hinterworldly"). They invent fictional worlds beyond our own in which to live out a fantasy existence. Of course, the hinterworldly are, quite literally, "meta-physicians"—in fact they are precisely those who fail the Eternal Recurrence test. The one thing you know if everything repeats again and again is that there will be no "hinterworlds"—no worlds beyond. It was my contention in a different essay that *Z* tells a story of Zarathustra coming to understand that his initial views (on the *Übermensch* in particular) fall on the side of the hinterworldly—that is, with Plato, against Achilles.¹³

One important question for Loeb is where Socrates is to be found on this scale. This is not just a question about how one interesting philosopher thinks about another. Loeb reads three successive aphorisms from *The Gay Science* together: 340—"The dying Socrates"; 341—"The heaviest weight"—in which Eternal Recurrence is invoked by the demon; and 342—"incipit tragoedia"—the opening of *Z*. A crucial interpretative point for Loeb is that Nietzsche is asking us to imagine the Eternal Recurrence demon (of 341) actually appearing to Socrates (in 340) and asking him the Eternal Recurrence question. I have already said that, for me, the actual asking of and responding to this question are not terribly important—what is important is, structurally, the kind of attitude toward Eternal Recurrence that a person's worldview already betrays. There is no doubt that Socrates looks like someone who fails. This is true both from what he says in Plato's dialogues (about death, the afterlife, and the insignificance of this world—as in the remarks in the *Republic*, mentioned above) and from his dying words, which Nietzsche talks about both here at *GS* 340 and, in more detail, in *Twilight of the Idols*.

Loeb is not merely suggesting that Socrates is an interesting case of failure. In his view, we are to conclude from reading these aphorisms together that the demon *always* asks his question at the moment of death; further, we are to imagine Socrates's *daemon* asking this question to him in *GS* 340 as he dies. Finally, for Loeb, the asking of the Eternal Recurrence question leads Socrates to make an important confession—about which more in a moment. None of this is specified, or at all evident, in *GS* 341. Loeb notes (among other things), however, that "the moment of the demon's revelation is specified at the start

as coming some day or night, an odd vagueness that may well refer to the idea that death can come at any time.”¹⁴ This, apparently, connects it with the death of Socrates in the previous section. Readers will have to decide for themselves what standards of evidence they wish to apply to interpretations of Nietzsche’s work. On the one hand, it is never going to be easy. On the other hand, claims like this must be recognized as at best rather weak; Loeb does display a tendency to assume that we are all on board with these kinds of inferences. It is true that he finds many of them; but one wonders whether, below a certain standard, more evidence like this does not actually make a more convincing case. Two copies of the same newspaper do not amount to twice the evidence.

Socrates’s important confession is revealed in his final words, in which (according to the *Phaedo*) he asks Crito to sacrifice a rooster to Asclepius. This is what one does when one gets better from an illness. The point, for Nietzsche, is that the illness Socrates is talking about can only be *life*. Socrates repeatedly denigrates this-worldly values. He is in a good position to do so, after all, having just proved the immortality of the soul. Now, in death, he is moving on to a healthier life. This, of course, is vintage hinterworldly behavior. For Nietzsche, then, Socrates’s final words are really best understood as “O Crito, life is a disease.” In *TI*, this turns into a discussion of the absurdity of making judgments about life as a whole. You *cannot* make judgments about the value of life in general, because, like Donny, you have no frame of reference here. So a negative judgment about life as a whole is nothing more than a sigh and cannot be taken seriously as a philosophical position.

For Loeb, Socrates’s confession that life is a sickness is forced out of him by the demon’s revelation of Eternal Recurrence, which comes at the moment of his death. One problem with this interpretation is that Nietzsche lists four possible non-demon-related, non-Eternal-Recurrence-related reasons why Socrates might have eventually made such a confession: death, poison, piety, malice. Loeb’s response is not overly convincing: “[W]hen in 340 Nietzsche lists possible causes of Socrates loosening his dying tongue to condemn life—death, poison, piety, malice—we may infer that he intends us to add to this list the possibility of the demon’s revelation described in the following section.”¹⁵ Nietzsche mentions four possible causes (none of which is Loeb’s favored cause) and expresses doubt about which was correct. For Loeb, this is meant to invite us to conclude, with certainty, that a fifth, unmentioned cause is really responsible. As for the use of *infer* in Loeb’s sentence, I can only repeat what I said a moment ago about our standard of evidence when interpreting Nietzsche’s writing.

Nonetheless, there is a further and more decisive reason for rejecting Loeb’s interpretation. Socrates *effectively* says that life is a sickness. If you found out about the Eternal Recurrence and got very upset, you might well turn to your old

friend Crito and say (as Loeb would have it): “Crito, life is a sickness; I don’t want to go through all this sickness again.” But Socrates doesn’t actually *utter the words* “life is a sickness.” He tells Crito to sacrifice the rooster to Asclepius for him. Sacrificing the rooster is what you do when you get *better*. Getting better from the sickness that is life *just means leaving it*. Of course, the one thing you cannot do in the context of Eternal Recurrence is leave life. That is why it is such bad news for people like Socrates, for the Hinterworldly. So Socrates most definitely is not saying “sacrifice the rooster” as a result of hearing about Eternal Recurrence. If he had heard about Eternal Recurrence, I imagine he would turn to Crito and say: “Crito, whatever you do, don’t bother sacrificing that rooster to Asclepius. I’m not getting better from this disease. I shall be sick forever.” As it is, Socrates thinks he will get better, that is, escape into a different world, a hinterworld. He has never heard of Eternal Recurrence.¹⁶

If the reader finds this kind of discussion a little too hung up on minor details, then he or she should note, first, that this is the level at which much of Loeb’s book is working and it demands this kind of response. Second, these very close, rather speculative readings of different passages slowly build upon one another to form an intricate and unified interpretation. The linking of *GS* 340–42, which fails for the reasons just given, is used as a foundation, for example, in Loeb’s analysis of the dwarf passage, in which the thought of the Eternal Recurrence is spelled out (*Z* III “On the Vision and the Riddle”). The dwarf becomes for Loeb the “Socratic type.”¹⁷ This in turn builds to the conclusion that, when the dwarf tells Zarathustra that “time itself is a circle,” what is really going on is that Zarathustra is telling the dwarf that “time is a circle.” Although he acknowledges its subtlety, Loeb almost seems surprised that this “essential point [. . .] is missed by most scholars who write about the exchange.”¹⁸ By the end of chapter 4, we are led to believe that in writing *Z* Nietzsche “re-enacts the death of Socrates and stages a world-historic agon between the dying Socrates and the dying Zarathustra.”¹⁹ All of this can be traced back to the misreading of *GS* 340–42 and some heavy reliance on an unpublished note in which Nietzsche appears to connect Plato with the Eternal Recurrence.²⁰

I doubt that any of these problems is really insurmountable for Loeb on his own terms, especially given the kinds of interpretative moves he is willing to endorse. I should stress, too, that leaps of faith in Nietzsche interpretation are not something to be ashamed of. They are a necessary part of trying to spell out what we think is important about this important philosopher. But the rapidity with which we find such leaps in Loeb’s book and its ambitious scope combine to form a piece of interpretation that is unlikely to find many supporters.

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NOTES

1. Isaiah Berlin, "The Hedgehog and the Fox," in *Russian Thinkers* (London: Penguin Books, 1994), 22–81.
2. Quotes are from Adrian Del Caro's translation of *Z* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
3. Paul S. Loeb, *The Death of Nietzsche's Zarathustra* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 42–44.
4. *Ibid.*, 115.
5. See, e.g., *ibid.*, 114–15.
6. A. Ridley, "Nietzsche's Greatest Weight," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 14 (1997): 20, quoted in Loeb, *Death of Nietzsche's Zarathustra*, 23.
7. Loeb, *Death of Nietzsche's Zarathustra*, 23.
8. *Ibid.*, 29.
9. *Ibid.*, 62.
10. *Odyssey* 11.489–91.
11. *Republic* 386c.
12. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust*, l. 1663—"My joys come from this Earth."
13. T. Stern, "Nietzsche on Context and the Individual," *Nietzscheforschung* 15 (2008): 299–315.
14. Loeb, *Death of Nietzsche's Zarathustra*, 34.
15. *Ibid.*, 37.
16. In actual fact, Socrates's suicide is a source of admiration for Nietzsche. I discuss this further, and give a different interpretation of the dying Socrates, in "Nietzsche, Freedom, and Writing Lives," *Arion* 27, no. 1 (2009): 85–110.
17. Loeb, *Death of Nietzsche's Zarathustra*, 51–54.
18. *Ibid.*, 54.
19. *Ibid.*, 83.
20. *Ibid.*, 82. The note is at *KSA* 10:8[15].