

5 Nietzsche's Ethics of Self-Cultivation and Eternity¹

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One of Nietzsche's great laments about modern philosophy is that it has forgotten or rejected the ethics of self-cultivation: 'Woe to the thinker who is not the gardener but only the soil of the plants that grow in him!' (*D* 382). Among his favourite analogues of self-cultivation was the art of horticulture: 'We have the ability to cultivate our temperament as a gardener' (*KSA* 9:7 [211]).² 'One can dispose of one's drives' as he explains 'like a gardener and, though few know it, cultivate the shoots of anger, pity, curiosity, vanity as productively and profitably as a beautiful fruit tree on a trellis' (*D* 560). Nietzsche maintains that we are at liberty to cultivate our 'temperament', or the order and dynamics of our drives, yet modern philosophers have neglected this art. By failing to become the gardener of our drives, he warns, they risk falling into philosophical pessimism (*D* 382). He conceives pessimism as the result of a lack of self-cultivation (*D* 382). Our 'morose and grey' pessimistic '*conclusions*,' he maintains, derive from failing to cultivate our drives, not from the exercise of pure, disembodied reason (*D* 382).

Nietzsche feared that the modern professionalisation of philosophy had swept aside this ethics of self-cultivation. Modern philosophy, he complained, had become a purely theoretical discipline detached from and oblivious to the ancient model of philosophy as a way of life. Professional philosophers aimed at 'systematic' theoretical knowledge or the critique of such systems, not at the realisation of a way of life. Nietzsche saw it as his task to reclaim self-cultivation as central to philosophy conceived as an art of living. 'The only critique of philosophy that is possible and that proves something, namely trying to see whether one can live in accordance with it,' he asserted 'has never been taught at universities: all that has been taught is a critique of words by means of other words' (*SE* 8).

It is in the context of Nietzsche's untimely project of reviving the ancient ethics of self-cultivation that we need to understand his famous doctrine of eternal recurrence of the same. He identifies as one of his foundational 'meta-philosophical' principles Goethe's statement: 'I hate everything that merely instructs me without augmenting or directly invigorating my own activity' (*HL* 2: 1). It follows therefore that he must conceive eternal recurrence among other things as a practice that stimulates self-cultivation. In

fact in one of his characteristically grandiose moments he identified it as 'the great cultivating thought' in the sense that it might weed out those too weak to bear the thought of living again (WP 1053). In a more tempered fashion, however, he framed the thought of recurrence as part of an ethics of self-cultivation and self-transformation: 'If you incorporate this thought within you, amongst your other thoughts' he maintains 'it will transform you. If for everything you wish to do you begin by asking yourself: 'Am I certain I want to do this an infinite number of times?' this will become for you the greatest weight' (KSA 9:11 [143]). Eternity plays a key role in his ethics of self-cultivation.

Nietzsche links together the thought of eternity and self-transformation in the famous penultimate section of *The Gay Science*:

The heaviest weight.—What if some day or night a demon [Dämon] were to steal into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: 'This life as you now live it and have lived it you will have to live once again and innumerable times again; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unspeakably small or great in your life must return to you, all in the same succession and sequence—even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned over again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!' Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: 'You are a god, and never have I heard anything more divine.' If this thought gained power over you, as you are it would transform and possibly crush you; the question in each and every thing, 'Do you want this again and innumerable times again?' would lie on your actions as the heaviest weight! Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to long for nothing more fervently than for this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?

(GS 341)

This chapter examines Nietzsche's suggestion that the thought of the eternal recurrence plays an important role in the ethics of self-cultivation. Section 1 explains his conception of the overall telos of self-cultivation. What kind of self does he wish to cultivate? I argue that Nietzsche's ethics values above all else the cultivation of the self as a unique, immortal artwork. The great work of art is his model of the affirmative life. Nietzsche suggests that those who artistically fashion their own unique, unrepeatable life wish for its eternal repetition. Nietzsche's ethics of self-cultivation idealises creating a life for ourselves that we would wish to live again and again such that we also wish that eternal recurrence were *literally* true. Eternal recurrence is, as it were, the wish fulfilment of those who have created their own lives.

Section 2 elaborates Nietzsche's account of how the thought of eternal recurrence not only expresses, but also cultivates the self as an artwork. It shows first how Nietzsche dramatises this doctrine as a motivational force for transforming our lives. It argues that he expresses the idea of eternal recurrence as the voice of what he calls our 'ownmost conscience, 'which decrees, 'You should become who you are' (GS 338, 270). Nietzsche's *Dämon* figures the thought of eternal recurrence as the expression of this ownmost conscience. By means of this framing, Nietzsche attempts to give recurrence a motivational force that compels us to cultivate ourselves in light of the imperative 'become who you are'. Second and relatedly it shows that Nietzsche conceives the thought of recurrence not as a theoretical doctrine that we simply need to understand, but as what we might call a 'spiritual exercise'. Nietzsche conceives the thought of recurrence as a particular spiritual exercise: viz., a meditation on the idea of our recurrence that incorporates this prospect into the way we conduct our lives. Third, it argues that Nietzsche's assumption that this spiritual exercise compels us to cultivate ourselves specifically as singular works of art hinges on his claim that individuals do in fact have the potential to become unique and incomparable selves and the romantic belief that the realisation of this end is the highest desideratum.

Section 3 examines the charge that Nietzsche ethics of self-cultivation generates deeply troubling normative concerns. I argue that these concerns about Nietzsche's 'ethics of eternity' flow from a failure to recognise its affective dimensions. Nietzsche famously debunks metaphysically grounded moralities on the grounds that we can give naturalistic explanations of the genesis, evolution, and uses of their principles.³ Nietzsche's naturalistic explanations also show that moral principles have an affective basis. 'Moralities' as he put it 'are only a sign-language of the emotions' (BGE 187). Once we acknowledge this explanatory framework we can see firstly how Nietzsche's ethics of self-cultivation lends itself to the cultivation of friendship. Nietzsche argues that joy necessarily flows from self-cultivation and that this affect establishes the conditions of friendship. If individuals take joy in themselves, he argues, then they have the affective capacity to relate to and cultivate others as particular individuals concerned with their own personal flourishing. Second, on the basis of this affective analysis of morality we can see how Nietzsche turns the tables on his critics. Nietzsche argues in effect that Kantian and Schopenhauerian moralities are antithetical to friendship: they diminish rather than cultivate others.

The Self as Singular & Immortal Artwork

If Nietzsche endorses an ethics of self-cultivation, what kind of self does it aim to cultivate? Nietzsche values above all else the cultivation of the self as a singular and immortal artwork. His celebration of artistic self-fashioning stretches back to *Schopenhauer as Educator* (1983b). The artist of life, as he put it, does not masquerade in borrowed fashions, but is 'uniquely himself to every last movement of his muscles' and in being

'strictly consistent in uniqueness he is beautiful' (SE 1). To become who one is, in Nietzsche's sense, requires that in the self we construct each 'movement' or part expresses what is unique to oneself, rather than what characterises the neighbour. Nietzsche suggests that giving style to oneself requires that we survey all the strengths and weaknesses of our own nature and then by means of 'long practice and daily work' fit all of its parts into an artistic plan (GS 290). For each of us, Nietzsche implies, what makes our lives worthy of eternity is living 'according to our own laws and standards' and in doing so shaping our nature so that it bears the 'monogram of our most essential individual essence, a work, a deed, an uncommon inspiration, a creation' (HL 3).

We can see how Nietzsche's celebrates cultivating the self as a singular, unrepeatable artwork in his reflections on death and immortality. 'It gives me a melancholy happiness' he writes in a postcard from Genoa 'to live in the midst of this jumble of lanes, needs and voices: how much enjoyment, impatience, desire; how much thirsty life and drunkenness of life comes to light every moment of the day!' (GS 278) Nietzsche takes this intoxicated Dionysian life as a measure of higher or healthier life against which he implicitly measures and condemns Platonism's ascetic desire for a transcendent world, the Epicurean and Stoic desire for tranquillity, and Schopenhauer's explicit morality of life-denial. In sharp contrast to philosophers these intoxicated people do not seek to purify their souls of embodied desires and passions, they do not make dying their profession, but rather intensely pursue these desires.

Nietzsche suggests that in general these 'life thirsty ones' live with such intensity that they rarely give any thought to their imminent death (GS 278). 'It makes me happy' he exclaims 'to see that [they] do not at all want to think the thought of death!' (GS 278). Nietzsche applauds their refusal to meditate on death because to do so is to become aware of their shared fate as mortals, of the fact that 'death and deathly silence are the only things common to all in this future!' (GS 278). If we think about death, Nietzsche maintains, we recognise that we are united in a 'brotherhood of death' (GS 278). In Nietzsche's judgement, when we contemplate death we become aware of our commonality or equality as mortal creatures. 'Ashes', as Seneca remarked, 'level all men' (Seneca 2001: 443).

Yet Nietzsche is happy because these passionate people 'are *farthest* removed from feeling like a brotherhood of death' and their 'commonality barely makes an impression on them' (GS 278). By applauding this popular refusal to meditate on death as the great leveller, Nietzsche lends his support to the focus on the individual pursuits and drives that separate or distinguish them from one another and a corresponding resistance to conceiving themselves in terms of a common humanity. Nietzsche writes that for those life thirsty people who are intoxicated by their own desires and goals he want to make the thought of life 'even a hundred times more *worth being thought*' (GS 278). If the thought of death demands acknowledgement of our common mortality, then its antithesis, what he calls the 'the thought of

life,' must concern what distinguishes us from one another. The 'beautiful meaning' we breathe into our life must be one that distinguishes us from all others (GS 303). For Nietzsche to think the thought of life must be to think about our distinctiveness and singularity. Nietzsche identifies the doctrine of eternal recurrence as this thought of life. It is, he claims, 'the sunshine of this doctrine' that enables a life devoted to self-fashioning to '*flourish* a hundred times more strongly' (KSA 11 [165]).

Nietzsche emphasises that we can immortalise ourselves through the creation of lives that we shape into singular, unrepeatable artworks. In his famous account of the doctrine of eternal recurrence Nietzsche observes that to celebrate our own recurrence we must become 'well disposed' towards our lives and ourselves (GS 341). For Nietzsche to become well disposed towards oneself requires creating ourselves as singular, unique individuals and giving this singularity a posthumous existence. Nietzsche identifies being well disposed towards oneself and life as a condition of wishing to repeat our lives.

Nietzsche illustrates what he means by this life-affirming disposition in brief in a portrait of aristocratic Genoese individuals. It is his allegory of the affirmative, self-fashioning life. For Nietzsche, how these individuals transformed their environment so that it bore their unique stamp is a model for how those who cultivate themselves must transform themselves into a singular work of art. Contemplating the magnificent villas and pleasure-gardens overlooking the bay of Portofino, Nietzsche reports that he sees in these a region dotted with 'images of bold and autocratic human beings' (GS 291). Nietzsche metaphorically describes these villas as '*faces*' to underscore his view that they express architecturally their unique, personal, unrepeatable essence. They have built, as he puts it, to express their 'superiority' and to place their 'personal infinity' between themselves and their neighbour (GS 291).

Nietzsche admires in great Genoese individuals their 'magnificent lust for possessions and spoils' that took shape through the incorporation and refashioning of their world so that it reflected their own 'personal infinity' (GS 291). Nietzsche stresses that their architectural styles expressed their singular individuality and their envious desire to destroy the old and impose on the world an image that reflected back to them nothing but their own unique identity. These life-loving individuals are only 'sated', as he explains, when they have put their own meaning into everything old and established and they see 'only what is their own and nothing alien appears to [their] eye' (GS 291). 'Each conquered his homeland again for himself' he observes 'by overwhelming it with his architectural ideas and refashioning it . . . into a house that was a feast for his eyes' (GS 291). Their affirmative life took shape as the desire to express their 'ownmost' self in an immortal works of art. These bold individuals, Nietzsche remarks,

have *lived* and wish to live on—this is what they are telling me with their houses, built and adorned to last for centuries and not for the

fleeting hour: they were well disposed towards life however badly disposed they often may have been towards themselves.

(GS 291)

While the Genoese became well disposed towards life by refashioning their world into an immortal expression of their singularity, Nietzsche suggests that self-cultivators must extend this to their own self. 'We should learn from artists' as he explains 'while otherwise being wiser than they. For usually in their case this delicate power stops where are ends and life begins; *we* however want to be poets of our lives' (GS 299). Nietzsche's ideal of self-cultivation requires then making of *oneself* a unique and immortal work of art.

In this way Nietzsche's ethics of self-cultivation echoes pre-Socratic notions of immortality. For the pre-Socratic Greeks, as Hannah Arendt observed, the distinctiveness of men among mortal creatures lies in the fact that 'individual life, with a recognisable life-story from birth to death, rises out of biological life' (Arendt 1958: 19). If nature guarantees members of a species eternity through cyclical recurrence, it cannot guarantee this to individuals qua individuals. 'This individual life' as she put it 'is distinguished from all other things by the rectilinear course of its movement, which, so to speak, cuts through the circular movement of biological life' (Arendt 1958: 19). On the pre-Socratic view, individuals can defy their mortal condition through the attainment of immortal greatness. As she explains it:

The task and the potential greatness of mortals lies in their ability to produce things . . . which would deserve to be . . . at home in everlastingness, so that through them mortals could find their place in a cosmos where everything is immortal except themselves. By their capacity for the immortal deed, by their ability to leave non-perishable traces behind, men, their individual mortality notwithstanding, attain an immortality of their own and prove themselves to be of a 'divine' nature.

(Arendt 1958: 19)

Against the Platonic philosophical notion of eternity (and the Christian notion of eternal salvation), and its condemnation of the vanity and vain-glory of transient appearances, Nietzsche strove to resuscitate the pre-Socratic striving for immortality through the creation of a unique self worthy of eternity. Nietzsche's affirmative life defies mortality, not by means of the Platonic and Christian flight from the 'vanity' of transient appearances, but through this task of creating the self as a singular and immortal work of art.

We can illuminate this point by contrasting Plato's Socrates and Nietzsche. On the one hand, Socrates conceives philosophy as a preparation for dying cheerfully, an exercise of purifying the soul of the burdens of the body so that at death it can escape the wheel of recurrence. The philosopher looks forward to death as liberation from eternally repeated embodied life. Socrates

maintains that death separates the philosophically purified soul from the body and its cycle of rebirth. He greets death cheerfully as the liberation from the eternal repetition of embodied life. If death does not liberate the philosophically purified soul from the eternal recurrence of the body, he argues, the philosopher's soul would be condemned 'once more to bondage, thus taking upon itself an endless task, like Penelope when she undid her own weaving' (Plato 1959: 137).

On the other hand, Nietzsche conceives his ethics of self-cultivation as teaching individuals to harmonise all the accidents of existence so that they become essential or necessary parts of a beautiful and singular whole. Following Nehamas, Rorty captured this aspect of Nietzsche's counter-Platonic ideal: '[Nietzsche] hoped that once we realised that Plato's 'true world' was just a fable, we would seek consolation . . . not in having transcended the animal condition, but in being that peculiar sort of dying animal who, by describing himself in his own terms, had created himself' (Rorty 1989: 27). As Nietzsche explained in a note from this period:

Let us etch the image of eternity upon *our* life. This thought contains far more than all those religions, which hold our present lives in contempt as being ephemeral, and which have taught us to raise our sights towards some dubious *other* life.

(KSA 9:503)

Nietzsche believes that to compose an artistic or 'musical' life makes it possible to will its eternal repetition. Nietzsche assumes that the harmoniously composed soul will want to repeat its life, including every last accident into which it has breathed a beautiful meaning. Plato's philosophy prepares the soul's liberation *from* eternally repeated life; Nietzsche's art of living prepares one to create an individual life that bears the image of this singular self and that one wants to live again and again. Platonic philosophy liberates the soul so that it can be free of this repetition. Nietzsche argues that through his art of living free spirits can weave together a beautiful life that they will want to live repeatedly. Free spirits do not seek liberation from their desires, as Platonists do, but to make of their thirst for life a beautiful composition worthy of eternal recycling. Nietzsche aims to replace the Platonic ideal of transcendent redemption *from* life with his own aesthetic model of redemption *within* life.

Eternity and Self-Cultivation

Granted Nietzsche defends an ethics of self-cultivation that values the creation of the self as a singular, immortal artwork, why does he introduce the strange and untimely idea of eternal recurrence? In Nietzsche's view the Genoese nobles he celebrated lived an affirmative life without any need to reflectively affirm its real or imagined recurrence (Gemes 2008: 462). If an

affirmative life is realisable without any need to will its eternal recurrence, why does Nietzsche introduce the ancient idea of cyclical cosmology? What is its significance in his ethics of self-cultivation? Nietzsche's critics argue against his assumption that the thought of eternity is integral to the ethics of self-cultivation. Properly understood, they claim recurrence is strictly a matter of indifference.

Many commentators argue that the thought of eternal recurrence is psychologically incoherent and/or insignificant. If even we believe it is literally true as a cosmological thesis, they argue, rather than gnashing our teeth at the thought of our own recurrence or proclaiming the demon's declaration of recurrence as divine we ought to greet it with profound *indifference* (Reginster 2006: 211; Soll 1973). On this view, the doctrine of eternal recurrence has no weight, it cannot compel us to take our choices more seriously, because the recurring lives cannot be *my* experiences in any relevant sense; these future selves are simply not me. We should remain unmoved by the doctrine of the eternal recurrence of identical lives since it necessarily rules out any psychological continuity between the reiterated selves.⁴ Soll argues, for example, that it is

impossible for there to be among different recurrences of a person the kind of identity that seems to exist among the different states of consciousness of the same person within a particular recurrence. . . . Only by inappropriately construing the suffering of some future recurrence on the model of suffering later in this life does the question of eternal recurrence of one's pain weigh upon one with 'the greatest stress'.

(Soll 1973: 343)

The Roman Epicurean Lucretius first expressed this objection to the practical and psychological significance of the doctrine of recurrence. Lucretius did so in the context of formulating a therapeutic argument designed to alleviate the fear we might have about repeating our life. Lucretius argues that even if the atoms that compose us now have been assembled in exactly the same way in the past or they reassemble in the future, we should have no concern about that past or future self. He claims that since we have no psychological continuity with these hypothetical past or future selves 'the suffering of these selves do not touch us' (Lucretius 1966: 121).⁵ Death, as he puts it, snaps 'the chain of our identity' (Lucretius 1966: 121).

Commentators illuminate this Epicurean-inspired argument by means of a spatial analogy: just as the possible existence of an infinite number of identical selves in other locations cannot add or subtract to our experience so too the temporal recurrence of identical selves is irrelevant to us since they lack any connection to our present self (Magnus 1978: 191; Clark 1990: 268). 'It seems reasonable for me', as Reginster explains this point 'to worry about myself in some future cycle only if there is some sort of continuity . . . between my current self and the self re-experiencing the same

pains and failures' (Reginster 2006: 211). If there is no psychological continuity between me and my future identical selves, then we cannot view their suffering as tantamount to my experiencing further pain. If we accept this claim, then Lucretius' therapeutic argument seems to succeed: a proper understanding of recurrence means we have no reason for alarm that we will suffer again since we will not have any psychological connection to future duplicate selves. Far from adding infinitely to the suffering and joy of our own lives, so this argument runs, these duplicates add nothing to it (Magnus 1978: 191).

If we conceive Nietzsche's thought of eternal recurrence as a thought experiment rather than as a theory concerning the nature of the universe, a similar problem concerning its psychological insignificance arises.⁶ As Williams reflects,

It is a good question what this model [eternal return] could possibly achieve. The affirmation is supposed to be immensely costly, an achievement commensurate with the dreadfulness of what it wills. Yet . . . the affirmation . . . occurs in the gravity-free space of the imagination. Can the 'greatest weight,' as Nietzsche calls it, really weigh anything, when it consists in willing an entirely contrary-to-fact recurrence? Can it be more than a Styrofoam rock on a film set of cosmic heroism?

(Williams 2007: 53–54)

Williams reasons that since by affirming the eternal recurrence of our lives we merely affirm a purely imaginative or contrary to fact recurrence it can have no great weight or significance. 'If it is a mere fantasy,' he asks rhetorically 'then how can 'willing' the Eternal Recurrence cost one anything at all?' (Williams 2001: xvi). On both the literal and imaginative interpretations of the thought of recurrence then it is difficult to see how it could have any psychological significance.

Yet these criticisms fail to comprehend the nature of Nietzsche's thought experiment. We can see how Nietzsche gave significance or 'weight' to the thought of recurrence by examining how he dramatises the demon's challenge. In the first place, he stages this thought in a way that precludes you from thinking that there can be any psychological break between you and your replica. If Nietzsche's demon were to remain strictly true to the Epicurean claim that there is psychological discontinuity among the exact replicas, then it would have to say: 'This life as you now live and have lived it *another, yet identical person* would have to live once again'. But Nietzsche's demon insists that life you have led will 'return to *you*' not merely to an exact replica (GS 341, emphasis added). Nietzsche's demon challenges you to face the prospect that *you*, your present self, will live the same life again, not the prospect that *another* person will lead the same life you have led. It is not a question of another person living the same life as you now lead it, but of your present self living it again.

Against Williams' view, Clark shows how Nietzsche's thought experiment has psychological significance. As she argues, Nietzsche asks us to imagine the eternal recurrence 'unrealistically, on the model of a later occurrence in one's present life' (Clark 1990: 269). 'To use eternal recurrence as a test of affirmation' as she explains 'one must . . . imagine the recurrences of one's life as continuous with and therefore as adding suffering and joy to one's present life' (Clark 1990: 270). We must then imagine the recurrence of our future selves as continuous with our present self. We must imagine, in other words, that our present self will re-experience again and again all of the joys and sorrow of our present life. If we conduct the thought experiment of imagining that we will relive the same life again and again then, as she suggests, 'the extreme reactions Nietzsche describes . . . make sense and complete indifference would seem psychologically impossible' (Clark 1990: 270). The purpose of the demon's challenge is to test your evaluation of your present life by ascertaining whether *you* want to live it all over again. 'The question is whether I love my life, my present life—love it so completely that I would live it again. I am being asked if I would live my life again to see if I love my present life' (Kain 2007: 55). To say that you do not identify with that future person is merely to avoid undertaking the test of whether you value your life sufficiently to want to repeat it *ad infinitum*.

Indeed, even if you insisted on the Epicurean-inspired notion that there is no psychological continuity between yourself and your past and future *doppelgangers*, this merely displaces the demon's question. Psychological discontinuity does not justify the further claim that we should be indifferent to future selves. We can see why this is so when we consider the conclusions one commentator draws from these same Lucretian arguments about the alleged practical insignificance of recurrence: 'So I live and die, and eons later someone is born whose life has exactly the same characteristics as mine, including temporal/spatial relation to everything in its cycle. No connection exists between the two lives, nothing carries over from my death to the birth of my double in the later cycle. A clear conception of this lack of *connection* should reduce a person's concern for her double in the next cycle to the level of concern one would have for any human being' (Clark 1990: 267–268). We should note that at most, if true, the Epicurean-inspired argument only justifies 'reducing' our concern for our future self to the same level of concern we have for any other human being. 'If I insist on viewing the liver of my next life as an other', as Kain puts it, 'the least I should do is ask myself whether I love my present life enough that I could wish it on another' (Kain 2007: 55). In other words, the standard objection to the psychological significance of Nietzsche's doctrine only serves to displace the question from 'Are you willing to live the exact same life again and again?' to 'Would you wish the exact same life on another?' And your concern for another person leading the same life as you have might turn out to be greater than your concern for yourself.⁷

If, then, Nietzsche's thought of recurrence can engender concern about how one lives by imagining one must confront and evaluate the prospect of

its eternal repetition, we might ask how this lends itself to the cultivation of oneself as a singular, immortal artwork. Part of the answer lies in the way Nietzsche dramatises this thought as the expression of our ownmost conscience. Nietzsche frames the thought of recurrence not only such that you must suppose that your present self will re-experience the same life again and again, but also that you must assess this prospect in light of what he calls your 'ownmost conscience' (GS 338). Nietzsche's dramatisation gives the thought the force of this conscience. In an earlier figuration of this concept Nietzsche suggested that we all have a 'secret bad conscience': 'the law that every man is a unique miracle,' that implores us to fashion ourselves into a unique unity (SE 1).

Nietzsche's demon's challenges you to assess your present life and actions in light of your 'ownmost' or 'secret bad conscience'.⁸ That Nietzsche wants us to assess the thought of our recurrence in light of our ownmost conscience follows from the *mise en scène*: the demon confronts you in a moment of the profoundest loneliness when all that matters to you is your own singular fate independent of or standing apart from all others. Nietzsche suggests that our evaluation of our own recurrence, the weight it has for us, must ultimately derive from what he calls our 'ownmost conscience' (GS 338). He identifies the law or principle of this conscience in the imperative: 'You should become who you are' (GS 270). Our 'ownmost conscience,' as he explains it, impels us to follow our own '*path*', a trajectory we follow independently of, and oblivious to anything other than the realisation and perfection of our own unique set of possibilities (GS 338). Nietzsche defends this 'ownmost conscience' against the force of moral conscience. One of his key objections to Kantian and Schopenhauerian morality is that they both entail 'losing myself *from my path*' by compelling us to follow generalisable rules or to live for others (GS 338). Nietzsche's ownmost conscience censures us for betraying our own unique individuality. Nietzsche observes that this morality says, 'Live in seclusion so that you *are able* to live for yourself!' (GS 338). Nietzsche's *Dämon* creates this moment of seclusion and separation by stealing into your loneliest loneliness to announce the doctrine of recurrence. He stages the demon's challenge in such a way that we cannot take 'refuge in the conscience of the others' and we must therefore consider the prospect of recurrence strictly in terms of whether our present lives realise our personal infinity (GS 338).

The thought of eternal repetition is crucial to Nietzsche's ethics of self-cultivation because answering the question 'do you want it again and again?' is the means by which we can disclose our ownmost conscience. We disclose our ownmost conscience by testing whether or not each and every action can bear the weight of eternity. By compelling us to imagine we have one and only one identical life and that we will repeat it to all eternity, Nietzsche's *Dämon* compels us to determine how we must live to abide by the imperative: become who you are. Eternity compels us to consider what we believe makes our transient lives worthy of this repetition. Nietzsche

assumes that when we examine our lives through the lens of eternity (or eternal repetition) we will judge that only a life that bears the monogram of our own existence, of what is singular or unique to ourselves is worthy of repetition. Eternity makes us hone in on our singularity. Or to put the point another way, Nietzsche supposes that if we take the view from recurrence we must despair if we discover that our lives are merely replications or minor variations on a common theme. For Nietzsche, what evokes a despairing response to the thought of our own recurrence is not the return of our suffering, but the return of a life that is not our *own* or that does not bear the monogram our existence. The thought of recurrence evokes the dread of not living a life according to our own laws and standards and in doing so failing to become the unique individuals we are. It is the dread, ultimately, of failing to become who you are. Nietzsche's assumes that the exercise of eternal recurrence both reveals our singularities and motivates the ideal of creating our lives as immortal artworks.

Nietzsche also stresses that for the thought of recurrence to function as instrument of self-cultivation we must employ it as an experiment or exercise. As Magnus rightly claims, mere belief in eternal recurrence 'does not cause or induce genuine affirmation . . . once the doctrine is 'understood' no automatic liberation seems to follow' (Magnus 1978: 156). Yet Nietzsche does not conceive eternal recurrence as a theoretical doctrine we simply need to understand, but as a 'spiritual exercise.' As Hadot defines this term, spiritual exercises are practices (meditation, memorisation, dialogue, and so on) that share the fundamental aim of transforming our vision of the world and placing us in the perspective of the Whole (Hadot 1995: 82–109). The object of these exercises is to bring about such a transformation in the way we live.

Nietzsche conceives the thought of recurrence as a particular spiritual exercise or practice: viz., a repeated meditation on the significance of idea of recurrence. It is an exercise through which we transform our present life such that it becomes such that we would desire its eternal repetition. Following a classical analogy we can conceive eternal recurrence as a spiritual gymnastics that makes us more adept at imposing the image of eternity on our lives. In this sense, as Hadot recognised, Nietzsche's philosophy follows in the footsteps of the ancient schools. Following the ancient model, Nietzsche rejects the idea of philosophy as the teaching of abstract theory—much less an exegesis of texts—and embraces it as an art of living (Hadot 1995: 83, 108). We therefore miss something essential about his doctrine if we conceive it as imagining or believing in recurrence as a logical or theoretical possibility. Nietzsche does not ask us to contemplate recurrence as a theoretical doctrine, but to incorporate the thought of recurrence into our lives as a practice of self-cultivation. Rather than contemplating or imagining recurrence, he asks how you might be transformed if 'this thought gained power over you' (GS 341).

In other words, the cultivating effect of the thought of recurrence hinges on it overpowering us, which is an entirely distinct proposition to idly

contemplating it as a theoretical doctrine. Nietzsche stresses that thought of recurrence must exercise the force of conscience: that is, it must exercise mastery over our lives. As Nietzsche conceives it, the thought of recurrence transforms or crushes us only if it exercises this mastery over our judgement and does so in the sense that ‘the question in each and every thing: ‘Do you want this again and again and innumerable times again? Would lie on [our] actions as the heaviest weight!’ (GS 341). Nietzsche implies that thought of repetition is only cultivating insofar as it is overpowering, applies to all of our actions, and becomes incorporated into our lives as a repeated practice. Nietzsche’s thought of recurrence demonstrates how Nietzsche adopted the ancient model of philosophy as a way of life. As he conceives it, the ethics of self-cultivation entails trying to see whether we can live in accordance with the thought of recurrence.

Yet even as Nietzsche models eternal recurrence on the ancient conception of philosophy as a technique of self-cultivation, he believes it achieves the opposite of the ancient exercises. According to Hadot, the goal of the ancient exercises is to enable individuals to transcend their individual, passionate subjectivity and ascend to an impersonal, universal perspective (Hadot 1995: 97). ‘Seneca’ as he explains ‘finds joy not in Seneca, but in the Seneca identified with universal Reason. One rises from one level of the self to another, transcendent level’ (Hadot 2011: 136). The goal of Nietzsche’s exercise, on the other hand, is to rise from the level of a common, collective self to a higher, singular level. If Stoics are necessarily uniform and unvaried, Nietzscheans must be irregular and varied. The Hellenistic schools more generally maintained that the ideal life is the realisation of a universal human nature. In order to realise this ideal they argued that philosophy must liberate us from false conventional values that encourage us to neglect a life in agreement with our universal nature. The Hellenistic idea, as Long puts it ‘is that an understanding of this nature can and should serve as the technologist of the self, shaping our innate potentialities in more life-enhancing ways than cultural norms themselves offer to us. This is not a project of making one’s life into an artwork . . .’ (Long 2006: 27–28).

By contrast Nietzsche maintains that the ideal life requires constructing ourselves as unique artworks, not agreeing with any presupposed universal nature. In order to realise this ideal he argues philosophy must liberate us from the structures of consciousness that compels us to neglect the cultivation of our singularity. Nietzsche’s thought of recurrence is a technique of self-cultivation that aims to counter-act the limits of consciousness. Nietzsche explains the origins and evolution of consciousness as an instrument of social integration that belongs to our existence not as individuals but rather as what he disparagingly calls herd animals. What we ‘know’ of ourselves through consciousness, he argues, is only that aspect of ourselves that is dependent upon the community. The limits on self-knowledge are built into the evolution history of consciousness: it has been shaped by evolutionary pressure to allow us to know and communicate only ‘that

in ourselves which is 'non-individual' or 'average', i.e. those frailties and vulnerabilities that we share with all the members of our community (GS 354). Nietzsche explains this limitation through a political analogue: consciousness is the tyranny of the majority extended into our 'depths.' When we 'translate' our unconscious thoughts into consciousness all that becomes visible is the typical, general, or herd-like. Our personal infinity is lost in translation. And yet, Nietzsche claims, 'at bottom all our actions are incomparably and utterly personal, unique and boundlessly individual, there is no doubt; but as soon as we translate them into consciousness, *they no longer seem to be*' (GS 354).

Nietzsche assumes then that that thought of recurrence is a technique or exercise that can help us to identify and cultivate this unrealised, yet potential singularity. The view from recurrence compels us to identify, value, and cultivate our singularity or personal infinity, he suggests, because we suffer despair at the thought of the eternal repetition of commonality and take joy in the thought of our eternal singularity. Nietzsche's exercise motivates the desire to create an uncommon life because it implicitly draws on one of the most powerful modern ethical ideals. 'Artistic creation', as Taylor observes, has become 'the paradigm mode in which people can come to self-definition. The artist becomes in some way the paradigm case of the human being, as agent of original self-definition' (Taylor 1992: 62). Nietzsche's belief that this exercise will cultivate our singularity is contingent on it mobilising background values, specifically the Romantic value of the self as artwork.

Eternal Recurrence: Immoral Self-Cultivation?

We can say then that by means of the thought of eternal recurrence Nietzsche formulates a coherent and psychologically significant exercise of whether or not you affirm or love your present life: the exercise is whether or not you are willing to live it again and again as the measure of your ownmost conscience. This leaves us with the final and most troubling challenge to Nietzsche's ethics of self-cultivation: viz., the relationship between self-cultivation and morality. Critics of the ancient tradition of ethical self-cultivation have been troubled by the tension or incompatibility between self-cultivation and morality—a tension that Plato and Aristotle worked so hard to eliminate. Nietzsche's educator Schopenhauer, however, identified a fundamental incompatibility between ancient ethical eudaimonism and the morality of virtue or duty.⁹ Schopenhauer maintains that the former is exclusively concerned with the use of reason to secure *ataraxia*, whereas the latter is exclusively concerned with virtuous conduct independently of happiness. Taking Stoicism as his example, Schopenhauer argues that the ancient ethics of self-cultivation is solely a guide to the rational life, whose end and aim is 'happiness' through peace of mind. Stoic *eudaimonia*, the godlike happiness of the sage, he argues, is therefore only *contingently* connected to virtue (WWR II: 159).

Unsurprisingly, given his effort to revitalise the ancient traditions, a similar problem troubles critics of Nietzsche's ethics of self-cultivation. Magnus, for example, argues that Nietzsche's thought of affirming one's life entails no 'normative ideal': it does not specify or delimit any particular way of life or behavioural norms (Magnus 1988: 173; Leiter 2015). It cannot function as a 'normative ideal of health,' as he puts it, since it seems possible that a person leading any kind of life could will its eternal return, including those leading 'wicked' or cruel lives (Magnus 1988: 173). Blurring the boundaries between poetry and life seems to mean embracing an immoralism that gives priority to aesthetic considerations over moral concerns (Mann 1959: 141–177). Among the many possible types of characters that one might esteem for their unity and coherence, some may exhibit scant concern for the welfare of others. All that is required to achieve affirmation is a certain attitude to life, not a particular type of life or set of virtues. Following one's ownmost conscience, in short, does not necessarily entail moral virtue. At most meeting the test of eternal recurrence requires creating a life that achieves certain formal or dynamic qualities: i.e. an integrated or unified self that realises one's own singular, unique ideal (Huddleston 2017). Nehamas succinctly states the key point: 'The totally integrated person (Nietzsche) so admires may well be morally repulsive' (Nehamas 1985: 167).

Indeed the normative problem becomes even more vexing once we acknowledge that Nietzsche argues that we cannot realise the ideal of self-cultivation by legislating and following universal rules or by acting according to the feeling of compassion (GS 335, 338). Nietzsche argues that 'becoming who you are' is incompatible with Kant's dutiful fulfiller of universal obligations and Schopenhauer's compassionate creature of universal sentiment. Yet what we might call Nietzsche's aesthetic notion of becoming the poets of our own lives is now undoubtedly one of modern European culture's most important and seductive ideals. Nietzsche's ethics therefore seems to leave us with a genuine, practical difficulty of how to accommodate aestheticism and moralism. In the modern philosophical tradition we can discern various attempts to reconcile or mediate self-cultivation and virtue: Schiller's aesthetic education in which morality and aesthetic wholeness, duty, and desire, neatly dovetail; the Hegelian view that individual freedom necessarily entails mutual recognition; or the liberal view that we can separate our private Nietzschean pursuit of self-fashioning from our public commitment to the principle that cruelty is the worst thing we do (Rorty 1989: 146). These attempts to reconcile morality and self-cultivation presuppose that the latter easily slides into or even necessarily entails 'immorality.'

Is this true of Nietzsche's ethics of self-cultivation? Nietzsche in fact gives us strong reasons to doubt these claims. We can see this by briefly examining how he connects self-cultivation and friendship (Ure 2008: 220–258). As we saw, critics of Nietzsche's self-fashioning suggest that its formalistic criteria of the good life do not preclude 'immoral' behaviour. It is precisely this point that leads exasperated critics of such a 'troublingly formalistic'

approach to rhetorically ask: 'What would a stylish rape look like?' (Eagleton 1990: 394).

Yet this interpretation of Nietzsche's ethic misses one of its fundamental aspects: viz., what we might call its 'affective' basis. If we understand Nietzsche's ethical ideal as the realisation of formal 'artistic' criteria, then it might seem to harbour the dangers that alarm his critics. Nietzsche, however, does not conceive the ideal of self-cultivation as simply a beautifully stylised life. Rather he shows the significance of the ideal of self-cultivation by looking at it from a first person, affective perspective. We need to ask not just what is the value of the ideal of self-cultivation, as he puts it, but what it says of the person who asserts it (*BGE* 187). Nietzsche suggests that individuals who cultivate themselves take *joy* in themselves and existence. Joy is the affect of self-cultivation. Once we see this affective dimension of Nietzsche's ethics, we can also see how his critics misunderstand its implications.

On the one hand, Nietzsche argues that individuals who take joy in their lives both give aesthetic pleasure to others and have the affective capacity for friendship. On the first score, he claims that while compassion only causes injury, we can help others cultivate themselves by '*creating* something out of oneself that the other can behold with pleasure: a beautiful, restful, self-enclosed garden perhaps, with high walls against the storms and the dust of the roadway, but also a hospitable gate' (*D* 174). Second, Nietzsche suggests that the joy we derive from successful self-cultivation is the affective basis our ability to take joy in and facilitate others' flourishing. '[I]f we learn better to enjoy ourselves' as Zarathustra puts it 'we best unlearn how to do harm to others and to contrive harm' (*TSZ*, 'Of the Compassionate'). If we take joy in ourselves, Nietzsche implies, then we have no affective grounds to diminish or spoil others. Rather, he argues, the ethics of self-cultivation give us not only joy in ourselves, but the affective basis of friendship: 'a rich capacity to share in the joys of others' (*HH.1* 614), rather than to feel envy at their use of exceptional or individual rules of life in the pursuit of their own happiness (*HH.1* 495).

On the other hand, Nietzsche suggests that the failure to exercise self-cultivation generates dissatisfaction with oneself that makes one 'continually prepared to avenge himself for this, and we others will be his victims' (*GS* 290). Nietzsche identifies Kantian and Schopenhauerian moralities as examples of the vengefulness that flows from the failure to cultivate oneself. He argues that Kant's universal or categorical imperative is a formal principle that necessarily denies to others the basic conditions of flourishing. 'The profoundest laws of preservation and growth' he explains 'demand the reverse . . . that each one of us should devise *his own* virtue, *his own* categorical imperative' (*AC* 11). To insist that everyone should follow the same maxim in the same circumstances is therefore a principle that necessarily denies others the condition necessary to their self-cultivation. It is to insist that they obey impersonal imperatives rather than cultivate the specific values that might bring them joy in themselves. Nietzsche holds

that Schopenhauer's morality of compassion also deprives individuals of the conditions necessary to their personal flourishing. Against the morality of compassion Nietzsche argues that 'midnights, adventures, risks and blunders' are necessary conditions of personal growth (GS 338). By conceiving suffering as intrinsically evil, and universally prescribing its elimination, he argues, the morality of compassion harms rather than benefits individuals. Nietzsche claims that the affective basis of this harmful compassion is the envious desire to spoil others. Its affective basis, he suggests, discloses itself in Schopenhauer's assumption that the envy of the compassionate is assuaged by others' misfortune and excited by their good fortune (Ure 2008: 194–209).

For Nietzsche Kant's categorical imperative cruelly denies others the possibility of living according to the particular values that best enable them to flourish and Schopenhauerian compassion enviously denies others the idiosyncratic conditions necessary to their personal happiness. In this sense Nietzsche maintains that these moralities systematically undermine friendship conceived as an exclusive concern to allow and encourage others to cultivate themselves according to the particular values and conditions necessary to achieving their own singularity. He reserves the virtue of friendship to those who pursue the ethics of self-cultivation. Nietzsche identifies this virtue of friendship, the ability to take joy in others' joy, as the highest and rarest achievement of humanity: 'to imagine the joy of others and to rejoice at it is the highest privilege of the highest animals, and among them it is accessible only to the choicest exemplars—thus a rare *humanum*' (HH.2 62).

Nietzsche then formulates a new ethics of self-cultivation that idealises the transformation of our lives into singular, immortal artworks. Nietzsche identifies the thought of eternal recurrence as a technique of self-cultivation. As we have seen, the critics of the doctrine of eternal recurrence merely evade rather than confront the question of whether or not we are willing to live our lives again. Against these critics, Nietzsche formulates eternal recurrence as a spiritual exercise that motivates and guides the pursuit of the ideal of becoming who one is. Nor can we dismiss this ethics of eternity as an immoralist aestheticism. Rather Nietzsche turns the tables on his critics by examining the affective underpinnings of moral principles. Nietzsche challenges Kantian and Schopenhauerian moralities by showing how their principles are motivated by affects that harm rather than cultivate others. By contrast, Nietzsche shows that his own ethic of self-cultivation engenders the affective basis necessary to the realisation of the virtue of friendship.

Notes

- 1 I would like to thank Michael Janover and Sander Werkhoven for their very generous, astute, and helpful comments on various drafts of this chapter.
- 2 Parkes (1994) brilliantly elaborates Nietzsche's horticultural analogies for self-cultivation.

- 3 Whether naturalistic explanations of the evolutionary origins of morality legitimately debunk moral beliefs is a matter of controversy. See e.g. Risse (2007) and Handfield (2016).
- 4 Cf. Kain (1983: 54) and Loeb (2010: 14–16) who challenge the view that complete qualitative identity of recurrence logically precludes any awareness of recurrence.
- 5 Slatin (2014) plausibly questions whether Epicurean metaphysics is sufficient to give Lucretius the consoling conclusion that we have no reasons to care about our future identical recurrences.
- 6 Nietzsche considers the potential significance of recurrence as a thought experiment: 'Even if the circular repetition is only a probability or possibility, even the thought of a possibility can shatter and transform us—not only experiences or definite expectations! How the (mere) possibility of eternal damnation has worked' (KSA 9:11 [203]). Nietzsche's analogy between eternal damnation and eternal recurrence is questionable. For Christians eternal damnation is not a thought experiment. Christians experienced the death-bed as a bed of torture because they believed in the reality of eternal damnation, not because they conceived it merely as a remote possibility (*D* 77). Cf. (Loeb 2010: 18, fn.13).
- 7 Nietzsche admits of a similar possibility in the case of friendship. We may be more affected by our friends' plight than they are themselves because our love for them is stronger than their love for themselves (*HH*.1 46).
- 8 Nietzsche no doubt alludes to Socrates' *daimonion* (see Higgins 2000: 128–132; Loeb 2010: 35–38). However, Nietzsche conceives his *Dämon* as playing the exact opposite role to Socrates' *daimonion*. Socrates's *daimonion* only dissuades him from acting, and never urges him on (*Ap.* 31 c–d). In sharp contrast, Nietzsche's *Dämon* challenges us to affirm life and to do so by becoming who we are.
- 9 Arguably Schopenhauer's analysis turns on an anachronistic conception of Hellenistic ethics. As Long observes, '[t]he ideal agent of ancient ethics is characterized by virtues that allow no space for conflict to arise between commitment to the good of others and commitment to the good of oneself' (Long 2006: 23).

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