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Michael Steven Green
William & Mary

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ETERNAL RECURRENCE IN A NEO-KANTIAN CONTEXT

*Michael Steven Green**
msgre2@wm.edu

RESUMO *Neste ensaio, argumento que qualquer um que adotasse um falsificacionismo do tipo que tenho atribuído a Nietzsche se sentiria atraído pela doutrina do eterno retorno. Para Nietzsche, pensar o ‘vir a ser’ revelado por meio dos sentidos significa falsificá-lo por meio do ‘ser’. Mas o eterno retorno oferece a possibilidade de pensar o ‘vir a ser’ sem falsificação. Em seguida, argumento que qualquer um que mantenha o falsificacionismo de Nietzsche veria na ação humana um conflito entre o ‘ser’ e o ‘vir a ser’, de modo semelhante ao que ocorre no juízo empírico. À luz desse conflito apenas o eterno retorno ofereceria a possibilidade de afirmar a vida de modo verdadeiro. Para concluir, discuto de que maneira tal leitura do eterno retorno resolve uma série de enigmas que têm atormentado os intérpretes.*

Palavras-chave *Nietzsche, Afrikan Spir, eterno retorno, ser, vir a ser, falsificação.*

ABSTRACT *In this essay, I argue that someone who adopted a falsificationism of the sort that I have attributed to Nietzsche would be attracted to the doctrine of eternal recurrence. For Nietzsche, to think the becoming revealed through the senses means falsifying it through being. But the eternal recurrence offers the possibility of thinking becoming without*

* Dudley W. Woodbridge Professor of Law, College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia, USA. I would like to thank Rogério Lopes and the other participants in the Conference on Nietzsche and the Kantian Tradition at the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais in Belo Horizonte, Brazil and at the Universidade Federal de Ouro Preto in Ouro Preto, Brazil, for helpful comments. Thanks also to Paul Loeb. Artigo recebido em 15/07/2013.

falsification. I then argue that someone who held Nietzsche's falsificationism would see in human agency a conflict between being and becoming similar to that in empirical judgment. In the light of this conflict only the eternal recurrence would offer the possibility of truly affirming life. I end by discussing how this reading of the eternal recurrence solves a number of puzzles that have bedeviled interpreters.

Keywords *Nietzsche, Afrikan Spir, eternal recurrence, being, becoming, falsification.*

My goal in this essay is to use Afrikan Spir's influence to situate Nietzsche's theory of the eternal recurrence (ER) into a broadly Neo-Kantian framework. My primary focus will not be Nietzsche's own discussion of ER, whether in *Zarathustra*, *The Gay Science*, or the *Nachlaß*. I will, instead, approach the matter indirectly, by arguing that someone who took an epistemological position like the one I have attributed to Nietzsche – a position derived from Spir's thought – would be motivated to adopt something like ER. In the course of my argument, I will consider previously unexplored issues of moral agency, pessimism and asceticism in Spir's philosophy.

Although I will not discuss here whether there is evidence for my interpretation in Nietzsche's own comments about ER, I think that even without considering such evidence my reading has substantial *indirect* evidence in its favor. This is so not merely because it ties ER to other significant aspects of Nietzsche's thought, such as his falsificationism, but also because of its ability to answer a number of puzzles about the doctrine.

My argument will proceed as follows. I will first briefly outline the reading of Nietzsche's epistemology that I offered in *Nietzsche and the Transcendental Tradition*,¹ a reading that depends heavily upon the influence exerted upon Nietzsche by *Denken und Wirklichkeit*, a book written by the obscure Russian philosopher Afrikan Spir.² I start with Spir's critique of Kant (especially of Kant's doctrine of the ideality of time) and then move on to Spir's reformulation of Kant's philosophy. For Spir, there is a fundamental incoherence to empirical judgment. What it seeks to explain is becoming revealed to us by the senses, but doing so requires seeing becoming from the

1 Green, 2002.

2 Spir, 1877. All citations to this work will be embedded in the text.

perspective of being, even though, in the end, no relationship between the two can be established. This is, as Spir puts it, the *fundamental antinomy* (I:377-86). Although becoming is real, it is, nevertheless, *false*: it is an inexplicable deviation from the true nature of reality, which is an unconditioned unity – a perfectly simple Parmenidean One. I then offer Nietzsche's own falsificationism, which is an inverted version of Spir's. For Nietzsche, the fundamental nature of reality is becoming and concepts of being falsify.

Next, I suggest how ER might play an important *epistemological* function for someone who holds Nietzsche's falsificationism. Although the world is essentially becoming, this cannot be thought. The very process of thought falsifies, because it involves seeing becoming from the perspective of being. ER arguably allows the true nature of becoming to reveal itself even in the context of thought.

I then consider questions of agency and the value of life in Spir's thought. Spir sees the sources of human action – pain and dissatisfaction – as inexplicable deviations from being. They are false or evil [*Uebel*] (I:224; I:382). The realization, through suffering, that reality is an unconditioned unity, Spir argues, is *religiosity*, and it stands behind an acknowledgement of the moral law. In contrast, Nietzsche adopted what Spir might call an anti-religious attitude, in which pain and dissatisfaction are affirmed. But how is such affirmation possible when pain and dissatisfaction, as becoming, cannot be thought – when thinking them means seeing them from the perspective of being? It is here, I argue, that ER can play a role. I end by discussing how this reading solves a number of puzzles about ER that have bedeviled interpreters.

Nietzsche's Spirean Epistemology

In this section, I want to briefly outline the account of Nietzsche's epistemology that I presented in *Nietzsche and the Transcendental Tradition*. I'll begin with Spir's critique of Kant.

Kant had an anti-naturalist account of cognition. The unification of particulars that occurs in thought cannot be explained empirically.³ Here his particular target was Hume. To the extent that we understand a causal judgment as the product of psychological laws of association, as Hume did, there is no thought – no representation – of causal connection at all.⁴ The fact that the mind moves from the idea of a cause to the idea of an effect does not

3 Kant, 1965, B142.

4 *Ibidem*, B4-5.

mean that these two particulars are united together in thought and, thus, have the capacity to represent anything.

Kant insisted that the cognitive unifications of particulars in a judgment cannot be known empirically. The unity of thought is evident not *in* experience but rather *through* experience, that is, through the fact that experience occurs to a unified subject.⁵ To be sure, Kant did not think that we have some special non-sensory knowledge – some intellectual intuition – of this self as an *object*.⁶ But insofar, as we think, we are aware of it as a unitary *subject*.

But if the self that thinks is a unity, how can it think *sensations*, occurring as they do successively? How does the flow of sensation connect to the thinking self? Kant appeals to “schemata,” which are rules created by the imagination for connecting sensory intuition to concepts.⁷ For example, although my sensations of a dog appear successively, I am thinking of a dog in connection with those sensations (rather than simply letting my mind drift from one sensation to another) if I possess “a rule according to which my imagination can always draw a general outline of the figure of a four-footed animal, without being restricted to any particular figure supplied by experience or to any possible image which I may draw in the concrete.”⁸

With respect to pure concepts of the understanding (that is, the fundamental logical forms of the unity in judgments), which have no specific empirical markers for their application, Kant argues that the relevant schemata are general rules for the unification of temporal succession within consciousness.⁹ For example, Kant describes the schema of substance as “the permanence of the real in time, that is, the representation of the real as a substrate of empirical determination of time in general, and so as abiding while all else changes.”¹⁰ It is only through this synthesis by the imagination that the succession of sensations can be thought. The role of this synthesis is evident in the Analogies of Experience, in which Kant argues that succession can be represented only by reference to underlying substances and causal relations.¹¹

But how does the imagination perform this function? How can it connect thought – which is a unity standing above succession – to sensations – which

5 *Ibidem*, B131-33.

6 *Ibidem*, B131-33

7 *Ibidem*, A77-78/B102-03, A137-42/B176-81.

8 *Ibidem*, A141/B180.

9 *Ibidem*, A142/B181.

10 *Ibidem*, A143/B183.

11 *Ibidem*, A178/B218-A218/B265.

are themselves successive? As Spir reads it, the heart of Kant's solution is his view that time is an a priori intuition not given passively by sensory content itself. *As originally presented*, sensations have no succession. They appear successive only *after* they have been taken up by the representing subject. Because sensory content is, in itself, not successive, the imagination's activities can take place outside time, allowing it to bridge sensation and thought.

But in an argument that was of great importance to Nietzsche (and quoted by him in *Philosophy and the Tragic Age of the Greeks*), Spir argues that change and succession are objectively real:

The actual fact is that one cannot deny the reality of change. If you throw it out the window, it will slip back in again through the keyhole. One can say: "It merely seems to me that representations and conditions change," but this semblance is itself something objectively given. Within it, succession indubitably has objective reality; within it something actually follows upon something else. (I:209-10)

That change is objectively real is evident in the fact that our thoughts themselves change.¹²

Spir argues that once change (or *becoming*) is recognized as objectively real, Kant loses the ability to explain how sensory content is taken up by the thinking subject (I:13-19). The sensory and cognitive elements separate in empirical judgment. One way of formulating Spir's position is in terms of the Kantian antinomies. Kant, of course, thinks the contradictions of the antinomies arise only when categories such as substance and causality are taken *beyond* all possible experience.¹³ It is only then that we find ourselves compelled to both accept and reject the unconditioned, such as first causes or absolutely simple substances. For Spir, in contrast, our everyday empirical judgments suffer from the antinomies. They show the failure of thought to connect to the change we are presented with in our sensations. The antinomies are a manifestation of the failure of empirical judgment to succeed in its project of thinking change. To think change one must put it in relation to being (that is, to the *thesis* position in the antinomies). But such a relation is impossible. This is the fundamental antinomy ["die fundamentale Antinomie"] (I:377).

As I put it in *Nietzsche and the Transcendental Tradition*, Spir argues that empirical judgments are false because their objects are contradictory in

12 As Nietzsche puts it: "[I]f thinking in concepts, on the part of reason, is real, then the many and motion must partake of reality also, for reasoned thinking is mobile" (PTAG 13).

13 Kant, 1965, A405-567/B432-595.

this sense.¹⁴ And Spir does indeed speak of empirical objects as having “a real contradiction” [*einen realen Widerspruch*], because they contain elements that are foreign to their essence (I:349-50). But an alternative way of putting Spir’s falsificationism – one more in keeping with Spir’s own emphasis in *Denken und Wirklichkeit* – is that sensations, upon which empirical judgments are based, are false. Because they present us with plurality and change, sensations are contrary to the essence of the world, which is an unconditioned unity. Becoming, although real, is *abnormal*: it is an inexplicable deviation from being.¹⁵

In some respects Nietzsche’s falsificationism mirrors Spir’s. For Nietzsche too, the problem with empirical judgment is that it seeks a connection between the conditioned and the unconditioned, between becoming and being.¹⁶ But for Nietzsche it is being that is the source of falsity.¹⁷ Another important disanalogy between Nietzsche’s falsificationism and Spir’s is the following: For Spir, becoming, although false, is real. Nietzsche, in contrast, is a monist – all that exists is becoming. He does not argue that being, although real, is an inexplicable deviation from becoming. Being does not exist at all. Becoming somehow creates the *deception* of being.¹⁸

As I argued in *Nietzsche and the Transcendental Tradition*, I think that this position is unstable. The heart of Nietzsche’s falsificationism is that being – the thesis positions in the antinomies – falsifies. Being is the objective correlate to the unity of the thinking self. But if all that exists is becoming, no such unity exists, thus removing the argument for falsificationism. Consider a causal judgment. If all that exists is becoming, then shouldn’t there be nothing more to this judgment than the fact that my thoughts flow from cause to effect? The unity of the judgment is an illusion. But if that is the case, then there is no reason to conclude that in making a causal judgment I impose the unconditioned upon becoming. There is no reason to think causal judgments are false.

This instability in Nietzsche’s falsificationism motivated him to adopt two other positions. The first is noncognitivism: Nietzsche retains an

14 *E.g.*, Green, 2002, pp. 58, 62.

15 Lessing, 1900, p. 49.

16 See *e.g.*, Green, 2002, pp. 63-87.

17 *TI III:2* (“It is what we make of [the senses]’ evidence that first introduces a lie into it, for example the lie of unity, the lie of materiality, of substance, of duration...‘Reason’ is the cause of our falsification of the evidence of the senses. Insofar as the senses show becoming, passing away, change, they do not lie.”).

18 *E.g.*, *KSA 9:11*[329] (Spring-Autumn 1881). See generally Green, 2002, pp. 67-70, 92-93.

antinaturalist theory of cognition and concludes, not that our judgments are false, but that they do not count as thought at all, and so are neither true, nor false.¹⁹ In the second position, Nietzsche embraces a naturalized theory of cognition, which allows for thought without falsification. This second position is the dominant one in Anglophone Nietzsche scholarship, and is evident, for example, in the readings of Nietzsche's epistemology provided by Maude Clark and Brian Leiter. Nevertheless, the Spirean influences upon Nietzsche were sufficiently strong that he returned again and again to falsificationism, not merely in his *Nachlaß* but also in his published works, right up to the end of his period of productivity in the winter of 1888-89.²⁰

The Epistemological Role of the Eternal Recurrence

Let us now consider how someone committed to Nietzsche's version of Spirean falsificationism might be inclined to offer ER as a means of thinking becoming. In offering this argument, I will concentrate on the idea of becoming as force [*Kraft*].

As we have seen, for both Nietzsche and Spir, becoming can be thought only through the imposition of being. As Spir puts it, the change revealed through the senses is a "creation out of nothingness" (I:214). In themselves, sensations arise out of nowhere and disappear into nothing. But even though we are directly aware of this change, we cannot think it without denying its reality. To think sensations together, some connection must be found between them (I:215-16). But because that means establishing a relationship to the unconditioned, the result is denying that change is the true essence of reality (I:218).

This inability to think becoming without being is evident in Spir's discussion of causal judgments. Imagine that there is change – say, a billiard ball moves.²¹ To *think* this change, I must link it to another change under a necessary law (I:268-69). The billiard ball moved, for example, because of the movement of the cue ball that bumped into it. Change is, so to speak, *pushed out* of the explained event and into another which, in turn, must have its change pushed out of it and into another, and so on.

19 See especially Green, 2002, Ch. 4.

20 Green, 2002, Ch. 1; Hussain, 2004, pp. 355-358; Anderson, 1996, pp. 307-341.

21 Of course, to even speak of a billiard ball, one has already falsified the plurality of becoming by treating the multiplicity revealed to the senses as inhering in a substance.

Through this process, we impose upon becoming a view of the world as one unchanging unit. If the totality of conditions were known, the world could be seen as a single unconditioned thing (I:271). But this attempt to impose being onto becoming fails. A simple unchanging substance can never connect with the becoming it is supposed to explain (I:327, II:130-31). Thus, Spir argues, to think about change we must deny that it is an essential characteristic of the world. Change is, in the end, an inexplicable deviation from being. Truly doing justice to change – that is, seeing it other than in the light of being – would simply mean giving up *thinking* about change at all, treating it as having no explanation (II:132).

The problem of thinking change is evident in Spir's discussion of force:

By force one means the actual driving effectuating principle of becoming. This makes it sound as if force is the cause of change. Only this view is indefensible. The driving principle is not something different from or separate from change itself, but rather, so to speak, simply the power of constancy [*Beharrungsvermögen*] of the general change, its inner impulse to continue moving forward. (II:132)

The idea of force is an attempt to get at the “driving principle” of the succession of appearances (II:138 footnote). It is the attempt to get behind causal laws, which deny that change is essential to reality, and explain what it is that actually drives change. Force cannot be thought of as the *cause* of change, because that would mean conceiving force as a necessary relation between changes, that is, in the light of being.

Spir anticipates Nietzsche's own views when he argues that someone who considered change to be essential to the world would offer a theory of “absolute becoming” [“ein absolutes Werden”] (I:212-15). Such a theorist would be inclined to understand change in terms of individual Boscovichean centers of force (II: 112-13). Spir argues, however, that an individual force – which would be “an inexhaustible source of always-new changes” (II:134) – is contradictory. If one used such a force to *explain* why a particular change had to happen, one is actually thinking causally in terms of a relation between changes, which means denying that change is essential to the world (II:133-35). The only other option appears to be giving up on explaining change at all. Those who claim that the world is actually becoming face a choice “between logical contradictions, that is, mental suicide, on one hand” [a position Spir associates with Hegel] and “the acceptance of the incomprehensibility of the world on the other” (I:292).

With this problem of representing absolute becoming as individual force in mind, we can now consider how someone committed to Nietzsche's

version of Spirean falsificationism might think that ER could allow absolute becoming to be thought. Assume that ER is true. Time is a circle: the chain of causal consequences of an event bends forward to *before* the event and becomes its cause. And the chain of causal antecedents of an event bends backward to *after* the event and becomes its consequence.

Someone placing the movement of a billiard ball in the context of ER is not simply giving up on explaining change. Change is *thought* – for it is linked to other changes under a covering law. Change is, so to speak, pushed out of one event and into another. But rather than continuing on into infinity – the sign, Spir argues, of the inability to connect becoming to the unconditioned (II:143-44) – it returns *to itself*. By representing a change as its own effect and its own cause, ER represents what could not be represented more directly by the concept of individual force, that is, something arising from nothing and disappearing into nowhere, an inexhaustible source of always new changes. By treating change as returning to itself, ER is, as Nietzsche put it, “the closest *approximation of a world of becoming to a world of being*.”²²

Spir on Pain and Dissatisfaction

The role of ER in Nietzsche’s thought is not, of course, primarily epistemological. It was, instead, understood by him as a test of life-affirmation. I shall argue, however, that someone who held Nietzsche’s form of Spirean falsificationism would also see a need for ER in order to truly affirm life. The key to my interpretation is Spir’s third argument in *Denken und Wirklichkeit* for the highest law of thought.

The highest law of thought is simply Spir’s falsificationism: the insight that reality is an unconditioned unity that cannot be connected to the plurality and becoming that we experience through the senses (I:199). Spir’s first and second arguments for the law proceed from the relativity of empirical objects (I:185-205) and from the nature of change (II:206-220). Given what we already know about Spir, these first two arguments are unsurprising. Both change and relativity (by which Spir means the fact that empirical objects depend upon one another for being the way they are) demand and forbid a connection to being. Without such a connection, relativity and change are inexplicable – there are no *relata* to relate, no *things* to become. But being is an absolutely

22 WP 617, KSA 12:7[54] (End of 1886-Spring 1887). This reading is similar to Heidegger’s description Nietzsche as attempting to “represent transience as a fixed becoming within the eternal recurrence of the same, and so to render it secure and stable.” Heidegger, 1977, pp. 64, 75.

simple Parmenidean One that cannot connect to the relationships and change it is supposed to explain.

Spir's third argument is based on the nature of feelings of pain and dissatisfaction.²³ Spir argues that “[t]he same thing that the [fundamental] law of thought speaks in the realm of thought, dissatisfaction speaks in the realm of feelings, namely this: In the true essence of things there reigns complete self-identity” (I:223-24). Here Spir's argument does not proceed from the perspective of ourselves as thinkers about that presented in sensation, but from the perspective of ourselves as agents. Indeed, Spir does not treat pain and dissatisfaction as sensed at all, although pain can be accompanied by sensations, which give it its particular quality, for example, of being sharp or dull (II:192-93). Rather, pain and dissatisfaction are the “living source of change itself” (I:222), the “source of all striving and action” (II:199). In this sense, they are *force* (II:161-62).²⁴

Spir's argument, as I understand it, is that as agents we have direct awareness of our two-fold nature as both being and becoming. Becoming is provided by dissatisfaction – a drive to change (“*Trieb zur Veränderung*”). Dissatisfaction is a state that cannot remain the same (“*der sich selbst nicht gleich bleiben kann*”) (I:222; II:204). In itself, it has no goal except to move forward. Only when it is taken up by the representing self can one act with a purpose (*Zweck*), for purpose requires the representation of one's goal (II:159-60; II:204).

But these two elements – the becoming moving us to act and the being of the self that represents what is to be done (II:173-74) – cannot connect. Insofar as I can represent a goal that could be brought to completion, insofar as I have a unity of action over time, I am being. But insofar as I can do anything, generate any change in the world, I am becoming. The conflict between being and becoming that we recognize intellectually in empirical judgment we feel in ourselves through our own agency, which tells us that our true nature is being and that becoming is abnormal (II:209-10). It is for this reason that we feel our drive to act as pain and dissatisfaction, that is, as states that seek

23 Spir speaks of “Schmerz- und Unlustgefühle” (I:221). I have translated “Unlust” as “dissatisfaction” because it captures the fact that Spir speaks of it as encompassing any drive for change. By “Lust” he means satisfaction with the actual, which expresses itself in the struggle against change (II:198).

24 Spir takes care to distinguish the force driving our actions from the will, but that is because the will is not simply the aimless striving of dissatisfaction, but action that proceeds through representations of the world. It is for this reason, Spir argues, that one cannot take the similarity between the will and force as a reason to adopt teleological interpretations of nature (II:161-62).

to annul [aufzuheben] or negate [vernichten] themselves (I:222). Becoming condemns itself in our own agency.

This felt recognition of the fundamental law of thought through pain and dissatisfaction, Spir argues, is *religiosity* (I:224-25). In religiosity we feel that becoming is an inexplicable deviation from the perfection (*Vollkommenheit*) and self-identity of being, which Spir identifies as God (I:358), and that our true goal is self-identity:

Because all willing [Wollen] and striving [Streben]... has and can have no other basis than the presence in us of states that cannot remain the same, implicating a lack of inner self-identity and a real contradiction, which we feel immediately as pain and dissatisfaction, the ultimate goal of human willing and striving can be nothing other than the most possible approximation of inner identity with the self, which is synonymous with the Good and the Perfect [Vollkommenheit]. (II:146)

This closest approximation is the moral law, which proceeds from the felt knowledge that our identity as individuals is appearance and that our true nature is an unconditioned unity (II:210).

In some respects, Spir's account of agency and his moral philosophy are like Kant's. Morality is grounded in the nature of ourselves as we are in ourselves rather than ourselves, as sensed. Furthermore, like Kant, Spir argues that rational agency – acting with a purpose – carries recognition of the moral law within itself. But there are also important differences. For Kant, the problem with action to satisfy desire – its heteronomous quality – is that one thereby treats oneself as *caused* and so as not free. But, for Spir, the dissatisfaction moving us to act is not a cause at all. It is simply force – the engine of becoming. Indeed, in another work, *Moralität und Religion*, Spir criticized Kant for identifying freedom with force – that is, with the acausal source of one's actions. This, Spir argues, is a theory of freedom as heteronomy.²⁵ For Spir, in contrast, the free self must be a *state* – it cannot be a faculty [*Vermögen*] capable of action at all.²⁶

The result is a Schopenhauerian ascetic quality to Spir's philosophy (one I believe was not lost upon Nietzsche). For Spir, all agency is, in a sense, futile. The becoming that drives us to act is purposeless – it has no goal itself except ending itself (“überzugehen”) (I:222; II:143-44). To act with a purpose, to be an *agent*, a representing subject is needed. But this subject is being and so cannot connect with what moves it to act. The futility of agency is like the futility of a causal judgment. While seeking to explain becoming, causal

²⁵ Spir, 1874, pp. 87-94.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 94-95.

judgment merely manages to push becoming into another event, which itself must be pushed into another event, and so on, endlessly. Likewise, in acting to achieve my goals, I have merely driven becoming forward into yet another act, which is itself driven forward into another act, endlessly.

Spir's philosophy is fundamentally, therefore, a rejection of life. To be sure, he argues that we can most approximate the self-identity of being when acting in accordance with the moral law. But it is unclear how this solution is supposed to work. Such action is still *action* – it is still driven by becoming. Although Spir never drew this conclusion himself, the lesson one apparently should draw from his philosophy is that our goal, even if impossible to be reached, should be doing nothing – or, better yet, never having existed at all.

Eternal Recurrence and Life-Affirmation

How would one expect someone who held Nietzsche's inversion of Spir's falsificationism to address these same problems of agency and the value of life? First, such a philosopher would agree with Spir that agency – acting with a purpose – involves the conflict between being and becoming. The drive leading one to act is becoming, but the agent – the representing subject that can identify the goal of action and persist to completion – is being. Unlike Spir, however, Nietzsche would argue that our true identity is becoming. The unity of the agent is a deception created within becoming.

But how can this becoming be affirmed? Won't any affirmation be in the light of a *goal*, a purpose that becoming serves for us? And won't this goal itself be a condemnation of becoming in the light of being? Just as it seems that the only way we can think becoming as essential to the world is by giving up thought, so it seems that the only way we can affirm becoming in our agency is by giving up agency and letting our drives flow through us without any thought of why we are doing what we do.

It is here that ER can play a role. Someone acting in the context of ER is not acting without purpose. His thoughts are directed outside the moment of action, toward the future. And yet, because time is a circle, the goal returns to the moment of action itself. Through ER, life – the purposeless striving of the moment – can itself be our goal and so be affirmed.

Conclusion

I would like to end with a brief discussion of how this reading of ER answers a number of puzzles about its role in Nietzsche's thought.

The first puzzle has been highlighted by Paul Loeb. Let us assume, as most believe, that Nietzsche did not think ER is in fact true of our lives. Given this is so, why does my greeting ER with joy mean that I have affirmed life? How can adding ER to my non-recurring life show that I have affirmed that life? It would seem to show that I have *not* affirmed it, since I greet my life with joy only by adding something to it that it doesn't have.²⁷

One might argue that I affirm my non-recurring life by adding ER to it because, by adding ER, I have made it *worse* than it is. If, with the introduction of this negative element, I still affirm it, then my level of life-affirmation must be especially high. As an analogy, let us assume that I hate movies with Nicolas Cage in them. (Indeed one need not assume this is so: I do, in fact, hate them.) If, despite this hatred, I would say yes to my life if I had to watch a Nicolas Cage movie every day, I must really love life.

But this reading can't be right, for Nietzsche understands one as having passed the test of life-affirmation only if one's attitude toward ER itself is positive. One affirms life *with* ER, not life *despite* it. But that reintroduces Loeb's challenge: How does the fact that I affirm my life by adding something positive that it *doesn't have* show that I affirm my actual life?

As Bernard Reginster has noted, this problem would be solved if ER is necessary to allow us to affirm a fundamental aspect of life, namely that it is becoming. But why, he asks, can't I simply recognize the way the world is – namely that it becomes – and say yes to it?²⁸ My reading, relying as it does on Spir's falsificationism, solves this puzzle, for it shows why the affirmation of becoming is so difficult – why Nietzsche thought an indirect approach like ER was necessary.

The second puzzle about ER is that most people's response to the doctrine is quite different from how Nietzsche describes it. Most people would respond to ER with simple indifference, not joy or despair.²⁹ What does it matter to me, situated as I am within my life, whether my life, as a whole, recurs? Who cares?

Consider someone whose life project is to build a tower and who sees the success or failure of her life in terms of that project. She is going to be indifferent to ER. When she imagines herself succeeding in her project, she will think of her life positively and when she imagines herself failing, she will

27 "[T]here is a deep inconsistency in the scholarly consensus that we affirm our non-recurring lives by craving their eternal recurrence" (Loeb, forthcoming).

28 Reginster, 2006, p. 223.

29 *E.g.*, Soll, 1973, p. 322.

think of her life negatively. The fact that her life – with her project – recurs will neither add to, nor subtract from that. Since that is how most of us think of our lives, most of us will not care about whether ER is true.

But under my reading, the fact that most people would be indifferent to ER makes perfect sense. Simply adding the fact of ER to my life does not force upon me the test of life affirmation. Rather, ER functions as it does only for someone who has recognized the conflict in human agency between the drives that move us to act and the unity of ourselves as actors. It is only a Spir, a Schopenhauer, or a Nietzsche – that is, someone who has concluded that the goals of one's life incoherently seek to bridge becoming and being – who would be tested by the prospect of ER.

As an analogy, consider the epistemological role that ER can play. Most people making causal judgments are perfectly satisfied with stopping the explanation of an effect with a particular cause. The problem – expressed in the Kantian antinomies – that the very fact of becoming has not been answered by such an explanation is untroubling. ER is not going to matter to such a person. Only someone like Nietzsche – who has adopted a philosophical outlook and recognized that the bridge between being and becoming that causal judgments seek cannot be fulfilled – would find ER useful.

The third puzzle is the curious fact that ER, despite being presented by Nietzsche as his most significant doctrine, is not well integrated into his philosophy as a whole. As a result, those, like Brian Leiter, who read Nietzsche as a naturalist, with a naturalized theory of cognition and agency, are able to present his thoughts on knowledge, freedom, and morality without discussing ER in any detail.

Again, this is just what one would expect under my reading. ER is tied to the Spirean falsificationist theme in Nietzsche's writings. To the extent that Nietzsche offered a naturalistic approach instead, ER has no place. And I think it is unquestionably true that Nietzsche did offer a naturalistic approach, even if falsificationism can be found in his writings up to the very end.

As we have seen, under a naturalized theory of cognition, judgments about causality or substance do not falsify, for they do not presuppose any antinaturalist unity of the thinking subject. By the same token, a naturalistic Nietzsche would not understand agency as presupposing such a subject, and so would not treat agency as possessing the contradiction Spir attributed to it. For such a Nietzsche, there is no puzzle in affirming life in the light of the particular projects or goals within one's life.

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