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## The Doctrine of Eternal Return

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## Chapter IX

### THE DOCTRINE OF ETERNAL RETURN

*The sickness of a time is cured by an alteration in the mode of life of human beings, and it was possible for the sickness of philosophical problems to get cured only through a changed mode of thought, not through a medicine invented by an individual.*

—Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*

We are reaching the end of a journey through Nietzsche. I have tried to establish that the nihilism besetting the Western world lies, in Nietzsche's analysis, so deep as to require a change in the very stuff of humanity. *Everything* is in error, *all* will have to be made new. The task of transfiguration seems, however, to be made impossible by Nietzsche's investigations of the will to power. He finds the will to power that which gives form to any existence. Form, however, must be given in terms of what is, and the problem immediately arises as to how beings who are radically flawed, who are human-all-too-human, can in fact transfigure themselves. Must not everything they do suffer from what they are?

Nietzsche seeks an answer to this problem in the doctrine of

eternal return. In this concluding chapter, I shall try to explicate this, the most difficult and obscure portion of Nietzsche's thought. Without an understanding of eternal return, I believe, the rest of Nietzsche is very little different from the writings of many other nineteenth- and twentieth-century cultural critics. Without the doctrine of eternal return, it is difficult to take seriously Nietzsche's claims of preparing a new transvaluation of values on the order of those effectuated by Socrates and Christ.

Eternal return presents problems to all commentators. Not only does Nietzsche give even less of an account of it than he does of the will to power, but furthermore, as a concept, it appears to fly in the face of common sense. If Nietzsche seriously intends to suggest that everything always comes back the same, and means by that that the present configuration of the universe will repeat itself and has already repeated itself countless times, one simply doesn't know what to say. Such a notion, even if true, can only have a heuristic significance for the practical life of human beings, since, obviously, they are destined to pass away, only to reappear again and again and again always unchanged. As such, the doctrine hardly seems worth taking seriously, except, perhaps, in the light of offering some new form of moral behavior by which the individual might relate his choices to a universal principle.<sup>1</sup>

Beyond the fact that, interpreted as a cosmic cyclical vision, eternal return doesn't seem to make much sense, there are additional difficulties. Nietzsche claims explicitly in *Ecce Homo* that eternal return forms the "fundamental conception" of *Zarathustra*, and constitutes the "highest formula of affirmation that is attainable"; he links "the philosophy of eternal return" with Dionysos as the sign and indicator of the transvaluation of values which he is seeking to achieve.<sup>2</sup> It would seem, then, that we will attain an accurate interpretation of what Nietzsche means by eternal return only if we can at least show how Nietzsche could have thought eternal return to be a "fundamental conception." It is necessary to note here that there is no a priori reason to see the will to power as somehow leading to eternal return; the analysis in the previous chapter gives no indication that there is a necessary link. In fact, Nietzsche, as far as I have been able to ascertain, with one possible exception always speaks of the two separately.

Nietzsche's method of exposition raises even more problems in

this case than it does in that of the will to power. He writes to Gast from Sils Maria on the fourteenth of August, 1881, that "thoughts have arisen such as I have never seen before" and hastens to add that he "will not speak of them, but will keep [his] unshakable peace." His account of a "vision" of eternal return, "six thousand feet above men and time" as he writes in *Ecce Homo*, and his subsequent furtiveness and secrecy in discussing it (mostly with Lou Salomé) are well-known. For whatever reasons, he apparently thought it was something that could not simply be said. In *Zarathustra*, the main exposition of eternal return comes in a chapter that ends with a riddle ("The Vision and the Riddle"); it is probably fair to surmise that this chapter constitutes some sort of account of the vision that he, Nietzsche, had on the plain between Sils and Silvaplana in the Swiss Engadin, and that he still finds the "riddle" to be the only possible means of expounding it. It is certainly true, and he writes Gast to this effect from Sils at the end of August, 1883, that *Zarathustra* is a structured book, each portion of which, in Nietzsche's mind at least, "forms a basis" for the subsequent portion. *Zarathustra*, however, was never completed. There do exist plans for a major book to be entitled "Philosophy of Eternal Return: An Attempt at the Transvaluation of All Values." And, while there are hints as early as the first book of *The Gay Science* of something apparently resembling the notion of eternal return,<sup>3</sup> the doctrine itself is announced only in the second book of *Zarathustra*, dealt with in the third and fourth, and not mentioned again in finished work until *Ecce Homo*. In any case, Nietzsche never actually says what eternal return is; the reason seems to be that men, as Zarathustra discovers in his first public appearance, "have not yet the ears" for such a new thought.<sup>4</sup> At the end of *Zarathustra*, the reader has a distinct feeling of dissatisfaction: something has happened to Zarathustra, but Nietzsche does not say what it is.

These preliminary considerations do serve a purpose, though. They give me some clear ground, making it possible to say what eternal return is *not*. If Nietzsche means anything, whatever he means will have to occupy a central, decisive, and coherent place in his thought as a whole. To begin by asserting that "all that is 'great' in Nietzsche no longer is so for our time . . . [and that] Nietzsche is great for us because of his 'little' sociological and social finds"<sup>5</sup> is to prejudge the issue. Similarly, Jaspers, for instance, finds Nietzsche's greatness in

that he "moves men's minds"; for Kaufmann, eternal return is "a most dubious doctrine which was to have no influence to speak of," which as a doctrine "transforms a fruitful notion into a rigid crudity."<sup>6</sup> Whatever the validity of these conclusions, they *cannot be* what Nietzsche thought, since none of them would allow the doctrine the central importance Nietzsche ascribed to it. They are, in fact, an intellectual operation which Nietzsche repeatedly criticized: they constitute an "as-if" on which to ground existence. Nietzsche, as we have seen, devotes much time to attacking world views and philosophical stances of which the most important member can only be intuited, or is in principle unknowable. In fact, notions such as the above are a way to avoid taking Nietzsche seriously; they proceed on the assumption that Nietzsche could not have meant anything *real* by eternal return. The doctrine is then judged either fruitful or not, depending on how the commentator approaches it.

I shall proceed here on the assumption that Nietzsche is being perfectly straightforward when he speaks of moving from the human to the over-human and thinks that eternal return can accomplish this. To do this, I shall avoid coming to conclusions about what Nietzsche "must" have meant and rather try to find out if he *could have been* saying anything meaningful, given the other terms of discourse that he sets for himself. An understanding of eternal return which makes no sense of the rest of Nietzsche is probably wrong.

In any case, my considerations above seem to me to eliminate a number of understandings on a purely methodological basis. Danto, Jaspers, Kaufmann, and the others cannot give us an understanding of eternal return which only either makes little sense of or contradicts other important portions of Nietzsche's writing. Having discarded these views, we are still in somewhat of a quandary, for when we turn to the few substantive things Nietzsche did say about eternal return, we find that they are not set out in direct statements, but rather in an exposition in a "vision and a riddle." I shall shortly give some indications why Nietzsche chooses this mode; firstly, I must set out the terms of the riddle.

The chapter "On the Vision and the Riddle" in the third book of *Zarathustra* is full of complex symbols, all of which have general meaning for Nietzsche. Zarathustra is recounting to some sailors his vision of climbing a mountain, while carrying on his back "his archenemy, the spirit of gravity — half dwarf, half mole."<sup>7</sup> This

creature represents the inverse of Zarathustra: he is the same person who jumped over the tightrope walker in the first book, a person who seems to overcome the human-all-too-human, but must in fact be carried along by someone else or skip necessary stages of development. Zarathustra finally calls a halt to bearing this burden, and the dwarf jumps off and squats beside him. Despite the dwarf's tenacity, he is not able to bear Zarathustra's "most abysmal thought." This thought is *not*, as the *dwarf* would have it, that time runs in a circle. Such a doctrine would be a caricature of Zarathustra, just as the spirit of gravity will be a caricature of Zarathustra's lightness. The abysmal thought is named "eternal return."

Zarathustra wonders aloud to the dwarf if they have not all been here before, whispering as they are now, under the gateway of moment, with time running in a straight line backward and forward into the past and future. Then, of a sudden, Zarathustra hears a dog howl, feels pity, and everything around him vanishes. A riddle is about to be proposed, that of eternal return.<sup>8</sup> Zarathustra sees a shepherd in whose mouth has bitten fast a large black serpent. He recoils in horror, and cries out to the youth to bite off the head of the serpent. The youth does so, spits it out, and is immediately transformed, apparently made new in the act of biting and expelling. As part of the riddle, Zarathustra asks his audience whom he has seen and what he has seen. This riddle is posed before the shepherd bites the serpent's head off. In appearance, and for some commentators, the presentation of eternal return is broken off at the end of this chapter,<sup>9</sup> but in appearance only. Zarathustra has not yet the "strength and lion's voice" to *summon* eternal return.

In fact, the vision that Zarathustra has had renders him sick and nauseous. By the end of the third book he is no more than convalescent. He is still divided in himself: "Acting as if someone else were still lying in his place who refused to get up . . . Zarathustra . . . spoke these words: 'Up abysmal thought; out of my depth; I am your cock and dawn, sleepy worm . . . and when you are awake you will stay awake eternally. . . .'"<sup>10</sup> Even here Zarathustra is still not strong enough to support his thought. It causes so much nausea that he again falls down senseless and remains thus for seven days — the time of creation. When he awakens, his animals attempt to comfort him by asserting the beauty of a purely cyclical version of eternal return. Zarathustra rebukes them: "Oh you buffoon and barrel

organs. . . . Have you already made a hurdy-gurdy song out of this? <sup>11</sup> The animals then refuse to let him proceed with an explanation of the true nature of eternal return; he is still a convalescent and must "cure his soul." The animals can probably assert a cyclical understanding without suffering nausea because, as Nietzsche points out at the beginning of *The Use and Disadvantage of History for Life*, they do not suffer from the "historical malady." The notion can be quite acceptable to them, but for men it is a hurdy-gurdy song, a mechanistic parody of creative art. <sup>12</sup>

This presentation does allow some steps forward. In the first place, whatever eternal return is, *it is not a theory of the cosmos*. The *state of being* of an individual (and of an animal, in the example above) seems to make the difference. The thought has to be "awakened" by Zarathustra, that is, he has to do something or act differently for it to come "out of [his] depth." The shepherd is *transfigured* by his act, and he laughs "as no man has ever laughed before." In a late note, Nietzsche proclaims, "when you incarnate the thought of thoughts in yourself, it will change you." <sup>13</sup> It is wrong, says Nietzsche — in fact, "one must guard against it" — to think of eternal return on the example of the "stars, or the ebb and flow, day and night, seasons. . . ." <sup>14</sup> The focus of most of Nietzsche's comments seems to be human beings, their souls and bodies. Once Zarathustra overcomes the dissociation of himself and that body lying there as if "in his place," his convalescence will be over. He will then "be awake [and] will stay awake eternally." It appears from these texts that we must look upon eternal return at least as the description of a particular manner of existing.

Secondly, the emphasis on what will happen *when* the "thought of thoughts" comes, *casts considerable doubts on the notion that eternal return is the return of everything "always the same."* As long as we mean by "always the same" that everything will come cyclically back and that there is no change, it seems we mean something other than what Nietzsche does. He speaks of eternal return as the "pivot point of history," <sup>15</sup> and of himself as "breaking history in two"; above, as we saw, he explicitly rejects analogies to cyclical notions of time. Indeed, this is hardly surprising. In *Ecce Homo*, he finds his idea of eternal return to be an entirely *new* idea, approached only perhaps by Heraclitus, and discovered "six thousand feet above men and time." It is unlikely that a man well acquainted with Hinduism

and an expert on things Greek might have thought cyclicism a *new* idea. Part of the source of this confusion comes from a misunderstanding of the meaning of "eternity." For Nietzsche, eternity does not "become," it has no past and future.<sup>16</sup> It simply *is*: the exterior provided for the scene with the dwarf and the shepherd in the chapter "On the Vision and the Riddle" takes place under the gateway of moment, in stopped time, as it were, for dramatic evidence. When something is eternal, it is with one always. It does not stretch out into infinity, since it is eternally present.<sup>17</sup>

Thirdly, whatever eternal return is, it is concerned with the question of how human beings deal with their past and their history. *The Genealogy of Morals* and the first book of *Zarathustra* establish the fact and the problem of the death of God. The rest of *Zarathustra* is the investigation of the consequences of that problem, both actual and to come. As we saw in the previous chapter, by the end of the second book, in "On Redemption," Nietzsche sets out as a central issue the question of the relation of the past and future to the present. Both memory and the past are now, in Nietzsche's views, problems and weights to men; yet, in his understanding, there can be neither going back nor, à la Hegel or Marx, the hope for a solution from the practical inertia of historical logic. Men cannot, for Nietzsche, *escape* time. It is the effort to remove oneself from history which Nietzsche sees at the root of the various attempts at redemption: Hegel, Kant, Schopenhauer, along with the Christians before them and science after, all maintain the existence of a world of transcendental concept(s) (be this God, theoretical reason, the *Geist*, the laws of physics), as the source for a solution to the problems of earthly being.<sup>18</sup> "Redemption" consists in escaping from this world to that one, or, conversely, having that world take this one over. Given, however, Nietzsche's general hostility to such notions of transcendence and two-worldliness, it is unlikely that he would assert the possibility or desirability of escaping the reality of time.

It then seems that interpreters of Nietzsche who see men as constantly "overcoming" themselves and rising higher and higher in a long succession of overmanliness miss the key point. If the chapter "On Redemption" establishes that man cannot "escape" time, and yet time is a *problem*, then men will have to find a manner of being-in-time so different that it no longer frames a problem. Failing such an existence, one can only adopt the traditional metaphysical



stances, or possibly the cynical cyclicism of the dwarf. In the doctrine of eternal return, Nietzsche then tries to evolve an understanding of a human relation to time which is neither a circle, nor a straight line running backward and forward.<sup>19</sup> One might formulate this question as follows. "Evolve a form of life in which the past never presents itself as a problem (one might say, as a source of neurosis or cyclical compulsion) and in which men (as contrary to animals) are nevertheless self-conscious." Nietzsche's vision here is breathtakingly specific and grandiose. He is concerned that his teaching "slowly sink in as to how generations must build and be fruitful on the basis of it — so that finally it becomes a great tree and overshadows the coming humanity. (Two thousand years for Christianity — many thousand for this.)"<sup>20</sup> From this, it appears that Nietzsche is talking about conscious breeding or evolving of life, no longer human-all-too-human, and that this will or can come about because of the teaching of eternal return.

So far, I have not said very much about what eternal return is; rather, I have given some indications as to how it might be recognized. If this is a doctrine which cannot yet be taught because there is no audience for it, then saying what it is will do no good. In fact, it might be harmful. "One only understands these things when they have been achieved in practice," writes Nietzsche as early as a note from the seventies.<sup>21</sup> To attempt to say them directly, as Nietzsche is increasingly tempted to do, or, at the end of his life, finds necessary, lays open the possibility of being dangerously misread and misused.<sup>22</sup> ("Above all, do not mistake me," he warns in *Ecce Homo*.) Hence, as a writer, he "dramatizes his ideas,"<sup>23</sup> and fashions them in such a way that understanding can only come from having lived through them. *Zarathustra* is a recognition of this on a large scale: its doctrine is presented in "a book for all," the true meaning of which is not available ("a book for none"), which is perhaps why Nietzsche thought that anyone who had truly understood six sentences of *Zarathustra* would have accomplished a great thing. The ideas are "dramatized" in the sense that Nietzsche brings them on stage and sets them to work. Understanding comes by the grasping and acknowledging of the coherence of their interaction. Eternal return is *first* conceived in a manner that makes Zarathustra nauseous. He has only been able to express it to sailors, themselves already *Sucher-Versucher*, in the form of a riddle. Riddles, I have suggested

before, can be characteristic forms of philosophical discourse when one is attempting to get something across for which nothing other than *perfect* clarity will suffice. "What is black and white and red all over?" One is presented with fragments of a world and is asked for the logic that would make them a picture. After initial confusion, if the answer is come up with, that is, once the bits are tied together in a picture, as "an embarrassed zebra" or "a bloody nun," the *problem no longer exists*. A riddle can't be asked twice, because after the first time, one has *got* it. However, the answer to a riddle doesn't come just from the pieces of information provided in the question; the answer has to be *made*. Once you have it, there is no problem anymore; but until then, it remains a mystery.

As with riddles, so with Nietzsche on eternal return. Here, though, the problem is complicated by the fact that the reader does not know a priori what counts as portions of the answer. This, as suggested, is partly due to the subject material, but also to what appears to be Nietzsche's inability to finish anything that contained creative themes.<sup>24</sup> The reader can only follow out the leads given and hope to discover the journey they describe.

### *The Problem of Audience*

I have pointed out above that eternal return is not something that can be taught, and that it seems to require a particular state of being in order to be able to understand and achieve it (the shepherd is transformed, Zarathustra is rendered nauseous). To me, this indicates that eternal return must operate more than just in thought. Since a particular *type* of person both experiences and understands eternal return, the doctrine cannot be effected only in the world of ideas. If there were no way in which the process of individual change might affect the process of general social change, Nietzsche would be contributing nothing more than a Hegelianized version of Kant. Some interpreters have indeed professed to find, in the doctrine of eternal return, analogies to the Kantian categorical imperative, to which Nietzsche adds a historical dimension.<sup>25</sup> To escape the judgment that eternal return is nothing more than esoteric Kant, one must show that what is seemingly merely a form of individual conception or understanding can have specific and actual human (I might more properly say "anthropological") consequences.<sup>26</sup>

Zarathustra understands this. "It is not enough to bring a teaching; one must also forcibly alter men, so they adopt it. . . ." <sup>27</sup> Men are not changing, for their relation to the nihilism afflicting Europe is "passive"; they "allow it to happen to them." <sup>28</sup> Should men attempt to directly overcome decadence as such, as Socrates did, they will only bring it back in a cyclical fashion, for no matter what specific historical circumstances may bring, the genealogical root will always be there. There have even, in fact, arisen forces that tend to ensure that the shape of modern morality will always be repeated. Such, for example, is the ascetic priest, who has as his historical mission to be "the predestined savior, shepherd, and advocate of the sick herd." <sup>29</sup> Here the repetition of this form of nihilism maintains life inside the pattern of slave morality, even though this pattern has reached complete logical emptiness. "The ascetic priest," says Nietzsche, "this apparent enemy of life, the deny-er, precisely he is among the great conserving and yes-creating forces of life." <sup>30</sup> The life the ascetic priest preserves is the passive, accepting, nihilistic one. He provides a moral cloak for the *schlecht-weggekommene*, the "badly developed," who can maintain life only through "passion extirpation." <sup>31</sup> Without the ascetic priest, "the oppressed man would perceive that he stands on the same ground as the oppressor and has no individual privilege, no higher rank than the latter. . . . Admitting this belief in morality could be destroyed, the badly developed would no longer have any comfort and perish." <sup>32</sup> In other words, unless one can destroy the means by which people keep themselves in their present slavely moral condition, there will be no possibility of escaping it. Nietzsche goes on to indicate that this process will be accomplished through a means of self-destruction. "The *perishing* [Zugrunde-gehen] presents itself as a *self-condemnation* [Sich-zugrunde-richten], as the instinctive selection of that which *must destroy*." <sup>33</sup> Already in the Prologue to *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche devotes much attention and praise to those men who wish to "go under." <sup>34</sup>

Earlier in the section of the *Nachlass* cited in the previous paragraph, Nietzsche indicates that eternal return may finally break the hold that European nihilism has on men. It appears that if "the unhealthiest men are infected by" eternal return, it will provoke a "crisis," the value of which is that "it *purifies*," for it will "extirpate everything that is meaningless and aimless." <sup>35</sup> This appears to mean

that eternal return, if "infecting" men in the last stage of slave morality, will unroot the nihilism reigning in them. This would be the "completion of nihilism," which the ascetic priest has been holding at bay. And, for Nietzsche, it represents the "period of the catastrophe," which sees the advent of "a teaching which filters men. . . ." <sup>36</sup> I read this to mean that eternal return is a manner of taking a stance toward the past, and thus toward oneself, which will eliminate ("filter") those portions of a man and those men (the *schlecht-weggekommene*— those whose "physiology" has become characterized by nihilism) who manifest nihilism. As an analogy, and only an analogy, I might suggest that eternal return would appear to be a manner of dealing with oneself which would eliminate those portions of one's character which formed an ongoing neurosis. (I repeat that this is, so far, only an analogy. Nietzsche's conception is far more complicated, for his language is physiological. And, in any case, it is difficult to understand what it means to get rid of— eliminate— a portion of one "character.")

If this initial characterization of eternal return is accurate, we can begin to understand why Nietzsche thinks his teaching is so significant. As seen above, Nietzsche holds that all previous teachings and philosophical doctrines have merely confounded the error initiated by the attitudes characterizing the historical Socrates. He writes about his own activity in a manner entirely consonant with the notion of "filtering" expressed above. "It has been my good fortune, after thousands of years of error and confusion, to have recovered the path that leads to a Yes *and* a No. I teach the No to all that makes weak— which exhausts. I teach the Yes to all that makes for strength— which stores up strength, which justifies [*rechtfertigt*] the feeling of strength."<sup>37</sup> It appears, then, that eternal return "filters," that it eliminates certain ways of being in the world (nihilism), and that it consists of both a Yes and a No. This means that *eternal return is selective*; only that which is not filtered out by the "yes and no" will return. Presumably, this would eliminate those things (those memories, that portion of the past and its concretion in and as a person) which are not lived "in eternal return." *Eternal return will not then be a sort of universal affirmation*; such would not be selective. For instance, the I-A (*Ja*-Yes) braying of the ass and the higher men in the last book of *Zarathustra* can only be a caricature of the life of eternal return to which the higher men are attempting

to rise.<sup>38</sup> Universal affirmation is not selective, for it affirms everything unconditionally and thus remains in the service of nihilism. As a beast of burden (like the camel), the ass carries all on its back. Its "yes" contrasts with the child's dionysiac Yes which negates, because, as an assertion of a new creation, it destroys a previous world.<sup>39</sup>

It is important here to understand on what scale Nietzsche intends his teaching. For two millennia, men have behaved in a slavely moral manner. Nietzsche calls this the human-all-too-human, and investigates the ramifications in all aspects of human behavior. These ramifications delineate a situation where men appear constitutionally incapable of behaving any way except that in which they do. The judgments about the world characteristic of slave morality hold man a prisoner. Nietzsche interrogates himself on this problem: "But if everything is necessary how can I control my affairs?" And he immediately answers: "Thought and belief are of chief importance; all other factors are in addition to this, which is greater than they. You say that nourishment, place, air, society determine and change you. Rather say, your judgments [*Meinungen* — which can have the sense of legal opinions] do it even more, for these determine your nourishment, place, air, society. When you incarnate the thought of thoughts, you will be transformed."<sup>40</sup> For "transformed," Nietzsche uses the term *verwandeln*, which also carries the notions of transubstantiation and metamorphosis; indeed the three *Verwandlungen* of the spirit in the first chapter of *Zarathustra* are often translated as "metamorphoses." That Nietzsche uses the same word here seems to indicate that he thinks the transformation effectuated by eternal return is on the order of passing from one kind of "spirit" to another.

In saying that eternal return is selective and transforming of the person who is living by it, I assert that Nietzsche understands eternal return to produce in human beings a transformation sufficiently deep and general as to completely change the nature of *all* interactions men have with themselves, with others, and with the world around them. Men are transfigured. By the selective and filtering effect of some activity, men can flush out some or all of what they have been. Nietzsche's language, for instance, often draws on the digestive (he accuses the Germans of "constipation"), and he is occasionally preoccupied with questions of food and nourishment. The concern is

probably more than metaphorical, for the imagery is appropriate. If the human problem is the weight of the past on the present, then men must learn *how* to carry and how to get rid of that which is a block. In the imagery of the chapter "On the Vision and the Riddle," the dwarf must jump down off Zarathustra's back. To move from the human-all-too-human to the overman (i.e., to that which is not "human") means to get rid of and transform all the processes by which men have related to the world over the last twenty-four hundred years, in fact to transform men themselves.<sup>41</sup>

As such, eternal return begins to look like Nietzsche's answer to the "problem of metaphysics" which Kant poses at the beginning of the Preface to the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant argues there, as is well known, that "human reason . . . in one species of its knowledge . . . is burdened by a question which, as prescribed by the very nature of reason itself, it is not able to ignore, but which, as transcending all its powers, it is also not able to answer."<sup>42</sup> As we saw in Chapter III above, Nietzsche calls activity under this dilemma nihilism, and extends the notion to the entire sphere of action of the slavely moral man. If eternal return can do away with "the problem of metaphysics," it will require at least a transformation in what men mean by reasoning and thinking. In the light of eternal return, the answers sought will be different sorts of answers to different questions; it could hardly be otherwise, for if men remain in the form of discourse analyzed by Kant, they will necessarily eventually be led to the dilemma he notes.

It is not surprising, then, that Nietzsche's thought has often been grouped with "irrationalism." Most interpretations following this vein do not have a very deep understanding of Nietzsche; their naïveté, however, has kept them from finding a reading of Nietzsche so sophisticated as to avoid recognition of the fact that Nietzsche really does want to abolish many of those forms of discourse which we identify as the exercise of reason. This is not, of course, to say that they have read Nietzsche correctly. Crane Brinton's book, which falls in the "naïve category," is much less a book than is Kaufmann's *Nietzsche*. It fastens on the obvious, but does not know what to make of it. Kaufmann, on the other hand, tends to disguise the obvious in Nietzsche and not deal with it. Nietzsche does think that the reasoning characteristic of metaphysics leads to nihilism and should be "extirpated." He does not mean, as later positivists did,

that man should simply *turn away* from that form of thinking.<sup>43</sup> The scope and import of his genealogical investigations is to assert that all forms of activity are in the same slave "family." Hence, there is no such thing as simply "giving up" metaphysics as pointless; one can no more "give up" metaphysics than successfully deny one's parentage. The problem is more general, to find a form of behavior which is not subject to the dilemmas apparently inherent in the present one.

Nietzsche knows that any new "non-metaphysical" world cannot simply be just created. One must first learn to deal with and eradicate this one. Therefore men must understand — much more profoundly than ever before — the precise nature of this world. All of Nietzsche's genealogical study is designed to show that moral valuations are the result of illusions, and that illusions are the necessary and inevitable characteristics of particular action in the river of existence. The important question is thus about that which underlies and informs a particular set of actions, for Nietzsche is not so much concerned to attack the *validity* of moral valuations as the soil in which they are rooted. The true significance of Nietzsche's thought is that it destroys not only by unmasking, but also through the provision of a new ontological setting. Nietzsche in a late fragment gives eloquent summary to the need to define this new dynamic attitudinal basis. "All goals are annihilated. Men must give themselves one. It was an error to suppose that they should have one: they have given them all to themselves. But *the prerequisites* for all earlier goals are annihilated. Science shows the river, but not the goal. It does, however, set the preconditions [*Voraussetzungen*] to which the new goal must respond."<sup>44</sup> Nietzsche, as we shall see, sees his task to be the establishment of new preconditions which will make the new goal possible.

### *The Question of Breeding*

The contention that Nietzsche is trying to reground the manner in which men relate to each other, and to the world, forces us to go further, into territory which recent work on Nietzsche has generally avoided. Nietzsche is not (just) talking about a manner of thinking; since he thinks that men have been changed in their nature by slave

morality, they will also have to be changed if they are to become overmen. It is the most "natural" thing in the world to be slavely moral; indeed, there appears to be nothing else. It will have to appear equally "natural" to be an overman. Hence, I am forced to take very seriously all those bothersome statements which most modern scholars of Nietzsche have simply left out of their analysis in a well-meant reaction to the distortions of the Nazis. The talk about "breeding" and "race" is important in Nietzsche's thought, and it simply won't do to pile up the quotations which say nice things about the Jews and nasty ones about the Germans. Nietzsche is talking about *developing* men who are not subject to the "human-all-too-human." He repeatedly uses the word *züchten*, which means to breed, raise, rear, grow or cultivate, a word normally used in connection with animals or plants. After leaving Basel, he conspicuously stops using *erziehen*, which has connotations of "bring up" and "educate."

These remarks permit a considerable modification of the usual opinion that Nietzsche was some sort of Lamarckian. He is saying that the effect of constantly repeating an action (of its being "in eternal return") can produce a change in the individual which is only "psychological," not just "second nature" or habit, but rather eventually becomes one's "real" nature, and in so doing expels the "nature" that was present before. In a passage I have had opportunity to cite before, but which now presents itself for the first time in a clear light, Nietzsche writes:

... As we are merely the resultant of previous generations, we are also the resultant of their errors, passions, and mistakes, indeed of their crimes. It is not possible to completely free oneself from this chain. Though we condemn the errors and hold ourselves to be free of them, we have not laid aside the fact that we spring from them. ... We arrive at best at a conflict between our innate, inherited nature and our knowledge, as well as a struggle of a new strong growth against that which has been from the past cultivated and inherited; we plant a new form of life, a new instinct, a second nature which withers the first. It is an attempt to give oneself a posteriori a past from which one might have sprung, as against that from which one does spring — always a dangerous attempt, because it is so difficult to find a limit to the denial of the past, and because the second nature is generally weaker than the first. We stop too often at knowing the good without doing it, because we also know the better but cannot do it. But here and there the victory is achieved and a special conciliation attained by the combatants . . . : to know that this first nature — it, too — was once a second nature and that every conquering second nature becomes a first.<sup>45</sup>



Already in this early essay Nietzsche takes up the concerns that remain central to the rest of his activity. In the past, men *have* changed radically: a number of forms of life have been possible, different from each other even in their most fundamental traits. Men appear to have no way to consciously free themselves from what they have been. Yet, it appears now that they must, for the triumph of slave morality has become well-nigh total. Nietzsche's task is to find a doctrine that replaces nihilism, now man's "first nature," with another "first nature," and to transfigure the "human" into the "over-human."

These considerations allow me to express my variance with the subtle and seductive interpretation of Martin Heidegger and the related one of Gilles Deleuze. The understanding of Heidegger is complex and complicated: complex, because his thought uses many terms which do not always carry an assured philosophical resonance; complicated, because it is a hallmark of Heideggerian interpretation that one should not necessarily be able to clearly separate the interpreter from the interpreted. For Heidegger, the philosophical meaning of a piece of criticism and interpretation must *emerge out* of the interaction of the writer and his subject — it cannot be stated.<sup>46</sup>

I once had some sympathies for this approach; much less now; in any case, this is not the place to elaborate on it.<sup>47</sup> However, it seems to me that in the case of his understanding of Nietzsche, Heidegger makes several important mistakes that keep him from recognizing what Nietzsche is saying to him. His interpretation<sup>48</sup> seems to contain the following points. (1) The experience of truth can be other than historical (i.e., one can "escape" metaphysics by "understanding" the *Grund* of *Sein*, p. 257). (2) The will to power culminates in eternal return (p. 10) which is still historical and metaphysical in kind (p. 9). (3) Nietzsche's thought, even though the "last stage of metaphysics," is still metaphysical in character, and is a metaphysics of pure subjectivity (p. 199). It would then follow that Heidegger must logically conclude that for Nietzsche there can be no change in basic ontology (no historical ontological relativity, cf. p. 259). He is thus led logically to conclude, for instance, that Nietzsche's "racial" thinking must be metaphysical and not biological in nature (p. 309).

I have noted in the previous chapter some important errors in

Heidegger's reading. I find no reason here to set out a full exposition of the differences between my understanding and his. That we share some points of understanding should also be apparent. For instance, Heidegger finds, as I do, that eternal return is not Heraclitean and cannot be a cyclical concept (pp. 11-12). However, the fact that he leaves Nietzsche fully in, if as the culmination of, the *philosophia perennis*<sup>49</sup> means that I must reject his overall understanding. Put bluntly: by trying to reserve for himself the so-called honor of being the first man to "escape" metaphysics, Heidegger is forced to ignore the fact that Nietzsche fully believed that his doctrine would make men really different — not human-all-too-human. Nietzsche's doctrine does admit of a coherent exposition, in Nietzsche's terms, as I have attempted to show. This understanding does, however, imply that distinctions between the biological and the "metaphysical," or more properly, the philosophical, such as Heidegger would have Nietzsche make, are, in fact, not made by Nietzsche. In no way could Heidegger's Nietzsche permit the extreme and radical rejection of the mind-body dualism which Nietzsche seems in fact to have made.

Gilles Deleuze's interpretation<sup>50</sup> I find even more brilliant than Heidegger's. He emphasizes strongly (if somewhat in *la manière des grandes écoles*) the noncyclical nature of eternal return and attempts to relate it to other aspects of Nietzsche's thought (in particular the views on nihilism). He, however, shares with Heidegger the notion that the will to power has something directly to do with eternal return. He and Heidegger seem to see the will to power as *physis*, the dynamic force leading to eternal return. As far as can be determined, there is no direct textual evidence for this. As we have seen, Nietzsche never calls the will to power *physis*, but rather sees it as *pathos*, as a sequence of states of affairs. The will to power seems to be the principle of a life; eternal return, however, is a *doctrine*. Almost never does Nietzsche speak of them in the same text, nor does he address them to the same audience. But Deleuze is led to affirm that eternal return produces a certain kind of orientation toward the world. He feels that, when coupled with the highest stage of nihilism, eternal return produces an "active" state of existence by a sort of "negation of the negation."<sup>51</sup>

My analysis tends to indicate that it works the other way around: a certain form of orientation produces eternal return. This raises far more difficult problems for putting the doctrine into practice. If the

process contains no inward logic which makes it happen in and of itself, how is one to arrive at the state of eternal return? Why will men not simply continue to act in the repetition of their present mode of acting; Nietzsche identifies in *The Antichrist* some "families, tribes, or peoples" who have fortunately and accidentally managed this feat.<sup>52</sup> Among them is, obviously, Greece. The problem for contemporary times, however, is so great and the onslaught of nihilism and decadence so overwhelming that man can no longer depend on accidents and lucky hits. Now, and in opposition to the Greeks, man must "make real by plan what happened before by accident."<sup>53</sup> This makes the task much more difficult and Nietzsche queries of those men who must do this: "How can such a man think of eternal return?"<sup>54</sup>

*Signs of Eternal Return:  
The Failures of the Higher Men*

I said above that eternal return is selective, that it allows us to eradicate the history which leads to present "nature" and which pushes us toward nihilism and, finally, that eternal return cannot operate unless one deals with the world in a certain way. The last contention is probably key; until now, I have had to leave it abstract and have only been able to note that the shepherd appears "transfigured," or that Zarathustra still fails to be able to summon eternal return. I turn here, then, to a consideration of exactly what it means to stand in eternal return. What is it that men must, as Nietzsche significantly says, "learn, practice, and translate into flesh and reality, and even into the commonplace."<sup>55</sup> What sort of beings must we be to experience ourselves and the world in a manner made new by the doctrine of eternal return?

In Book Four of *Zarathustra*, we meet examples of men who, despite their efforts, have been unable to live in eternal return. They are the "higher men," examples of the highest types humanity has yet evolved, and all would-be followers of Zarathustra. Notwithstanding all their discipleship, or perhaps because of it, these men are not on the path to *Übermenschlichkeit*.<sup>56</sup> Zarathustra tells them: "When you reach your goal, when you jump off your horse — on your very *height*, you higher men, you will stumble."<sup>57</sup> The failings

in these men are such that they will *never* be able to become overmen, for their will to power maintains them ineluctably in the world of the human.

Nietzsche gives a fairly specific account of these failings, which serves as a happy focal point for an investigation of those traits one would have to have to live in eternal return. The higher men themselves have an inkling of their failures. Nietzsche notes that they feel a need for a constant and unselective affirmation, a yea-saying to everything. They celebrate this in their worship of the ass, "the animal," Zarathustra remarks, "with long ears who only says Yes and never says No. Has he not created the world in his own image, namely as stupid as possible?"<sup>58</sup> The ass is to be contrasted to those creatures who have small, discriminating ears, such as Ariadne, into whose ear Dionysos can whisper the secret of eternal return.<sup>59</sup> The path to eternal return, it appears, is labyrinthian and never direct. It is only available to those who are able to deny as well as affirm. If one tries to say "yes" to everything, as do the higher men, one lacks certain abilities, which Nietzsche seems to hold as central to and descriptive of the world of eternal return. These are spelled out in the chapter "On the Higher Man" as the ability to play and gamble (*spielen*), the ability to laugh, and the ability to dance.<sup>60</sup> These are abilities that appear to make it possible to begin the process of learning, practicing, internalization, and transformation which is characteristic of eternal return. Unless one can do these, nothing else is possible.

All of these abilities involve particular attitudes toward the world and a particular way of dealing with oneself, with others, and with the environment. Nietzsche selects them as exemplary of the failures of the higher men because, I believe, they portray a mode of existence different from the "normal," yet generally available to the reader who has experienced them and is able to understand the importance of his or her experience.

Play, the first of these activities, is a form of behavior in which a goal is of little or no importance. The German *spielen* carries with it denotations even more extensive than those accompanying the English "play." Not only does it signify "playing" and "play-acting," but it is also used where an English speaker would say "gambling." With this activity, Nietzsche wants to bring back an attitude he had found central to Heraclitus. What Heraclitus saw, "the teaching of

*the law in becoming and play in necessity* must be seen from now on in all eternity. He raised the curtain on this greatest of all possible dramas."<sup>61</sup> For Heraclitus, the world was the gaming table of the divine world-child. It is the affirmation of the accidental necessities of such gaming that attracts Nietzsche. He writes in *Zarathustra*: "If I ever played dice with gods at gods' tables . . . — for the earth is a table for the gods and trembles with creative new words and god-throws: Oh, how should I not lust after eternity. . . ." <sup>62</sup> Gaming combines in one activity the result *created* by the throw, the *accident* of that result, and the *necessity* of the conditions that make the throw possible.

Playing is sufficiently important to Nietzsche that he makes it the characteristic of the self-affirming child who is the final metamorphosis of the spirit in the beginning of *Zarathustra*.<sup>63</sup> What attracts Nietzsche, I believe, is the fact that games and gaming are only made possible by necessities, yet, while playing, one does not experience the necessities as constraint. They are rather the condition of freedom which makes the game possible. For instance, one simply would not know what to say to a chess player who (seriously) claimed to be oppressed by the rule that "bishops move on the diagonals." This and other necessities make chess possible. Nietzsche selects dice as an example because while there is the experience of chance as to what comes up, one would not want to claim at the same time that there was not a necessity to the throw.

In play, then, one's behavior is an affirmation of those rules which, in their necessity, make possible that one plays. Nietzsche claims, for instance, that Zarathustra's kingdom is that of chance,<sup>64</sup> an affirmation of that which happens to be Zarathustra. It is as if in dice one were what one plays, and, if one plays oneself correctly there can be no cause for recrimination, either at the external world (which is "bad conscience") or at oneself (*ressentiment*). The higher men refuse to affirm what they play and seek a reason for failure, or feel ashamed. Nietzsche writes: "Shy, ashamed, like a tiger whose leap has failed: thus I have often seen you slink aside, you higher men. A throw failed you. But you dice-throwers, what does it matter? You have not learned to gamble and jest as one must gamble and jest. Do we not always sit at a big gambling table and jesting table? And, if something great has failed you, does it follow that you yourselves are failures, does it follow that man himself is a fail-

ure?"<sup>65</sup> Though they *appear* to play, the higher men do not know how; the game remains a means for them in their misbegotten attempt to attain *Übermenschlichkeit*.

The higher men do not realize that since they fail in their throw, it *does* follow that man is a failure. Instead of looking for reasons, Nietzsche thinks then that they should accept that they are also *schlecht-weggekommene* and wish to perish. "I love him," writes Nietzsche, "who is abashed when the dice fall to make his fortune and asks, 'Am I then a crooked gambler [*falscher Spieler*]?' For he wants to perish."<sup>66</sup> Instead of going under, the higher men seek to stay alive; they are evil, slavely moral players who seek to trap the dice in a web of probability and to profit from an infinite series of chances. This is a very different attitude from that which accepts that one wins because one has the right to win. The other stance is *amor fati*,<sup>67</sup> the love of necessity, which recognizes that perhaps one is entitled *only* to go under. The acceptance of oneself in eternity may require that one perish; above all, Nietzsche says, don't wait for your chance. Statistics are not the path of eternal return.

In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche can then refer to a final stage which closes out morality, the *ausser-moralisch*, in which matters will not be judged by their effects, nor their intentions, but rather when "the decisive value of an action lies precisely in what is *unintentional* to it."<sup>68</sup> In such a situation, character would once again be destiny, much as it had been for Aeschylus. In games, too, the intentions of the players (as long as they are playing the game) are of little importance. For instance, excuses and the attendant concept of responsibility do not often occur in a game. Should one kick the ball over the goal in soccer, the plea that "I did not intend to" is not really appropriate; on the other hand, the notion of fault is equally out of place. The game is then a capsule summary for Nietzsche of a life beyond good and evil, beyond utility and the moral antinomies which "normally" shape existence. In a game, properly played, one truly "wills one's *own* will."<sup>69</sup>

Situations such as gaming imply a perfect union between obligation and desire, between what one has to do (play this game) and what one wants to do (play the game). This resembles what Kant thought would be the case with a being both perfectly rational and perfectly moral. Kant, characteristically, found such a life to be impossible; Nietzsche hopes to make one possible. For both men,

however, the perfect unity characterizing such a being is one that knows no moral *problems*, that eliminates choice between moral alternatives. The world cannot present (moral) problems, when whatever one might and can do is appropriate.<sup>70</sup> In such cases, one is reminded, as Nietzsche writes in *The Gay Science*, "of the improvising masters of the musical art, to whom even the listeners would fain ascribe a divine *infallibility* of the hand, notwithstanding that they now and then make a mistake as every mortal is liable to do. But they are skilled and inventive, and always ready in a moment to arrange into the structure of the score the most accidental tone. . . . And animate the accident with a fine meaning and soul."<sup>71</sup>

*Laughter* is the second attitude that leads to eternal return and that the higher men lack. We can appreciate here the leap that has occurred since the world of the *Iliad*. There Achilles accuses Apollo of gaming with him and is furious over it.<sup>72</sup> Nietzsche would have had him laugh. Such laughter, though, was not possible in the shame culture of Homeric Greece. Achilles had been shamed by Apollo and had no means to deal with it, for laughter implies a nobility that transcends the bounds of the heroic.

From *The Birth of Tragedy* to the problems of the higher men, Nietzsche sows his work with affirmations of the necessity of laughter. At the moment of transfiguration which leads to eternal return, the shepherd laughs "not like a man." Man must "learn to laugh,"<sup>73</sup> Nietzsche constantly asserts. And laughter will be a characteristic of the transfigured man; a sign of the final approach of eternal return to Zarathustra is the "laughing lion."<sup>74</sup> For Nietzsche, not to laugh is in the end to revere;<sup>75</sup> to revere is to take as permanently deserving of reverence that which is at best transitory. Nietzsche reproaches the higher men for their seriousness: ". . . learn to laugh at yourselves as one must laugh! You higher men, *how much is still possible*."<sup>76</sup> The higher men do *attempt* to laugh. The magician's *Nur Narr! Nur Dichter!* is a poetically successful though ontologically clumsy attempt at self-mockery, which immediately follows Zarathustra's command to laugh. It is possible to fail in laughter — to laugh in the wrong manner — just as it is possible to game wrongly.

Laughter is not, however, the simple denial of the present situation. It is, if done properly, the sign of a different consciousness, of an existence grounded on some other basis than that which is being laughed at. Thus, the higher men must learn to laugh at themselves.

Laughter is the means by which the suffering in the world is transformed into joy. Zarathustra must "laugh angrily" at himself *before* he realizes that he has overcome the last obstacle to eternal return: pity.

If laughter *transforms* suffering and nausea into joy, it is also symbolic of the affirmation of this joy. Laughter is will to power in that the same basic impulse takes on a plurality of forms on a plurality of occasions. Each laugh affirms a particular instance, but in so doing affirms the power of laughter and ontological height of the laugh. Laughter, as an overcoming of pity, is the means by which the whole question of the past is transformed. It allows men to forget that the whole question of guilt was ever asked. Without the past, there can be no guilt, for guilt implies the existence of the past independent of the actor. Laughter is a sign that the past is willed and is thus contained in the willing individual; it therefore returns as he acts. As in tragedy, this means that the laugh is *by his existence* affirming the responsibility for his acts. Laughter gives men an existence that does not ask the questions of transcendent guilt.

Upon the overcoming of the nauseating version of eternal return, the shepherd is transformed, laughs, and breaks into *dance*. The inability to dance is the third failure of the higher men, for the dance is the symbol of the joyful wisdom: it is that which can only be expressed in activity, but which nevertheless comes welling up out of a conscious innocence.<sup>77</sup>

Some examination of dance as an activity makes clear what Nietzsche was getting at and further fills in the characteristics of eternal return. "Only in the dance," Nietzsche writes, "do I know how to speak the image of the highest things."<sup>78</sup> For Nietzsche, to dance is to signify triumph over the spirit of gravity and over the spirit of *ressentiment*.<sup>79</sup> What seems important to Nietzsche is that dance is a learned activity in the sense that one learns to do all the steps making up a dance, but that, even though learned, it is not thereby reflective. Once one has learned how to do a *tour jété*, one can do it without a feeling of difficulty or compulsion — almost, I might say, "naturally." As a whole a dance is a plurality, or, as Nietzsche notes in a more exalted language during the time he was figuring these ideas out for the writing of *Zarathustra*, it is the "*impression upon becoming of the character of being.*"<sup>80</sup> As with



music or a language, a dance is a process, learned, yet nonetheless natural, which appears as a whole.

In dance, then, the dancer manifests in a conscious fashion that which is an acquired instinct. The dance is "learned, practiced, translated into flesh and reality and even into common sense." It is not that Nietzsche wants people to punctuate their walks with occasional *entre-chats* (though we do speak approvingly of "jumping for joy"); he rather chooses dance as a sign of the failure of the higher men to learn a new and complicated form of activity so well that they feel no compulsion, and can do it "naturally." As T. S. Eliot put it some twenty-five years later from a somewhat more Anglican vein:

The inner freedom from practical desire,  
The release from action and suffering, release from the inner  
And the outer compulsion, yet surrounded  
By a grace of sense. . . .<sup>81</sup>

These reflections incidentally enforce a further modification in the normal interpretation that Nietzsche is some sort of Lamarckian and believes in the inheritance of acquired characteristics. There certainly is a manner in which Nietzsche wants to say that the more one practices new forms of activity, the more natural and commonplace the artificially acquired traits become.<sup>82</sup> It is not really important to settle the problem as to whether or not they can be genetically inherited. As is often the case, there is some truth in the designation (here as Lamarckian) given Nietzsche; as usual, the understanding misses its mark.

### *Eternal Return: A Simple Case*

These concepts — playing, laughing, dancing — are highly metaphorical and condensed in resonance. It must be understood, though, that while Nietzsche intends them as metaphors and wishes the reader to be carried back and forth between two worlds, one of which may be familiar, the other rich and strange, he also intends them as descriptive of a particular orientation toward the world. It should therefore be possible to give a description of a person in this state, a state of eternal return. Before moving to Nietzsche's discus-

sion of the historical and social consequences of eternal return, I will essay a description which ties these notions together in an available manner.

In doing so, I must immediately enter a caveat. The example of eternal return that follows is as simple as it can be. It is an example of only a limited activity, not a whole life, where behavior is like that which Nietzsche describes as subject to eternal return. There is the danger that the reader assume that this is "all" that eternal return means. I shall attempt to dissuade the reader from this position as I go along, but my experience has often been that this made no difference.

Since eternal return involves the return of specific forms of life, it cannot be investigated in general. An understanding, though, may be gained from the description of a particular activity. I pick here skiing. In doing so I recognize two things. In the first place, skiing is obviously a limited portion of a human life. It does not imply the sort of complete transformation that Nietzsche was trying to bring about. It does, however, seem to me probable that Nietzsche accepts the possibility of eternal return for a particular portion of a person's life, as long as, during the time the person is engaged in that activity, the activity can or does encompass all of the person's attention. Such is true of skiing, as it is of many other activities.<sup>83</sup> Secondly, it is probable that this discussion will be fully meaningful only to the degree that the reader skis, or is able to substitute a similar activity of his own. Nietzsche notes that "one only understands these things theoretically when they have been achieved in practice."<sup>84</sup> Unless the reader has experienced the sense of freedom and power and the lack of constraint attained when skiing well, or when in more complicated situations, such as playing in a string quartet or making love, the following description may remain in part a mystery.

In skiing, one affirms skills that one has acquired. However, the affirmation of these skills is not reflexive: one does not have to *think* to do a parallel christiania. In fact, to the degree that my parallels are still reflexive, the chances of their execution are diminished. Furthermore, the easier my turns come, the more difficult can be the slope I undertake (and the more likely I will be to undertake them.) If a fall, in this case, it will be because I have made a mistake; that is, I have undertaken something I should not have, or need not have.<sup>85</sup> In this case, however, it is wrong to say, as slave-skiing-morality would have

it, either that "something tripped me up," that is, that something inevitable happened, or that I did something not really my fault, for example, "caught an edge." Both of these explanations are possible, but they are not about skiing; they remove the process of skiing from me and ascribe my problems to an outside agency. There is a way in which it makes sense to say that a really good skier gets down anything that is a ski slope. In a happier subcase of having made a mistake, I may also fall, in that I tried to do something I am not capable of. In this case, I may eventually come to master the slope; if I cannot, I should be content with that, or perhaps realize that skiing is not what I am cut out for. "My teaching says," writes Nietzsche, "live such that you must wish to so live again. . . . To whom striving gives the highest feeling [*Gefühl*], let him strive; to whom peace gives the highest feeling, let him be peaceful; to whom ordering, following, obedience give the highest feeling, let him obey. May he only *become conscious* about that which gives him the highest feeling, and not balk at any means. It is a matter of *eternity*. . . ." <sup>86</sup> When I ski, that portion of me which lets me ski "naturally," without reflection, is constantly being actualized. Yet my ability to ski, now so "natural," is an acquired characteristic, which I am no more capable of forgetting than I am capable of not knowing how to ride a bicycle. In my skiing, I have, then, solved the problem that Nietzsche sets as entirely new, "just dawning on the human eye and hardly yet recognizable: *to embody knowledge within ourselves and make it instinctive*." <sup>87</sup> In a note from the period of *Morgenröte*, Nietzsche seems even to indicate that the change is neurophysiological: "All which has been organized in the nerves lives on in them." (Biochemically, this is, of course, pure hypothesis and speculation. It may not be entirely without reality, however. See note 45 above.)

When I have thus learned to ski, in a certain manner I have also conquered time. That portion of my life which was not-skiing and wanting-to-ski no longer affects me and has been completely eradicated. I am not capable of returning to that form of existence; my skiing ability is now always with me, and will appear whenever I ski. So Wagner was to "make art become natural." <sup>88</sup> As Nietzsche writes, my "new life . . . has slain [my previous life]; (I) *do not require it anymore*, and now it breaks down of its own accord." <sup>89</sup> For Nietzsche, if an activity of a life is in eternal return, all that

might affect this activity or life adversely is destroyed. For instance, when I have learned how to ride a bicycle (or to ski), to go again to the situation of not being able to ride a bicycle will probably require more effort than the acquisition of the ability to ride, and may be impossible. It is, I believe, the situation of having learned how to ride a bicycle and no longer being the sort of person who cannot ride a bicycle, which Nietzsche characterizes in *Morgenröte* as "conscious innocence."

Finally, what one has learned and incarnated in becoming a person-who-can-ski will be manifest in the entire activity for which it is appropriate. As Zarathustra notes: "That which you called world, that must be created first by you: it must itself become your reason, your picture [*Bild*], your will, your love."<sup>90</sup> And thus one will call this situation good. "Each fundamental character trait that lies at the bottom of every occurrence and finds expression in every occurrence must, if recognized by the individual as his fundamental character trait, drive every individual to triumphantly call each instance of the whole existence [*des allgemeinen Daseins*] good. It would in fact come down to this: one happily feels this fundamental character trait in oneself as good and worthwhile, with pleasure."<sup>91</sup> Many of our common expressions carry out the image that Nietzsche conveys here. We say easily, "I was skiing way above my head — that's why I fell." Here we are much like those who wish to go under, for even if we don't fall when skiing "above our head," we know that we are not entitled to that run. In fact, we often feel, I think, a *frisson* of childish pleasure at having gotten away with something. Nietzsche would deny us this by the above citation: we must know that what we are and do shall pervade every part of our activity.

In skiing-eternal return, then, a learned process is constantly and unreflexively manifesting itself in the particular present that is skiing. It is not surprising that Nietzsche notes that there have been homologues to eternal return in the past. Indeed, there are several occasions in history when the immediate life of a man was colored by the constant pressure of a particular dominant notion. For instance, the "prospect of damnation" played such a role in making men examine their acts in terms of something other than the moment.<sup>92</sup> The possibility of eternal damnation is, for Nietzsche, a thought similar to eternal return. That it was a false thought and did not liberate men from their past, is, of course, true. But the effect of this

erroneous thought is, in Nietzsche's eyes, still staggering. "Let us examine," he writes, "how the thought that something recurs [*sich etwas wiederholt*] has worked until now (the year, for example, or periodic illness, waking and sleeping, etc. . . .). Even when the coming back again is only a possibility it can stagger and reform us. . . ." <sup>93</sup> It is worth noting here that Nietzsche contrasts his position with this one; for him, living in eternal return is not to function as a simple "possibility," but only as a reality. Nor is his position the *folie circulaire* referred to in *Ecce Homo*. <sup>94</sup> Nietzsche is talking of a life informed by entirely new tones, different in kind from the old ones. I should think it a change, on a vast scale, analogous perhaps to that one feels the first time one knows one is able to ride a bicycle or do a parallel christiania, but whereafter there is, so to speak, a different era. As Nietzsche writes: "From the moment on, when this thought is there, all colors are changed and there is a new history." <sup>95</sup>

#### *Eternal Return and the Times to Come*

I have picked a very limited example of an activity that can occur in something like what Nietzsche means by eternal return. In skiing, or riding a bicycle, or indeed, in playing in a string quartet or making love, though these last two examples involve other people and are thus more complicated, one learns to do a very complicated set of actions perfectly well, such that these actions come into play whenever it is appropriate for them to. Once the activity is fully made part of a person, he or she is incapable of not being that sort of person. I, for instance, am incapable of *not being able* to ride a bicycle; whenever I am on a bicycle, the ability to ride naturally comes back and manifests itself. It is true, of course, that riding a bicycle or skiing occupy only a portion of my life. If, however, it should be my whole life, or, as Nietzsche says, my "highest feeling," then everything I did would stand in eternal return and in the joy that comes in feeling no discontinuity between myself and the world in which I act. (Think here of what it is like to ski well, or play an instrument well.)

I realize that my focus on examples such as skiing may prove misleading: as skills, they do not apparently involve a transformation of the whole person. Nietzsche, however, certainly thinks the doc-

trine of eternal return to have consequences beyond those in a portion of an individual. He writes in a late note: "The coming history: this thought will always conquer more — and those who do not believe in it must eventually, due to their nature [*ihrer Natur nach*], die out. Only he who holds his existence [*Dasein*] capable of eternal return will remain [*bleibt übrig*]; among such, however, conditions such as no utopian yet has imagined are possible."<sup>96</sup> Eternal return then will provide a doctrine that can eventually inform all existence, much in the way that Socratic Christianity dominates at present. Though Nietzsche gives very little extended discussion of what he has in mind, it is possible to say a bit about the new transvaluation of values.

For the last twenty-four hundred years, Nietzsche says, men have incarnated an error.<sup>97</sup> They have persuaded themselves of the "truth" of the self-destructive illusions of slave morality and have lived them out. We saw in previous chapters how the logic of the genealogy of slave morality leads men inexorably to the vicious circle of nihilism. One might say that the last (slavely moral) men are their own fetishes, their own prisoners in their own errors.

To break out from the prison of our present being is both difficult and dangerous. Nietzsche speaks often of the attractions that his doctrine will have for men and is afraid that men will seize upon it as justification for behavior to which they are not entitled. "Are you prepared?" he demands in a late note. "You must have lived through every degree of skepticism and have desiringly bathed in ice-cold streams — otherwise you have no right to this thought. I must *defend* myself against the easy-to-believe and the enthusiasts."<sup>98</sup> Nietzsche's notes from this period are filled both with his conviction that his doctrine should be spread throughout the world and with his fear of the danger that mankind will not be sufficiently prepared to be able to incorporate the new teaching.

His reason is cautiousness: the soil must be prepared. Success for the doctrine of eternal return, such that it becomes "a great tree, which overshadows all of coming humanity,"<sup>99</sup> will require careful husbandry over a long period. Whereas, in the past, some men and peoples may have lived as overmen, they attained it through lucky and only partially successful circumstances, which Nietzsche does not think sufficient for the future. He writes that "success in individual cases is constantly encountered in the most widely different

places and cultures: here we really do find a higher type which, in relation to mankind as a whole, is a kind of overman. Such fortunate accidents of great success were always possible and will perhaps always be possible. And even entire families, tribes, peoples can occasionally represent such a bull's-eye." <sup>100</sup> The Greeks were such a success. For the future, however, we can no longer rely on accidents; instead, and this is the source of Nietzsche's concern with "breeding" and "extirpation," the overman must be "bred, willed, and attained" through the doctrine of eternal return. <sup>101</sup>

Conditions must be created such that the doctrine can "sink in slowly," <sup>102</sup> failing which there will be "thirty years *Gloria*, with drums and fifes, and then thirty years of grave-digging." <sup>103</sup> It is true, Nietzsche writes, that the democratization of civilization, which he spends so much time diagnosing in *On the Genealogy of Morals* and *The Antichrist*, makes it possible for the overman to "maintain and develop himself the most easily." <sup>104</sup> But overmen can only exist initially in conjunction with a philosophical ruling class <sup>105</sup> addressing itself to the central political task, without which nothing else will be possible. "The question and at the same time the task is approaching with hesitation, as terrible as fate, but nevertheless inevitable." Nietzsche warns: "How shall the earth as a whole be ruled? And to what end shall man as a whole — no longer as a people or a race — be reared and trained?" <sup>106</sup>

The task of the preparation for the doctrine of eternal return is of central concern to Nietzsche. In a note from 1885, he writes: "Basic idea: the new values must first be created — we shall not be *spared* that! The philosopher must be a lawgiver to us. New types. (As earlier the highest types (e.g., Greeks) were bred: this type of 'accident' to be willed consciously.)" <sup>107</sup> We seem to be in a situation where nothing holds mankind back: there is a danger of a total chaos, in which any and all voices will speak, and none be heard. Nietzsche is then concerned that the earth be prepared for his doctrine, so that he be not misinterpreted. Much as for Zarathustra, Nietzsche's initial problem is to develop an audience able to hear what he says.

To this extent, Nietzsche occasionally refers to the "lords of the earth," who seem to be a dominating and legislative class, and whose role it is to create the conditions that will make meaningful discourse and life possible again on the earth. The "lords of the earth" will

have to discover "a whole host of transitory and deceptive measures . . . to this end: slowly and cautiously to liberate . . . a whole host of slandered instincts. . . ." <sup>108</sup> There is no doubt that Nietzsche thinks that the function of this political class will be to reshape what it means to be human.

From now on, there will be more favorable conditions for more comprehensive forms of domination, whose like has never yet existed. And this is not even the most important thing; it is rather the development of the possibility of international species-unions [*Geschlechts-Verbänden*] which will set themselves the task of rearing a new master race [*Herren-Rasse*], the future "lords of the earth"; — a vast new aristocracy, based on the most severe self-legislation, in which the will of the philosophical men of power and the artist-tyrants will be given permanence [*Dauer*] over millennia; — a higher kind of men who . . . will work on "men" themselves as artists. Enough, the time comes, in which one will have to change all one knows about politics. <sup>109</sup>

To bring about this new transfigured world, and put into practice the doctrine of eternal return, will require a change in "all one knows about politics." By this Nietzsche seems to mean that in the past, politics was, as was the case in Greece, an often fearful agon of equals inside an unquestioned arena. Men fought and competed for advantage and superiority. They did not, however, fight to define *what* would make a man superior or give him advantage. In previous politics, Nietzsche is saying, men fought and cooperated to gain more of what there was to get; it is, however, presumed that men knew what they were fighting about. The breakdown of the common world, which Nietzsche sees as a necessary characteristic of modern times, <sup>110</sup> means that men increasingly have no idea of what counts to be fought for. Hence, the new idea of politics must be war to *say what will count*, what the standards by which men will measure themselves shall be. This is politics to *define* the world, not to gain control of a portion of it. (On a far lesser scale, since both the United States and the Soviet Union emerge from a common tradition, Nietzsche would think that there is a right track in the naïve belief that "we are fighting with the communists — or capitalists — to see who will run the world.")

If nihilism was a form of behavior in which one could never rest content with a conclusion, where, as Wittgenstein said, one could not stop philosophizing, the modern world is for Nietzsche a world in which one cannot possibly be content. The will to create a world



where one would be, and know, who one is, leads Nietzsche, as it does Max Weber, to occasionally express admiration for the caste system of India. However, he thinks it to be so simplistic a system as to be unworkable ("a school for stupefaction," in which is lacking "nature, technology, history, art, science . . ." <sup>111</sup>). The world which must be made for Europeans and eventually for all men ("mankind wants to become one") must take its own past into account. The eradication of the forms of behavior which men have inherited from Socrates and Christ and which form the basis of Western nihilism does for Nietzsche, require the eradication of what we have meant by the moral point of view. Nietzsche finds that at this time in history, the conjoining of morality and war (the "war of spirits" above) is not only dangerous, but leads nowhere except to insanity. As Stanley Cavell has remarked: "Someday, if there is a someday, we will have to learn that evil thinks of itself as good, that it could not have made such progress in the world unless people planned and performed it in all conscience." <sup>112</sup> One must only add to this that when men lose the ability to call anything good or evil, then *all* must appear, as it does to the higher men, worthy of affirmation.

To the nihilism of universal affirmation, a world taught by the doctrine of eternal return provides an alternative, not a necessary or likely one, nor an immediately available position, but only an alternative. Nietzsche hopes that men will begin to think of life as "an experiment of the thinker — and not as a duty, not a fatality, not a deceit." <sup>113</sup> In such a tentative, the whole science of ethics which evolves from Socrates and which Nietzsche characterizes as "knowledge in service to life" will become simply unnecessary. Such men will not need knowledge to shore up their life; rather, for them, "life is a means to knowledge." They will uncover, or recover themselves, and, as in a game, not have to ask "What should I do?" as a moral question.

Nietzsche, in fact, thinks that his own life has proceeded along such lines. Only that which the language of his life has made knowledge, exists and survives. The rest, the mistakes and the past which might otherwise weigh upon his life, is no more. On his birthday in 1888 he writes a passage to this effect, which stands as epigraph to his autobiography, *Ecce Homo*: "On this perfect day, when everything ripens and not only the grape becomes brown, the eye of the sun just fell on my life; I saw backward, I looked forward,

I never saw so many and so good things at once. It was not in vain that I buried my forty-fourth year today, I had the right to bury it; what was life in it is saved, is immortal. . . . How could I fail to be grateful to my whole life? And so I tell my life to myself." <sup>114</sup>

This is a life beyond good and evil, which has no need of moral problems, where one does what one is, means what one says, where character is destiny. But this is not a claim by Nietzsche that anyone can do anything one wants to, or that morality is simply pabulum for the weak. Men who live in eternal return are entitled to live beyond morality. Not anyone can at any time do this, however: one cannot claim to live beyond morality just because one wants to. The transfiguration required is slow and difficult and requires much effort. <sup>115</sup>

### *Nietzsche's Political Predicament*

In the *Republic*, Plato writes of a man who has attained the blessings of philosophy. Such a man, remarks Plato, may be compared to "a man who has fallen in among wild beasts — he will not join the wickedness of his fellows, but neither is he able to singly resist all their fierce natures, . . . and therefore he goes his own way, . . . and will have done a great work before he departs; . . . but not the greatest, unless he finds a state which is suitable for him; for in a state suitable for him, he will have a larger growth and be the savior of his country as well as of himself." <sup>116</sup> At the end of his life in sanity, Nietzsche writes to his old friend and mentor Jacob Burckhardt that he is having the top leadership of Germany done away with; a few days earlier, he had written August Strindberg that he has ordered "a convocation of princes in Rome" and means "to have the young emperor shot." Presumably, these political leaders are those he identifies as keeping him from taking over Europe to prepare the way for the doctrine of eternal return. I have mentioned that to extend the description of eternal return beyond the range of some portions of an individual's life to a whole life, and from there to interpersonal relations and the world is so complex as to defy, I suspect, all attempts. Nietzsche certainly feels it to be necessary, though. The Dionysos he celebrates throughout his life is also "the type of the lawgiver." And, at the very end, he hopes that war will not be necessary, for "there are still other ways to bring physiology

to honor [*die Physiologie zu Ehren zu bringen*] besides military hospitals. . . . Well and good, *very good* in fact: after the old god is abolished, I am ready, *to rule the world.*"<sup>117</sup>

There was to be no state for Nietzsche, which is not really surprising; but to call this demented or megalomaniacal misses the point. If, in annihilating the Hohenzollern, Nietzsche claims to be annihilating lies,<sup>118</sup> it is because he understands that changing ideas is, in the end, not possible without changing the lives and habits and indeed the world in which one lives. This theme runs through all of Nietzsche: our moral behavior, our language, our epistemology, our institutions, religions, and political practices are of a loose piece. No more for Nietzsche than for Marx could one make a radical change of opinion without making a change in the *nature* of men, in their lives and world. "Previous philosophers have merely interpreted the world; the problem, however, is to change it," wrote Marx in the last of the *Theses on Feuerbach*. I read this in the same light as the citation of Wittgenstein which serves as an epigraph to this chapter: "The sickness of a time is cured by an alteration in the mode of life of human beings. . . ." <sup>119</sup> And, it is in this consciousness that we must understand the last letter which, with one foot over the edge into insanity, Nietzsche sends to Burckhardt, on January 6, 1889: "In the end, I would rather be a Basel professor than God; but I have not ventured to carry my private egoism so far as to desist from creating the world on its account." For Nietzsche, unless that world is created and made available, the sickness of the time will not be eradicated.