

**Zarathustra in the Anthropocene:
Temporality, Agency, and Responsibility in an All-Too Human Epoch**

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Abstract:

In response to the cognitive and political challenges of climate change, many have embraced the idea of “the anthropocene:” the claim that humans have fundamentally transformed the Earth system as to inaugurate a distinct geologic epoch. However, surveying utopian, apocalyptic, and progressive interpretations of the anthropocene, I argue that anthropocene narratives that rely on a linear temporality depoliticize climate change creating impasses for theorizing agency and responsibility. For resources to respond to this dilemma, I turn to Friedrich Nietzsche’s thought of the eternal recurrence of the same as an alternative temporality better suited for the anthropocene. The eternal recurrence encourages three dispositions and practices of citizenship in responding to climate change: replacing moralized interpretations of natural history with a tragic perspective, grounding a responsibility for the world against resentful ascriptions of blame and guilt, and expanding the focus of political thought and action from the level of the individual to the system. By expanding our temporal imagination, the eternal recurrence can animate political responses to climate change while avoiding nihilistic resignation to or faith in overcoming our geologic fate.

Zarathustra in the Anthropocene:

Temporality, Agency, Responsibility and the Challenge of Climate Change

Chief among the political challenges posed by global climate change is a cognitive one: it is difficult to conceptualize humanity's fundamental transformations of the Earth system, which has occurred over generations and will continue for generations to come. In response, many scholars, across disciplines, have turned to the idea of "the anthropocene" to conceptualize not only the size, scale, and complexity of climate change, but also its particular anthropogenic nature. Initially proposed in 2000 as a new geologic epoch to reflect "the central role of mankind in geology and ecology."¹ The concept of the anthropocene has transcended geology. While scientific debates over its specific definition and boundaries continue,² the term has captured the academic and popular imagination.³ More than a stratigraphic question, the anthropocene raises fundamental political questions including the relationship between humanity and non-human nature and the prospects of human survival. According to Dipesh Chakrabarty, it collapses the distinction between natural and human history, bringing into crisis a "fundamental assumption of Western (and now universal) political thought."⁴ Similarly, Clive Hamilton notes, "the convergence – or better, the collision – of human and Earth histories in the Anthropocene kindles the suspicion that all social sciences and their philosophical foundations have been built on an understanding of the historical process that is no longer defensible."⁵ Political theory and science can no longer isolate human behavior and societies as sole objects of inquiry, in the anthropocene

¹ Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, "The "Anthropocene"," *Global Change Newsletter*, no. 41 (2000): 40-41 at 41.

² Jan Zalasiewicz et al., "Making the Case for a Formal Anthropocene Epoch: An Analysis of Ongoing Critiques," *Newsletters on Stratigraphy* 50, no. 2 (2017): 205-226.

³ See: Mark A. Maslin and Simon L. Lewis, "Anthropocene: Earth System, Geological, Philosophical and Political Paradigm Shifts," *The Anthropocene Review* 2, no. 2 (2015): 108-116.

⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (2009): 197-222 at 206-07.

⁵ Clive Hamilton, *Defiant Earth: The Fate of Humans in the Anthropocene* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2017), 8.

The power and attraction of the anthropocene narrative is undeniable, but it also creates a political paradox. While it attributes geologic power to humanity, the anthropocene simultaneously describes an increasingly uncontrollable and inhospitable world. As Dale W. Jamieson and Marcello Di Paola summarize: “Never has humanity been more powerful, yet never have ‘things’ seemed more in control.”⁶ This challenge has not gone without theoretical attention, as political and social theorists have subject humanity’s collective geologic agency to critical scrutiny. For some, it holds promise, whether as the promise of a collective human consciousness and agency to come,⁷ or as the call for humanity to take collective “responsibility for a changing climate.”⁸ Many critique this trope for ascribing collective agency to humanity, contending that the anthropocene naturalizes climate change by disavowing the unequal histories of industrialism, capitalism, and colonialism which “have been an integral part of fossil fuel combustion in the first place.”⁹ Hence the introduction of phrases such as the “Capitalocene”¹⁰ and “Plantationocene”¹¹ to highlight the anthropocene’s political history.¹² While illuminating, such debates leave questions about a positive theory of agency unanswered..

⁶ Dale W. Jamieson and Marcello Di Paola, "Political Theory for the Anthropocene," in *Global Political Theory*, ed. David Held and Pietro Maffettone (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2016), 254-280 at 263.

⁷ Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Human Condition in the Anthropocene," in *The Tanner Lectures in Human Values* (Yale University 2015), 139-188 at 159.

⁸ Jedediah Purdy, *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 3.

⁹ Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg, "The Geology of Mankind? A Critique of the Anthropocene Narrative," *The Anthropocene Review* 1, no. 1 (2014): 62-69 at 65-66. See also: Giovanna Di Chiro, "Environmental Justice and the Anthropocene Meme," in *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental Political Theory*, ed. Teena Gabrielson, et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 362-381.

¹⁰ Jason W. Moore, ed. *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2016).

¹¹ Donna J. Haraway, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin," *Environmental Humanities* 6 (2015):159-165 at 160.

¹² Not all who invoke the anthropocene do so uncritically. Chakrabarty emphasizes that capitalism and industrialism are necessary components of the anthropocene, and that analysis must attend to the political divisions and inequalities within the *anthropos*. "Climate of History," 219 and "The Human Condition in the Anthropocene," 159. Similarly, William E. Connolly admits his own ambivalences in using the term, given the form of generalized responsibility it projects. William E. Connolly, *Facing the Planetary: Entangled Humanism and the Politics of Swarming* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 32-33.

Inspired by Ian Baucom's call to "return to our archive, to seek and discover in it (in addition to the concept of freedom) the further conceptual material that will allow our studies, our interpretive strategies, and our habits of critique to acquire a new planetary potentiality,"¹³ I turn to Friedrich Nietzsche to engage and reframe debates over agency in the anthropocene through the lens of temporality.¹⁴ Over a century before term anthropocene was coined, Nietzsche wrote in an unpublished essay written in 1862:

Perhaps, free will is nothing but the highest potency of fate. World history is, then, the history of matter, if one takes the meaning of these words in the broadest sense. For it is necessary that there be yet higher principles into which all distinctions flow together in a great unity in which all development is in stages: everything flowing into a monstrous ocean wherein once again all the levers of development of the world unite, consolidate, all-one (*FH*: p. 156).¹⁵

¹³ Ian Baucom, "The Human Shore: Postcolonial Studies in an Age of Natural Science," *History of the Present* 2, no. 1 (2012): 1-23 at 12.

¹⁴ With this move, I am indebted to those who have explicitly interpreted and engaged the anthropocene through the lens of temporality, particularly: Michelle Bastian, "Fatally Confused: Telling the Time in the Midst of Ecological Crises," *Environmental Philosophy* 9, no. 1 (2012): 23-48; Ian Baucom, "History 4°: Postcolonial Method and Anthropocene Time," *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 1, no. 1 (2014): 123-142; and Lars Tønder, "Five Theses for Political Theory in the Anthropocene," *Theory & Event* 20, no. 1 (2017): 129-136.

¹⁵ I use the following in abbreviations for Nietzsche's works in the text:

A = Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, in *Twilight of the Idols and the Anti-Christ* (New York: Penguin, [1895] 1990).

BGE = *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Judith Norma (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1886] 2002).

BT = *The Birth of Tragedy*, in *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, ed. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1872] 1999).

D = *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1881] 1997).

EH = "Ecce Homo," in *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, [1908] 1989).

FH = "Fate and History" in George J. Stack, "Nietzsche's Earliest Essays: Translation of and Commentary on 'Fate and History' and 'Freedom of the Will and Fate,'" *Philosophy Today* 37, no. 2 (1993).

FWF = "Freedom of the Will and Fate" in *ibid.*

GM = Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1887] 1997).

GS = *The Gay Science*, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1882] 2001).

KSA = *Kritische Studienausgabe Im 15 Banden* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1999).

TI = *Twilight of the Idols*, in *Twilight of the Idols and the Antichrist* (New York: Penguin Books, [1889] 2003).

TSZ = *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, trans. Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1883, 1884, 1885] 2006).

WP = *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, [1901] 1968).

WS = "The Wanderer and His Shadow," in *Human, All Too Human* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1880] 1990). Citations refer to aphorism, section name, or page number as appropriate. Unless noted, I retain the stylistic features of the text.

To say that Nietzsche anticipated the anthropocene would be anachronistic. However, his organizing problematic – synthesizing human freedom with natural necessity – offers theoretical insights into current debates. His own warnings of traditional resolutions to this tension mirror the twin dilemmas of the anthropocene: “Absolute freedom of the will, absent fate, would make man into a god; the fatalistic principle would make him an automation” (*FWF*: p. 158). Negotiating these challenges without transforming humans into gods or automata remains our challenge as much as Nietzsche’s.

While political theorists have turned to the history of political thought to engage environmental questions,¹⁶ few have attempted to leverage Nietzsche’s thought to such ends and such efforts remain deeply contested.¹⁷ My wager is that Nietzsche’s efforts to theorize agency after the death of God can offer potential resources for theorizing agency and responsibility in the face of humanity’s newfound geologic power. By interrogating the relationship between temporality and agency, Nietzsche’s thought can motivate a theory of human agency in the multiple and sometimes conflicting time scales of the anthropocene.

More specifically, I advance two primary arguments. First, dominant interpretations of the anthropocene rely on linear temporality – a series of now-points arranged in a progressive line with a unidirectional causal arrow moving from past to future. Such temporal narratives limit our ability to theorize agency within the anthropocene creating depoliticizing responses such as a messianic faith

¹⁶ See: John M. Meyer, *Political Nature: Environmentalism and the Interpretation of Western Thought* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001); Melissa Lane, *Eco-Republic: What the Ancients Can Teach Us About Ethics, Virtue, and Sustainable Living* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); and Harlan Wilson, "Environmental Political Theory and the History of Western Political Theory," in *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental Political Theory*, ed. Teena Gabrielson, et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 19-38.

¹⁷ Max O. Hallman, "Nietzsche’s Environmental Ethics," *Environmental Ethics* 13, no. 2 (1991): 99-125; Ralph Acampora, "Using and Abusing Nietzsche for Environmental Ethics," *Environmental Ethics* 16 (1994): 187-194; Martin Drenthen, "Nietzsche and the Paradox of Environmental Ethics: Nietzsche’s View of Nature and Morality," *New Nietzsche Studies* 5, no. 1 and 2 (2002): 12-25; Graham Parkes, "Staying Loyal to the Earth: Nietzsche as an Ecological Thinker," in *Nietzsche’s Futures*, ed. John Lippitt (London: MacMillian Press, 1999), 167-188; and David E. Storey, "Nietzsche and Ecology Revisited: The Biological Basis of Value," *Environmental Ethics* 38, no. 1 (2016):19-45.

in technological solutions, an apocalyptic resignation towards geologic fate, or a radical hope in enlightenment progress. As such, a new temporal imaginary is necessary to identify and create space for agency and responsibility. Thus, my second argument is that Nietzsche's doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same (ERS) can ground agency in the anthropocene. ERS represents the world as without beginning or end, with a flat ontology of eternally recurring forces and process. This not only captures the intermingling of geology and politics heralded by the anthropocene, but also provides a way for agents to "will backward" and thus claim an ongoing responsibility for the world.

I proceed as follows. First, I demonstrate the impasses generated by linear interpretations of the anthropocene by critiquing three dominant narratives of the anthropocene as depoliticizing: the eco-modernist's depiction of technologically driven "good anthropocene," apocalyptic narratives of climate change that end in human extinction, and enlightenment narratives that place hope in human progress. Drawing on Nietzsche's own critique of the nihilistic resentment generated by linear time, I suggest the need for alternative temporal imaginaries. Subsequently, I provide an interpretation of Nietzsche's doctrine of ERS, as a means to overcome resentment and ground affirmative conceptions of agency and responsibility between fatalism and transcendence. Finally, I return to the anthropocene to suggest how this temporal reorientation can animate practices of political responsibility aimed at transforming the political structures which perpetuate climate injustice.

Utopia or Apocalypse? The Limits of Linear Temporality in the Anthropocene

The anthropocene is not an uncontested narrative: it has been subject to external criticism and has been invoked in diverse narratives. Drawing on Carol J. Greenhouse's insight that "time articulates people's understanding of agency: literally, what makes things happen and what makes act relevant to social experience,"¹⁸ I argue that dominant narratives of the anthropocene share a linear temporality that creates theoretical impasses. Understood as "the image of time as an irreversible

¹⁸ Carol J. Greenhouse, *A Moment's Notice: Time Politics across Cultures* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 1.

progression of moments, yielding ordinal conceptions of past, present, and future as well as duration” linear time is the commonsense of Western modernity.¹⁹ This should not be taken for granted, because “time’s forms (including potential ‘formlessness’) derive from the disparate formulation of agency drawn into their ‘making,’ along with the social organization and substance of the crisis in which agency is called into doubt.”²⁰

More specifically, linear temporalities project particularly individualistic conceptions of agency. As Greenhouse argues, individuals correspond, or literally “fill the space,” of discrete temporal intervals, and the unidirectional flow of time foregrounds intentionality as the hallmark of agency.²¹ Nietzsche, similarly argues that conceptions of linear causality are rooted in psychological need: “We believed ourselves to be causal agents in the act of willing; we at least thought we were there *catching causality in the act* [...] we had *created* the world on the basis of it as a world of causes” (*TI*: “Errors,” §3). Linear temporality orders the world to facilitate ascriptions of responsibility: “I notice something and seek a reason for it” (*WP*: §550) and thus “Our ‘understanding of an event’ has consisted in our inventing a subject which was made responsible for something that happens and for how it happens” (*WP*: §551). Thus faced with a complex and uncertain world, linear time allows for individuals to ascribe harms to a single individual cause, which is “is alleviating, soothing, gratifying, and gives moreover a feeling of power” (*TI*: “Errors,” §5). Doing so both grants the “right to ordain punishments” (*TI*: “Errors,” §7) and secures humanity as “the free being in a world of unfreedom” (*WS*: §12).

The anthropocene lends itself to linear temporality, emerging originally as a stratigraphic claim about the geologic time scale. Drawing on fossil content, physical, chemical, and magnetic properties, as well as sea-level patterns in geologic strata, stratigraphy is the practice of subdividing

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 82.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 80-81.

geologic history into increasingly smaller units, arranged as periods, eons, epochs, and ages ().²²

“Thus, if the Anthropocene is to take its place alongside other temporal divisions of the Phanerozoic [Eon], it should be expressed in the rock record with unequivocal and characteristic stratigraphic signals.”²³ Such language of temporal subdivision and progression easily suggests linear interpretations. Yet, “linear time has many variations,” and the specific ways in which intentional agency and causal responsibility are prefigured depend on the specific narratives through which the anthropocene’s linearity is interpreted.²⁴ In what follows, I offer readings of three dominant narratives.

One popular narrative of the anthropocene treats it as a heralding humanity achieving its destiny of mastering and commanding nature. This narrative describes the anthropocene as the inevitable outgrowth of human nature towards global stewardship. Will Steffen, Paul Crutzen, and John R. McNeil contend that “the mastery of fire by our ancestors [...] put us firmly on the long path towards the Anthropocene.”²⁵ Similarly, the ecologist Erle C. Ellis suggests that “the Anthropocene was a long time in the making.”²⁶ Drawing on “the redemptive promise of linear time,”²⁷ these narratives offer optimistic interpretations of the anthropocene, as a call for humanity to take intentional control over its world transformative power. Emblematically, Ellis calls for creating “a better Anthropocene,” as “our knowledge and power have never been greater.”²⁸ The broadest application of this thinking can be found in *An Ecomodernist Manifest*, to which Ellis is a contributor, which asserts that humanity’s technological power can “re-wild and re-green the Earth

²² Jan Zalasiewicz et al., “Stratigraphy of the Anthropocene,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, no. 369 (2011): 1036-1055 at 1037-38.

²³ *Ibid.*, 1038.

²⁴ Greenhouse, 20.

²⁵ Will Steffen, Paul J. Crutzen, and John R. McNeill, “The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature,” *Ambio* 36, no. 8 (2007): 614-621 at 614.

²⁶ Erle C. Ellis, “A World of Our Making,” *New Scientist*, June 11 2011, 26-27 at 26.

²⁷ Greenhouse, 22.

²⁸ Ellis, 27.

– even as developing countries achieve modern living standards, and material poverty ends.”²⁹ Here the anthropocene offers an opportunity to embrace humanity’s world-transforming power not only to resolve the climate crisis, but also to end global inequality. This anthropocene narrative emphasizes the openness of the future promised by linear time; each distinct now moment offers the opportunity to transcend the past.

The second popular narrative rejects both the naturalization of and optimism toward the anthropocene embraced by the messianic narrative. This narrative, using the language of Clive Hamilton, treats the anthropocene as a “rupture” in history.³⁰ Dating the beginning of the anthropocene in 1945 and the “great acceleration,”³¹ Hamilton describes the anthropocene thusly: “The new geological epoch is radically is radically distinct from all previous ones, so that 1945 may be thought of as the boundary that marks a break in Earth history of the greatest profundity; it divides the life span of Earth into two halves ontologically.”³² Far from undermining linear narratives, the language of rupture and division reinforces a linear conception of the present as a middle or break point between to the radically distinct segments of past and future. As Hamilton writes, “Humankind is now confronted with a momentous decision.”³³ Events only happen in the present and time is a succession of such moments. The past remains utterly fixed; the future is radically undetermined. Only in the present can action occur.

While Hamilton himself does not make this move, apocalyptic narratives similarly rely a conception of the anthropocene as a fundamental and irreversible shift. In political and social

²⁹ John Asafu-Adjaye et al., *An Ecomodernist Manifesto* (Available at <http://www.ecomodernism.org/>, 2015), 15; see also: Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger, *Break Through: From the Death of Environmentalism to the Politics of Possibility* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2007), 130-54.

³⁰ Hamilton, *Defiant Earth*, 13-21.

³¹ Will Steffen et al., "The Trajectory of the Anthropocene: The Great Acceleration," *The Anthropocene Review* .2, no. 1 (2015): 81-98.

³² Hamilton, *Defiant Earth*, 7.

³³ *Ibid.*, 9.

theory, the anthropocene has been described as “both our apotheosis and our eclipse,”³⁴ a sign that “the end of the world has already occurred,”³⁵ or, evoking Job, as “the Whirlwind of today.”³⁶

Within these narratives, responding to the anthropocene involves reconciling oneself to the apocalyptic truth of humanity’s extinction. In this vein, Baucom argues that the task of critical theory in the anthropocene must be “to orient us toward a future measured against the promise of freedom but, instead, to direct us to (and desperately against) a future marked by the threat of extinction.”³⁷ Roy Scranton pushes this thinking perhaps the furthest, contending that the true challenge of the anthropocene is “understanding that this civilization is already dead. The sooner we confront our situation and realize that there is nothing we can do to save ourselves, the sooner we can get down to the difficult task of adapting, with mortal humility, to our new reality.”³⁸

Despite connotative differences, these two narratives are two sides of the same eschatological coin. Both secularize of the theological origins of linear time: “the advancement of time, always toward Judgment Day.”³⁹ Where the first recalls the Pelagian claim that humanity can achieve its own salvation, the revelation of this second set of narratives is more Calvinistic. The decisive rupture of the anthropocene constitutes a fall from grace that cannot be repaired; the predestination of our carbon sins precludes any space for human action. This depoliticizes the anthropocene, by either replacing political contestation and judgment with technocratic and technological management or, as suggested by James Lovelock, by putting “democracy on hold for a

³⁴ Bronislaw Szerszynski, “The End of the End of Nature: The Anthropocene and the Fate of the Human,” *The Oxford Literary Review* 34, no. 2 (2012):165-184 at 181.

³⁵ Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 7.

³⁶ Connolly, 7.

³⁷ Baucom, “History 4°,” 140.

³⁸ Roy Scranton, *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization* (San Francisco: City Light Books, 2015), 23.

³⁹ Greenhouse, 21.

while” in the name of survival.⁴⁰ Without the potential to enact efficacious political change, individuals, at best, turn inward, adopting a green virtue ethics to live a meaningful life in an increasingly inhospitable climate.⁴¹ Or, as Andrew Fiala argues, individuals may conclude that since our geologic fate is sealed, the only rational response is to pursue short term, carbon-intensive pleasures, deciding, like Nero, to fiddle while the Earth burns.⁴²

Attempting to negotiate between these two positions – between “engulfment and omnipotence” – Byron Williston offers a third narrative.⁴³ The enlightenment project, he contends, contains the necessary normative resources, once reworked, for grounding the political project of rapidly decarbonizing the global economy.⁴⁴ Three virtues are specifically necessary: justice, or a basic sense of cosmopolitan equality that stretches across generations, that can temper greed and moral weakness; truthfulness, or a willingness to bear anxiety inducing truths about our climate against the temptations of self-deception; and hope, or a positive, but realistic, orientation towards the future that motivates action.⁴⁵ Cultivating these virtues “in a way that avoids both hubris and timidity can act as a catalyst for us, inducing us to take full responsibility for our wrongdoing which, in turn, might lead us to take meaningful steps towards securing decent future for humanity.”⁴⁶

While Williston insists that “we can no longer neatly separate the workings of techno-social and biogeophysical systems,”⁴⁷ he maintains a belief in linear progress, casting the anthropocene as the “culminating moment or phase of the Enlightenment project.”⁴⁸ While the Enlightenment’s

⁴⁰ Quoted in Leo Hickman, "James Lovelock: 'Fudging Data Is a Sin against Science'," *The Guardian*, March 29 2010. See also: Erik Swyngedouw, "Apocalypse Forever? Post-Political Populism and the Spectre of Climate Change," *Theory, Culture & Society* 27, no. 2-3 (2010): 213-232.

⁴¹ Dale Jamieson, *Reason in a Dark Time: Why the Struggle against Climate Change Failed - and What It Means for Our Future* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 178, 86-87.

⁴² Andrew Fiala, "Nero's Fiddle: On Hope, Despair, and the Ecological Crisis," *Ethics & the Environment* 15, no. 1 (2010):51-68.

⁴³ Byron Williston, *The Anthropocene Project: Virtue in the Age of Climate Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 25.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 80-90, 128-132, 150-157.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 49.

excessive optimism must be tempered, “we should embrace the Enlightenment’s commitment to moral progress.”⁴⁹ The problem lies not in its ontological assumptions or moral values, but in the failure to fully implement these ideals. With this move, he sidesteps the challenges of the anthropocene for modernity’s self-understanding, including the implication of Enlightenment ideals and massive increase in greenhouse gas emissions.⁵⁰ “The mansion of modern freedoms,” Chakrabarty writes, “stands on an ever-expanding base of fossil fuel use.”⁵¹ Separating moral progress from the assumptions of human perfectibility and rational control of nature is difficult, as they formed the ontological basis of Enlightenment optimism. Furthermore, as Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz argue, linear narratives of awakening downplay and depoliticize the contingent history of the anthropocene; instead, “we must understand how we entered the Anthropocene despite very consistent warnings, knowledge and opposition, and forge a new and more credible narrative of what has happened to us.”⁵² The anthropocene, they conclude, requires “multiple, debatable and polemical narratives rather than a single hegemonic narrative that is supposedly apolitical.”⁵³ While it is necessary to preserve a space for agency, progressive narratives remain plagued by the threat of depoliticization.

Despite their different forms, these linear narratives ultimately moralize natural history, identifying an end or purpose to geologic time. Whether interpreted through the lens of eschatological fulfillment, apocalyptic destruction, or moral progress, the anthropocene is depoliticized and endowed with moral meaning. It becomes a form of what Nietzsche calls the

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁵⁰ For example, Timothy Mitchell not only shows how fossil fuels enabled population and economic growth that made possible modern democracy, but also that differences between coal and oil, and the exploitation of the latter by the West, shaped political and economic outcomes around the globe. Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (New York: Verso Books, 2013).

⁵¹ Chakrabarty, “Climate of History,” 208.

⁵² Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene: The Earth, History, and Us* (New York: Verso Books, 2016), 91.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 308.

“moral world-order.” Such thinking subjects the contingencies and vicissitudes of time and life to moral categories of desert, guilt, and debt, transforming life into a transcendental balance sheet wherein every instance of suffering can and should be rectified by blaming and punishing an accountable agent. The moral world-order culminates in nihilistic resentment of oneself, others, action, and of the human condition itself (*D*: §563; *TI*: “Errors,” §7, “Expeditions,” §34; *A*: §24-25).

Furthermore, the demand that the passage of time correspond to moral categories generates resentment against the passage of time. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the titular character warns his disciples “‘It was:’ thus is called the will’s gnashing of teeth and loneliest misery. Impotent against that which has been – it is an angry spectator of everything past. The will cannot will backward; that it cannot break time and time’s greed – that is the will’s loneliest misery.” The feeling of powerless and impotence against the passage of time culminates in either fatalistic resignation – “everything passes away, therefore everything deserves to pass away! And this itself is justice, this law of time that it must devour its own children” – or vengeful ascriptions of blame and punishment – “wherever there was suffering, punishment was supposed to be there as well” (*TSZ*: “Redemption”).

Within the moral world-order, individuals are autonomous, self-responsible, and thus “sovereign” (*GM*: §II.1-3). However, this independence, fed by linear temporality’s emphasis on discrete and punctual now-moments, isolates and alienates individuals from both past and future. As Nietzsche later writes, institutions require a “will to tradition, to authority, to a responsibility that spans the centuries, to *solidarity* in the chain that links generations forwards and backwards *ad infinitum*.” Modernity, however, has replaced such instincts with a moral and temporal individualism: “People live for today, people live very fast, – people live very irresponsibly: and this is precisely what people call ‘freedom.’ [...] people think that they are in danger of a new sort of slavery when the word ‘authority’ is so much as spoken out loud” (*TI*: “Expeditions,” §39). This atomism is particularly ill-suited for addressing the intergenerational and global challenge of the anthropocene.

As Bill McKibben writes, almost echoing Nietzsche, “we are fatally confused about time [...] our culture has placed our own lives on a demonic fast-forward.” However, “the long slow accretion of epochs – the Jurassic, the Cretaceous, the Pleistocene – lulls us into imagining that the physical world offers us an essentially stable background.”⁵⁴ The anthropocene requires confronting the effects of individual actions on geologic time scales.

Linear narratives, intentionally or not, displaces this insight that political time is both plural and vertically scaled,⁵⁵ or that “time (including the time of the anthropocene) continues to be out of joint; that the time of time-knots is not over.”⁵⁶ Thus, our reliance on linearity leaves us like “the last men,” of *Zarathustra*. Unable to make sense of and create space for agency in geologic time, we repeat mindlessly with them: “What is love? What is creation? What is longing? What is a star?” (TSZ: “Prologue,” §5). Overcoming this impasse requires expanding our temporal and political imagination. Thus, I turn to the eternal recurrence.

The Innocence of Becoming and the Eternal Recurrence of the Same

ERS has famously been a contentious object of Nietzsche scholarship. Lacking an explicit philosophical elucidation in Nietzsche’s published writings, many interpreters turn to the “proofs” as presented in *The Will to Power*.⁵⁷ Georg Simmel’s 1907 refutation of these proofs have substantially shaped ERS’s subsequent reception.⁵⁸ While Paul Loeb has provided a strong defense of cosmological readings of ERS in 1881,⁵⁹ and Paolo D’Iorio’s archival work has demonstrated that

⁵⁴ Bill McKibben, “Worried? Us?,” *Granta*, no. 83 (2003): 7.

⁵⁵ Tønder, 131.

⁵⁶ Baucom, “History 4°,” 141.

⁵⁷ Arthur Danto, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, Expanded ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); Martin Heidegger, “The Eternal Recurrence of the Same,” in *Nietzsche Volume II: The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, [1961] 1984).

⁵⁸ Georg Simmel, *Schopenhauer and Nietzsche*, trans. Helmut Loiskandl, Deena Weinstein, and Michael Weinstein (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, [1907] 1986), 172-74.

⁵⁹ Paul S. Loeb, *The Death of Nietzsche’s Zarathustra* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 11-31; “Eternal Recurrence,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche*, ed. Ken Gemes and John Richardson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013): 645-671.

Nietzsche was studying cosmological debates over temporality, thermodynamics, and the heat death of the universe while he was first experimenting with the idea of ERS,⁶⁰ many favor deflationary readings that transform it into an ethical maxim.⁶¹

Contributing to this hermeneutic confusion, Nietzsche's writings contain multiple, evolving, and sometimes conflicting conceptions of ERS through, in James Winchester's words, "collages of shifting voices and perspective."⁶² As such, interpretations of ERS say as much about the interpreter as they do about Nietzsche, and my own is no exception. However, "Nietzsche's thought is rich enough to make substantial contributions to all of these thinkers and many more. If we resist our scholarly tendencies to synthesize the various accounts of Nietzsche's 'doctrines' into Nietzsche's final position then we will be more open to the myriad of possibilities that his thought offers."⁶³ In what follows, I do not attempt to resolve these interpretive debates, but offer *an* interpretation of ERS as Nietzsche's attempt to resolve the paradox between agency and fatalism through a new temporal imaginary, which contains theoretical resources for responding to the anthropocene.

To that end, ERS's motivating puzzle is responding to the seeming irrelevance of human action amidst the passage of time without imposing a transcendental moral meaning onto nature or giving into nihilistic resignation. Zarathustra continues his discussion of the will's impotence against time by asserting, "That will which is the will to power must will something higher than any reconciliation – but how shall this happen? Who would teach it to also will backward?" The challenge is making sense of agency despite the apparent meaninglessness of the past: "All 'it was' is a fragment, a riddle, a grisly accident – until the creating will says to it: 'But I will it thus! I shall will it

⁶⁰ Paolo D'Iorio, "The Eternal Return: Genesis and Interpretation," *Lexicon Philosophicum*, no. 2 (2014): 41-96.

⁶¹ See, for example: Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (New York: Meridian Books, 1956), 277-86; Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 141-69; Maudemarie Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 245-86; and Bernard Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 201-27.

⁶² James Winchester, "Of Scholarly Readings of Nietzsche," *New Nietzsche Studies* 3, no. 3 (1999): 77-97 at 92.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 93-94.

thus” (*TSZ*: “Redemption”)! ERS, therefore, must provide an immanent justification for action amidst time’s passage.

With this in mind, Nietzsche’s earliest writings on ERS attempt to ground human agency amidst the constant becoming existence. A notebook entry from the summer of 1881 describes ERS as “the new weight” that forces us to ask “what will we do with the rest of our lives,” for this teaching must be “incorporated into ourselves” (*KSA*: 9:11[141]). This language re-emerges in ERS’s first explicit appearance in Nietzsche’s published writings, *The Gay Science*’s aphorism 341. Here it is offered as a demon’s provocation: “this life as you live it and have lived it you will live it once again and innumerable times again; and there will be nothing new in it” in which “unspeakably small or great in your life must return to you, all in the same succession and sequence.” Would knowledge of such a truth lead to despair, the demon asks, or can you affirm this truth, incorporating it into your life, treating your “actions as the heaviest weight” (*GS*: §341). Rather than a cognitive test, Nietzsche believes that this doctrine, once affirmed, fundamentally transforms one’s life, creating space for agency within fate, rather than by transcending it.

The subsequent aphorism of *The Gay Science* introduces Zarathustra (*GS*: §342), and Nietzsche himself identifies ERS as “the fundamental conception” of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (*EH*, “Zarathustra,”).⁶⁴ Throughout that text, Zarathustra struggles to incorporate this thought without succumbing to nihilistic despair, in the form of the Soothsayer’s teaching that “everything is empty, everything is the same, everything was” (*TSZ*: “Soothsayer”). Rejecting this Schopenhaurian pessimism, Zarathustra’s task is to reinterpret ERS as empowering a life affirming and creative will.⁶⁵ In “On Redemption,” Zarathustra is not yet able to publicly pronounce or affirm ERS – “Zarathustra suddenly broke off and looked entirely like one who is appalled in the extreme” (*TSZ*:

⁶⁴ See also: Loeb, *Death of Nietzsche’s Zarathustra*, 32-33.

⁶⁵ On the transformation of ERS within *Zarathustra*, see: Robert Gooding-Williams, *Zarathustra’s Dionysian Modernism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 198-205.

“Redemption”). However, shortly afterwards, he describes ERS in an enigmatic vision, revealing key aspects of this temporal vision. After climbing a mountain with “spirit of gravity,” his “devil and arch-enemy” riding on his shoulder as a dwarf (*TSZ*: “Vision and Riddle,” §1), Zarathustra confronts him at a gateway emblazoned with the word “moment.” “Two paths come together here; no one has yet walked them to the end,” Zarathustra tells the dwarf, “This long lane back: it lasts an eternity. And that long lane outward – that is another eternity. They contradict each other, these paths; they blatantly offend each other” (*TSZ*: “Vision and Riddle,” §2).

Thus, the first critical element of ERS is that it is an a-teleological temporality. Consistent with Nietzsche’s earlier critiques of teleological history, time’s becoming neither begins nor ends, but flows perpetually without goal or purpose. Whereas linear temporalities presuppose a discrete beginning and end of time, Zarathustra imagines a world that moves infinitely into the past and into the future. Second, this conception of time is causally closed; the world of forces is all that there is. As he writes in his notebooks, “everything becomes and recurs eternally – escape is impossible” (*WP*, §1058). One cannot transcend the world of becoming nor can anything external intervene in its causal processes. Echoing the Madman’s lamentation at the death of God in *The Gay Science* (*GS*: §125), Nietzsche describes a world where the only thing that is infinite is finitude; there is only the constant flow and recurrence of finite forces and processes without transcendental author or purpose. It is, following Adrian Del Caro, a conception of the earth “as the property, past, present and future, of a humanity that acknowledges no ownership, now empowerment except to itself.”⁶⁶ Eschewing hope in progressive narratives, ERS forces humanity to confront a world that is of its own making, infinitely moving without purpose or end

Returning to *Zarathustra*, the dwarf refuses to confront this terrifying thought, and instead murmurs contemptuously, “All that is straight lies [...] all truth is crooked, time itself is a circle.”

⁶⁶ Adrian Del Caro, *Grounding the Nietzsche Rhetoric of Earth* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), 243.

Chastising the dwarf for dismissing this temporal challenge, Zarathustra then describes the ERS as the implication of such infinite time:

Must not whatever *can* already have passed this way before? Must not whatever *can* happen, already have happened, been done, passed by before? And if everything has already been here before, what do you think of this moment, dwarf? Must this gateway too not already – have been here? And are not all things firmly knotted together in such a way that this moment draws after it *all* things to come? Therefore – itself as well? For whatever *can* run, even in this long lane *outward* – *must* run it once more (*TSZ*: “Vision and Riddle,” §2).

For Zarathustra, ERS is a challenge to see oneself as bound up in eternal cycles of becoming, the knot of causes that connects all things in time and space, from which there is no escape. Inextricably interwoven together, nothing truly passes away, but recurs perpetually; what is to come is simply another configuration and interpretation of the same finite processes which have always existed. As he notes in a notebook entry, the world of ERS is a “world of forces,” that continually moves without “loss,” any “standstill,” any “balance,” or even “a moment’s rest.” Instead, “whatever state this world can attain, it must have reached it, and not once, but countless times. So, this moment: it has been here before, and many times, and will return as well, distributing all forces just as now: and so, it stands with the moment that gave birth to it and with the one who is the child of the present one.” ERS reveals “the entire correlation of all things” (*KS4*: 9:11[148]).

Thus, the third aspect of ERS is that it projects a world that is fundamentally interconnected. Because all things are “firmly knotted together” every moment contains eternity; past, present and future co-mingle. Humanity, in this conception, is not elevated above the rest of nature, but is a particular instantiation of the world of forces that will in turn pass away. Thus, ERS also works to cleanse nature from moralistic interpretations. As he writes in *The Gay Science*, the universe is neither a living organism nor a machine. The apparent stability of the world, is an exception and “the exceptions are not the secret aim, and the whole musical mechanism repeats eternally its tune.” However, “how could we reproach or praise the universe,” Nietzsche continues,

“Let us beware of attributing to it heartlessness or unreason or their opposites” as all improperly apply human categories to inhuman nature (*GS*: §109).

Instead of linear narratives that glean moral lessons from the passage of time, ERS offers a de-deified nature. Towards the end of the “Third Part” of *Zarathustra*, after collapsing under the nauseating thought that even the “small human beings recur eternally,” Zarathustra is tended to by his animal companions (*TSZ*: “Convalescent”) and speaks silently with his own soul. He tells himself that “I gave you back your freedom over what is created and uncreated: and who knows as you know the lust of future things?” The thought of ERS leaves his soul “super-rich and heavy,” pregnant with future possibilities (*TSZ*: “Great Longing”). Zarathustra then dances and sings with life herself, who warns him of the “old heavy, heavy growling bell” signaling that “you will soon leave me.” In reply, Zarathustra tells her hesitantly, “But you also know –’ and I said something in her ear,” to which life replies: “You *know* that, oh Zarathustra? No one knows that” (*TSZ*: “Other Dance Song,” §2). Thus, incorporating the thought of ERS is not a test of knowledge, but a question of affirming even the most terrible aspects of existence. Yet by doing so, Zarathustra frees nature from moralistic demands. As Nietzsche later writes, to overcome the moral world-order requires affirming that “one is a piece of fate, one belongs to the whole, one *is* the whole [...] *this alone is the great liberation* – thus alone is the *innocence* of becoming restored” (*TI*: “Errors,” §8). ERS offers, in Lawrence Lampert’s words, a “baptism beyond good and evil” in which existence is “freed of all rational, teleological, or mechanical necessity.”⁶⁷

Such a world seems to leave even less space for agency and responsibility than linear time. If everything is fated to repeat itself sequentially, it is impossible to change the course of events. Hence Martin Heidegger’s critique of ERS as “form of ill will *against* sheer transiency and thereby a highly

⁶⁷ Lawrence Lampert, *Nietzsche's Teaching: An Interpretation of Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 176.

spiritualized spirit of revenge.”⁶⁸ Yet Zarathustra is eventually, after fleeing from this thought for much of the narrative, able to incorporate it and affirm existence. How is such transformation possible? First, while Nietzsche does describe ERS with the language of identical “succession and sequence—even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself” (*GS*: §341; see also: *KSA*: 9:11[148]), his recurring critiques of substance, being, and mind-independent facts complicate the “same” of ERS (e.g. *TSZ*: “Self-Overcoming; *BGE*: §21; *TI*: “Reason,” §2). If all things only achieve thing-hood through interpretation and interaction that isolates particular aspects of the flux of becoming and mesh of wills-to-power (e.g. *GM*: §II.12; *TI*: “Reason,” §1; *WP*: §633-635,655), things lack a stable identity to repeat. Instead, ERS offers an interpretation of the world in which every moment contains all other moments, and thus drawing “after it *all* things to come” (*TSZ*: “Vision and Riddle,” §2). In the eternal flow of becoming, every moment is connected to every other moment, and every part is united in the whole. Thus, while we experience the passage of time, every moment is the same in that it contains all that is. Recurrence, therefore, is less about identical repetition, than appreciating that every moment contains all that is, and is thus the same.⁶⁹ ERS grounds agency amidst constant becoming with a temporal picture that implicates action, in every moment, with all that is, adding existential weight to even what seems trivial.

Second, even if one rejects this more revisionary interpretation, ERS creates space for agency by liberating individuals from the resentment generated by the irreversibility of time. Freed from the moral world-order’s narratives of progress and moral responsibility, individuals thus face

⁶⁸ Martin Heidegger, “Who Is Nietzsche’s Zarathustra?,” in *Nietzsche Volume II: The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, [1954] 1984), 288.

⁶⁹ For similar interpretations see: Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, [1962] 1983), 47-49; Gooding-Williams, 295-96; Joshua Foa Dienstag, “Nietzsche’s Dionysian Pessimism,” *The American Political Science Review* 95, no. 4 (2001): 923-937. Such interpretations are not uncontroversial. D’Iorio criticizes Deleuze for both his significant departure from the text and for interpreting Nietzsche through his own conceptual binary of active/passive. D’Iorio, 42-47. Loeb makes a similar critique of Gooding-Williams. Paul S. Loeb, “The Thought-Drama of Eternal Recurrence,” *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, no. 34 (2007) :77-95.

an open future. Zarathustra himself, having incorporated ERS, sings a song, which closes the “Third Part,” titled “The Seven Seals.” Inverting the eschatological imagery such a name implies, he sings of his love for life as eternity, and his desire to have children with her. Transformed by the lightning strike of ERS, Zarathustra can now “kindle the light of the future” (*TSZ*: “Seven Seals,” §1), and play dice with the gods, for “the earth is a gods' table, and it trembles with creative new words and gods' throws” (*TSZ*: “Seven Seals,” §3). In his desire for the future and for children, Zarathustra rejects nihilistic fatalism with an experimental attitude. As Nietzsche writes in a note, ERS is a “freedom from morality [...] the enjoyment of all kinds of uncertainty, experimentalism, as a counterweight to this extreme fatalism; abolition of the concept of necessity” (*WP*: §1060).

Thus, ERS is not an uncritical and irresponsible affirmationism. Zarathustra explicitly rejects such acquiescence: “there is nothing more false in the world, nor malicious” than the doctrine, “Just let the world be the world! Do not lift so much a finger against it” (*TSZ*: “Old and New Tablets,” §15). Instead, to affirm ERS is to claim responsibility for the world itself, understanding oneself is both a product and contributor of its character. In claiming responsibility through ERS, transforming the “grisly accident[s]” of time through the creative “I shall will it thus” (*TSZ*: “Redemption”), we no longer displace our responsibility to the world by ascribing guilt, but to take on the challenge it offers. Every moment contains the totality of all that was and all that will be, offering the potential for taking action and becoming, in Adrian Del Caro’s words “responsible for and to ourselves, our fellow human beings, fellow animals, and all life forms on earth, but not responsible in the sense of guilt, bad conscience.”⁷⁰ Thus, ERS offers a counterweight to linear narratives that displace agency and responsibility by grounding responsibility for the world on the interconnections of all things. While its success is never guaranteed, the challenge of ERS is to see every moment, as a space for agency and responsibility.

⁷⁰ Del Caro, 408. See also: Lampert, 254.

Political Responsibility and Geologic Time

In contrast to dominant narratives of the anthropocene, ERS offers a radical reinterpretation of geologic time: time, and thus the geologic record of fossil fuel consumption, neither passes away into the mists of history nor contributes to some eschatological or progressive purpose. However, ERS should not be understood as simply a cognitive representation of the anthropocene, but as a means to create new affective dispositions within citizens and communities that can motivate and orient political action. As Nietzsche reminds us, overcoming internalized moral values requires that we “*learn to think differently* – in order at last, perhaps very late on, to attain even more: *to feel differently*” (*D*: §104). Through its temporal reorientation, ERS reinterprets and revalues the anthropocene narrative, calling for both a critical interrogation of the eternally recurring political history of climate change and a political ethic of responsibility that animates plural, multi-scalar, and interacting political projects to respond to climate change. Three specific reorientations are noteworthy.

First, in contrast to linear narratives, ERS necessitates a tragic perspective. It offers the culmination of a tragic perspective that animated Nietzsche’s writings from his earliest studies of the ancient Greeks (*BT*: §3, p.23). It posits that humans are inexorably bound by time and forces they do not author. Where linear interpretations of the anthropocene moralize geologic time, affirming ERS is to “translate humanity back into nature; to gain control of the many vain and fanciful interpretations and incidental meanings that have been scribbled and drawn over that eternal basic text of *homo natura* so far” (*BGE*: §230). The world lacks any pre-established harmony – either from which humanity has fallen or towards which humanity is called. Instead, ERS depicts a world of will to power, of forces that necessary conflict, and beset by continual and purposeless change.

However, tragedy need not entail resignation. Apocalyptic interpretations of the anthropocene still endow it with a moral logic that renders it bearable; extinction is either humanity’s moral desert or a release from the terror of reality. Instead, ERS’s tragic perspective offers what

Nietzsche calls a “pessimism of strength” (*BT*: “ASC,” §1, p. 4; *WP*: §1019), that embraces, after a “free quest for the dreadful and questionable aspects of existence” a “Dionysian yes-saying to the world, as it is: as far as the wish of its absolute return and eternity.” This affirmation does not take the form of utilitarian justification but recognizes the “negative” aspects of existence as “the more powerful, fertile, truthful sides of existence” (*KS4*: 12:10[3]). ERS rescues the tragic from resignation, and maintains space for a chastened agency, by insisting that the world, though beyond humanity’s complete control, is not predesigned, but vulnerable to our actions in every moment. As such we are forced to choose among and act upon constrained choices and limited alternatives, all of which will incur significant costs. Therefore, Nietzsche embraced the realist tradition as encapsulated by Thucydides and Machiavelli against the idealism of Plato (*TI*: “Ancients,” §2). The realities of power and conflict both preclude absolute metaphysical or moral justification of political power and projects of human transcendence and perfection.⁷¹

This tragic vision is vital in the anthropocene. Hamilton argues, in almost Nietzschean language, that humanity becomes “a kind of tragic figure, the central agent, unable to fulfill the dream of modernity, to extricate ourselves from nature and rise above it. The new anthropocentric self does not float free like the modern subject, but is always woven into nature, *a knot in the fabric of nature*.”⁷² Therefore, ERS requires acknowledging that our carbon history cannot be reversed; it is unlikely that we will be able to fully mitigate the effects of climate change and political communities must begin reimagining human flourishing and justice in a 2° warmer world. Finally, the tragic perspective of ERS insists that any action taken on climate change is likely to create unforeseen and irreversible consequences on the functioning of political and Earth systems, creating new

⁷¹ See: Jean-François Drolet, “Ennobling Humanity: Nietzsche and the Politics of Tragedy,” *Journal of International Political Theory* 10, no. 3 (2014): 231-260; and Paul E Kirkland, “Nietzsche’s Tragic Realism,” *The Review of Politics* 72, no. 1 (2010): 55-78.

⁷² Hamilton, *Defiant Earth*, 52.

distributions of power and resources, elevating some and placing burdens on others. Rather than viewing such realities as a paralytic to action, ERS's tragic perspective empowers action with the reminder that suffering, burdens, and unintended consequences are constitutive of reality itself.

Second, ERS severs responsibility from its moralistic connotations of debt and guilt, replacing moral responsibility with a future-oriented responsibility for the world. Responsibility is not grounded on autonomy, but on humanity's mutual imbrication with the Earth. ERS requires confronting the reality that the world and time lack transcendental purpose or guidance, and that actions in every moment transform all of reality. While ERS liberates humanity from the moral world-order's interpretation of responsibility as guilt – “We deny God; in denying God, we deny accountability: only by doing *that* do we redeem the world” (*TI*: “Errors,” §8) – it also eliminates God, Nature, and Reason as objects of blame for the world's state. Humanity is no longer guilty but must bear an absolute responsibility for the world.

Such a form of responsibility is necessary in the anthropocene. Attempts by both scholars and political actors to ascribe responsibility for climate change have been plagued by theoretical and practical challenges. As Jamieson has argued the complexity of the climate system, including its potential for lock-in and butterfly effects, makes it difficult to draw clear lines of attribution to individual action. Thus, he concludes, “we face the possibility that the global environment may be destroyed, yet no one will be responsible.”⁷³ Similarly, Simon Caney has contended traditional conceptions of responsibility, such as the “Polluter Pays Principle,” cannot be easily applied to climate change as it would require holding current generations accountable for the, potentially ignorant, actions of previous generations.⁷⁴ More cynically, political actors have appealed to such

⁷³ Dale Jamieson, “Ethics, Public Policy, and Global Warming,” *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 17, no. 2 (1992): 139-153 at 149.

⁷⁴ Simon Caney, “Cosmopolitan Justice, Responsibility, and Global Climate Change,” *Leiden Journal of International Law* 18, no. 4 (2005).

challenges to disavow and displace responsibility to take action on climate change. Todd Stern, the United States' top negotiator at the 15th Conference of Parties in Copenhagen (2009) rejected “the notion of a debt or reparations or anything of the like” appealing to the ignorance of previous generations to resist any settlement that placed a higher burden on developed countries.⁷⁵

The temporality of ERS renders such attempts to settle past debts impossible, and instead offers a conception of responsibility closer to Donna J. Haraway's definition as “the capacity to respond.”⁷⁶ It is a practice of responding, in every moment, to the world and answering for one's actions as they ripple forward in time causing unintended consequences and opening unforeseen opportunities. Freed from guilty-conscience, we can respond with generosity and gratitude to the world, by acting with the knowledge that our actions will eternally recur. This added existential weight requires not only caution and respect but also joy and creativity. By reorienting the affective economy of responsibility, ERS can temper the flows of resentment over both the inequalities of our carbon histories and the future burdens that the anthropocene will create. In doing so, it can encourage solidarity across spatial and temporal distance to care for the Earth as the sole place of human dwelling. “The duty to care for the Earth is the *meaningful goal*” that orients and motivates human projects after the Enlightenment dream of human perfection has been relinquished.⁷⁷

Finally, and building on these two moves, ERS works to expand political imagination from a focus on individuals to systems. That is, while ERS is an existential challenge with which individuals, as individuals, must grapple, incorporating its Dionysian worldview breaks down the conceits of liberal individualism. As Nietzsche writes, “This is the first effect of Dionysiac tragedy: state and society, indeed all divisions between one human being and another, give way to an overwhelming

⁷⁵ Quoted in Bryan Walsh, “Do Rich Nations Owe Poor Ones a Climate Debt?,” *Time*, December 10 2009. On the political impasses generated by the “climate debt” trope, see: Jonathan Pickering and Christian Barry, “On the Concept of Climate Debt: Its Moral and Political Value,” *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 15, no. 5 (2012): 667-685.

⁷⁶ Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 71.

⁷⁷ Hamilton, *Defiant Earth*, 145.

feeling of unity which leads men back to the heart of nature” (*BT*: §7, p. 39). Given the inextricably connection between all things across time and space, even minor acts reverberate infinitely, affecting all of reality. Thus, while driving to work is a routine and seemingly innocent act, ERS encourages us to see the small amount of greenhouse gasses such actions release as eternally affecting the Earth as a whole. In one respect, this is an overwhelming burden. However, it is also empowering, as even small changes to one’s individual habits transform the entire Earth. Read through this lens, the anthropocene’s claim of global interconnection and humanity’s geologic force requires claiming agency over one’s life rather than abdicating it.

This perspective expands the scope of political responses to the anthropocene beyond mere individual changes. It requires attending to the interconnection between social, economic, and political systems with geologic processes, appreciating how seemingly unrelated and disparate decisions and policies can have impacts on the global climate. Changes in the tax code or trade policy can shape production, distribution, and consumption patterns shifting emissions profiles. While this interpretation does foreground humanity’s enhanced causal power, it is not a story of omnipotence or unidirectional causality. As Hamilton notes, while the anthropocene signals humanity’s enhanced power, “nature’s dormant powers have been unleashed” as “the climate system is becoming more energetic, bringing more storms, wildfires, droughts, and heatwaves.”⁷⁸ Such changes will inevitably have political consequences. The ontology of ERS, predicated on multiple conflicting forces, provides a useful heuristic for understanding the mutual co-constitution of “geologic” and “political” systems.

Furthermore, the ERS’s representation of multidirectional and recursive causality, as individuals are both embedded in and authors of natural and social systems, expands the scope of political action and agency beyond individual action. By emphasizing a holistic account of agency,

⁷⁸ Hamilton, *Defiant Earth*, 45.

ERS shifts the political focus from questions of personal virtue and ethical consumption towards transforming political structures that both support carbon-intensive forms of life and create systems of global inequality and domination. Individual behavior cannot be evaluated in a vacuum; encouraging more sustainable behavior requires transforming large-scale structures, including the questioning the consensus around undifferentiated economic and population growth.⁷⁹ Conversely, because agency is temporally, spatially, and socially distributed and embedded, cultivating capacities to respond to the anthropocene requires building lines of solidarity and community to empower action. ERS's temporal revision provides a way of representing the multi-directional and multi-scalar causal processes that constitute the Earth system. While it cannot identify specific political strategies, it expands political imagination beyond the limits of moral and temporal atomism.

“Remain Faithful to the Earth” – Political Theory in the Anthropocene

Towards the end of *Zarathustra's* “First Part,” Zarathustra implores his followers:

Remain faithful to the earth, my brothers, with the power of your virtue! Let your bestowing love and your knowledge serve the meaning of the earth! Thus I beg and beseech you. Do not let it fly away from earthly things and beat against eternal walls with its wings! Oh, there has always been so much virtue that flew away! Like me, guide the virtue that has flown away back to the earth - yes, back to the body and life: so that it may give the earth its meaning, a human meaning (*TSZ*:“Bestowing Virtue”)!

With these almost prophetic words, Zarathustra encapsulates the challenges for political theory in the anthropocene. How can we make sense of our relationship with non-human nature without relying on a transcendental moral system to provide meaning? How do we remain faithful to our earthly embodied nature while preserving a space for agency and responsibility against the power of

⁷⁹ See: John Barry, "Green Political Economy: Beyond Orthodox Undifferentiated Economic Growth as a Permanent Feature of the Economy," in *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental Political Theory*, ed. Teena Gabrielson, et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016): 304-317; and Diana Coole, "Population, Environmental Discourse, and Sustainability " in *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental Political Theory*, ed. Teena Gabrielson, et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016): 274-288.

geology? How can we negotiate our inherited carbon history and uncertain climatic future without succumbing to resignation, resentment, or wishful thinking?

I have argued that Nietzsche's own attempt to respond to analogous dilemmas through his provocative doctrine of ERS provides valuable resources with which to theorize the anthropocene. Unlike standard models of linear temporality, ERS provides a means to imagine ourselves as able to "will backwards" and redeem the past without giving the illusion of mastery of nature. It theorizes agency and responsibility through and within, not in spite of, our geologic fate. Its tragic ethos helps us reconcile ourselves with the possibility of human extinction, or at least significant transformations in human life, without passive resignation and resentment. It provides no existential guarantees that our responses to climate change will preserve our Earthly dwelling but helps us bear the dizzying burden of responsibility in the anthropocene.

While a provocative imaginary, the apparent esotericism and contradictions of ERS may suggest against its pragmatic value. Given stark lines of disagreement over climate change, many may be skeptical that such a controversial thought experiment can provide anything but confusion or dismissal. However, ERS is no more complex than Earth system nor no more esoteric than cutting edge climate models. The task of political theory in the anthropocene must be to draw on the broad tradition of political thought to find provocative images through which we can represent climate change and render the demands it places on politics meaningful. It must uncover resources to revise or craft new political values to motivate and orient action. I have argued for ERS as one such resource, but I harbor no illusions that it is the only resource the tradition holds; a challenge as complex as climate change demands a plurality of lines of inquiry. Importantly, political theory's task in the anthropocene cannot only be scholarly but must be pedagogical. The anthropocene not only calls for robust research agendas, but also a pedagogical responsibility to provide means for students and publics to make sense of climate change and imagine new political possibilities.