

**Zarathustra in the Anthropocene:
Recurrence, Resentment, and Responsibility in an All-Too Human Epoch**

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Abstract: The Anthropocene creates a paradox for political theory: despite endowing humanity with world-shaping power, its massive timescales leave little room for human agency. This tension encourages resentment against time's irreversible passage, impeding political responses to climate change. Responding to this challenge, this article turns to Nietzsche's teaching of the eternal recurrence of the same (ERS) as a means to reconceive of agency and temporality in the Anthropocene. This article advances two arguments. First, by replacing linear progress with a temporality in which past, present, and future intermingle, ERS conceives of agency in the Anthropocene as both chastened and expanded, encouraging an ethic of responsibility for the planet distinct from guilt or liability. Second, Nietzsche's own responses to eternal recurrence, ranging from anti-political withdrawal to elitist tyranny, demonstrate the danger that this expansive sense of responsibility can become an overwhelming burden for any individual, intensifying, rather than tempering, temporal resentment. Reading Nietzsche against himself, this article defends ERS as both a means of cultivating a sense of responsibility for the Earth and a cautionary tale necessitating a political project capable of bearing responsibility in the Anthropocene.

Keywords: Nietzsche, Eternal Recurrence, Anthropocene, Agency, Temporality, Responsibility

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Since the term was introduced into broad usage by Crutzen and Stoermer (2000), the Anthropocene has become an organizing problematique in social and political theory. For geologists, the Anthropocene is the proposed new epoch of geologic time whose defining characteristic is pervasive human activity, which both ‘rival the great forces of Nature and are pushing the Earth into a planetary *terra incognita*’ (Steffen, Crutzen, and McNeil, 2007: 614). While geologists continue to debate the stratigraphic details of the Anthropocene (Zalasiewicz et al., 2017), for many social and political theorists (e.g. Chakrabarty, 2009; Hamilton, Bonneuil, and Gemenne, 2015), the Anthropocene has special salience because it calls into question some of the fundamental onto-political assumptions of modern political thought. As such, it has been invoked in and interpreted through diverse theoretical discourses, from the eschatological to the utopian and from the Marxist to the posthumanist (Bonneuil, 2015). As such, the Anthropocene is too politically important to be left to the natural scientists; despite its geologic connotations, it demands more political theorizing, not less.

Temporality and agency constitute two particularly important dimensions of such a theoretical project. Given its origin in stratigraphy – the discipline of measuring and organizing the geologic time scale – the Anthropocene naturally raise questions of one’s relationship to time. Many interpret the Anthropocene through linear temporal narratives, such as enlightenment progress (Williston, 2015), catastrophism (Scranton, 2015), or dialectical materialism (Malm and Hornborg, 2015). However, while the invocation of geologic may call to mind the regular progression of the Earth system, the IPCC (2018: 14) has recently warned that averting catastrophic climate change requires reducing CO₂ emissions by nearly half of 2010 levels by 2030, reaching net zero by 2050. This disconnect leaves political communities, in McKibben’s (2003: 8) words, ‘fatally confused about

time'. As such, several theorists contend that the Anthropocene requires a more fundamental revision to dominant temporal imaginaries, not only expanding its scope, but reimagining time as complex, layered, multi-scalar, and even multi-directional (Bastian, 2012; Baucom, 2014; Connolly, 2017; Haraway, 2016; Latour, 2017; Tønder, 2016).

Similarly, the Anthropocene radically reframes the question of agency. On the one hand, it depicts human activity as a force of nature, inflating human agency to almost god-like proportions. Hence, for self-proclaimed 'eco-modernists', the Anthropocene offers the utopian promise that humanity will use its 'social, economic, and technological powers to make life better for people, stabilize the climate, and protect the natural world' (Asafu-Adjaye et al., 2015: 6). Yet, on the other hand, the predictions of extreme weather events and unpredictable state-shifts chasten any hopes of human mastery. Despite humanity's enhanced causal power, it can neither fully predict nor master the effects of its interference in the Earth system. As Jamieson and Di Paola (2016: 263) summarize: 'Never has humanity been more powerful, yet never have "things" seemed more in control'.

These dilemmas are intimately related: the scope, shape, and direction of time determine not only the direction of causality, but how individual actions are narrated and situated in a larger social whole. These interconnections are amplified in the Anthropocene, which simultaneously humbles human agency by placing it in the context of deep geologic time and inflates it by insisting on its power to cause a distinctive break in the geologic time scale. Furthermore, while most climate models focus on the period from industrialization until 2100, Clark et al. (2016), contend that this represents an arbitrary set of constraints that inadequately restrict the scope and scale of political responses. Instead, the Anthropocene demands a perspective 'measured in millennia rather than human lifespans', which reveals that the 'next few decades offer a brief window of opportunity' to shape changes to the Earth system 'that will extend longer than the entire history of human civilization so far' (Clark et al., 2016: 360-361).

This seemingly inescapable persistence of deep time and the impinging presence of the far future on present concerns echo themes animating the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche.¹ Almost anticipating Latour's (2017: 219) characterization of the Anthropocene as '*an injunction to rematerialize our belonging to the world...the signal telling us to come back to the Earth*', Nietzsche's mouthpiece Zarathustra begins his teaching by calling for a new relationship between humanity and the Earth: 'Behold, I teach you the Overman', he declares, who is 'the meaning of the earth'. He further beseeches the crowd to '*remain faithful to the earth* and do not believe those who speak to you of extraterrestrial hopes' (*TSZ*: 'Prologue', §4). Furthermore, the eternal recurrence of the same (ERS) – Nietzsche's famous thought experiment and Zarathustra's fundamental teaching – stages the encounter between temporality and agency that itself recurs in the Anthropocene. Mirroring the contemporary condition, ERS is a challenge to affirm, by finding space for meaningful action, within a world in which time neither begins nor ends, but eternally becomes without purpose such that past, present, and future are united in every single moment.

Yet, while many have pointed to Nietzsche's potential contributions to environmental ethics more broadly, the affinities between ERS and the Anthropocene remain relatively unexplored.² In this article, reading Nietzsche's thought experiment in the context of political theories of the Anthropocene, I argue that ERS provides a political ontology for the Anthropocene that can both diagnose and orient political responses to the dilemmas of temporality and agency it presents. I advance two arguments. First, ERS provides a temporal imaginary well-suited for the Anthropocene, replacing a linear temporality in which only isolated now-moments exist with a cyclical one in which the past continues to persist and affect the present and the future is embedded in the past. Such temporal thinking both humbles and expands human agency: though entangled with non-human processes unfolding through moments of non-linear becoming, human actions extend beyond their immediate execution, continuing to shape the Earth and those who dwell upon it far after the death

of the agent, for which the effects of greenhouse gasses emitted a century ago that remain in the atmosphere are a painful reminder. This ‘timefulness’ or ‘polytemporal’ thinking, in Bjornerud’s (2018: 163) language, is necessary to cultivate greater attunement to the interactions and dependencies between human and non-human systems and a sense of planetary responsibility for the Anthropocene that extends beyond individual guilt or calculating the carbon debt.

However, the political contours of this planetary responsibility are underdetermined; an expansive sense of temporality, agency, and responsibility risk encouraging a resigned withdrawal from or resentful attempt to dominate politics, especially when conceived of individually. Zarathustra’s own struggle to affirm ERS and Nietzsche’s incorporation of the doctrine into an anti-democratic political program testify to the dangers of this form of thinking, which themselves recur in the Anthropocene. Therefore, my second argument is that thinking through ERS – and Nietzsche’s own responses to it – demonstrates that a revisionary temporality is necessary but alone insufficient to orient democratic and generous political responses to the Anthropocene. It is also necessary to conceive of the expanded temporality, agency, and responsibility put forward by ERS and demanded by the Anthropocene as collectively borne. Reading Nietzsche against himself opens up possibilities for a collective political affirmation of ERS; affirming ERS and taking responsibility for the Anthropocene requires constructing a global and intergenerational political collectivity that can bear such a burden without giving in to the temptations of resignation and despair.

To develop this argument, I first situate my reading of Nietzsche in the context of contemporary theoretical engagements with the Anthropocene to demonstrate the relevance of Nietzsche’s work for rethinking agency, temporality, and responsibility. I then reconstruct ERS as a means of cultivating a political ethic for the Anthropocene through attunement to the presence, motion, and fragility of time. The third section analyzes Nietzsche’s own responses to ERS as anticipatory of anti-political responses to the Anthropocene while also uncovering resources for a

political incorporation of the ERS. I conclude by speculating on the conditions of global and intergenerational political responsibility.

Recurring Dilemmas: Temporality and Agency in the Anthropocene

As a marker of geologic time, the Anthropocene raises unavoidable questions of temporality. For some, it locates the contemporary crisis in the larger time scales of human evolution, as ‘the mastery of fire by our ancestors provided humankind with a powerful monopolistic tool unavailable to other species, that put us firmly on the long path towards the Anthropocene’ (Steffen, Crutzen, and McNeil, 2007: 614). For others, the Anthropocene ‘marks a break in human history of the greatest profundity’ and ‘divides the life span of earth in two halves ontologically’ (Hamilton, 2017: 7). Despite their differences, both point to challenge of making sense of human agency in the context of the Anthropocene’s expanded time scales. Whether the Anthropocene is an evolutionary inevitability or an irreversible rupture in time, it is difficult to conceptualize meaningful individual action in response to the climate crisis.

Following Haraway (2016: 3-4), Anthropocene discourses tend to rely either a ‘comic faith in technofixes’ or an ‘abstract futurism and its affects of sublime despair and its politics of sublime indifference’. Recent theoretical work, however, argues that an effective political response to the Anthropocene requires a new temporal imaginary. Haraway (2016) herself reworks the Anthropocene into the provocative ‘Chthulucene’, or a way of ‘staying with the trouble’, and attending to the present moment and the shared vulnerability across species. Similarly, Connolly (2017) calls for rethinking Western modernity’s temporal assumptions to cultivate an ‘entangled humanism’ in which agency is not a sole possession of humanity. Latour (2017) similarly orients his ‘Gaia politics’ around an apocalypse that remains present rather than laying in the future or past. These projects seek to, in Connolly’s (2017: 83) words, ‘overcome existential resentment’ and ‘counter cultural orientations oscillating wildly between stances of mastery, studied indifference,

disappointment, and aggressive nihilism with an ethos of reflective attachment to a world that is rich in diverse meanings and purposes' (2017: 119; see also: Haraway, 2016: 139; Latour, 2017: 288). By attuning political theory to the Anthropocene's multiple intersecting temporalities, these projects encourage affirmative relationships with the Earth that ground aggressive but generous political responses to climate change.

These projects echo Nietzsche's attempt to overcome nihilism by situating human beings within an immanent natural history rather than a teleological moral history. These dilemmas occupy his work as early as a series of unpublished student essays on freedom, fate, and history written in the 1860s (Stack, 1993), and motivate his account of ERS and its elucidation in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. A famously contentious object of Nietzsche scholarship, interpretations of ERS reveal as much about the interpreter as they do about Nietzsche's thought. Mine is no exception. Embracing its protean nature, I interpret ERS as Nietzsche's attempt to reconcile agency and becoming without succumbing to nihilistic resignation or resentment. Drawing on Del Caro's (2004) emphasis on Nietzsche's terrestrial language, I interpret ERS as an attempt to ground human agency amidst the flow of time without teleology or transcendence. In the absence of divine purpose or redemption, humanity gains an existential responsibility to and for the Earth – understood as the sole space of human dwelling, the web of material and cultural forces in which humanity participates and upon which it depends.

These existential connotations can be found in Nietzsche's earliest writings on ERS, including a note from August, 1881. Here Nietzsche describes it as 'the new weight' that demands those who affirm or incorporate it to consider what they will 'do with the rest of our lives' (*KS4*: 9:11 [141]). In its more famous appearance in *The Gay Science*, ERS is offered as a demon's provocation to consider 'this life as you live it and have lived it you will live it once again and innumerable times again'. Rather than a cosmological truth about the universe, the demon offers it

as a challenge. Can this thought be entertained without existential despair and resentment: ‘Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus?’ Or would this thought ‘transform and possibly crush you’ and ‘lie on your actions as the heaviest weight’ (*GS*: §341)? Nietzsche’s earliest discussions of ERS thus resemble contemporary theorists’ interpretation of the Anthropocene as a challenge to overcome ‘existential resentment’ (Connolly, 2017: 83) or despair at belonging to the world (Latour, 2017: 13).

This is made more explicit in *Zarathustra*, whose ‘fundamental conception’ is ERS (*EH*: ‘Zarathustra’, §1). After beginning his public teaching by calling on the crowd to ‘remain faithful to the earth’ (*TSZ* ‘Prologue’, §4), Zarathustra demands that humanity reject metaphysical justifications for the world. Rather than burying ‘your head in the sand of heavenly things’ he calls for the people to ‘bear it freely instead, an earthly head that creates a meaning for the earth’ (*TSZ*: ‘Hinterworldly’)! In place of narratives of nature’s stability or divine providence, he calls for attention to the material and physical reality of Earthly existence. Such a call is even more pressing in the Anthropocene, which reveals an instability ‘in *the very notion of “nature”*’, which ‘was supposed to stabilize, pacify, reassure, and bring minds into agreement’ (Latour 2017: 35). The loss of nature’s metaphysical authority to settle political disagreement and orient action, intensifies Nietzsche’s demand for immanent forms of meaning to ground and orient life on Earth.

However, though Zarathustra expects the death of God to create an opportunity for such creativity he is distressed to find only the ‘last human being[s]’ for whom ‘the earth has become small’ and who despise conflict and creativity as burdens (*TSZ*: ‘Prologue’, §5). Whereas Nietzsche’s madman who announces the death of God in *The Gay Science* finds only the silence of the marketplace (*GS*: §125), *Zarathustra*’s last humans have embraced nihilistic resignation towards time as personified in the Soothsayer’s Schopenhauerian refrain, ‘everything is empty, everything is the same, everything was’ (*TSZ*: ‘Soothsayer’). In the face of the breakdown of the world’s established

metaphysical and moral order, Nietzsche must overcome such indifference and nihilism to ground a positive attachment to the Earth. Responding to the Anthropocene faces a similar dilemma, as described by Fiala (2010): overcoming indifference and motivating large-scale action in the Anthropocene requires emphasizing its catastrophic stakes, yet such rhetoric may perversely encourage the fatalistic response of fiddling while the world burns.

Zarathustra diagnoses these responses as rooted in temporal resentment. ‘All “it was” is a fragment, a riddle, a grisly accident’, he describes. Faced with the irreversibility of time, the will becomes ‘an angry spectator of everything past’ and succumbs to the ‘spirit of revenge’, or ‘the will’s unwillingness toward time and time’s “it was”’. This resentment against time is transfigured as either 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’). The spirit of revenge culminates in what Nietzsche elsewhere calls the ‘moral world-order’ which subjects the contingencies of time to moral categories of desert and debt while attempting to satiate existential resentment by inflicting painful punishments (*TI*: ‘Errors’, §7).

The power of temporal resentment recurs in the Anthropocene. Climate denialism and blanket resistance to mitigations efforts, particularly prevalent in conservative white men, can be seen as a resentment of a future that threatens to undermine – whether through political and economic transformation or ecological catastrophe – existing institutions and hierarchies from which they benefit (McCright and Dunlap, 2011). Temporal resentment also manifests itself in those explicitly committed to proactive responses to climate change. Todd Stern, President Obama’s chief negotiator at the 15th Conference of Parties in Copenhagen explicitly rejected ‘the notion of debt or reparations’ owed by wealthy countries to poor ones, further contending that ‘For most of the 200 years since the Industrial Revolution, people were blissfully ignorant of the fact that emissions

caused a greenhouse effect' (Quoted in Walsh, 2009). Resenting both the loss of ignorance regarding greenhouse gasses and that the emissions of previous generations cannot be reversed or ignored but continue to shape the present, Stern resists attributions of responsibility and seeks to shift blame. Faith in geoengineering also exhibit a resentment of the past, proposing to literally reverse the effects of past emissions rather than make structural changes to existing social and economic structures. Though manifesting in different forms than Nietzsche described, a Nietzschean hermeneutic interprets attempts to evade responsibility in the Anthropocene as resentful attempts to escape the inescapable reality that time is binding and that the histories of carbon-based societies and economies cannot be wished away.

Temporal resentment, or what Bjornerud (2018: 7) describes as 'chronophobia', can also manifest as a dismissal of the reality of the past and future. This prioritization of immediacy is built into our social, political, and economic infrastructure and precludes an honest reckoning with the Anthropocene, whether through electoral cycles that focus attention on short term issues, the practice of 'discounting' in economics that writes off future harms, to climate models that extend only until the end of the twenty-first century. Nietzsche too understood both the institutionalization and political stakes of temporal resentment, bemoaning the loss of 'instincts that give rise to institutions, that give rise to a future' in Western modernity, where 'People live for today, people live very fast, – people live very irresponsibly: and this is precisely what people call "freedom"' (*TI: 'Expeditions', 39*). This alienation from both the past and future prevents the climate crisis, and responses to it, from being understood in the context of histories of capitalism, colonialism, and globalization, while encouraging forms of self-serving rationalization to disavow obligations current generations owe to the future (Gardiner, 2006). In summary, 'environmental malefactions and existential malaise are arguably both rooted in a distorted sense of humanity's place in the history of the natural world' (Bjornerud, 2018: 161-162).

In contrast, Zarathustra calls for a ‘a reconciliation with time’ that preserves agency within time’s ceaseless becoming without appeals to transcendental skyhooks. This requires a creative will that says to all time: ‘But I will it thus! I shall will it thus!’, gaining the capacity to ‘will backward’. This language points to ERS, though at this point, Nietzsche’s prophet is unable to even name this thought, as he ‘suddenly broke off and looked entirely like one who is appalled in the extreme’ (*TSZ: ‘Redemption’*). The challenge of overcoming temporal resentment requires not only rejecting temporal master-narratives, whether of progress or decline, but also reconceiving of time itself. As long as time moves inexorably forward and the past remains an unchangeable given, autonomous agency is constrained and resentment is encouraged.

Cultivating Capacities to Respond: The Eternal Recurrence and Planetary Responsibility

Zarathustra’s teaching of ERS offers a political ontology for the Anthropocene, or, in Haraway’s (2016: 10) words, a story that ‘propose[s] and enact[s] patterns for participants to inhabit, somehow, on a vulnerable and wounded earth’. Replacing unidirectional linear time in which the past and future lack reality, ERS depicts time as ceaseless becoming without beginning, end, purpose or direction in which the past and future impinge upon and are affected at every moment. Simultaneously this temporal imaginary reinterprets agency from autonomy and independence from nature, to a non-sovereign conception, in which agency is socially distributed and therefore dependent upon and generative of agents and processes that both precede and outlast the individual. Through these revaluations, ERS cultivates an expanded sense of responsibility both for the future of the Earth and those who dwell upon it as well as for the social, economic, political, and geophysical transformations of the Earth wrought before one’s birth.

Zarathustra returns to ERS, intimated in ‘On Redemption’, while aboard a ship returning from ‘the blessed isles’ (*TSZ: ‘Wanderer’*). Still on board, he describes it through recounting a vision during which he climbs a mountain while the ‘spirit of gravity’ rides on his shoulder as a dwarf (*TSZ:*

‘Vision and Riddle’, §1). The dwarf, his ‘devil and arch enemy,’ and the personification of the moral world-order (*TSZ*: ‘Spirit of Gravity’, §7), weighs down his ascent until the dwarf leaps from his shoulder and the two confront each other at a gateway emblazoned with the word ‘Moment’. ‘Two paths come together here; no one has yet walked them to the end’, Zarathustra describes, ‘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’ (‘Vision and Riddle’, §2). Zarathustra begins his exposition by depicting time as infinite becoming without beginning, ending, or anything outside of this movement. ‘Everything becomes and returns eternally – escape is impossible’, he writes in a notebook entry (*KSA*: 10:24[7]). One cannot transcend the world of becoming nor place hope in an external intervention into its causal processes. Nietzsche describes a world where the only thing that is infinite is finitude.

Infinite time is insufficient to ground the affirmative relationship with the Earth that Zarathustra desires, as the dwarf’s ‘contemptuous’ response – ‘All that is straight lies [...] all truth is crooked, time itself is a circle’ – reveals the tenacity of temporal resentment. Zarathustra chastises the dwarf for making things ‘too easy’ for itself, by appealing to a transcendental image to make sense of time’s infinite becoming rather than dwelling in the tensions both within this sense of time and between it and the phenomenological experience of linear time. In contrast, Zarathustra describes ERS as an immanent result of time’s infinite becoming:

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).

Recurrence is inevitable because existence is inextricably interwoven together, such that 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. In his notebooks, he describes ERS as a ‘world of forces’, that continually moves without ‘loss’, ‘standstill’, ‘balance’. or ‘a moment’s rest’. In this ‘correlation of all things’, every moment of becoming paradoxically contains all that becomes (*KSA*: 9:11[148]).

Rather than revealing time’s hidden meaning, ERS offers a counterweight to linear temporalities. Because all things are ‘firmly knotted together’ every moment contains eternity; past, present and future co-mingle. Time neither moves towards eschatological culmination nor falls from an edenic past. As Nietzsche 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’. Nietzsche thus warns, ‘how could we reproach or praise the universe’ as doing so would improperly apply human categories to inhuman nature (*GS*: §109). Against the moralism of both pessimistic and optimistic temporalities, ERS conceives of the Earth ‘as the property, past, present and future, of a humanity that acknowledges no ownership, now empowerment except to itself’ (Del Caro, 2004: 243).

My reading is distinct from cosmological readings that understand ERS as identical self-same repetition, which would leave no space for agency and recreate the Soothsayer’s pessimistic conclusions.³ Zarathustra affirms agency within recurrence through the very relational ontology upon which ERS is grounded. Throughout his work, Nietzsche critiques the ideas of mind-independent substance (e.g. *TSZ*: ‘Self-Overcoming’; *BGE*: §21; *TI*: ‘Reason’, §1). Something’s thinghood is achieved 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; *KSA*: 13:14[79,95]). Thus, things lack a stable identity that can repeat. In his 1881 notebook that contains the first sketches of ERS (*KSA*: 9:11), Nietzsche himself vacillates between affirming sameness and attacking it as a metaphysical fiction (Krell, 1996: 158-176). Furthermore, in *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche links ERS to the

philosophy of Heraclitus (*EH*: 'Birth of Tragedy', §3, whom he holds 'in high reverence' for resisting philosophy's 'lie of unity, the lie of materiality, of substance, of duration' and insisting on 'plurality and change' (*TI*: 'Reason,' §2). Therefore, even if Nietzsche even at times explored the possibilities of cosmological recurrence, the broader context of his writings points towards an alternative interpretation.

Instead, all things recur eternally because every moment contains the totality of infinite becoming, and thus draws '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, united in the whole, but without pre-established harmony or mechanical necessity. Connolly (2002: 123) describes this as a 'rift in being' recurring in 'every moment, and no new moment allows you to return to the one that just passed. The rift is a gap [...] that cannot be closed. It recurs eternally'. Recurrence is less identical repetition, than a means to depict every moment as both containing and affecting all things and yet radically distinct and unique. Thus, following Dienstag (2004: 934) Nietzsche 'is not saying that we must relieve the past again and again; rather, this pattern of destruction and creation is unalterable and must be borne'. What recurs eternally, therefore, is reality's instability and vulnerability. Lacking a metaphysical purpose, constituted by interconnected processes of becoming, the Earth – all that is – is vulnerable, in every recurring moment, to all action.

ERS thus affirms a non-sovereign agency. The will cannot transcend the necessity of nature or free itself from the past. Instead agency is a collective and collaborative process; one's interconnections with and dependencies upon others are constitutive of, not constraints upon, agency. Agency is necessarily pluralistic, constituted by competing drives and porous boundaries, without which agents could never change or affect anything else. (*BGE*: §12). Only because humans are immanently part of and not separated from nature, can they alter the flow of becoming. Yet these very connections also entail both that agency is not an individual achievement but is

necessarily shared with others, including non-humans. Furthermore, the effects of an action are not limited in scope, but impinge on all reality, constituting what Del Caro calls a ‘new gravity’ that replaces the guilty weight of the moral world-order with a ‘reorientation toward life such that life is felt in its weight, felt in its substance, such that it becomes embodied’ (2004: 237).

ERS, thusly interpreted, functions as a way of making sense of time that, following Haraway (2016: 88), demands ‘a certain suspension of ontologies and epistemologies, holding them lightly, in favor of more venturesome, experimental natural histories’. True to Nietzsche’s own description of the philosopher as both an experiment [*Versuch*] and a temptation [*Versuchung*] (*BGE*: §42), the value of ERS in the Anthropocene is not that it provides an accurate depiction of reality, but that its thought experiment seduces the reader to rethink their conception of time through its own paradoxes and contradictions. Rather than attempting to overcome temporal resentment through rational demonstration, ERS instead works ‘on the visceral register of habits and reluctances in need of being moved’ (Connolly, 2017: 12) to cultivate sensitivity towards the multiple and conflicting temporalities of the Anthropocene. By simultaneously encouraging a self-conception of agency as dependent upon and entangled with others – including past and future generations and non-humans – it begins the process of shifting the affective attachments to linear time and sovereign agency from resentment towards gratitude and generosity.

The slow work of engaging with and incorporating ERS into one’s life attunes individuals to the diverse temporalities that lie underneath the phenomenological and cultural experience of linear time. ERS does not simply require contemplating the vast scales of time, but also embracing what Bjornerud (2018: 162) describes using the Norse concept of *nyrd*, as the ‘strange circular conception of time in which the future is embedded in the past’. ERS, by insisting on reality of the past and future impinging on each present moment, represents the Earth system in which greenhouse gasses emitted over a century ago will continue to affect the climate system centuries in the future.

Conversely, it renders the future, and the future inhabitants of earth, as making real tangible claims upon the present that demand response and cannot be dismissed.

By challenging the conceits of human autonomy and connecting individual actions to perpetual becoming, ERS also cultivates a sense of responsibility ‘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’ (Del Caro, 2004: 408). Both more humble and more demanding than individual moral responsibility, a moral fiction used to justify vengeance and soothe temporal resentment (*TI*: ‘Errors’, 7), this account of responsibility is more appropriate to the Anthropocene. Because one is inextricably linked to the whole, it is impossible to be guilty, unless all of reality is guilty (*TI*: ‘Errors’, §8). Responses to climate change, similarly, cannot ascribe moral blame to individual carbon emitters without accounting for the broader structural and historical context of fossil fuel use. Regressive carbon and fuel taxes that punish individuals without addressing energy production systems, transportation infrastructures, and economic inequality should be treated with skepticism.

On the other hand, responsibility is expanded almost infinitely: in every moment, one is to be eternally responsible to and for all that is, an unbalanced system of constant becoming beyond full control. In this sense individual efforts to take responsibility for emissions by changing consumption habits are necessary but insufficient, as affirming ERS is to also take responsibility for the not only greenhouse gas emissions of previous and future generations, but also the social and economic structures which encourage unsustainable fossil fuel use and unevenly distribute the risks of climate change. Rather than an impossible burden, ERS’s non-sovereign conception of agency becomes a twofold source of empowerment. Rather than seeing individual actions as making little difference, ERS attaches existential weight to even mundane habits as fundamentally shaping the Earth system far into the future. Furthermore, rather than seeing mitigation or adaptation efforts as

sacrificing the present for future generations, ERS's cyclic temporality frames future and past generations as intimately related to and vital to one's self, encouraging intergenerational solidarity.

Combining these insights, ERS's temporal imaginary frames the causes of and responses to the Anthropocene as necessarily political. Rather than the next stage in the inexorable march of geologic time, the Anthropocene must be understood as the material recurrence of capitalism, colonialism, and global political hierarchies manifesting as lingering concentrations of greenhouse gasses in the atmosphere and unequally distributed vulnerability to climate hazards. ERS's radically revisionary temporality demands equally imaginative political responses that challenge the linear conceits and immediacy of market liberalism, inaugurate novel value systems premised on a responsibility for the earth forwards and backwards in time, and build innovative political institutions that can bind together individuals across political, geographic, and temporal boundaries. However, in contrast to this vision, Nietzsche's own response to ERS reveals its political risks.

Beyond Resentment and Resignation: Eternal Recurrence as Political Responsibility

While it is tempting to draw straight lines from an expanded temporal imaginary to a generous and just political response to the Anthropocene,⁴ Nietzsche's own responses to ERS range from ascetic withdrawal to an anti-democratic politics of domination. Nietzsche's response must be taken seriously, as they form a cautionary tale about the tenacity of temporal resentment. However, Nietzsche also can be read against himself, as pointing towards the necessity of a collective, intergenerational, and democratic political subject.

Zarathustra initially struggles to affirm ERS. He frequently withdraws into solitude, unable to publicly articulate ERS or share its burden with his followers (*TSZ*: 'Child with the Mirror'; 'Stillest Hour'; 'The Homecoming'; 'Convalescent', §1). His own attempt to incorporate his 'abysmal thought' leaves him incapacitated for seven days (*TSZ*: 'Convalescent', §1-2). Upon his recovery, he admits to his animals that it initially encouraged his own temporal resentment, telling them, 'My

great surfeit of human beings - that choked me and crawled into my throat; and what the soothsayer said: “All is the same, nothing is worth it, knowledge chokes”. Zarathustra’s initial response to ERS was to see ‘the human earth transformed into a cave, its chest caved in’ and feel ‘nausea’ at ‘eternal recurrence of even the smallest’ that perpetuates the last human (‘Convalescent’, §2). While he ultimately overcomes this resentment and incorporate ERS as an affirmation of life, contingency, and creativity (*TSZ*: ‘Other Dance Song’, ‘Seven Seals’), his initial reaction demonstrates that ERS risks intensifying the very nihilism it opposes. Rather than cultivating an affirmatives responsibility for the Earth, it can inculcate a resigned fatalism and withdrawal from the political world.

The Anthropocene elicits similar reactions. An environmental impact assessment for the Trump administration’s proposal to freeze fuel efficiency standards accepts the reality of catastrophic climate change. However, the report uses this to justify relaxing efficiency standards because the standards alone are insufficient mitigation mechanisms and effective mitigation would require the entire economy ‘to substantially move away from the use of fossil fuels, which is not currently technologically feasible or economically practicable’ (NHTSA, 2018: §5-30). While this example may be dismissed as in bad faith, the Soothsayer’s fatalism manifests itself even in those who take the Anthropocene’s ethical demands seriously. Jamieson (2014: 178) betrays a similar desire to withdraw from politics, concluding that ‘our failure to prevent or even respond significantly reflects the impoverishment of our systems of practical reason, the paralysis of our politics, and the limits of our cognitive and affective capacities’. Taking these limitations as ontological givens, he advocates for a green virtue ethics, withdrawn from political contestation, as the only viable option for living an ethical life in the Anthropocene (2014: 186-187). Even more troubling are the segregated adaptation measures taken by the wealthy to weather the inevitable rising temperatures and seas, creating what Goodell (2017) calls ‘climate apartheid’.

That encounters with deep time can encourage rather than temper temporal resentment demonstrates the importance of seeing ERS as requiring a project of incorporation and affirmation rather than providing a political panacea. For many scholars (e.g. Danto, [1964] 2005; Nehamas, 1985), Zarathustra's struggles necessitate reading ERS as a project of ethical self-cultivation. However, Nietzsche names Zarathustra as the 'one who first *creates* truth, a *world-governing* spirit' (*EH*: 'Zarathustra', §4), suggesting that ERS must be understood as a political project. In 'that most decisive passage' 'On Old and New Tablets' (*EH*: 'Zarathustra', §4), Zarathustra finds himself surrounded by 'old broken tablets' and 'new tablets only partially written upon' (*TSZ*: 'Tablets', §1). Challenging the last humans' resignation (§5-6), Zarathustra praises the creator, who both 'breaks tablets and old values' and 'writes new values on new tablets', as one who is able to achieve the redemption of time promised by ERS and overcome the nihilistic moralism of the last humans. The creator, Zarathustra continues, must possess a strength of will sufficient 'to write upon the will of millennia as if upon bronze' (§29). Incorporating and affirming ERS requires constructing new values which will guide humanity as a whole over many generations.

Because values are inherently intersubjective, reflecting 'the conditions for preserving one community' over another (*GS*: §116), creating new values by which ERS can be incorporated requires transforming these cultural and political conditions (Drochon, 2016: 129-151). Nietzsche insists that his language of legislation is not metaphorical, describing the philosopher as 'the man with the most comprehensive responsibility, whose conscience bears the weight of the overall development of humanity' and who 'will make use of religion for his breeding and education work, just as he will make use of the prevailing political and economic situation' (*BGE*: §61). The creation of new values, made possible by ERS, is fully realized through the transformation of social, economic, and political structures.

While this challenges anti-political interpretations suggested by Zarathustra's solitude, it carries the unsettling implication that ERS is linked to a eugenicist project to breed 'a *new nobility*' (*TSZ*: 'Tablets', §11) who 'shall be my begetters and growers and sowers of the future' (§12). ERS selects those who are naturally suited for this role; those able to affirm its tragic truth will have the strength needed to mercilessly give a push to declining European culture (*TSZ*: 'Tablets', §20) and unite Europe under a healthy world culture where 'the best should rule' and 'the best also want to rule' (*TSZ*: 'Tablets', §21)! Thus, Drochon (2016: 115) contends that ERS 'brings to the fore the necessity of a caste society – one sphere devoted to the production of the overman, and the other to the perpetuation of the last man – and the necessary pathos of distance that the former must maintain'. To overcome the challenge Zarathustra describes in his convalescence – to affirm the existence of the 'smallest human[s]' who are themselves unable existence (*TSZ*: 'Convalescent', §2) – Nietzsche insists in a hierarchical society in which the many exist solely to produce the rare few able to achieve his own philosophical and political goals. The existential burden of responsibility for the Earth infinitely in time is so great that it becomes a megalomaniacal aspiration to control, master, and fully determine the world: hence his declaration in *Ecce Homo*: 'The concept of politics will have merged entirely with a war of spirits; all power structures of the old society will have been exploded – all of them are based on lies: there will be wars the like of which have never yet been seen on earth' (*EH*: 'Destiny', §1).

A similar refusal to entrust the masses with planetary responsibility recur in the Anthropocene. It can be seen in James Lovelock's call for a 'more authoritative world' where it 'may be necessary to put democracy on hold' (Quoted in Hickman, 2010) or the dream of what Mann and Wainwright (2018) call 'Climate Leviathan', a form of planetary sovereignty that is seemingly democratically legitimated, supported by scientific expertise, given authority to manage, with coercive force, humanity's adaptation to an inevitably changing climate. Like Nietzsche's nausea at

the last humans, the Anthropocene's call to responsibility can encourage multifaceted elite resentment: towards the masses who cannot be trusted to make correct decisions, towards decarbonizing economic and social structures from which they benefit, and towards the demands of climate justice on behalf of developing nations. Climate Leviathan, claiming authority in the name of survival and characterized by concentrated power in the hands of political and economic elite who manage planetary systems to maintain existing hierarchies, is a plausible response to these dynamics (Mann and Wainwright, 2018: 152-153).

If ERS holds resources for political theory in the Anthropocene, these equally unsatisfying responses – withdrawal and domination – must be both taken seriously and resisted. However, these are not the only conclusions to be drawn. ERS's non-sovereign conception of agency implies that action and value-creation is a necessarily intersubjective process. Individuals do not act completely autonomously nor do they control the full consequences and interpretations of their actions; as Zarathustra himself maintains, 'First peoples were creators and only later individuals; indeed, the individual himself is still the youngest creation' (*TSZ: 'Thousand and One Goals'*). That Nietzsche resents this dependence can be seen both in Zarathustra's distrust of those who misinterpret his teachings (*TSZ: 'Child with the Mirror'; 'Awakening'; 'Ass Festival'*) and his own skepticism that the public would even comprehend *Zarathustra*.⁵ Yet to affirm all that exists, has existed, and will exist, requires not only tolerating other perspectives but actively incorporating them into one's own.

In this light, the hierarchical politics Nietzsche favors stem less from ERS itself than Nietzsche's own resentment of the intersubjectivity and contingency at ERS's heart. This opens space for an alternative political reading of ERS. Rather than selecting a new ruling class, it instead becomes a way to cultivate 'the 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*' which are necessary to build and maintain institutions. While such a perspective is 'anti-liberal to the point

of malice' (*TI*: 'Expeditions', §39), it points to the inability of liberal individualism, by excluding connections to the past and future, to even entertain intergenerational political action – the very form of action necessary in the Anthropocene. Thus, rather than eliminating perspectives in favor of a single vision of the future, ERS insists that 'Many noble ones are needed, to be sure, and many kinds of noble ones *for nobility to exist*' (*TSZ*: 'Tablets', §11). ERS can only be affirmed through recurring political integration and contestation, as a community struggles to overcome resentment and create an affirmative relationship with the Earth.

The extremes that Nietzsche takes his sense of planetary responsibility should encourage skepticism of proposals to curtail political contestation and deliberation in the name of humanity's survival and attune political theorists to the disavowed resentments of politics lurking in political and theoretical responses to the Anthropocene. Furthermore, this alternative interpretation of the political stakes of ERS points to the necessity of conceiving of planetary responsibility in and for the Anthropocene as a collective political project. Individuals attempting to bear an infinite planetary responsibility are likely to give in to antipolitical resignation or resentment. Instead, taking responsibility demands pluralizing the perspectives involved in climate politics and cultivating solidarity across geographical distance, cultural and class differences, generational boundaries and even species divisions. The lesson of ERS in the Anthropocene is that the only politically viable subject of responsibility in the Anthropocene is the Anthropos itself, understood not as an undifferentiated species that absolves particular political responsibility, but as a political project that must eternally re-negotiate humanity's histories, inequalities, and divisions to respond to the challenge of the Anthropocene.

This conclusion confronts the paradox of politics: the very political agent that is to be generated by affirming ERS is itself presupposed as the only agent that can affirm it. Or, the political project of constructing a collective agent that can bear planetary responsibility and respond to the

Anthropocene requires individuals and communities taking responsibility and acting as if this collective agent already existed.⁶ While paradoxical, this non-linearity is at the heart of the Anthropocene, as it describes the Earth's present and future in terms of a geologic timescale that is used to date Earth's past. Political responses to this condition must similarly engage in multi-scalar and multi-directional thinking and action, addressing climate change simultaneously engaging short term mitigation and adaptation measures and the longer-term project of decarbonizing energy systems, while contextualizing these efforts in response to the historical injustices wrought by capitalism and colonialism that continue to shape vulnerability to climate hazards. This project requires the non-resentful relationship with time cultivated by ERS's temporal imaginary. Rather than resisting this paradox as an insurmountable obstacle, ERS reimagines it as constitutive of political time itself. Every moment both presupposes the anticipated future in whose name action is taken while also reinterpreting and renegotiating its inherited past. This sensibility is necessary to construct a collective political agent capable of responding to the Anthropocene.

Conclusion: Anticipating Anthropocene Responsibility

How would such a political agent and planetary responsibility be constituted? Given that Nietzsche's own political proposals suggest an endorsement of Climate Leviathan, answering this question requires moving beyond Nietzsche's texts themselves. While a full explication of a novel form of political community and authority is beyond the scope of this article, reading ERS in the context of contemporary political theories of the Anthropocene illuminates three general contours.

First, animated by ERS's account of non-sovereign agency, political responsibility in the Anthropocene must be collective, pluralistic, and multi-dimensional. Responding to the injustices of climate change demands action in concert operating on multiple registers, sites, and scales of political action. Connolly's (2017: 125) 'politics of swarming' – 'composed of multiple constituencies, regions, levels, processes of communication, and modes of action, each carrying

some potential to augment and intensify the others with which it becomes associated' – is instructive. Connolly imagines individuals and communities acting both independently and in concert within and across their social networks, so as to construct a 'militant pluralist assemblage' (Connolly 2017: 131) that cuts across class, ethnic, religious, age, and educational differences, culminating in a climate general strike. ERS's demand to take responsibility for actions one has not committed can motivate such action. Individuals, holding themselves responsible for the emissions of their employer might simultaneously work with colleagues to adopt more sustainable practices and put pressure on their corporation to divest from fossil fuel corporations, while also mobilizing political pressure in favor of carbon taxes and greater restrictions to new fossil fuel exploration. Responsibility for the Anthropocene will necessarily mirror its complex and distributed nature.

The second principle inspired by ERS is that political agency must be conceived of intergenerational, not only extending into an uncertain climate future, but also claiming responsibility for the Anthropocene's history. Dismissing this history as irrelevant to the problem humanity faces now, even with the seemingly laudable goal of securing consensus for climate action moving forward, risks recreating and perpetuating the very injustices that generated the crisis. The challenge is to reconceptualize political agency as not only moving forward in time, but as extend both forwards and backwards to create a single intergenerational agent. The historical damage of capitalism and colonialism cannot be reversed or settled, but must be borne forward and actively incorporated into political community and action going forward. Haraway's (2016) reworking of Orson Scott Card's idea of a 'Speaker for the Dead' – one who collects and retells the stories of the past dead, 'to bring the dead into the present' (69) – provides an aesthetic model of the form of active incorporation and affirmation of the past ERS demands. Political action in the Anthropocene must be similarly grounded on intergenerational solidarity.

Building on these, the third orienting principle is that political representation must be radically reconceived. To take responsibility for the Anthropocene is to represent a much broader constituency than envisioned by traditional theories. Not only does this require representing past and future generations, but also non-humans, from various plant and animal organisms and species to forests, mountains, rivers, and entire ecosystems transformed in the Anthropocene. Whereas only nation-states are recognized parties to UNFCCC negotiations, Latour (2017: 262) provides the imaginative suggestion of supplementing nation-state representation with ‘non-state delegations’ because ‘they are other powers, possessed by other interest, which exert continual pressure on the interests of Humanity’. To Latour’s (2017:255) list of “Forest” after “France”, “India” next to “Indigenous Peoples”, the “atmosphere” delegation before “Australia”, “Oceans” after “Maldives”, can be added past and future humans, species that have gone extinct in the Anthropocene, and species not yet evolved, among others. Only a political agent that incorporates such diverse spatial, temporal, species, and material interests can truly claim to take responsibility in and for the Anthropocene.

The challenge for political theory and practice in the Anthropocene is to imagine and realize this utopian political agent – constituted by collectives of humans and non-humans, living, dead, not yet born, and never truly alive – capable of responding to the crisis of the Earth system, without giving into the temptations that haunted both Zarathustra and Nietzsche: namely that such a burden can only be achieved by subordinating democratic equality, plurality, and justice to a global authoritarianism justified by the demands of survival. As Mann and Wainwright (2018: 196) conclude, the challenge of the Anthropocene is not simply a political struggle for sovereignty and authority, but a struggle to create new interpretations of authority, community, and responsibility as inexorably entwined with history and the Earth. As has been shown, incorporating the lessons of the eternal recurrence cannot guarantee the construction of a novel form of political agency and

responsibility necessary in the Anthropocene. However, my analysis of ERS demonstrates that challenging temporal resentment by cultivating a polytemporal sensibility and appreciation for non-sovereign agency is a necessary pre-requisite to politics in the Anthropocene.

¹ I use the following in abbreviations for Nietzsche's works in the text, referring to aphorism, section name, or page number as appropriate: *BGE* = (Nietzsche, [1886] 2002); *EH* = (Nietzsche, [1908] 1989); *GM* = (Nietzsche, [1887] 1997); *GS* = (Nietzsche, [1882] 2001); *KSA* = (Nietzsche, 1999); *TI* = (Nietzsche, [1889] 2003); *TSZ* = (Nietzsche, [1885] 2006). Translations from *KSA* are my own. Unless noted, I have retained all stylistic features from the texts.

² Storey (2016) provides a critical overview and engagement of this literature. A notable exception, Shapiro (2016) places Nietzsche's thought in conversation with twentieth century thinkers of 'the Earth' to argue for Nietzsche's relevance, but his engagement of ERS focuses on a garden metaphor used by Zarathustra's animals rather than the doctrine itself. Connolly (2017) draws on Nietzsche to engage the affective dimensions of the Anthropocene, but does not explicitly engage ERS.

³ Despite Simmel's ([1907] 1986) refutation of the cosmological 'proofs' found in Nietzsche's notebooks, D'Iorio (2014) has defended the cosmological reading through an archival reconstruction of Nietzsche's readings on thermodynamics and cosmology while he was drafting ERS and Loeb (2013) reads *Zarathustra* as depicting in narrative form the literal recurrence of Zarathustra's life.

⁴ Bjornerud (2018: 173-177) and Clark et al. (2016) at times make such suggestions. While less sanguine, Connolly, Latour, and Haraway share the hope that an expanded temporal sensibility will encourage robust political action in response to climate change, even if they admit that its success is not guaranteed.

⁵ Hence its subtitle, 'A Book for All and none.' In letters to Peter Gast, Nietzsche lamented that no one will interpret the hidden truth of *Zarathustra* (See: Drochon, 2016: 135, n.19). In *Ecce Homo*, he is not surprised that commenters did misunderstand it, as understanding six sentences 'would raise one to a higher level of existence than "modern" men could attain' (EH: 'Books,' §1).

⁶ Connolly (1995) and Honig (2007) trace this paradox back to Rousseau: reforming political institutions requires virtuous citizens, yet reformed political institutions are necessary to cultivate virtuous citizens.

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