The gnoseological meaning of Nietzsche’s eternal return and the similarities with Emerson’s thought

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Abstract
This article aims to show how Nietzsche’s theory of the eternal return is a post-metaphysical gnoseology. It also aims to demonstrate how, in developing this theory, Nietzsche may have been inspired by Ralph Waldo Emerson. For both Emerson and Nietzsche, being is continuously becoming in a circular movement. The enlightened man, wanting to attain knowledge of reality, must reproduce in himself this circular movement, which involves always experimenting with contradictory values throughout his life. He can never attain complete and definite knowledge of being, but only knowledge as approximate as possible to its true essence.

Keywords
\textit{adaequatio rei et intellectus}, contradiction, Ralph Waldo Emerson, eternal return, experimentation, gnoseology, post-metaphysics, truth

Introduction

Assuming, finally, that we succeeded in explaining our entire life of drives as the organization and outgrowth of one basic form of will (namely, of the will to power, which is my claim); assuming we could trace all organic functions back to this will to power and find that it even solved the problem of procreation and nutrition (which is a single problem); then we will have earned the right to clearly designate all efficacious force as: will to power. The world seen from inside, the world determined and described with respect to its ‘intelligible character’ – would be just this ‘will to power’ and nothing else. (\textit{BGE}: 35–6)

We assume that with the concept of the will to power Nietzsche elaborates his own ontology. With regard to the type of ontology he suggests, Heidegger’s (1961) standpoint is
presupposed. Heidegger affirms that it is an ontology in which the being of everything that exists is conceived of as a will whose unique activity is the continuous creation of new values. Such a creation describes the way the will happens or its movement: after having created certain values, the will returns to itself to destroy its previous creation and create again. This movement is the eternal return.

By always creating new values, the will is subject to continuous becoming or self-overcoming. Therefore, Nietzsche’s expression of ‘the eternal return of the same’, far from designating the necessary recurring of the same reality after death again and again, in fact refers to the eternal movement of creation of the will to power.

According to Heidegger, the eternal return of the will to power is not only an ontology, but also an ethic. It is an ethic that endows man with maximum awareness when making decisions. By conceiving of the world as the eternal return of the will to power, man pays the greatest attention to the single moment in which he decides how to act, since whether something will return or not depends on this moment. He should live in such a way that he wishes to live again. In this fashion, far from being a mere spectator of his life, he gains control over it at every moment.

The man who decides to abandon the metaphysical account of reality and embrace the ontology of the will to power goes through a transformation after which he becomes overman. The overman is the man who has liberated himself from morality: he is one who is able to live without eternal values, unlike the majority of mankind who need stable reference points to orient themselves in the world. The overman is a creator: he always behaves according to different values that he himself creates, instead of behaving according to external values created by society, as most people do. By accepting the theory of the will to power as the ultimate explanation of reality, the overman behaves in the same way as the will: after having created values, he constantly returns to himself to create new ones.

While Heidegger considered the eternal return both as an ontology (i.e. the movement of the will to power which describes everything that exists) and as an ethic (i.e. the task to live in such a way that we wish to live again), most scholars regard the will to power and the eternal return as mutually exclusive. They consider the first as the ontology of a cosmic reality that always repeats itself and the second as an ethical attitude. In other words, for the majority of them, the eternal return is either a cosmology or an ethic.

According to Löwith (1956), the cosmological and ethical interpretations contradict each other. The eternal return as a cosmology describes a necessary reality, i.e. the recurring of the same again and again, while the eternal return as an ethic, involving the task of living in such a way that we wish to live again, illustrates a reality in which events are not already predetermined but are in our power.

A similar stance is taken by Jaspers (1936) who, however, does not consider the eternal return the core of Nietzsche’s philosophy as Löwith does. On his account, the eternal return is just one of Nietzsche’s attempts to explore the possible meanings of being. For Jaspers, Nietzsche’s will has two contradictory meanings: on the one hand it expresses one’s freedom to create events, and, on the other, it itself describes the necessary recurring of the same events again and again.

Kaufmann (1974: 323) underplays the role of the eternal return within Nietzsche’s thought, regarding it as ‘a dubious doctrine, which was to have no influence to speak of’.
He thinks that the eternal return is ‘to Nietzsche less an idea than an experience – the supreme experience of a life unusually rich in suffering, pain, and agony’. Against Kaufmann, Strong (1988) puts the eternal return at the heart of Nietzsche’s philosophy, considering it a new kind of moral behaviour, a new way of being in the world.

For Magnus (1978), the ontological and ethical interpretations of the eternal return are in conflict. According to him, we could not accept the task to live in such a way that we wish to live again if the eternal return described a reality in which everything returns again and again. In this case, willing or not, we would not have any control over our decisions, being forced to behave in the same way we did in our previous existences.

Schacht (1983) believes that, although the cosmological proof of the eternal return is rich in contradictions, this does not undermine its ethical meaning, being that of a life-enhancing thought experiment to test our strength. Likewise, Müller Lauter (1999) considers the cosmological proof of the eternal return to be rich in contradictions and the eternal return a thought experiment. According to him, the eternal return has only an ethical meaning, that of living while joyfully embracing the finitude of the world of becoming. Similarly, for Vattimo (1974), the eternal return, having a mere metaphorical meaning, leads to this ethical approach to life. While assuming some of Müller Lauter’s tenets, instead Abel (1998) maintains that the eternal return is both an ontology and an ethic.

More recently, Hatab and Loeb have suggested an interpretation that brings the cosmological and ethical accounts together. On the one hand, Hatab (2005: 106) believes that ‘the first-order condition of engaging recurrence should be at the level of mimetic reading and direct impact, rather than a theoretical examination of a proposed ‘worldview’ pondered by the gaze of philosophical study’. Although the cosmological account should be subordinate to the ethical, for him considering the reality of the eternal return only as a mere hypothesis would undermine the immediate ethical impact. On the other hand, according to Loeb (2010: 106), interpreting the eternal return literally as the return of the same does not exclude an ethical meaning. Indeed, ‘Nietzsche’s implication is that Zarathustra’s new understanding of his life as a ring leads him to see that he will once again, and indeed eternally, experience all those joys that he wanted back but thought were lost forever’.

Starting from Heidegger, we interpret the eternal return both as an ontology and as an ethic, and therefore accept most of the ethical meanings that were stressed by those scholars who regarded the eternal return exclusively as an ethic. On our account, only if we assume that everything that exists is the eternal return of the will to power, man can fulfil his essence as will to power and thus become the overman who lives by continuously creating new values.

Assuming that the will to power is both an ontology and an ethic, this article primarily aims to demonstrate that it is also a gnoseology, which is entirely ignored by the scholars. The creation of values turns out to be the new method of knowledge of post-metaphysical philosophy, and the overman is the post-metaphysical philosopher who puts this new method into practice. Second, this article aims to illustrate how Emerson can be considered a valuable source for Nietzsche for the development of his gnoseology, which is also totally ignored by the scholars. It is not a philological study, but the similarities between Nietzsche and Emerson are so striking, that Emerson’s role in this respect cannot be disregarded.
Most often Emerson’s intuitions remain in an embryonic state. It is Nietzsche who draws the consequences from such intuitions, making philosophical reflections out of them. Nietzsche first read Emerson when he was 17 years old. The books he read at that time were *Essays: First Series* (1841), *Essays: Second Series* (1844) and *Conduct of Life* (1860). From then on, such texts would accompany Nietzsche for the rest of his life. He would repeatedly come back to them throughout his philosophical activity. Around 20 years after his first encounter with Emerson, in 1882 in a notebook he wrote down passages drawn from Emerson’s *Essays*. In 1888, the year before his death, he declared that Emerson had been for him a good friend who had always made him happy in his dark moods, which confirms the importance of Emerson for Nietzsche throughout his life.

**The conception of being in Nietzsche and Emerson**

Before analysing the similarities between Nietzsche and Emerson, it must be underlined that they have two radically different views of being. Nietzsche is an anti-metaphysical thinker disdainful of religion, while Emerson a metaphysical one with a strong religious background.

The power of spirit to appropriate foreign elements manifests itself in a strong tendency to assimilate the new to the old, to simplify the manifold, to disregard or push aside utter inconsistencies: just as it will arbitrarily select certain aspects or outlines of the foreign, of any piece of the ‘external world’, for stronger emphasis, stress, or falsification in its own interest. Its intention here is to incorporate new ‘experiences’, to classify new things into old classes, – which is to say: it aims at growth, or, more particularly, the feeling of growth, the feeling of increasing strength. (*BGE*: 121–2)

According to Nietzsche, life is will to power: constant creation of values, interpretations. Beings interpret the world in a different way, depending on their conditions of existence. For example, some ignore specific aspects of reality that scare them, while others falsify them.

When attributing meanings to the stimuli that surround them, beings come to take control of the stimuli insofar as these are no longer something unknown but a part of their world. Giving senses to the stimuli, beings come to assimilate them, to possess them. This enables beings to take advantage of stimuli. Hence, interpreting means assimilating the world, exerting power over it.

Likewise, Emerson (1860: 32) speaks in terms of absorption, assimilation of the world: ‘As soon as there is life, there is self-direction, and absorbing and using of material.’ According to Emerson, all beings modify the surrounding stimuli to satisfy their needs, and this process of modification is defined as an absorption of the world. For example, plants develop leaves or thorns, depending on their necessities.

As with Nietzsche, also for Emerson (1860: 32) assimilating the stimuli means taking advantage of them: ‘There are more belongings to every creature than his air and his food. His instincts must be met, and he has predisposing power that bends and fits what is near him to his use.’ The absorbing and using of material, by means of which beings take advantage of stimuli, is the essence of life, which Emerson defines as a ‘search after power’.
Emerson’s definition of life seems very similar to that of Nietzsche as will to power, but a closer look at them reveals deep differences. For both Nietzsche and Emerson, life is becoming, continuous change. However, they turn out to elaborate completely different conceptions of becoming: Emerson’s view is metaphysical while Nietzsche’s is anti-metaphysical.

For metaphysics, the world in which we daily live is not the true being insofar as it is conditioned: it was created by an unconditioned principle, and this is the only one being. Likewise, according to Emerson, the world owes its origin to an unconditioned divine principle he calls ‘Oversoul’. Everything that exists is an emanation of the Oversoul, and, for this reason, it is divine, it mirrors its characteristics.

In this respect, becoming is the movement through which the Oversoul emanates giving birth to the world. This movement shows a teleological order, it is progressive: from time to time the Oversoul emanates assuming always a new figure that has a higher degree of perfection than the previous one. The Oversoul is continuously changing, it progresses toward greater perfection.

On the other hand, for Nietzsche the will to power is not an unconditioned principle that gives birth to the world as with Emerson, but it is the world. If we examine the world under a magnifying glass, it turns out to be will to power. Everything that exists is will to power, continuous becoming. While for Emerson becoming is progressive, tending toward greater perfection, according to Nietzsche it is mere chaos without aims.

With the theory of being as will to power, Nietzsche intends to reject exactly the concepts of unconditioned principle and teleology that he considers the stamp of metaphysics. Unlike Emerson’s Oversoul, Nietzsche’s will to power has no external aims, it does not tend toward greater perfection. Its unique aim is to fulfil its essence, i.e. to constantly overcome itself.

**Nietzsche’s post-metaphysical truth criterion**

There is only a perspectival seeing, only a perspectival ‘knowing’: the more affects we are able to put into words about a thing, the more eyes, various eyes we are able to use for the same thing, the more complete will be our ‘concept’ of the thing, our ‘objectivity’. But to eliminate the will completely and turn off all the emotions without exception, assuming we could: well? would that not mean to castrate the intellect? (GM: 87)

Throughout history, metaphysics maintained that reality was something perpetually stable and that by means of eternal concepts it was possible to grasp the ultimate truth about it. Such concepts were assumed to be true for all eternity: they were so self-evident that human beings had to take them for granted. However, far from allowing the human being to obtain knowledge of reality, being something absolute, fixed and stable, such concepts negate reality, which instead is nothing stable at all: it is the continuous self-overcoming of the will to power.

Furthermore, metaphysical concepts are the product of the self-preservation instinct of human beings. Since the dawn of civilization, human beings used these concepts to try to stabilize the transitory reality of becoming, because they were terrified by the lack of stable reference points. The fundamental concepts of metaphysics – namely substance,
cause and aim – do not belong to the world in itself, but they are human interpretations of the world which were caused by the self-preservation instinct.

In reality, there are no substances, fixed things with eternal features. Instead, things are temporary configurations of the flux of becoming that perpetually transforms itself. Likewise, the concept of cause is the product of our imagination. According to the concept of cause, reality is made of two moments, i.e. cause and effect. However, there are actually no moments, but reality is something continuous. Furthermore, since reality necessarily overcomes itself, it has no external aims. Its unique aim is to overcome itself.

Nevertheless, the fact that metaphysics failed to know reality does not mean that it is unknowable. Indeed, one can have ‘objective knowledge’ of reality. Objective knowledge means a tendency of approximation to reality: it does not involve the total understanding of reality. Therefore, it is neither true nor definitive; it is inadequate with respect to the total intelligibility of being. Considering that reality is an endless becoming, which involves the continuous conversion of things into their opposite forms, objective knowledge can be obtained by trying to look at reality by as many eyes as possible, i.e. by as many interpretations as possible. This means always assuming opposite points of view, ultimately contradicting oneself.

In this respect, Nietzsche’s concept of objectivity is actually the highest expression of subjectivity: in order to attain objective knowledge of reality, one must look at reality not only from one’s own perspective but also from the perspectives of other individuals. While for metaphysics objective knowledge can be obtained only by setting aside one’s own point of view and investigating reality by means of concepts considered true for all eternity, for Nietzsche objectivity means multiplying the personal points of view.

According to metaphysics, concepts are true exactly because they are impersonal: their truth is self-evident, it does not depend on personal points of view. On the other hand, in Nietzsche’s eyes, there are no impersonal concepts true for all eternity but only personal points of view, and we can access reality only by means of the multiplication of interpretations and by assuming various antithetical points of view.

This means that the constant creation of new values can lead to the attainment of the knowledge of reality. However, the overman-creator can grasp the complexity of reality, but never completely. In fact, reality, as an endless transformation, transcends all kinds of understanding. It is always beyond it. While the concept-based metaphysical theory of knowledge paradoxically led to the negation of reality insofar as it made use of fixed concepts to investigate reality which is nothing stable but continuous becoming, the theory of knowledge as objectivity affirms reality to the maximum.

According to Nietzsche, reality is the becoming of the will to power, constant creation of values, perspectives. Nietzsche’s theory of objectivity affirms reality to the maximum exactly because it involves the continuous creation of values, which is the definition of reality for Nietzsche. Creating values is both Nietzsche’s definition of reality as will to power and his definition of objectivity. Since reality is the continuous becoming of the will to power, the constant creation of new values, the creator must himself create different values in order to obtain knowledge of it.

The fact that the creator seeking knowledge must always create different values does not mean that for Nietzsche every value has the same value. In his view, there is a hierarchy of values depending on the capacity of the values to make the will to power increase
further. Values that lead to this outcome are, for example, creation or experimentation, suffering, honesty, solitude etc.

According to Nietzsche, there are two main categories of values: at the top of the hierarchy are those which make the will to power increase further, while at the bottom those which cause its preservation. The essence of the will to power is a continuous self-overcoming, and bottom-level values, such as the values of Christianity, block the will to power, preventing it from fulfilling its essence.

In general, the will to power creates either values of preservation or values of growth depending on its conditions of existence, which in turn can be either conditions of preservation or of growth. These conditions play a twofold role: sometimes they cause the will to power to create certain values, and sometimes they coincide with the values themselves. In this respect, top-level values, especially the value of creation, are both values and conditions of growth.

These values make it possible to momentarily embrace other values or perspectives. Indeed, insofar as they are values of growth, they turn out to be self-overcoming. For example, the value of experimentation: creation involves always creating new values, thus also values that are opposite to itself, but the same does not apply to preservation values. Indeed, these prevent the will to power from creating at all.

In sum, the creator seeking objective knowledge of reality must continuously create new values or perspectives, but this does not lead to indifferentism. The values that allow continuous creation are the top of the hierarchy. The creator can create new values exactly because he attributes the highest value to creation, acknowledging that creation itself is the essence of the will to power, and thus it enables its self-overcoming.

With his theory of objectivity, Nietzsche introduces a new truth criterion that enables him to go beyond metaphysics. Such a criterion indeed negates the two fundamental principles on which the metaphysical truth criterion is based: the principle of non-contradiction on the one hand and that of *adaequatio rei et intellectus* on the other.

For metaphysics, the true essence of reality is completely opposite to the reality of everyday life. We live in a world where things are subject to birth and death, where nothing lasts forever. However, such a world is just an illusion. The true world is eternal and unchangeable: everything remains the same for all eternity. Starting from the opposition between illusory and true world, metaphysics developed a method of knowledge on the basis of the principle of non-contradiction.

While for metaphysics contradiction represented the negation of truth, for Nietzsche, on the contrary, it is the very truth criterion in the post-metaphysical sense. Only by creating as many interpretations as possible, thus including contradictory ones, can one grasp the essence of reality, which, as becoming, is the continuous conversion of things into their opposite forms. Since reality is contradictory, one can know reality only by being contradictory.

Making contradiction the new method of knowledge, the concept of truth as objectivity goes beyond the other main principle of metaphysics: the principle of *adaequatio rei et intellectus*. For metaphysics, something is true if it perfectly mirrors reality, expressing all its possible meanings. Instead, the truth criterion as objectivity presupposes the fact that it is impossible to obtain knowledge perfectly mirroring being, since, at every moment, being is something different. As a consequence, one can only obtain approxi-
mate knowledge of being, trying to approach it as closely as possible, without the pretention of grasping it once and for all.

Whereas for metaphysics there is only one truth, which is absolute and valid for all eternity, for Nietzsche there are many truths. Truth is a process of approximation to reality in which one, by continuously creating a new interpretation, at the same time affirms a different truth. Affirming a new interpretation means affirming a new truth. There are multiple truths – as many as there are interpretations. The more interpretations one creates, the more one approaches the essence of reality. It turns out that the truth criterion as objectivity includes opposite truths. This would lead to a vicious circle, but only if one adopted the point of view of metaphysics and thus assumed the principle of non-contradiction. Instead, from the post-metaphysical point of view, the circle is virtuous: contradictions lead to truth.

As a consequence, Nietzsche cannot be criticized for replacing his truth, that of reality as will to power, with the metaphysical truth. This is because, first, contradiction for him is the truth criterion in the post-metaphysical sense, and, second, this truth criterion by definition embraces all other truth criteria, also those contrary to it, such as the metaphysical one. Indeed, metaphysical interpretations, provided they are adopted temporarily, can be used as an instrument to approach the essence of reality. Since his truth criterion is all-encompassing, thus including also opposite truth criteria, Nietzsche does not replace one truth with another: according to his truth criterion as objectivity, all the truths, all the interpretations are instruments to attain knowledge of being.

No, life has not disappointed me. Rather, I find it truer, more desirable and mysterious every year – ever since the day the great liberator overcame me: the thought that life could be an experiment for the knowledge-seeker – not a duty, not a disaster, not a deception! And knowledge itself: let it be something else to others, like a bed to rest on or the way to one, or a diversion or a form of idleness; to me it is a world of dangers and victories in which heroic feelings also have their dance- and playgrounds. ‘Life as a means to knowledge’ – with this principle in one’s heart one can not only live bravely but also live gaily and laugh gaily! And who would know how to laugh and live well who did not first have a good understanding of war and victory! (GS: 181)

Given that there is no absolute truth, the creator’s route to knowledge does not have a specific starting point. It has no end point either, because the world is an endless transformation and thus any attempts to obtain objective knowledge of it must be endless. Therefore, the creator proves to be he who lives his life as a means to knowledge, since, while creating, he lives according to as many interpretations of reality as possible in order to achieve objective knowledge of reality.

Creating values involves continuously changing lifestyles, i.e. attempting to reproduce the complexity of reality with the aim of approaching the comprehension of it. For this reason, life is a means to knowledge. Life and knowledge are the same insofar as life is led by constantly experimenting with different values, and this experimenting is the means to obtain an objective knowledge of reality.

Into your eye I gazed recently, oh life! And then into the unfathomable I seemed to sink. But you pulled me out with your golden fishing rod; you laughed mockingly when I called you unfathomable. ‘Thus sounds the speech of all fish’, you said. ‘What they do not fathom,
is unfathomable. But I am merely fickle and wild and in all things a woman, and no virtuous one: Whether to you men I am called ‘profundity’ or ‘fidelity’, ‘eternity’ or ‘secrecy’ . . . At bottom I love only life – and verily, most when I hate it! But that I am fond of wisdom and often too fond; that is because it reminds me so much of life! It has its eyes, its laugh and even its little golden fishing rod – is it my fault that the two look so much alike? And when life once asked me: ‘Who is this wisdom anyway?’ – I hastened to reply: ‘Oh yes! Wisdom! One thirsts for it and does not become sated, one peeks through veils, one snatches through nets . . . It is fickle and stubborn; often I saw it bite its lip and comb its hair against the grain. Perhaps it is evil and false, and in all things a female; but when it speaks ill of itself, precisely then it seduces the most.’ When I had said this to life it laughed sarcastically and closed its eyes: ‘Whom are you talking about?’ it said. ‘Surely about me?’ (Z: 84–5)

The fact that life and knowledge coincide is emblematically shown in the second part of *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, in the paragraph *The Dance Song*. This paragraph features Zarathustra who, while walking in the woods with his disciples, by chance meets some maidens happily dancing with Cupid. Dance represents the essence of life, the fact that life is ‘fickle and stubborn’, namely becoming.

When life asks Zarathustra to speak about his wisdom, his knowledge, Zarathustra answers that life and knowledge are very similar: they have the same eyes, laughter, unsteadiness; both are ‘false, and in all things a female’, that is, appearance, continuous transformation. Surprisingly, life finds that such a description describes itself, and rhetorically asks Zarathustra if he was speaking about it instead. This means that life recognizes itself to be identical to wisdom, knowledge. The reason is that life is a means to knowledge: it is the route by which the creator can gain knowledge of reality. While creating, the creator ceaselessly changes conditions of existence, living many lives to be able to approach the complexity of reality.

However, the fact that life and knowledge are identical does not mean that they have the same importance. On the one hand, life and knowledge are equal because experimenting with several lifestyles is the method of gaining knowledge of reality *in fieri*. On the other hand, as a means to knowledge, life is the necessary condition of knowledge. Basically, knowledge is possible only within life. Therefore, Zarathustra claims that, although life and knowledge resemble each other, he takes care of wisdom only because it reminds him of life. Life and wisdom are the same when experimenting with several interpretations or lifestyles are concerned. In fact, this experimenting is the means to progressively attain knowledge of reality. Nevertheless, knowledge is based on life, since it consists in testing out several lifestyles.

‘Desire to relive everything an infinite number of times. The incessant transformation – in a short period of time you must go through many individuals. The means is the incessant struggle’ (*NF 1880–1882*: 520). Given that being is the eternal return of the will to power, the creator comes to know reality inasmuch as he becomes the ‘mirror’ of this cosmic reality. This involves leading his life as an eternal return, that is, being he who after having created values returns to himself in order to create again. By imitating the movement of the cosmos, the creator goes through a depersonalization because he tries to incarnate as many people as possible, i.e. to test out as many points of view as possible. The creator has no personal identity because he does not have only one interpretation
of the world. He is like a snake sloughing off its skin: he continuously changes values, conditions of existence.

Since becoming involves the continuous conversion of things into their opposite forms, the creator must reproduce the movement of becoming in order to grasp it. This means living according to opposite points of view. This process is endless because the eternal return of the cosmos is endless. That is to say, one can never obtain complete knowledge of reality but only endlessly approach it in order to gain knowledge as approximate as possible. Hence, the eternal return proves to have a gnoseological meaning. It is a gnoseology.

This gnoseology includes both the ontological and the ethical interpretations which were previously mentioned in the introduction. Only if the creator ethically makes the decision to say yes to the ontology of the eternal return, can he undertake the path to knowledge. The latter, in turn, involves leading his life as an eternal return, by returning to himself in order to leave behind previous values and create again.

But true philosophers are commanders and legislators: they say ‘That is how it should be!’ they are the ones who first determine the ‘where to?’ and ‘what for?’ of people, which puts at their disposal the preliminary labour of all philosophical labourers, all those who overwhelm the past. True philosophers reach for the future with a creative hand and everything that is and was becomes a means, a tool, a hammer for them. Their ‘knowing’ is creating, their creating is a legislating, their will to truth is – will to power. – Are there philosophers like this today? Have there ever been philosophers like this? Won’t there have to be philosophers like this? (*BGE*: 106)

The creator is nothing but the new type of philosopher in the post-metaphysical age. The creator and the philosopher are the same. In fact, the philosopher is by definition he who gives meaning and purpose to things. Unlike his predecessors, the creator-philosopher is aware that the world can be given endless interpretations, because there is no absolute truth. While the previous philosophers, the so-called ‘philosophical labourers’, were committed to establishing the given values of metaphysics and morality, the philosophers of the future are like legislators: they create new values.

**Emerson’s truth criterion and the comparison with Nietzsche**

In elaborating his theory of the eternal return as a gnoseology, Nietzsche may have been inspired by Emerson. For Emerson, as for Nietzsche, being happens in a circle.

The life of man is a self-evolving circle, which, from a ring imperceptibly small, rushes on all sides outwards to new and larger circles, and that without end. The extent to which this generation of circles, wheel without wheel, will go, depends on the force or truth of the individual soul . . . The result of to-day, which haunts the mind and cannot be escaped, will presently be abridged into a word, and the principle that seemed to explain nature will itself be included as one example of a bolder generalization. In the thought of to-morrow there is a power to upheave all thy creed, all the creeds, all the literatures of the nations, and marshal thee to a heaven which no epic dream has yet depicted. (*Emerson*, 1950: 280–1)
For Emerson, everything that exists is the emanation of the Oversoul. Such a principle gives birth to things through a circular movement by which it always becomes something else. Becoming is the law of being, thus also of the human being. As a consequence, he who aims to unite with the Oversoul must lead his life according to his true essence as an emanation of the Oversoul, that is, as a circle. Living as a circle means living with the awareness that ‘around every circle another can be drawn’, i.e. that the Oversoul is continuous becoming. In turn, this involves that one cannot have a complete and definitive understanding of the Oversoul, but only a temporary one, since, at the moment when one has suggested an interpretation of it, the Oversoul has already become something else.

I am only an experimenter. Do not set the least value on what I do, or the least discredit on what I do not, as if I pretended to settle any thing as true or false. I unsettle all things. No facts are to me sacred; none are profane; I simply experiment, an endless seeker with no Past at my back. (Emerson, 1950: 288)

Being aware that the Oversoul is continuously becoming in a circle, the enlightened man lives mirroring the circular movement of the Oversoul. He lives as an experimenter and from time to time he experiments with a different creed: after having lived according to a creed, he abandons it to incarnate another one. The more he experiments with different creeds, the more knowledge of the Oversoul he acquires. Incarnating always more creeds, he comes to gain a ‘bolder generalization’ of the Oversoul, that is, knowledge as approximate as possible to its true essence.

Here it becomes clear why Nietzsche’s truth criterion as objectivity may have been inspired by Emerson’s notion of generalization. First of all, for both Emerson and Nietzsche, reality is a continuous becoming and, as such, one can never grasp its essence once and for all. On the contrary, one can only have approximate knowledge of it, a generalization that grasps some of its endless meanings, without having the pretension to express all of them. Second, since being is becoming, which involves the constant conversion of things into their opposite forms, for both thinkers mirroring the circular movement of being involves living according to contradictory creeds. Before Nietzsche, Emerson had already seen contradiction as a method of knowledge.

The end and the means, the gamester and the game-life is made up of the intermixture and reaction of these two amicable powers, whose marriage appears beforehand monstrous, as each denies and tends to abolish the other. We must reconcile the contradictions as we can, but their discord and their concord introduce wild absurdities into our thinking and speech. No sentence will hold the whole truth, and the only way in which we can be just, is by giving ourselves the lie; speech is better than silence; silence is better than speech. (1950: 446)

The enlightened man is he who, being aware of his essence as a part of the Oversoul, lives his entire life experimenting with contradictory points of view. As a consequence, he chooses experimentation as his own destiny.

He thinks his fate alien, because the copula is hidden. But the soul contains the event that shall befall it, for the event is only the actualization of its thoughts; and what we pray to ourselves for is always granted. The event is the print of your form. It fits you like your skin. What each
does is proper to him. Events are the children of his body and mind. We learn that the soul of Fate is the soul of us. (Emerson, 1860: 36–7)

The events that happen in the enlightened man’s life are his destiny. These events are the consequence of his decision to dedicate his life to the knowledge of the Oversoul with the aim of uniting with it. Also for Nietzsche destiny means experimentation. Affirming that living life as a means to knowledge is the creator’s destiny, he may have had Emerson’s view in mind.

‘One must perish to be reborn . . . Metamorphosis through a hundred souls: it is your life, your destiny. And finally: willing the whole sequence again!’ (NF 1882–1884: 213). Leading life as a means to knowledge is a process of depersonalization for the creator: he tries to approach the comprehension of reality by means of a ‘metamorphosis through a hundred souls’, i.e. by ‘putting himself in someone else’s shoes’ in trying to observe things from countless perspectives. For this reason, since the creator’s life consists in experimenting with values, this experimenting proves his destiny. Destiny is the product of the decision of humanity to accept the eternal return and live according to it: that is, by continuously creating values.

For Emerson destiny means the experimentation of the enlightened man who, aware of being part of the Oversoul, decides to dedicate his life to the knowledge of it. Likewise, for Nietzsche, the creator, aware that being is the eternal return of the will to power, decides to lead his life as an eternal return, i.e. experimenting with values in order to obtain approximate knowledge of being.

For Nietzsche the creator is he who wants his destiny to be the experimentation of values. This means that the creator essentially loves every kind of destiny. ‘Everything works out for the best: who would like to be my destiny? I love every destiny’ (NF 1882–1884: 90). Destiny indicates the various lifestyles that constitute the several stages of the post-metaphysical route to knowledge. For this reason, the creator seeking knowledge loves them.

In other words, the creator loves every destiny because he loves knowledge; like a brave eagle he is willing to live dangerously by waging new wars for the sake of thoughts. On the other hand, like a snake which periodically sloughs off its skin, he changes identities by living according to as many perspectives as possible.

Here emerges the meaning of Zarathustra’s companions, the eagle and the snake. They are the symbols of post-metaphysical philosophy: the eagle, meaning the courage to live without definite reference points in always creating new values, and the snake, meaning the way creation happens, i.e. living one’s life as a means to knowledge.

The colportage-philosophers, who build a philosophy not from their life, but from collections of proofs of certain theses. One must not see only to see! One must live and wait as a psychologist – until the sifted result of many experiences draws conclusions itself. One can never know, where one knows something from. (NF 1885–1887: 369–70)

In the past, philosophy, in the form of metaphysics, has always negated the becoming of life by trying to fix it by means of concepts. In negating life, metaphysics turned out to be fallacious. The collapse of the metaphysical truth involves the freedom of knowledge.
for philosophy, the possibility of asking new questions, waging new wars for the sake of thoughts, testing out new interpretations. The way metaphysics philosophized consisted in defining reality a priori by means of concepts that were supposed to be the product of an objective and impersonal study.

Instead, the method of post-metaphysical philosophy consists in letting life itself determine a posteriori what reality is. The method of attaining knowledge by post-metaphysical philosophy involves leading life as a means to knowledge. This means that the contents of philosophy come from life itself. Thus, knowledge is no longer the product of a supposed objective and impersonal study. Conversely, knowledge is the product of a depersonalization which, far from eliminating the personal point of view, multiplies the perspectives on reality ad infinitum.

The post-metaphysical philosopher does not know what reality a priori is. Nor does he have a starting point for his route to knowledge. ‘One can never know, where one knows something from’, because one does not have only one point of view on reality, but endless. Any point of view can be the starting point of one’s route to knowledge. Thus, in order to attain knowledge of the world, philosophy must wait for its results, because they are not labels attached to life, like the metaphysical concepts, but they are the outcome of life itself. In this sense Nietzsche asserts that ‘one must live and wait as a psychologist – until the sifted result of many experiences draws conclusions itself’.

Notes
1 ‘Begierde, alles noch einmal und ewige Male zu erleben. Die unablässige Verwandlung – du musst in einem kurzen Zeitraume durch viele Individuen hindurch. Das Mittel ist der unablässige Kampf’ (my translation).
2 ‘Man muss vergehen wollen, um wieder entstehen zu können – . . . . Verwandlung durch hundert Seelen – das ist dein Leben, dein Schicksal: Und dann zuletzt: diese ganze Reihe noch einmal wollen!’ (my translation).
3 ‘Es gereicht mir Alles zum Besten: wer hat Lust mein Schicksal zu sein? Ich liebe jedes Schicksal’ (my translation).
4 ‘die Colportage-Philosophen, welche nicht aus ihrem Leben, sondern aus Sammlungen von Beweisstücken für gewisse Thesen eine Philosophie aufbauen. Nie sehen wollen, um zu sehen! Als Psychologe muß man leben und warten – bis von selber das durchgesiebte Ergebniß vieler Erlebnisse seinen Schluß gemacht hat. Man darf niemals wissen, woher man etwas weiß’ (my translation).

Abbreviations of Nietzsche’s works

BGE Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future, ed. RP Horstmann and J Norman, trans. J Norman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
GM On the Genealogy of Morality, ed. K Ansell Pearson, trans. C Diethe. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
GS The Gay Science, ed. B Williams, trans. J Nauckhoff. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
NF 1880–1882 Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden. Nachgelassene Fragmente 1880–1882, ed. G Colli and M Montinari, vol. IX. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1988.
NF 1882–1884 Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden. Nachgelassene Fragmente 1882–1884, ed. G Colli and M Montinari, vol. X. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1988.
NF 1885–1887 Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden. Nachgelassene Fragmente 1885–1887, ed. G Colli and M Montinari, vol. XII. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1999.
Z Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None, ed. A Del Caro and R Pippin, trans. A Del Caro. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

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