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Nietzsche's Doctrine of Eternal Return

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Nietzsche's Doctrine of Eternal Return

"Six thousand feet beyond man and time."[1]

In the Western world, we have a pronounced affinity for understanding time as something ultimately simple. Despite our recognition of the differences in subjective perception of the passing of intervals, we tacitly affirm that time itself must objectively follow a comprehensible structure of unidirectional flow which, like the commonly cited river metaphor, begins at one point and is definitively moving towards another. Thanks especially to the Judeo-Christian model of history plowing inevitably towards a conclusion at the end of days, even in the absence of direct religious influence, our intuitive understanding of time remains linear. We see this model addressed and contested by metaphysicians throughout the ages, but only rarely do we glimpse a philosophy that is able to cogently upturn this intuitively correct ideal. In his notion of eternal return of the same[*2], Friedrich Nietzsche positions himself as perhaps the most profound proponent of a temporal doctrine that refutes the problematic simplicity of the telic model preceding it.

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[*] Throughout this work, I have chosen to follow Joan Stambaugh in the alternating usage of return and recurrence in referring to Nietzsche's concept. The two German words that Nietzsche utilizes, "wiederkunft" and "wiederkehr", correspond with return and recurrence respectively in common translations. However, Nietzsche's own usage varies enough to make a definitive analysis on the basis of this difference seem somewhat arbitrary and conducive to selective interpretation on the part of the translator.

With only three published elaborations, a brief interlude within his autobiography, and a handful of unpublished writings within what is now circulated as *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche managed to confound the likes of philosophical minds for ages in his wake. The doctrine of eternal return of the same has been touted as one of Western philosophy's most confusing tenets. It is ambiguous and infuriatingly paradoxical, yet impossible to ignore and vital to the understanding of Nietzsche's philosophy as a whole. Heidegger calls it the roots of Nietzsche's philosophical tree,[3] without which no branches could ever grow. Considering the breadth of Nietzsche's work, this is no small statement.

Despite the elegance that his cyclical description creates, in refuting the linear model of time that Western culture has come to tacitly accept Nietzsche runs in to a number of problems of his own. In this work I will investigate the thought of eternal return of the same through careful analysis of each representation of the doctrine, followed by misconceptions that Nietzsche himself predicted, and finally through the analysis of contemporary interpretations of this idea. Though it is a daunting task to definitively assert what Nietzsche meant in his writings on this nearly inscrutable topic, it is certainly helpful to point out the insights and especially the errors present in popular critiques. By understanding what eternal return is not, we can come one step closer to discovering what it is and to truly facing the challenge that this doctrine poses to us.

Three Deliberate Explications:

Though enigmatic references and ponderings can be traced all the way back to journals and letters from Nietzsche's nineteenth year,[4] it wasn't until his fifth published work *The Gay Science* that he makes blatant reference to the thought of eternal return. Beginning at the end of book four of this text, he writes what will come to be the most poetic statement of his idea. Here Nietzsche asks us to imagine that in our darkest, loneliest hour a soothsaying demon creeps into our chamber and whispers his mephitic truth into our ears.[5] What he tells is that everything we have thus experienced and will ever experience will come to us again, not one time and not ten times but again and again for all eternity. Nothing new can ever occur, nothing novel. All that can recur is that which has been, and furthermore all that will come in our lives has already come to pass innumerable times before.

Fully comprehending the demon's words, Nietzsche believes, will necessarily lead in one of two directions. One individual might reel in dismay at the eternal damnation of being forced to relive the same existence in its entirety again and again. He will curse the demon and the poisonous venom his tongue has unleashed, rejecting the inane meaninglessness of his fate. Realizing that the burden of his life's existence is in fact the boulder of Sisyphus, this man will shriek out in dismay at the never-ending labor before him.

Alternately, there is the possibility that one might hear the demon's words and rejoice. He might praise the new truth revealed to him and, whether true or not, will that it should be the case that his lot be one of eternal repetition. To Nietzsche, it is this latter

man that has fully actualized the ethical imperative that the idea of recurrence carries with it. Namely, one must live his life such that every choice he makes is one that he would be willing to repeat for all eternity. The weight of even the simplest decision becomes suffused with an importance beyond measure when this imperative is taken to heart. Indifference in light of eternal return is not an option. Faced with the knowledge of the demon's truth, one is either changed forevermore or crushed beneath the weight of the burden.[6]

Immediately following his beautiful description of the greatest burden, Nietzsche provides the first chapter of his subsequent book, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. In this novel, a stylistic departure for Nietzsche but what he himself considered his magnum opus,[7] the doctrine of eternal recurrence forms the conceptual substrate for the entire book. In these pages Zarathustra begins to realize that his lot is not simply to teach of the Overman to be strived for, but rather to teach of eternal return.[8] It is this gradual comprehension and struggling to come to terms with the weight of this ideal that carries the reader along with Nietzsche's protagonist into the simultaneous anguish and exuberance of affirming the eternal recurrence of all things.

It comes as little surprise that, as we wade alongside Zarathustra into the supposed veracity of this doctrine, we see the first hint of Nietzsche's cosmological defense of his belief. In his hour of deep sickness at the tenets imparted to him, Zarathustra's animal friends come to him. The serpent and the eagle speak to Zarathustra such:

> "The soul is as mortal as the body. But the knot of causes in which I am entangled recurs and will create me again. I myself belong to the causes of the

> eternal recurrence. I come again, with this sun, with this earth, with this eagle, with this serpent—*not* to a new life or a better life or a similar life: I come back eternally to this same, selfsame life…"[9]

We see then immediately the tinges of a metaphysical defense beginning to emerge. Here Nietzsche presumes a mechanistic viewpoint of the universe when he writes of a "knot of causes". The commonly held presumption of this model of thinking assures that for every given event there must be a cause. That cause in turn must too have its own cause and its cause its own and so on. The knot here mentioned is meant to represent our entrapment between the many forces that create us and those we in turn are predetermined to instigate. We are wholly bound. What is vital to stress within this passage is the early insistence on this mechanistic, causal link being *apparently* validated through its inclusion within the framework that guarantees eternal return. Every event and every existent necessarily being entangled within a web of causation provides a crucial element to the cosmological proof of eternal return that will be elaborated upon below.

Nietzsche's personal understanding of causation is more veraciously clarified in other texts when he refers to such conceptions of causality as being leftover errors in language. Separating "the lightning from its flash"[10] is the mistake that man has the tendency to make when splitting an effect away from the cause that brought it into being. In this light, the entire concept of a chain of causation becomes fallacious. This subtle yet devastating attack on the whole of scientific thought must be recognized as an actual instance of idol-smashing that Nietzsche brings us along to witness. Be that as it may, the fact that this same philosopher time and again refers to just such a causal web in his

defense of eternal return should clearly stress to us that there is an important rhetorical device being employed. Nietzsche's apparent assent to commonly held notions of causation should not be read too literally unless interpreted through the lens of what seems to be his larger aim. This point will be expanded upon further as the proofs for eternal return conclude in elucidation.

Apart from the early presaging of the metaphysical side of recurrence, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is also important in its introduction of at least two more concepts that are vital to a thorough understanding of the precept. Both are what Nietzsche considers to be misconceptions of his doctrine. The first of these is surely the most confounding upon immediate encounter. It arises when Zarathustra recites the story of a most peculiar incident to a group of sailors. While climbing a treacherous mountain path, Zarathustra is besieged by the "leaden thoughts" of the dwarf clutching his back, a dramatic symbol of the spirit of gravity who strives to pull Zarathustra downward, even as he struggles to climb higher. Eventually, he tires of the dwarf. Casting him to the ground Zarathustra challenges this spirit to comprehend the burdensome magnitude of the thought that he possesses: the thought of eternal return. [11]

A stone gateway stretches before the two, arching over the path that winds in each direction, seemingly on into infinity. It is precisely this image of eternity that Nietzsche allows his protagonist to convey. Etched upon the gateway is the title "Moment". Using the obvious symbolism present, Zarathustra confronts the dwarf to comprehend the magnitude of what he is seeing. Eternally the pathways of time stretch in either direction,

yet at this point, they are an affront to each other. In the "glance of an eye"* these two eternities accost one another in contradiction and yet somehow converge.[12]

The dwarf's simple answer to this riddle is that time itself is a circle. The two infinite roads meet again where the loop becomes closed, eliminating apparent inconsistency. This is instantly and vehemently decried by Zarathustra to be far too simplistic.[13] When the notion of eternal return is taken at the surface level, it is difficult to see just what it so mistaken about the dwarf's understanding of time. Zarathustra does not say that his opponent is outright wrong but rather that he is making it too easy for himself. Why is it that Nietzsche's doctrine cannot be so easily categorized as simply cyclical? Interpreting the answer to this question will help to clarify exactly what makes recurrence into what must be deemed the greatest burden.

"Behold this gateway, dwarf!" Zarathustra commands.[14] It is precisely the disrespect for Moment that leads to the dwarf's oversimplification. Comprehending the subtlety of the difference between the two conceptions is not easy, but the key lies in the overwhelming awe of the power that lies in the Moment. Zarathustra assures us that what has passed through the gateway must have done so before. Echoing the causal links once again, he mentions the moonbeams, the spiders, and even the whispers of their very conversation dragging with them through the gateway everything that came before and will come hence.[15] Perhaps the dwarf can respect this notion, even if not appreciate its magnitude, but what his simplistic answer provides is the abstract notion of the two eternal paths uniting in some distant, unknowable time. The two eternities form a closed

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* Arguably a more precise translation of the German word "Augenblick" that Nietzsche places as the gateway's inscription.

loop somewhere out there in obscure infinity. What Zarathustra wants him to appreciate is the unification of those endless roads at the gateway Moment. Though this distinction seems overstated, it is of the utmost importance to truly respecting the thought of eternal return.

With Moment being given this priority as the ultimate union between two infinities, he who stands at the gateway, lucidly acknowledging the roads before and behind him, is imbued with a power and responsibility incomparably great.[16] This forms the crux of the ethical, existential imperative of the thought of eternal return. Even within the unbroken flow of eternity that surges on, in the glancing of the eye we have power. Though Nietzsche asserts that all which has happened will happen again, unfalteringly, within Moment we have the ability to choose what will recur. We have the responsibility to decide our actions, knowing that every step we make along the roadway we will be forced to retread again and again for all eternity. Beneath the gateway, we have power to command how the recurrence will come to pass, though we cannot affect whether or not it will.

This is a profound affirmation of our responsibility, and merely scoffing that time is a circle refuses to acknowledge that profundity. However, with such a guaranteed recurrence set forth for us, we are forced to acknowledge that every step towards progress that we seem to make is ultimately an act of indifference. If even the venomous spiders of what Nietzsche elsewhere deems *ressentiment* must recur, then how can any step towards betterment be seen as anything but an act of futility? The small man may allow his apathy to carry him through the gateway Moment, but as a part of the closed universe

he too indeed must recur. This idea too weighs heavily on Zarathustra's mind. In fact, it is the very realization that even the unworthy small men of slave morality must return eternally that nauseates him.[17] That such a person could have power over eternity is difficult to bear, but one must face the importance of Moment to begin to understand recurrence.

When the dwarf utters his quip that "time is a circle" he makes a further mistake that *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* allows Nietzsche to address. What the dwarf is doing here is chanting empty talk and hollow words in dealing with an issue that demands more. Nietzsche insists we understand that eternal return is not a catch-phrase or witty slogan that likes of which should be adhered to automobile bumpers. Recurrence is rather something so disturbingly or invigoratingly important that it cannot be converted into mere song.

Even Nietzsche's animal friends become guilty of this when in trying to cheer him from his convalescence. "O you buffoons and barrel organs, be silent!" Zarathustra chides, "Must you immediately turn this too into a hurdy-gurdy song?"[18] Their song and dance fails to recognize the magnitude of the thought that possesses him.[19] Though the eagle and the serpent surely comprehend the tenet more firmly than the dwarf was able to manage, their pleasant description of the world as seen through the eyes of eternal return begins to border on platitudes and empty talk.

Indeed, the weight of this heaviest burden does not, at times, seem to bear down upon them as it does to Zarathustra. Their "hurdy-gurdy song" praises the affirmative power of return as the will choosing what will recur infinitely yet ignores the darker side

that Zarathustra has the most difficult time accepting. With the recurrence of the small man, the tarantulas of revenge, actions in contradiction to their poisons begin to seem useless.[20] If it isn't even worth the trouble to counteract the life-negating small men, then how can we meaningfully affirm life? It is just this question that Nietzsche wishes to face head-on. He seems all-too-aware that the weighty, burdensome notion of his may become nothing more than a catchy, whimsical song to minds incapable of truly sharing a bed with the demon of eternity.

Nietzsche's third published explanation of eternal recurrence can be found in the pages of *Beyond Good and Evil*. In this brief allusion, Nietzsche enigmatically references his doctrine in a half-page passage formed by one immense run-on sentence. The fact that this entry is structured in such a way is surely not accidental, nor is the obscurely inscrutable final three words written in Latin: "*circulus, vitiosus, deus*".[21] These words translate to "circle", "vicious", and "god" respectively, but because each is left in the nominative form, the precise structure of what is intended by this phrase is left ambiguous. There is no reason to doubt that this is precisely what Nietzsche intended.

What is most worth noting for general purposes in this passage is the reiteration of the ethical imperative to be found within his notion of eternal return. Here Nietzsche speaks eloquently about the powerful, world-affirming man who not only is satisfied with what has come to pass in his life but loves his fate so dearly that he wishes nothing more than to live it all again for eternity. This higher man is not grudgingly accepting of the fate of recurrence, an act in itself daunting. Rather he is able to shout insatiably "*da capo*", or "from the top",[22] again and again, never tiring from his lot, and never

grimacing at the sight of the boulder and the hill set before him. Here Nietzsche poetically reminds us of the requirements of living truly within this framework.

It is this kind of poetry that is the most unifying element of the three published references to eternal return. Though never suffering a lack of certainty and assertiveness, the prose in which these original texts were written leaves them open for a level of interpretation as to the metaphysical and cosmological status with which we are asked to comprehend eternal return. The element that becomes such an issue of contention for many philosophers since is the actual proofs that are given in the *Nachlass*, Nietzsche's personal journals and unpublished writings. While briefly and stylistically addressed within the pages of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* with the mention of every cause returning, bringing with it everything that came before, it is not until these personal writings that the actual metaphysical doctrine of recurrence becomes prevalent. The notes and writings that formed the *Nachlass* eventually were brought together and published posthumously in the compilation that we now know as *The Will to Power*. While these writings do take place within Nietzsche's unpublished journals, it is as much an error to disregard them as unimportant as it is to praise them as his highest, most genuine revelations. For this reason, we must consult their pages to fully understand Nietzsche's burden.

The Proofs:

The first formulation of Nietzsche's cosmological proof of eternal return comes directly on the heels of the animals' speech concerning the "knot of causes" seen in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.[23] In the posthumous publications this is elaborated upon to create a

scientifically based doctrine that addresses the necessary result of a universe comprised of a limited amount of matter and energy, yet an infinite amount of time. No matter how many seemingly infinite numbers of combinations we could imagine for the substances and powers within our world, with the infinite nature of time to extend before us, it is only a matter of when a precise combination of matter and energy will occur that will lead to a single event being repeated.[24] One event recurring entails that everything that led to that event, all the elements entangled within its web, must also repeat. Nothing happens without the causal links that have brought it into existence. No single piece of that causal chain can repeat without necessitating the entirety of the chain. With a universe compacted together, atom to atom in the connectedness of causality, a single repetition guarantees entire repetition.

This supposition could be overturned by one of two ideas presumed in the premises. If space is not finite, then there would be no need to suppose that it could ever run out of combinations of its constituency. Nietzsche outright dismisses this idea, as he contends that the very idea of space came about as the result of the imaginary creation of empty space. Force is all that is real to Nietzsche, as he often reminds us.[25] Time must be infinite for this theory to congeal as well. Though it is difficult to secure an absolute reason for this, time in Nietzsche's conception is considered quite real. Contrasting space to which he himself has been known to link it, time is not bounded by constraints of finitude.[26]

It is vital to understand however, that the basis for his proof of the infinity of time comes from the disproof of the commonly held notion that an infinite regression into the past leads into contradiction. When one typically asserts that the past could not have

been infinite, as the ends necessary to reach the present would never have been reached, that individual makes what Nietzsche considers a fallacy.[27] Infinite regression is not the mental process implored when one takes the direction of time to be inconsequential. Standing at the present moment, the head of eternity becomes the now, and the eternities stretching in either direction are no longer logical contradictions. The infinite regression is no longer any more contradictory than the supposedly more coherent thought of time infinitely stretching before us into the future.

The picture that we find emerging once again is that of a coiled snake, feeding on its own excrement.[28] Like the first mythical living creature, a serpentine ouroboros described by Plato in his creation story,[29] this beast of time lives without beginning and without end. It simply exists, spinning constantly in circles upon itself in a never ending cycle of devouring. Even within the pages of his more supposedly scientific approaches to philosophy, we find the same penchant for vivid imagery and stylistic prose.

Another formulation of essentially the same contention is made in Nietzsche's discussion of equilibrium. Non-becoming and the possibility of a state of finality poses a problem, once we accept the premise of the infinity of time. If time is not eternal and infinity is not to be found on each opposing side of Moment, then there should be no changes at all. Were entropy possible at all within our universe, it would necessarily have to have occurred by now.[30] If the linear model is accurate, then it must be the case that with the infinite time prior we should have been able to attain a state where things cease to become. This is not what we find. Contrarily, in our universe and indeed in our very lives there is no being, only constant becoming. There is no goal, no telos. If it had

been possible for the universe to attain either being or nothingness, it would have happened by now. The fact that this has not occurred proves that it never can.

This statement of the impossibility of being in a constant, fixed way is worth expanding upon. Nietzsche asserts in ways reminiscent of his favored pre-Socratic Heraclitus that everything is in constant change or flux. There is no such thing as being for the individual existent. Because change is universally constant in this surging of time through the gates of Moment, a shiftless kind of becoming is the permanent state.[31] Nietzsche writes:

> "You teach that there is a great year of becoming, a monster of a great year, which must, like an hourglass, turn over again and again so that it may run down and run out again; and all these years are alike in what is greatest as in what is smallest…"[32]

This great year is nothing less than our universe entire. This distinction, however, should not be interpreted as a denial of being entirely. Being is, on the universal scale, quite possible. Consisting of the eternal becoming of its composition, the expanse of our world is a whole that exists without instigation. The constituent parts can be said to hold being in themselves only in relation to the universe, as each part is said to contain within it the entirety of the whole.[33]

In both of these metaphysical formulations of eternal recurrence we see a dramatic refutation of the previously commonplace picture of the universe as having beginning and definite progression towards some kind of goal. Utilizing the methods of the mechanistic worldview to prove a situation so very contrary to the notion of a telic, orderly universe flies in the face of the Enlightenment ideal of rationality guiding us toward our highest ends. The prized rationality with which the world can be understood

is here thrown into doubt by its use in apparently proving the opposite, a world without purpose that repeats eternally, unchangingly.[34] We cannot discard the idea that this doubt may have been exactly what Nietzsche was aiming for in his cosmological proofs.

Careful analysis of Nietzsche's work will show that he has already used the tools of the "enemy" to strengthen his case, as in the proclamation of the Overman. In the first chapters of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche's protagonist echoes the madman introduced in *The Gay Science* when he declares that "God is dead."[35] In the parable of the madman, Nietzsche showed that without God as our foundation for morality, all judgments of right and wrong become meaningless. Without the anchoring within divine will, objective morality goes reeling from its harness, like the earth unhinged from the sun and set adrift into the abyss.[36] Zarathustra takes this a step further and proposes the Overman as the new goal for mankind. Because nihilism is the result of a world without objectively based morals, the Overman becomes the new paragon towards which we must all strive. So the very telic model of goal-oriented values transposed onto the new paragon becomes evident. God's divine will is supplanted with the act of paving the way for the Overman. With the same tools of the opposing ideology, Nietzsche is able to create a contradictory, yet similarly purposive, ideal.

It should not be assumed by this methodology that Nietzsche would have personally acquiesced to what he considered a fallacious divide between cause and effect any more than it should be assumed that Nietzsche believed in an absolute, objective value created by the struggle towards the Overman. Each usage is one of paralleling argumentation. To state that Nietzsche believed in objective, otherworldly values is a confused misinterpretation of the method behind the creation of the Overman, just as

asserting that he defended traditional causation is a misunderstanding of the instruments used in positing eternal return. However, paradoxically, it must also be stressed that despite the debatable rhetoric, there should be little doubt surrounding Nietzsche's genuine belief in the need for both the Overman and eternal return.

Another factor that cannot be ignored in understanding the cosmological proofs of recurrence is the atmosphere surrounding Nietzsche's philosophy. While comparing directly to the works of other philosophers and scientists can lead to inappropriate conclusions, we cannot suppose that his thoughts, or the forms they were bound to adhere to more accurately, would not be affected by the particular intellectual spirit hanging in the air of Nietzsche's Europe. No philosophical paradigm comes about in a cultural or intellectual vacuum.[37] The fact that Nietzsche uses concepts such as the law of conservation of energy to prove his eternal return[38] emphasizes the point that he was responding to the mechanistic model profuse in the mindset of nineteenth century Europe. The teleological remnants of traditional theology are similarly his impetus.

As noted before, Nietzsche's work seems to stand on the heels of the very beasts he wishes to slay. Using the weapons of his adversaries effectively shows that his theories are just as plausible if only equally as provable. While it may or may not color our opinion as to the truth or falsity of Nietzsche's intended claims with his scientific proofs, we must appreciate the strong possibility that disproving the mechanistic and telic pictures of the universe by proving a contradictory paradigm with the same tools of reason was exactly Nietzsche's goal.[39] Despite the work of the Romantics before him to chisel away at such certainty, Nietzsche was still in the midst of a scientifically driven society. But science, like every other framework to Nietzsche, was not possessed of any

avenue of actual truth but was rather simply another interpretation.[40] The rhetorical device that he hoped to employ by utilizing this interpretive framework should become our focus when investigating the cosmological proofs of eternal return. What did he hope to accomplish by speaking in these terms? To fully understand Nietzsche's proofs, we must address them in this way.

Two Contemporary Interpretations:

Nietzsche did overall leave the cosmological proofs of his theory out of the deliberately published works. This is a point that we should not ignore. But the fact that this is the case does not mean that he himself found these proofs to be irrelevant or that we can legitimately ignore them.[41] In fact, it is entirely on account of this metaphysical side of eternal return that Karl Löwith finds the ammunition to attack the doctrine as incoherent. What is praiseworthy in his work is that Löwith does not simply ignore this side of eternal return as the overreaching calamities of a philosopher dilettante, posing as physicist. Rather Löwith takes these claims so seriously that he asserts the cosmological meaning to have overridden the importance of the existential imperative.[42]

What Löwith calls the "anthropological equation" of eternal return is what is typically considered the existential imperative.[43] This title refers to Nietzsche's realization that mankind must have a goal. Correlative to his replacement of the will of God with the act of striving towards the Overman, in a similar way Nietzsche places the will to create a life worth reliving again and again at the head of the anthropological imperative. In eternal return, a goal is acquired that reaches beyond the world we

comprehend yet refrains from the appeal to divinity that has so far provided Western society with a telos for thousands of years. This form of atheism is, to Löwith, ironically a form of religion.[44] Things become troublesome however when the metaphysical necessity tries to unite with this new religion.

Regardless of its legitimacy in the realm of physics, Löwith argues that the very supposition of the metaphysically absolute nature of eternity recurring nullifies the importance of the anthropological equation. The cosmological certainty of an eternally returning world is the pinnacle of absurdity.[45] The universe will uncaringly repeat itself, bringing the great man, the small man, the moonbeam, and the tarantula all along for the ride. Indiscriminately all things must recur. For this reason, what point can there be in an existential imperative that attempts to find normative value in the affirming of recurrence? What meaning is there in saying "I willed it to be so" when it will be as such no matter what you decree? If everything has happened before and will happen again, then you will do as you have done.[46] There seems little point in an imperative to feign mutability.

Where we begin to see problems in this interpretation is when the concept of willing is investigated more closely. Within our commonplace understanding of willing, it is indeed nearly unthinkable to follow what Nietzsche seems to be imploring us to do, to will backwards. Under his existential imperative, we find ourselves forced to not merely accept that which has been but to actively will that it should be so. The will is often understood to be a "prisoner" to time.[47] As this captivated force, the will commonly finds itself anguishing over that which, through the passing of days, it no longer has the power to change. If eternal return is the case, then indeed Löwith would

seem to be correct. Every step we take we have taken before. How can we will what has occurred already?

Nietzsche's answer comes again within the pages of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Here we find Zarathustra engaged in precisely this debate with his disciples. He admits that the will is captive to the dreadful "it was", but affirms the strength of the redemptive power of learning to will backwards. Thus the devastating "it was" can be converted into the affirmative, "thus I willed it; thus I shall will it."[48] Willing itself need not be directed towards the changing of what has been. Rather, the power of the backwards thinking will is in *amor fati*, the love of one's fate. In a cry back to the Stoics, Nietzsche seems to be proposing that the only freedom that can be exercised is that of willing, genuinely willing, that your world be cyclical. The fact that it will be regardless is in support of the magnitude of this act. It does not remove the potency from the act of willing that it should be so regardless. On the contrary, it strengthens the importance of one saying that if given unlimited choices, he would still want it to be no other way than it is.

This confusingly unique perspective on willing is appropriately equivalent to the absurdist philosophy of Albert Camus, one of Nietzsche's intellectual descendants. As has been alluded prior, using the mythological character for philosophical double-duty, Camus places the legendary Sisyphus on the mountaintop, looking down to his boulder as it tumbles away from him. Condemned for eternity by the gods for transgressions made on earth, Sisyphus is forced to eternally retrieve his boulder and push it to the top of the mountain again and again, each time seeing it hopelessly roll down the mountain away from him just as he crests the apex. While seemingly powerless in this situation, Sisyphus gleans an existential potency in his reaction to the situation. This man's power

and control lie directly in the idea that, were he to be given a choice, he would want for his eternal future to proceed no other way.[49] This is a power that the gods cannot touch. This is a strength that the universe cannot bend into submission. Willing the inevitable is not to be understood as consciously aligning yourself with the way that the world works, then claiming victory when it obviously comes to pass. Contrarily, the power of the will is in understanding the metaphysical alternatives that could be yet consciously refusing them all.

To believe that you cannot have an effect on the universe, since you cannot retain memories between cycles of repetition and nothing that you change now will alter when the loop begins anew, is equally as fallacious as believing that any alteration that you do make upon your lot is a result of it having happened prior.[50] These forms of fatalism have no place in Nietzsche's understanding of the will. There is a qualitative difference between the acceptance of fatalistic doctrines and the affirmation of his existential imperative. So perhaps Löwith is correct to point out that what has been will be regardless, but this cannot circumvent the importance of what he deems the anthropological equation of eternal return. The freedom found within willing one's place, with true *amor fati*, is strengthened by the understanding that it is fate and not merely choice that enlightens the thinker of eternal recurrence. An attempt in scientific terms to prove that this doctrine is the case must not detract from the necessity of living as though it was regardless. Simply believing in eternal return is enough to change a man either towards the terror of nihilism or the exhilaration of affirming your life's choices forevermore.

There is a kind of compatibilism present between the necessity of the metaphysical doctrine and the imperative of the existential that Löwith seems to overlook in his critique. This form of understanding invites the use of a parable that connects intimately with the issue of existential relevance.[51] Suppose that you are walking across a lonely bridge in winter when, glancing down, you happen to see a child flailing and screaming for help in the middle of the icy water. You are a strong swimmer, yet you know that it is a significant risk to your own life to jump haphazardly into the water to rescue the youth. Though the cosmological doctrine implies that you have no real power in this situation and will only do as you have always done and will always do for all eternity, the existential imperative would not be trumped. Were it possible for you to freeze time and consume every book on the topic of eternal return, causality, determinism, and free will that you could find, you would afterward still be no closer to making the decision of whether or not to risk your own life on behalf of the screaming child. The cosmological proofs can show us what the universe may or may not be like, but only the existentially relevant imperative can dictate to us *how* we ought to live. In this situation, Nietzsche would surely urge that we choose the option that we would be willing to choose again for all eternity. The literal cosmological reality would not undermine the importance of being, in every sense, free to decide at every given juncture.

What Nietzsche wants to heap upon our shoulders is the idea that our decision on atop that bridge is not confined within the shell of some fleeting "now" but rather a now that will come again to us forevermore. The now of Moment is the union of the two eternities. We must understand that in Moment, it is not the conflict of man against fate that should draw our focus, nor the possibilities of fate subjugating man into some form

of determinism. Instead it is our own relationship with fate that Nietzsche wants to focus our attention upon, that we may comprehend the magnitude of the decisions we ultimately are forced to make.[52] The ethical imperative of eternal return cannot be dismissed nor can it be weakened by the status of the metaphysical claims.

The second interpretation that dogs Nietzsche's doctrine of recurrence stems from the problem of the concept "same". Exactly what it is that is implied to repeat eternally is not so simple a thing to determine, as volumes of reactionary critiques can attest. Is it literally precisely the same events that will recur or is there some ambiguity present in Nietzsche's language that can offer a different hypothesis? From an etymological standpoint, the German word *das Gleiche* is used where English translations place the word "same". There were other options open to Nietzsche, as most languages allow, but he chose *das Gleiche* as his operative term. With the language barrier, unfortunately this term is difficult to translate directly. While always interpreted as "the same", the true meaning falls somewhere in-between the English words same and similar. Joan Stambaugh offers the example of hats in her discussion of the terminology. If two women were said to have the "same" hat on in terms of this German expression, then these hats would not literally be the same but would be so indistinguishable from each other to perception that unless one saw these women side-by-side, it would be assumed that the hat they wore was shared.[53] We are not therefore dealing with merely similar hats, but, with this translation, separate identities can still be maintained.

The insight this offers us is somewhat difficult to discern. Nietzsche states again and again that the same will recur infinitely. The identities of two different occurrences are different in that they occur within different cycles, yet we must not be tempted to

think of them as simply similar. What comes again is what has happened before. The exact same events will replay within the universe's loop of infinity. What meaning does it have to say that the same repeats? If there is nothing outside of the cycle of universal repetition by which to gauge our particular place within the loops, then it seems as though it would be meaningless to pretend that there is such a thing as mere similitude yet not identity.[54] Nietzsche demands that there can be no difference between two repetitions, so what can be made of this?

The postmodern author Jorge Luis Borges offers enigmatic clues to a possible understanding within his short story, "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*". In this bizarre tale, Pierre Menard sets out to write, from the novelty of his own pen, an exact, word-for-word replication of Miguel de Cervantes's original masterpiece *Don Quixote*.[55] Menard aims ambitiously to make his next work literally the same as that of the great Cervantes. Borges addresses this problematic issue of sameness when he reveals the reception of Menard's book as the daunting task is finally completed. Critics praise the text on its boldness, ambiguity, and richness despite it being a verbatim replica of a text that already exists. Even the contrasting styles are pointed to as a credit to Menard's brilliance.[56] This might seem most comical until we realize the importance of the distinction. Because Cervantes wrote his *Quixote* in the common prose of the seventeenth century, it is impressive but not astounding. With nearly two centuries separating the copies, Menard's version takes on the deliberately more challenging task of writing in another era's idiom.

The applicable point we can glean from this story is a key issue that the postmodernists seem prepared to confront: identity. The two books are the same in

every sense of the word, but one should be more praiseworthy than the other because of the context into which it is born. So too it can be said that though two repetitions of eternal cycles are absolutely the same in every sense of the word, their identity's remain distinct. Under this definition of difference, we are forced to throw out any conceptions of identity that rely too heavily upon constituent parts and causational forces. The danger of not doing so leads to one of two results for Nietzsche's doctrine. If there is no meaningful difference between one repetition's identity and the next, then the idea of eternal return itself falls apart into meaningless tautology that can impress no burdensome weight upon us as Nietzsche insisted it must. Alternately, if what repeats is not the actually the same, then the very existential imperative that gave us a non-religious foundation for how we ought to act loses its fangs entirely. What obligation does cyclical time foist upon me if I will not be the one reliving it?

Interestingly, another postmodern thinker, Gilles Deleuze, denies the notion of literal sameness[57] but attempts even so to rescue the all-important vestiges of the existential imperative that Nietzsche created. What Deleuze sees as problematic within the idea of eternal return of the same is that a reactive force has the power to recur. He splits the becoming of forces within the universe into two separate factions, those of action and those of reaction. Since Deleuze deems reactive behavior as nihilistic and contrary to the overall goal of eternal recurrence to reintegrate purpose into our lives, reactive forces cannot be said to repeat without contradiction.[58] The small man with his vengeful *ressentiment* therefore cannot repeat in the next cycle. Only the creative is granted eternal return.

In this way, Deleuze creates a kind of selective repetition that turns Nietzsche's existential doctrine into what he perceives to be a far more cogent ethical, almost Kantian imperative of normative action. He deems this the great "selective thought" and formulates in speech deliberately reminiscent of the Categorical Imperative the following mandate: "whatever you will, will it in such a way that you also will its eternal return."[59] To Deleuze, this willing must equal creation for only the active forces are capable of recurrence. We are therefore capable of selecting those moments that we will into the next cycle of existence. To support this claim, he cites a passage of Nietzsche's within *The Will to Power* that seems to imply the same understanding of eternal return as being a selective ideal.[60] Marking the reference made in Nietzsche's own pen, Deleuze uproots the common interpretation of eternal return of the same, refusing outright that it is even necessarily the same world that will return to us again and again.

As thought provoking and insightful as this interpretation may be, it in no way resembles the philosophy that Nietzsche seems to have left us. In fact Deleuze may have misinterpreted the very term "selective" to mean something other than intended. The ontological status of selection within Nietzsche's philosophy was abstracted from this single entry within *The Will to Power*; however other scholars take the same passage to refer merely to recurrence's inclination towards strength rather than weakness.[61] Any implication that this statement was made to hint at a new metaphysic of the doctrine of return is vastly overreaching.

Deleuze seems to have hit upon a strong point though. For it may seem that the negative forces of reactive *ressentiment* would have no place in a selective principle. Even so, in no uncertain terms Nietzsche states, within the same compilation, that what

repeats must be "absolutely identical."[62] While it may be contrary to our sense of universal justice or fairness, there can be no doubt that what weighed most heavily on the minds of Nietzsche and Zarathustra was the fact that even the small man returns eternally. No matter how much we may wish it not to be so, even the nihilistic, slave morality that negates life and praises the other-worldly must recur again and again. It is this very fact that took the greatest strength for Zarathustra to bear. It is this absolute certainty that drove him time and again into convalescence and soul-crushing nausea.[63] To ignore this fact as Deleuze attempts is to fly in the face of nearly every other piece of writing that Nietzsche composed on the subject.

Deleuze seems to believe, in much the same way that Löwith did, that the existential imperative is negatively affected by the introduction of this element of literal return. But in much the same way as we answered Löwith, we can answer Deleuze. The will to affirm what will be anyway is not a desire to change what can occur; it is rather an owning of the fate that we have been given. To believe that only selected actions can be repeated makes incoherent the idea of a same repetition. One's decision to own his fate is an acceptance of the absurdity that befalls him. Claiming that our actions can positively affect the next cycle by willing what is creative and knowing that the small, reactive forces will fall away with the passing of the repetition is akin to believing in the adjudicating power of a higher being to grant heaven to some and hell to others. The absurdity with comprehending that even the most worthless elements have the power to return again forces us to make the existential imperative out of genuine *amor fati* and not some juvenile hope or appeal to the justice of the universe.

As for the underlying question of whether the same literally recurs or not, the point here is still worth analysis. Here we begin to see again how the notion of identity becomes central to Nietzsche's doctrine. The analogy of the myth of Sisyphus returns to us once more. Few would doubt that there is an actual, metaphysical distinction between the thousandth and the thousand and first times that Sisyphus pushes the boulder up the mountain. However, if nothing ever changes between each repetition of the act, it is all but meaningless to even count them. There will never be an end to Sisyphus's toil, just as Nietzsche asserts that we too will eternally repeat our labors. But identity cannot be so easily explained. Again we come to the problem that if it is not literally me that must repeat the act for all eternity, then it is meaningless to concern myself with the existential weight of each decision. For Nietzsche's thought to hold its power, it must be the same me, the same everything that recurs time and again. This is of course paradoxical. There can be no logical enumeration of the selves that have occurred if there is nothing to differentiate them. It is here that we find once again how troublesome the thought of eternal return can be to our ordinary conceptions of time and identity.

Conclusion:

These two thinkers provide perfect exemplars of the kinds of interpretive work that is done pertaining to Nietzsche's greatest burden. Löwith argues in his book that Nietzsche is logically incoherent with his description of the conditions of eternal return, refusing to accept that the existential imperative can coexist with a metaphysical doctrine. Deleuze accepts that there is merit within the imperative but wishes to comprehend this

credo through an obscure interpretation gleaned from the pages of Nietzsche's personal writings. His assessment borders on being life negating in its insistence upon a subsequent cycle where the creative returns and the reactive disappears. But what both Löwith and Deleuze have in common in their interpretations and critiques is that they seem uncomfortable with the idea that Nietzsche is saying exactly what he seems to be saying. Many argue similarly by decreeing that the doctrine of eternal recurrence was never meant to be more than a thought,[64] as though this can defeat the troublesome paradoxes that result from its application into a rigorous philosophy.

While these methods of disregarding the completeness of Nietzsche's conception of eternal return each possess valid reasons for wanting to cast aside one element or another of the overall doctrine, this is an approach that I believe is necessarily over-simplistic. Attempting to contort the seemingly incongruent paradoxes of Nietzsche's greatest puzzle removes the sting from the sublime ambiguity. He was a forceful thinker with ideas that often became philosophically enigmatic. It should not be assumed that these conundrums indicate that the distinct formulation for eternal return should be overlooked or remolded in any way. Whatever factors pose a problem for us somehow did not pose a problem for Nietzsche. Regardless of whether we ultimately choose to affirm or deny the validity of the precept, first attempting to understand why Nietzsche was able to proclaim it as he did, as the "greatest weight",[65] is pivotal to truly comprehending his philosophy. We must take eternal return on its own terms, as it is actually presented to us, or not at all.

As we have seen, however, even after correcting the misinterpretations of those unwilling to confront eternal return as it is, there are still philosophical paradoxes that

will not go away. Nietzsche at times seems to possess in overabundance the quality of speaking in contradictions that Jaspers once praised him for.[66] Perhaps these contrary paradoxes are unintentional flaws in the doctrine, but I find this implausible. Ralph Waldo Emerson, an early inspiration for the young Nietzsche, surely imparted his loathing for consistency and belief in the inscrutability of great minds upon his reader.[67] Nietzsche certainly appreciated the importance of the problems within his work, as his own strongest critic,[68] but did not back down from his assertions. Perhaps the ambiguity of interpretation was precisely what he strived for.

Eternal return was never meant to be a finality of thought. Nietzsche wanted no disciples and would have cringed at the notion of any great mind abdicating its creative power and intellectual capacity for the sake of his own doctrine. In fact, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche speaks to the fear that grows within him. He writes:

> "Alas, what are you after all, my written and painted thoughts! It was not long ago that you were still so colorful, young, and malicious, full of thorns and secret spices—you made me sneeze and laugh—and now? You have already taken off your novelty, and some of you are ready, I fear, to become truths: they already look so immortal, so pathetically decent, so dull!"[69]

The fear Nietzsche has that his thoughts are becoming truths should stress for us the importance he placed on inscrutability and enigma. We must never forget that his position as author and philosopher was meant as a catalyst for our own thinking and ruminating. The eternal return of the same is the most serious of Nietzsche's challenges to our minds, and the higher man is encouraged to slowly, intellectually digest this thought for himself.

No matter how confounding the metaphysical proofs, interpretations, and refutations can become, what eternal return ultimately brings us back to is the simple, uncomfortable question: how would we respond to the soothsaying demon who whispers secrets of recurrence into our ears on the darkest of hours? If it isn't with an affirmative cry of "*da capo*", then we must ask ourselves why. To what degree do we actively strive to make our lives worth reliving again and again? Do we live our lives gazing off towards some far-off conjunction to answer the demon's challenge, as Zarathustra's dwarf confidently asserted, or do we accept the heaviest burden of living under the gateway Moment?

In the text, Zarathustra slowly learned of his own destiny to explicate the doctrine of eternal return to all of mankind. Nietzsche felt himself possessed of a similar goal. Teaching man to live under the brilliant sun of a supreme Moment, a "Great Noon"[70] when all shadows are vanquished and all lies disappear from the perception of man's ultimate truth, was his lifelong aim. It is this concept that must be kept constantly in mind when interpreting Nietzsche's writing. If we read of eternal recurrence and yet still see the emptiness of shadows stretching out from the soles of our shoes, then we have not truly forced ourselves to encounter that supreme Moment. Constant vigilance must be fostered in such a delicately enigmatic philosophy, lest we find our interpretations falling shy of the benchmark set by the very man who challenged our minds in the first place.

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