

On the Eternal Recurrence

Harrison Potts

Friedrich Nietzsche's eternal recurrence (or sometimes translated as "eternal return") is considered among his strangest and most esoteric topics. The question that often creates so much confusion is whether the eternal recurrence should be examined literally or as a metaphor. Here, I will be exploring the eternal recurrence as a chiefly metaphorical concept while also uncovering why the line between metaphorical and literal truth is considered so blurry in this case. There are three main places in Nietzsche's work in which the eternal recurrence appears: once in *The Gay Science* and twice in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. In delving into the philosophy of these passages, the wider implications of the eternal recurrence on Nietzsche's message and the broader message of existentialism itself will be uncovered.

Aphorism 341 of *The Gay Science* is bestowed with the title "The Greatest Weight," and it's the first time that Nietzsche evokes the impact of a circular modality of time. Nietzsche describes a demon on a lonely night, who proclaims that everything will be exactly as it has been again forever. The demon says to "you" the reader:

This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all

in the same succession and sequence—even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!

From this demon's monologue, the thought experiment is set in motion. In this concept, a person is not only born as the *same* person over and over, but they also experience every single moment of life in the *exact same way* over and over. The implications of this thought experiment are stated in Nietzsche's next paragraph by exploring how a person would react to such a fate.

Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: 'You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine.' If this thought gained possession of you, it would change you as you are or perhaps crush you. The question in each and every thing, 'Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?' would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight. Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life *to crave nothing more fervently* than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?

As Nietzsche explains, the eternal recurrence would mean that there would be an infinite weight

on every action taken or untaken. With this eternal re-experiencing, everything that is done is *done forever* and every un-lived potentiality is *unlived forever*. As the description and the meaning are both metaphorical in this case, how does this infinite burden apply to a human existence that *doesn't* repeat? In Nietzsche's atheistic existentialism, the eternal recurrence actually applies to a fragile, finite, no-afterlife version of reality quite well. If one were to consider the implication that a human consciousness comes from the void of non-existence and will return to the void of non-existence upon death, never to exist again, this burden would weigh equal. This is because nothing is permanent other than what has been done. With no soul, no heavenly kingdom, and no endless cycle of reincarnation, the *only* permanence in a universe of horrifying impermanence would be the fact that *nothing which has been done can ever be undone*. If a person has done something bad, they've done something bad *forever*. Similarly, a noble or courageous action remains accomplished, inviolable, and inalterable for eternity. The metaphor of the eternal recurrence begins here, but it doesn't end with this concept of an action's weight. As we'll see in the case of Zarathustra, the real tension in the eternal recurrence comes from one of Nietzsche's central themes: despair vs. life affirmation.

Thus Spoke Zarathustra proceeded *The Gay Science* as the next work in Nietzsche's canon. As such, it picks up where *The Gay Science* left off, including the topic of the eternal recurrence. No longer limited to strict nonfiction aphoristic conventions, Nietzsche uses his character Zarathustra to create metaphorical scenes throughout the text. The first indication of the eternal recurrence comes in Part 3 in a section titled "On the Vision and the Riddle." Again, a *demon* appears in the text, this time to haunt Zarathustra on his journey. "All that is straight lies,' the demon murmured contemptuously. 'All truth is crooked; time itself is a circle'" (Nietzsche 158). As

this is the second time that the thought experiment is channeled through a sort of malevolent creature (i.e. the demon), it's worth exploring *why*. If the eternal recurrence is meant to be a confirmatory seal on the weight of one's actions, why isn't it proposed through an angel? Why doesn't an *angel* visit Zarathustra? The answer is found in Nietzsche's attempt to twist the supposed quality of a fate around on itself. For Nietzsche, the eternal recurrence isn't meant to be *originally* proposed as a gift, it's meant to originally be sentenced as an obligation or even as a punishment. It is precisely here that we see what would later become the theme of Camus' understanding of Sisyphus: that a fantastic liberation comes from accepting and even enjoying what is meant to be a burden. As Camus says, "We must imagine Sisyphus happy" (Camus 123). Indeed, the case of Sisyphus is similar to the eternal recurrence, as the task of life is on an endless loop.

Zarathustra is not quite ready to embrace this idea in "On the Vision and the Riddle." This is merely where the idea is *proposed* to Zarathustra. His initial reaction here is actually quite negative. "Among the cliffs I stood suddenly alone, bleak, in the bleakest moonlight. [...] Oh how do I bear to go on living!" (Nietzsche 160). As Walter Kaufmann says in his esteemed analysis, here Zarathustra experiences a kind of "nausea" from his initial exposure and "still cannot face the thought of the eternal recurrence" in the following sections (Kaufmann 148). Zarathustra's eventual ascension to finally confront the eternal recurrence is what creates the later climax of the book in the final section of Part 3.

"The Seven Seals" is the culminating moment of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and it again poses the issue of the eternal recurrence, this time not as a *problem*, but as a definitive *Yes*. This is clear from the beginning, as the alternate title of the section is "The Yes and Amen Song." The refrain for the seven-versed song

is “For I love you, O eternity!” (Nietzsche 228). The contrast between this statement of love and Zarathustra’s previous nausea signifies his central character arc, which points to Nietzsche’s solution to the eternal recurrence and his call to action. For Nietzsche, the eternal recurrence is certainly a terrifying proposition, but it’s not one that needs to be despairing. Instead, much like the fate of Sisyphus, Nietzsche calls us to imagine Zarathustra as happy with the fate of the eternal return. In “The Seven Seals,” the fate of the situation evokes within Zarathustra an eternal, joyous Yes-saying. As Kaufmann says of Zarathustra at this moment, “His affirmation is now boundless and without reservation” (Kaufmann 151). Freed from his despair, his nausea, and his melancholy, Zarathustra is able to command a resounding *Yes* to the weight of his actions and to the repetition of every pain and triumph infinitely.

As a metaphor and a thought experiment, the eternal recurrence is a powerful statement of existential thought. In it, we find Nietzsche’s commitment to life-affirmation in the face of both suffering and joy. As a foundational topic that inspired the later theories of the French existentialists, the eternal return signifies the human capacity to embrace the absurdity and perhaps full-blown meaninglessness of life with a resounding *Yes* that, if strong enough, can repeat its affirmation into the cycle of pain and redemption endlessly.

Works Cited

- Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm and Walter Kaufmann. *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs..* [1st ed.]. New York, Vintage Books, 1974.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None.* Translated by Walter Kaufmann, Modern Library, 1995.
- Camus, Albert and Justin O’Brien. *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays.* New York, Vintage Books, 1955.