

## THE POINT OF CONVERGENCE FOR THE NIETZSCHEAN DOCTRINES OF THE WILL TO POWER AND ETERNAL RECURRENCE

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Why Nietzsche held both a doctrine of free will and a view that the world is possibly governed by eternal recurrence has been a point of controversy for some time now. Critics have given various interpretations of the significance of eternal recurrence in Nietzsche's philosophy. Karl Jaspers, for example, stated that the idea of eternal recurrence was to Nietzsche "... most overpowering, while probably no one since then has taken it seriously."<sup>1</sup> Others feel that eternal recurrence was *the* most important aspect of Nietzsche's philosophy—but were at a loss to explain why it was so. An early critic of Nietzsche wrote:

Ascending the tower of modern knowledge, but still encircled by the clouds of his prophetic visions, Nietzsche drew conclusions which are of doubtful value from a cosmological standpoint. His Eternal Recurrence may cosmologically be possible; but how does it concern us, since we have no recollection of our former existences?

The critic went on to compare Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal recurrence with Heraclitus' doctrine of the world as being in a process of change. Without adequately supporting his evaluation, he concluded: "Of course all this, i.e., Heraclitus' theory, is only hypothesis; yet it is little more probable than Nietzsche's cloud-like visions of Eternal Recurrence and Superman."<sup>2</sup>

Further criticisms are affirmed on the basis that if one accepts the doctrine of eternal recurrence, how is one to avoid confusion which arises over the difficulty in finding a common meeting ground for the two main themes in Nietzsche's philosophy. *Why would an individual seek to exercise an act of creation if he is part of a world which is historically determined by eternal recurrence?* Arthur C. Danto said of Nietzschean doctrines such as the overman and eternal recurrence:

Here, perhaps, Nietzsche speaks as a philosopher in a narrower sense. But these doctrines do not give the sense of fitting together in any systematic and coherent way . . . They do not seem to be solutions to what we would call philosophic problems. If, indeed, Nietzsche's philosophy is to be found here, then that philosophy appears as a conjunction of disparate teachings, . . . an assembly rather than a construction, . . . unsupported, ill-digested, and unfit for location within that context of philosophical analyzing in which the philosophical critic or historian feels at home.<sup>3</sup>

Danto, despite his above statements, went on to attempt to show that Nietzsche's philosophy was still filled with meaning. I, also, will endeavor

to show that eternal recurrence is not only very important to the understanding of Nietzsche's thought, it is a concept Nietzsche needed in order to make the will to create a trait suitable to the man who has the potential to become the overman.

First, in partial answer to the stated problem, I wish to consider the possibility that Nietzsche would have held that one is free only if one accepts the fact that eternal recurrence is a possible cosmological view of the nature of things—a view which is unacceptable to the "little man." Finally, I will attempt to answer the related question: What reason does one have for accepting eternal recurrence as a possibility? In his book *Nietzsche as Philosopher*, Danto presents a logically consistent argument for the existence of eternal recurrence—an argument hinted at by Nietzsche. If, however, we do not wish to commit ourselves to granting the truth of the premises of the argument as presented by Danto, then what other concern could possibly compel us to accept eternal recurrence?

Nietzsche stressed that certain "forces" tend to enslave man and devalue life. These forces include the self, God, conventional morality, and the rule of masters. A free act only occurs after one realizes that he has been enslaved. Dissatisfaction follows the awareness of enslavement. Only then, for example, can the self be overcome; only then can one create one's self anew. A man determined in his existence does not create a new state of affairs; only one dissatisfied with his condition can endeavor to change that condition.

One is only relatively free, however, if all that he overcomes are particular forces. Life itself, as determined by eternal recurrence, must be overcome. Just as morality, for example, determines one in a particular aspect of one's existence, eternal recurrence determines one in every aspect of his existence. Just as one attains partial freedom if he overcomes morality, one attains complete freedom when he overcomes that which determines every part of his existence. How, one might ask, does one overcome something which is a determining factor of all existence? Nietzsche's answer appears to be: *One overcomes eternal recurrence by willing that eternal recurrence be a fact!* Instead of feeling nausea at eternal recurrence—an eternity which denies the possibility of a heaven or even a different kind of state of affairs than one is accustomed to—one wills that what cannot be otherwise should be what it is. Then and only then can one laugh—laugh as a human cannot.<sup>4</sup> A human has to will a beyond; the overman seeing that there possibly is no beyond, wills the life that is.<sup>5</sup>

In a passage from *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche clearly states his view concerning both the bondage or the lack of freedom of one who does not overcome eternal recurrence and the reward—a reward of joy-obtained in

willing what is the case to be the case:

To gain knowledge is a *joy* for the lion-willed! But those who have become weary are themselves merely being "willed," and all the bellows play with them. And this is always the manner of the weak: they get lost on the way. And in the end their weariness still asks, "Why did we ever pursue any way at all? It is all the same." Their eyes appreciate the preaching, "nothing is worth while! You shall not will!" Yet this is an exhortation to bondage.<sup>6</sup>

But why, one might ask, ought one to accept that eternal recurrence is the determining factor governing life? Though Nietzsche may have presented a logically consistent argument, why should one agree to his premises? For example, it would appear that one would not necessarily be irrational if one were to deny the premise that the "sum total of energy is finite" or that the "amount of energy is constant."<sup>7</sup> The term "energy" utilized here is entirely too vague. However, had Nietzsche admitted that though one will not be convinced of the truth of eternal recurrence by logical argument and had he gone on to state—as he obviously would have—that still eternal recurrence is a theory readily acceptable to his "overman," one even so has reason to ask *why* the overman would wish to accept the possibility of such a "dismal" world-view.

Let us ask somewhat more specific questions. (a) Why would it be in *my* self-interest to accept eternal recurrence? (b) Would I obtain certain desirable feelings of self-satisfaction and joy? (c) Despite Nietzsche's insistence that the world lacks meaning, is it not true that he indeed did grant one meaning to be extracted from life: the overcoming of eternal recurrence? The key to the answer to all these questions lies in an analysis of what Nietzsche meant by "amor fati." Let us approach each question separately:

(a) It is in my self-interest to love that which cannot be otherwise because not to love it would lead one to have either a feeling of resentment against the world or a non-committal attitude. Both of these attributes, however, are predictable of the little man—not of the overman. Nietzsche's assumption, of course, is that the overman is something to be desired.

(b) To love life in spite of having knowledge of its determination by eternal recurrence is a characteristic unique to the overman. Merely the attainment of such knowledge enables the overman to experience "joy." The eternal self-creation and self-destruction presents the strong-willed with a "twofold voluptuousness" in the "bliss of the circle" which is the eternally recurring states of affairs.<sup>8</sup>

The little man requires a guarantee that something different (and better!) will eternally arise and, thus, he postulates a God which will grant him this guarantee. By such a postulate he negates his life and wills an after life. The overman with his doctrine of eternal recurrence negates the

after life and wills *this* life. Both the little man and the overman, though in different senses, are "self-satisfied." The little man is satisfied with his God, who, although unknown to the little man, is, as Feuerbach said, merely a projection of his own self. The little man, then, is self-satisfied because his God is his own self. Thus he is satisfied with a *lie*.

The overman rejects all lies and by doing so rejects the God of the little man. The overman is self-satisfied in the sense that he is the discoverer of lies and because he wills the one truth—that life *is* overcoming and to cease overcoming one is willing death. Moreover, the overman's self-satisfaction is based on his power to eternally overcome any lies which might enter into his own self. As quoted before, Nietzsche asserts that to "gain knowledge is a *joy* for the lion-willed." Indeed, it might be said that *joy* is the one emotion which distinguishes the overman from the little man. Also, the overman attains a self-satisfaction by advancing an infinite distance above men, i.e., by willing the world in the face of eternal recurrence. Only at such a distance can one "know what is height, what depth."<sup>9</sup>

(c) The remarks above indicate that despite the many quotes on the meaninglessness of life, Nietzsche did indeed hold that the overman is—at least in two senses—an end-in-itself. First, since what is stagnant and repulsive ought to be overcome—just as Life overcomes anything static—the will *ought* to be the instrument of overcoming. The being which manifests a will to overcome is the overman and *this* being is something which ought to be affirmed as valuable. Secondly, only the completely free being who creates can attain that which even the little man strives for and calls the meaning of existence—self-fulfillment, peace, and joy. However, while the little man looks to the "Other" for fulfillment and joy—and thus never finds them—the source of well-being for the overman is *not* the other but his own self.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Nietzsche: An Introduction to the Understanding of His Philosophical Activity* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1965), p. 352.

<sup>2</sup> M. A. Mugge, *Friedrich Nietzsche: His Life and Work* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1908), pp. 362-63.

<sup>3</sup> Arthur C. Danto, *Nietzsche as Philosopher* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), p. 21. Cited hereafter as *Danto*.

<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Press, 1966) pp. 158-60. Cited hereafter as *Zarathustra*.

<sup>5</sup> Nietzsche is not unique in holding a view that one is free only if one accepts the factors that determine him, Spinoza, for example, held a similar doctrine with his concept of the "intellectual love of God."

<sup>6</sup> *Zarathustra*, p. 206.

<sup>7</sup> For the analysis of the Nietzschean argument for eternal recurrence see *Danto's* chapter entitled " 'Übermensch' and Eternal Recurrence."

<sup>8</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 2 Vols., trans. by Anthony M. Ludovici (New York: Macmillan, 1924), Vol. II, p. 432.

<sup>9</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967), p. 305.

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