

Inside Faust's Study
Michael Huguenor
University of California, Santa Cruz

Abstract: In my Paper, "Inside Faust's Study," I attempt to show how Nietzsche's Eternal Recurrence is the culmination of his many disparate points of philosophical discourse. Of particular importance are his notions of consciousness, embodiment, duality and necessity. In the end, I conclude that the affirmation of the Recurrence is a desire for a totality of self, which is how Nietzsche characterized Goethe – whom he respected greatly.

It is a great privilege to hear from the mouth of an initiate what struggles we are ensnared in and what the meaning is of the sacrifices we are required to make before veiled images. Even if we should hear something evil, it would still be a blessing to see our task as something beyond a senseless cycle of recurrence.

(Ernst Junger, *The Glass Bees*)

To say that Nietzsche's doctrine of the Eternal Recurrence is odd, even frustrating, would be a massive understatement. The notion of life as a sort of film in which the last cell is tied to the first, forming a looped narrative of perpetual sameness, would be less than satisfactory for many people and seems even more exceptional within the oeuvre of a staunch genealogist and philosopher (albeit an odd, often frustrating one). Also, the fact that Nietzsche regarded this notion as his masterstroke doesn't help to lessen the pressing strangeness. But when regarded with a keen eye for his main points of discourse – those of consciousness, self, embodiment, will-to-power, duality and necessity – Nietzsche's Eternal Recurrence does achieve a peculiar sense of harmony. Thus it becomes clear: the Eternal Recurrence is the culmination of Nietzsche's teachings boiled down to one momentous passage. This is the "Greatest Weight."

In *The Gay Science* (GS) the Eternal Recurrence appears in the form of a thought experiment. We, the readers, are asked to imagine that a demon comes to us and explains that our life and all things in it – great and small, happy and sad – will be repeated again and again, ad infinitum. Nietzsche's question, then, is: "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" (GS 341). Elsewhere Nietzsche tries to justify the Recurrence with a cosmological proof, though he never publishes these musings. The proof, in short, runs on the belief that, with a limited amount of energy states over an infinite amount of time, states must repeat themselves. The question of whether to take the Eternal Recurrence as merely a thought experiment or to assume it as Nietzsche's model for the temporal universe has been hotly contested, though the answer to this is, ultimately, inconsequential to understanding its implications. Instead of getting involved in the question of authorial intent, I propose that the only reasonable excavation of meaning can be developed through Nietzsche's own texts, connecting his philosophical strands and letting them emerge as a whole within the Eternal Recurrence. Thus, we look to "The Greatest Weight."

Immediately present in the passage is the issue of the self, something which Nietzsche continually critiques. One must be well disposed to one's *self* as well as to life for affirmation of the recurrence to be possible. However, as is often seen throughout his writings, Nietzsche is staunchly against a thing-in-itself notion of the self. Alexander Nehamas, in his essay simply titled "The Eternal Recurrence," hammers the nail on the head: "Nietzsche thinks there is no subject, no thing [no substantial self], left beyond the sum-total of its characteristics and effects, its experiences and actions" (Nehamas 2001, p.128). As is often seen, Nietzsche proposes a notion of self that is synonymous with action, disavowing any suppositions of an autonomous entity. "No such agent exists," he writes in the first essay of *The Genealogy of Morals* (GM). "There is no 'being' behind the doing, acting, becoming...the doing is everything" (GM: I, 13). Thus, Nehamas is correct when he posits that the recurrent life must be *identical* to the one in which the demon appears – down to "even this spider and this moonlight between the trees" (GS 341) – since a change to any of these aspects would result in a different life recurring. If one's actions were any different, then it wouldn't be that life recurring (protecting the Eternal Recurrence from being read as a form of reincarnation). Again, whether or not this is seen as reality or simply a possible reality is inconsequential to its logical followings and what it means within Nietzsche's work. However, it does, indeed, seem that this is a question of life-affirmation, as well as *self* affirmation – but what does this mean for life if the self is only the actions it commits?

The act of self-judgment – of whether or not this life one wishes to repeat *ad nauseum*, thus affirming it – is precipitated by the demon's visit. Without the demon present in "The Greatest Weight"

there would be no acknowledgement of the weight at all. So it is important to view the agency of the demon, and particularly the fact that the demon *says* to the concerned interlocutor that life will repeat. This act of statement, of communication, is particularly important for Nietzsche, as he holds that self-consciousness "has developed *only under the pressure of the need for communication*" (GS 354). Indeed, in this case it is via communication that the "mirror of consciousness" turns towards the self and judges its repeatability. Without the interjection of language, this act would never occur and one would continue onwards without any knowledge of the Eternal Recurrence. This is, in large part, because Nietzsche is highly critical of the value and power of consciousness itself, stating that it is only the most recent addition to the human animal. He goes so far as to say that we can "think, feel, will, and remember" (GS 354) without any manner of consciousness whatever. The idea, then, is that all action can take place (especially since the self is only action) without there being consciousness of this. This is largely due to Nietzsche's emphasis placed on embodiment. As Lynne Tirrell states in her essay, "Sexual Dualism and Women's Self-Creation:"

Unconscious thought, or instinct, has been traditionally associated with the body, while conscious thought has been associated with the soul...Nietzsche's nonreductive monism leads him to claim that the soul or mind is not a different kind of substance than the body; it is a refinement of the same stuff. (Tirrell 205)

The embodiment of physically reliving the same life as well as the move from rationalist notions of the self as mind are both here present and important. Thus the act of consciousness applied to the self present in the Eternal Recurrence is a peculiar moment in which Nietzsche actually finds consciousness important – distinguishing it from all other moments of consciousness – largely, because it is still tied to an embodied view of life.

That the self is embodied is a matter of necessity for Nietzsche, and thus it is also necessary to construct our knowledge of the world via the embodiment of observations. However, more important than this is the very notion of necessity to Nietzsche, and *its* very necessity. Necessity is that which exists completely apart from human concerns. In describing the workings of the universe, Nietzsche says: "Let us beware of saying that there are laws in nature. There are only necessities: there is nobody who commands, nobody who obeys, nobody who trespasses" (GS 109). It is this move away from an anthropomorphized universe which Nietzsche sees as *necessary* (both in that the move is necessary, and that the universe only works out of necessity). It is also this de-humanization of the

universe which he so loves, as he proclaims, for the new year to “want to learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things” (GS 276). It is important to see the Eternal Recurrence through this lens of necessity. Notions of the afterlife (and of a metaphysical system in general) which Nietzsche opposes suppose the self to be a monad – wholly constituted even after death and disembodiment. It should seem no wonder, then, that what Nietzsche finds most beautiful, most haunting, and most necessary, is a vision of the self that is *perpetually* embodied, and thus forever *becoming* (with no final telos). Again, it is unnecessary to force the Recurrence into a disjunctive syllogism of strictly *either* thought experiment, *or* cosmological proof, as fundamental to both is the self questioning nature of the event.

But, still, there remains the question of what the notion of “self” is that is to be questioned if being is only action. It seems necessary to conclude, then, that all that can be judged are past actions and past occurrences. However, as we will see, a unified self-image must emerge from this (though it can only arise from the fragmented drives which constitute the notion of “self”). Yet, if “there is no ‘being’ behind the doing, acting, becoming” (GM I: 13), then Nietzsche would appear to espouse a determinist system. This, in particular, seems to be the case if one becomes aware that all of existence is to repeat endlessly in the exact same manner – the future would have to be circumscribed as well as the past. And yet Nietzsche states explicitly that awareness of the Recurrence could “change you as you are or perhaps crush you” (GS 341), implying *what seems to be* control over one’s fate (fate being the odd word Nietzsche often chooses in describing man). Brian Leiter, in his essay, “The Paradox of Fatalism and Self-Creation in Nietzsche” pushes strongly for this idea of fate, viewing the self as a battle ground for competing wills, with the consciousness as a mere spectator to the event. Ultimately, he finds Nietzsche to be what he dubs a “causal essentialist,” meaning that people are limited by certain causally primary facts which govern the direction of their life’s trajectory. And yet the presence of *change* in the Eternal Recurrence is something which cannot be written off. Here there is the most tangible moment of tension between freedom and determinism in Nietzsche’s writing. On the one hand he is advocating a change which springs from deep self-evaluation, yet on the other he is persistently, doggedly, dismissive of these very notions of autonomous agency. Perhaps this can be accounted for on his own terms, since he describes *The Gay Science* as having “high spirits, unrest, [and] contradiction” (GS, Preface 1) deeply within. Contradiction, however present, though, is not the correct term for

what is going on, since it carries the belief that this renders an argument unsound. Though contradiction is a fair *description* of what it at play, it is a less than satisfactory *explanation*; it is much more important to keep in mind Nietzsche's anti-dogmatic stance on dualities like free will and determinism in the very first place, before writing them off as wholly contradictory. He writes in *Beyond Good and Evil* (BGE):

it might even be possible that what constitutes the value of these good and revered things is precisely that they are insidiously related, tied to and involved with these wicked, seemingly opposite things - maybe even one with them in essence (BGE 2).

Nietzsche is often critical (as has been seen) of free will, going so far as to describe man as a boat "with no helmsman at all" (GS 360). But it becomes clear that despite these often confusing phrases he is just as critical of a strictly determinist system. It is thus necessary to suppose that, like the Slave and Master moralities, free will and determinism are "insidiously related," and that they may even share aspects in their very "essences." Given the naturalistic outlook that tends to be Nietzsche's primary lens, as well as the pre-determined events present in the Eternal Recurrence, it appears that free will *must* emerge from determinism and not vice versa, since the very system is determined before humans enter the picture. However, the extent to which free will exists, and is related to the notion of "self-creation" is still under scrutiny.

What seems apparent is that the past is wholly determined, in that it has already happened. The mirror that is self conscious is sparked by the demon's speech and applied to the self, judging its worth. But the self is only action, meaning that all that can be judged is always wholly posterior to the present – namely, previous action. That much, so far, is clear. Finally, what follows is the application of the will to power – the fundamental dynamism in all of Nietzsche's philosophy. "A living thing seeks above all to discharge its strength – life itself is *will to power*" (BGE 13), he writes concisely in *Beyond Good and Evil*, bringing up another fundamental aspect of the Eternal Recurrence: that the demon comes to you "into your loneliest loneliness" (GS 341). It is at this moment, in the loneliest of lonelinesses, that a person is most likely to lack strength – to feel sapped of the energy to survive, and most desirous of "the hypnotic nirvana, the peace of profound sleep" (GM III: 17). In short, it is this moment at which one would be most hopeful of a God, or a traditional afterlife (or even just a peaceful demise). Thus, it is a true show of *strength*, of the exertion of will to power, if one can *at his weakest* regard all that has happened before, good and bad, and will

it to eternity. As Junger shows in the passage which begins this paper, the desire for meaning from elsewhere is one that governs most people. Nietzsche, however, in typical fashion, uses necessity and will to power to present another model, one that favors the strength inherent in rejecting this all too human want.

So the question finally arises: if the self is only action and what can be known is only the past – if “the single human being is a piece of fatum from front to rear” (*Twilight of the Idols*, ‘Morality as Anti-Nature,’ 6) – how can Nietzsche’s self-creation be anything but a contradiction in terms? It is here that Alexander Nehamas has succeeded most effectively: in connecting freedom and determinism. Since changing anything about one’s past would change the person emergent from it, one has to grapple with all the things good and bad which have happened, including the most painful. This means that one must “survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and then fit them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye” (GS 290). This willed order of weaknesses – this acceptance of things one may have, at the time, wished never happened – this one thing is needful. Nehamas articulates the transaction perfectly: “If, therefore, I am even for a moment such as I would want to be again, my past actions can be seen in retrospect to be essential to, and therefore constitutive of, the self which I would want to repeat. What is thus changed is not the past, but its significance” (Nehamas 2001, p. 132). One is certainly circumscribed by his past, but the past can, at the same time, be circumscribed by the artist – the immoralist – by affirming it as necessary for the manner of consciousness which regards the past to even be at all. It is here that the will to power is most important to the Eternal Recurrence. By willing the past into a structured order in which all of one’s traits form an “artistic plan” one is, essentially, willing one’s self into a cohesive whole out of the fragmented pieces with which one has to work. It is in this way that Nietzsche deems Goethe as self-created, since “he did not divorce himself from life but immersed himself in it; he never lost heart, and took as much as possible upon himself, above himself, into himself.” In short, “what he wanted was *totality*” (II, ‘Skirmishes of an Untimely Man,’ 49). It is this desired *totality* that is paradoxically aimed for in the Eternal Recurrence: though one can never achieve Being in a metaphysical sense, one can strive for a totality of parts through the will to power, consciousness and Eternal Recurrence functioning together. In “Tradition and the Individual Talent” T.S. Eliot writes of the artist effectively rewriting the history of art in the act of creation, writing, “the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each

work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new" (Eliot 1977, p. 16-17). What Nietzsche accomplishes through the eternal recurrence is a similar feat of unity between past and present, except that, instead of reorganizing the past through the creation of art, as in Eliot, the art is created through the act of reorganizing the past. The art, in this case, is undoubtedly the totality of self.

There is, however, the reality of the other reaction to the recurrence. Not all who are visited by the demon can affirm its revelation: some will be crushed under this, the greatest weight. Here, Nietzsche shows up as the anti-egalitarian and Brian Leiter's causal essentialism fits into the picture. For there to be Masters to flourish, there must always be slaves to do the grunt work. Though the word Slave, as used by Nietzsche, does not directly signify a literal slave, there will always be literal slaves who populate this class. For a slave of this type, one who has little to no control over his or her own life, to be faced with the demon's revelation it would near impossible to affirm the recurrence. The determinism of one's situation – the particularity of one's thrownness, to borrow from Heidegger – can indeed circumscribe one's life direction. In this case something like social standing can fit the description of what Leiter calls a "type-fact," or a primordial aspect of a person which limits their possibilities. To Nietzsche, those who fit the description "slave" will never be able to affirm the recurrence, but he has all along had the grace to admit this up front – never sidestepping the fact that he is only writing for a small portion of the populace. If one has enough strength, and the inherent ability to achieve such strength (again, emphasizing the embodiment of self), then the affirmation of the recurrence is a striving for totality of self. Nietzsche just doesn't believe that all people have what is necessary to desire this totality.

The inherent peculiarity of the Eternal Recurrence as a singular moment in Nietzsche's thought begins to disappear when noticing how rich the language is, and how richly reflective it is of all his major areas of interest. In less than one page he creates a functional tapestry of self, necessity, will to power, duality, embodiment; all of which coalesce into and out of paradox to form a poetic unity. As reflective of his body of writing, though, it does enforce an anti-egalitarian standpoint – one which (though we are loathe to admit) cannot be swept away. That being said, however, the anti-egalitarianism spreads to members of the elite class as well, as many of them are completely without the fortitude to affirm the Eternal Recurrence, regardless of social standing. It seems fitting that Nietzsche should regard this as his masterpiece, since its imagery evokes that of *Faust*, the masterpiece of his hero. Both involve the

appearance of a demon of questionable intent arriving at a moment of intense loneliness, and both result in the creation of a rare art. What Nietzsche wants is the will to power turned towards a striving for a totality of self. What he wants is to proclaim even in the face of the horizon of the infinite, however dark:

I have the courage to venture into the world,
to bear the woe and joy of earth,
to tussle with storms,
and not to fear the crash of shipwreck"
(Goethe, *Faust Part I*).

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