

The eternal return as crucial test.

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"Ich will das Leben nicht wieder. Wie habe ich's ertragen? Schaffend. Was macht mich den Anblick anschauen? Der Blick auf den Übermenschen, der das Leben bejaht. Ich habe versucht es selber zu bejahren - Ach!" (KSA X: 137).¹

"Unser Blick ist der Augenblick, wo ich die Wiederkunft zeugte. Um dieses Augenblicks willen ertrage ich die Wiederkunft" (KSA X: 210).

To an even greater extent than with the other important themes of his philosophy, through his doctrine of the "eternal return of the same" ("ewige Wiederkehr - Wiederkunft - des Gleichen") Friedrich Nietzsche confronted his readers with an almost inextricable tangle of questions and counter questions, of difficulties and riddles. The fact that Nietzsche was well aware of this situation is evident from the chapter of thus spoke Zarathustra bringing up the issue of the eternal return for the first time in the book. Its title significantly says "Of the Vision and the Riddle". We should therefore not be surprised to find the most divergent and even contradictory interpretations among the innumerable publications concerning this subject. Some of them are even totally unfounded. One well-known example is the attempt of Martin Heidegger to relate the doctrine of the eternal return of the same to contemporary technology, more particularly to the mechanical rotating repetition of a machine.² Even after discarding similar headstrong and peculiar readings, we are still left with an interminable number of interpretations. Within these, two main directions stand out more and more prominently as the most plausible: a cosmological and an ethical interpretation. Moreover, both often blatantly contradict each other. This contradiction is sometimes even considered as symptomatic of a fundamental contradiction of Nietzsche's philosophy itself.³

1. The eternal return as a cosmological-ontological doctrine

According to the cosmological-ontological interpretation of the eternal return, the world has no beginning or end point. It is endlessly becoming, however without continuously producing new "States of affairs". In time, the same states of affairs repeat themselves. This implies that the world elapses cyclically: the same cycle covering a certain time span infinitely repeats itself over and over. In Nietzsche's words, the theory of the eternal return advances that "the world as a cycle [...] has infinitely repeated itself and plays its game in infinitum" (KSA XIII:376). This event, for example, of my talking to you about the eternal return of the same, is an event within a particular cycle that itself was preceded by an infinite number of identical cycles. I thus already spoke to you about the eternal return an infinite number of times before. On the other hand this cycle in which we live now, will be followed by an infinite number of identical cycles. According to this interpretation, you won't get rid of me anymore. You cannot prevent me from returning and telling you exactly the same story as the one I am telling you now.

Nietzsche as a classical philologist knew very well that a great number of versions of similar doctrines existed already in the antiquity: Pythagoras, Heraclitus, Empedocles, Plato and the Stoics among others. This is evident from his autobiography *Ecce Homo*: "The doctrine of

'eternal recurrence', that is to say of the unconditional and endlessly repeated circular course of all things - this doctrine of Zarathustra could possibly already have been taught by Heraclitus. At least the Stoa, which inherited almost all its fundamental ideas from Heraclitus, shows traces of it" (KSA VI: 313 [EH81]). And yet, he sometimes calls this doctrine new (KSA IV: 275; also KSB VI: 112). This could be because - in contrast to the philosophical speculations from the antiquity - he tried to provide a scientific argumentation for it. He even calls it "the most scientific of all possible hypotheses" (KSA XII: 213).
Reduced to its simplest form this argumentation consists of the justifications of two theorems.

The first is that time is infinite. When I go back in time from this very moment, I can never reach the first moment of time, the moment when time came into being. By accepting that time has a starting point, one inevitably introduces the notion of "creation" in this issue. As Kant did before him, Nietzsche rejects this notion and calls it theological. It is indefinable and inapt. It dates from times long past that were unscientific and superstitious (KSA XIII: 374). According to Nietzsche, the becoming of the world never started. As I can further and further go back in time, I can also continuously go further to the future, or rather, forward. At no one moment can I reach an end point, an end of time. The becoming has always already started and will never end.

The second theorem is that the totality of force is finite. The notion of force by definition implies a circumscribed quantity of force, and thus is incompatible with an "infinite force", an infinite volume of force. In our world, according to the principle of preservation of force, force has a constant and finite quantity which cannot increase nor decrease. It is for this reason that for Nietzsche the number of constellations and combinations of force centres, i.e. the number of situations in the world, is finite. The world cannot incessantly produce novelty. This means that over an infinite time period (the first theorem), the same situations infinitely recur, over and over. Nietzsche writes:

The total amount of energy is limited, not 'infinite'. Let us beware of such conceptual excesses! Consequently, the number of states, combinations, changes, and evolutions of this energy is tremendously great and practically, 'immeasurable', but in any case finite and not infinite. But the time through which this total energy works is infinite. That means the energy is forever the same and forever active. An infinity has already passed away before this present moment. That means that all possible developments must have taken place already. Consequently, the present development is a repetition, and thus also that which gave rise to it, and that which arises from it, and so backward and forward again! Insofar as the totality of states of energy always recurs, everything has happened innumerable times. (KSA IX: 523).

Today I don't want to investigate the validity of Nietzsche's argumentation for an eternal return. Others have done this with the required accuracy. Of greater importance however are a number of considerations preceding this critique.

First, the texts where Nietzsche attempts to prove the eternal return as a scientific theory, without exception all belong to his posthumous work. He himself never published them, even though he had ample opportunity to do so during the years before he became mad. A great number of these fragments, among which the one I just quoted, date from the period immediately after the revelation of the eternal return in Sils-Maria in the summer of 1881. Why did he never publish these texts? We can only make assumptions: possibly he

considered the argumentation still lacunary and insufficient, or he might have considered them superfluous and irrelevant to the problems he wanted to discuss.

Second, we know from Nietzsche's contemporaries, as well as from his own letters (KSB VI: e.g. 208, 223, 226) that he intended to study natural sciences and mathematics at the University of Paris or Vienna, among other reasons to give his doctrine a scientific foundation. He however rather quickly let go of this plan, probably because he realised that his doctrine has to be set at a completely scientific argumentation he came forward with his *Zarathustra*, i.e. a literary story about how an imaginary person experiences the eternal return of his life.

Third, since the publication of the critical edition of G. Colli and M. Montinari, we are able to accurately study the full context of these posthumous fragments on the eternal return. From this it is evident not only that Nietzsche formulated and tried various thought-experiments, but also at that same time - and even sometimes in one and the same fragment - he doubted, questioned and (partially) retracted them. For example, he criticised the notion of "the same (*das Gleiche*)". He thinks that it is prejudicial to claim that two things - for example two leaves - are exactly the same. Man considers them as equal or attempts to make them equal. Although this prejudice is very useful in daily life, it is one of the "fundamental errors" of mankind (KSA IX: 531).

Fourth, the interpretation of the eternal return as a cosmology is hard to reconcile with some other important themes of his philosophy. I can only briefly mention two of them: perspectivism and the will to power. If his theory seeks to give scientific argumentation for the truth of a particular cosmology, then this implies a realistic conception of knowledge. Such a realism pretends to look at the world from a "God's Eye View" and to know the world as it is in itself (H. Putnam). This however, is contradictory to the antirealism of his perspectivism. Why would Nietzsche attach such a great importance to a scientific argumentation when he considers science itself only as a perspective, an interpretation of the world next to so many other possible interpretations? "If is perhaps just dawning on five or six minds that physics too is only an interpretation and arrangement of the world (according to our own requirements, if I may say so!) and not an explanation implies a determinism: the cosmic evolution is ruled by strict laws, that inevitably lead to the endless repetition of the same events. This doesn't seem to be in agreement with Nietzsche's will to power, i.e. a labelling will to live which continuously has to overcome and exceed itself. Whereas the eternal return realises for the same, the will to power aims at the realisation of the other, at the continuous production of novelty."

Fifth, in a careful reading of the texts published by Nietzsche himself, his doctrine nowhere turns out to be a cosmological one, but quite the contrary. Many students have not, or not sufficiently, taken into account whether Nietzsche did or did not publish a particular text himself. This is tied up with the often exaggerated appreciation of the posthumous manuscripts and more in particular of the so-called book *The Will to Power*. Heidegger even postulates that Nietzsche's "proper philosophy" is to be found in his posthumous writings: "What Nietzsche himself is to be found in his creative life was always foreground. [...] His philosophy proper was left behind as posthumous, unpublished work."

Finally, Nietzsche in his Untimely Meditations more than once blatantly says that there is no eternal return, "that the dice-game of chance and the future could never again produce anything exactly similar to what it produced in the past" (KSA I: 262 [UM 70]). Caesar was murdered only once. Columbus only once discovered America. Each person is unique: "In his heart every man knows quite well that, being unique, he will be in the world only once and that no imaginable chance will for second time gather together into a unity so strangely variegated an assortment as he is" (KSA I: 337 [UM 127]).

2. The eternal return as an ethical 'deontological' doctrine

For these reasons - and probably a few more - the doctrine's cosmological-ontological interpretation is more and more explicitly dismissed in recent years. In stead a normative-'deontological' interpretation is often proposed (from Oskar Ewald²⁾ to Bernd Magnus³⁾). As an ethical doctrine the eternal return formulates an imperative (Showing an unmistakable resemblance to the Kantian categorical imperative): act in such a way that at any moment you would be prepared to want the eternal return of this act. To make this alternative interpretation sound, one generally goes back to completely different texts by Nietzsche. I only mention two of them:

Not to look out for far away, unknown blisses and blessings and gifts, but to live such that we want to live again, and to live such in eternity! - Our task comes up to us at each moment. (KSA IX: 503).

My doctrine declares: the task is to live in such a way that you must wish to live again - you will anyway! To whom striving gives the highest feeling, let him strive; to whom rest gives the highest feeling, let him rest; to whom ordering, following, obedience give the highest feeling, let him obey. May he only become aware of what gives him the highest feeling and spare no means! Eternity is a stake! (KSA IX: 505)

The exclamation "in any case you will live again!" from the second quote is an indication that Nietzsche still struggled with an ontological issue. It again suggests an unavoidable cosmic event that is hard to reconcile with the pragmatic meaning of an imperative. Indeed, an imperative in general assumes that it may not be followed, whereas according to an ontological interpretation this possibility is dropped or in any case threatens to be dropped. I will not discuss this inconsistency here.

In these texts Nietzsche proposes an important "assignment" or "task" for human existence. Man is placed for this task not only occasionally, but - in his words - "at every moment". No reprieve is accorded. He is constantly called upon. Whatever he does, it always has to be done in such a way that it complies with the imperative's requirements. And yet, what is pursued through this assignment is not to be situated in an uncertain, unknown and far away future. Paradoxically the fiction of an eternal return of an act in the future exclusively has the role to draw the attention of the actor to the enormous importance of his act here and now. An infinite series of identical moments are only introduced to illuminate this moment in its irreplaceable meaning and tremendous importance. In short, at every single moment only this very moment counts: "in me the concept 'future' lacks [...] no wish, not even a little one, no planning, no wanting-it-differently" (KSA XIII: 501).

As with the ontological-realistic interpretation, this normative interpretation points to a number of serious problems.

First, both cited texts once again are from Nietzsche's posthumous writings, and once again they date from the eighties. Moreover, I believe that an eternal return viewed as an imperative is not explicitly present in his writings that were published by himself. (In the third part of my speech, I will try to prove this for only one text by Nietzsche).

I want to go more in detail about the second difficulty. The imperative does not indicate what you should do, but only that, whatever you do, you should do it in such a way that you could wish for the infinite return of this act. (Like the Kantian-imperative, it is thus a formal imperative). But the question is: when do you want to repeat an act over and over? Nietzsche says that this is only the case when you "feel most wonderful". Only those acts should be performed that give you "the highest feeling". Apparently Nietzsche doesn't consider this imperative as a curtailment to the diversity of possible acts. you are still free to do whatever you want. For example, you might strive for a particular aim, but you might as well refuse to strive for anything, and preserve an "unshakable rest" (letter dd. 14 August 1881 to P. Gast, KSB VI: 112). You can conform to the behaviour of others, or you can decide for yourself which way to go. Rather than prescribing what to do, Nietzsche tells you only in which state of mind and with which feelings you should do what you do. In the famous "Night wanderer's Song" from Thus spoke Zarathustra it is indicated which acts man wants eternally, "Wants deeps, deep eternity!" (KSA IV: 286 and 404 [Z 333]). This shows that man wants repetition of only those acts that are accompanied by lust, whereas he flees those that cause pain. The "greatest feeling" thus is nothing else but an intense sense of pleasure. Living consistently according to this imperative therefore leads to avoiding those acts that cause sorrow. Whether a true ethical theory can be constructed starting from such an imperative is very doubtful. I will however not discuss this complex and far too general question. More important is whether such an ethic would lead directly to crude hedonism and egoism, i.e. to a way of life that as much as possible tries to eliminate pain and to maximise lust. The difficulty however is that Nietzsche always decisively rejected such ethics (e.g. KSA VI: 200-201); indeed, by eliminating pain one would also eliminate lust and happiness (KSA III: 384).

Third, I find it difficult to see how eternal return - viewed as an ethical imperative - could possibly escape the hammer of Nietzsche's critique on "You shall" and more in general on this imperative would weigh as a heavy burden on all human behaviour? Suffice it to refer to the well-known passage "On the three Transformations" where Zarathustra talks about the horrible dragon "You shall" (KSA IV: 29-31). On the one hand, the "You shall" -imperative is a command submits mankind to an irrational constraint, a suffocating oppression, an arbitrary tyranny, a uniformizing reduction (KSA V: 108-110). On the other hand, this imperative is also a ludicrous dragon because the enormous yawning abyss between norm and fact can never be removed by the imperative's commanding character (and it is a good thing that it cannot): "Let us consider finally what naively it is to say 'man ought to be thus and thus!' Reality shows us an enchanting wealth of types, the luxuriance of a prodigal play and change of forms: and does some pitiful journeyman moralist say at the sight of it: 'No! Man ought to be different?' [...] But even when the moralist merely turns to the individual and says to him: 'You ought to be thus and thus' he does not cease to make himself ridiculous" (KSA VI: 86-87 [TI 46]).

Fourth, the arrow of this ethical imperative point straight to the present, eliminating all retrospect and prospect. It extremely focuses on the now-moment.¹⁵ It is not a coincidence that Nietzsche's doctrine of the eternal return is often considered as a philosophy of the here and now. To live according to this means that one has an attitude to life radically opposed to the one that ruled western tradition. According to this tradition, the present's role was related only to an afterwards, a future that however never arrived, that never became present but always remained future. The eschatological and teleological character of this tradition led to a never ceasing tyranny of the future on our lives. For example, in Christianity the present was denied in favour of an hereafter, a great beyond after death (heaven). According to Platonic metaphysics, the sensory perceptual realm was denied in favour for a transcendental spiritual world ("*Hinterwelt*"). Similarly, in romanticism (e.g. Richard Wagner) the present was considered as bad and reprehensible. It was denied in favour of an idealization of a far away past (the Middle Ages) or of an utopian future. The Nietzschean doctrine however does not aim at a metaphysics of the "hereafter" ("*Jenseits*") but at a philosophy of the "herenow" ("*Diesseits*") (KSA VI: 133, 185). Each moment is lived merely for its own sake and not in function of a later moment, a moment to come. The discomforts caused by certain events are no longer placed in a larger context of an action meant to prepare an in the future obtainable objective. Thus a life according to this imperative boils down to a plea for an unconditional, carefree and unconcerned life now, for a life that does not bother about the future. Indeed one could find texts (nevertheless posthumous!) in which Nietzsche suggests something similar: "At every moment becoming must appear legitimate [...]; it is certainly not allowed that the present would be justified for the sake of the future nor the past for the sake of the present" (KSA XIII:34; see also XIII: 455 and XIII: 493). However, it is highly doubtful whether a life according to such a prohibition on its radicalness is possible and desirable. For example, it seems obvious that a mother doesn't want the labour pains for the sake of the pains themselves, but only for the sake of the child.¹⁶ To illustrate that this prohibition is problematic, I would like to end with an example of two characters from the fascinating movie *Down by Law* by Jim Jarmusch: one character made a complete mess of his life by living continuously in the future, the other made at least as big a mess of it by living continuously in the present! Besides, I think Nietzsche's philosophy implies a condemnation¹⁷ such a way of living: "one lives for today, one lives very fast - one lives very irresponsibly" (KSA VI: 141 [T 94]). It is true, sometimes man envies the happiness of the animal tied up at the peg of the now-moment (KSA I: 248), but yet a return to the bestial is not possible and not even desirable. Nietzsche doesn't plea for a state of self-sufficiency and momentary happiness, but he wants to bend the bow of desire and keep it bent as strong as possible (a.o. KSA V: 12-13).

The fifth and last problem that I will briefly mention here, concerns the question whether a life largely ruled by such an imperative would not resemble more and more a life in which the same acts are repeated again and again. Does an act carried out in the persuasion of its eternal return in the future, not inevitably tend to the stereotypical repetition of this very act over and over? Does an act which one wishes to repeat not lead to the eternal repetition of this very act? We won't find a life as advocated by Nietzsche with such passion and eloquence - an adventurous and most colourful life -, but to the contrary we will come to a life that wants safety, security, and predictability, and which runs compulsively and monotonously. Such a life would strikingly resemble a life determined by what Sigmund Freud called a "repetition compulsion" ("*Widerholungszwang*"). Besides, when Freud

investigates the repetition compulsion in the mental system in his *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* he talks - winking at Nietzsche - about the "eternal return of the same".

3. The eternal return as a crucial test.

After having sketched rather globally these two interpretations of the eternal return and their respective difficulties, I would like to venture a third interpretation that I consider neither ontological nor 'de-ontological'. The tenor of this is already indicated by the title: the eternal return as a crucial test. To clarify this interpretation I must confine myself to one single text by Nietzsche. However, this choice is not arbitrary: the aphorism I would like to read and comment on is the first version of the eternal return that Nietzsche published himself. It occurs in the book *The Gay Science* and is the last but one aphorism (341) of the book as it appeared in the 1882 first edition. The last aphorism is almost identical to the beginning of *Thus spoke Zarathustra* and bears - as we will see - not without reason the title: "*Incipit tragœdia*" (KSA III:571). At the same time, I am convinced that the basic idea of the interpretation I want to discuss, also applies to the other stagings of the thought of the eternal return (particularly "*Of the Vision and the Riddle*" and "*The Convalescent*" from the third part of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*). Let's start by reading slowly the complete aphorism:

The greatest weight (*Das grösste Schwergewicht*). - What, if (*Wie, wenn dir*) some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: '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 every sign 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 myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!' 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 (*das grösste Schwergewicht*). Or how well disposed would you have to become towards yourself and to life to crave nothing more fervently than this ultimate confirmation and seal?' (KSA III: 570)

This important passage is frequently cited, but almost never interpreted accurately.¹⁸ But also in my exposition a complete "*Buchstabierung*" is not possible. (But what is completeness in this case? And is it even possible in general?) I will therefore only treat those aspects that are important for what I want to prove: on the one hand that the thought of the eternal return escapes an ontological-cosmological interpretation as well as an ethical-normative interpretation, and on the other hand, that it functions as some kind of experiment, a test ("*Probe*"), an attempt, a trial ("*Versuch*"). Nietzsche writes: the "epoch of the trials. I am doing the big experiment: who can stand the thought of the eternal return?" (KSA XI: 85). It is known that Nietzsche considered his whole philosophy as a series of experiments. Sometimes he tried out a thought to find out its value. But also, he sometimes used a thought to put his reader to the test. Nietzsche often calls the thought of eternal return a hammer (KSA XI: 295; XII: 109, 128, 132). This hammer not only is the philosopher - sculptor's tool for shaping and modelling man, but it is also the philosopher-doctor's tool for asking

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questions and provoking meaningful reactions (KSA VI: 57-58).⁹ These reactions are symptoms of a particular psychic-corporal disposition. In the aphorism that we just read, Nietzsche performs such a psychological or even stronger a physiological-medical test, a crucial importance to the framing of a psychology and physiology of our culture.

a. What is the importance of the test?

In the title "Das grösste Sehngewicht" Nietzsche already refers to a number of aspects relevant to the eternal return. First, he believes that this thought is in general experienced as heavy. Milan Kundera in his book *The unbearable lightness of being* has very clearly understood the importance of the opposition between light and heavy clearly in Nietzsche's work. And yet Kundera probably viewed this opposition too simply - he made light of it. In his opinion, an incessantly repeated life is heavy, unbearably heavy, whereas a once-only life manifests itself "under the mitigating circumstance of its passing nature". It is unbearably light. Nietzsche in contrast, believes that life can be considered as heavy but also as light. Everything depends on our disposition towards life. A spirit-viewing life as heavy -- the "Spirit of Gravity (*Geist der Schwere*)" -- will experience the thought of the eternal return of life as crushing. To this spirit, it is "the heaviest thought". In contrast, to a spirit-viewing effect. It pushes the spirit higher up, gives it wings. Because the eternal return in both cases leads to a colossal enlargement, it has such clear opposite effects on man.¹⁰ Compromises are no longer possible. Second, the thought is ~~weighty~~ in the sense of important. It is the most powerful thought (KSA IX: 526), the "Thought of Thoughts" (KSA IX: 496). In boxing Muhammad Ali of all philosophical doctrines so to say. It is of the utmost importance. It is the main concept of his Zarathustra (KSA VI: 335), and therefore requires most emphasis. It has enough power to split up the history of mankind in two halves (KSB VI: 485). Third, this thought has to fulfill the role of a new centre of gravity in our culture. A center of gravity is a point around which the weight of an object is evenly distributed. It brings rest and stability. For example, a well positioned center of gravity prevents a ship from rolling.¹¹ As Nietzsche says, the center of gravity ("*Schwergewicht*") provides for balance ("*Gleichgewicht*") (KSB VII: 34). ~~But also it is not a steady and unchanging point.~~ It can change places and even gravity pointside life, in a "Jenseits", in an otherworldly God (KSA VI: 216:217). For this reason Nietzsche thinks that Christianity is doomed. Together with the death of God, the old center of gravity has disappeared, as a result of which human existence lost its direction and meaning. "Time will come when we will have to pay for having been Christian for two thousand years long. We are losing our center of gravity (*Schwergewicht*) that let us live, for some time we don't know how to get in or how to get out" (KSA XIII: 69). Through the new center of gravity of the eternal return Nietzsche, wants to give a new significance, an "Infinite significance" to our way of life, to our habits and opinions (KSA IX: 494).

b. Who is the testperson and who the experimenter?

The narrator in this passage addresses each one of us, every possible reader. In this way Nietzsche suggests the presence of three different characters on stage, which for a good understanding need to be clearly distinguished from one another: (1) a narrator addressing (2) me, an arbitrary reader, with a story about (3) a demon whispering me in the ear: "This life [...] you will have to live once more".

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To every single reader - to "you" - the narrator asks to imagine a situation where a demon stalks you. This situation is at the least peculiar. In any case it creates an impression of unreality. Already from this incipit Nietzsche uses all textual means to indicate to the reader that he is not dealing with an eyewitness account, as faithful as possible, but with a clearly fictitious story. What is evoked, is not our familiar everyday world, but a strange dreamworld. Grammatically, the narrator chooses the conditional mode: "what if (*wie wenn dir*)". In this way he asks the reader to imagine a particular situation: "suppose that...; how would it be to...; what would happen if...". In any case it should be evident that the scene presented here is merely a product of the imagination, a hypothetical construction of the mind. In talking about the eternal return, Nietzsche never calls it a theory that can be true or false, but mostly a "thought (*Gedanke*)", or sometimes a "doctrine (*Lehre*)".

Moreover, we should mention another element in the opening words, which is inevitably lost in the English translation. The narrator does not address the reader in the polite form. The German formal "Sie" unavoidably creates a certain distance. In contrast, he calls the addressee one by his first name, "duzent" in German: to address with "du".¹² Apparently from the very start he wants to create a relationship based on mutual trust with the reader. He undoes every distance between them, since he wants to obtain the most spontaneous, unreflected, corporal and even visceral reaction from the reader. He wants a fully sincere answer.

At the moment - "some day or night" - the demon can loom up. It can happen when you are awake as well as when you are asleep at night. But if it emerges, it is always totally unexpected. In an unguarded moment.

The incident appears as a complete surprise. You do not ~~consequently~~ aim at it. You don't look for the demon in his cave, but it sneaks upon you. It surprises you. You don't attempt to meet it, but the incident just happens to you, even stronger, it catches you by surprise. Nietzsche similarly says in his beautiful letter to Peter Gast from the time when the eternal return was revealed to him (August 1881), that the thought suddenly "emerged" (KSB VI: 112). A thought does not come when you want it, but when it wants it (KSA V: 31).

Not the narrator, and certainly not Nietzsche, but a demon-exposes to us the content of the thought.¹³ If we can find out the nature of the demon, we might perhaps understand why he says what he says and what it means. Indeed, what he says is determined by his perspective (and at the same time distorted by it). In Nietzsche's writings and probably mostly in his early letters, demons often occur. (On this point he is related to Goethe and the whole romanticism). Most generally, a demon is a creature that assists and advises you, that wants to get a grip on your acts. It wants to push you in a particular direction.¹⁴ This influence can be either good or bad. You can be possessed by a good demon (a god) as well as by a bad one (a devil). More in particular, the voice of the demon is the voice of the instincts. In the aphorism preceding "The greatest weight", Nietzsche talks of Socrates and his demon ("dämonion"), or better of Socrates as a demon.¹⁵ Nietzsche believes that with Socrates decadence came about in Greek civilisation. He was the first to state the prevalence of reason in human behavior, which to a great extent led to the repression of the instincts. However, from time to time, these instincts express themselves in Socrates' psyche, although they can do so only in a negative way. They have become so weak and unable to drive or direct

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behavior; they can only slow down and obstruct it. In contrast, according to Nietzsche the voice of the instincts not only has an inhibiting role, but also a positively stimulating one. This is not the voice of the (philosophical) cosmologist or of the natural scientist. It is not so much reason that speaks to us, but rather the will, the desires and instincts (KSB II: 264).

This demon's voice can only touch you when you're in a state of "loneliest loneliness", i.e. in a state of the most absolute loneliness, when "man [is] alone with himself" (KSA II: 317 [HH 179]). This implies not only that there is no-one to turn to, but that also that one does not (anymore) long for the other(s). Loneliness ("Einsamkeit") is not experienced as a deprivation, a lack. It is not the consequence of abandonment ("Verlassenheit"), of being abandoned by everybody (KSA IV: 231). To the contrary, it is considered an important and valuable: "choose the good solitude, the free, wanton, easy solitude which gives you too a right to remain in some sense good" (KSA V: 42-43 [BGB 56]). It is something absolutely to be conquered, protected, cherished and defended (KSA VI: 276). It is no longer an enemy, but a friend. It can only be obtained by distancing oneself from the others. Similarly, the eternal return thought revealed itself to Nietzsche when he had risen "6,000 feet beyond man and time" (KSA VI: 335 [EH 99] and KSA IX: 494). A radically new vision of human existence can only emerge if one completely isolates oneself from the other people. One also needs to distance oneself from God. A radical atheism is necessary. An experience of such radical loneliness is impossible for the worshipper. Even the hermit, in the silence of his cave keeps desiring for "multitude" (KSA VI: 297 [EH 67]). He longs for a "dialogue" with God through prayer. "For a pious person there is no loneliness yet - we first invented this, we the ungodly" (KSA III: 616; also IX: 580).

c. *What is the test protocol?*

From the demon's sentence "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", it is evident that the most radical version of return is unfolded. This version is formulated so radically to obtain reactions which are as distinct as possible from the reader-testperson.

The demon says first that it regards "this life", your life, not 'a' life, a life that is neutral and impersonal, not the life in itself, the life in general. The demon makes no theoretical statements of the kind of: 'all history repeats itself', 'there is nothing new under the sun', 'the world runs cyclically', 'life will return', etc. Such statements can often be heard in philosophy, as well as outside it. What the demon asks you to imagine is nothing that wouldn't concern you, nothing that could be considered detachedly, noncommittally, and in abstracto. To the contrary, by asking each person separately to apply this thought without any restriction to his life, one is forced to unambiguously take sides.

The demon further says that your life "as you now live it and have lived it" will return. It does not say that a specific period will return, as for example a time full of pleasant event. Of course, we want those to occur again. Neither does it say that only this moment will return. In any case it doesn't command you to live in such a way that you would like it to return infinitely. On the contrary, it does ask you to imagine that the totality of your life would return. The repetition thus is a repetition of your whole life, without leaving out any single event.

Third, the demon does not state that this will return only once, or two times, but an infinite number of times. The demon speaks of "innumerable times". When Nietzsche speaks of an "eternal return", "eternal" does certainly not refer to something that is beyond temporality, a kind of timeless-being, but to something that is through and through temporal. "Eternal" in this expression does not refer to what escapes all change, but to the change itself. To that kind of a change that never stops repeating itself. This is very explicit in Ecce Homo: "The doctrine of 'eternal recurrence', that is to say of the unconditional and endlessly repeated circular course of all things..." (KSA VI: 313 [EH 81]; italics by E.O.).

Fourth, the demon states that not an analogous life, a life partly the same partly different, will return, but an identical life. The demon's eternal return of the same thus is a return of your life without the slightest difference from the previous one. What returns does not hold a single new element. The demon explicitly says: "and there will be nothing new in it". Because we are confronted with an identical repetition, not only moments of happiness but also moments of sorrow will return, not only what we desire but also what we dislike, not only the important moments of our life but also the frag of daily life. All will return exactly as they were, to the smallest detail: "every pain and every joy and every thought and every sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, and in the same succession and sequence". The thought of a limited return (a finite number of times) or of a return in another (hopefully) better life (such as the reincarnation doctrine in many eastern religions) mostly causes us fewer problems. Such weaker versions of repetition don't force us so strongly to unambiguously take sides. In this case however, the demon subjects us to the "heaviest" test possible, a crucible: a return of your life, a return of the same life as an identical one in addition, a never ending return.

Finally, the demon states that this life will return you will relive this life in the future. The eternal return's perspective that is revealed here is not retrospective, it is not directed to the past. The demon does not say: 'this life as you now live it, you already lived it innumerable times before.' Such a perspective appears fatalistic. The consideration that one cannot do anything about it easily leads to indifference, lethargy and defeatism. The demon does suggest however: "this life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more". In short, the perspective chosen by the demon is prospective, pointed to the future. It incites to unambiguously determine one's position, to make a clear choice.

d. *What is the possible outcome of the testing?*

The first reaction to the demon's statement is one of complete rejection: "Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus?" Here the narrator once again addresses every reader separately and asks for his (or her) reaction to the evocation of the eternal return. The reaction to throw oneself on the floor is sometimes seen with small children who absolutely refuse to do something, or with demonstrators refusing to obey the police orders. It is to unambiguously a corporal expression of rejection here, an unwillingness to repeat one's life infinitely. This is also evident from the teeth grinding and damning the demon. It is however also possible that it is the thought itself which throws you down. This could only be the case if you, like the beasts of burden (the camel or the ass), would experience life as heavy, as something which incessantly weighs you down. Through the eternal repetition of this existence, this weight will obviously be multiplied by infinite. The load becomes unbearable. The weight threatens to crush and smash you.

V

The second possible reaction is radically opposite to the first one: "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?'" One wants the eternal return of his life, one agrees to it, one confirms it unconditionally, one welcomes and applauds it. The voice which initially in your "loneliest loneliness" seemed as if coming from a hideous demon, from a devil, now appears to be the voice from a god, not the Christian God, but Dionysus. Nietzsche only describes two polarly opposite reactions. Why doesn't he sketch an attitude of indifference, one of shrugging? Apparently the demon's question evokes a problem which is a such vital importance for man that the attitudes towards it are neatly divisible into two extremes. When man gets clutched in the embrace of the thought, it inevitably must change him: either weigh him down and crush, or strengthen and stimulate him: "If this thought gained possession of you, it would change you as you are or perhaps crush you".

Thus what matters for Nietzsche is not the demonstration of the truth of the eternal return, but how man reacts to believing its truth, what its influence or effect is on the person who believes it. So that this thought could fulfill such a role, the actor needs to consider as true. One should act "as if" (Kant!) it were true, which evidently doesn't mean it is really true. Even when the eternal return would prove not to be true, it is still of the utmost importance to feign the thought, to act "as if" it were true, in order to examine the changes it can evoke in human existence. "Let's examine how the thought of something repeating itself has worked (for example the year, or periodical illnesses, waking and sleeping, etc.). Even if the circular repetition is only a probability or possibility, even the thought of a possibility can shatter and transform us [...]! How the possibility of eternal damnation has worked!" (KSA IX: 523-524). In the same way Nietzsche wonders how the thought of a transcendent divine being has worked in our culture, why this activity in our times is lost more and more, and how man reacts to this loss.

"The question in each and every thing, 'Do you desire this once more?' would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight (*das grösste Schwergewicht*)". On the one hand, it is evident from this sentence that to Nietzsche, this is not an ontological issue, it is not an issue whether the eternal return does or does not exist. He doesn't ask if the return is ingrained in the nature of things. To the contrary, what matters is the issue of will, the issue whether you do or don't want this to occur "once more and innumerable times more". But on the other hand, it is not a normative issue either: no command is given as to how each person has to act on every single moment. Only a question is asked, but a question which rakes up an issue vital to man: his fundamental attitude towards the totality of his life, towards "each and every thing" in his existence.

e. *What does the demon aspire to find out through the test?*

Only in the very last sentence does Nietzsche make clear what he wants to find out through the test. Whether one loves or hates the eternal return of one's life teaches Nietzsche about one's affirmative or negative attitude towards life. "Or how well disposed-would you have to become toward yourself and the life to crave nothing more fervently than this ultimate confirmation and seal?" Someone who is on good terms with himself and with life, accepts his own person and life exactly as they are. In contrast, someone who is not on good terms with himself and with life tends inadvertently towards a pessimistic attitude. From this, it is evident among other things that one is boated and one can "no longer stand oneself" (KSA

III: 418), that one longs for suffering and for death. One even wants to commit suicide, sometimes "heroically" as a martyr. One does penalty and lives ascetic. Since man is a living being, the condemnation or laudation he pronounces towards life is merely a symptom of the particular form of life he (or she) is (KSA VI: 86). "Judgements, value judgements concerning life, for or against, can in the last resort never be true: they possess value as symptoms" (KSA VI: 68 [II 30]).

In his *Ecce Homo* Nietzsche calls the thought of the eternal return "the highest formula of affirmation that can possibly be attained" (KSA VI: 335 [EH 99]). The question is what wanting the return or longing for it has to do with affirmation of life and even with its "highest formula". Nietzsche believes that one doesn't (really) affirm a particular event unless one desires its return. If one does want its repetition, then one does not really want it, one does not fully want it. It belongs to the little pleasures, the half satisfactions, those of which one says: "It's all right for once but not again", or also is not active, but reactive and negative. Let me try to clarify this with the example of the well known proverb: "See Rome and die". I always - maybe wrongly - interpreted this as follows: When one sees the eternal city and its monuments, one is so overwhelmed by its enchanting beauty that one does not desire anything (else) anymore. One is so fulfilled that one is prepared to die. Indeed, what could one possibly wish to see after having seen Rome? In Nietzsche's opinion though, the desire to see Rome or more in general to live life, can never be stilled. When the will is active and affirmative, one never gets enough of Rome nor of life. Never does one say: "I've had it". In short, a wish reaching the highest form of affirmation wants the same thing again and again and infinite number of times. Such a wish longs for the "ultimate confirmation and seal (Bestätigung)". To seal is to affirm once again what one had affirmed already; it is a ratification. You say "I will" and you seal it by repeating it, for example by proclaiming it solemnly to everyone or by doing what you promised to do. Saying 'yes' thus already includes the repetition of this 'yes'."

Being caught by a demon which subjects you to a severe test, looks strikingly like an unexpected confrontation with death coming to get you but giving you a moment of respite to review your whole life. Undoubtedly this similarity didn't escape Nietzsche: "Was this - life? Is what I want to say to death. Well then, once again!" (KSA XI: 409). Face to face with death you would look back at your life with a kind of synoptic glance. Life would unwind before your eyes in an accelerated and compressed form: "We know that at times of exceptional danger, or in general at any decisive turning point of their lives, men compress together all they have experienced in an infinitely accelerated inner panorama, and behold distant events as sharply as they do the most recent ones" (KSA I: 343 [UM 199]). Arrived at the ultimate moment of your life you can only look back at your past life. During your life you continuously looked forward. Now that this is no longer possible, you are forced to look back. For the first and also last time you can review your life in its totality. At that moment "an evaluation of what has been desired and what achieved in life, an adding-up (*Summierung*) of all, your life worth living, then you are also prepared to live again. Otherwise you don't. Testing if you want your life back must prove whether or not you consider it valuable (or even pernicious), whether you have an affirmative or negative attitude towards life.

On the basis of whole series of more or less autobiographical remarks we can subject a number of authors to this test. It is striking that in general these very two opposite reactions

occur as described by Nietzsche. He himself took on both opposite reactions as is evident from the two texts serving as this paper's mottoes. As for other philosophical authors, I restrict to a few examples. Kant and of course Schopenhauer come to a pronounced negative conclusion:

Who hasn't read it in his [Kant's] writings, and which of his friends has not heard it very often from himself, that under no circumstance - under the condition of living once more from the start- he would want to repeat his existence.³³

But perhaps at the end of his life, no man, if he be sincere and at the same time in possession of his faculties, will ever wish to go through it again.³⁴

Bertrand Russell and Jacques Derrida, the latter with an explicit reference to Nietzsche's general return, come to the opposite conclusion. At the same time both authors link the wish for repetition to an affirmative attitude towards life:

Three passions, simple but overwhelmingly strong, have governed my life; the longing for love, the search for knowledge, and unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind. These passions, like great winds, have blown me higher and thinner. In a wayward course, over a deep ocean of anguish, reaching to the very verge of despair. [...] This has been my life. I have found it worth living, and would gladly live it again if the chance were offered me.³⁵

When I say: I love repetition, I cry over the impossibility to repeat. I would like to repeat all the time, to repeat everything: this is what affirmation is. It is even the Nietzschean meaning of affirmation: to be able to repeat what we love, to be able to live in such a way that we can say at all times: this I would like to relive infinitely. I myself, and in this I am happy, I don't have negative experiences in this sense: everything that I live, or almost everything, a great deal of what I live is such that I could wish for its eternal return.³⁶

Looking back at one's life is at the same time analogous to looking at a work of art. The spectator can be opposed to it and horror-stricken, but he can also applaud it and be thrilled. In the later case one wishes to repeat this experience incessantly, one wants it again with the same intensity, just like the first time.³⁷ One prays as the Greek: "All beautiful things twice or three times" (KSA III: 569 and KSB VIII: 69). "We want to enjoy a work of art again and again! One should give shape to one's life in such a way that one has the same wish for all the parts separately! This is the main thought!" (KSA IX: 505). In *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche illustrated this with the example of attending a drama or music performance. One calls out da capo loudly when one lies it. Similar is the attitude of the person who feels affirmative towards life. He is a person who, like Nietzsche says, "wants to have it again as it was and is to all eternity, insatiably calling out da capo not only to himself but to the whole piece and play, and not only to play but fundamentally to him who needs precisely this play - and who makes it necessary" (KSA V: 75 [BGE 82]).³⁸

Finally, one could compare the demon's test to the question whispered by - let's say - the wife (a bit like a demon) into her husband's ear at the moment of the golden jubilee's height: 'if you could start over, would you marry me again?' She evidently doesn't ask him if he would start over again with her in an improved and 'tidied up' version. She does ask if he would marry her again exactly life she is, with all her qualities but also with her weaknesses,

with her good sides but also with her little ways, with her beauty spot but also with her old hag's wart, with all her belongings, in short with everything without exclusion. If his answer is affirmative, if he does want the repetition, he actually means that all in all, it was good. He becomes once again the groom saying yes, repeating it and sealing it. To Nietzsche we all are this groom and life is our wife (KSA III: 568-569). The repetition we ritually long for, "the ring of return" is "the wedding ring of rings" according to Zarathustra (KSA IV: 287-291), a connecting and reconciling ring.

Before realising it, we are in the middle of the theme of the tragic. Because of lack of time I have to be short. In *Eccle Home* (the part where he discusses *The Birth of tragedy* as well as in the Twilight of the Idols Nietzsche explicitly relates the eternal return to the tragic. The tragic for him is the "affirmation of the life even in its strangest and sternest problems; the will to life rejoicing in its own inexhaustibility" (KSA VI: 312 [EH 30]). Neither the cosmological nor the normative interpretation of the eternal return knows how to deal with the tragic. The eternal return seen as an imperative is even in direct conflict with the tragic. It spontaneously leads to hedonic optimism. These problems do not occur with its false, cruel, contradictory, meaningless. But unlike the pessimist the tragic man brings about a strange transformation, transfiguration and inversion: grief becomes joy, pain becomes happiness, longing becomes desire, disgust becomes fascination. Unlike the optimist the tragic man does not look away from the worst and ugliest things of life: illness, disaster, cruelty, death and calamity. In contrast, even these phenomena become a source of continuous satisfaction for him. These too are an incentive to his life. In Greek tragedy the hero still says 'yes' to the dark side of his life. He endorses even his doom. To his fate, that what escapes his will, he calls out in ecstasy 'Yes, that's how I want it'. This is what Nietzsche calls "*amor fati*". I want to learn more and more to esteem the necessary at things as the beautiful - such I will be one of those embellishing things. Amor fati: let this be my love from now on!" (KSA III: 521). Nietzsche's philosophy aspires to be the opposite of a philosophy that negates life. Whereas Christianity and pessimism were at odds with life, suffered from it, and therefore look revenge at life, slandered and taunted life, Nietzsche through his philosophy wants to remain faithful, confirm, agree, praise and applaud not only life, the earth, being, sensuality, corporality, sexuality, joy and pleasure, but also suffering, sorrow and death.

Through this crucial test Nietzsche wants to find out which people are capable of a radical and unconditional affirmation of life. One could remark that he as well offered such an attitude as an "ideal" (KSA V: 75), and therefore possibly as the starting point of an ethical issue. I can fully agree with this. The question is however whether for Nietzsche this ideal can take the form of an imperative to which each person at each moment of his life should subject. I hope I made clear that I don't think so.

Endnotes

³³ This is the text of a speech held at a Nietzsche symposium in 1994 in Tilburg (The Netherlands). I did not try to efface the colloquial character of the text.

² For Nietzsche's texts I have used the G. Colla and M. Montinari's edition: *Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe* (Berlin & New York: W. De Gruyter, 1980) (abbreviated KSA) and for the letters: *Sämtliche Briefe, Kritische Studienausgabe* (Berlin & New York: W. De Gruyter, 1986) (abbreviated KSB). For the English quotes I used the translations by R. J. Hollingdale: *Ecce Homo* (EH) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980); *Beyond Good and Evil* (BGE) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990); *Untimely Meditations* (UM) (Cambridge et al.: Cambridge University Press, 1983); *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Z) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969); *Twilight of the Idols* (TI) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968); *Human, all too Human* (HH) (Cambridge et al.: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

³ M. Heidegger 'Wer ist Nietzsches Zarathustra?', in *Idem. Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1967), Teil I, p. 118 and Was heisst Denken? (Tübingen: Neimoyer, 1961), p. 47. Fortunately, this is not Heidegger's only opinion on Nietzsche's eternal return. But probably it is his last.

⁴ This idea was most explicitly pronounced by Karl Löwith: *Nietzsches Philosophie der ewigen Wiederkehr des Gleichen* (Hamburg: F. Meiner, 1978), pp. 66-67 and 86 ff. See also from the same author: *Nietzsches Doctrine of eternal recurrence*, in *Nietzsche* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1987), p. 426, and *Nietzsche, nach sechzig Jahren*, in *Gesammelte Abhandlungen. Zur Kritik der geschichtlichen Existenz* (Stuttgart et al.: Kohlhammer, 1969), pp. 139-140.

⁵ Nietzsche discusses the Greek conception of the eternal return more at length during a series of lectures philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks, held in 1872 at the University of Basel: KSA I: e.g. 822 and further. See also I: 261 and XIII: 375.

⁶ It may suffice here to refer to the critiques of Simmel and Danto: G. Simmel *Schopenhauer und Nietzsche. Ein Vortragszyklus* (Leipzig: Duncker und Humblot, 1907), pp. 250-251 and A. Danto *Nietzsche as Philosopher* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), pp. 203-209.

⁷ Mainly from KSA IX:494 and further.

⁸ *L. Andreu-Salomé Friedrich Nietzsche in seinem Werken* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1983), pp. 256-257.

⁹ H. Putnam *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge et al.: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 49, and *Idem. Realism with a Human Face* (Cambridge Mass, & London: Harvard University Press, 1990), among other p. 5.

¹⁰ On the anti-realism of Nietzsche's perspectivism: E. Oger 'Nietzsches Inszenierungen der Philosophie', in R. Dünhamel & E. Oger (Eds.) *Die Kunst der Sprache und die Sprache der Kunst* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1994), pp. 9-36.

¹¹ It is still necessary to repeat that *The Will to Power* is not a book by Nietzsche himself, but a rather arbitrary hodgepodge by others?

¹² M. Heidegger *Nietzsche* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1961), Volume I, p. 17.

¹³ O. Ewald *Nietzsches Lehre in ihrer Grundbedeutung. Die ewige Wiederkehr des Gleichen und der Sinn des Übermenschen* (Berlin: Hofmann, 1903).

¹⁴ B. Magnus *Nietzsches Existential Imperative* (Bloomington & London: Indiana University Press, 1978), pp. 111 ff.; *Idem. Nietzsches Eternalistischer Cosmology*, in *Review of Metaphysics* Nr. 4, 1973, pp. 604-616; *Idem. Eternal Recurrence*, in *Nietzsche-Studien*, Volume 8, 1979, pp. 362-377 and B. Magnus, St. Stewart & J. P. Miller *Nietzsch's Case. Philosophy as and Literature* (New York & London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 25 ff.

¹⁵ By concentrating life completely at the present one will live each moment as if it were the last moment, each day as if it were the last day. This way, everything one does becomes final. What is done cannot be undone. It cannot be changed, improved or restored tomorrow.

¹⁶ Probably Nietzsche too says something similar in KSA VI: 159.

¹⁷ S. Freud 'Jenseits des Lustprinzips', in *Gesammelte Werke* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1940), Band XIII, p. 21. The Nietzschean approach however strongly differs from the Freudian: 1. Nietzsche's eternal return arises from a desire to repeat an act accompanied by lust. 2. The incessant return of the same act for Freud however arises from a "repetition compulsion". An act is repeated not so much because it produces it produces lust, but rather because it doesn't give satisfaction. This "waiting in vain for satisfaction" (p. 19) can lead to a compulsive repetition of the same act.

¹⁸ An exception however is J. Salquarda 'Der ungeliebte Augenblick', in *Nietzsche-Studien*, Volume 18, 1989, pp. 317-337.

¹⁹ The second aspect was stressed by Patrick Wooling in his important *Nietzsche et le problème de la civilisation* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1995), pp. 359-360.

²⁰ Nietzsche's perspectivism makes essentialist statements such as "Einmal ist keinmal" extremely problematic.

²¹ See M. Heidegger *Nietzsche*, Volume I, p. 272.

²² Nietzsche frequently uses the word "Schwergewicht". A few examples from his last period: KSA VI: 141, 187, 372.

²³ As you know, in German-speaking regions - and certainly in the nineteenth century - one is very sensitive to the distinction between "dazun" and "siezun". For Nietzsche as well, this was very markedly the case (KSA VIII: 574).

²⁴ In other versions, among others in *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, the theoretical content of the thought is stated not so much by Zarathustra's animals (the snake and the eagle).

²⁵ A few examples in his letters where he speaks of demons: KSB II: 232, 240, 262, 282, 330; III: 130, 190, 234; V: 25, 410; VI: 235, 255.

²⁶ The demon is also a creature that tests man. With his insinuating questions Socrates too put the opinions of his fellow-townsmen to test. He incessantly tried the strength of their knowledge.

²⁷ Already in the period of *Untimely Meditations* ('On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life' of 1874), thus in a time where there was no talk of the eternal return yet, Nietzsche carried out similar experiments with his friends and acquaintances. He played the demon's role: "If you ask your acquaintances if they would like to relive the past ten or twenty years, you will easily discover which of them is prepared for this suprahistorical standpoint: they will all answer 'No', to be sure, but they will have different reasons for answering 'No'. Some may perhaps be consoling themselves: 'but the next twenty will be better' [...] Let us call them historicist; looking to the past impels them towards the future and fires their courage to go on living and their hope what they want will still happen, that happiness lies behind the hill they are advancing towards. These historical men believe that the meaning of existence will come more and more to light in the course of its process [...] But our question can also be answered differently. Again with a 'No' - but with a 'No' for a different reason, with the 'No' of the supra-historical man, who sees no salvation in the process and for whom, rather, the world is complete and reaches its finality at each and every moment. What could ten more years teach that the past ten were unable to teach?" (KSA I: 255 [UM 65-66]). By this question Nietzsche does not want to find out whether someone would wish the repetition of his life. Indeed, he believes everybody would answer this question in the negative, an unmistakable sign of the influence of the pessimistic philosophy of Schopenhauer: Nietzsche is exclusively interested in the way this 'no' is motivated: whether one does or does not believe in progress and thus also in history. What is tested here is not the attitude towards life, but the attitude towards history. Therefore, the test does not have to be so severe; one has to live its life only once more and then only the last ten or twenty years.

²⁸ The distinction made by Joan Stambauch, ('Das Gleiche in Nietzsches Gedanken der Ewigen Wiederkunft des Gleichen', in *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, Nr. 1, 1964, p. 91) between "das Gleiche" and "das Selbe", cannot be found in Nietzsche's texts, but - without her indicating it - comes from Heidegger: *Vorläge und Aufgabe* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1967), Volume 2, p. 67. Many interpreters - such as Gilles Deleuze Nietzsche et la philosophie (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1962), pp. 52-55 - find it difficult to consider the return of the same as a return of the identical. The fundamental reason for this is their ontological interpretation of the return. Deleuze did not see, that the selection is not carried out by the eternal return as a cosmic event (by the centrifugal force of the turning of the return), but solely by the thought taken for true.

²⁹ In other texts however (for example the Zarathustra) sometimes a retrospective perspective is chosen: KSA IV: 200.

³⁰ On the as if ("Als ob")-issue, see I Kant Kritik dreihen Vernunft, B 699 ff.

³¹ This Nietzschean thought is found very explicitly in Derrida: *Ulysse gramophone*. Deux mots pour Joyce (Paris: Galilée, 1987), pp. 90, 108 and *Psyché*. Inventions de l'autre (Paris: Galilée, 1987), among others p. 642.

³² L. E. Borowski 'Darstellung des Lebens und Charakters Immanuel Kants', in *Wer war Kant?* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1974), p. 73.

³³ A. Schopenhauer *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (Zürich: Diogenes, 1977) volume 2, 59, p. 405; (NEW York: Dover, 1969) translation E.F.J. Payne, Volume 1, p. 324.

³⁴ B. Russell *The Autobiography 1872-1914*, (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1967), p. 13.

³⁵ J. Derrida 'Dialaugues', in *Points de suspension* (Paris: Galilée, 1992), p. 154.

³⁶ This maybe shows some similarity to Wittgenstein's conduct, as is described in B. McGuinness's biography *Wittgenstein A Life. Young Ludwig 1889-1921* (London: Penguin, 1988), p. 34.: "He [Wittgenstein] read him" rather as he would when listening to music on the gramophone put the needle back repeatedly to some musical transition from which he wanted to extract everything".

³⁷ I borrow this example from the inspiring book by M. Clark *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy* (Cambridge et al.: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 269.

Nietzsche's Greatest Weight

Aaron Ridley

One of Nietzsche's best known thoughts, the thought of eternal recurrence, figures largest in *The Gay Science* and *Zarathustra*. It then drops out for *Beyond Good and Evil*, the *Genealogy*, *Twilight* and *The Antichrist*, before reappearing in *Ecce Homo*, where he still seems quite attached to it. The best known statement of it is in the section of *The Gay Science* called "The Greatest Weight:"

What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: "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, a speck of dust!" 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 confirmation and seal? (GS 341).

It is clear that the thought of eternal recurrence is being proposed as a test of some kind, a thought experiment which will somehow sort the sheep from the goats. It is *not* being offered as a cosmological hypothesis about the nature of the universe. Nietzsche did toy with eternal recurrence as a physical theory in his notebooks, but wisely chose not to enter it under that aspect in any of his published works. So the thought of eternal recurrence is a thought experiment designed to test something. And one passes the test, it seems, if one can experience the thought as maximally welcome, one falls if one falls to the floor and starts gnashing one's teeth.

The context of the test is set chiefly by Nietzsche's even better known declaration in the section (125) of *The Gay Science* called "The madman" -- the declaration of the death of God. "God", for Nietzsche, means not just the Christian god, but transcendental entities and interpretations of all kinds: thus Plato's forms are filed under "God," Kant's noumenal realm of things-in-themselves are filed there, as well as all the more obviously other-worldly fantasies that we call religions -- anything, in fact, that is committed to the denial of, as he puts it in the *Genealogy*, "the whole sphere of becoming and transitoriness" (GM III 11). In the penultimate section of *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche gives an impressively concise summary of his quarrel with God: