

“Nietzsche’s Eternal Recurrence: Prediction or Prophecy?”
(or – What goes around comes around, ad infinitum.)

Brent McAuslan at the Existentialist Society, 3rd February 2009.

It is the god Brahma that creates the universe and all that there is. Brahma then retires. The god Vishnu takes over. Vishnu sustains and preserves the universe in every moment of its existence. And then at the end of time the Lord Shiva appears and dances the Tandava dance. A weird and terrible dance of Fire in which the entire material universe is destroyed in blinding light brighter than ten thousand suns. And the universe is no more. There is only silence. Vast cosmic sleep. And out of this cosmic sleep Brahma awakens himself again. He looks about and sees nothing. He decides to create the universe again. After creating it he retires pleased with his eternal play. Nietzsche once said that he could never believe in a god who couldn’t dance. Anyway, a nice poetic description of the multiple big bang big crunch theory.

In Nietzsche’s time there was no big bang theory. It came into existence in 1949. Fred Hoyle, the astronomer, coined the phrase. The big bang theory of the origin of the universe is widely accepted by the physics community. The idea that our universe started out as some infinitesimally small point that expanded out to what we see today, makes a lot of sense. Except for one small thing. The initial point, called a singularity by physicists, is a physical impossibility. According to the models we have today, the temperature of the universe at that first moment would have had to be infinite, which mathematically makes no sense. Also the singularity doesn’t do a good job of explaining where all the matter and energy we see today in the universe came from. So now physicists are starting to look at other branches of physics to replace the singularity with a more reasonable theory.

I was watching a TV program recently where Steven Hawking, the world’s most famous physicist, said the universe arose spontaneously out of nothing. How can something come out of nothing? Nothing did. I forgot it was spontaneous, which means without a cause. It was spontaneous. That is why most Atheists hate the question – What existed prior to the big bang??? Or, what was God doing before He created the universe??? There are only two answers. Nothing is not one of them. No space is completely empty. And no matter is completely without empty space.

When David Miller asked me to give this talk he suggested Nietzsche. And I thought – Why not make it difficult and tackle eternal return, or eternal recurrence. Since the Existentialist Society began no one else has dealt with the topic. I emailed various Nietzsche Societies. They weren’t much help, so I thought I would tackle it on my own. Without sounding too Star Trekkie, could we possibly say that there are strange and mysterious forces at work which are beyond our understanding. Mystery is the source of all science and art, said Einstein.

Before I begin, I want to reveal something about Nietzsche. On July 11th 1882, in a letter Nietzsche wrote to a person called Fran Ziska, he stated, “Tonight I shall take so much opium that my reason will go astray”. A second insight from Walter Kaufmann who, in the ‘The Portable Nietzsche’, says that Nietzsche produced some of his best art while he was influenced by opium. Just like Edgar Allen Poe and Hector Belioz. Was it all one big hallucination???

Eternal return or eternal recurrence is not Nietzsche's discovery. It is a concept which suggests that the universe has been recurring, and will continue to recur in a similar form an infinite number of times. The concept has roots in ancient Egypt and was taken up by the Pythagoreans and Stoics. In the Hebrew Scriptures, Ecclesiastics 1:9, that which has been is that which will be. And that which has been done is that which will be done. So there it is. Nothing new under the sun. Sounds like a version of history repeating itself. With the spread of Christianity this concept of eternal recurrence fell into disuse. Nietzsche most likely picked up the idea from his one and only educator, Schopenhauer.

Eternal recurrence is a purely physical concept involving no reincarnation, but the return of beings in the same bodies. Time is viewed as cyclical not linear. The premise is that the universe is limited in extent and contains a finite amount of matter. While time is viewed as being infinite. The universe has no starting or ending state, whilst matter is constantly changing its state. The number of possible changes is finite, and so sooner or later the same state will recur. But what they fail to ask is – Will this only happen every billion years? As a belief reincarnation is more interesting in that it happens every eighty years or so. And also I can come back as a tree, a cat or an emperor.

Nietzsche writes very little about eternal recurrence. In 'The Gay Science' he states:-

“The greatest stress: How, if some day or night, a demon were to sneak 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 immeasurably small or great in your life must 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 over and over, and you with it, a dust grain of dust.’ Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or did you once experience a tremendous moment when you would have answered him, ‘You are a god, and never have I heard anything more godly.’ If this thought were to gain possession of you, it would change you, it would change you, as you are, or perhaps crush you. The question in each and every thing, ‘Do you want this once more and innumerable times more?’ would weigh upon your actions as the greatest stress. Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to crave nothing more fervently than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?”

This reminds me of a Woody Allen quote, “If this theory is true, I will have to sit through the ‘IceCapades’ again.” The first line in Disney's ‘Peter Pan’, “All this has happened before and it will happen again.” P.D. Orspensky, in his book, ‘Strange Tales of Ivan Oskin’, explores the idea that even given free will to alter events in one's life, the same events will re-occur regardless. Jim Morrison, from ‘The Doors’: “Well, we are all in a cosmic movie. You know that means the day you die you gotta watch your whole life recurring eternally forever.” At the end of the movie ‘K Pax’, starring Kevin Spacey and Jeff Bridges, the extra-terrestrial Prot explains eternal return by scientific laws in the universe, implying the big crunch will restart the big bang and every person and life will be lived out in exactly the same way each time this

occurs. Here is the quote at the end of the movie: "The universe will expand, then it will collapse back on itself, then it will expand again. And it will repeat this process forever."

Is everyone familiar with the movie, 'Ground Hog Day', starring Bill Murray? The plot is living the same identical day over and over. Aren't we all in a relative way living a Ground Hog Day every day of our lives? The Rat Race. The term taken from the image of a lab rat running on a wheel and getting nowhere. Aren't we all Sisyphus? Doomed to an eternity of repeating the same thing. Pushing that rock up the hill over and over, ad nauseam. "Going over the same old ground with the same old fears", said Pink Floyd. When I lived in San Francisco years ago, I had a girl friend who would get up in the morning, wash her face, and blow her nose three times, twice. Then get in the shower. It always woke me up and never varied the whole time we were together. I thought one morning maybe in the future she might do it twice or four times.

What you don't know is that when this universe expands again everything will be as it is now. Whatever mistakes you make this time around, you will live through on your next return. Every mistake you make you will live through again and again forever. So my advice to you is to get it right this time around. Because this time now is all you have. Eternal return has an ethical and moral dimension. If one is to come and live this very life over and over again, one should live it to the utmost, without any regrets. If we look at India, the country has lived under the shadows of karma and reincarnation. The Brahmins, the highest caste, have dominated the whole society and kept the Untouchables as their footstools, without any hope or dream of salvation. Fatalism or karma does not tell people to live life to the fullest. It states that one must accept one's fate unquestionably, and live it. If this recurrence theory holds any water, it is the first time around that is important. Once the first life is lived, that's the one that is lived over and over. And the next one will be repeated exactly the same way. We have no choice. Bound by determinism, free will is impossible.

From 'Thus Spoke Zarathustra': In the Vision and Riddle section, Nietzsche is talking to an imaginary friend:-

"Behold this gateway, dwarf!" I continued. "It has two faces. Two paths meet here; no one has yet followed either to its end. This long lane stretches back for an eternity. (He means the past) And the long lane out there, that is another eternity. (Here he means the future) They contradict each other, these paths; they offend each other face to face; and it is here at this gateway that they come together. The name of the gateway is inscribed above: 'Moment'."

In my opinion he should have stopped here. But knowing nothing of Zen Buddhism and other Eastern and Western esoteric traditions, he goes on a bit more:-

"But whoever would follow one of them, on and on, farther and farther – do you believe, dwarf, that these paths contradict each other eternally?"

"All that is straight lies," the dwarf murmured contemptuously. "All truth is crooked; time itself is a circle."

"You spirit of gravity," I said angrily, "do not make things too easy for yourself!""Behold," I continued, "this moment! From this gateway, Moment' a long eternal lane lead backward: behind us lies eternity. Must no whatever can walk have walked on this lane before? Must not whatever can happen have happened, have been done, have passed by before? And if

everything has been there before – what do you think, dwarf, of this moment? Must not this gateway too have been there before? And are not all things knotted together so firmly that this moment draws after it all that is to come? Therefore – itself too? For whatever can walk – in this long lane out there too, it must walk once more.”

“And this slow spider, which crawls in the moonlight itself, and I and you in the gateway, whispering together, whispering of eternal things – must not all of us have been there before? And return and walk in that other lane, out there, before us, in this long dreadful lane – must not we eternally return?”

My favourite philosopher, Schopenhauer, had also invoked the image of Time as an endless revolving sphere. This deeply impressed Nietzsche. As did Schopenhauer's characterization of the present as a Now that cannot be lost in awareness. Schopenhauer saw the present as the vertical streaming sun of an eternal noon. The earth moves from day to night. The individual dies, but the sun itself burns without intermission, an eternal noon. For him the fact that the present cannot be lost meant that in the course of time everything can change. Except the form of existence in the present which persists. The landscape is modified, but the window through which we look at it remains. And why should the stability of this window onto the present be imperceptible to us??? Why aren't we aware of this? Schopenhauer meditated on this question.

The 'present', he explained, is the 'tangent' that has one point of contact with the circle of time. This point does not turn with the circle, but stays in place, yielding an eternal present or eternal noon. Our problem is that we look at the turning circle and not at the present point of contact with the tangent. Even though we can perceive this turning only in contrast with the persistent point. We are the turning wheel as creatures in time. But as presence of mind and attention we are ourselves the sun and the eternal noon, which is outside time. Not that which is observed, which is in time and is constantly changing.

Does everyone get this? That Nietzsche would use the image of eternal noon in Zarathustra in connection with eternal recurrence shows how deeply he was affected by Schopenhauer's ideas. The fact that every moment recurs eternally should lend the here and now the dignity of the eternal. Living in a sacred place in a timeless ritual. All the ecstasy, all the bliss, all the ascensions of feelings. All the hunger for intensity previously projected into the beyond would now be concentrated in the immediate life of the here and now. Buddha said Samsara is Nirvana. Heaven is not some fantasy realm in the sky; some other dimension. It is this very life fully engaged; consciously witnessed now. Nietzsche used rich imagery to conjure up this bliss in the here and now which opened up the perspective of eternal recurrence to him.

Every moment recurs eternally. Every moment is significant by virtue of its eternal return. It is the tremendous moment that is assured to work the miracle. Nietzsche greatly admired Goethe. A quote: "I have observed that all intelligent people recognise, some in a refined and some in an unrefined way, that the moment is everything." End of quote. I will finish now. I just want to make my last point. We are accustomed to dividing time into past, present and future. But in reality they are not the divisions of time, these are divisions of our mind. Because past does not exist, except in our memories. And the future exists not yet, except in our imaginations. As far as time is concerned, it is always the present. It is always NOW.