One August afternoon in 1881, while walking down a wooded path alongside Lake Silvaplana in Sils-Maria, Switzerland, Friedrich Nietzsche stopped to rest beside a pyramidal rock that sat by the water’s edge. It was there, while gazing at this rock, that an idea overtook him. I say “overtook” because this was no ordinary sort of notion, to say the least. Even a great many extraordinary notions have been conceived with a settled mind, perhaps with no more outward evidence than a raised eyebrow or quickened lips—but this was quite different. Nietzsche would later describe this idea as his “most abysmal thought” and “the heaviest weight.” In one sense it was a solution to many problems he had been struggling with, but at the same time it posed an even greater problem—namely, “How does one live knowing this?” This idea would come to be known as “eternal recurrence.”

It is not so easy, however, to give a preliminary explanation of eternal recurrence, especially since the purpose of this essay is to offer a new interpretation of it. We might say, for example, that it is the theory that whatever happens in this world has happened innumerable times in the past and will happen again innumerable times in the future, and so on throughout all of eternity. But even this explanation, while it gives us something to work with, is misleading. It presupposes that Nietzsche understood eternal recurrence in a certain way—in this case as a cosmological theory—and this may or may not be accurate. At any rate, eternal recurrence is truly an idea that needs interpretation, and if one wishes to suggest a new one, the old explanations will obviously not suffice.

We should also note at this point that the incident at the pyramidal rock was not the first time Nietzsche had come across the notion of eternal recurrence. In his studies as a classical philologist, he encountered it in the writings of Leucippus, and his “Lectures on the Pre-Platonic Philosophers” specifically cite what he considered to be the Pythagorean and Stoic versions of the idea. Elsewhere he says quite explicitly, “I have come across this idea in earlier thinkers.” In any case, he would have known that it was not a new or innovative idea when he initially conceived of it at the rock. What was it, then, that made this experience so poignant, such that he would later call it his “most abysmal thought?” Why did he not feel such dread when he encountered it in the writings of other philosophers? In this essay, I endeavor to shed light on these questions by suggesting a new interpretation of eternal recurrence that reveals it to be of far greater significance to Nietzsche’s thought—and moreover to the existentialist movement—than the usual interpretations allow. The essence of eternal recurrence, I posit, lies in a lived experience, akin to Nietzsche’s own at the pyramidal rock; and to fully grasp it in this aspect demands

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2 Ibid., 762.
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much more of the reader than idle speculation. It demands, first of all, that one in effect enter Nietzsche’s mind-space (which admittedly is not the most pleasant thing to do) and share his thoughts in the spirit in which they were conceived. And if such a communion is either possible or desirable, eternal recurrence should at least not be regarded as a theory to be either accepted as true or rejected as false. One may speculate on the relative value of the lived experience it represents, but its truth-value (at least in the sense of truth as correspondence) is unimportant. Eternal recurrence describes an existential movement of the soul, and, for better or worse, the simple fact is that this movement happens, in Nietzsche’s thought and in the thought of many philosophers before and after him.

I will begin by pointing to some of the usual interpretations of eternal recurrence and tracing them back to their origins in Nietzsche’s writings. In this way it should become clear how these interpretations have come about. More importantly, we will see that none of these interpretations are wrong; they simply cause an essential aspect of the eternal recurrence to be overlooked, even if it is acknowledged in an implicit way. By way of conclusion, I will show how eternal recurrence fits into the larger scheme of the existentialist movement.

Common Interpretations of Eternal Recurrence

According to T. K. Seung, the greater number of interpretations of eternal recurrence can be grouped into three categories: (1) the cosmological, (2) the attitudinal, and (3) the normative. In the cosmological interpretation, the eternal recurrence is taken to be a description of the nature of the cosmos. In the attitudinal, it is regarded as a sort of thought experiment designed to test one’s attitude toward existence. In the normative interpretation, it is taken to prescribe a standard for making normative decisions. We will look at each of these in turn.

(1) Here is, I suspect, one of the deciding passages for proponents of the cosmological interpretation:

The total amount of energy (All-kraft) is limited, not “infinite”: let us beware of such excesses in concepts! Consequently, the number of states (Lagen), combinations, changes, and transformations (Entwicklungen) 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 transformations must already have taken place. Consequently, the present transformation 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 (die Gesamtlage aller Kräfte) always recurs, everything has happened innumerable times.\(^7\)

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It seems obvious that Nietzsche is here advancing a theory of the cosmos. If time is infinite and the forms that energy can take are finite, he says, then those forms are bound to repeat themselves; therefore every present form has existed an infinite number of times in the past and will re-exist an infinite number of times in the future. In *The Will to Power* as well (if we are to regard that work as a reliable source of Nietzsche’s thought) there is an entire section devoted to eternal recurrence, in which Nietzsche speaks of it as a serious possibility. Outlining a section he planned to complete, he writes: “1. Presentation of the doctrine and its *theoretical* presuppositions and consequences. 2. Proof of the doctrine.” Elsewhere in the book he mentions that one of his “fundamental innovations” as a philosopher was to offer the theory of eternal recurrence “in place of metaphysics and religion.” So, while in some of his other works (as we shall see) it is not clear whether Nietzsche thought of eternal recurrence as a theory *per se*, this is definitely the case in *The Will to Power*. Arnold Zuboff speculates that the reason he left the work unfinished was that he was unable to provide a metaphysical basis for the doctrine. We will consider later whether or not this affects the value of the doctrine in other respects.

(2) Probably the most common interpretation of eternal recurrence is the attitudinal, which holds that it is a thought experiment by which one can judge one’s fundamental attitude toward existence. In *The Gay Science*, not long after Nietzsche conceived of eternal recurrence at the pyramidal rock, he writes:

What if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into 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 … 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.”

This passage is basically a thought experiment. Nietzsche is in effect saying, “If it were the case that this were true, what would you do?” If you would throw yourself down and gnash your teeth, you would thus reveal yourself as a nihilist who fails to find this world of appearances inherently satisfying. If, however, you would say, “I have never heard anything more divine,” then you have passed the test because you have found meaning in life without having to resort to fictive imaginings of eternal realities.

Now, would the effectiveness of this thought experiment as an attitudinal test be lessened if eternal recurrence were not literally true? It would seem not. Nietzsche’s intent in offering this test is essentially to create a psychological effect in the reader. As Ivan Soll notes, “the presentation of eternal recurrence in the published works [that is, in all of his works besides *The Will to Power*] without any substantive argumentation for its truth indicates that it was not primarily the doctrine’s truth or theoretical content that

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8 Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 544.
9 Ibid., 255.
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cconcerned Nietzsche but rather people’s attitudes and reactions to this theory.” In this passage, Nietzsche is not trying to convey any theory or doctrine—even if at the time he believed it to be true—but to provoke readers.

(3) Lastly, the normative interpretation holds that eternal recurrence is recommended as a mental framework for making normative decisions. It thus follows from and is derivative of both the cosmological and attitudinal interpretations. Whatever one’s reaction to either of these, it nonetheless throws a new light on the process of making decisions. One should behave—so the interpretation goes—as if eternal recurrence were true. If you were to implement this principle in your everyday life, you would be required to will each of your actions in such a way that you also will its eternal return. The passage which most seems to suggest this interpretation follows directly after the aforementioned thought experiment in The Gay Science: “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.”

Here again, we should note, the truth of eternal recurrence does not make or break the argument. Even if it were false, one should still behave as if it were true. Only in this way can one make the “ultimate eternal confirmation” of life.

The Experiential Interpretation of Eternal Recurrence

As I mentioned above, each of these three interpretations is completely valid. We have seen passages which unequivocally show that Nietzsche, at some point or other, advocated eternal recurrence in one of these three ways. What I want to ask is, What do each of these interpretations presuppose? More importantly, what does Nietzsche presuppose by communicating eternal recurrence in these ways?

Let us consider the cosmological interpretation first. We have already seen that Nietzsche encountered this idea early on in the writings of Leucippus and in the ideas of Pythagoras and Heraclitus. So why does he begin to bring this idea to the forefront of his philosophy only after his experience at the pyramidal rock? What happened then that made this idea so poignant? He relates in his autobiography that the events of the preceding months had been directly leading up to this moment. Could it be, then, that eternal recurrence was a key to an experience of some more fundamental fact? We will pick up this question later. For now, suffice it to say that eternal recurrence as a cosmological theory (as Nietzsche had known it all his adult life) was sterile when devoid of its experiential aspect. It is only when he began to feel that this theory was true—disregarding whether or not it really was—that its cosmological aspect became important at all. We may conclude, therefore, that Nietzsche’s intent in presenting the doctrine was to communicate a transformative experience akin to his own at the pyramidal rock, that eternal recurrence as a cosmological theory is at base a vehicle for an existential experience. What he

13 Seung, Nietzsche’s Epic of the Soul, 124.
14 Ibid., 125.
15 Nietzsche, The Gay Science, 274.
16 Nietzsche, Ecce Homo, in Basic Writings of Nietzsche, 751.
presupposes, however, is that those who hear his theory will recognize the true import of its consequences as he did—which, depending on the individual, may or may not happen.

Now consider the attitudinal interpretation. At the time Nietzsche had his experience at the rock, he was in the midst of writing *The Gay Science*. The passage from this book that we quoted above may therefore be viewed as an effort to re-create this experience in readers by means of a thought experiment. There is an assumption on Nietzsche’s part, however, that something will take place in the reader’s mind, that he or she will recognize the true import of eternal recurrence—all factors which, if absent, would nullify his intended effect. Suppose, for example, that the reader makes no great effort with the thought experiment and does not realize the weight of all it implies—what has really happened here? Has anything actually been communicated? The idea may have been speculatively understood (as it can also be understood in the cosmological sense) but without the experience being communicated the thought experiment is fruitless. We thus find, as with the cosmological interpretation, that *eternal recurrence as an attitudinal test is also at base a vehicle for an existential experience.*

I mentioned above that the normative interpretation follows from the cosmological and attitudinal interpretations. So if either of those are successful in communicating Nietzsche’s experience, readers will naturally begin to look upon their actions in a new light. But what if they are unsuccessful in communicating the experience? Would eternal recurrence “lie upon your actions as the greatest weight?” It probably wouldn’t. And if it did, it would be merely a command from above, an edict saying: “Act thus only if you would will its eternal return!” This, however, would be a form of slave-morality, which Nietzsche detested as a sure sign of weakness. Eternal recurrence can only become a valid standard of action if one has first realized the full significance of the idea—thus sharing in Nietzsche’s experience—through either the vehicles of the cosmological theory or the attitudinal test.

We find, therefore, that the four interpretations of eternal recurrence—the cosmological, attitudinal, normative, and experiential—fit together in a curious way. The cosmological theory and the attitudinal test are vehicles through which an experience is meant to be communicated, and the standard of action follows from the experience.17 If, however, the experience is bypassed (A and B) and eternal recurrence is understood without reference to this essential element, the cosmological and attitudinal aspects lapse into speculation and the normative aspect becomes mere artifice. We might diagram this progression as follows:

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17 It could be argued that the experience would not in fact be followed by a standard of action, but result rather in a sort of paralysis of will (T. K. Seung, *Nietzsche’s Epic of the Soul*, 125). Since you have already made the decision an infinite number of times in the past, you cannot properly say you are making a decision at all. This, however, is not an objection to the progression outlined above, but to the normative interpretation of eternal recurrence. Taking this objection into consideration, we might draw a second line under “experience” pointing to “paralysis of will.”
Viewed in this light, Nietzsche’s various ways of communicating eternal recurrence become different methods of creating in the reader an *existential experience*, that is, a mode of being and posture toward existence. Even if he would later advocate eternal recurrence as a cosmological theory, the fact still remains that it must first become a *lived experience* or else it is just so much speculation. To borrow a notion from Kierkegaard, we can view eternal recurrence as essentially an “existence-communication.” Explaining this concept, Kierkegaard writes:

Surely a philosophical theory that is to be comprehended and speculatively understood is one thing, and a doctrine that is to be actualized in existence is something else. If there is to be any question of understanding with regard to this latter doctrine, then this understanding must be: to understand that it is to be existed in, to understand the difficulty of existing in it, what a prodigious existence-task this doctrine assigns to the learner.\(^{18}\)

Eternal recurrence, then, is meant to be “existed in” *as if it were true*. Only once this “prodigious existence-task” is accomplished can eternal recurrence become a valid standard of action that is not grafted, as it were, onto one’s conscience.\(^{19}\) Kierkegaard continues: “With regard to such a doctrine, however, it is a misunderstanding to want to speculate on it…and as one goes further and further along this way one becomes guilty of a greater and greater misunderstanding.”\(^{20}\) Accordingly, if we attempt to understand eternal recurrence without making reference to its experiential element, we are apt to misunderstand it altogether. I mentioned earlier that this aspect is often acknowledged in an implicit way, and this may often be the case; but unless it is explicitly brought out, Nietzsche’s true intention is likely to go unnoticed. Imagine how many beginning students of Nietzsche have failed to recognize this element of eternal recurrence either in their own reading or their teacher’s comments and have dismissed it as an

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\(^{19}\) Or, as we have said, a cause of paralysis.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 880n.
implausible theory. To understand it merely speculatively is entirely to miss the point! The eternal recurrence is meant to be *lived in*—or, if that is not desirable, it should at least be speculatively understood as a lived experience.

**The Experience of Eternal Recurrence**

We have said almost nothing about the nature of the experience, however. What exactly is it an experience of? So that we do not end up putting any words into Nietzsche’s mouth, we had better let him speak for himself. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* we get closest to such an experiential account of eternal recurrence.

In the chapter “On the Vision and the Riddle,” Zarathustra and the dwarf he is carrying on his shoulders (who symbolizes “the spirit of gravity”) are walking along an uphill pass. Suddenly they encounter a gateway that stretches over their path and Zarathustra comes to a halt. The dwarf jumps from his shoulders and perches on a rock beside the road.21 Zarathustra then begins speaking of eternal recurrence, though only speculatively: “From this gateway, Moment, a long, eternal lane leads backward: behind us lies an eternity. Must not whatever *can* walk have walked on this lane before? Must not whatever *can* happen have happened, have been done, have passed by before? … must we not eternally return?”22 Slowly, however, the seriousness of the thought begins to dawn on him, and he stands transfixed.23 “Thus I spoke, more and more softly; for I was afraid of my own thoughts and the thoughts behind my thoughts.” Moments later, the scene around him falls away and he finds himself standing in a dark field before a young shepherd who is choking on a black snake. This snake, asserts Seung, symbolizes the time line of eternal recurrence.24

A young shepherd I saw, writhing, gagging, in spasms, his face distorted, and a heavy black snake hung out of his mouth. Had I ever seen so much nausea and pale dread on one face? He seemed to have been asleep when the snake crawled into his throat, and there bit itself fast. My hand tore at the snake and tore in vain; it did not tear the snake out of his throat. Then it cried out of me: “Bite! Bite its head off! Bite!” Thus it cried out of me—my dread, my hatred, my nausea, my pity, all that is good and wicked in me cried out of me with a single cry.25

Take note of the language Zarathustra uses—“pale dread,” “nausea,” “pity,” “hatred.” He is experiencing eternal recurrence in a visceral way, and he is sickened by it.

Yet this still does not answer our question. We asked *what* the experience is of—not *how* it is, or what it feels like. We might put the issue to rest by saying that it is an experience of “eternal recurrence”—but what does this really amount to saying? That Zarathustra *visualized*, that is, held up to his mind’s eye a

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21 Some commentators have claimed that this rock is meant to represent the pyramidal rock that Nietzsche encountered on his walk at Lake Silvaplana (Seung, Nietzsche’s Epic of the Soul, 130).
23 We might here imagine Nietzsche standing before the pyramidal rock.
24 Seung, Nietzsche’s Epic of the Soul, 127.
25 Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 159.
representation of eternal recurrence, perhaps a cosmic-scale image of eons sweeping by in a moment’s time and even the lives of galaxies repeating themselves? Do such mental representations really cause “dread,” “nausea,” “pity,” and “hatred” to well up in one’s gut? Or might there be another explanation for Zarathustra’s experience? What if, perhaps, the representation of eternal recurrence, rather than being itself the source of Zarathustra’s nausea and dread, is actually a key to some more fundamental experience, one that causes even the objects lying before him to be transfigured before his eyes, to be disclosed in an entirely new and frightful way?

In one of the next chapters, “Before Sunrise,” this indeed seems to be the case. Zarathustra’s nausea has subsided and he is now comfortable—indeed, as he says, “blissful”—in the knowledge of eternal recurrence, and he alludes to a certain vision of existence which eternal recurrence has opened up: “‘By Chance’—that is the most ancient nobility of the world, and this I restored to all things: I delivered them from their bondage under purpose.” Zarathustra has “restored” to the world its native state, one without purpose, meaning, or valuation, a world where “Chance” is the primordial ruler of all. What he confronts in his experience of eternal recurrence, then, is essentially the aimless and impersonal nature of the universe. He realizes that existence is intrinsically purposeless and meaningless, and this gives rise to his feelings of nausea and dread.

It may be objected that this renders the notion of eternal recurrence basically incidental to the experience of purposelessness. If this were the case, one might say, then Nietzsche might have arrived at such an experience in all manner of ways, making eternal recurrence very easily replaceable. But how can it be so central to his philosophy if it can also be easily disposed of?

I will let Nietzsche answer to this objection. In The Will to Power, he says that “the belief in the absolute immorality of nature, in aim- and meaninglessness, is the psychologically necessary affect once the belief in God and an essentially moral order become untenable,” that is, when one sees the world as it is, stripped of valuation; and the impression one is left with, of “duration ‘in vain,’ without end or aim, is the most paralyzing idea.” He then goes on to implore the reader: “Let us think this thought in its most terrible form: existence as it is, without meaning or aim, yet recurring inevitably without any finale of nothingness: ‘the eternal recurrence.’” Eternal recurrence, then, is the hyperbolic pinnacle of expression of purposelessness. If existence is meaningless, then this is the “most terrible form” in which that meaninglessness can be expressed. One is condemned to return, throughout all of eternity, to the same senseless and futile round of existence—without even a “finale of nothingness” to relieve one of this burden. It is this prospect which makes Zarathustra cry out, “Nausea, nausea, nausea—woe unto me!” and remain on the floor of his cave, pale and trembling, for seven days on end.

26 The cause of this bliss, which we will later explore, is Zarathustra’s acceptance and affirmation of eternal recurrence.
27 Ibid., 166.
29 It is interesting to note that, for the philosophers of antiquity, eternal recurrence did not render existence meaningless as it does for Nietzsche. It always retained at least some underlying metaphysical principle, such as “the divine mind” for Heraclitus and Logos for the Stoics. The characteristic element of eternal recurrence in Nietzsche’s thought is that it strips the world of all valuation, even of a governing principle.
30 Friedrich Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, 216. This passage, we should note, could be cited as evidence for the assertion that the experience of eternal recurrence would result in a paralysis of will.
At the same time, however, by virtue of its being the highest possible expression of purposelessness, eternal recurrence also sets up the possibility for the highest affirmation of life. If you are able to affirm life in spite of this—in spite of the horror witnessed when eternal recurrence grips you in your very being—then you have achieved the “ultimate eternal confirmation” of which he speaks. Such an affirmation, Nietzsche believed, would engender a new kind of strength in those who are willing and able to make it, the likes of which has yet to be achieved by any human. This strength would thus cause individuals to rise above humanity and become Übermensch (overhumans). It is in reference to the strength of the Übermensch that Zarathustra, after the passage in which he beseeches the young shepherd to bite the head off the black snake of eternal recurrence, goes on to say: “Far away he spewed the head of the snake—and he jumped up. No longer shepherd, no longer human—one changed, radiant, laughing! Never yet on earth has a human being laughed as he laughed! … My longing for this laughter gnaws at me; oh, how do I bear to go on living! And how could I bear to die now!”

Eternal recurrence thus serves a two-fold function. First, it is the key by which one gains access to an existential experience of the purposelessness of existence. In Nietzsche’s words, “it makes everything break open,” letting existence reveal itself in its nakedness. Second, eternal recurrence provides one the opportunity to make the highest possible affirmation of life and transcend “mere” humanity. This much is clear in The Will to Power:

Such an experimental philosophy as I live anticipates experimentally even the possibilities of the most fundamental nihilism; but this does not mean that it must halt at a negation, a No, a will to negation. It wants rather to cross over to the opposite of this—to a Dionysian affirmation of the world as it is, without subtraction, exception, or selection—it wants the eternal circulation:—the same things, the same logic and illogic of entanglements. The highest state a philosopher can attain: to stand in a Dionysian relationship to existence—my formula for this is amor fati.

A third function of eternal recurrence, we might add, is that it paves the way for “revaluation.” Nietzsche firmly believed that this doctrine held a special “place in history as a mid-point,” when all of the values which have accrued throughout history are robbed of their foundation and begin to crumble. With the advent of eternal recurrence, history is in effect forced to start anew. Nietzsche anticipated, however, that humanity would not be up to this task—that they would cling to the values of the past or else settle with the “wretched contentment” afforded them by material comfort. This is why he advocated the “destruction” of values. Only if we destroy these long-revered edifices of the past and confront directly the meaninglessness of existence, as it reveals itself in the experience of eternal recurrence, can we begin the monumental task of revaluation.

We’ve made chiefly two points: (1) that the usual interpretations of eternal recurrence fail to capture the essence of eternal recurrence; (2) that the essence of eternal recurrence lies in a lived experience. This

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31 Ibid., 536 (emphasis mine).
32 Ibid., 545.
33 Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, 13.
34 Nietzsche, The Will to Power, 544.
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raises several questions, however. When we look at the texts themselves, Nietzsche never mentions any “experience.” As we have seen, he only speaks of eternal recurrence in its cosmological, attitudinal, and normative aspects. So was he unaware of this “essential” aspect of his own doctrine? Are we claiming to possess a better understanding of eternal recurrence than Nietzsche himself?

This would seem to be going a bit too far. We said earlier that a proper “understanding” of the doctrine does not hinge upon any kind of speculative comprehension of its theoretical aspect, but rather on an intuitive and visceral grasping of the doctrine’s more far-reaching implications. (Considering this, it might even be the case that no one has so thoroughly “grasped” eternal recurrence as Nietzsche himself.) Nevertheless, it does seem safe to say that today we are better situated than he—by no fault of his own—to determine what place his doctrine has come to occupy in the larger scheme of the history of philosophy. Like many great thinkers, he was too close to some of his own ideas to recognize their true historical significance, especially as he stood at a turning point in philosophy, and as a result his emphasis was liable to fall in the wrong places. It will be of benefit, therefore, to consider eternal recurrence from this larger perspective, particularly in relation to those areas of philosophy on which he has exerted the most influence. We find that this “essence” of eternal recurrence becomes clear only in contrast to what has come after him.

Eternal Recurrence and Existentialism

I mentioned earlier that eternal recurrence was central, not only to Nietzsche’s thought, but to existentialism in general. This point, so far as I know, has not been emphasized enough. The vision of existence which eternal recurrence discloses can be seen in the writings of virtually every major figure of this movement. The key difference is that while this experience is given no specific name by Nietzsche and thus often remains obscured by the various other aspects of the doctrine, it is explicitly phenomenalized by these other philosophers and held up as a crucial feature of their work. Kierkegaard, for instance (whose writings Nietzsche never had the opportunity the read), speaks of the “unfathomable, insatiable emptiness … hid beneath everything” revealed in the experience of “despair.” Heidegger, who was profoundly influenced by Nietzsche, speaks of “anxiety,” which “unveils the nullity that determines Dasein [human being] in its ground.” Sartre, in a more popular example, speaks of “nausea.” In his novel of the same name, Antoine Roquentin describes this experience in language that is markedly similar to the above description of Nietzsche’s own. He is sitting on a park bench staring at the tangled roots of a chestnut tree, when all of a sudden existence is revealed to him as it really is, stripped of all valuation:

The roots of the chestnut tree were sunk in the ground just under my bench. I couldn’t remember it was a bench anymore. The words had vanished and with them the significance of things, their methods of use, and the feeble points of reference which men

have traced on their surface … This veneer had melted, leaving soft, monstrous masses, all in disorder—naked, in a frightful, obscene nakedness.37

Perhaps the most striking parallel is found in Camus’s The Myth of Sisyphus.38 In this work Camus emphasizes the absurdity and pointlessness of life, comparing it to Sisyphus’s endless task of rolling a boulder to the top of a mountain only to have it fall back down of its own weight. Like eternal recurrence, this task is never-ending and essentially pointless; and like Nietzsche, Camus urges readers to passionately embrace this pointlessness and to affirm life in spite of its absurdity.

It should now be clear why Nietzsche regarded eternal recurrence as “the hardest idea” and sought not only a “means of enduring it” but also a “means of disposing of it.”39 It is not merely a theory to be accepted as true, nor a thought experiment to be entertained at one’s leisure. Nietzsche intended eternal recurrence to invade his readers’ consciousness and being, to free them from traditional, slavish concepts of morality and teach them to suffer the uncertainty of purposelessness (which he believed was encroaching on humanity either way). This uncertainty, however, far from resulting merely in nihilism, should be “conceived [of] as a tool,” as a way of developing “new means against the fact of pain”—indeed, as “the father of pleasure.” Only in this way can we realize the “greatest elevation of the consciousness of strength” and enable ourselves to begin anew and remain “continually creative.”40 Throughout history humanity has clung to the pillars of crumbling buildings, and to avoid being buried in the rubble we must loosen our grasp and leave them behind. Once we’ve escaped, however, we should not be content to remain among the ruins—we must clear the wreckage and learn to build anew. Only in this way, says Nietzsche, can humanity avoid certain nihilism.

38 I am grateful to Lawrence von Buskirk for pointing this out to me.
39 Nietzsche, The Will to Power, 545.
40 Ibid, 555.
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