

## Transcendence and Life: Nietzsche on the “Death of God”

### Abstract

The aim of this essay is to reflect on the implications of the thought of the death of God with a view to two related themes. The first has to do with the a-teleological interpretation of Being and the world as a result of the collapse of the transcendent realm which heretofore had given a meaning to life. The death of God implies that no finality can be ascribed to either the world or human action. The investigation of this theme necessitates examining one of Nietzsche’s central doctrines, the Eternal Recurrence of the Same. It has long been considered to be the most puzzling idea in Nietzsche’s corpus, to which he himself offered no thorough explanation but simply referred to it obliquely as his “most abysmal thought.” The second theme to be discussed is the nature and the task of thinking after the death of God and its relation to suffering. The a-teleological interpretation of life implies that reason and the good no longer guarantee one another, and that thinking cannot justify suffering in the name of the greater good. The relationship between life and suffering must be re-evaluated and so too must the value of suffering. The point that Nietzsche makes is double; the transformation that he calls for is not only to *affirm* suffering rather than eliminate it, but to affirm that thinking *is* suffering.

### Keywords

Nietzsche, Death of God, Eternal Recurrence of the Same, Transcendence.

## Aşkılık ve Yaşam: Nietzsche ve “Tanrının Ölümü Üzerine”

### Özet

Bu çalışmanın amacı Tanrı’nın ölümü düşüncesinin iki tema çerçevesinde incelenmesidir.. İlk tema şimdiye kadar hayata anlamını veren aşkılık alanının çökmesi sonucu varlığın ve dünyanın teleolojik yorumlanması ile ilgili. Tanrı’nın ölümü ne dünyaya ne de insan eylemine bir sonuç yüklenemeyeceğini ima eder. Bu temanın araştırılması Nietzsche’nin ana doktrinlerinden biri olan Aynının Bengi Dönüşü’nün incelenmesini gerektirir. Bu kavram, uzun süreden beri Nietzsche’nin eserleri içinde anlaşılması en zor olanlardan biri olarak değerlendirilir. Nietzsche de kavramın detaylı bir analizini vermemiş sadece “en

dipsiz düşünce” olduğuna değinmiştir. Tartışılacak ikinci tema ise Tanrı’nın ölümünden sonra düşüncenin doğası ve ödevi ile bunun ızdırap çekme ile ilişkisi olacak. Hayatın teleolojik yorumu akıl ve iyinin artık birbirinin teminatı olmadığını ima eder. Ayrıca düşünce artık daha yüce iyi uğruna ızdırap çekmeyi temellendiremez. Yaşam ve ızdırap çekme arasındaki ilişki ve buna bağlı olarak ızdırap çekmenin değeri yeniden değerlendirilmelidir. Nietzsche’nin iddiası iki yönlüdür; talep ettiği dönüşüm ızdırabı ortadan kaldırmak yerine onaylar ama düşünmek ızdırap çekmektir.

### Anahtar Terimler

Nietzsche, Aynının Bengi Dönüşü, Aşknlık, Tanrı’nın Ölümü.

Few philosophers are instantly recognizable from a single phrase that seems to sum up the essence of their thought. Friedrich Nietzsche is one of those. ‘God is dead’ is a proclamation that belongs as unmistakably to him as does the *cogito sum* to Descartes or ‘know thyself’ to Socrates. But there is at least one difference between them. From the moment it became known, Nietzsche’s proclamation has been misinterpreted as a provocation or as a battle cry along the lines of Voltaire’s famous *écrasez l’Infâme*.<sup>1</sup> The most common misunderstanding of his statement is as a strident affirmation of atheism, one of the strongest in modern times which asserts both that God doesn’t exist and that religion, especially Christianity and its fraudulent claims about the afterlife and its moral directives for this life, has little or no value left for our secularized and globalized world. The new ethics by which we live is power, if power can be said to have an ethics at all. Nietzsche is often seen as both herald and advocate of the age of the power, and from an ethical point of view the judgment about both is generally negative. Some hold the death of God and the loss of religion as responsible for the loss of moral values, and even if a purely rational basis for ethics is still thought possible, Nietzsche is again seen as an enemy because of his apparently anti-rationalist, even irrationalist views. The loss of God and the loss of reason are the twin maladies of our *Zeitgeist* in which the mad grab for power seems to be the only thing left that defines the goals of individuals, groups and states.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Literally, “wipe out the infamous!” *L’infame* in this case refers to the Catholic Church, its fanaticism and claims to authority. Although Nietzsche admired Voltaire, his aims regarding Christianity are much different than the celebrated *philosophe*. “God is dead” is not a call for action in the name of science and rationality but a diagnosis of a historical destiny.

<sup>2</sup> Two of the more well-known figures that criticize Nietzsche’s philosophy as irrationalist are Jürgen Habermas and Luc Ferry. In *The Philosophical Discourse of the Modern*, Habermas argues that Nietzsche gives up on the project of reason that is announced in the Enlightenment completely in favor of a mythology of the Dionysian. In *Why we are not Nietzscheans*, Luc Ferry and Alain Renault in a similar manner claim that Nietzsche’s attack on democracy and argumentation as decadent forms of rationalism in modernity lead him to espouse a new form of authoritarianism. [Ferry, 106]

Although views such as these have been questioned significantly for a long time and more so lately, they are still prevalent enough to perpetuate a distorted picture of Nietzsche and his ideas—superficial at best and almost always misleading, especially if they discourage us from addressing the real concerns and themes of a philosopher who has rightfully been regarded as one of the major influences on our time. A hundred years after his death this fact has not changed. Nietzsche's presence in contemporary thinking not only in philosophy but also in art, politics, ethics and religion has grown dramatically, just as Nietzsche himself predicted it would do. "One day my name will be associated with the memory of something tremendous—a crisis without equal on earth. . ."(EH, 326) And what is this tremendous event? He identifies it using various expressions, as the 'revaluation of all values,' the 'uncovering of Christian morality,' or as nihilism, all of which are either synonyms for or inseparably tied to the death of God. The wording chosen by Nietzsche for his proclamation suggests that there is far more at stake than a simple affirmation of atheism. The death of God is an *event* whereas atheism is a belief. This should be noted from the outset. One chooses not to believe in God just as one chooses to believe in progress or the survival of the fittest and so on. Belief is a matter of considering-something-true, but when Nietzsche says that God is dead, he understands it as a world-historical event that has changed the nature of European culture and civilization irreversibly. If the Christian God has become unbelievable (GS §343), this is a symptom for a greater change, one that pertains to the fundamental interpretation of the world and of life that has been part of European culture since its beginnings.

The aim of this essay is to reflect on the implications of the thought of the death of God with a view to two related themes. The first has to do with the a-teleological interpretation of Being and the world as a result of the collapse of the transcendent realm which heretofore had given a meaning to life. Teleology refers to the study of ends and purposes in relation to beings as a whole, and more specifically to the question concerning final causes or ultimate ends. The death of God implies that no finality can be ascribed to either the world or human action. As Nietzsche remarks, "the aim is lacking; "why?" finds no answer." (WP §2, p. 8) The investigation of this theme necessitates examining one of Nietzsche's central doctrines, that which he named as the Eternal Recurrence of the Same. It has long been considered to be the most puzzling idea in Nietzsche's corpus, to which he himself offered no thorough explanation but simply referred to it obliquely as his "most abysmal thought."

The second theme to be discussed is the nature and the task of thinking after the death of God and its relation to suffering. Thinking *qua* rationality has been taken to be man's proper nature through which he frees himself from prejudice and false opinion in the pursuit of the true and the good. The priority given to rationality has been based on a belief that the final purposes of the world and the aims of human action can be brought into a harmony, even though they may appear to be at odds in the particular case. The pursuit of universal knowledge offers us the surest path toward the good life, and progress towards the good life involves the alleviation of suffering, especially unnecessary suffering. If however the alliance between reason and the good, between thinking and progress is broken, then thinking cannot justify suffering in the name of the greater good. The relationship between life and suffering must be re-evaluated and

so too must the value of suffering. The point that Nietzsche makes is double; the transformation that he calls for is not only to *affirm* suffering rather than eliminate it, but to affirm that thinking *is* suffering. Our discussion of these two themes will begin with a clarification of the meaning of the death of God. The relation between the collapse of transcendence and the eternal recurrence of the same will then be discussed, and after that, the problem of suffering as an issue for thinking.

## The Death of God

Of the various statements concerning the death of God, the most well known is the parable of the madman in Book Three of the *Gay Science*.

"Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly, "I seek God! I seek God!""

One of the noteworthy features of this scene is that the loss of the belief in God has already become a part of the public world.

"As many of those who do not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter. Why, did he get lost? said one."

It is the man of the market place who no longer believes in God. He lives quite comfortably and contently in his atheism, which suits the lifestyle of a secularized world in which conducting business sets the agenda. The madman is by contrast the one who seeks after God because he is genuinely distressed by his withdrawal.

"Whither is God" he cried. "I shall tell you. *We have killed him*—you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how have we done this? How were we able to drink up the sea. . . What did we do when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving now?"

To which he then adds, "Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing?" The men of the marketplace are completely unaware of the catastrophe that has befallen them until the words of the madman reach their ears. They stand there astonished and speechless. However, their loss for words is telling; not only have they not heard, they do not wish to hear. That would require a leap out of the everyday and a leap into the question concerning the fundamental values that justify their lives, something they have no interest in doing.

"At last he threw his lantern to the ground, and it broke and went out. "I come too early," he said then; "my time has not come yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering—it has not yet reached the ears of man."

The extraordinary character of this event comes to the fore in that it has happened, but not yet arrived. It has taken place but it has not been recognized as having happened.

“Deeds, though done, still require time to be seen and heard. This deed is still more distant from them than the most distant stars—and yet they have done it themselves.”<sup>3</sup>

Thus the madman concludes.

It is obvious that atheism is not the issue that concerns Nietzsche. The loss of the belief in God is already present in crowd. But how can Nietzsche be so sure that the death of God is an event that has taken place, and yet not yet arrived? How can that be? The event cannot have the character of a simple matter of fact or a positive historical occurrence witnessed by someone at a certain place and time. It must therefore correspond to a spiritual occurrence to which certain empirical phenomena can be referred to as signs, but which becomes factual only if it is placed within the unfolding of a truth that comes to light over time, which can only be brought to light through an act of interpretation that comprehends the whole of the history of the West since the Christian God first appeared as the governing principle of life and thought. The interpretation is needed in order to make the event “arrive” in the sense that it articulates the event and through it, the event becomes itself: what is at stake in the death of God is the realization that the values that have sustained an entire way of life have devalued themselves—“and yet they have done it themselves.” The crowd in the marketplace no longer believes in God, and so they belong in a certain way to an event that has taken place, but they have not paid any heed to it. Instead, they go about their everyday business with the false security that in life one need not trouble oneself with idle questions about God and ultimate purposes, and that the pursuit of happiness is the only thing that matters.

A second statement by Nietzsche adds clarification to the enigmatic character of this event. “The greatest recent event—that “God is dead,” that the belief in the Christian God is becoming unbelievable—is already casting its first shadows over Europe.” (GS §343) Nietzsche once again identifies three ways in which the event can be said not to have arrived. It is first of all too great and too distant to be understood, the “tidings” have not even arrived yet, and least of all is there any understanding of “what this event really means.” The discrepancy between the event and its arrival is one that consists of the absence of interpretation in a double sense. In the first sense, the meaning of the event has not been unfolded or articulated in any way; in the second and more fundamental sense, the event *as such* has not been recognized. There is no “as such” of the event, because this would involve bringing the event to language and naming it. What has thus not yet arrived is a thinking through of the meaning of the event, which involves the “whole of our European morality” rather than the question of the existence or non-existence of God. To be sure, there have been certain signs pointing to it, but *what it is* that they point toward is still hidden in obscurity.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> GS §125.

<sup>4</sup> “Looking at nature as if it were proof of the goodness and governance of a god. . . that is all over now, that has man’s conscience against it. Has existence any meaning at all? It will require a few centuries before this question can even be heard completely and in its full depth.” (GS §357, p. 307)

The meaning of the death of God lies in the sphere of moral values and valuation, and what the name "God" refers to is a hierarchical system of values that affirms otherworldly salvation based on the denigration of worldly existence. Nietzsche's primary aim will be to uncover the many consequences of its collapse. While it is certainly true that Nietzsche is referring to the Christian God in these passages, it is no less true that it stands for a great deal more than that. The "shadows" that are spreading themselves over Europe involve nearly every aspect of life, and *life* is basic phenomenon to which all interpretations and perspectives on religion are related. Martin Heidegger has offered a concise and illuminating summary of the meaning of Nietzsche's thought which is worth quoting at some length:

"God is the name for the realm of Ideas and ideals. This realm of the suprasensory has been considered since Plato, or more specifically since late Greek and Christian interpretation of Platonic philosophy, to be the true and genuinely real world.

The pronouncement "God is dead" means: The suprasensory world is without effective power. It bestows no *life*. Metaphysics, i.e. for Nietzsche Western philosophy understood as Platonism, is at an end." ("The Word of Nietzsche: God is Dead," 61)

Several things are notable in this passage. First, the religious-moral interpretation of life is what Heidegger calls the metaphysical. The second is that the religious and moral world view of Christianity is decidedly Platonic in character. The third is that both the religious-moral and the metaphysical gain their justification only in relation to life: do they bestow life or take it away? Do they empower life or weaken it? Do they set a goal that life can aim at or do they deprive life of its ultimate aims? In short, do they affirm life, or do they deny life by depriving it of meaning? Nietzsche's answer is unequivocal. Despite whatever advantages the Christian moral interpretation of the world may have granted concerning man's absolute value and dignity, this advantage is gained at the price of turning the will against life: "Moral value judgments are ways of passing sentence, negations; morality is a way on turning one's back on the will to existence." (WP §11, p 11)

It is now possible to give a more precise account of the character of this deferred event. The loss of belief in the Christian God is due to a long historical process in which the fundamental tenets of Christian morality, which are metaphysical in character, have been shown to be false, mendacious, and even cowardly once they are subject to critical scrutiny in the name of the very same truthfulness that Christianity as Platonism has espoused. The scientific conscience that prevails in modernity can no longer accept the untruth of Christian teaching. What is more, at the heart of Christianity as a "Platonism for the people" lies a devaluation of everything sensuous and everything "this-worldly" in favor of an over-valuation of all the ideals that transcend the worldly. Once the meaning of the world and of life is exiled into the "Hinterwelt" of the transcendent and everything in this life is given meaning only in relation to that which lies beyond it, then an abyss opens up between the two worlds which is destined to collapse. Yet there is something more. Part of the reason why it is bound to fail is that the metaphysical separation of the transcendent from the world down here is also a *moral* valuation. Metaphysics and morality in Christianity are inseparable. To affirm the transcendent

realm as the source of all meaning one must at the same time *pass judgment* on existence, a judgment motivated by revenge: in this world of change and inconstancy, things are never as they ought to be and so one turns against existence, one incriminates existence and lives only for the fiction of an ideal world, a heavenly paradise that can be reached only after death. The "Yes" to the ideal is a "No" to life and life's Becoming.

The teleological structure of Christian Platonism needs to be brought to light if we want to understand why Nietzsche sees the need for a revaluation of all values and of what it must consist. The critique of morality and metaphysics is inseparably tied to the problem of teleology. If the death of God is Nietzsche's phrase for the collapse of the entire moral edifice that sustained life up to this point in European history, then the resulting sense of worthlessness, aimlessness, the "why" that has no answer are symptoms of the fact that life can no longer aim beyond itself towards another world, a "Hinterwelt", and that it is precisely this Otherworld that has collapsed.

What does Christian morality set as life's aim? At his most polemical, Nietzsche castigates both the morality and religion of Christianity for being "completely out of touch with reality." It consists of an entirely "fictitious world" with an "imaginary teleology" in which one lives entirely for the sake of the otherworldly, to enter the kingdom of God and to await the eternal life. (AC, p. 15) By means of this falsification and devaluation of reality, the Christian God has degenerated into a "contradiction of life instead of its transfiguration and eternal yes!" (AC, p.18) Once Christian morality places life's aim beyond life, once God the creator becomes identical with God as Good, then transcendence becomes total, and nothing *in* life has worth except as it serves the beyond. This denial of immanence is fatal to Christianity, for once any form of transcendence *within* life is denied, once the meaning of life cannot be found *in* life itself, then we are made to live for something which never *is*, which is always to come but which never arrives. "The whole of history is in fact the experimental refutation of the principle of the so-called 'moral world order'." (EH, p. 145)

With the death of God this form of transcendence collapses. This is in fact the primary meaning of this event: the structure of transcendence inherited from Platonism has become impossible. Even the latest attempts at establishing a meaning to life through Humanism, feeble though they may be, do not bridge the abyss that has opened up. Thus does Zarathustra speak of the "last man." "We have invented happiness"—say the last man, and they blink." And likewise, of the last man Zarathustra remarks, "Everyone wants the same, everyone is the same;" "one is clever and knows all that has happened;" "one has one's little pleasures for the day and one's little pleasures for the night;" (*Zarathustra's Prologue*, p. 13) The last man takes progress and happiness to be the goals of life and does not seek transcendence at all but rather contentment. It is the last gasp of transcendence in so far as it aims at nothing beyond itself, and a humanity that aims at nothing beyond or ahead of itself has ceased to be human.

Why is the last man so despicable? Because he is incapable of overcoming himself by setting a goal for himself. This makes him inferior even to religious man, for at least the latter thinks of humanity as poised in between the animal and the divine. Likewise, man is a transitional figure for Nietzsche, who is on the way from the animal to something higher, which can no longer be God. "All beings so far have created

something beyond themselves: and you want to be the ebb of that great tide, and would rather go back to the beast than overcome man?” This aptly describes modern man’s dilemma. In so far as he is compelled to go beyond his base animal nature and strive for the eternal, Christian man creates a goal that gives human life a sense of worth precisely through its moral-metaphysical doctrine. However once this valuation of life collapses, modern man is left only with his animal being, which gives him nothing to affirm.<sup>5</sup> “What is the ape to man? A laughing-stock or a painful embarrassment.” (Z, p. 9) The reversion back to the animal provides man with nothing he can affirm, because *affirmation* involves a projection of what is highest and most worthy out ahead of oneself. For this the animal cannot suffice.<sup>6</sup>

To summarize the foregoing, there are two major consequences that follow from the thought of the death of God. The first is the collapse of transcendence and with it, the disappearance of a sense of moral obligation that gives an aim and a value to life. The second is the impossibility of interpreting life as a transition from animality to divinity. This renders our human existence and the very definition of our humanity as questionable. Like the tightrope walker in *Zarathustra’s Prologue*, humanity stands over an abyss, the “infinite nothing” through which we are straying. When humanity has lost its essence, which consisted of a going-over, then it has nowhere to go.

## The Value of Religion

Given what has been said about the meaning of the death of God, can we conclude that Nietzsche is against religion as such? To answer this question one must keep in mind that Nietzsche’s main objection to Christianity is that it separates the divine from life in such a way that the former *deprives* the latter of any value.

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<sup>5</sup> Much as Nietzsche admires Darwinism it has a major flaw. It reduces human action to a single goal, survival, which as Nietzsche points out, simply reduces life to a common denominator which will never be able take man out *beyond* himself as he is now. See for instance *Twilight of the Idols*, aphorism 14 entitled “Anti-Darwin:” “As far as the famous ‘struggle for existence’ is concerned, this seems to me to be more of an opinion than a proven fact at the moment.” To which he adds, “where there is a struggle, it is a struggle for *power*.” (TI, p. 199)

<sup>6</sup> It is interesting to consider this in light of contemporary research in biology, genetics, neuroscience, cognitive theory, and other various attempts to explain human behavior from an evolutionary perspective. There has been a virtual explosion of this kind of research, but what does it accomplish? If anything, the possibility for establishing a set of values that might provide some kind of binding force for society or create a sense of moral obligation seems even more remote than before. This has grave social and political consequences. We are policed and administered in the contemporary world, which can surely change our behavior, but the power that binds is that of force and a threat to conform, not obligation. Foucault’s work on biopolitics has explored the various aspects of this in depth. See also the work of Giorgio Agamben, especially *Means without Ends*, where he argues that the recent history of politics in the West is characterized by a “zone of indistinguishability,” where political life which is embodied in the citizen and bare life which is embodied in the biological fact of being human are becoming increasingly difficult to separate.



Nietzsche’s stance could only be interpreted universally if he also claimed that all religions regardless of time or place were equally hostile to life. There is plenty of evidence to show that this is not the case, and so the label of “anti-religious” is inappropriate. On the contrary, an *affirmative* religion that remains consistent with the thought of the death of God is entirely possible.

“A people that still believes in itself will still have its own god. In the figure of this god, a people will worship the conditions that have brought it to the fore, its virtues, - it projects the pleasure it takes in itself, its feeling of power, into a being that it can thank for all of this. Whoever has wealth will want to give; a proud people needs a god to *sacrifice* to. . . On this presupposition, religion is a form of gratitude.” (AC §16, p. 13)

What should be noted once again is that Nietzsche interprets religion from the perspective of value. It is not so much whether religion *has* value as to what value a given religion *projects* on behalf of a people. Nietzsche’s conception is cultural-anthropological to be sure, but in a quite extraordinary way. Religion is not so much a set of practices through which a people expresses itself in relation to both the animal and the divine and through which it establishes a cosmic and social order; the *will* to religion arises from a desire to embody the highest virtues in a being and by means of this embodiment, to exemplify what is most worthy. *Giving thanks* to the god makes possible the celebration of that which a people deem to be the highest and most excellent—its virtues.

Once again it is clear that the existence or non-existence of God is not the question, but rather to what extent a religion serves as a spur to life’s essential movement of overcoming itself in the creation and positing of a value. This helps to further illuminate the reasons why Nietzsche considers the death of God to be an historical event that is neither simply factual nor the result of an underlying law that determines such events. Claims that Nietzsche is a historicist miss the point, if by ‘historicism’ one is referring to the view, stated most definitively by Karl Popper, that believes in the existence of non-empirical, non-verifiable laws that govern the destiny of history.<sup>7</sup> Nietzsche does speak of a historical destiny, but its necessity is of a different nature than of a deterministic law. On the one hand, Nietzsche does have recourse to empirical evidence that he believes refutes Christian doctrine. The “experimental refutation of the principle of the so-called ‘moral world order’” by the whole of history is something that he carried out in greater detail in *Human, All-too Human* and *Daybreak*. On the other hand and more importantly, the very concept of ‘event’ cannot be viewed from a traditional scientific perspective which separates fact from value, or fact from interpretation.

Gilles Deleuze in his book on Nietzsche has explained this well. “We will never find the sense of something (of a human, a biological or even a physical phenomenon) if we do not know the force which appropriates the thing, which exploits it, which takes possession of it or is expressed in it.” Something like a phenomenon or an event, he

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<sup>7</sup> Karl Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*. Historicism is a form of monism for Popper. It reduces all events to one single truth. In this context Nietzsche would certainly appear not as a monist but as a pluralist thinker.

writes, is for Nietzsche "not an appearance or even an apparition but a sign, a symptom which finds its meaning in an existing force." (Deleuze 3) If he is right and there is no such thing as a simple appearance for Nietzsche, if that which appears is in fact a sign or a symptom of a certain configuration of forces, then an event signifies nothing less than a certain will that has taken possession of an existing complex of forces and re-configured it, and with that re-configuration not only does the meaning change, but so does the appearance. The history of things is the history of their successive appropriations by a plurality of wills, each of which has a different aim and a different set of values. As such there can be no ultimate end to which things owe their meaning<sup>8</sup>: "whatever exists, having somehow come into being, is again and again reinterpreted to new ends, taken over, transformed, and redirected by some power superior to it." (GM II. §12 p. 77) The point to be made here is that the death of God is likewise an event that comes into being as the result of an interpretation, which means something more than the act of deciphering a text. Interpretation *is* an act of appropriation that subjects the entire history of Christian metaphysics and morality to a new force that strives for dominance. As such, the sense and value of God undergo a change from that which is identical to the True, the Good, the Eternal and the One to that which, from the perspective of life, expresses a will to nothingness as the ultimate consequence of the devaluation of life. And what drives the will to nothingness is in turn, a spirit of revenge.

## The Eternal Recurrence of the Same and the Problem of Transcendence

The death of God heralds the end of transcendence. In the wake of the death of God where no ultimate meaning or aim is possible, there emerges a plurality of appropriations and thus a plurality of senses, but as long as the problem of transcendence is not clarified and answered, the possibility for overcoming the nihilism of the modern situation remains in doubt.

Nietzsche experienced the force of this catastrophe and addressed this problem with an unequalled courage and resolve. His response is simple yet supremely difficult, because it forces man to put his entire being at risk in so far as he is "man," and to create a new mode of valuation. It is not simply a set of new values that is needed, but a revaluation of all values in terms of their place of origin and the process of their creation. What are the elements of this revaluation? In his book entitled *Nietzsche's Philosophy*, Eugen Fink sums up the four major ideas that comprise the revaluation of all values. They are in order: the death of God, the overman, the will to power, and the eternal recurrence of the same.<sup>9</sup> (Fink 73] It is beyond the scope of this essay to address all four at length. For the purposes of this essay I have chosen to focus on the eternal recurrence of the same because it pertains most directly to the problem of collapse of transcendence.

<sup>8</sup> This once again confirms that Nietzsche cannot be charged with historicism.

<sup>9</sup> "Overman" is the accepted translation of *Übermensch* because overman is not a type of man but the movement of *going-over* man.

The question to be raised at this point is the question of whether transcendence is still possible after the death of God. Is it possible for man to surpass the condition of nihilism and to posit new aims, and if so, where does it lie—in a separate realm or in the future? Is transcendence possible that remains *in the world*?

Restating the previous conclusion, with the collapse of the ideal realm, the value of life no longer transcends life. This can lead either to a sense of worthlessness and a will to nothing or to a new search for the possibility of transcendence in immanence.

At first glance, Nietzsche espouses a kind of immanence. "*But there is nothing outside the whole!*" writes Nietzsche in *Twilight of the Idols* which implies that nothing, neither God nor any other *causa prima* lies outside of the world. From a cosmological perspective, there are no ultimate purposes. "We have invented the concept of 'purpose': there are no purposes in reality." (TI §8, p. 182) The problem is however whether life can itself be its own value, but as long as 'life' is understood scientifically, this also seems doubtful, and Nietzsche's aforementioned criticisms of Darwinism attest to this. That is to say, the biological sciences cannot establish a purpose for life because their primary aim is to describe its causal mechanisms. Nor can survival or the competition with other species act as values; they are basic conditions for the existence of organic life but not ends.

What is needed is a different concept of life. Life itself must become transcendence, not toward that which is outside the world, but toward life itself. What is the Being of life for Nietzsche? The Being of life is becoming. This statement stands directly opposed to Christian-Platonic metaphysics which rests on the separation of the two. Being is permanent and unchanging; becoming is the opposite. However, Nietzsche's point is that this over-valuation of Being does not think becoming at all. For Plato, there is in becoming always a confusion: one can never say whether something is or is not, and for that reason a changing thing is never one thing at all but rather a plurality which is unintelligible and what is more, unjust. Consequently, the changeable thing can only be justified by an unchanging ideal that makes it *one thing*. So how then can the Being of becoming be thought otherwise than as a privation of Being? This is what must be done. "Becoming must be explained without recourse to final intentions; becoming must appear justified at every moment; the present must absolutely not be justified by reference to a future, nor the past by reference to the present." (WP §708, p. 377) What is notable here is not only the denial of final ends, but the relation that this has to the problem of justice and to time. What Nietzsche would appear to affirm is contingency, in which each and every moment of time is self-justifying. This would also seem to deny the possibility for moral judgments that rely upon an "ought" and indeed it does. Since that which "ought to be" transcends that which is, and the "is", i.e. the state of affairs in the world in the present, is measured in relation to an unconditional moral law that lies outside of the world, then it is clear once again that the moral interpretation of the world is what is at stake. Thus, the attempt to think the Being of becoming coincides with the attempt to overturn Christian morality and its successors.

To carry out this task might very well be the most difficult problem raised by Nietzsche's philosophy. On the one hand, life as becoming is the will to power. Its essence consists of a continual going beyond whatever the valuation of life "is" at a

given time for the sake of setting itself a new purpose through the creation of a new value(s). The movement of life is not an aimless becoming that is characterized by impermanence in the way that Platonism described it; it is rather the expression of power that realizes itself not by hoarding that power but by expending it in a creative impulse. On this issue, the difference between Nietzsche's conception of life in contradistinction to the Darwinian could not be greater. The main fault in Darwinism lies in its interpretation of the evolution of organic life as a process of adaptation to external constraints imposed by the environment. This defines life as essentially reactive, whereas will to power interprets life as *active* and dynamic: "the essential thing in the life process is precisely the tremendous shaping, form-creating force working from within which *utilizes* and *exploits* "external circumstances". (WP §647, p. 344)

On the other hand, the Being of becoming is reinterpreted as the eternal recurrence of the same. "Return is the being of that which becomes," writes Deleuze. (Deleuze 24) Much has been written about Nietzsche's idea of the eternal recurrence of the same. There is in fact a long tradition of Nietzsche criticism which considers it to be neither true nor coherent.<sup>10</sup> This view has come under increasing challenge, and that in fact Nietzsche's idea presents us with an interpretation of beings as a whole which belongs essentially together with his other major ideas.<sup>11</sup> There are several significant places in Nietzsche's corpus where he invokes this idea, the first being Book Four of the *Gay Science*, and the most significant by far being the third book of *Zarathustra* in which Zarathustra's destiny is finally revealed to him by his animals: "behold, *you are the teacher of the eternal return*,-- that is now *your* destiny!" (Z III "The Convalescent, p. 189)

What is the meaning of the eternal return of the same? Two separate statements offer some clues. The first is from *Zarathustra*. Nietzsche places the speech in the mouths of Zarathustra's animals, the eagle and the serpent:

"Everything goes, everything returns; the wheel of being rolls eternally. Everything dies, everything blossoms forth again; the year of being run eternally. .

In every Now being begins; the ball There rolls around every Here. The center is everywhere. The path of eternity is crooked." (Z, p. 187)

The second one is a fragment from Nietzsche's *Nachlass*:

"The world exists; it is not something that becomes, not something that passes away. Or : it becomes, it passes away, but it has never begun to become and never ceased from passing away—it maintains itself in both." (WP §1066, p. 548)

What do these two passages suggest? First, their scope is cosmological. The movement of beings in relation to time is circular and cyclical, but it is not simply beings that return to where they have been, it is time itself that returns. According to the traditional conception, time stretches infinitely in two asymmetrical directions, the past

<sup>10</sup> See the works of Lou Salomé, Georg Simmel, Karl Jaspers, and Walter Kaufmann.

<sup>11</sup> Among them are the works of Heidegger, Fink, Deleuze, Klossowski, and more recently Lawrence Lampert, and Paul Loeb.

and the future. The past or the "it was" is finished and cannot be changed. The future or the "it will be" is not yet determined and is thus open to a range of possibilities. The problem with the traditional interpretation of time is that, even though it assumes that time runs infinitely in both directions, it implicitly assumes that there is a beginning and an end, an origin and a telos. If time runs along a line, the infinity of time appears paradoxical.<sup>12</sup> According to this new interpretation, time neither starts nor finishes, so there cannot be either an origin nor an end to becoming, and that is precisely what recurrence implies: it is becoming without a beginning and without a final state. It is that which "has never begun to become." But what is it exactly that returns over and over again eternally? Nietzsche is not always consistent on this point. At times he seems to suggest that all beings and all events return, that "this life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more." (GS §341, p. 273) This conception does not seem very credible because it contradicts our basic experience that in fact things *do* change and that the future is *not* the same as the past. This conception would seem to be further contradicted by Nietzsche's own claim that the death of God and the uncovering of Christian morality are events without equal and that they mark a clear break of the history of humanity into two parts. "Some live before him [Zarathustra], some live after him. . ." ("Why I am a Destiny," EH, p. 150)

Yet there is another way of interpreting the eternal return. What returns eternally are not the events themselves but the moment of decision *for* a transvaluation of values. The "new" takes place as the repetition of the same moment of decision that has already been, a repetition that recurs eternally. And what is repeated? What is the event that recurs over and over again? The event of a beginning; paradoxically however, this implies that there has never been an origin or a beginning *ex nihilo* to which everything else is posterior. In so far as there has never been an original beginning, every return becomes a new beginning, and yet each new beginning is never original. The movement of eternal return denies the existence of a First Time.

How can we make sense of this paradox? There are two ways. First, the eternal recurrence implies that beginnings never happen just once at the start of a time sequence. Every beginning already exists in relation to what it repeats. Thus to put it another way, every return repeats the act of beginning with a difference. That is to say, the beginning that is repeated reinterprets the complex of events, entities and values attached to them, and most of all, it reinterprets the *self* that wills it. If we recall that interpretation is synonymous with the appropriation of a thing according to the configuration of forces that belong to it, the re-interpretation that takes place in the recurrence re-configures the forces. Forces that may have been subordinate can become dominant and vice versa. Far from producing the monotonous return to identity, the eternal recurrence of the same produces differentiation, a new configuration of forces which are the product of a new will to power.

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<sup>12</sup> Kant's first antinomy expresses this cosmological dilemma. That the world has a beginning in time and that it has no beginning in time and space are both arguable positions which reason cannot resolve. See Kant, "The Antinomy of Pure Reason. First Conflict of Transcendental Ideas," *Critique of Pure Reason* A426-A435. pp. 458-464]

The second way is to realize that the eternal recurrence is not bound by causality. As Kant showed in his first *Critique*, causality is the rule of necessary succession in time. In so far as one state necessarily follows in time from a previous state, causality provides the rule for understanding objective events, however this also creates the problem of an infinite regress which cannot be resolved by the understanding. Since every event in time is conditioned by the rule of necessary succession, it is always preceded by another event *ad infinitum*. Since the occurrence of events in the world forms an infinite series, that which is eternal can only belong to another realm, the realm of the unconditional into which the pure intuition of time does not extend. In the traditional conception of time therefore, eternity remains separate. However, when time is no longer interpreted in this way but rather as the repetition of the moment of a beginning, causality no longer forms the rule of succession and eternity is no longer separated from time. Movement is what is eternal; it consists of the return of the act of going beyond. When the will re-creates by re-valuing, it decides for a future that will also become the past. What will be decided will become what has been decided.

A couple of examples may help to clarify. If we decide to renounce God in the name of a Humanism that affirms the value of Man as the ultimate aim, then the future we have projected is also one that reinterprets the past. What is past has been reappropriated so that it shows itself as a history of the emergence of Man, of his struggles and development. And yet, the difference between Man and God relies on a certain repetition of God *as* Man. Even though God no longer inhabits the place of transcendence, Man does, which means that the place of transcendence has been repeated and preserved, but with a difference. To offer another example, suppose that a religious political movement demands strict adherence to the letter of the sacred book and its doctrines. This represents a form of willing backwards towards an imagined origin where illumination was pure and unsullied by subsequent history. However such a longing for the origin follows the same movement. The desire to retrieve the past be arises out of a moral judgment, a spirit of revenge that condemns the present in the name of what ought to be. What ought to be—the future that is envisioned—is what has been. However the return to a past that will make things right is not the return to an origin at all, but rather a repetition that produces a new configuration of forces. Such a religious fundamentalism is a thoroughly modern form of will to power, because the strict adherence to the letter of the law as written in the sacred text is *not* a return to the original religion but a *revision* and a *forgetting* of its entire history. In both cases there is no evidence of progress towards some ultimate aim but of an ever-repeating situation in which a new willing takes over and appropriates things through a re-creation of values.

## The Joy of Suffering

The doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same presents an interpretation of the world as a whole which denies the existence of anything outside of life that can justify it. This not only places Nietzsche's doctrine in direct opposition to the Christian promise of redemption in the afterlife, it also puts into question the interpretation of suffering that goes with it. Christianity lives and breathes on the idea that suffering is

punishment for one's sins, and since we are all guilty of original sin, we are all doomed to suffer. For Christianity, the fact of suffering means that life is not just. Suffering therefore is experienced as something negative; it is the means by which we accuse life and find it guilty. We are called upon to accept our suffering as penance and punishment for the very fact of living. Worse than that, as punishment suffering is extended beyond mortal death into the realm of eternal damnation. The famous passage from *Romans* 6:23 proclaims just that. "For the wages of sin *is* death; but the gift of God *is* eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." The death that is spoken of here is a second death, an eternal death that is opposed to the eternal life that awaits the faithful after mortal death.

Eternal recurrence changes this completely. If we accept and affirm that we shall repeat over and over again the events of our lives, then we must also necessarily affirm the sufferings that we undergo. In a sense, transcendence is linked to the desire to live a different life and to escape from suffering. Christianity has idealized this into the notion of the "new life," which can only be obtained through an acceptance of Jesus Christ as the savior who alone can wash away our sins. But what if the "new life" is never new but is always repeated? What if one eternally returns to the moment of re-willing oneself through the creation of new values? Then one cannot separate the good parts of life from the bad and seek to retain only the former, which means that one must say 'Yes' to suffering even though it cannot end in redemption as per Christian teaching. There is no reason why we suffer, no reward that we will receive at the end. Our suffering appears to be quite meaningless, so how could Nietzsche turn this into an affirmation?

Nietzsche's reinterpretation of suffering seems strange. Shouldn't we try to eliminate suffering from our lives? Not necessarily. Once suffering is understood as a negative and harmful thing, then our aim to try and avoid or eliminate it. This is what the Last Man tries to do. In doing so however, we allow suffering to set the terms and conditions for our lives. The avoidance of suffering then rules our destiny, and we in turn become slaves to it. Philip Kain makes the following very insightful comment about this issue: "Embracing eternal recurrence means imposing suffering on oneself, meaningless suffering, suffering that just happens, suffering for no reason at all. But at the very same time, this creates the *innocence* of existence. The meaninglessness of suffering means the innocence of suffering." (Kain, "Nietzsche, the Eternal Return and the Horror of Existence," 59) There is much to recommend this reading. What would we be without our sufferings after all? Do they not make us who we are as much as our happiness, perhaps even more so? We are not shaped simply by the act of enduring our sufferings patiently and working to overcome them, but by *affirming* them, and those who do are freed from the weight of judging, blaming and devaluing life. We can summarize Nietzsche's point by saying that the affirmation of life without goal or aim requires the affirmation of suffering; only then can we be freed from the spirit of revenge; only then can we be freed from the Nay-saying of Christian morality.

There is yet one further aspect of the affirmation of suffering that must be noted. The common idea of the course of human life is one that proceeds irreversibly in one direction from birth to death. Our personal identity is intimately bound to this interpretation of time—it is assumed to remain the same throughout our lives because this "I" that I am is co-present at every moment through which I pass and throughout the

entire succession of nows that will make up my life. This is merely an assumption however. If time is not constituted as a series of nows but as the eternal recurrence of the same, then the self to which “I” return may be the same but is never identical. Nietzsche’s idea that I re-live my life innumerable times suggests that what I actually pass through are multiple selves, and that my life consists of a plurality of selves in which I am constantly returning to a self which is certainly mine, but which is also different from the self that I was. My identity does not remain the same through the changes. I do not live according to a history that develops along a single, successive line of moments and hours and days, but as a repetition of myself that is lived through a series of different individualities. This does not mean that there is no “I,” but that the “I” constantly returns to itself only by becoming other.

Remarkably enough, the eternal recurrence of the same not only makes it possible for us to experience the innocence of life, but it also makes it possible for us to finally break with a certain notion of the self. Christian morality is inseparable from the idea of the self as a person with a conscience who is capable of feeling guilty. This interiorization of the self is necessary for us to think and act as morally responsible agents. As free-willed beings we enjoy a certain independence from the temptations and injustices of the world, which solidifies into the notion of a person who is in possession of an identity that remains essentially the same. The eternal recurrence of the same releases us from this idea of the self and the corresponding accusation of existence. “There are two kinds of sufferers: first, those who suffer from a *superabundance of life* – they want a Dionysian art as well as a tragic outlook and insight into life – then, those who suffer from an *impoverishment of life*. . .” (NW, p. 271)

“Dionysian” suffering is not penance and it does not make one passive. It is life as the will to power expending itself in a new release of energy that does away with the stability of existing forces. The joy of suffering arises from the feeling of discordance that results when the overabundance of the will to power encounters the feeling of security of an existing life, and surmounts it. To affirm the return of is this joy-in-suffering represents an unrestrained affirmation of eternally returning life, which serves no other end except for itself.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Abbreviations of Nietzsche’s works:

- EH : Ecce Homo
- GS : The Gay Science
- WP : The Will to Power
- Z : Thus Spoke Zarathustra
- AC : The Anti-Christ
- TI : Twilight of the Idols
- GM : On the Genealogy of Morals
- NW : Nietzsche contra Wagner



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