Nietzsche on eternal return

THE IDEA OF ETERNAL RETURN
Nietzsche says that no sacrifice is too great to help bring new philosophers into existence (§23). What could justify this? The quick answer is that they justify life, even with all its suffering. With them, it is possible to say that it – life, history – is worth it. The goal of humanity, says in Nietzsche in an early work, lies in its highest specimens. (Untimely Meditations, II §9)

Throughout history, human beings have suffered terribly, physically and mentally. For what purpose? We deceive ourselves about this to try to make life bearable. One self-deception is to say that this life is not worth much, that there is a better, greater world, that we suffer because we sin. But there is no transcendent world. This life is it. With no transcendent world, are we left with the judgement that life is worthless, pointless – pessimism?

We need a new ideal, one based in this life, not denying it. We need ‘the ideal of the most audacious, lively, and world-affirming human being, one who has learned not only to accept and bear that which has been and is, but who also wants to have it over again, just as it was and is, throughout all eternity’ (§56). The ability to say ‘Yes’ to life is the ultimate mark of someone who is ‘higher’ and a genuine free spirit.

This idea of ‘having it over again… throughout all eternity’ is the idea of the ‘eternal return’ of the world and everything that happens. In his unpublished notebooks, Nietzsche toyed with the idea that the world actually does repeat itself, that everything that has happened in the past will happen again, that everything that happens in the future has happened in a previous cycle. But he never defended the idea in print. So we should not interpret him as making a metaphysical claim. Instead, Nietzsche presents it as a psychological test: what sort of person could will the eternal return of the world?

To will eternal return is different from merely accepting it or resigning oneself to it. It is to want it. Second, in what you will to happen again, you change nothing. So to will eternal return is to will all the wars, genocide, natural disasters, diseases, torture, mental illness and broken hearts that have ever occurred. All events are ‘entangled’ with each other. So to will the return of any happiness or joy is to will the return of every sorrow. Third, to will something is also to accept responsibility for it. You can be held accountable for what you deliberate choose to do. To will eternal return, then, is to be able to accept responsibility for the entirety of human history. New philosophers ‘assign value and rank according to how many and how many sorts of things one person could bear, could take upon himself, by how far a person could extend his responsibility’ (§212). To will eternal return is to take responsibility, of a kind, for everything that happens. New philosophers will take on themselves responsibility for the future of the human race, to make of us something ‘higher’ (§61).
So what would it take to be able to will eternal return? Above all, one needs to resist pity for people suffering: ‘taking all the pain of the world together, who could dare decide whether the sight of it should necessarily seduce and coerce us to feel pity in particular, thus redoubling the pain?’ (§30) – why should we add more suffering to the suffering we see? ‘There are heights of the soul from which vantage point even tragedy ceases to have a tragic effect’. To will eternal return is to have a particular perspective on suffering that is able to say ‘Yes’ to it because it is part of life.

Free spirits express a strong, healthy yearning for life, even as it is. They do not seek to avoid or minimize suffering. Suffering is necessary for people to achieve greatness. Free spirits are therefore grateful for everything that is past, all the suffering included, because it has made their lives possible. And in them, the joy of life is deeper and stronger than suffering, even though they suffer terribly because they are deep, insightful people.

We should recall again that Nietzsche does not separate beliefs and life; our beliefs are an expression of our values, and these are an expression of our instincts and our psycho-physiological ‘type’. Free spirits, then, do not just ‘believe’ that life is worth living over and over again, exactly as it is; they are the living embodiment of this affirmation. Their lives are the affirmation of life, and in this way, their lives redeem life, they show it is something that can be affirmed as worthwhile. It is, therefore, possible for life to affirm itself in full self-conscious knowledge. Their existence demonstrates why and how.

New philosophers, then, are the ‘goal’ of humanity and ‘ordinary’ people can be only the means to this end. They are an ideal, ‘everything that mankind could be bred to be’, on which free spirits set their hopes (§203). Nietzsche means ‘breeding’ literally, because new philosophers will be a new psycho-physiological type of human being. You can’t be trained to become a true philosopher:

We have to be born to every higher world; put more clearly, we have to be bred to it. We have a right to philosophy (taking the word in its finest meaning) only because of our origins – here too, ancestors, ‘bloodlines’ are decisive. Many generations have to have prepared the ground for the philosopher’s development. (§213)

Nietzsche can only negate the ascetic ideal, he cannot say what the new values are that new philosophers will create, but they will be ones that do not consider suffering evil. In some of his works, he claims that he says ‘yes’ to life, but in a letter to a friend, he writes ‘I do not wish for life again. How have I borne it? Creatively. What makes me bear the sight of life? The view of the ‘super-man’ [the higher type of human] who affirms life. I have tried to affirm it myself – alas!’

**CRITICISMS**

There are many moral objections that we could make to Nietzsche’s ideal – that it supposes there are ‘higher’, and so ‘lower’, people; that it requires that lower people are sacrificed for the goal of creating ‘higher’ people; that what is worthwhile about life is demonstrated only in the lives of ‘higher’ people. However, these objections presuppose moral values, e.g. of equality, that Nietzsche rejects; and we have not looked in detail at his arguments for rejecting these values. Moral objections, then, will have to deferred to handouts that discuss Nietzsche’s criticism of morality.
However, we can question whether the idea of eternal return has the significance Nietzsche gives it. We are being asked to imagine our response to the thought that everything will recur, just as it has. One response is ‘so what?’. If everything happens again identically, then just as we have no knowledge now of what we did last time, so next time, we will have no knowledge of what we will do this time. We can do nothing to change what happens – so why should we feel any horror at the thought?

But doesn’t the prospect of everything recurring make you feel, e.g. to think that all the suffering that has happened will happen again? Doesn’t this seem worse than it happening just once? But if eternal return makes things seem worse, then we can’t will it. To someone who can affirm eternal return, life recurring seems better, not worse. And Nietzsche is not asking us just to imagine how we feel at the prospect of eternal return, as though we were mere observers, he is asking if we can will it, if we could take responsibility for it. It is one thing to be aware of suffering, another to will it, even as a necessary means to greatness.

A second objection: suppose that we could affirm eternal return; then what? What difference does that make to our lives? How would we live differently? Nietzsche never discusses what new philosophers do. In fact, Nietzsche says that ‘It is not the works, it is the faith that is decisive here’ (§287).

Third, in his requirement that we say ‘yes’ to everything, Nietzsche retains something of the ascetic ideal. He criticises that ideal for its notion of ‘unconditional’ truth and goodness. But isn’t the ‘all-embracing yes’ equally unconditional? It is, but Nietzsche argues that we must embrace it all, or not at all, because everything is entangled. To think that we can separate the good from the bad, the true from the false, suffering from greatness, is an illusion created by the ascetic ideal.

A fourth objection is perhaps the strongest so far: is the attitude of affirming eternal return coherent? There are several reasons for thinking that it is not:

1. We are invited to imagine the return of all events. But a position from which we can see things happening again and again would be outside the cycle of events. From our perspective, as part of the series of events, we experience everything just once, so the perspective embodied in the idea of eternal return is not one available to us (any more than an unconditional perspective on the truth).
2. Developing this, from the perspective of eternal return, one does not wish anything differently. But life itself is not indifference, it is the desire for things to be different (§9). It would therefore be practically inconsistent to affirm life but not to want things to be different.
3. Is transforming our attitude to the past from ‘this is how it happened’ to ‘this is how I will it to be’ a type of self-deception, perhaps self-aggrandizement? There is no willing the past to be as it is. It has happened, end of story.
4. Does it make sense to talk about taking responsibility for human history? In his book, *The Joyful Science* (§337), Nietzsche says that if you could experience the history of humanity as your own history, and survive this amount of suffering and grief, you would experience a greater happiness than anyone has ever known, full of a sense of power and love. But what are we to do with this idea? It is not genuinely achievable, it rests on a psychological impossibility. We cannot coherently aspire to it. Why should this ideal of limitless suffering, responsibility and then happiness be relevant to us, who are limited?
Fifth, the attitude of affirming eternal return seems to contradict other attitudes Nietzsche expresses and attributes to new philosophers. Their affirmation of eternal return is countered by their revulsion at almost all life they meet! Are they really only saying ‘yes’ to themselves? The biggest objection, Nietzsche thought, to affirming eternal return is the return of the ‘small’, ‘lower’ man – which most men are. But to exclude most human life is an odd expression of the affirmation of all life!

Willing at the very general, abstract level of eternal return glosses over the inhumanity of willing this or that particular event (e.g. the Holocaust). At the particular level, Nietzsche is horrified at what he finds – it seems that we can only say ‘yes’ if we have the blurred vision of the very distant perspective. But this is also a self-deception, because it hides the fact that Nietzsche values some things more than others. The ‘yes’ is not an equal ‘yes’ to everything – some things are to be put up with for the sake of other things. But Nietzsche can reply here that this is no objection: the whole point is whether we our will for the end – life in its highest form – is strong enough to will the terrible means.

We can, finally, turn Nietzsche’s method on himself. What is the origin of his valuing new philosophers? We find it, perhaps, in his idea of states of the soul so ‘high’ that suffering does not evoke pity (§30). Nietzsche’s philosophy, we can argue, is an attempt to be or become immune to suffering, to achieve a perspective on life (eternal return) from which nothing would upset, repel or harm him. It is a form of self-protection.

Is this fair? It suggests that Nietzsche seeks to avoid suffering – but while new philosophers may reject pity, they do not seek to avoid suffering. Indeed, they are fierce with themselves in their quest to overcome the ascetic ideal (e.g. §§41, 44); and we may say the same of Nietzsche.