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NIETZSCHE'S ETERNAL RECURRENCE: THE QUESTION OF THE WHAT OF RETURN

Abstract: Renewed interest in *Eternal Recurrence* has surfaced recently as the result of an early note from Nietzsche known as the *Zeitatenlehre*, a note from 1873. This note languished in obscurity until its resurrection in 1952 and numerous commentators have thrown their voice into the arena on *Eternal Recurrence*. Traditionally, *Eternal Recurrence* has been examined from two primary perspectives, the *cosmological* and *hypothetical*, with most of the recent examination adopting a *cosmological* approach. In this article I examine the two traditional interpretations, suggesting that they both fail to adequately reflect a Nietzschean position on *Recurrence*. In particular, they both adopt a similar answer to the problem of the *what* that returns (sequential circularity of events), but approach this answer from two different foundations: one factual, the other hypothetical. I will show that because of this they both come into conflict with Nietzsche's comments on *Eternal Recurrence* and with his philosophy as a unified whole. My solution to this problem will focus on the *Zietatomenlehre* note and the depiction of *Eternal Recurrence* in "On The Vision And The Riddle" in *Zarathustra*, focusing on the significance of the *Moment* to properly understanding *Eternal Recurrence*.

Keywords: Nietzsche, *Eternal Recurrence*, *Zeitatenlehre*, Moment

Much has been written, and more will follow concerning Nietzsche's *Eternal Recurrence*: a topic which seems to consistently resurface, and fittingly so.² *ER* is one of the more enigmatic topics within the Nietzschean corpus and like many of his other topics, such as the *Urbemensch* and the *death of god*, its direct appearance within the texts and notes is limited to a few citations and indirect references, making it difficult to exegetically develop an adequate interpretation of *ER*. Traditionally, there have been two primary approaches to *ER*, the *cosmological* and the *hypothetical*, with each side attempting to establish a clarification of their interpretation. Recently, renewed interest in *ER* has resurfaced as a result of the resurrecting of an obscure and little examined note of the young Nietzsche, a note written in the Spring of 1873 and brought to light

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2 Hereafter referred to as ER.

by Alwin Mittasch in 1952.³ This note, often referenced as the *Zeitatomenlehre* (the time-atom teaching) brought about a flurry of articles, including a number of English translations, and once again I have found the analysis of this enigmatic concept to be inadequate to Nietzsche and his corpus, demanding a recurrence of my own analysis of *ER*. My concern with many of these interpretations is that they construct a mask of Nietzsche's concept and so before tackling *ER* itself, some issues regarding Nietzsche scholarship must first be clarified.

A recent work on Nietzsche by Steven Hicks suggests that a common complaint on Nietzsche's philosophy is that it is irrational and paradoxical.⁴ This complaint has surfaced before, but it overlooks Nietzsche's own comments about his writings. Once Nietzsche breaks with the philological method that defined his educational background, the method of *Altertumswissenschaft* (the *Science of Antiquity*) under which he was educated at Bonn and Leipzig, we are no longer dealing with a Philologist, but Nietzsche the Philosopher has surfaced and he recognizes that this places certain constraints on his thought. In a letter to George Brandes, Nietzsche implores his friend that a 'long logic of a quite determinate philosophic sensibility is involved here,' an indication that Nietzsche was well aware of the repercussions of his stylistic choices, repercussion that might pejoratively influence those who read his work.⁵ In this admonition, Nietzsche is imploring Brandes that his thought is neither isolated nor poetic, but logical and philosophical, and he reiterates this concern for his reading public in *The Genealogy of Morals* where he emphatically states that:

...this alone is fitting for a philosopher. We have no right to *isolated* acts of any kind: we may not make isolated errors or hit upon isolated truths. Rather do our ideas, our values, our yeas and nays, our ifs and buts, grow out of us with the necessity with which a tree bears fruit- related and each with an affinity to each, and evidence of *one* will, *one* health, *one* soil, *one* sun.- Whether *you* like them, these fruits of ours?- But what is that to the trees! What is that to *us*, to us philosophers!⁶

Recognizing that *ER* is a 'fruit' derivative from this '*one* will' it is essential that analysis of *ER* be such that it meets this requirement of 'affinity' otherwise we risk the possibility of masking Nietzsche in a construction not of his own doing.

Further, Nietzsche prides himself on his intellectual *Redlichkeit*, his intellectual integrity, and if we take him at his word, the analysis of *ER* must be compatible and integrate into the corpus that is Nietzsche's thought. As suggested above, seeking such connectedness is complicated by Nietzsche's stylistic decisions, which makes it all too easy to rationalize a position through random selection of pertinent quotes, while avoiding any discrepancies. Such selective substantiation of a position leads to what appears to be a *prima facie* case to support a position, but usually a case that fails on closer exami-

3 Crawford, C., "Nietzsche's Overhuman: Creating on the Crest of the Timepoint" in *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, Penn State University Press, Issue 30, 2005, p. 22.

4 Hicks, S., *Nietzsche and the Nazis, Ockham's Razor*, Loves Park, 2010, p. 95-6.

5 Pfeffer, R., *Nietzsche: Disciple of Dionysus*, Bucknell University Press, Lewisburg, 1972, p. 13.

6 Nietzsche, F., *The Genealogy of Morals*, Vintage, New York, 1989, p. 16.

nation. Historically such cases have surfaced to turn Nietzsche into a characterization of himself and Hicks does this in his examination of Nietzsche's so called irrationality.⁷ What is present in such *prima facie* cases is the appearance of textual justification, the appearance of a supportive foundation for a position, but, and this is essential, in the end they only mask Nietzsche in an inadequate construction. A horrendous exemplification of this is what Abir Taha does in her work *Nietzsche, Prophet of Nazism: The Cult of the Superman*.⁸ Such presentations deform Nietzsche and do a disservice to the man and his philosophy. To avoid constructing such a deformation of Nietzsche's *ER* one must avoid two common mistakes: selective and decontextualization of citations, and conflict with Nietzschean thought as an integrated whole. Nietzsche's *Redlichkeit*, and ours as well, demands that whatever position is presented must have an 'affinity' to Nietzschean Philosophy and avoid direct conflict with those explicit textual references to the topic under discussion, this is especially so when dealing with Nietzsche's mature thought, and it is with the mature thought of *ER* that I am concerned with.

My focus will be on 4 passages that speak directly to *ER*: the *Zeitatenlehre* note from 1873⁹; note #55 from the *Will to Power*¹⁰; the famous 'demon' passage from *The Gay Science*¹¹; and finally 'On the Vision and the Riddle' from the 3rd book of *Zarathustra*.¹² These passages seem to present a rather disjointed and conflicting view of *ER*, offering everything from the scientifically cosmological, to a hypothetical attitudinal approach. If Nietzsche is adamant about the requirements placed on himself as a result of his switch to Philosophy, then either a reconciliation of these conflicts should be possible or Nietzsche must be accused of being hypocritical. I will suggest, and hope to substantiate, that the conflict between these passages is only apparent and with an adequate understanding of the *what* that returns, these obstacles can be overcome, and an interpretation of *ER* can be established that coincides with direct comments on *ER* and integrates into the Nietzschean corpus as a derivation from the 'one will' that is Nietzsche.

Before beginning, it is helpful to position the primary scholarly approaches to *ER*, and that can be done via a generalized classification of past attempts to understand the concept. Traditional approaches to *ER* have focused on two primary interpretations, what have been termed the *cosmological* and the *hypothetical*, with each side presenting textual support for their position. Much of the current resurfacing of interest in *ER*, especially that dealing with the *Zeitatenlehre*, tends to focus on the *cosmological* and so I will begin with the reasons that I find this approach inadequate. At the basis

7 Hicks, Nietzsche and the Nazis, p. 95-6.

8 Taha, A., Nietzsche, Prophet of Nazism: The Cult of the Superman, AuthorHouse, Bloomington, 2005.

9 Nietzsche, F., The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche (Vol. 11), Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1995, p. 147-51.

10 Nietzsche, F., The Will to Power, Trans. By Walter Kaufman and R. J. Hollingdale, Vintage, New York, 1968, p. 35-9.

11 Nietzsche, F., The Gay Science, Trans. By Walter Kaufman, Vintage Books, New York, 1974, p. 173-4.

12 Nietzsche, F., The Portable Nietzsche, Trans. By Walter Kaufman, Viking Press, New York, 1968, p. 267-72.

of the *cosmological* interpretations is an understanding of existence as quantifiable. As Alexander Nehamas points out in his work *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, these *cosmological* interpretations begin with two premises: unlimited time and limited power centers.¹³ From these premises they conclude that *ER* must imply a circular return of events, which simply stated suggests that if the universe is comprised of a limited number of *Kraftlagen* (power centers) and an unlimited amount of time, then there is a necessity for repetition.

It is important to notice that this interpretation understands the *what* of return as the circularity of sequential events; hence they suggest that Nietzsche's use of the circle is not merely symbolic. As Bernd Magnus states such cosmologists tend "to interpret the doctrine of eternal recurrence as itself an attempt to offer a theory of the universe."¹⁴ What is suggested is that *ER* is a scientific theory, similar to Einstein's theory of Relativity, grounded in a Cartesian mathematical explanation of reality. The *cosmologists* theory rest on the circularity of events in time as a result of limited *Kraftlagen* and unlimited time, but this is where the fundamental problem of the *cosmological* interpretation of *ER* surfaces: the *cosmological* account depends on a premise that in itself is antagonistic to Nietzsche's mature thought. Why?

The answer lies in the premise that is necessary for their depiction of the sequential circularity of events. According to the theory, if there is a limited amount of matter and an unlimited amount of time there is a necessity that repetition must occur. But, again, what is it that necessarily returns? In *Zarathustra* Nietzsche gives the indication that what repeats is similarity in the ideal: 'And this slow spider, which crawls in the moonlight, and this moonlight itself, and you and I in the gateway, whispering together, whispering eternal things- must not all of us have been there before?'¹⁵ The *what* that returns is here expressed as the repetition of sequential events, a repetition in which events are repeated in order and Nietzschean *cosmologists* have taken this literally to imply that what returns is the exact sameness that not only has been, but is and will be forever: the eternal circle whose points are spatially and sequentially determined.

But there are many simple ways of showing that given just these premises there need not be a circular repetition of sequential events, to such a degree, that every event repeats itself in the same order. If, for example, we conceive of a limited universe, say of four numbers (1, 2, 3 and 4), it is easy to construct a model in which repetition occurs, but not in a necessitated sequential format. Our model allows a selection of a number from this limited universe, followed by returning it back to the pool from which it came, then another selection, and on to infinity. This model will result in a sequence of numbers that can go on forever. Let us say that your first four choices are 1, 2, 3 and 4, with the next selection a repetition will necessarily occur, but will it instantiate a repetition of the previous sequence? No, there is no necessity to establish that once a recurrence of a selection surfaces, or even the recurrence of a pattern arises, that the

13 Nehamas, A., *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1985, p. 143.

14 Magnus, B., *Existential Imperative*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1978, p. 141.

15 Nietzsche, F., *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (in the *Portable Nietzsche*), Viking Press, New York, 1968, p. 270.

entire original sequence will recur in the same order eternally. For this to occur another premise is needed and one that the *cosmologists* seem to forget: that of cause/effect. It is as a result of this needed premise that the *cosmological* approach fails, why?

To obtain sequential circularity of events, it is necessary to have a casual relationship existing between events, otherwise there would be no necessity that one event follows both sequentially and necessarily from another. Without this causal connection events could occur randomly, even if the *Kraftlagen* were to return to an early state of affairs, hence the *cosmological* position rests heavily on the connection that Nietzsche suggests holds between events: either Nietzsche allows for cause/effect, in which case ideal circular recurrence can be justified, or he rejects the causal connection in which case we must come up with another understanding of the *what* that returns. So what does Nietzsche say about cause/effect?

Indicative of his position on cause/effect is a passage from the *Gay Science* that is quite emphatic on the subject: 'Cause and effect: such a duality probably never exists;...' ¹⁶ In the same passage Nietzsche suggests that science, in relation to cause and effect, 'is an attempt to humanize things as faithfully as possible;...' ¹⁷ Further, in *Beyond Good and Evil* he states: 'It is we alone who have devised cause, sequence, for-each-other, relativity, constraint, number, law, freedom, motive, and purpose; and when we project and mix this symbol world into things as if it existed "in itself," we act once more as we have always acted- *mythologically*.' ¹⁸ For Nietzsche, such terms are the constructs of an aesthetic being capable of mythological projection, of the *transformation* of reality into an *Apollonian dream*. As artist we create these concepts and project them on to existence as if they were there to be found or as Nietzsche states 'we first turn everything into an *image*, our image!' ¹⁹

And yet, Nietzsche's comments on *ER* appear to suggest that events in the arena of life are connected causally in such a manner that no event is capable of being separated from the circular sequence. For example he states:

And since between every combination and its next recurrence all other possible combinations would have to take place, and each of these combinations conditions the entire sequence of combinations in the same series, a circular movement of absolutely identical series is thus demonstrated: the world as a circular movement that has already repeated itself infinitely often and plays its game *in infinitum*. ²⁰

Such quotes seem to support the *cosmological* account of *ER* and appear to rest on the acceptance of cause/effect relationships, hence demanding some attempt to alleviate the discrepancy with the previous quotes. But careful examination of the text reveals that Nietzsche classifies such a position as a 'mechanistic conception' that is

16 Nietzsche, F., *The Gay Science*, p. 173.

17 *ibid.*, p. 173-74.

18 Nietzsche, F., *Beyond Good and Evil*, Vintage Books, 1966, p. 29.

19 Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*. P. 172.

20 Nietzsche, *The Will To Power*, p. 549.

imperfect.²¹ Rather than an expression of Nietzsche's position on cause/effect, this passage is a critical examination of such a conception. This same need for careful textual examination occurs with many of the passages on *ER*, especially those from the notes and *The Will to Power*, that compilation of his notes arranged originally by his sister.

Without this causal premise the *cosmological* approach fails and since it comes into direct conflict with Nietzsche's philosophical corpus, to suggest that he holds such a position would be unjustified. *Cosmologists* seem to neglect the necessity of this premise in securing their version of the *what* of return and without this the *cosmological* understanding of *ER* violates the demand for integration with the 'one will' that is the source of *ER*. This leaves the *hypothetical* option, but it also must be examined to see if it does in fact accommodate the two provisos that I have set: agreement with direct quotes and overall integration.

The *hypothetical* approach to *ER* is what Bernd Magnus expresses as the normative and, as with the *cosmological*, is best understood in relation to how it attempts to handle the problem of the *what* that returns.²² Where the *cosmological* rendering is based upon the attempt to offer recurrence as a scientific theory, the *attitudinal* examines *ER* from the perspective of belief in recurrence and the psychological changes that would follow from mere acceptance of *ER*, regardless of its reality. As Magnus suggests "we are admonished to behave *as if* recurrence were true."²³ In opposition to the *cosmologists*, the *hypotheticalists* are suggesting that *ER* is a means of inducing a reorientation to reality merely as a result of belief in recurrence.

This viewpoint is textually given credence in one of Nietzsche's most famous remarks on *ER*, which seems to indicate an acceptance of the *hypothetical* interpretation. This aphorism, #341 from the *Gay Science*, is one of the primary texts used to justify the *as if* interpretation. It begins with the admonition 'What, if,' a hypothetical construct not a factual presentation, in which Nietzsche offers a conditional that does not in itself establish the existential veracity of the antecedent of the conditional. Granting this, Nietzsche appears to be seeking an answer to the question of how one would restructure their life if *ER* were factual, and not only an answer, but is suggesting that belief in *ER* would condition certain drastic responses to existence.

Like the *cosmological* approach, a problem surfaces with the *hypothetical* position in that no significant evidence is given, or for that matter can be given, to establish any reason for believing in the doctrine of sequential circularity of events and this is a troublesome. We are admonished to believe this *most abysmal* thought, yet in such passages as the one from *The Gay Science* no evidence is given for our acceptance of the position and of course this leads us to ask why then should we believe? As participants in the sequential circularity it would seem that we could not get outside the events to establish verification, hence why believe? It appears that under this interpretation, Nietzsche is attempting to have one accept a position similar to the Metaphysical systems

21 *ibid.*, p. 549.

22 Magnus, B., Nietzsche's Existential Imperative, p. 141

23 *ibid.*, p. 141.

that he opposes: belief in a non-verifiable reality, belief in an *ER* that is beyond our comprehension. This would seem to be an irrational approach and would contradict Nietzsche's own notion that a 'long logic' is behind his work. Further, the *hypothetical* approach seems to avoid those texts in which Nietzsche suggests that *ER* is a fact or more scientifically established, for example aphorism #55 from *The Will to Power*, where Nietzsche refers to *ER* as the 'most *scientific* hypothesis.'²⁴

So, both the *hypothetical* and *cosmological* approaches appear to find textual justification for their position, but each offers only a *prima facie* case that on further examination fail. So how to solve this problem? How are we to understand this *most abysmal* thought? Central to comprehension of *ER* is to recognize the significance of the *what* that returns. Each traditional perspective rests upon an interpretation of the problem of the *what* that returns: the *cosmologists* argue that the sequence of events in circularity is fact, the *hypotheticalists* suggest that it is not important whether this circularity is fact or not but only that one accepts the sequential circularity of events in belief. Magnus states this difference as follows: 'The cosmological version argues that Nietzsche thought that recurrence is true. The normative version argues that Nietzsche asks us to behave as if it is true.'²⁵ These positions differ in their assessment of the reality of the *what* of return, but both answer in a similar fashion regarding the *what*: each understands *ER* as the sequential circularity of events. In this point neither the *cosmological* nor the *hypothetical* differ, nor does Magnus in his alternate version that he terms *Existential Imperative*. Is there an alternative that avoids the problems inherent with these two traditional positions? Is there a way of interpreting *ER* such that the two primary problems of textual conflict and corpus integration can be overcome?

Yes, and it is predicated on a solution to the problem of the *what* of return, a redefining of the *what*. Let me begin with an examination of the *Zeitatenlehre* note from 1873, which has garnered such interest recently.²⁶ There are a number of scholars who have written on this, but I will focus on two Claudia Crawford²⁷ and Keith Ansell Pearson²⁸, as both tend to isolate Nietzsche's thought on *ER* within a context that seems to discount later passages concerning *ER*, and both reflect an attempt to turn *ER* into a scientific concept as a result of Nietzsche's reading of Boscovich. This would be fine if they were merely presenting the young Nietzsche's musings on *ER* and I would have no complaint recognizing that these musing on *ER* are from a young and immature Nietzsche who is still overly influenced by all too many positions that he would later reject as his thought matured. The note itself is a complex mixture of spatial and temporal discussions that seems to rely on some Boscovich, but when examined closely

24 Nietzsche, F., *The Will to Power*, p. 36.

25 Magnus, B., *Nietzsche's Existential Imperative*.

26 Nietzsche, F., 'Unpublished Writings from the Period of Unfashionable Observations', *The Complete Works of Nietzsche*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1995, p. 147-51.

27 Crawford, C., 'Nietzsche's Overhuman: Creating on the Crest of the Timepoint', p. 22-48.

28 Pearson, K. A., 'Nietzsche's Brave New World of Force: Thoughts on Nietzsche's 1873 'Time Atom Theory' Fragment & on the influence of Boscovich on Nietzsche', in *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, Penn State University Press, Issue 20, 2000, p. 6-35.

there is the early remnants of the mature concept of *ER*, remnants that both Crawford and Pearson mention, but seem to overlook as a result of their focus on the scientific. For example, Crawford suggests that there are 'elements and relations of what later becomes Nietzsche's major idea of the eternal recurrence of the same' and she is correct, but then she adopts a position that is contrary to Nietzsche's mature doctrine and that is that 'the finite one spacepoint cycles through its possible positions in infinite dynamic timepoints, there will come the timepoint at which it will start to repeat the same chain of positions.'²⁹ What we see here is the *cosmological* position and the attempt to bring *ER* in line with a modern scientific formulation, with Crawford even soliciting the help of Lee Smolin, a theoretical physicist.³⁰ Is this the sense in which Nietzsche uses the term *science* and can we establish this, especially for the mature Nietzsche? Can we substantiate a modern scientific version of *ER*?

To begin, it is apparent in the language used in formulating *ER* that a novel comprehension of *science* is present, for in most Nietzschean comments on *ER*, and especially in the published material, Nietzsche does not conform to modernity's desire for mathematical precision expressed in the simplicity of a formal symbolic system. This suggests that Nietzsche is using the term *science* in a non-traditional sense and the Hollingdale-Kaufmann translation of *The Will To Power* suggests as much by italicizing the term German term *Wissenschaft* in aphorism #55, enticing us to examine its use, and giving the indication that we should pay special attention to the semantic meaning that is attached to this term. What needs clarification is whether this inducement to attention is merely an indication of the fact that *Wissenschaft* is a much more encompassing concept than the traditional English equivalent or are Hollingdale and Kaufmann suggesting that Nietzsche has an alternative usage of the term?

So how are we to understand this German term? First, to immediately comprehend Nietzsche's use of *Wissenschaft* as comparable to, or equivalent with modernity's Cartesian mathematical science is hasty and erroneous. In fact it would lead to a double error for first it would go contrary to the more encompassing meanings of the German term *Wissenschaft* and secondly, it would contradict the language that Nietzsche uses to present this 'most *scientific* of all possible hypotheses,' a language which is quite contrary to that of the Cartesian mathematical system.³¹ Accordingly, what is necessary is an examination of the meaning Nietzsche attaches to this term in *his* conceptual system and not that of the ubiquitous science of Western society. We need to ask the question: What does Nietzsche mean by *science*?

Nietzsche's view of science, as well as philosophy, religion and all attempts at explaining the unexplainable are grounded in the aesthetic constructions of our attempts to explain reality. A representative, textual example of science expressed in aesthetic terms occurs in *The Will To Power* where Nietzsche states: "Science-the transformation of nature into concepts for the purpose of mastering nature-belongs under the rubric

29 Crawford, G., "Nietzsche's Overhuman: Creating on the Crest of the Timepoint," p. 28.

30 *ibid.*, p. 32.

31 Nietzsche, F., *Will To Power*, p. 34.

‘means.’³² Science, according to this note, is a *means*, but a *means* to what? Traditionally, science has self-servingly answered this question by equating itself with knowledge about reality and thus it understood itself as a *means* for knowledge acquisition. As such, it appropriates from nature the static knowledge present prior to the appropriation, but if we examine Nietzsche’s terminology he suggests that science *transforms* nature in the attempt to *master* it, hence he suggests that science is nothing more than an aesthetic *means* of survival, where aesthetic is understood as creative. The concern is not with acquiring a static cognition of existence expressed in the appellation *knowledge*, but with dominating and controlling existence through our ability to *transform* it. What is significant is that science, in its attempt to master existence, does not objectify existence but rather constructs a reality to meet with our desire to dominate, our desire for the *will to power*.

Science is no better than any other *means* employed by the aesthetic species to enable an *overcoming* and *transformation* of reality to promote our continued survival. This ability to transform nature is not, therefore, the soul property of science, but on the contrary it is for Nietzsche an essential character of the aesthetic species. Our ability to *transform* reality thus becomes a fundamental aspect of human existence: an ability that Nietzsche terms in *The Will To Power* our ‘will to art, to lie.’³³ For aesthetic beings science is one means among many to dominate existence and thus the information derived from science is based on ‘a particular species of animal that can prosper only through a certain relative rightness; above all regularity of its perceptions....’³⁴ Accordingly, Nietzsche praises science as a *means* enabling a ‘regularity of perceptions’ and thus ensuring continued survival. Early in his career, even with this more comprehensive understanding of science, Nietzsche approves of the modern scientific approach, evidenced in the *Zeitatenlehre*.

But the mature Nietzsche condemns science and the reasoning behind this condemnation must be properly understood. The aesthetic species is capable of a variety of perspectives with each seeking ‘regularity of perspective’ to enable species survival. Each perspective obtains the data from which this *regularity* is constructed out of the temporal world in which we live, and only from this data can the aesthetic species create solutions to the problem of existence. Perspectives *regulate* these experiences and apparently each is justified, and hence the inevitable problem with all perspectivism: how do we rank conceptual systems? If science is merely one out of many, it would appear that all these *means* can be equally justified leaving none as preferential. In other words is Nietzsche, given his system, capable of axiologically judging perspectives?

Factually we can state that he does judge, one need only examine his comments on Christianity to verify this, but does he have a justifiable position from which to make this evaluative decision? Nietzsche would answer in the affirmative, claiming that he adjudicates perspectives according to their relation to the world in which we live, the

32 *ibid.*, p. 328-29.

33 *ibid* p. 452.

34 *ibid.* p. 266.

wellspring of all experiences. Every *means* for creating a 'regularity of [our] perceptions' must, of necessity, axiologically decide on the worth of the flux that is becoming. It is this axiological decision of each perspective that supplies Nietzsche with a means for ranking systems.

Given this criterion Nietzsche equates science, when understood as universal mathematics, with metaphysics, religion, and traditional morality as a perspective attempting to objectify its *transformation*.³⁵ The fact that these systems project meaning is in itself not problematic for Nietzsche, the problem lies in their assumption that man is capable of judging once-and-for-all the value of becoming: a viewpoint which Nietzsche patently rejects. To the contrary, Nietzsche suggests that this is precisely what the aesthetic species is not capable of for as he states in *Twilight of the Idols*: '*the value of life cannot be estimated*. Not by the living, for they are an interested party, even a bone of contention, and not judges;...' ³⁶ But is this not precisely what science, metaphysics, religion and traditional morality want to accomplish, as well as much of Western philosophy: to judge the value of life once-and-for-all?

It becomes apparent from the above that Nietzsche is using the term *Wissenschaft* in a non-traditional fashion and hence the claims of Crawford and Pearson are suspect in that they are predicated upon examining the *Zeitatenlehre* though the lens of modern science. What I would suggest is that the note, as a note contains some localized contextual interests of Nietzsche's, interests that follow from his early research into science, but that as with his interest in Schopenhauer, Kant and Wagner his perspective on science changes as he matures, and that Crawford is correct in suggesting that there are embryonic vestiges of the mature thought on *ER* contained within this note. Unfortunately, both Pearson and Crawford, though mentioning this connection, do not delve fully into this and avoid key passages that coexist well with the larger corpus. These are those passages that suggest that time is only possible with the arising of a *representing being*, or as Nietzsche states it: 'a reproducing being is necessary, one that holds earlier moments in time next to the current one.'³⁷ Time arises with the evolution of a species with memory, a species that possesses the ability to store information on the changes that have occurred in the single *spacepoint* that is existence. This is the central distinction that Nietzsche makes between the cattle and humans in *On the Utility and Liability of History for Life* where Nietzsche suggests that the reason we look 'enviously upon their happiness' is precisely because we remember and hence are historical beings.³⁸ It is because we are capable of memory that time exists for Nietzsche, a point that he makes clear in the *Zeitatenlehre* note:

The reality of the world would then consist of an abiding point. Manifolddness would arise due to the fact that there would be representing beings who would

35 Nietzsche, F., *The Will to Power*, p. 451-52.

36 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols in The Portable Nietzsche*, Viking Press, New York, 1968, p. 474.

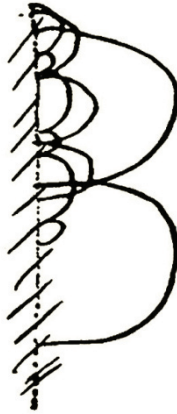
37 Nietzsche, F., *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche* (Vol. 11), p. 148.

38 Nietzsche, F., *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche* (Vol. 2), Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1995, p. 87.

conceive of this point as being repeated in the tiniest moment of time: beings who assume the point to be nonidentical at different points of time and now consider these points simultaneously.³⁹

Time becomes a construct of memory that is derived from the 'abiding point' that is reality.

There is a similar expression of time in the images that accompany this note, and in particular the hand drawn image that Nietzsche uses to represent time:



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This image is unusual in that it does not represent a common approach to diagrammatically representing time, and that is a horizontal line, reflecting the sequential following of moments. Instead we have a vertical dropping of time, much more in tune with Husserl's notion of the *running-off* that human memory is.⁴¹ Time is the episodic memory of previous instances of the spacepoint that is reality, and is only possible with a *representing being*, and this does not rest on the need for a cause/effect premise, as does both the *cosmological* and *hypothetical* version of temporal circularity.

So how is Nietzsche using *Wissenschaft* in regard to *ER*? A more adequate answer can be obtained by examining the quotes more carefully, especially those within the unpublished notes. Examination reveals that Nietzsche offers *ER* in both the *cosmological* and *hypothetical* sense in some passages, justifying the confusion. A representative example from *The Will to Power*, note #1066, titled 'The new world-conception' seems to present *ER* in the hard scientific expression of sequential circularity, but it is important to see that the paragraph in which this occurs opens with the hypothetical: 'If the world may be thought of...' ⁴² In similar notes Nietzsche refers to *ER* in relation to 'theoretical

39 *ibid.*, p. 148.

40 Nietzsche, F., *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche* (Vol. 11), p. 150.

41 Husserl, E., *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness*, Indian University Press, Bloomington, 1964, p. 48-50

42 Nietzsche, F., *The Will to Power*, 549.

presuppositions'; 'consequences of its being believed'; and 'the presuppositions that would have to be true if it were true.'⁴³ This leaves the reader confused as some notes suggest a 'what if' approach to the doctrine while others are more emphatic and seem to adopt a harder *cosmological* approach.⁴⁴ It is from this apparent discrepancy that the two primary interpretations of *ER* have prospered. We need to alleviate the contradiction that seems to be inherent between these two perspectives.

To alleviate this problem, it is essential to examine Nietzsche's writings on *ER* from the perspective of finding an adequate answer to the *what* of return. Both the *cosmological* and the *hypothetical* accept the standard doctrine that the *what* of return is a sequential circularity of events and both positions fail as a result of the need for the cause/effect premise. But if this is not what Nietzsche is speaking about, then what? And if *ER* is the 'most *scientific* hypothesis' what makes it scientific? Both traditional perspectives accept the circularity of repetitive, sequential events, is there another way to approach this? All preceding examinations of Eternal Recurrence have based their conclusions on this comprehension of *ER*, and all seem to conflict with either direct passages or the corpus as a whole.

Examining note #55 from *The Will to Power*, a note that emphasizes the relation between *ER* and science, I think via a closer examination an answer can surface. Just prior to Nietzsche's suggestion of this relation he gives a description of *ER* that clarifies the relation between it and science. If by science is understood modernity's notion there would be expectations, at least according to a *cosmological* viewpoint, of a scientific presentation referenced to the sequential circle of events. But this is precisely what is not given prior to the dramatic equating of science and *ER*. Instead we are told '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*."⁴⁵ *ER* is presented as 'existence as it is,' not as the circle of events but existence as presented. There is no expression of repetitive circles, but an acceptance of the experience of an eternal becoming. What is offered is a unification of eternality and becoming expressed in the recognition of an eternal/temporality. This is the Dionysian experience of *Das Ur-eine* of existence, not a circular unity, but a *primordial unity* that offers temporal existence in perpetuity.

Temporality as eternal illuminates Nietzsche's suggestion that *ER* is to 'impose upon becoming the character of being- that is the supreme will to power.'⁴⁶ In a later line he states that '*everything returns* is the closest *approximation of a world of becoming to a world of being*:'⁴⁷ What is attempted in this non-traditional juxtaposition of terms is the stamping of becoming with the character of being, a character that is based on the concept of duration through eternity. Yet becoming is precisely an existence that is structured un-durationally for its characteristic is that of change, continual

43 *ibid.*, p. 544-45.

44 *ibid.*, p. 544.

45 *ibid.*, p. 35.

46 *ibid.*, p. 330.

47 *ibid.*, p. 330.

change, and thus the attempt to stamp becoming with being is just that, only an attempt, and at best an attempt which receives an 'highest approximation.' As Heraclitus would suggest 'Those who step into the same river have different waters flowing ever upon them.'⁴⁸ What remains the same is the fact of becoming, the river of becoming, but the waters are continually changing. In other words, *ER* is, at best, an hypothesis that stamps becoming with the character of eternity and to this extent it is the 'most scientific of all hypotheses.' It seeks not to become verifiable law, but remains an experience of existence and therefore highly subjective. No attempt at verification can succeed, for if it could it would fall into the same pitfall as metaphysics, religion and objective morality, and that is the attempt to judge that which is by nature beyond our abilities, an attempt to the once-and-for-all.

The *cosmological* interpretation of *ER* would, to the contrary, stamp becoming with circular being, hence would be successful at imposing the character of being on becoming. Yet Nietzsche states that only the attempt is made to equate becoming and being and therefore the *cosmological* interpretation is fundamentally problematic as it would accomplish that which cannot be successful: the stamping of becoming with the being of the circularity of sequential events. Such *cosmological* conclusions are an attempt at objective universalization and are quite beyond our abilities, accordingly, the *what* that returns in *ER* must reference something other than the circularity of events, but what?

This *what* that returns according to note #55 is becoming, not a particular becoming, but generalized becoming. *ER*, when examined from this perspective, is in relation to process, to existence as process and change, and therefore what is textually open to substantiation is the generalized fact of becoming and not the circularity of sequential events. What returns is existence, is temporal existence, and Nietzsche presents this quite emphatically in the famous passage from *Zarathustra*, 'On the Vision and the Riddle.'⁴⁹ This is the passage in which the *dwarf* jumps upon Zarathustra's back, a *gravity* to hold Zarathustra back, a struggle that eventually leads to the revelation his most *abysmal thought*. In the opening salvos of the struggle, Nietzsche presents the thought in its *hypothetical* guise: 'Was *that* life? Well then! Once more!'⁵⁰ Here sequential circularity is not presented, rather the attitudinal approach that leads to a psychological comportment to becoming and with this the struggle with the *dwarf* begins.

Zarathustra begins the clarification of his *most abysmal* thought with the exclamation 'Behold this gateway, dwarf!' and continues:

It has two faces. Two paths meet here; no one has yet followed either to its end. This long lane stretches back for an eternity. And the long lane out there, that is another eternity. They contradict each other, these paths; they offend each other face to face; and it is here at this gateway that they come together. The name of the gateway is inscribed above: 'Moment.'⁵¹

48 Freeman, K., *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1983, p. 25.

49 Nietzsche, F., *The Portable Nietzsche*, p. 267-72.

50 *ibid.*, p. 269.

51 *ibid.*, p. 269-70

It is at the *gateway* that the solution to the problem of the *what* that returns is to be found: it is the *Augenblick*, the *Moment*, that returns eternally. It is in this passage that we get a solution to the problem, one that integrates Nietzsche's comments on *ER*. It is at the meeting point of past and future, at the *gateway* that the question of the *what* is answered. What continually, eternally returns, in fact what never leaves is the *Moment*, unbridled eternal presence. *Moment* returns, not this particular moment, or any particular sequence of moments, but *Moment* and therefore in the continual present we have the ability to experience what Nietzsche terms in the *Zeitatenlehre* the 'entire world with one stroke.'⁵² Recurrent existence is substantiated in the experience of the *Moment* as eternal, and not in the repetitive circular sequence of events that both the *cosmological* and *hypothetical* perspectives rested on, and this experience of the *Moment* is quite within our abilities.

Accordingly, *ER* is not to be turned into some objective law of nature, but it is experiential and therefore dependent on the recognition of the permanence of the *Moment*. Scientifically, the *Moment* exists in perpetual permanence and it is only when a *representing* being surfaces that the temporal sequence, that time is experienced. With this *representing* being comes the recognition of *Moment*, of the 'spacepoint' from the *Zeitatenlehre* note and memory as well, memory of the previous states of the 'spacepoint.' This recognition is not in search of scientific verification of sequential circularity of events, but, as with the shepherd and the snake in *The Vision and the Riddle*, a response is needed, a confrontation to the beast that is *ER*.⁵³ The need for a response in the light of the recognition of the *Moment*, reflects those passages in which Nietzsche offers an *hypothetical* position on *ER*, for example the demon passage from *The Gay Science*.

ER when understood as the eternal return of generalized becoming, return expressed in the permanence of the *Moment*, enables for Nietzsche an adequate and honest reflection on human existence, the existence of a *representing* being. What makes *ER* the 'most *scientific* of all possible hypotheses' is its expression as that *gateway* that connects the two opposing paths and is always in existence, for if it were to go out of existence, so would we. Understanding the *what* of return as the continual permanence of the *Moment* does not suffer from the same failure that the *cosmological* perspectives does, which is the need for the cause/effect premise to justify the sequential circularity. The *Moment*, as the permanent 'spacepoint' does not rely on cause/effect. Further, Nietzsche's uses of the hypothetical in many of his notes about *ER* is justified in that the conditional does not guarantee the truth-value of the antecedent, and thus the antecedent of Nietzsche's conditional, the sequential circularity of events, is offered as an 'as if' to induce some kind of response. For Nietzsche this inducement must always be made in accordance with an experience of life, which for him meant the *Dionysian Experience*. What he is seeking is a way of getting man to act according to a justified perspective on existence and man, an honest experience that reflects the permanence of the

⁵² Nietzsche, F., *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche* (Vol. 11), p. 147.

⁵³ Nietzsche, F., *The Portable Nietzsche*, p. 271.

Moment. As artists Nietzsche is asking that we create in proportion to our experience of the *Moment* and not according to the delusions of the metaphysical systems of our tradition that have bifurcated existence into a world of being and becoming. His concern is with the value that we project on existence and thus note #55 establishes an equation between *ER* and the experience of the meaninglessness of existence that follows from *ER*. This nihilism is what is expressed in note #55 from *The Will to Power* and reflects Zarathustra's unwillingness to speak of *ER* and his claim that it is an 'abysmal thought.' Such a thought can be a most defeating experience for us, and Nietzsche suggests as much in his exposé of European Nihilism in the first book of *The Will To Power*.

What *ER* offers is an avoidance of this defeat by comparing our existence to the circle, not in the sense that life is a factual repetition of sequential events, but by suggesting that we view our existence as complete in temporality. The circle represents life, as singular for any particular existence, for all is given in the circle, there is no depth, no other dimension behind what is presented. Any enclosed, two-dimensional polygon would have sufficed to express this, but what Nietzsche wants to avoid is any suggestion that there is something behind existence, something more *real* than our experience of becoming.

The *hypothetical* then is a means of getting man to accept the singularity of his existence and thus to get response and action of a temporal nature and not one of a metaphysical perspective. Nietzsche terms such a response: "the revaluation of all values. No longer joy in certainty but in uncertainty; no longer 'cause and effect' but the continually creative; no longer will to preservation but to power; no longer the humble expression, 'everything is *merely* subjective,' but 'it is also *our* work!- Let us be proud of it!'"⁵⁴ And here we see why *ER* is the 'most *scientific* of all hypotheses,' for not only does it avoid the universality of scientific law, and Nietzsche objects to all attempts to construct universality of law, but it makes us aware of the significance of our ability to *transform* existence. When *ER* is understood as this Dionysian experience of becoming, the uniting of being and becoming in the eternal *Moment*, and the psychological motivation of accepting hypothetically the sequential circle of events, it avoids the pitfalls of traditional scientific thought and yet allows for the method to proceed according to a fundamental recognition of not only ourselves, but also of existence. Is it any wonder that once we extricate the snake from our throats, once we bite the head off of the snake with our acceptance of *ER* that Nietzsche describes such a man as 'one changed, radiant, laughing!'⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Nietzsche, F., *The Will to Power*, p. 545.

⁵⁵ Nietzsche, F., *The Portable Nietzsche*, p. 272.

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NIČEOVO VEČNO VRAĆANJE: PITANJE O ŠTA POVRATKA

Sažetak: Obnovljeni interes za večno vraćanje pojavio se skoro kao rezultat rane Ničeove beleške, poznate kao *Zeitatenlehre*, iz 1873. godine. Ova beleška tavorila je u mraku do svog vaskrsenja 1952. godine i brojni komentatori bacili su svoj glas u arenu večnog vraćanja. Tradicionalno je večno vraćanje bilo ispitivano iz dve primarne perspektive, kosmološke i hipotetičke, gde je većina novijih istraživanja prihvatila kosmološki pristup. U ovom radu ispitujem dve tradicionalne interpretacije, ukazujući na to da su obe podbacile u adekvatnom razumevanju ničeanske pozicije vraćanja. Odnosno, obe su usvojile sličan odgovor na problem o šta koje se vraća (sekvencijalna cirkularnost događaja), ali tom odgovoru prilaze iz dva različita utemeljenja: jednog faktičkog, drugog hipotetičkog. Pokazaću da iz tog razloga obe dolaze u sukob s Ničevim komentarima večnog vraćanja i s njegovom filozofijom kao celinom. Moje rešenje ovog problema biće usmereno na *Zeitatenlehre* belešku i opis večnog vraćanja u odeljku „O prividenju i zagonetki“ iz *Zaratusstre*, fokusirajući se na značaj *Trenutka* kako bi se pravilno shvatilo večno vraćanje.

Ključne reči: Niče, večno vraćanje, *Zeitatenlehre*, trenutak

