Nietzsche, Eternal Recurrence, and the Horror of Existence

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I

At the center of Nietzsche’s vision lies his concept of the “terror and horror of existence” (BT 3). As he puts it in The Birth of Tragedy:

There is an ancient story that King Midas hunted in the forest a long time for the wise Silenus, the companion of Dionysus. . . . When Silenus at last fell into his hands, the king asked what was the best and most desirable of all things for man. Fixed and immovable, the demigod said not a word, till at last, urged by the king, he gave a shrill laugh and broke out into these words: "Oh, wretched ephemeral race, children of chance and misery, why do you compel me to tell you what it would be most expedient for you not to hear? What is best of all is utterly beyond your reach: not to be born, not to be, to be nothing. But the second best for you is—to die soon." (BT 3)

Why is it best never to have been born? Because all we can expect as human beings is to suffer. Yet, still, this is not precisely the problem. As Nietzsche tells us in On the Genealogy of Morals, human beings can live with suffering. What they cannot live with is meaningless suffering—suffering for no reason at all (GM III:28). In Nietzsche’s view we are “surrounded by a fearful void . . .” (GM III:28; cf. WP 55). We live in an empty, meaningless cosmos. We cannot look into reality without being overcome. Indeed, in Beyond Good and Evil, Nietzsche even suggests that “it might be a basic characteristic of existence that those who would know it completely would perish . . .” (BGE 39; cf. WP 822).

And it was not just intellectual reflection that led Nietzsche to a belief in the horror of existence. He lived it himself. In a letter of April 10, 1888, he writes: “Around 1876 my health grew worse. . . . There were extremely painful and obstinate headaches which exhausted all my strength. They increased over long years, to reach a climax at which pain was habitual, so that any given year contained for me two hundred days of pain. . . . My specialty was to endure the extremity of pain . . . with complete lucidity for two or three days in succession, with continuous vomiting of mucus.”

In Nietzsche contra Wagner, he tells us how significant this suffering was for him:

I have often asked myself whether I am not much more deeply indebted to the hardest years of my life than to any others. . . . And as to my prolonged illness,
do I not owe much more to it than I owe to my health? To it I owe a *higher* kind of health, a sort of health which grows stronger under everything that does not actually kill it!—*To it, I owe even my philosophy.* . . . Only great suffering is the ultimate emancipator of the spirit. . . . Only great suffering; that great suffering, under which we seem to be over a fire of greenwood, the suffering that takes its time—forces us philosophers to descend into our nethermost depths. . . . (NCW “Epilogue”)}

Nietzsche’s belief in the horror of existence is largely, if not completely, overlooked by most scholars. I hope to show that it had a profound effect on his thought, indeed, that he cannot be adequately understood without seeing the centrality of this concept. To begin to understand its importance, let us consider three different visions of the human condition.

The first holds that we live in a benign cosmos. It is as if it were purposively planned for us and we for it. We fit, we belong, we are at home in this cosmos. We are confirmed and reinforced by it. Our natural response is a desire to know it and thus to appreciate our fit into it. Let us call this the *designed cosmos.* Roughly speaking, this is the traditional view held by most philosophers from Plato and Aristotle through the medievals. And for the most part it has disappeared in the modern world—few really believe in it anymore.

The second vision backs off from the assumptions required by the first. This view started with Francis Bacon, if not before, and it is the view of most moderns. Here the cosmos is neither alien nor designed for us. It is neither terrifying nor benign. The cosmos is neutral and, most importantly, malleable. Human beings must come to understand the cosmos through science and control it through technology. We must *make* it fit us. It does not fit us by design. We must work on it, transform it, and mold it into a place where we can be at home. We must create our own place. For these modern thinkers, we end up with more than the ancients and medievals had. We end up with a fit like they had, but we get the added satisfaction of bringing it about *ourselves,* accomplishing it through our own endeavor, individuality, and freedom. Let us call this the *perfectible cosmos.*

The third vision takes the cosmos to be alien. It was not designed for human beings at all; nor were they designed for it. We just do not fit. We do not belong. *And we never will.* The cosmos is horrible, terrifying, and we will never surmount this fact. It is a place where human beings suffer for no reason at all. It is best never to have been born. Let us call this the *horrific cosmos.* This is Nietzsche’s view.

Nietzsche simply dismisses the designed cosmos, which few believe in anymore anyway (*WP* 12a). On the other hand, Nietzsche takes the perfectible cosmos very seriously. He resists it with every fiber of his being. For Nietzsche, we must stop wasting time and energy hoping to change things, improve them, make progress (see, e.g., *WP* 40, 90, 684)—the outlook of liberals, socialists, and even Christians, all of whom Nietzsche tends to lump together and excoriate. For
Nietzsche, we cannot reduce suffering, and to keep hoping that we can will simply weaken us. Instead, we must conceal an alien and terrifying cosmos if we hope to live in it. And we must develop the strength to do so. We must toughen ourselves. We need more suffering, not less. It has “created all enhancements of man so far . . .” (BGE 225, 44; WP 957; GM II:7).

If we look deeply into the essence of things, into the horror of existence, Nietzsche thinks we will be overwhelmed—paralyzed. Like Hamlet we will not be able to act, because we will see that action cannot change the eternal nature of things (BT 7). We must see, Nietzsche says, that “a profound illusion . . . first saw the light of the world in the person of Socrates: the unshakeable faith that thought . . . can penetrate the deepest abysses of being, and that thought is capable not only of knowing being but even of correcting it. This sublime metaphysical illusion accompanies science as an instinct . . .” (BT 15). In Nietzsche’s view, we cannot change things. Instead, with Hamlet we should “feel it to be ridiculous or humiliating that [we] should be asked to set right a world that is out of joint” (BT 7; cf. TI “Anti-Nature,” 6).

Knowledge of the horror of existence kills action—which requires distance and illusion. The horror and meaninglessness of existence must be veiled if we are to live and act. What we must do, Nietzsche thinks, is construct a meaning for suffering. Suffering we can handle. Meaningless suffering, suffering for no reason at all, we cannot handle. So we give suffering a meaning. We invent a meaning. We create an illusion. The Greeks constructed gods for whom wars and other forms of suffering were festival plays and thus an occasion to be celebrated by the poets. Christians imagine a God for whom suffering is punishment for sin (GM II:7; cf. D 78).

One might find all this unacceptable. After all, isn’t it just obvious that we can change things, reduce suffering, improve existence, and make progress? Isn’t it just obvious that modern science and technology have done so? Isn’t it just absurd for Nietzsche to reject the possibility of significant change? Hasn’t such change already occurred?

Well, perhaps not. Even modern environmentalists might resist all this obviousness. They might respond in a rather Nietzschean vein that technology may have caused as many problems as it has solved. The advocate of the perfectible cosmos, on the other hand, would no doubt counter such Nietzschean pessimism by arguing that even if technology does cause some problems, the solution to those problems can only come from better technology. Honesty requires us to admit, however, that this is merely a hope, not something for which we already have evidence, not something that it is absurd to doubt—not at all something obvious. Further technology may or may not improve things. The widespread use of antibiotics seems to have done a miraculous job of improving our health and reducing suffering, but we are also discovering that such antibiotics give rise to even more powerful bacteria that are immune to those
antibiotics. We have largely eliminated diseases like cholera, smallpox, malaria, and tuberculosis, but we have produced cancer and heart disease. We can cure syphilis and gonorrhea, but we now have AIDS.

Even if we could show that it will be possible to continuously reduce suffering, it is very unlikely that we will ever eliminate it. If that is so, then it remains a real question whether it is not better to face suffering, use it as a discipline, perhaps even increase it, so as to toughen ourselves, rather than let it weaken us, allow it to dominate us, by continually hoping to overcome it.

But whatever we think about the possibility of reducing suffering, the question may well become moot. Nietzsche tells a story: “Once upon a time, in some out of the way corner of that universe which is dispersed into twinkling solar systems, there was a star upon which clever beasts invented knowing. That was the most arrogant and mendacious minute of ‘world history,’ but nevertheless, it was only a minute. After nature had drawn a few breaths, the star cooled and congealed, and the clever beasts had to die” (TL 1, 79). Whatever progress we might think we are making in reducing suffering, whatever change we think we are bringing about, it may all amount to nothing more than a brief and accidental moment in biological time, whose imminent disappearance will finally confirm the horror and meaninglessness of existence.

The disagreement here is not so much about the quantity of suffering that we can expect to find in the world but, rather, its nature. For proponents of the designed cosmos, suffering is basically accidental. It is not fundamental or central to life. It is not a necessary part of the nature of things. It does not make up the essence of existence. We must develop virtue, and then we can basically expect to fit and be at home in the cosmos. For the proponents of a perfectible cosmos, suffering is neither essential nor unessential. The cosmos is neutral. We must work on it to reduce suffering. We must bring about our own fit. For Nietzsche, even if we can change this or that, even if we can reduce suffering here and there, what cannot be changed for human beings is that suffering is fundamental and central to life. The very nature of things, the very essence of existence, means suffering. Moreover, it means meaningless suffering—suffering for no reason at all. That cannot be changed—it can only be concealed.

Nietzsche does not reject all forms of change. What he rejects is the sort of change necessary for a perfectible cosmos. He rejects the notion that science and technology can transform the essence of things—he rejects the notion that human effort can significantly reduce physical suffering. Instead, he only thinks it possible to build up the power necessary to construct meaning in a meaningless world and thus to conceal the horror of existence, which cannot be eliminated.

We cannot prove the opposite view, and I do not think we can dismiss Nietzsche’s view simply because it goes counter to the assumptions of
Christianity, science, liberalism, socialism, and so forth. And we certainly cannot dismiss this view if we hope to understand Nietzsche. At any rate, for Nietzsche, we cannot eliminate suffering; we can only seek to mask it.

II

Nietzsche embraces the doctrine of eternal recurrence for the first time in The Gay Science 341:

*The greatest weight.*—What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: “This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence—even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!” Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: “You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine.” If this thought gained possession of you, it would change you as you are or perhaps crush you. The question in each and every thing, “Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?” would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight. Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to crave nothing more fervently than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal? (GS 341)

It is not enough that eternal recurrence simply be believed. Nietzsche demands that it actually be loved. In Ecce Homo, he explains his doctrine of *amor fati*: “My formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati*: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary, still less conceal it . . . but *love it*” (EH “Clever” 10; cf. GS 276). In Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Zarathustra says: “To redeem those who lived in the past and to recreate all ‘it was’ into a ‘thus I willed it’—that alone should I call redemption” (Z II: “On Redemption”; cf. Z III: “On Old and New Tablets” 3). To turn all “it was” into a “thus I willed it” is to accept fate fully, to love it. One would have it no other way; one wants everything eternally the same: “*Was that life? . . . Well then! Once more!*” (Z IV: “The Drunken Song” 1).

How are we to understand these doctrines? Soll argues that eternal recurrence of the same would not crush us at all. If every detail of one recurrence were exactly the same as every detail of another, if they were radically indistinguishable, recurrence would not be terrifying. To be terrified, Soll thinks, we would have to be able to accumulate new experience from cycle to cycle, remember past recurrences, and tremble in anticipation of their return. If all recurrences were exactly the same, if new experience could not build and accumulate, recurrence would be a matter of complete indifference. I think this view is mistaken. In the first place, people who lead a life of intense suffering often look forward to death as
an escape from that suffering. Aeneas, for example, when he visits the underworld in book VI of the Aeneid, expects just that. When he finds that he will have to be reincarnated, he is appalled. His next reincarnated life, it is true, would not be exactly the same, as for Nietzschean eternal recurrence, but Aeneas seems to expect it to be similar enough in its misery and suffering. And despite the fact that in his reincarnated life he would not remember his present life, Aeneas is nevertheless horrified at the idea that he will have to go through it all again.\textsuperscript{8}

Furthermore, although it is true that experience cannot build and accumulate from cycle to cycle, nevertheless, we must recognize that there are places in which Nietzsche suggests that it \textit{is} possible to remember earlier recurrences.\textsuperscript{9} Moreover, we can certainly be \textit{aware} of other recurrences in the sense that we \textit{believe} in them—the demon \textit{informs} us of these other recurrences. This raises no problems as long as the very same memory, awareness, and reaction recur in each and every cycle at the very same point—each and every cycle must be exactly the \textit{same}. It is possible that Soll assumes that such memories, awarenesses, and reactions would necessarily make the cycles different because they would have to be absent in at least one cycle—the first.\textsuperscript{10} But that would be a mistake. Nietzsche is quite clear. Time is infinite (Z III: “On the Vision and the Riddle” 2; \textit{WP} 1066)—there is no \textit{first} cycle. These memories, awarenesses, and reactions could occur in \textit{all} cycles at exactly the same point in the sequence.

Still, Soll argues that it is “impossible for there to be among different recurrences of a person the kind of identity that seems to exist among the different states of consciousness of the same person within a particular recurrence. . . . Only by inappropriately construing the suffering of some future recurrence on the model of suffering later in this life does the question of eternal recurrence of one’s pain weigh upon one with ‘the greatest stress.’”\textsuperscript{11} I think this too is mistaken. I can very well not want to live my life again even if in the next cycle I will not remember the pain of this cycle. If I am to love my life, not want to change the slightest detail, if I am to desire to live it again, it does not matter if in the future cycle I do not remember this cycle. If the demon \textit{tells} me, if I \textit{believe}, that the future cycle will be exactly the same, if I \textit{know} that now, then it could be quite difficult, \textit{right now}, to be positive enough about my existing painful life to choose to go through it again, even if when I do go through it again I will not remember it.

Soll’s point gains whatever plausibility it has by looking back from a future life at our present life and denying that we could remember anything or tremble in anticipation of its return. But that is not the only perspective one can take on the matter, and it is not the perspective Nietzsche wants to emphasize. For Nietzsche the demon forces us to look over our present life, reflect on it, test our attitude toward it, and assess the degree of positiveness we have toward it. We do that by asking how we feel about having to live it over again without the
slightest change. What is relevant here is how we feel about our present life at the present moment. It is also irrelevant to suggest that there is insufficient identity for me to think that it will really be me in the next cycle. The point, for Nietzsche, is how I react to my present life—the threat of a future life is brought up to elicit this reaction. If I do not identify with the person who will live my next life, if I do not care about that person, if I consider that person an other, then I evade the question the demon put to me—and I avoid the heart of the issue. The question is whether I love my life, my present life—love it so completely that I would live it again. I am being asked if I would live my life again to see if I love my present life. If I insist on viewing the liver of my next life as an other, the least I should do is ask myself whether I love my present life enough that I could wish it on another.

At any rate, Nietzsche claims that just thinking about the possibility of eternal recurrence can shatter and transform us. In published works, eternal recurrence is presented as the teaching of a sage, as the revelation of a demon, or as a thought that gains possession of one. In The Gay Science 341, we must notice, eternal recurrence is not presented as a truth. Many commentators argue that it simply does not matter whether or not it is true; its importance lies in the effect it has on those who believe it.

I have written at length about this complex doctrine elsewhere. I refer the reader there for further treatment of details. What I want to do here is point out that the philosopher who introduces eternal recurrence, the philosopher who believes in amor fati, is the very same philosopher who also believes in the horror of existence. This is a point that is never emphasized—indeed, it is hardly even noticed—by commentators. Lou Salomé tells us that Nietzsche spoke to her of eternal recurrence only “with a quiet voice and with all signs of deepest horror .... Life, in fact, produced such suffering in him that the certainty of an eternal return of life had to mean something horrifying to him.” Try to imagine yourself with a migraine. Imagine yourself in a feverish state experiencing nausea and vomiting. Imagine that this sort of thing has been going on for years and years and that you have been unable to do anything about it. Extreme care with your diet, concern for climate, continuous experimenting with medicines—all accomplish nothing. You are unable to cure yourself. You have been unable to even improve your condition significantly. You have even thought of suicide (BGE 157). Now imagine that at your worst moment, your loneliest loneliness, a demon appears to you or you imagine a demon appearing to you. And this demon tells you that you will have to live your life over again, innumerable times more, and that everything,
every last bit of pain and suffering, every last migraine, every last bout of nausea
and vomiting, will return, exactly the same, over and over and over again.

What would your reaction be? If your reaction were to be negative, no one
would bat an eye. But what if your reaction was, or came to be, positive? What
if you were able to love your life so completely that you would not want to
change a single moment—a single moment of suffering? What if you were to
come to crave nothing more fervently than the eternal recurrence of every
moment of your life? What if you were to see this as an ultimate confirmation
and seal, nothing more divine? How could you do this? Why would you do this?
Why wouldn’t it be madness? What is going on here? How has this been
overlooked by all the commentators? This cries out for explanation.

Eternal recurrence, I think we can say, shows us the horror of existence. No
matter what you say about your life, no matter how happy you claim to have
been, no matter how bright a face you put on it, the threat of eternal recurrence
brings out the basic horror in every life. Live it over again with nothing new? It
is the “nothing new” that does it. That is how we make it through our existing
life. We hope for, we expect, something new, something different, some
improvement, some progress, or at least some distraction, some hope. If that is
ruled out, if everything will be exactly the same in our next life, well that is a
different story. If you think you are supremely happy with your life, just see
what happens if you start to think that you will have to live it again.

Suppose that you can, as Aristotle suggested, look back over your life as a
whole and feel that it was a good one—a happy one. Would that make you want
to live it again? Would you at the moment in which you feel that your life was
a happy one also crave nothing more fervently than to live it again? What if your
life was a joyous life or a proud life? It is quite clear that you could have a very
positive attitude toward your life and not at all want to live it again. In fact,
wouldn’t the prospect of eternal repetition, if the idea grew on you and gained
possession of you, begin to sap even the best life of its attractiveness? Wouldn’t
the expectation of eternal repetition make anything less appealing? Wouldn’t it
empty your life of its significance and meaning? Most commentators seem to
assume that the only life we could expect anyone to want to live again would
be a good life. That makes no sense to me. On the other hand, most people would
assume that a life of intense pain and suffering is not at all the sort of life it makes
any sense to want to live again. I think Nietzsche was able to see that a life of
intense pain and suffering is perhaps the only life it really makes sense to want
to live again. Let me try to explain.

For years Nietzsche was ill, suffering intense migraines, nausea, and vomit­
ing. Often he was unable to work and confined to bed. He fought this. He tried
everything. He sought a better climate. He watched his diet fanatically. He exper­
imented with medicines. Nothing worked. He could not improve his condition.
His suffering was out of his control. It dominated his life and determined his
every activity. He was overpowered by it. There was no freedom or dignity here. He became a slave to his illness. He was subjugated by it. What was he to do? At the beginning of the essay “On the Sublime,” Schiller writes:

[N]othing is so unworthy of man than to suffer violence…. [W]hoever suffers this cravenly throws his humanity away…. This is the position in which man finds himself. Surrounded by countless forces, all of which are superior to his own and wield mastery over him…. If he is no longer able to oppose physical force by his relatively weaker physical force, then the only thing that remains to him, if he is not to suffer violence, is to eliminate utterly and completely a relationship that is so disadvantageous to him, and to destroy the very concept of a force to which he must in fact succumb. To destroy the very concept of a force means simply to submit to it voluntarily.20

Although Nietzsche did not go about it in the way Schiller had in mind, nevertheless, this is exactly what Nietzsche did. What was he to do about his suffering? What was he to do about the fact that it came to dominate every moment of his life? What was he to do about the fact that it was robbing him of all freedom and dignity? What was he to do about this subjugation and slavery? He decided to submit to it voluntarily. He decided to accept it fully. He decided that he would not change one single detail of his life, not one moment of pain. He decided to love his fate. At the prospect of living his life over again, over again an infinite number of times, without the slightest change, with every detail of suffering and pain the same, he was ready to say, “Well then! Once more!” (Z IV: “The Drunken Song” 1). He could not change his life anyway. But this way he broke the psychological stranglehold it had over him. He ended his subjugation. He put himself in charge. He turned all “it was” into a “thus I willed it.” Everything that was going to happen in his life, he accepted, he chose, he willed. He became sovereign over his life. There was no way to overcome his illness except by embracing it.

III

I think we are now in a position to see that for eternal recurrence to work, for it to have the effect that it must have for Nietzsche, we must accept without qualification, we must love, every single moment of our lives, every single moment of suffering. We cannot allow ourselves to be tempted by what might at first sight seem to be a much more appealing version of eternal recurrence, that is, a recurring life that would include the desirable aspects of our present life while leaving out the undesirable ones. To give in to such temptation would be to risk losing everything that has been gained. To give in to such temptation, I suggest, would allow the suffering in our present life to begin to reassert its psychological stranglehold. We would start to slip back into subjugation. We would again come to be dominated by our suffering. We
would spend our time trying to minimize it, or avoid it, or ameliorate it, or cure it. We would again become slaves to it.

For the same reason, I do not think it will work for us to accept eternal recurrence merely because of one or a few grand moments—for the sake of which we are willing to tolerate the rest of our lives. Magnus holds that all we need desire is the return of one peak experience. This suggests that our attitude toward much of our life, even most of it, could be one of toleration, acceptance, or indifference—it could even be negative. All we need do is love one great moment and, because all moments are interconnected (Z IV: “The Drunken Song” 10; WP 1032), that then will require us to accept all moments. This would be much easier than actually loving all moments of one’s life—every single detail. The latter is what is demanded in Ecce Homo, which says that amor fati means that one “wants nothing to be different” and that we “[n]ot merely bear what is necessary . . . but love it” (EH “Clever” 10, emphasis added [except to love]). We want “a Yes-saying without reservation, even to suffering. . . . Nothing in existence may be subtracted, nothing is dispensable . . .” (EH “BT” 2). If we do not love every moment of our present life for its own sake, those moments we do not love, those moments we accept for the sake of one grand moment, I suggest, will begin to wear on us. We will begin to wish we did not have to suffer through so many of them, we will try to develop strategies for coping with them, we will worry about them, they will start to reassert themselves, they will slowly begin to dominate us, and pretty soon we will again be enslaved by them. Our attitude toward any moment cannot be a desire to avoid it, change it, or reduce it—or it will again begin to dominate us. Indeed, in Ecce Homo, Nietzsche says that he had to display a “Russian fatalism.” He did so by

  tenaciously clinging for years to all but intolerable situations, places, apartments, and society, merely because they happened to be given by accident: it was better than changing them, than feeling that they could be changed—than rebelling against them.

  Any attempt to disturb me in this fatalism, to awaken me by force, used to annoy me mortally—and it actually was mortally dangerous every time.

  Accepting oneself as if fated, not wishing oneself “different”—that is in such cases great reason itself. (EH “Wise” 6)

Eternal recurrence is an attempt to deal with meaningless suffering. It is an attempt to do so that completely rejects an approach to suffering that says, Let’s improve the world, let’s change things, let’s work step by step to remove suffering—the view of liberals and socialists whom Nietzsche so often rails against. If it is impossible to significantly reduce suffering in the world, as Nietzsche thinks it is, then to make it your goal to try to do so is to enslave yourself to that suffering.
IV

We have seen that in Nietzsche’s opinion we cannot bear meaningless suffering and so we give it a meaning. Christianity, for example, explains it as punishment for sin. Eternal recurrence, however, would certainly seem to plunge us back into meaningless suffering (WP 55). It implies that suffering just happens, it repeats eternally, it is fated. There is no plan, no purpose, no reason for it. Eternal recurrence would seem to rub our noses in meaningless suffering.

In one sense this is perfectly correct. And Nietzsche does want to accept as much meaninglessness and suffering as he can bear (BGE 39, 225; WP 585a). Nevertheless, we must see that there is meaning here—it is just that it lies precisely in the meaninglessness. 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. That is the new meaning that suffering is given. Suffering no longer has its old meaning. Suffering no longer has the meaning Christianity gave to it. Suffering can no longer be seen as punishment. There is no longer any guilt. There is no longer any sin. One is no longer accountable (TI “Errors” 8; HI 99). If suffering just returns eternally, if even the slightest change is impossible, how can one be to blame for it? How can one be responsible? It can be none of our doing. We are innocent. This itself could explain why one would be able to embrace eternal recurrence, love every detail of one’s life, not wish to change a single moment of suffering. One would be embracing one’s own innocence. One would be loving one’s own redemption from guilt.

Eternal recurrence brings the Übermensch as close as possible to the truth, meaninglessness, the void, but it does not go all the way or it would crush even the Übermensch. Eternal recurrence gives the Übermensch meaning. It eliminates emptiness. It fills the void. With what? It fills it with something totally familiar and completely known; with something that is in no way new, different, or strange; with something that is not at all frightening. It fills the void with one’s own life—repeated eternally. It is true that this life is a life of suffering, but (given the horror of existence) suffering cannot be avoided anyway, and at least suffering has been stripped of any surplus suffering brought about by concepts of sin, punishment, or guilt. It has been reduced to a life of innocence. Moreover, as Nietzsche has said, it is only meaningless suffering that is the problem. If given a meaning, even suffering becomes something we can seek (GM III:28). Eternal recurrence, the fatedness of suffering, its meaningless repetition, makes our suffering innocent. That might well be reason enough to embrace it. Or, although we may not be able to embrace it ourselves, I think we can at least see why Nietzsche might—and even why it might make sense for him to do so.
Eternal recurrence also gives suffering another meaning. If one is able to embrace eternal recurrence, if one is able to turn all “it was” into a “thus I willed it,” then one not only reduces suffering to physical suffering, breaks its psychological stranglehold, and eliminates surplus suffering related to guilt, but one may even in a sense reduce suffering below the level of physical suffering. One does not do this as the liberal, socialist, or Christian would, by changing the world to reduce suffering. In Nietzsche’s opinion that is impossible, and, indeed, eternal recurrence of the same rules it out—at least as any sort of final achievement. Rather, physical suffering is reduced by treating it as a test, a discipline, a training, which brings one greater power. One might think of an athlete who engages in more and more strenuous activity, accepts greater and greater pain, handles it better and better, and sees this as a sign of greater strength, as a sign of increased ability. Pain and suffering are turned into empowerment. Indeed, it is possible to love such suffering as a sign of increased power. One craves pain—“more pain! more pain!” (GMIII:20). And the more suffering one can bear, the stronger one becomes.

If suffering is self-imposed, if the point is to break the psychological stranglehold it has over us, if the point is to turn suffering into empowerment, use it as a discipline to gain greater strength, then it would be entirely inappropriate for us to feel sorry for the sufferer. To take pity on the sufferer either would demonstrate an ignorance of the process the sufferer is engaged in, what the sufferer is attempting to accomplish through suffering, or would show a lack of respect for the sufferer’s suffering (GS 338; D 135). To pity the sufferer, to wish the sufferer did not have to go through such suffering, would demean the sufferer and the whole process of attempting to gain greater strength through such suffering.

Let us try again to put ourselves in Nietzsche’s place. He has suffered for years. He has suffered intensely for years. He has come to realize that he cannot end this suffering. He cannot even reduce it significantly. But he has finally been able to break the psychological stranglehold it has had over him. He is able to accept it. He wills it. He would not change the slightest detail. He is able to love it. And this increases his strength. How, then, would he respond to our pity? Very likely, he would be offended. He would think we were patronizing him. He would not want us around. He would perceive us as trying to rob him of the strength he had achieved, subjugate him again to his suffering, strip him of his dignity. He would be disgusted with our attempt to be do-gooders, our attempt to impose our own meaning on his suffering (treating it as something to pity and to lessen) in opposition to the meaning he has succeeded in imposing on it.

Nietzsche wagers a lot on his commitment to the notion that suffering cannot be significantly reduced in the world. For if it can, then pity and compassion would be most important to motivate the reduction of suffering. Nietzsche is so committed to the value of suffering that he is willing to remove, or at least radically devalue, pity and compassion.
To appreciate how committed he is, suppose we are incorrigible do-gooders—liberals, socialists, or Christians. We just cannot bear to see anyone suffer. Suppose we find a researcher who is working on a cure for Nietzsche’s disease. This researcher thinks that within a few years a drug can be produced to eliminate the disease. Suppose the researcher is right. And suppose that just as Nietzsche has solidly committed to eternal recurrence, just as he is able to love his fate, just as he has decided he would not change the slightest detail of his life, we tell him about this cure.

How would Nietzsche respond? Would he accept the cure? Would he give up his hard-won attitude of accepting his migraines, nausea, and vomiting, of refusing to desire any change? Would he revert to his old attitude of hoping to reduce his suffering, trying out whatever might accomplish this? Would he give his illness a chance to reassert its psychological stranglehold? We must remember that our supposition is that he would actually be cured in a few years. But he would also forgo the discipline, the strengthening, the empowerment that a commitment to eternal recurrence and amor fati would have made possible. Although his illness would be cured, he would not have developed the wherewithal to deal with any other suffering—in a world characterized by the horror of existence. We cannot know whether Nietzsche would decide to take the cure or not. What we can be sure of is that if he did, he would not be the Nietzsche we know.

Kierkegaard retells the story of Abraham and Isaac. God commands Abraham to take his only son to Mount Moriah and to sacrifice him there as a burnt offering. Faithful Abraham sets off to obey God’s will. But just as he arrives, just as he has drawn his knife, just as he is about to offer his son, he is told instead to sacrifice the ram that God has prepared. Kierkegaard suggests that if he had been in Abraham’s position, if he had sufficient faith in God and had obeyed him as Abraham did, if he had been able to summon the same courage, then, when he got Isaac back again he would have been embarrassed. Abraham, he thinks, was not embarrassed. He was not embarrassed because he believed all along, by virtue of the absurd, that God would not require Isaac.

What about Nietzsche? Let us assume that Nietzsche has fully committed to eternal recurrence and amor fati, that he has come to love his fate, that he has decided he would not change the slightest detail. Moreover, he has announced this to the world in his writings. Let us assume that over the years this commitment has empowered him, given him greater strength. We do-gooders now inform him that we can cure his disease and eliminate his suffering. Even further, suppose we were able to prove to him that eternal recurrence is impossible. Would Nietzsche be embarrassed?

Maybe. But it is not absolutely clear that he would be. He might respond that believing in eternal recurrence—perhaps even by virtue of the absurd—allowed him to face the horror of existence. He might respond that it does not really matter whether his life will actually return. The only thing that matters is the attitude he
was able to develop toward his present life. He might respond that it does not really matter that it has become possible to cure his particular illness; there is still plenty of other suffering to be faced given the horror of existence. He might respond that what matters is the strength he was able to gain from believing in eternal recurrence and loving his fate, not whether eternal recurrence is actually true.

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NOTES

1. See also Sophocles, Oedipus at Colonus, in Sophocles I, trans. R. Fitzgerald (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), 134. Nietzsche also speaks of the “original Titanic divine order of terror” (BT 3) and of the “terrors of nature” (BT 9); of the mere thought of pain as a “reproach against the whole of existence” (GS 48); of Christianity as creating “sublime words and gestures to throw over a horrible reality” (WP 685); and of the world as “false, cruel, contradictory, seductive, without meaning” and of “the terrifying and questionable character of existence” (WP 853). See also WP 4.


5. My three models, that of the perfectible, the designed, and the horrific cosmos, should be compared with the three models that Nietzsche sets out in BT 18 ff., that of the Socratic, artistic, and tragic. See also WP 333.

6. See also Z III: “On the Vision and the Riddle" 2; Z III: “The Convalescent” 1–2; WP 1057–67. For a discussion of earlier approximations to the doctrine of eternal recurrence in the history of philosophy, see Magnus, Nietzsche’s Existential Imperative, 47–68.


8. Also, if one believes in anything like a Christian afterlife, eternal recurrence would hardly be a matter of indifference. If eternal recurrence were true, the Christian would be deprived of an
afterlife that makes any sense—at the very least it would have to be interrupted eternally, each time one has to relive one’s earthly life.


13. KGW V 2, 11[203].


17. Salomé, Nietzsche, 130. It is quite clear that Nietzsche wavered on eternal recurrence; see Salomé, Nietzsche, 133. At times Nietzsche even said: “I do not wish for life again” (KGW VII 1, 4[81]).


22. One great moment may be enough to get us interested in, and excited by, eternal recurrence, but then, as Nietzsche says, the thought has to “[gain] possession of you.” I suggest that for it to gain possession of us we must come to love every moment of our life or eternal recurrence will crush us; see GS 341. However, see Z IV: “The Drunken Song” 10.

23. Eternal recurrence itself does not entail that it is impossible in the present cycle to do something about reducing suffering, but eternal recurrence does entail that in the next cycle, as for Sisyphus, all would be undone, and we would have to start over again from scratch.