

NIETZSCHE'S ETERNAL RECURRENCE

INTRODUCTION: Having read my book, *Gorfu Contra Nietzsche*, ⁽¹⁾ some had commented that a very important dimension of Nietzsche's philosophy had been left out. And some even said that 'Eternal Recurrence' was such a crucial part of Nietzsche, ⁽²⁾ and central to his entire philosophy that without some discussion of the topic, they felt as if a large part of his philosophy had been left untouched and unexplored.

Though a couple of times in passing, I did touch on 'eternal recurrence' in my book I never felt the subject really merited a serious enough examination. This could be due to my background in scientific field and my engineering training, and of being firmly grounded in logic and the material world, I neither considered 'Eternal Recurrence' to be of much importance, nor felt it would add or take away anything from the main work of Nietzsche. On hindsight, however, I could, just as easily, have added a few more pages on this topic without any serious diversion from the main thrust of the arguments, or adding an undue burden on the reader. I am hoping that this essay, perhaps, would address the issue and satisfy everyone.

What follow in the next few pages, therefore, is a brief examination, discussion, and a total refutation of Nietzsche's doctrine of 'Eternal Recurrence.' First, we will start with quotations from *Zarathustra*, where the doctrine of 'eternal recurrence' has been expounded, so that the reader can see for himself the basis of this philosophy. We will then try to see where such thoughts and concepts came from, and then examine some supporting views and explanations of this doctrine, in order to understand what one might be able to understand from this philosophy. Finally, we will show the weaknesses in these arguments and demonstrate the total banality, as well as the bankruptcy of the philosophy of 'Eternal Recurrence.'

Quotes: -

But there was a gateway just where we had stopped.

"Behold this gateway, dwarf!" I continued. "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.' But whoever would follow one of them on and on, farther and farther – do you believe, dwarf, that these paths contradict each other eternally?"

"All that is straight lies," the dwarf murmured contemptuously. "All truth is crooked; time itself is a circle."

"You spirit of gravity," I said angrily. "Do not make things too easy for yourself! Or I shall let you crouch where you are crouching, lame-foot; and it was I that carried you to this *height*."

“Behold,” I continued, “this moment! From this gateway, Moment, a long, eternal lane leads *backward*: behind us lies an eternity. Must not whatever can walk have walked on this lane before? Must not whatever *can* happen have happened, have been done, have passed by before? And if everything has been there before – what do you think, dwarf, of this moment? Must not this gateway too have been there before? And are not all things knotted together so firmly that this moment draws after it *all* that is to come? Therefore – itself too? For whatever *can* walk – in this long lane out *there* too, it *must* walk once more.

“And this slow spider, which crawls in the moonlight, and this moonlight itself, and I and you in the gateway, whispering together, whispering of eternal things – must not all of us have been there before? And return and walk in that outer lane, out there, before us, in this long dreadful lane – must we not eternally return?” (3)

“...O Zarathustra, who you are and must become” behold you are the teacher of the eternal recurrence – that is your destiny! That you as the first must teach this doctrine – how could this great destiny not be your greatest danger and sickness too?

“Behold, we know what you teach: that all things recur eternally, and we ourselves too; and that we have already existed an eternal number of times, and all things with us. You teach that there is a great year of becoming, a monster of a great year; which must, like an hourglass, turn over again and again so that it may run down and run out again; and all these years are alike in what is greatest as in what is smallest; and we ourselves are alike in every great year, in what is greatest as in what is smallest.

“Now I die and vanish... the soul is as immortal as the body. But the knot of causes in which I am entangled recurs and will create me again. I myself belong to the causes of eternal recurrence. I come again, with this sun, with this earth, with this eagle, with this serpent – not to a new life or a better life or a similar life: I come back eternally to this same, selfsame life, in what is greatest as in what is smallest, to teach again the eternal recurrence of all things...” (4)

Discussion: Though Nietzsche briefly touches on ‘eternal recurrence’ a few more times in other works, the quotes given above are the most fundamental, and stand out like two supporting pillars of the doctrine. Right off the bat one can see from these quotes, ‘eternal recurrence’ is a thread woven out of thin air, a simple fantasy presented without any argument. It is a tale, a story told as part of the narrative of that old oracle, Zarathustra, along with his eagle, serpent, spider and other animals. This narrative, which at its very best is only a fabrication of the writer’s imagination, does not amount to a reasoned argument in support of a theory or doctrine. In the narrative, ‘eternal recurrence’ is just a hypothesis put forward by the author. None of the exhaustive arguments, axioms, theorems, syllogisms, etc., required to prove or support a ‘philosophical’ theory, are ever given either here, or any other works of Nietzsche. Eternal Recurrence is just an idea, a concept, thrown at us much like a ghost story. There are those, who, like little children, believe any ghost story at face value. But there are also some of us who demand a more substantive and objective proof before we can accept an idea.

The strongest of the 'pseudo scientific' arguments, often put forward to support this doctrine by the followers of Nietzsche, is a mixture of statistical mathematics, physics and astrophysics. It goes something like this: '...Time is infinite, an endless eternity, but since space and matter in the universe are finite, limited, all the matter in the universe, therefore, can be combined, arranged and rearranged in a finite number of permutations. Given the eternity of time, these permutations must therefore, repeat themselves over and over again, and must already have repeated themselves many, many times in the eternal past. And they will also continue to repeat themselves going in circles in the eternity of the future. Bingo! Therefore, eternal recurrence is a scientific fact! Q.E.D.

For those who don't have a strong background in math and statistics, and are unfamiliar with terminology like permutation, here is a simplified version of what permutation means and a brief introduction to the concept. If we toss a coin, the most probable outcome of heads or tails coming up is fifty/fifty, (50%) That means, since the coin has only two sides, a throw of one hundred times will probably result in heads and tails coming fifty times each. This is only 'probability', though. There is no absolute way of knowing for sure. To simplify the example, let us examine only ten throws. According to the statistical probability we are very likely to get five heads and five tails. But from experience we know it is also possible to get all ten heads and no tails. Or nine heads and one tails, or eight heads and two tails, or all the other combinations of heads and tails up to one heads and nine tails, and no heads and ten tails. That is why mathematics can only give us the statistical 'probability.' Taking each of these combination of heads and tails and performing some mathematical operation would then give us the famous 'bell curve' which shows the percentage probability of each combination of heads and tails. The fifty/fifty heads to tails ratio would have the highest probability at the top of the dome, right on the top of the bell. The nine heads to one tail and nine tails to one heads would be at each wing of the bottom of the bell curve, having the lowest probability of occurrence.

Having bored the reader with all these mathematical concepts, we are still left without any way of knowing with '*certainty*' what the next coin throw will produce. It can be a head or tail. Not only that, but the next ten throws can be all heads and no tails, or all tails and no heads. Put bluntly: we have no way of knowing what the future holds. That precisely, is the reason why fortune-tellers, Tarot card readers, the entire horoscope industry, the Las Vegas slot machines, the horse races, the dog races, and all other forms of gambling will always be in business.

Regardless of the odds, the gambler keeps hoping, and betting that a few more coin tosses or dice throws will bring a series of results favorable to him. Occasionally, this turns out to be true, and the gambler wins, proving all the statistical probability wrong! In the case of the dice, since it has six sides, each face has a one sixth probability of coming up on top. That is a smaller percentage than the coin. That is only 16.66% as compared to 50%. But when we apply the mathematical operation on the combinations of the dice, we still end up with the bell curve. The 16.66% for every face on the dice coming up will be on

the top of the bell, but all other combinations will be spread on the bell curve from the top all the way to the bottom fringes.

To simplify the theory of eternal recurrence further and give one more concrete example, suppose we have a necklace with an arrangement of a variety of colored beads on a string. These colored beads can be arranged in a sequence: red, blue, yellow, orange, green, purple... etc. Suppose that we keep a record, and change the sequence of colors after wearing the necklace every day. Since there are a limited number of beads on the necklace, we soon find that we will have exhausted all possible sequence of colors, and would need to repeat a sequence previously used. If we continue this for a long time, we will have pattern after pattern repeating again and again. That, in short, is the sum total of the doctrine of 'eternal recurrence', and its proof. The colored beads would represent 'matter' while the string in which the beads are threaded represents 'space.'

From this simplistic 'pseudo scientific' explanation, one is expected to arrive at that horrendous conclusion that we must have lived this same life many times in the past, and everything goes on and on in an ever repeating '*single*' circle. So we have no alternative or power to do otherwise, but to come again and again and relive this very same life over and over again through all eternity. That is the basis of the doctrine or philosophy, if you will, of 'Eternal Recurrence.' God can then be seen as a child with a single film, audio or videocassette, and who replays that single tune or film again, and again, for eternity. What poverty of imagination! What total pauperism of the intellect that this doctrine should be advocated by a mind as rich and as fertile as that of Nietzsche! This betrays a linear mind and a limited view.

The above 'proof' of Eternal Recurrence, so well camouflaged in the terminology of western thought, painted in heavy 'pseudo-scientific' makeup, and supported by physics and statistical probability to boot, on closer inspection, begins to give off a strong smell of Curry and Vindaloo. It reminds us of that dinner we had many years ago in an Indian restaurant. The only difference being that in the Indian menu it was referred to by another name, - Reincarnation/Karma. Those two names too, recurrence and reincarnation begin to sound more and more alike. Has that German chef, Nietzsche, moved from traditional baking of chocolates and cakes to the cooking of spicy, Oriental dishes? The reincarnation/karma combo, usually marinated with Madras curry, is a traditional Indian dish, served with rice!

There are several forms of reincarnation in many Hindu religions. In Buddhism too, a person is born and reborn dozens of times until he learns to master his emotions and desires. Life is believed to be for the purpose of overcoming the desires of the body. Through a series of births and deaths a person finally achieves Nirvana, when the cycle of births and deaths ends, and one is born no more. Nirvana is supposed to be a state of bliss where one has reached the state beyond birth and death. In some Hindu religions, one can be reborn as an animal, an insect, a worm... etc. One Indian saint told his disciples that he would come as a rat in the next life. There is an Indian temple in his honor where they still continue to feed and protect rats of the neighborhood daily for fear that one of them might be the reincarnation of that saint. There is another Hindu god, Hanuman, who was

incarnated as a monkey in his last appearance. They have a temple for him too, where they feed monkeys daily, protect and care for them in the environs of the temple. The law of Karma too, fatalism, is about the powerlessness of man to change or do anything about his fate, that whatever is written is what will take place, and one lives one's life only in the way that the law of Karma dictates.

So, Nietzsche's *Eternal Recurrence* is just a form of reincarnation and karma. Along with the book of Manu, Nietzsche must have come across one or more of the many kinds of Indian religions, absorbed their teachings, and regurgitated some of those thoughts in his writings under the new name, - Eternal Recurrence. (5) So much for originality! This is an old shoe, so common in many Oriental thoughts, and the quote above, "*O Zarathustra, who you are and must become*" *behold you are the teacher of the eternal recurrence – that is your destiny! That you as the first must teach this doctrine...*' is simply not true, and has no basis. This doctrine is an ancient concept, taught in various forms by many Oriental teachers throughout the ages, and Zarathustra was not the *first* to teach this doctrine. Why then does Nietzsche make the claim of being the first to teach it? The answer is simple. It was customary in those days for European travelers to come to Africa or Asia, ask native guides to show them the way to the source of a river, or to the top of a mountain, and then turn around and claim it as their discovery. They would then name it after themselves or their king or queen. Nietzsche's claim of originality and of being first to teach this doctrine must be seen in that light. He could claim of introducing it to Europe. That is all. This concludes the first part of our inquiry into the banality of the doctrine of Eternal Recurrence. There is nothing original about it.

Now we move on to the second part, where we show the bankruptcy of this doctrine. The above argument, using time, eternity, finite matter, statistical probability... etc. might sound as if a scientific proof has been rendered, making an open and tightly shut case of the theory. However, this is not the case. Let us examine the above argument carefully. Even if we accept that time is infinite and matter and space are finite in the universe, it does not immediately follow therefore: 'Eternal Recurrence' is a fact. Q.E.D. That, indeed, is a farfetched conclusion.

First of all, let us take the 'proof' at its face value and accept it fully. Even if true, it is only a mathematical 'probability', not a mathematical 'certainty.' As we mentioned at the end of the mathematical description, there is no way to predict the future. Furthermore, the premises that space and matter are finite while time is infinite, has yet to be proved. Science has, so far, failed to confirm or deny the finitude of the universe. Astrophysics has yet to map the entire universe, and even the very possibility of that idea is becoming arguable and doubtful. We still have no way of knowing as to whether space or matter in the universe has any limit. The further away we look we find galaxies and more galaxies, all speeding away from us at faster and faster rate of velocities, accelerating away from us. We try to measure velocities with the speed of light and distances with light years, and still, the universe has become so vast, velocities so great, that even as we write the numbers, we are hard pressed to imagine or comprehend their meaning. Furthermore, the universe continues to expand at greater and greater pace,

suggesting that space is not limited or finite. The concept of finite matter and space in physics is becoming much like the Medieval concept, the 'Dome of the sky', the ceiling above the earth, beyond which God was believed to reside, sitting on his 'golden throne of glory.' We now know that there is no such ceiling above us called 'sky'. It is just empty space, the atmosphere. So, the very foundation of the above 'pseudo-scientific' argument is flawed. There simply, is no evidence to support the statement that space and matter in the universe are finite. These assumptions are simply not true. Matter and space may very well be, and most likely are, infinite. The doctrine of Eternal Recurrence has no legs to stand on in science. Matter, space and time are proving ever more elusive, and appear to be merely different forms of one and the same fundamental substance of the universe, - energy. Perhaps, that may be the new name for God?

Even within finite matter, the possibility for infinity does, indeed, exist. The ancient Greek legend of Achilles, racing ten times faster than a turtle but forever unable to catch up comes to mind. If I have a glass of water and always take a sip of only one tenth of the water, and leave nine tenth in the glass, the water in the glass will never run out. And I can sip from one glass of water forever and ever, as long as I sip only one tenth of it. Here is an example of infinity within that which is finite, - a glass of water. We can have an infinite recurrence – sipping – even within the finite substance. This proves the foundation, as well as the conclusion of the doctrine of Eternal Recurrence, to be totally baseless.

In order for a 'natural' event to take place there are a host of other events, by coincidence or design, that need to come together and happen at exactly the same time. Many chemical reactions in the lab often fail to take place precisely because, either the quantity of one, or other of the ingredients, the temperature, pressure, type of mix, the grind, or blend, some or all of the above, were not at exactly the correct point during the experiment. Such failures occur in spite of the full and active participation and cooperation of the chemist, who keeps repeating and trying his hardest to get the reaction to take place. Now, imagine if these chemicals were left to themselves to roam randomly throughout the universe and an eternity of time to elapse, and we would expect for the chemical reaction to come about by sheer coincidence or luck.

Even though, with the above arguments, we have already debunked both the foundation and the conclusion of 'Eternal Recurrence', to further illustrate its absurdity, let us consider this. We can start with a flask, totally evacuated and begin to introduce a few molecules into the vacuum. Left to themselves, the molecules would randomly float all over the space inside the flask. To make this illustration more realistic, let the size of the flask be as large as the sky and as wide as the horizon. When one looks at the horizon as far as the eye can see, it is about a fifty miles radius and a hundred miles in diameter. The height of the sky too, up to the upper mesosphere is about a hundred miles. So let us imagine a balloon shaped flask, which has been evacuated. Let us also increase the size of these molecules to the size of an average potato to make it easier to visualize.

Into this flask we can introduce a spinning gyro, which is free to roam randomly everywhere. If we color two potatoes, one red and one blue, and glue them each on

opposite periphery of the gyro and let it spin, it would spin in the flask for ever and ever, but the two potatoes will never come together. Just because space is finite and matter too, it does not immediately follow that things can arrange and rearrange themselves a number of times. It is possible that any and all arrangements can be prevented because of forces that prevent the limited matter from ever coming together. This reminds us of Enrico Fermi's law of gaps in the spectrum of energy/matter. Energy, and thereby, matter can exist only in specific places, (energy bands.) The concept of randomness is immediately cut to pieces. The things that happen can only happen in specific energy bands, and not everywhere. That means there are many permutations that will never take place even if you wait forever and ever, even as the two potatoes glued at opposite ends of the gyro that will never meet, no matter for how long the gyro spins in the flask.

Now, there are also other phenomena that can never repeat even in a limited space and limited material arrangement as we have constructed in our experiment. Suppose we take out the gyro and introduce the red and blue potatoes into the flask all by themselves, one at a time. As these potatoes randomly float in the vacuum, it is possible, given enough time that they will come together and collide. The blue potato crashes against the red potato.

Depending on how violent the collision was, some damage will be sustained. It is possible that one side of the potato could be smashed up and many pieces fly away. After the damage is sustained the potatoes are permanently, and irreversibly, altered in size and shape. Not only that but now we have small pieces of potatoes flying about in our flask. These collisions can be repeated many, many more times, but every time a new deformation will take place and more pieces of potatoes will fly away. From this we see what is known as 'entropy', or the arrow of time. We can accept that time is endless and eternal, but it has only one direction of motion, forward. It is irreversible. It might be possible for pieces of flying potato to stick together from time to time and form a chunk of potato. But Nietzsche's Eternal Recurrence teaches that all these flying pieces of a potato will come back together to form each of the original red and blue potatoes in the same exact shape and form as before. This concept obviously, borders on insanity.

Potatoes can disintegrate but there is no way for the smashed up pieces of potato to come together by themselves and get reconstructed into the original potatoes with skin and all, no matter how long eternity lasts. And if these two plain and simple potatoes cannot come back into their original shape by sheer coincidence, or permutation of matter, how would it be possible for two airplanes that crash to get reconstructed into their original shape by sheer permutation of matter? Eternal Recurrence is even worse, in that it tells us not only airplanes, but human beings too, and elephants, and cows, serpents, spiders, and eagles... get reconstructed not once, but over, and over again by sheer permutation of matter. Therein lays its sheer insanity. How is one to accept this doctrine?

Energy is given off and dissipates; a candle can burn off and the wax, melt. Left to themselves, all natural events can only happen in one, and only one direction, in the direction of 'the arrow of time,' or 'negative entropy,' as it is known in chemistry. But there is no way that the light given off by a candle can come back and get collected, or

the melted wax, come together and stand erect again. We can give this experiment millions or billions of years, but the probability of a smashed up potato, or a burnt up candle ever coming back whole all by itself, due to "Eternal Recurrence," is zero. Only in the religious realm do we find the dead, like Lazarus, coming back to life. In the science of the real world, however, this is not so: - hence, the total bankruptcy of the doctrine of 'Eternal Recurrence'.

One final point: among those who support the doctrine of Eternal Recurrence some say, it has an ethical and moral dimension. If one is to come and live this very life over and over again, one should try to live it in a way that one wants to come and relive it. That is, they tell us: 'One should live it to the utmost, and without leaving anything regrettable.' (6) This sounds nice, and we would have nothing against it. In fact, some people might even be moved and motivated to live life to the utmost because of the ethical interpretation of this doctrine. However, it is not even necessary to conduct a controlled social experiment to see how this doctrine affects the majority of mankind. A social experiment is still going on several millenniums old places. Just look at India, a country that has lived under the shadow of karma and reincarnation for the longest time. It is a nation where Brahmins, the highest caste, have systematically ruled and dominated the whole society and kept the chandala, (untouchables) as their footstool, without any hope, or dream of salvation. Fatalism, or karma, does not tell people to live life to the fullest. It simply states one must accept ones fate, and live it. 'If I have already lived this same life many times before, and there is nothing for me to change, why talk to me about living life to the fullest? If my previous life was lived to the fullest, I will live it to the fullest again this time. If I have not done so in previous lives, then there is nothing I can do about it now. I am totally powerless.' This is the logical result of this *doctrine of despair*, which reduces human life to that of a marionette or puppet, where the strings are forever held in the hands of fate, creating a total paralysis in the mind of the individual and society. So, from either the scientific, or the moral and ethical standpoint, there is nothing much going for this doctrine. It is totally bankrupt.

CONCLUSION: The beliefs of reincarnation and karma are part and parcel of many Oriental religions. If one wants to teach Eternal Recurrence as a religion, fine. We will not object to that. But to present this as a serious philosophy is simply unacceptable. It does not surprise us that Nietzsche advocated this doctrine. He did not have much of mathematics or scientific training, which has proved to be his Achilles' heel. As for the ethical view of this philosophy, Nietzsche might not have known what poverty and squalor this fatalistic religion had brought to India. Otherwise, we don't believe he would advocate such an evil system to be introduced into European thinking. If, however, he knew full well of the paralyzing social effect of this doctrine in India, and still advocated it, then this would further prove Nietzsche's evil genius. Since his whole philosophy was centered on weaving the myth of the "Superman" and the "Super race," to rule over the earth, was he perhaps paving the way and preparing a moral code for the rest of us, the chandala, to accept and live by, - Eternal Recurrence? This could perhaps, explain why he considered it as a very crucial part of his philosophy? In that case, he meant it to serve as the final nail that would hold down the lid of the coffin he created. History, however, bears witness to the fact that it was the very "Superman" and the "Super race" Nietzsche

created with the myth of this philosophy that were buried in that very coffin, - Hitler and his followers.

Thus, having fully demonstrated both the banality and bankruptcy of the doctrine of Eternal Recurrence, we hereby conclude our inquiry.

G. E. Gorfu. 5/16/00

NOTES:

1. *Gorfu Contra Nietzsche*, G. E. Gorfu, Vantage Press Inc., 1999. 516 W. 34th Street, New York, N. Y., 10001
2. "...Whenever Nietzsche thinks something to be of crucial significance to his teaching, one can be certain that Nietzsche has erred... However, since he saw the doctrine as key to the understanding of human existence, anything so pompously labeled had to be taken seriously. The "trade" requires it to be so." *Nietzsche, The Mind's Greatest Storyteller* p. 97-98 by Anthony Mlikotin, New Dimension Press, 1991 Chicago, Los Angeles, New York.
3. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, III, 2, translated by Walter Kaufman, p. 157-158 Modern Library, NY. 1995
4. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, III, 13, translated by Walter Kaufman, p. 220-221, Modern Library, NY. 1995
5. *Conversations With Nietzsche*, p. 200 by Sander L. Gilman, translated by David J. Parent p. Oxford University Press 1987, 200 Madison Ave. NY, NY 10016. We have the following account:- "Nietzsche showed the liveliest interest in his Indian studies and spoke much in those days about the unique brotherly people on the Ganges... the fakir, sitting still and radiating benevolence, the theosophical movements link to the Eastern religions – all this and much more was the topic of discussion in those days. And the transferring of these alien things into modern life was very fascinating." Meta von Salis-Marschlins, May 1887
6. "So live, that you might desire to live again... Eternity is worth it... Let us stamp the form of eternity upon our lives... This life is your eternal life." *Werke* XII: 116, 124, 126, 212, 213 Kristische Gesamtausgabe, Editors Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari. 30 vols. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1967-78 **NIETZSCHE'S ETERNAL RECURRENCE**

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"Behold this gateway, dwarf!" I continued. "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.' But whoever would follow one of them on and on, farther and farther – do you believe, dwarf, that these paths contradict each other eternally?"

"All that is straight lies," the dwarf murmured contemptuously. "All truth is crooked; time itself is a circle."

"You spirit of gravity," I said angrily. "Do not make things too easy for yourself! Or I shall let you crouch where you are crouching, lame-foot; and it was I that carried you to this *height*."

“Behold,” I continued, “this moment! From this gateway, Moment, a long, eternal lane leads *backward*: behind us lies an eternity. Must not whatever can walk have walked on this lane before? Must not whatever *can* happen have happened, have been done, have passed by before? And if everything has been there before – what do you think, dwarf, of this moment? Must not this gateway too have been there before? And are not all things knotted together so firmly that this moment draws after it *all* that is to come? Therefore – itself too? For whatever *can* walk – in this long lane out *there* too, it *must* walk once more.

“And this slow spider, which crawls in the moonlight, and this moonlight itself, and I and you in the gateway, whispering together, whispering of eternal things – must not all of us have been there before? And return and walk in that outer lane, out there, before us, in this long dreadful lane – must we not eternally return?” (3)

“...O Zarathustra, who you are and must become” behold you are the teacher of the eternal recurrence – that is your destiny! That you as the first must teach this doctrine – how could this great destiny not be your greatest danger and sickness too?

“Behold, we know what you teach: that all things recur eternally, and we ourselves too; and that we have already existed an eternal number of times, and all things with us. You teach that there is a great year of becoming, a monster of a great year; which must, like an hourglass, turn over again and again so that it may run down and run out again; and all these years are alike in what is greatest as in what is smallest; and we ourselves are alike in every great year, in what is greatest as in what is smallest.

“Now I die and vanish... the soul is as immortal as the body. But the knot of causes in which I am entangled recurs and will create me again. I myself belong to the causes of eternal recurrence. I come again, with this sun, with this earth, with this eagle, with this serpent – not to a new life or a better life or a similar life: I come back eternally to this same, selfsame life, in what is greatest as in what is smallest, to teach again the eternal recurrence of all things...” (4)

Discussion: Though Nietzsche briefly touches on ‘eternal recurrence’ a few more times in other works, the quotes given above are the most fundamental, and stand out like two supporting pillars of the doctrine. Right off the bat one can see from these quotes, ‘eternal recurrence’ is a thread woven out of thin air, a simple fantasy presented without any argument. It is a tale, a story told as part of the narrative of that old oracle, Zarathustra, along with his eagle, serpent, spider and other animals. This narrative, which at its very best is only a fabrication of the writer’s imagination, does not amount to a reasoned argument in support of a theory or doctrine. In the narrative, ‘eternal recurrence’ is just a hypothesis put forward by the author. None of the exhaustive arguments, axioms, theorems, syllogisms, etc., required to prove or support a ‘philosophical’ theory, are ever given either here, or any other works of Nietzsche. Eternal Recurrence is just an idea, a concept, thrown at us much like a ghost story. There are those, who, like little children, believe any ghost story at face value. But there are also some of us who demand a more substantive and objective proof before we can accept an idea.

The strongest of the ‘pseudo scientific’ arguments, often put forward to support this doctrine by the followers of Nietzsche, is a mixture of statistical mathematics, physics and astrophysics. It goes something like this: ‘...Time is infinite, an endless eternity, but since space and matter in the universe are finite, limited, all the matter in the universe, therefore, can be combined, arranged and rearranged in a finite number of permutations. Given the eternity of time, these permutations must therefore, repeat themselves over and over again, and must already have repeated themselves many, many times in the eternal past. And they will also continue to repeat themselves going in circles in the eternity of the future. Bingo! Therefore, eternal recurrence is a scientific fact! Q.E.D.

For those who don’t have a strong background in math and statistics, and are unfamiliar with terminology like permutation, here is a simplified version of what permutation means and a brief introduction to the concept. If we toss a coin, the most probable outcome of heads or tails coming up is fifty/fifty, (50%) That means, since the coin has only two sides, a throw of one hundred times will probably result in heads and tails coming fifty times each. This is only ‘probability’, though. There is no absolute way of knowing for sure. To simplify the example, let us examine only ten throws. According to the statistical probability we are very likely to get five heads and five tails. But from experience we know it is also possible to get all ten heads and no tails. Or nine heads and one tails, or eight heads and two tails, or all the other combinations of heads and tails up to one heads and nine tails, and no heads and ten tails. That is why mathematics can only give us the statistical ‘probability.’ Taking each of these combination of heads and tails and performing some mathematical operation would then give us the famous ‘bell curve’ which shows the percentage probability of each combination of heads and tails. The fifty/fifty heads to tails ratio would have the highest probability at the top of the dome, right on the top of the bell. The nine heads to one tail and nine tails to one heads would be at each wing of the bottom of the bell curve, having the lowest probability of occurrence.

Having bored the reader with all these mathematical concepts, we are still left without any way of knowing with ‘*certainty*’ what the next coin throw will produce. It can be a head or tail. Not only that, but the next ten throws can be all heads and no tails, or all tails and no heads. Put bluntly: we have no way of knowing what the future holds. That precisely, is the reason why fortune-tellers, Tarot card readers, the entire horoscope industry, the Las Vegas slot machines, the horse races, the dog races, and all other forms of gambling will always be in business.

Regardless of the odds, the gambler keeps hoping, and betting that a few more coin tosses or dice throws will bring a series of results favorable to him. Occasionally, this turns out to be true, and the gambler wins, proving all the statistical probability wrong! In the case of the dice, since it has six sides, each face has a one sixth probability of coming up on top. That is a smaller percentage than the coin. That is only 16.66% as compared to 50%. But when we apply the mathematical operation on the combinations of the dice, we still end up with the bell curve. The 16.66% for every face on the dice coming up will be on

the top of the bell, but all other combinations will be spread on the bell curve from the top all the way to the bottom fringes.

To simplify the theory of eternal recurrence further and give one more concrete example, suppose we have a necklace with an arrangement of a variety of colored beads on a string. These colored beads can be arranged in a sequence: red, blue, yellow, orange, green, purple... etc. Suppose that we keep a record, and change the sequence of colors after wearing the necklace every day. Since there are a limited number of beads on the necklace, we soon find that we will have exhausted all possible sequence of colors, and would need to repeat a sequence previously used. If we continue this for a long time, we will have pattern after pattern repeating again and again. That, in short, is the sum total of the doctrine of 'eternal recurrence', and its proof. The colored beads would represent 'matter' while the string in which the beads are threaded represents 'space.'

From this simplistic 'pseudo scientific' explanation, one is expected to arrive at that horrendous conclusion that we must have lived this same life many times in the past, and everything goes on and on in an ever repeating '*single*' circle. So we have no alternative or power to do otherwise, but to come again and again and relive this very same life over and over again through all eternity. That is the basis of the doctrine or philosophy, if you will, of 'Eternal Recurrence.' God can then be seen as a child with a single film, audio or videocassette, and who replays that single tune or film again, and again, for eternity. What poverty of imagination! What total pauperism of the intellect that this doctrine should be advocated by a mind as rich and as fertile as that of Nietzsche! This betrays a linear mind and a limited view.

The above 'proof' of Eternal Recurrence, so well camouflaged in the terminology of western thought, painted in heavy 'pseudo-scientific' makeup, and supported by physics and statistical probability to boot, on closer inspection, begins to give off a strong smell of Curry and Vindaloo. It reminds us of that dinner we had many years ago in an Indian restaurant. The only difference being that in the Indian menu it was referred to by another name, - Reincarnation/Karma. Those two names too, recurrence and reincarnation begin to sound more and more alike. Has that German chef, Nietzsche, moved from traditional baking of chocolates and cakes to the cooking of spicy, Oriental dishes? The reincarnation/karma combo, usually marinated with Madras curry, is a traditional Indian dish, served with rice!

There are several forms of reincarnation in many Hindu religions. In Buddhism too, a person is born and reborn dozens of times until he learns to master his emotions and desires. Life is believed to be for the purpose of overcoming the desires of the body. Through a series of births and deaths a person finally achieves Nirvana, when the cycle of births and deaths ends, and one is born no more. Nirvana is supposed to be a state of bliss where one has reached the state beyond birth and death. In some Hindu religions, one can be reborn as an animal, an insect, a worm... etc. One Indian saint told his disciples that he would come as a rat in the next life. There is an Indian temple in his honor where they still continue to feed and protect rats of the neighborhood daily for fear that one of them might be the reincarnation of that saint. There is another Hindu god, Hanuman, who was

incarnated as a monkey in his last appearance. They have a temple for him too, where they feed monkeys daily, protect and care for them in the environs of the temple. The law of Karma too, fatalism, is about the powerlessness of man to change or do anything about his fate, that whatever is written is what will take place, and one lives one's life only in the way that the law of Karma dictates.

So, Nietzsche's *Eternal Recurrence* is just a form of reincarnation and karma. Along with the book of Manu, Nietzsche must have come across one or more of the many kinds of Indian religions, absorbed their teachings, and regurgitated some of those thoughts in his writings under the new name, - Eternal Recurrence. (5) So much for originality! This is an old shoe, so common in many Oriental thoughts, and the quote above, "*O Zarathustra, who you are and must become*" behold you are the teacher of the eternal recurrence – that is your destiny! That you as the first must teach this doctrine...' is simply not true, and has no basis. This doctrine is an ancient concept, taught in various forms by many Oriental teachers throughout the ages, and Zarathustra was not the *first* to teach this doctrine. Why then does Nietzsche make the claim of being the first to teach it? The answer is simple. It was customary in those days for European travelers to come to Africa or Asia, ask native guides to show them the way to the source of a river, or to the top of a mountain, and then turn around and claim it as their discovery. They would then name it after themselves or their king or queen. Nietzsche's claim of originality and of being first to teach this doctrine must be seen in that light. He could claim of introducing it to Europe. That is all. This concludes the first part of our inquiry into the banality of the doctrine of Eternal Recurrence. There is nothing original about it.

Now we move on to the second part, where we show the bankruptcy of this doctrine. The above argument, using time, eternity, finite matter, statistical probability... etc. might sound as if a scientific proof has been rendered, making an open and tightly shut case of the theory. However, this is not the case. Let us examine the above argument carefully. Even if we accept that time is infinite and matter and space are finite in the universe, it does not immediately follow therefore: 'Eternal Recurrence' is a fact. Q.E.D. That, indeed, is a farfetched conclusion.

First of all, let us take the 'proof' at its face value and accept it fully. Even if true, it is only a mathematical 'probability', not a mathematical 'certainty.' As we mentioned at the end of the mathematical description, there is no way to predict the future. Furthermore, the premises that space and matter are finite while time is infinite, has yet to be proved. Science has, so far, failed to confirm or deny the finitude of the universe. Astrophysics has yet to map the entire universe, and even the very possibility of that idea is becoming arguable and doubtful. We still have no way of knowing as to whether space or matter in the universe has any limit. The further away we look we find galaxies and more galaxies, all speeding away from us at faster and faster rate of velocities, accelerating away from us. We try to measure velocities with the speed of light and distances with light years, and still, the universe has become so vast, velocities so great, that even as we write the numbers, we are hard pressed to imagine or comprehend their meaning. Furthermore, the universe continues to expand at greater and greater pace,

suggesting that space is not limited or finite. The concept of finite matter and space in physics is becoming much like the Medieval concept, the 'Dome of the sky', the ceiling above the earth, beyond which God was believed to reside, sitting on his 'golden throne of glory.' We now know that there is no such ceiling above us called 'sky'. It is just empty space, the atmosphere. So, the very foundation of the above 'pseudo-scientific' argument is flawed. There simply, is no evidence to support the statement that space and matter in the universe are finite. These assumptions are simply not true. Matter and space may very well be, and most likely are, infinite. The doctrine of Eternal Recurrence has no legs to stand on in science. Matter, space and time are proving ever more elusive, and appear to be merely different forms of one and the same fundamental substance of the universe, - energy. Perhaps, that may be the new name for God?

Even within finite matter, the possibility for infinity does, indeed, exist. The ancient Greek legend of Achilles, racing ten times faster than a turtle but forever unable to catch up comes to mind. If I have a glass of water and always take a sip of only one tenth of the water, and leave nine tenths in the glass, the water in the glass will never run out. And I can sip from one glass of water forever and ever, as long as I sip only one tenth of it. Here is an example of infinity within that which is finite, - a glass of water. We can have an infinite recurrence – sipping – even within the finite substance. This proves the foundation, as well as the conclusion of the doctrine of Eternal Recurrence, to be totally baseless.

In order for a 'natural' event to take place there are a host of other events, by coincidence or design, that need to come together and happen at exactly the same time. Many chemical reactions in the lab often fail to take place precisely because, either the quantity of one, or other of the ingredients, the temperature, pressure, type of mix, the grind, or blend, some or all of the above, were not at exactly the correct point during the experiment. Such failures occur in spite of the full and active participation and cooperation of the chemist, who keeps repeating and trying his hardest to get the reaction to take place. Now, imagine if these chemicals were left to themselves to roam randomly throughout the universe and an eternity of time to elapse, and we would expect for the chemical reaction to come about by sheer coincidence or luck.

Even though, with the above arguments, we have already debunked both the foundation and the conclusion of 'Eternal Recurrence', to further illustrate its absurdity, let us consider this. We can start with a flask, totally evacuated and begin to introduce a few molecules into the vacuum. Left to themselves, the molecules would randomly float all over the space inside the flask. To make this illustration more realistic, let the size of the flask be as large as the sky and as wide as the horizon. When one looks at the horizon as far as the eye can see, it is about a fifty miles radius and a hundred miles in diameter. The height of the sky too, up to the upper mesosphere is about a hundred miles. So let us imagine a balloon shaped flask, which has been evacuated. Let us also increase the size of these molecules to the size of an average potato to make it easier to visualize.

Into this flask we can introduce a spinning gyro, which is free to roam randomly everywhere. If we color two potatoes, one red and one blue, and glue them each on

opposite periphery of the gyro and let it spin, it would spin in the flask for ever and ever, but the two potatoes will never come together. Just because space is finite and matter too, it does not immediately follow that things can arrange and rearrange themselves a number of times. It is possible that any and all arrangements can be prevented because of forces that prevent the limited matter from ever coming together. This reminds us of Enrico Fermi's law of gaps in the spectrum of energy/matter. Energy, and thereby, matter can exist only in specific places, (energy bands.) The concept of randomness is immediately cut to pieces. The things that happen can only happen in specific energy bands, and not everywhere. That means there are many permutations that will never take place even if you wait forever and ever, even as the two potatoes glued at opposite ends of the gyro that will never meet, no matter for how long the gyro spins in the flask.

Now, there are also other phenomena that can never repeat even in a limited space and limited material arrangement as we have constructed in our experiment. Suppose we take out the gyro and introduce the red and blue potatoes into the flask all by themselves, one at a time. As these potatoes randomly float in the vacuum, it is possible, given enough time that they will come together and collide. The blue potato crashes against the red potato.

Depending on how violent the collision was, some damage will be sustained. It is possible that one side of the potato could be smashed up and many pieces fly away. After the damage is sustained the potatoes are permanently, and irreversibly, altered in size and shape. Not only that but now we have small pieces of potatoes flying about in our flask. These collisions can be repeated many, many more times, but every time a new deformation will take place and more pieces of potatoes will fly away. From this we see what is known as 'entropy', or the arrow of time. We can accept that time is endless and eternal, but it has only one direction of motion, forward. It is irreversible. It might be possible for pieces of flying potato to stick together from time to time and form a chunk of potato. But Nietzsche's Eternal Recurrence teaches that all these flying pieces of a potato will come back together to form each of the original red and blue potatoes in the same exact shape and form as before. This concept obviously, borders on insanity.

Potatoes can disintegrate but there is no way for the smashed up pieces of potato to come together by themselves and get reconstructed into the original potatoes with skin and all, no matter how long eternity lasts. And if these two plain and simple potatoes cannot come back into their original shape by sheer coincidence, or permutation of matter, how would it be possible for two airplanes that crash to get reconstructed into their original shape by sheer permutation of matter? Eternal Recurrence is even worse, in that it tells us not only airplanes, but human beings too, and elephants, and cows, serpents, spiders, and eagles... get reconstructed not once, but over, and over again by sheer permutation of matter. Therein lays its sheer insanity. How is one to accept this doctrine?

Energy is given off and dissipates; a candle can burn off and the wax, melt. Left to themselves, all natural events can only happen in one, and only one direction, in the direction of 'the arrow of time,' or 'negative entropy,' as it is known in chemistry. But there is no way that the light given off by a candle can come back and get collected, or

the melted wax, come together and stand erect again. We can give this experiment millions or billions of years, but the probability of a smashed up potato, or a burnt up candle ever coming back whole all by itself, due to "Eternal Recurrence," is zero. Only in the religious realm do we find the dead, like Lazarus, coming back to life. In the science of the real world, however, this is not so: - hence, the total bankruptcy of the doctrine of 'Eternal Recurrence'.

One final point: among those who support the doctrine of Eternal Recurrence some say, it has an ethical and moral dimension. If one is to come and live this very life over and over again, one should try to live it in a way that one wants to come and relive it. That is, they tell us: 'One should live it to the utmost, and without leaving anything regrettable.' (6) This sounds nice, and we would have nothing against it. In fact, some people might even be moved and motivated to live life to the utmost because of the ethical interpretation of this doctrine. However, it is not even necessary to conduct a controlled social experiment to see how this doctrine affects the majority of mankind. A social experiment is still going on several millenniums old places. Just look at India, a country that has lived under the shadow of karma and reincarnation for the longest time. It is a nation where Brahmins, the highest caste, have systematically ruled and dominated the whole society and kept the chandala, (untouchables) as their footstool, without any hope, or dream of salvation. Fatalism, or karma, does not tell people to live life to the fullest. It simply states one must accept ones fate, and live it. 'If I have already lived this same life many times before, and there is nothing for me to change, why talk to me about living life to the fullest? If my previous life was lived to the fullest, I will live it to the fullest again this time. If I have not done so in previous lives, then there is nothing I can do about it now. I am totally powerless.' This is the logical result of this *doctrine of despair*, which reduces human life to that of a marionette or puppet, where the strings are forever held in the hands of fate, creating a total paralysis in the mind of the individual and society. So, from either the scientific, or the moral and ethical standpoint, there is nothing much going for this doctrine. It is totally bankrupt.

CONCLUSION: The beliefs of reincarnation and karma are part and parcel of many Oriental religions. If one wants to teach Eternal Recurrence as a religion, fine. We will not object to that. But to present this as a serious philosophy is simply unacceptable. It does not surprise us that Nietzsche advocated this doctrine. He did not have much of mathematics or scientific training, which has proved to be his Achilles' heel. As for the ethical view of this philosophy, Nietzsche might not have known what poverty and squalor this fatalistic religion had brought to India. Otherwise, we don't believe he would advocate such an evil system to be introduced into European thinking. If, however, he knew full well of the paralyzing social effect of this doctrine in India, and still advocated it, then this would further prove Nietzsche's evil genius. Since his whole philosophy was centered on weaving the myth of the "Superman" and the "Super race," to rule over the earth, was he perhaps paving the way and preparing a moral code for the rest of us, the chandala, to accept and live by, - Eternal Recurrence? This could perhaps, explain why he considered it as a very crucial part of his philosophy? In that case, he meant it to serve as the final nail that would hold down the lid of the coffin he created. History, however, bears witness to the fact that it was the very "Superman" and the "Super race" Nietzsche

created with the myth of this philosophy that were buried in that very coffin, - Hitler and his followers.

Thus, having fully demonstrated both the banality and bankruptcy of the doctrine of Eternal Recurrence, we hereby conclude our inquiry.

G. E. Gorfu. 5/16/00

NOTES:

1. *Gorfu Contra Nietzsche*, G. E. Gorfu, Vantage Press Inc., 1999. 516 W. 34th Street, New York, N. Y., 10001
2. "...Whenever Nietzsche thinks something to be of crucial significance to his teaching, one can be certain that Nietzsche has erred... However, since he saw the doctrine as key to the understanding of human existence, anything so pompously labeled had to be taken seriously. The "trade" requires it to be so." *Nietzsche, The Mind's Greatest Storyteller* p. 97-98 by Anthony Mlikotin, New Dimension Press, 1991 Chicago, Los Angeles, New York.
3. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, III, 2, translated by Walter Kaufman, p. 157-158 Modern Library, NY. 1995
4. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, III, 13, translated by Walter Kaufman, p. 220-221, Modern Library, NY. 1995
5. *Conversations With Nietzsche*, p. 200 by Sander L. Gilman, translated by David J. Parent p. Oxford University Press 1987, 200 Madison Ave. NY, NY 10016. We have the following account:- "Nietzsche showed the liveliest interest in his Indian studies and spoke much in those days about the unique brotherly people on the Ganges... the fakir, sitting still and radiating benevolence, the theosophical movements link to the Eastern religions – all this and much more was the topic of discussion in those days. And the transferring of these alien things into modern life was very fascinating." Meta von Salis-Marschlins, May 1887
6. "So live, that you might desire to live again... Eternity is worth it... Let us stamp the form of eternity upon our lives... This life is your eternal life." *Werke* XII: 116, 124, 126, 212, 213 Kristische Gesamtausgabe, Editors Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari. 30 vols. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1967-78

of ... MYTH, MAN, AND MONSTER

G.E. Gorfu

What is in a myth? Joseph Campbell has taught us a lot in this area. (1) A myth may appear to be just a fable or a simple story of little or no consequence, but it can tell us a lot about the people who hold the myth? Let us examine the story of St. George and the dragon from the Catholic Official Encyclopedia to see what this myth might tell us:

The Cult and Legend of Saint George

“The cult of Saint George goes back a long way - certainly to the 4th century. The Syrian Church held him in great esteem. The church of Saint George in *Velabro - (The Veil of Gold)* – Rome, dating from that time was built. Saint Clothilde, in Gaul, dedicated a church to him; in Venice, he is the second patron after Saint Mark; the Greeks hold him in honor. And in 1222 the **Council of Oxford** appointed 23rd April as his Feast Day. He became the English Patron Saint in 14th Century and was associated with the Order of the Garter. He is also the patron saint of **Moscow, Russia, and of Georgia**, which bears his name, and of **Aragon**. He was, until 18th century, patron of **Portugal** (when they broke from Spain in 12th century, they chose a new patron: their acquaintance with the English in the Crusades confirmed George as the natural successor. He remains to this day still "in charge" of the army), although Our Lady is the Protectoress of the Country now. St George is patron saint of **Aragon...**”



In the same Encyclopedia we also find:

“St. George, a knight born in Cappadocia, came in to the province of Libya, to a city which is named Silene. And by this city was a stagne or a pond like a sea, wherein was a dragon which envenomed all the country. And on a time the people were assembled for to slay him, and when they saw him they fled. And when he came nigh the city he venomed the people with his breath, and therefore the people of the city gave to him every day two sheep for to feed him, because he should do no harm to the people, and when the sheep failed there was taken a man and a sheep. Then was an ordinance made in the town that there should be taken the children and young

people of them of the town by lot, and every each one as it fell, were he gentle or poor, should be delivered when the lot fell on him or her. So it happed that many of them of the town were then delivered, insomuch that the lot fell upon the king's daughter, whereof the king was sorry, and said unto the people: For the love of the gods take gold and silver and all that I have, and let me have my daughter. They said: How sir! Ye have made and ordained the law, and our children be now dead, and ye would do the contrary. Your daughter shall be given, or else we shall burn you and your house.

“When the king saw he might no more do, he began to weep, and said to his daughter: Now shall I never see thine espousals. Then returned he to the people and demanded eight days' respite and they granted it to him. And when the eight days were passed they came to him and said: Thou seest that the city perisheth: Then did the king do array his daughter like as she should be wedded, and embraced her, kissed her and gave her his benediction, and after, led her to the place where the dragon was.

“When she was there S. George passed by, and when he saw the lady he demanded the lady what she made there and she said: Go ye your way fair young man that ye perish not also. Then said he: Tell to me what have ye and why weep ye, and doubt ye of nothing. When she saw that he would know, she said to him how she was delivered to the dragon. Then said S. George: Fair daughter, doubt ye no thing hereof for I shall help thee in the name of Jesus Christ. She said: For God's sake, good knight, go your way, and abide not with me, for ye may not deliver me. Thus as they spake together the dragon appeared and came running to them, and S. George was upon his horse, and drew out his sword and garnished him with the sign of the cross, and rode hardily against the dragon which came towards him, and smote him with his spear and hurt him sore and threw him to the ground. And after said to the maid: Deliver to me your girdle, and bind it about the neck of the dragon and be not afeard. When she had done so, the dragon followed her as it had been a meek beast and debonair. Then she led him into the city, and the people fled by mountains and valleys, and said: Alas! Alas! We shall be all dead. Then S. George said to them: No, doubt ye no thing, without more, believe ye in God, Jesus Christ, and do ye to be baptized and I shall slay the dragon. Then the king was baptized and all his people and S. George slew the dragon and smote off his head, and commanded that he should be thrown in the fields, and they took four carts with oxen that drew him out of the city.” (2)

Historical Research and the Quest for Validity

Does the story have any validity? These, and other stories like it, were not very well received by historians. One of them had this to say about the legend of St. George:

“...Still less is St. George to be considered, as suggested by Gibbon, Vetter, and others, a legendary double of the disreputable bishop, George of Cappadocia, the Arian opponent of St. Athanasius. "This odious stranger", says Gibbon, in a famous passage, "disguising