

# The Doctrine of Eternal Recurrence

## PREFACE

§1

*Eternal Recurrence as the "Middle Way" between Science and Religion?* - In this book, the unexamined is examined — perhaps even the unaskable — a possibility that, for this age, appears far too vague: the existence of a "middle path" between religious and scientific convictions, that is, between the religious and the scientific view of the world. Just as once, in ancient India, Gotama Buddha set out upon his "middle path" between Hinduism and Jainism, so too do we today take a step onto our own middle path — a kind of pantheistic religious philosophy, resembling a silent thaumaturgy — which we wish to insert between the overgrown footpaths of great and small religions on one side, and the one and only straight-lined "highway of science" on the other.

While the religious paths are still adorned with trees bearing diverse fruits of meaning, the scientific highway offers interesting and sophisticated stopping points — resting places in a technical sense. If such a "path" is possible at all, we believe it might rest on a form of faith grounded in intuition and feeling, but also in philosophical and scientific reasoning — a faith in the **Doctrine of Eternal Recurrence/Return (of the Same)**, entrusted to us by none other than the "freest of all free spirits" and "the prophet of our time" — **Friedrich Nietzsche**.

This possibility of a "middle path" is examined here more thoroughly than in any previous work, and though it has taken a side — faith in Eternal Recurrence — it does not shy away from exposing the many difficulties of such a teaching, as well as the objections it faces, sometimes rightly, sometimes not. For to many — which currently means the vast majority of people on this planet — this possibility still appears unimaginable, and therefore wholly unacceptable.

§2

*Toward a New View of Reality.* - Our intention here is neither to devalue religious beliefs nor to contradict scientific insights — as our Teacher might have wished. Rather, our aim is to present them as special cases of a new perspective on reality, a perspective that would bring together the best of both: the religious sense that all of us — stars, trees, stones, living beings — are parts of one and the same, for us only intuited, ontological Whole, about which we know nothing ontically and probably never will; and the scientific insight into the way it functions as the eternal return of the same.

In the first case, this would mean a syncretic, and in its deepest nature pantheistic, religion — not seeking God outside the Whole nor within its parts, but recognizing the Whole itself as divine. In the second case, it would imply a radically new approach in science, if not a new science altogether: one capable of renouncing the old onto-epistemological aspirations to answer the question of what the

world is "in itself," and instead calmly accepting the fact that it can only discover how the world functions — precisely as Eternal Recurrence/Return of the Same — thereby finally granting the only possible meaning to its knowledge.

### §3

*The Moment of Illumination (or The Birth of the Insight-Feeling).* - Before April two thousand and nineteen, even the author of these lines was not convinced that Eternal Recurrence was truly *at work* in this world. Having first encountered that—then merely an idea from *The Gay Science*—twenty-five years earlier, he found it intriguing, yet at the same time too vague and, in the end, implausible. What was the "Master" raving about? How could "everything return"?

Then, in April two thousand and nineteen, something within him broke open — a moment of illumination occurred, perhaps akin to the one Nietzsche experienced beside the rock at Surlej in August 1881. For the first time, he could *feel* the Eternal Recurrence of the Same as something that truly *is*, rather than merely think or contemplate it. In a single flash of thought, he grasped that "Holy-Grail-like" finitude of the world in its deepest depth and understood its sole possible implication — that it is compelled to bring back its own states, or, vulgarly put, to "repeat" them.

In that instant, an insight interwoven with feeling was born — which he called an *insight-feeling* into Eternal Recurrence. Thus the idea of Eternal Recurrence of the Same incarnated itself in his life and became reality. Even today, he is not entirely certain what gave rise to that *insight-feeling*; he only knows he witnessed it under less exalted circumstances than Nietzsche did when struck by the same revelation — in the bathroom of his apartment, after his usual evening shower. That *insight-feeling* referred rather to that sense of truth which even Einstein once felt in connection with the theory of relativity — long before he had proved it mathematically — than to pure faith, which, as Pascal showed, takes root in man more readily through habit and upbringing.

### §4

*The End of Infinity and the Science of Eternal Recurrence.* - Enlightened by an insight into the ultimate eschatological possibilities of the world we inhabit—that it is probably limited, rather than unlimited, in its possibilities—the author of this book came to realize that **the very concept of the infinite, alongside that of God the Creator, may be one of our greatest inventions, devised in order for us to survive.** What if infinity exists only within our experience of space and time—as Kant taught us, with unrelenting clarity—and not in the reality that surrounds us? And since our mathematics, too, historically emerged from this very experience of space and time, it is there as well that we encounter infinity, at least at its present stage of development.

On the other hand, we find that science is becoming ever less certain about what this world is (whether a universe, or perhaps a multiverse, if such a notion is indeed "to the point"), while becoming ever more certain about how it functions. Science cannot tell us what things are in themselves, nor what we ourselves are in ourselves; it cannot determine where we and things begin, and where we end—quantum mechanics, in an interpretative sense, offers only vague notions here—but it can show us how we function, and how this world, the universe (or multiverse), functions. It is precisely in this capacity to uncover the mode of functioning of all that is that, in the view of the

author of these lines, the ultimate knowledge attainable by science itself resides: the discovery that this world functions as Eternal Return.

**Eternal Return is, in principle, a scientifically testable hypothesis concerning the mode of functioning of all that is.** After all, did not our Teacher himself describe the Doctrine of Eternal Return as precisely such a hypothesis—and, moreover, as “the most scientific” of all?!

*“It is the most scientific of all possible hypotheses. We deny final purposes: if existence had one, it would have been reached already. One then understands that the circle of recurrence has no “goal,” nor anything resembling one; rather, in its entirety, it is the highest state one can conceive.”* (Nachlass 1881, fragment 11[141])

Although at present this hypothesis does not seem capable of confirmation—whether because of the entropic principle of the second law of thermodynamics, or the currently most persuasive, yet still hypothetical, theory of the Big Bang, as well as quantum theory (which, in an important sense, stands in its way), and the eternally unfalsifiable metaphysical presupposition of God’s existence—this nevertheless does not mean that one day it could not become so.

## §5

*A Book Written Outside Its Time.* - Another question is this: how is it possible that such a thought—one so distant from today’s “social reality,” from the “noise of everyday life”—could even occur to someone? How could anyone seriously contemplate it in this age, which we might rightfully call the media age, or the technological age—or perhaps the media-technological one—an age marked by a flood of half-beliefs, half-truths, and half-information (or post-truths) of every kind; by the emptiness of a consumerist and exhibitionist way of life; by the omnipresence of daily politicking and criticism; and by the general commodification of cultural values—and still believe that such a thought could interest anyone at all? Indeed, it is quite another question how to awaken in any free spirit of this time even the slightest interest in it—how to persuade them to take it *in earnest*. These are questions to which the author of this book has no answer.

For that reason, it may also seem to him that he is condemned to the same kind of ignorance to which Nietzsche himself was once condemned. Perhaps this book will be read only among the ruins of this world—a world whose downfall, without doubt, has already been scheduled. When it will occur—that is hard to predict... That is why it is being written within the author of these lines, in the stillness of his inner time, which is, in its own peculiar way—timeless. **As for the author, this book could have been written two thousand years ago, or two thousand years from now; in both a practical and spiritual sense, it has nothing to do with this time.**

For that reason, dear reader, it may strike you as a kind of speculative science-fiction essay—a piece *sui generis*—something that might momentarily amuse you between two business meetings or during a corporate retreat at some spa resort... After a few pages, you will return to your usual corporate routines, managing human and other resources within some serious “business entity,” striving to keep it within the bounds of its “sacred profitability.” Perhaps those few pages you stumbled upon in the wilderness of the internet you will recount, laughing, to a friend or a colleague, saying: “Imagine—that everything returns! That’s impossible! How could anyone ever come up with such a thought!”—and then move on to tracking the next rise or fall of stock prices.

Of course, the author of these lines can hardly hold that against you. It is quite possible that the sheer abundance of technical possibilities with which this age overflows diverts your attention from approaching this book in the way it asks to be approached. It is also possible that all these astonishing promises of artificial intelligence and algorithms, the chatter about uploading one's mind to a machine or about "eternal life within this life," draw you away from it. And it may well be that what turns you from the ideas written in this book is your faith in yourself — in your "self" — a faith fortified by the "indisputable fact" that you exist in this world, backed by your best counsellor: common sense. But even there, the author can do nothing... he cannot persuade you otherwise.

Many will therefore simply pass over **this book**; for in this age of general secularisation and egoisation of society, there truly is something that prevents you from taking it more deeply and seriously. Be that as it may, it is not for the author of these lines to ponder what influence this book might ultimately have — or fail to have. That is the essence of every thinker: his only duty is to let his spirit speak — and nothing more.

## §6

*A Faith of the Few.* - However ultimate it may be, this thought seeks neither to intrude nor to impose itself upon anyone. Once spoken — though it was surely spoken more than once — it allows itself to be ignored. It will be content merely to find its way to those free spirits (and minds) for whom it was always meant — and to no one else.

Let us not, then, deceive ourselves: the Eternal Return will never become the faith of the majority of humankind. Nietzsche himself believed that only a few would ever be able to bear its truth. The Doctrine of the Eternal Return of the Same, whether taken as a religious pantheistic philosophy or a philosophical pantheistic religion, will remain *a faith of the few* — of that minority whom no other doctrine can satisfy, and who draw from it the strength to endure the very fact of existence.

Ultimately, that is how matters stand with the Doctrine of Eternal Return: if it frightens you, if it sends fear into your bones — then flee from it without looking back. But if it lifts you more than it weighs you down, if it frees you from the fear of death — then it may well become your religion.

After all — as every post-age demands of us, and as Nietzsche taught us, as his "philosophers of the future" — we no longer insist on being right at any cost. Perhaps we are mistaken — so be it! While we are here, we shall live and wrestle with our "truths" — and one of them is precisely the truth of the Eternal Return of the Same. At times we shall guard them jealously for ourselves, and at times reveal them before others. Yet it is undeniable that they alone draw from us what is highest — and that only beneath their "sky" and "climate" do we remain the healthiest and most potent, prepared for every possibility they carry within themselves...

## §7

*On Disbelief in the Eternal Return.* - Yet the question arises: **what if it is sometimes necessary that some part of us does not (be)lieve in this doctrine.....?** What if, at times, this ultimate certainty of being in the world must be told "no" — must be opposed? By this *part of us* I do not mean the few free spirits who, by some miracle, still wander this earth, but rather, in the literal sense, the parts of our own spirit which, within us — like Nietzsche's "three hundred fronts" (*Beyond Good and Evil*, §289) — have differentiated into separate spiritual worlds. What if life in the universe, every positive charge,

every growth, the writing of this book and everything else, were only possible if one part of us never (be)lieved in the Eternal Return? As though Nietzsche himself were aware of this primordial necessity and might never have written a single line of *The Will to Power* had he not, with one part of his spirit, opposed the thought of the Eternal Return...

It is, therefore, beyond question that *our truths* also contain their opposite: **disbelief in the Eternal Return**. We have lingered too long in the land of the mind, within our own thoughts, not to know that mood in which we can no longer bear this idea – in which we begin to act treacherously toward it, taking into consideration other, opposing doctrines. In such moments, one part of our thought no longer sees eternal recurrence as the same, but only as self-similar, almost “Hindu-like,” in all its variations and alternatives – perhaps even with a promise of redemption, and therefore, in a moral sense, meaningful. Another part will cling to the Buddhist teaching, believing it will awaken in the next life as a caterpillar or as moss upon a stone beside a murmuring brook — for even that seems closer to eternity than returning once more into itself. Finally, the most defiant, darkest, and most nihilistic part of our thought will see in death the greatest comfort – the only form of eternity given to us – and, in the end, will deny the Eternal Return altogether.

Moreover, the Doctrine of the Eternal Return – like every other doctrine or claim of pure reason – is haunted by **Descartes' demon**. Because it is in the nature of pure reason to doubt everything, we can never be entirely certain that this doctrine truly *is the case*. Perhaps the reason lies in the possibility with which we can least cope: **the possibility of a hidden dimension of reality** that can affect us without our awareness. Together with the notion of infinity, it is one of the greatest objections to the doctrine of Eternal Return – if not its greatest. It is hard to take that possibility as null, though our scientists all too readily do. For if there exists a hidden part of reality which we cannot perceive, sense, or experience – and which may nonetheless act upon us – then even the scientific, etiological proof of the nature of this world’s functioning, which we believe may one day be confirmed, might one day prove false, for it will have failed to include precisely those hidden possibilities of reality.

Thus, the secret of believing in the Eternal Return – however self-contradictory it may seem – perhaps lies in opposing it from time to time: in living and thinking “beyond it” for a while; which, after all, we too often do in the cold, wintry seasons such as this one – **nihilistic** at their root – in which we find ourselves today, listlessly passing the time, no longer believing in anything at all.....

## §8

*Nihilism stands at the door: whence comes this uncanniest of all guests? (Will to Power, Book I, §1)*

On *Nihilism — the Uncanniest of All Guests (as the Reason Behind This Book)*. Since we have already touched upon **nihilism** — “*the uncanniest of all guests*” standing before our door, as our Teacher once described it — we cannot but mention it as yet another, perhaps even **the main reason for writing this book**. That unwelcome guest has long since entered our house. Whether we admit it or not, we live in an age of the most intense and most manifest nihilism, an age in which we have uprooted almost everything we once believed in. The tree of meaning, which we had once cultivated and tended with care, we have finally cut down ourselves. Around it now grows only the weed of

nihilism — individuals turned inward to their own gain and pleasure, within the frightening “*unbearable lightness of being*.”

Yet such a life can only temporarily protect man from the all-encompassing meaninglessness that has settled over his existence after the death of God — a death that took place within himself. Let us recall that it was our Teacher who first drew attention to this decisive event. Everything that unfolds today on the world stage — political, economic, and social — is but the consequence of a centuries-long struggle within Western civilization between religion and the Enlightenment for the right to truth. In the end, that very Truth became an abyss to both contenders: it cast them into the chasm of nihilism. Their passion for truth — religion’s desire to find it in the teaching of Christ, and science’s in the cold laws of an indifferent universe — became their own shackles, for that truth, absolute and whole, neither could ever prove. (*The Gay Science*, §344)

Though there will always be ruthless individuals with a strong will to power, those who wish to remain in this state — for whom nihilism poses no problem, since they can profit from it — we must not forget that, in the long run, **it is nihilism itself that corrodes and destroys every community, society as a whole, and ultimately every culture and civilization**. Be that as it may, today, in our honest judgment, there are far more people who — consciously or unconsciously — no longer know what they live for; those for whom meaninglessness, that dreadful companion of nihilism, has wrapped itself around their necks like a noose they scarcely attempt to remove.

And to every individual who feels that meaninglessness tightening around his neck, yet still strives to find a way out of that condition — this book is dedicated. To him, philosophy reveals itself as “*the balm for all wounds*” (*The Birth of Tragedy*, §7), for only within works of philosophical reflection can he find both solace and a path toward deliverance from his hopeless condition. **He is called to become a philosopher — perhaps even a Teacher of Eternal Return. For it is precisely the Eternal Return that represents Nietzsche’s exclusive solution to the problem of nihilism** (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*). And for that reason, we no longer approach this thought out of will or desire, but out of sheer necessity.

## §9

*Why Is Eternal Recurrence So Hard to Accept?* - And what is it, in truth, that is hardest to accept in the possibility of Eternal Return—and what repels people from it at the very outset? It is not, as one might first assume, the endurance of one’s own undeserved suffering and ill fate. Something else weighs far heavier: witnessing the suffering and misfortune of others. Let us think, if only for a moment, of all the hungry and the poor, the sick and the oppressed, those deprived of basic rights, and those ruined by the circumstances of their lives. The inventory of human misery is endless, and seems never to exhaust itself. How does one tell people who suffer that their torment will return eternally? The mere thought that someone might be so ill-fated that the bare knowledge of eternally reliving their own misfortune would break them completely is—for the one who witnesses it—utterly unbearable. **The true reason for disbelieving in Eternal Return therefore does not lie in the intolerability of eternally reliving one’s own pain, but in the intolerability of witnessing the pain of others—and in the pure horror that springs from it.**

Nietzsche himself struggled terribly with this problem. For a time he entertained the thought that the teaching of Eternal Return should be imparted at the end, not at the beginning of one’s

education... Perhaps one must indeed first learn *how* to live the most desirable life on earth, and only after achieving it—after mastering it—learn to accept that everything returns... One might also ask why this insight had not already arisen in many before us... Perhaps it had, but in the end they understood that it was not to be spoken aloud.

Yet the author of this book has nonetheless chosen to speak it aloud. It is the question he pursued the longest, the one that touched him most deeply and weighed on him most darkly in his most dreadful nights; perhaps he has at last found an answer to it, and perhaps he has not... If he has, it is again an answer that will require centuries to be understood—and then accepted.

*My work has time — and I absolutely do not want to be confused with what the present age has to solve as its task. In fifty years ... perhaps only a handful will become aware of what has been accomplished through me. At present, however, it is not only difficult but (according to the laws of historical perspective) quite impossible to speak of me publicly without falling infinitely short of the truth.*

*(Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche, Venice, 1884.)*

What makes a life 'worthy' and bearable in its return has nothing to do with its meaning, nor with the goals it achieved or failed to achieve, nor with the judgments of others, nor with the judgment the life itself carries of itself—all of that is illusion. **What is truly valuable, what gives a person the strength to endure Eternal Return, are those moments of happiness, fulfilment, and inner clarity that arise—amid all our striving after such illusions—in every human being, and which, like suffering, return eternally.** And if we focus our thoughts on those very moments in which we felt fulfilled, clear, and joyful—then we shall be able to withstand the thought of Eternal Return. **Nietzsche wrote that the ability to endure the thought of Eternal Return depends on whether one has experienced even a single moment one would wish to relive.** A person who has experienced even one such moment is ready to endure the thought of Eternal Return.

§10

*Who Is Actually Writing This Book — and Why Him? (on the Writer of these Lines).* - Naturally, every author, while writing a book, eventually asks himself: why *him*? Why is it he — or, as we shall show, his '**peculiarity within the Whole**', which compels him to write in the third person — who is driven to write a book such as this, and not someone else, that is, **another 'peculiarity within the Whole'**...? Might this not, once again, be the usual, concealed longing for the glory of that same stubborn **separated self** which we must — and wish to — renounce on these very pages...? The truth is likely the opposite. For let us be honest: who today is willing to publish a book such as this under their own name? Which of today's living philosophers is prepared to sacrifice their good reputation, standing, fame, etc., by aligning themselves with a doctrine that is, in principle, rationally incomprehensible and emotionally disquieting...? And when they do write about Eternal Return, these philosophers — and, more broadly, the so-called "people of spirit" — write about it with reserve, sometimes even with irony or condescension, approaching it only as a distant and improbable possibility to which this world might be subject — if it is subject to it at all.

After all, are we not witnesses that before us no one has stood behind this doctrine without reservation — except Nietzsche himself, to whom it was often attributed as a kind of "excess in thinking," one that seemed explainable by nothing else? From this it follows that no one has yet

written a book on Eternal Return that would advocate this doctrine without hesitation — with sincere, almost fanatical devotion; and that not even our Teacher, that “philosopher above philosophers,” truly accomplished this, even though at one moment he clearly tried. **Thus Spoke Zarathustra was meant to become the manifesto and the first book of the Doctrine of Eternal Return**, but the sequence of circumstances during its creation — circumstances that brought forth another thought, equally powerful (if not more so), the thought of the “will to power” — caused its fourth part to turn into a parody, a kind of theatre of masks that seems to ironize and deconstruct Zarathustra’s mission as the Teacher of Eternal Return. Already then Nietzsche hinted at his conviction that the Doctrine of Eternal Return cannot be directly communicated to others, and that his alter ego — Zarathustra, the Teacher of Eternal Return — can become such a teacher only to himself. Because of all this, it seems that Nietzsche, at the end of his path, all but abandoned that role. If all this is taken into account, then it means that until now no one has stood so clearly and consistently on the side of this “thought above all thoughts” as the author of this book, who — like the greatest prophets of their god — was irrevocably compelled to do so.

And yet, his name remains concealed. Why? Only so that the reader’s attention may remain upon the doctrine itself, and not upon its intermediary. The Doctrine of Eternal Return — although it does not transmit a Revelation in the manner of the Bible — ought to be read as the writing of one of its “evangelists.” And the evangelist, in the end, is unimportant. Though his name will sooner or later reveal itself, depending on whether the Doctrine of Eternal Return sinks into insignificance or gains in importance, here are a few words about the author of this text. He is neither theologian, nor philosopher, nor scientist. In writing he may be only slightly above average. It is entirely possible that his intelligence is not equal to the task that has presented itself before him. His reasons for believing in Eternal Return may appear insufficient in the eyes of others. In the end, this book may not even be a “good” book. But none of this alters what he has experienced, nor his need to transmit that experience to others.

Ultimately, the question will always remain whether someone else could have written this better. He himself is often seized by the feeling of being unequal to the task that has arisen before him. All he experienced was a moment of enlightenment: the insight that Eternal Return is “at work,” that it is the manner in which this world functions, and that — as such — it is the only knowable truth of this world that was granted to him. Perhaps in the future someone who undergoes a similar enlightenment will write a better book. Perhaps they will be more called, more intelligent, more prepared for this Great Task than the writer of these lines. In truth, he is more than convinced of this — but only because he has understood that **what matters is not the one who is called to reveal the truth and essence of the world, but that very essence itself**. Just as what matters is not the “meaning of life,” but only the moments through which we live it — guided by faith, and not yet by knowledge, but only by that earlier mentioned “*insight-feeling*” (see §3), that it will return eternally.

## §11

*On the Eternal Return of the Same — or the Eternal Departure into the Different?* - And so — is it the Eternal Return of the Same that is “at work,” or the Eternal Departure into the Different?

And since we have already mentioned this second possibility — the one that, at this moment, appears “victorious” and widely accepted in the clash of eschatological, or rather eschatological-

cosmological possibilities concerning the question of *how this world works* — it is difficult not to point out the way in which it *feels* victorious. It is approached almost as a fact of the world itself. Who, today, would dare deny that space is infinite and that time is infinite? It is precisely for this reason that this possibility no longer feels like a possibility — like one eschatological possibility among other eschatological possibilities. No one thinks of it in its original eschatological form: as the “Eternal Departure into the Different,” stepping onto the field against another “possibility above all possibilities” — the Eternal Return of the Same. This raises the question of whether we can add to these two possibilities any other of equal weight — perhaps only that of metempsychosis and reincarnation, which pertain primarily to the Eternal Return of the Self in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions, rather than to the return of the world as a totality; and, of course, that unavoidable possibility of Eternal Heat Death, or the End — which stands in a kind of symmetrical relation to the Big Bang, that is, to a single Beginning... and that is all. All these eschatological, as well as eschatological-cosmological possibilities, will be examined in detail in this book. What we wish to emphasize here is that when the question is posed from the eschatological vantage point of possible scenarios of how this world functions — whether everything is inclined to return (or to repeat, roughly speaking) or is instead endlessly new — it quickly becomes clear that there is still no final answer to it, and that new questions sprout from it continually.

If we assume, in the Kantian spirit, that these questions are “practical” enough to evade an antinomic fate, would it not then be permissible to seek an answer to them...? **What if our insatiable hunger for meaning, our attachment to morality, our tedious pragmatism, our will to survive and will to power — in a word, our humanity, in both its affirmative and pejorative senses — compels us, within this increasingly unbearable nihilistic atmosphere, to seek an answer nonetheless?** And if so — what kind of answer would it have to be, in its structure and in relation to the one to whom it is addressed? Would it not have to encompass our reason, our intellect, our heart, and our feelings...? If we could demonstrate its practicality, as well as its usefulness for the preservation of the species, then it would indeed be permissible to seek such an answer. Just as, according to Kant, it is impossible to stand beyond morality (“the moral law within me”) that governs our practical actions — even though one may stand beyond a *particular* morality, such as the morality of good and evil, as Nietzsche did — so too there may be certain questions to which we must have an answer, despite our skepticism regarding its ultimate credibility, which will continue to linger quietly in its shadow.

And therefore — let us boldly and cheerfully repeat the question: **Is it the Eternal Return of the Same that is “at work,” or the Eternal Departure into the Different?** And even if it seems difficult to find a coherent answer, and even if new questions arise unceasingly from this one..... **perhaps the answer ultimately depends on which of the two we choose to entrust not only our reason and our intellect, our heart and our feelings, but — may we already say this here, in the Preface? — our “new faith” as well...**