

THE DOCTRINE OF ETERNAL RECURRENCE

I n t r o d u c t i o n

§1

According to its most general formulation, the Doctrine of Eternal Return holds that everything that has ever “existed” or will “exist,” everything that has unfolded or will unfold as a “process,” in the most diverse modes of cohabitation with other “things” and “processes,” will — “once” and “somewhere” — necessarily return, repeat itself¹...

And yet, let us be realistic: from today’s scientific standpoint, who is truly prepared to believe in such a doctrine...? It suffices to think of any segment of our everyday experience for the doctrine of the Eternal Return of the Same to appear immediately implausible. Consider the following example: how are we to accept a teaching that claims that a bird, from that (over there) rooftop, will, in every ring of Return, perform the same semicircular flight, land again on that (same) rooftop, and continue to glance about itself in an apparently unpredictable manner — exactly as it is doing now, while I, “at the same time,” observe it from the safety of my balcony...? How are we to accept a doctrine that explicitly asserts that this has already happened countless times, and that it will continue to happen countless times, always in one and the same way...? Because of such aleatory insights drawn from our everyday experience, many of us will never come to believe in the Eternal Return, and nothing can be done about that. From within the niche of a spatio-temporal perspective on reality, it is simply not rationally graspable. We cannot explain its mechanism — and perhaps we never will. Something in all of this will always remain incomprehensible, and we must come to terms with that from the outset. Our experience begins from the middle², and however much we may strive, we may never reach its possible ends...

§2

On the Existential Unbearability of Eternal Recurrence. - Beyond its rational incomprehensibility, disbelief in the Eternal Return rests upon yet another unease —

¹ In the literature, Nietzsche’s thought of the Eternal Return, or the Return of the Same — which in German reads *Die Ewige Wiederkehr des Gleichen* — appears under various names. The most common are **Eternal Return** and **Eternal Return of the Same**. Taking into account loanwords from English usage, the Eternal Return (or Eternal Returning) may also be referred to as **Eternal Recurrence**. In this book, contrary to common practice, all variants of this concept’s name will be used.

² Cf. Derrida’s thesis on the mediated character of beginnings and the derived nature of immediacy: “Immediacy is derived. That all begins through the intermediary is what is indeed ‘inconceivable [to reason].” Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976/1997, p. 157.

the existential unbearability of one's own life, consciously imprisoned within a hopeless circle: a life that meaninglessly "repeats itself" ad infinitum, without any hope of ever being lived even slightly differently. Nietzsche clearly had this unease of the Eternal Return in mind when he decided to publish the doctrine for the first time — in those somber passages of the otherwise *The Gay Science*:

"What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: 'This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence—even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again—and you with it, speck of dust!' Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus?" (*The Gay Science*, §341, trans. Walter Kaufmann, New York: Vintage, 1974)

Nietzsche affectionately referred to the thought of Eternal Return as *seine schwerste Gedanke* ("his heaviest thought") (Nachlass, summer 1881, KSA 9, 11[141]), and also as "the greatest weight" (*das grösste Schwergewicht*), a formulation that appears later in the same cited aphorism. Thus, at the very outset of this writing, we must conclude that the doctrine of the Eternal Return bears upon its back two truly hard-to-digest burdens — the rational incomprehensibility and the existential unbearability of the teaching — for which reason it will, willingly or unwillingly, always struggle to find its adherents.

§3

On the Human Endurability of the Eternal Return. - Yet since this book is addressed, first and foremost, to those free spirits who still carry within themselves that never-sufficiently-mourned *spirit of Enlightenment*—the spirit that seeks to dispel the "post-structuralist darkness" that has come to dominate the "spaces of thought" after—may we now say it—an unreflective deconstruction of the very elements of thinking and their reduction to the level of a mere "language game," beyond the anti-deconstructionist search for a new ontology, a "saviour of the mind" (Žižek, *Sex and the Failed Absolute*, 2019)—**the same question must be put to them as well: why, O heirs of Enlightenment, leaders of today's progressive human thought, do you not believe in the Eternal Return?**

Why should the rational incomprehensibility of the mechanism of the Eternal Return constitute an obstacle to your interest in this hypothesis—if not even to its acceptance—**especially given that, through the theories arrived at by twentieth-century physics—the theory of relativity and quantum theory—you have already come to realise that this world is, in itself and in all likelihood, rationally incomprehensible? Both theories, and quantum theory in particular (together with its wholly rationally incomprehensible Copenhagen interpretation), are not rationally intelligible in the way scientific theories of earlier centuries once were.** Common sense cannot grasp them. We know how they work and function, but we do not know *why* they work as they do; and least of all—at least for the time being—do

we understand why they mutually exclude one another. What we observe, then, is that in much the same way the rational incomprehensibility of the hypothesis of the Eternal Return should not, from the outset, repel you—as it evidently does. It should not prevent you from engaging with it more seriously, for you have already trained your mind to endure the rational incomprehensibility of the world that surrounds you.

What, then, is the true reason for your disbelief in the Eternal Return? Does it stem from calculations of the “heat death” of the universe, once regarded as its sole ultimate fate? Hardly—for you yourselves are no longer so convinced of the inevitability of the universe’s heat death. In the meantime, other scenarios have emerged that predict markedly different destinies for the cosmos, some of which partially—or at least to some extent—set the stage for a cosmological account of the mechanism of the Eternal Return. **One of them, known as the *big bounce*, goes so far as to almost entirely prepare the stage for the “enactment” of the Eternal Return, which unfolds in so-called “bounces,” through cycles of contraction and expansion and of a cosmic *hylē*—unknown to us—from which this universe is composed;** another scenario, by contrast, claims that the universe will end in a *big crunch*. Both scenarios, whether or not they are explicitly connected to the Eternal Return, agree at least on one point: they stand in direct opposition to the image of the universe’s “heat death”—alongside which contemporary cosmology considers other possibilities as well.

Thus, it would seem that **the true reason for your disbelief in the doctrine of the Eternal Return lies neither in its rational incomprehensibility nor in the personal, existential unbearability of this thought, but in something else—something upon which we have already passed judgment in the Preface.** What first repels you from this thought—so we wrote—“does not lie in the [rational incomprehensibility and] unbearability of the eternal return of one’s own suffering and pain, but in the unbearability of witnessing the suffering and pain of others—in the sheer horror that arises from it.” Who could endure that? The certainty of an unpleasant companion of all existence in this world—suffering—once compelled even a Buddha to begin teaching the extinction of all sensations, in order to avoid it. To this objection against the call to accept the doctrine of the Eternal Return, it is indeed difficult to respond. It seems that for many, precisely for this reason, insight into this doctrine must remain withheld.

Apart from Nietzsche, this is the question we ourselves pursued the longest—the question that “in the most dreadful nights touched us most deeply and pressed upon us most gloomily”; the question because of which there will always be those among you who will reject this teaching from the very outset. Yet in that same Preface we already dared to offer an answer to it—**“an answer that [may] require centuries to be understood, and then accepted”—and it does no harm to repeat it once more here, for it appears decisive; after all, we shall return to it throughout the entire book.**

For what must be regarded as the greatest value in our life—a life that returns—are not our judgments about ourselves, the world, and others, for these are the greatest illusions, but the moments of happiness, fulfilment, and inner serenity that arise within us and that, as such, eternally return. Who are we? What is this world? We cannot know that. We can know only what we do, what we desire, and what we do not wish to do—and how we feel while doing so. And **if we focus our thoughts on those moments in which we felt happy, fulfilled, and serene, then perhaps we may be**

able to endure the thought of the Eternal Return. And so we conclude this aphorism with the same passage as the one to which we referred in the Preface:

“Nietzsche wrote that the ability to endure the thought of the Eternal Return depends on whether one has experienced at least a single such moment—one that one would wish to experience again. A person who has lived through even one such moment is prepared to endure the thought of the Eternal Return.”

§4

On the Philosophical Character of the Thought of Eternal Return. - The most ambitious intention of this book is not to point to new moments or aspects that would render the thought of Eternal Return rationally more comprehensible. This can scarcely be achieved under conditions in which science constructs its fundamental image of the world on the concepts of linear time, the “Big Bang,” and the “heat death of the universe.” By contrast, indications of the plausibility of Eternal Return are found in a specific—and to this day largely unacknowledged—mode of thinking about the ultimate possibilities of the universe, about Reality as a whole, or even about God himself, the “creator of heaven and earth”—if he is, at all, “in play.”

It is precisely owing to this specific eschatological and cosmogonic mode of thinking that, at a certain moment, we unshakably arrive at the conviction that all of us—humans, animals, trees, and stones—are limited manifestations of a single impersonal and formless, perhaps even spaceless and timeless protosubstance: Aristotle’s *hylē*, Anaximander’s *apeiron*, or God’s primordial “clay.” Of it we know nothing—and of it, most likely, we shall never know anything—except that all the forms and/or states it has attained, on an aeonic scale of time, it returns, or, crudely put, repeats, by necessity of its finite “nature.” From this it follows that we too return, that we “repeat” ourselves—whether as selves or as states of consciousness, it makes no difference—within the “eternal circle” of return.

Accordingly, **we hold that the thought of Eternal Return may be considered** outside every historical, metaphysical, anthropological, psychological, and social context; that is, it may be thought beyond any affiliation with a particular historical epoch, culture, or philosophical school—as (perhaps) **the single thought of a predicate—of all predicates—in the sense of an action, a verb, rather than a property, through which we may attain some kind of insight into what we call reality.** This means that other relations—such as motion, change, becoming, or differentiation—are to be conceived as concrete instances of a more grandiose predicate of returning, within which every action and every process is already included in advance; yet the objectivity of this predicate does not rest directly in itself, but is confirmed precisely through the objectivity of its individual instances, which, on limited “small” scales, bear witness to its reality.

The only thing we can know with absolute certainty in this world is this—that we return, and nothing more. Beyond the deconstructivist practice of French post-structuralist theory, which insists that reality is never immediate but always mediated; beyond the uncompromising stance of American pragmatists on the impossibility of thinking without initial—and, by all appearances, unfounded—assumptions; and beyond the lethal thought of the German “morphological” philosopher of history

Oswald Spengler, according to which every thought is transient—we nevertheless think otherwise. The sole thought of a predicate that provides us with a final, if modest, “objective knowledge” of the world, we maintain, is the thought of Eternal Return. And it is the only thought that can be thought in every age.

And why do we believe we are permitted to think in this way? Among other reasons, because the knowledge on which it rests—and which enables us to “capitalize our experience”—does not depend on insight into the nature of things as they are, but on the correct determination of relations—of relations, that is, of predicates—between incessantly becoming and changing “things.” In other words, for the same reason that, at every step, we can convince ourselves that we succeed in “capitalizing our experience” on the basis of our capacity to know relations among things, rather than the things themselves, we can also attest that the primordial predicate—the primordial relation—is precisely returning, precisely Eternal Return.

§5

Those who choose to believe in the Eternal Return are those for whom neither religion nor science is sufficient. **Only for those to whom ancient religious texts appear unconvincing and mean nothing — but who, on the other hand, are terrified by the scientific image of the world, especially by the idea of the heat death of the universe — and who cannot reconcile themselves with the thought of a final end, can the thought of Eternal Return become appealing and offer consolation.** In other words, although it may at first seem impossible, **the Eternal Return can console, for in its own way it offers — if not an otherworldly — then at least a “this-worldly” immortality. In doing so, it denies both the final, “eternal” death into which contemporary science would have us believe, and the eternal life in one and the same skin, with ever new possibilities, promised by religions.** What the Doctrine of Eternal Return offers in return is nothing spectacular — only this wretched life that endlessly returns.

On the other hand, we do not wish to appear frivolous and take our fear of death as an argument that in any way undermines or denies the scientific conviction that there is no one standing behind the nature of this world. Our fear of death merely brought us back to the beginning — to the point of origin, and at the same time to the crossroads of eschatological beliefs about the nature of the world in which we live — or merely feel alive — and where, after some necessary clearing, we discover that neglected “middle path” leading toward the thought of Eternal Return. From this crossroads of eschatological beliefs about the nature of the world, despite the clearly signposted two remaining paths — the religious and the scientific — we set out on a third path and there encountered the “thought of all thoughts”: that of the Eternal Return.

It is important to understand that the thought of the Eternal Return of the Same is reached through a particular philosophical–eschatological mode of thinking that does not rely on religious or scientific intuitions; neither religion nor science can present it in its original form. This can be done only by philosophical thinking. Only through this particular philosophical–eschatological way of thinking (which will be set out in more detail in the fifth chapter of this book) does the individual necessarily arrive — or fail to arrive — at the conviction of the certainty of the Eternal Return of the Same. For this reason, **the thought of Eternal Return possesses a profoundly philosophical character.**

It requires neither God nor scientific proofs as guarantees of its credibility, although it leaves open the possibility of both. For although God is denied any role in the thought of Eternal Return, it does not exclude Him; and although it is not supported by scientific insights today, it does not exclude them either. Whether it will one day be shown that God stands behind the mechanism of the Eternal Return, or whether — following insight into the nature of quantum reality or the Big Bang — it might be scientifically proven, is of no concern to the Eternal Return. What matters is to remember that the most authentic conviction in the certainty of the Eternal Return is reached by philosophical means. And that this is sufficient in itself.

Even in the case that certain ultimate possibilities — such as the existence of God or the multiverse — were to become certain, this thought would not lose its relevance. Whatever may ultimately be the case, due to the inherent finitude — and not infinity — of this world, of the Whole, after innumerable temporal moments this very moment will return: the moment in which this book is being written, as well as the moment in which it is being read.

Accordingly, when it is claimed that this thought is philosophical in nature before it is theological or scientific, what is meant is that conviction in its certainty is achieved through the logic of the eschatological thinking outlined here, accessible to those who penetrate into it, rather than through rational or theological reasoning. For this reason, the thought of Eternal Return is a kind of “god” of philosophers and of philosophical thinking.

§6

Everything Returns — Even the Supersensory or Why the Doctrine of Eternal Return Can Coexist with Other Religions) — Yet before it can be grasped in its epistemological depth and attain the status of a “justified true belief,” the doctrine of the Eternal Return of the Same must first be believed. And although it enters the domain of religions, **the doctrine of the Eternal Return** seems to remain beyond the reach of their teachings, above all **because of its indifference toward questions of God, that is, toward the beginning and the end of the world**. Even if we initially approach this indifference to the “question of all questions” of every eschatology as a certain weakness of the doctrine—since it offers no argument to show why the world could not have a beginning and an end, advocating only its cyclicity—this very indifference, on the other hand, **places the doctrine of the Eternal Return in a conciliatory position toward the teachings of other religions**.

As a kind of “**meta-religion**” or “**trans-religion**,” the doctrine of the Eternal Return is willing to listen to the narratives of other religions about how this world came into being, how it itself came into being—the ring of the Eternal Return—and at times to grant them authority, and at other times to withdraw it. Yet it must not be forgotten that it does so for one reason alone: because these stories of the origin and the end of the world do not belong to the domain of its thought. Nor **can it be entirely certain whether the ring of the Eternal Return truly came into being at some distant time in the past. Perhaps it did—although its own religion, its own faith, tells it that it has “existed” forever. Of this, it can possess no knowledge. It merely shows how this world, seen from within, functions**. It says nothing about when it began or when it will end, nor about who created it or who will destroy it. In this play of tolerance with other religions, the doctrine of the Eternal Return may acknowledge their

beginnings and ends of the world, while for itself it binds the notions of beginning and end exclusively to the beginning and the end of a single cycle, that is, of a single ring of the Eternal Return—both of which, at present, remain unknown even to itself.

In this sense, **the doctrine of the Eternal Return does not ask you to abandon your religion, with quotation marks or without them. You may remain Christians or Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, or Taoists, as well as adherents of other faith communities and spiritual traditions; you may continue to claim that you are atheists or scientific thinkers; or you may remain uncommitted as skeptics or agnostics.** It speaks only of this: that everything you experience in the sensory world, or suppose you may experience in the supersensory, is subject to a single *fatum*—returning. **Here one must pause, for what follows marks a shift in the understanding of the doctrine of the Eternal Return: as Nietzsche conceived it—though he never stated this explicitly—it also encompasses the return of all possibilities of the supersensory world, insofar as these are real, that is, truly “at work.”** If our world amounts to a single finite Whole, it is incapable of endlessly producing new possibilities. After eons upon eons spent not only on Earth, but also in heaven or in hell, in communion with God or with the Devil, in higher dimensions, in nirvana or in singularity, reincarnating into different modes of existence and repeated embodiments—the numinous, majestic Whole is compelled to return you, because it has simply exhausted all other possibilities...

§7

Why Eternal Recurrence Does Not Conflict with Religion (Or: On Introducing the Particularities of the Whole). - There is yet another reason why the Doctrine of Eternal Recurrence does not come into conflict with other religions. It generously leaves to them the answer to the question of what (it is that) returns... Who are we who return, and what is this world that returns? The Doctrine says very little about this. It does not tell us whether we are ‘selves’, ‘egos’, ‘subjects’, or something else; divine beings, human animals, or merely ‘brains in vats’; whether some God, Brahman, apeiron, or perhaps pure Nothingness is ‘at play’ — or something, at this moment, wholly unimaginable and inconceivable. We are simply parts of that something in which we are immersed.

The only thing the Doctrine speaks about concerns what each of us immediately finds within our own experience, regardless of whether that experience is real, constructed, or illusory. What we encounter are ‘states of consciousness’ (a phenomenon that could be named otherwise and that does not prejudge the existence of anything like consciousness — we have merely chosen to call our experience so) which, whether we are willing to admit it or not, stand at the foundation of everything else, including ‘our’ existence and life itself. ‘States of consciousness’ are the only certainty of which we have experience. They are the eyes through which we observe and experience the world, through which we think and decide what to do or which possibility within it to choose — without having to know what these states are ‘in themselves’.

But when we say ‘our’ ‘states of consciousness’ — what exactly do we mean? Do we mean our ‘self’, our ‘ego’, or something else? When we say ‘our’ states of consciousness, we mean individuated states of the Whole that are capable of experiencing other states of that same Whole — even though the manner of this experience remains enigmatic to us. In other words, the very possibility of encountering other states in experience is

what makes these states ‘states of consciousness’. And since such an individuated state continually encounters new states — that is, the changes of the Whole itself — it becomes a witness to the Whole’s temporal unfolding. The possibility of memory — of retaining states that the Whole has already assumed — forms what we call ‘our’ states of consciousness. These states are nothing outside the Whole; they are immanent to it.

This temporally unfolded coherence and unity that we are is what, in this book, we have called the **Particularity, or the Properness, of the Whole** — rather than a ‘self’. For unlike the ‘self’, the Properness of the Whole is not something ‘programmed’ from without, nor is it determined by so-called ‘social factors’. Nor is it some kind of ‘ego’, since it includes no a priori, conditioned, and indisputable psychological aspect of a being — no inherent qualitative feature in a spiritual sense that would possess value in itself. ‘Our’ states of consciousness, as ‘our’ Particularity of the Whole, are merely connected possibilities among countless other connected and unconnected possibilities that the Whole receives within itself... One Properness or Particularity of the Whole cannot be another — and for that reason alone it is ‘ours’. It is meaningless to determine in advance ‘our’ states of consciousness as the Properness of the Whole; every such determination arises only a posteriori. Just as we cannot conceive our hand apart from the body to which it belongs, so too we cannot conceive ‘our’ Properness/Particularity of the Whole — including within it both our body and our spirit — apart from the Whole into which it is woven. The awareness of this aspect of ourselves — that we are Particularities of the Whole rather than thrown ‘selves’ into the world — places us in a disposition receptive to insight into the philosophical character of the thought of Eternal Recurrence and to the feeling of its certainty.

We may always speculate about God and the Whole, or, in agreement with the poststructuralists, cry out: “Il n’y a pas de hors-texte.”³ Insight into the nature of that ‘What?’ which returns remains unattainable; the only thing we can know is that we return — indeed, this is the only certainty we can have about this world, one that even the poststructuralist ‘murderers of metaphysics’ have overlooked. We have long known that the question ‘How?’ is answered by science together with analytic philosophers; and now we see that to the question ‘What?’ — the simpler version of the more perilous ‘Why?’ — the final answer can only be religion, some form of belief, or perhaps a new continental philosophy. We do not know who we are or what we are; our ultimate, ‘Holy-Grail’ identity remains in darkness, just as we do not know the ground upon which this world rests. The only thing we know is that within it we return — inevitably and without exception — and nothing more. And this is the central hypothesis of this book.

The fourth chapter of this book is devoted to ‘our’ states of consciousness as Propernesses — that is, Particularities — of the Whole.

[...]

³ “There is nothing outside the text.” Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 158.

Eternal Recurrence as the Religion Behind Religions. - And although at first glance it seems that the doctrine or teaching of Eternal Recurrence draws its “blood” from other religions—above all from Hinduism and Buddhism—and that it borrows from them its basic outline, perhaps the opposite is true... **Perhaps most, if not all, ancient religions rest upon that single archaic source: an insight into the Eternal Recurrence of the Same.** This is one of the hypotheses explored in this book. What if the only certainty that can be reached at all in this world—“in itself” unknowable—has always been dimly intuited by a handful of exceptional minds of their time, who then, out of the greatest necessity, adapted it for the majority precisely through what we today call “religions”? In other words: what if religions themselves rest upon the principles of that ancient, forgotten tradition—and not the other way around?⁴

It is therefore hardly surprising that Nietzsche regarded the thought of Eternal Recurrence as one of his most important ideas—and that we interpret it here as a kind of “religion behind religions,” something that may even drive this entire eschatology. And we believe that this is precisely where it belongs. If it should turn out that in certain periods of human prehistory and history the belief in the Eternal Recurrence of the Same emerged as one of the significant eschatological features of their spiritual development, nothing prevents us from imagining a scenario in which this might continue to occur in the future as well.

But if we are to examine this possibility more seriously, what we need is an anthropologist of Eternal Recurrence—someone “of our kind,” prepared to undertake an anthropological and cultural investigation not yet undertaken: an inquiry into the beliefs of our “Ancients,” along the lines of what Mircea Eliade attempted in his book *The Myth of the Eternal Return*. Such an investigation would have to include not only the beliefs of the Sumerians, Babylonians, Egyptians, and Greeks, as well as those of the ancient peoples of the East and of the American continents, but also the beliefs from the dawn of the first great cultic centres and communities some eight or nine thousand years ago—in the “age of Göbekli Tepe.”⁵ In other words, one would have to re-examine the beliefs of the earliest farmers gathered in primitive communities, and

⁴ In **ancient Egypt** the scarab (dung beetle) was taken as a symbol of renewal and the repetition of life, associated with the idea of cosmic rebirth. In some of the great cultures of Central America—especially among the **Maya** and the **Aztecs**—time was conceived as a succession of cosmic cycles or epochs. In ancient Greece, the idea of eternal recurrence was sometimes connected with certain Presocratic thinkers, such as **Heraclitus** and **Empedocles**, and received its most developed form in **Stoic** philosophy, particularly in the doctrine of the periodic destruction and rebirth of the world. In **Virgil’s Aeneid** (Book VI), an intriguing motif appears: before a new life, souls drink water from the river Lethe in order to forget their previous experiences. Only after this forgetting do they re-enter the world of the living, where they are destined to relive suffering, errors, but also brief moments of pleasure. In Indian religions—**Jainism**, **Hinduism**, and **Buddhism**—the idea of an unending cycle of birth and rebirth (samsara) likewise appears, from which human beings seek to free themselves through salvation or enlightenment. Even the Christian idea of the Resurrection may—at least from one philosophical perspective—be interpreted as a faint echo of a much older and more archaic insight into the repetition of life. We might briefly imagine the Resurrection in a different light: it is true that we “rise from the dead,” that we have indeed “been resurrected,” but not in order to spend eternity in Heaven with God, but rather in order to live once again this one and the same life in this one and the same skin.

⁵ **Göbekli Tepe** is a prehistoric archaeological site in southeastern Anatolia (present-day Turkey), dated approximately between 9600 and 8000 BCE. It is considered the oldest known monumental cult complex in the world and provides evidence of highly developed religious practices long before the emergence of permanent agricultural communities.

then perhaps go even further back into the past to investigate the beliefs of hominids of the later Stone Age (that is, the Upper Palaeolithic), who left their famous artistic testimonies on the walls of Altamira and Lascaux fifteen, twenty, and perhaps even forty thousand years ago.

And it will probably turn out that, **besides philosophers and anthropologists, we shall also need mathematicians, physicists, and psychologists of Eternal Recurrence**—and quite possibly **even a computer programmer who might one day attempt to run a computer simulation of Eternal Recurrence** as a contribution to the search for its proof. In that sense, this book is only a beginning. If we were to succeed in our intention—to find and win over such experts for the doctrine of Eternal Recurrence—and if they were in turn able to confirm the initial hypotheses with their findings, human beings might begin to live in this world as dedicated scientists or rational mystics—whichever they prefer—humbly examining and testing every one of its possibilities.

Yet we cannot help asking: how is it possible that the thought of Eternal Recurrence could even occur to anyone's mind, especially at the earliest stage of the development of consciousness? How could such a sophisticated idea arise and be accepted in primitive societies rather than in highly civilized ones? This is even harder to grasp—and therefore harder to explain—than the previous question. We can imagine it only within the framework of an even bolder hypothesis: that already in the ancient nomadic tribes of early communities there existed individuals—shamans, seers, and guardians of sacred traditions—to whom, at some moment in their lives, the ring of Eternal Recurrence revealed itself in its monstrous force, to such a degree that, because of its unbearable nature, they had to keep it secret from the other members of their tribe. One might also imagine that nothing prevented them from introducing at least something of this supreme secret of existence—"sacred knowledge" of which only they were aware—into their rituals. The eternal circle. The eternal fire.

In this way, even down to the present day, we can find traces of that possible highest teaching in many of the world's religions. Nothing therefore prevents us from holding to our hypotheses and attempting to show how this teaching, within different religions of the world, gradually adapted itself to the tastes of the masses, depending on the cultural and geographical environments in which it arose, increasingly effacing itself and drifting away from its original form. If we succeed in this, **we may perhaps also fulfil what could be called Nietzsche's hidden intention: to make Eternal Recurrence not merely a "religion behind religions," but a religion above other religions**—a kind of "meta-religion"—something that it itself mysteriously hints at in part of its own name, in that "re" at the beginning, which in Latin means again (or once more).

§10

The Authentic and Inauthentic Variants of Eternal Recurrence. - Finally, just as cultures in the past differed according to the type of religion and God in which they believed, so too future cultures — or civilizations — may differ according to the variant of Eternal Recurrence in which they believe. Just as there are multiple religions in the world, so too there are multiple doctrines, that is, variants of Eternal Recurrence. **It is important to emphasize that the variants of Eternal Recurrence, according to their possible outcomes or modes of recurrence (identical, similar, different),**

must not be confused with the types of mechanisms of its unfolding (deterministic, based on probability theory, etc.). In the second chapter we deal with the variants of Eternal Recurrence according to their possible outcomes or modes of recurrence, while the possible mechanisms of its unfolding will be discussed at the end of the third chapter.

According to Nietzsche's original variant of the **Eternal Recurrence of the Same**, we shall always observe a swallow from a neighboring roof at one and the same moment of life, from the comfort of our balcony, performing a completely identical semicircular flight and, each and every time, landing in exactly the same place on another roof. Yet nothing prevents us from imagining that, in the returned lives, this flight occurs in a slightly different way each time — something that is closer to our intuitive understanding of reality. We may be sitting or standing on our balcony, while the swallow uses a slightly different trajectory each time when landing on the other roof. The event is one and the same, but it unfolds in a slightly different, or self-similar, manner. This variant of Eternal Recurrence presupposes return in similar ways, and we might call it the variant of the **Eternal Recurrence of the Approximately Same...**

But it may also happen that the swallow does not land on the other roof, or that we do not observe it, or that neither occurs, because at that moment both the swallow and we are somewhere else... In this case, we say that the return still occurs, but always in different ways — that we are compelled to guide our returned life according to an ever-different scenario: in one life we are successful in what we do, in another unsuccessful; in one we fulfill most of our desires, in another we fall ill because of them, and so on. As we shall see, this latter variant of eternal recurrence — which we may call the **Eternal Recurrence of the Different** — is closest to the Hindu variants of the same concept.

Nevertheless, we may already assert that the only — and, to put it in Heideggerian terms, **the authentic — variant of Eternal Recurrence is Nietzsche's**: the one according to which everything that once happened to us, that is happening to us, and that will yet happen — including our “states of consciousness,” whatever we may mean by them — will return in exactly the same way in which we have already lived through it once, and infinitely many times. **All other variants, including those found in the religious and cultural traditions of archaic peoples, belong to the inauthentic variants of Eternal Recurrence** — from self-similar to entirely different modes of return.⁶

As will be shown in the next chapter, even two inauthentic variants of Eternal Recurrence, in relation to Nietzsche's authentic one, arise from Hindu and Buddhist traditions, paradoxically preceding it. Thus the question arises whether we may call them “inauthentic variants” of Eternal Recurrence at all, if there is a possibility that Nietzsche himself was, at one point, inspired by them. It should nevertheless be noted

⁶ In *Being and Time*, Heidegger distinguishes two fundamental modes of human existence (Dasein): the authentic and the inauthentic mode of being. In the inauthentic mode, human beings live immersed in everydayness, guided by the indeterminate “they” (*das Man*), adopting established opinions and patterns without personally assuming responsibility for their own existence. By contrast, in the authentic mode of existence, Dasein takes over its own finitude and possibilities — especially through confrontation with death — and thereby becomes authentic in relation to its own being. Here, this distinction is applied, in an extended and metaphorical sense, to different modalities of Eternal Recurrence. The “authentic” is thus taken to designate the most consistent and existentially most radical form of recurrence — Nietzsche's Eternal Recurrence of the Same — while the “inauthentic” refers to its softened religious variants.

that both the **Hindu and Buddhist doctrines of eternal return are grounded on metaphysical foundations fundamentally different from Nietzsche's**. Above all, both concepts connect recurrence with the moral action of the individual, whereby return into the same or another life serves as a form of redemption. At the same time, Hinduism and Buddhism proceed from different ontological assumptions regarding the “subject” of return — Hinduism, which believes in the existence of the soul (ātman), claims that it is the self, whereas Buddhism, which does not accept such a soul, claims that these are merely “states of consciousness.”

Such hope for a new cycle of return — the hope that life may be altered and redeemed — paves the way for the religious belief in Eternal Recurrence that marked almost all ancient cultures. But we, “faithful to the earth,” can know nothing of this. Perhaps it does occur, says Nietzsche's doctrine of Eternal Recurrence — but in a package together with the return of this very miserable and wretched life of ours, to which, if nothing else, we can at least point with a finger as real, since we are living it right now... After we have lived through countless lives in this same body, in various ways, for the sake of moral improvement (Hinduism), and after we have lived through countless lives in the body of a worm, a bat, or some other known or unknown animal — and perhaps even another human being (Buddhism) — the authentic variant of Eternal Recurrence “says” that we shall once again relive this miserable and wretched life of ours... The “surplus of life,” in this regard, presents no problem for it whatsoever.

§11

Noon of Humanity: Eternal Recurrence as the Ananke of the World. - Finally, and at the close of this Introduction, we may speculate that Eternal Recurrence resembles **Ananke** (Ἀνάγκη), **the Greek principle of necessity** that compels the world to return — by necessity, and not merely as one possibility among many. This insight comes closest to our *insight-feeling* of Eternal Recurrence mentioned in the Preface. Everything that exists — matter and time, space and gods, human beings and all other living creatures — is subject to one and the same principle of necessity: return.

The question, however, is whether we can truly accept this necessity, or whether we are condemned to forever deceive ourselves with illusions of infinite possibilities, cultivating openness toward each of them, as Heidegger advised. Is there, then, any sense in bringing such an insight to consciousness? And what benefit do we gain from such knowledge if it lowers rather than elevates us? Hegel showed, in the example of Being and Nothing, that thought will always be able to think the opposite of every truth, every necessity. In this way, oppositions in thought become possibilities. Reason is compelled to choose one — the one in which it will believe.

In a peculiar way, we have arrived at the conclusion that philosophy precedes religion. Each age is thus given the task of choosing which pole of opposition, which offered possibility, it will believe in. Our present age has chosen faith in linear time, infinity, and — with its hasty theory of the heat death of the universe — nothingness.

The question arises: **could there come an age in which we place our faith in the possibilities that today stand opposed to these — cyclical time, finitude, and Parmenides' unchanging Being?**

We must remain aware that the powers of spirit are not confined to philosophy and religion alone. Science is granted the power to test certain possibilities and determine whether they truly have a foundation in reality. A dreadful moment for humanity would arise if science were to demonstrate that Eternal Recurrence — now merely one possibility in thought — is in fact necessity itself, the truth: **that Eternal Recurrence is the Ananke of this world.**

And however small this possibility may seem, we must prepare for it. **Human beings love themselves, but not their lives. This may well be the greatest obstacle to accepting the Doctrine of Eternal Recurrence.** Preparation for belief in Eternal Recurrence therefore consists in learning to love one's life. If we were to succeed in renouncing all further belief in the "ego" and the "self" — something that may require centuries — and if we were to accept and feel that we are merely **the Particularities of the Whole**, through which it manifests its possibilities, then we might become ready to accept the fate of Eternal Recurrence — unless we immediately recognize that Eternal Recurrence is, in fact, the greatest grace the world, or God, has bestowed upon humanity.

Yet we must not forget that belief in Eternal Recurrence appears only occasionally among the majority, although among the minority it may always be present. And, as Nietzsche taught us, it emerges at the "noon of humanity," when humanity — or any other conscious species — reaches its peak, only to disappear again thereafter. Before and after that noon, human beings will believe in something else.