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Commentary on Brown

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In Response To: Richard Brown's [The riddle as argument: Zarathustra's riddle and the eternal return](#)

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Eternal Return solves the riddle of modern history. It provides the new value system that has love of life at the center. Not an Afterlife or an Otherlife but This Life.

The problem is that thinking people no longer accept the traditional Western value system based on an otherworldly Afterlife. They no longer believe that a judgmental God who punishes the wicked and rewards the meek governs their lives.

At best, this belief is the opium of the people, giving them happy dreams of another life to support the dreary chains of this one. At worst, it is a system of anti-life, teaching people, in the words of Rousseau, to run to chain themselves.

Eternal Return, however, brings the concept of eternity down to earth. In the light of Eternal Return, we see that this life, in its concrete particularity, is not passing, ephemeral, merely temporal. It is eternal. In this sense at least: it passes, but then it passes again, and again, and again . . .

By contrast to my colleague Rick Brown, I will interpret Eternal Return to mean what, on the surface, it appears to mean: the return of the same actions and the same things! Zarathustra says, "And this slow spider which creeps in the moonlight, and this moonlight itself and you and I in this gateway whispering together, whispering of eternal things--must we not all have already existed?" Eternal Return means what it says: Eternal Return of the spider in the moonlight! Eternal Return of this lecture in this classroom!

We need to ask whether this is an appealing or a desirable doctrine. Nietzsche/Zarathustra says that the doctrine of Eternal Return is a test. If we are appalled at the idea that our actions will all happen over and over again, an infinite number of times, then this indicates that we do not love life. If we are thrilled by the idea, then we do love life. If we love life, we would naturally want this very life to occur over and over again.

Do we agree with Nietzsche on this point? Kant, for one, would seem implicitly to disagree.

Kant argues that the moral individual must postulate the immortality of an Afterlife because there is so much about our lives that fall short of the mark. There is so much that one would want to be different: our vices, our egotism, our laziness, our stupidities. Above all, perhaps: the injustices that afflict decent human beings. The inner voice of morality requires that we live up to the highest standards of humanity: become all that you can become, and help others to do so as well. But in one short lifetime, how can we possibly make

much headway in realizing this command put to us by the inner voice of conscience? The shortness of the individual lifetime, moreover, is Nature's way of telling us that the development of human potentiality can take place only over the many generations.

Putting these ideas together suggests that Kant's postulated Afterlife best accords, not the Christian or Moslem heaven, but with Buddhist or Hindu reincarnation in accord with the laws of Karma. In his early work *General History of Nature* (1755) Kant explicitly argues for reincarnation:

In view of the endless duration of the immortal soul throughout the infinity of time, which even the grave itself does not interrupt . . . shall the soul remain forever attached to this one point of world-space, our earth? Will it never participate in a closer contemplation of the remaining wonders of creation? Who knows but that the intention is for it to become acquainted at close range, some day, with those far distant globes of the cosmic system and the excellence of their institutions, which from this distance already provoke our curiosity? Perhaps for just such a purpose some globes of the planetary system are in a state of preparation as a new dwelling place for us to occupy after we have completed the period of time allotted for our sojourn here. Who knows but that the satellites coursing around Jupiter will some day shine on us?¹

But this is not the same as Nietzsche's Eternal Return of the Same--the same spider in the moonlight, the same conversation. Kant does not postulate the Eternal Return of the Same, but Temporal Return of the Different, of the Better!

The film "Groundhog Day" illustrates this idea. The Bill Murray character repeats a particular day again and again. Everything is the same, with this one difference: he knows that it is the same, and with this knowledge he can act differently. At first, it's depressing, boring, frustrating. He tries to use his knowledge to trap the woman he loves into loving him, but everything he tries is a failure. There is the same dreary rejection over and over. He finally wants to kill himself, it's so depressing. But no matter what he does to put himself out of his misery, he always wakes up again the next morning.

This continues until he figures out that this very repetition gives him the possibility of living this day more fully, more lovingly. Instead of using tricks to trap his beloved, he tries to change himself to become a different, more evolved, morally better individual.

Repetition of life therefore only seems appealing only if we can do better the next time.

Nietzsche himself brings a kind of change for the better into his idea of Eternal Return:

"In every one of these cycles of human life there will be one hour where for the first time one man, and then many, will perceive the mighty thought of the eternal recurrence of all things:--and for mankind this is always the hour of Noon. . . . From the moment when this thought begins to prevail all colours will change their hue and a new history will begin..."²

Even the banal, conformist last men, Nietzsche suggests, will eventually awaken from their dogmatic slumbers and recognize that, because it will be lived over and over again, one might as well begin to put some energy into this life.

Nietzsche's concept of the *Übermensch* suggests a kind of Kantian ideal of perfection toward which we should be striving, to overcome ourselves, to become more talented, more free, more creative. Isn't it necessary to combine Eternal Return and the doctrine of the *Übermensch* to produce a theory of Eternal Return of the Different, of the potentially better? How reconcile Nietzsche's endless repetition of the same with his idea of overcoming, of transformation?

It is clearly impossible for the same life to recur again and again in the ordinary understanding of reincarnation. If I had a lifetime 200 years ago, it would necessarily have been quite different from this one. But Nietzsche does not say that every life is the same, only that at some time in the infinity of the past, we lived the same life we are now living.

It is necessary to enlarge our time scale to understand Nietzsche's theory. In his notes he gives a simple mathematical argument for Eternal Return. The argument assumes three things: continuity of the Self over repeated lifetimes, a cyclical conception of the universe, and a finite number of possibilities for any particular universe. If we suppose that there are a finite number of possibilities for any one cycle of the universe, but an infinite number of cycles, the same combination of possibilities will occur an infinite number of times. It's simple mathematics.

I'm not entirely sure that the possibilities of existence are limited in all their detail. But it seems likely that at least the significant possibilities are indeed limited.

So when we imagine Eternal Return, we should not think of ourselves merely repeating the same lifetimes one after the other. The Eternal Return of the Same could possibly occur only on a vastly larger time frame--if, on such a scale, we can still speak of time. I agree with Rick Brown that at this level of reflection, when we are dealing with cyclical infinities, our ordinary concept of time tends to break down. This breakdown results in a concentration of the mind on the present, the eternal Moment.

During the current cycle of 40 or so billion years, of course, it is not necessary that we repeat the same moments, the same lifetimes. Most

likely the previous cycle of 40 or so Billion years, or the following one, will be significantly different from this one, and so no repetitions will occur. But if we suppose an infinite number of such cycles, then, if the possibilities are limited, simple mathematics will prevail. The same moment in the garden, the same spider on the wall in the same shaft of the moonlight, and certainly this same commentary of mine, will occur again and again.

Kant and Nietzsche can therefore be reconciled, and Eternal Return can be reconciled with the conception of the *Ubermensch*. Within any particular cycle of the universe, the emphasis must be on evolution, on progress, on overcoming, on becoming a better, a higher being. On this time scale, the ordinary concept of Reincarnation and the laws of karma are applicable.

But what happens when we finally reach perfection or Nirvana? Will we be happy with happiness? Not for long. Without darkness there is no light. Without evil there is no good. Without sorrow there is no joy. This is why the traditional Christian and Muslim concept of Heaven, like the Buddhist Pure land Doctrine, are finally unsatisfactory.

After savoring the supreme joy of life for a few lifetimes--or one exceedingly long one thanks to the benefits of joyful living-- we will yearn once more for the experience of sorrow and wrenching death. Only by overcoming these dark shadows can we truly appreciate the light. When this desire dawns in us, it will then be time to drink especially deeply from the waters of Lethe and begin all over again from the very beginning.

Since true joy is impossible as long as others are suffering, such a moment no doubt will occur simultaneously with all conscious beings. Who knows but that the combined will to power of so many transformed higher *Ubermensch* may then be powerful enough to cause the present universe to collapse on itself, thereby turning the hourglass and bringing about the birth of a new cycle. We will then have the proof that God isn't dead after all. He/She/It is Us.

Endnotes

¹Cited from Joseph Head & S. L. Cranston, *Reincarnation: The Phoenix Fire Mystery* (New York: Julian Press/Crown Publishers, Inc. 1977), 272-3.

²*Ibid.*, 466; cited from Oscar Levy, ed., *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1964), XVI, notes 41, 60, 62.
