

The Question

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Thus spoke Artsuhtaraz- “See this moment!” I continued. “From this gateway Moment nothing stretches backward: behind us lies nothing.

Must not whatever *can* never have passed this way before? Must not whatever can happen, never really happened, never will happen, never pass by anything at all?

And if nothing has been here before, what do you think of this moment, dwarf? Must this gateway too not have ever been here?

And are not all things firmly knotted together in such a way that this moment draws after it more nothing to come? Therefore- itself as well?

For, whatever can run, even in this long lane outward, - can never even take a step.

And this slow spider that creeps in the moonlight, and this moonlight itself, and I and you in the gateway whispering together, whispering of nothings-must not all of us never have been here?

- And become nothing, never having run in that other lane, outward, before us, in this long, eerie nothing – must we not ever exist?”

Eternity and Transcendence – Would the Eternal Recurrence eliminate the possibility of an afterlife?

Indeed, a person who is stuck in the circle of time, who can and will experience “infinite” time, ironically has no time for an afterlife.

However, we must ask ourselves how much of the circle of time does the individual’s life occupy?

If the circle of time only contains the lifetime of an individual, then there can be no afterlife.

Their death would immediately be followed by their birth.

However, is that what Nietzsche envisioned in his thought experiment?

It seems unlikely considering his description: “The eternal hourglass of existence is turned over again and again, and with you it, speck of dust!” (Gay Science, 194)

If you still stand by the first interpretation, skip the rest. If not, let’s assume that our life is simply a tiny fraction of the circumference of the circle of time.

If this is the case, does it necessarily follow that there is no afterlife or that there is no other plane of existence?

What if we had another circle of time exactly the same size above our original circle? Call it Heaven.

What if we had another circle of time exactly the same size below our original circle? Call it Hell.

Could it not be that right after our death, we move to either Heaven or Hell?

And right before our birth, we would move back down or up into our original circle of time?

Indeed, if all these circles rotated about the same axis at the same speed, from a bird-eye view, it will seem as if we are smoothly moving through one circle.

It seems that we have a “functional” interpretation of the Eternal Recurrence that contains other planes of existence or an “afterlife.”

(Considering how trivial our time in the original circle will seem compared to the rest of the time we will spend in Heaven or Hell, people will still want to go to Heaven and avoid Hell. So in a way, this conception of the “afterlife” functions almost identically to our current conception)

If Nietzsche didn’t consider such a possibility or intended the first interpretation, then it seems that the Eternal Recurrence is meant to be a rejection of the afterlife.

Those who believed in the afterlife would surely “throw [themselves] down and gnash [their] teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus.”

However, what if Nietzsche did consider this possibility?

Of course, Nietzsche objects to a transcendent realm in myriad other ways, but what if the Eternal Recurrence isn’t intended for this purpose?

What if instead, Nietzsche is arguing that the Eternal Recurrence is so damning, so nauseating that everyone, regardless of the afterlife, would “throw [themselves] down and gnash [their] teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus”?

What if Nietzsche is arguing that no one can escape the weight of the Eternal Recurrence?

What if all of Nietzsche’s thoughts in The Gay Science is converging to one point embodied in the Eternal Recurrence, a singular question that requires an answer?

If so, what is The Question?

The Premise – If something is overall valuable, we should want infinite amounts of it.¹

If something is overall harmful, we should not want even one more of it.

The devil and the angel, Part 1- Imagine a person who only feels intense pain throughout their entire life.

Imagine a person who only feels intense pleasure throughout their entire life.

Imagine that both live in the same world as you.

If you could choose whether to repeat the world, exactly as it is, once, will you do it?

Let's say you choose to do it.

To the person who only feels pain, you are the devil;

You chose to have them suffer for another full lifetime.

To the person who only feels pleasure, you are an angel;

You gifted them a blessing called life, a gift people can only dream of getting.

Let's say you choose not to do it.

To the person who only feels pain, you are an angel;

You ended their life of suffering, curing them of the disease called life.

To the person who only feels pleasure, you are the devil;

You took away their chance to experience euphoria ever again.

On the question of 'willing' the Eternal recurrence, Williams writes, "we would have not simply to say 'yes', but to say 'yes' and mean it." (Gay Science, xvi)

It seems that we would have not simply to say 'no', but to say 'no' and mean it.

The meaning of "meaning X" Part 1– What does it mean to "mean 'yes'"? What does it mean to "mean 'no'"?

The necessity of eternity – Williams questions whether the eternal aspect of the Eternal Recurrence is truly important.

¹ Assume that the value of each thing is independent of one another and that there is no new cost associated with having more of it.

He writes:

If there is anything in this test at all, why would willing one recurrence not be enough? If ... all the rest will come round again even once, and say 'yes' to it, you would have taken the essential step: could willing all those further recurrences cost you very much more?" (Gay Science, xvi-xvii)

Williams is entirely correct in thinking that willing further recurrences cannot cost you very much more.

But we must ask why.

One might interpret Williams as simply saying that willing to have the suffering of the world repeat once is such a large moral cost that any additional cost would be negligible.

While this may be true, it is not the reason why willing further recurrences cannot cost you more.

Let's say that given the knowledge of everything about the world, you say 'yes'.

You say "Yes, the world is so valuable that even with all the suffering that I have experienced and the much larger history of suffering that others have experienced, I will like to, nay, feel morally obligated to say that it should happen once more."

As the thought experiment goes, the world will restart and every tragedy, every laughter, every birth, and every death before you will happen once more until you are born.

You will be born and you will live until you are asked the same question.

Is it not true that if everything about the world is the same, that your knowledge of everything about the world would be exactly the same as the last time you were asked the question?

And if your knowledge of everything about the world is the same, will you not choose the same answer?

And if you choose the same answer, will the world not repeat once more with every tragedy, every comedy, every birth and every death until yet again, you are born, only to face the same question?

There is no singular 'yes' or 'no'.

There is only the eternal 'yes' and the eternal 'no'.

Eternity is not part of the question.

Eternity is the question.

The devil and angel, Part 2- Repeat Part 1 knowing that saying 'yes' once is equal to saying 'yes' an infinite number of times and saying 'no' once is equal to saying 'no' an infinite number of times.

Does that change your choice?

Should it change your choice?

The meaning of “meaning X” Part 2– What does it mean to “mean the eternal ‘yes’”? What does it mean to “mean the eternal ‘no’”?

Two birds with one stone – “The species is everything, an individual is always nothing.” (Gay Science, pg 27)

The Setting – You stand alone in an empty room. No one has ever come here; no one will ever come here. There is no mentor to guide you; there is no demon to deceive you. You alone can answer The Question.

The Question –Zarathustra or Artsuhtaraz?