

Neitzsche and the ETERNAL RETURN

Some persons and groups (most notably, Friedrich Neitzsche, 1844-1900) have taught that we have our lives over and over again. They are repeated forever. This is the notorious doctrine of the eternal return.

It is possible that our lives are not ACTUALLY repeated all the time but EXPERIENTIALLY they would be as if they were.

We identify then that there is the version of the eternal return in which our lives are repeated forever. There is a version that denies this but which affirms that our life experience is indestructible and eternal. We can call it the experiential eternal return.

The experiential return seems to be a paradox. It is no paradox as we will see.

Here is the case for the experiential eternal return in the bolded text with some elaborations.

“Eternity is timelessness. In eternity there is no past or future but all events are rolled into one “now”. The moment I was born exists now but is in eternity. Time is impossible or very hard to understand because it is in the words of TS Eliot - a 'pattern of timeless moments.'" Any experience I have somehow still exists.

Timelessness has been proven to exist by science. And by reason. Time must have had a beginning which means that, strictly speaking, there was no before before time started. If time is everlasting you never get to the end of it and if it had no beginning you would never get to the start of it if you travelled back in time. If it never had a start then it is not getting any greater for because what had no start is infinite and you cannot add to what is infinite. This shows that the notion of time always existing is absurd for even if it has no start it cannot exist. You cannot get to event x if there were an infinity of events before it.

What is the “now” of eternity?

It could be all the moments of time happening at once. They are frozen and static. They are separate events – the birth of Buddha will still be a different event from World War 1. This view says that time really exists and is change. This is possible. We know that separate events happen in the now we have got in time. In eternity, it is exactly the same thing except that the past and future moments are thrown in together with the present. They all become the present. It is like you use a time machine to restore a moment from the past and you make that moment frozen. It still feels experientially like one moment but it is actually frozen and static.

The alternative is that everything is rolled into one moment without distinction. There is no separation of past from present or future to the degree that the birth of Buddha is the same event as World War 1. This view is incoherent.

Some think that time really exists and is change. Others say that there is no time but totally separate moments that are unconnected and that only seem to cause the next moments.

The moment you are being born now doesn't exist any more in time it has gone to eternity and so it exists there now and is happening now.

“If death is the end then our past lives still exist in eternity and so will our experience. This means that when we cease to exist when we die we will “go back” to the first moment of our existence. This is not a repeat of our life but the same life. Remember every moment of your life still exists and so does your experience of it. But it would feel and seem to be a repeat to us and that is what counts. We don't experience the past moments again because we are in time and we are moving along. But if we got out of time we would. If we go out of time at death and cease to exist at death or whatever it will be like those experiences are happening again. They will follow the order they had in time. You may ask, ‘If you cannot have the same life all over again, then perhaps you experience all of it in a single timeless instant at death or when you go into eternity?’ That would be a different experience. A new experience. There is no need for it or to posit it. What happens is that because the experiences of the past life are still in existence they continue to be experienced. They are your experiences and they are in eternity and there has to be somebody there to have the experiences so your past is preserved forever. The old you still exists. He or she is dead in time but is alive in eternity and nothing can change that. You are dead in time but preserved in eternity when you die.”

This theory would say we live with what bad we do and endure forever. It makes it absolutely important to make the most

of your life. To work for others often makes you suffer so it is accused of advocating extreme selfishness when you can get away with it. But if you have the right heart, there will be a part of you that no amount of suffering can get to. It doesn't stop you from helping others. It is extremely selfish to hurt others when it condemns them to everlasting misery. It is giving them a bad experience that can never be taken away. In that sense the misery is eternal. The reason then you must not hurt others is because you are freezing their pain in eternity. Even if you don't die at death and you will never experience the past again and will be in time forever, it is still true that you created a bad moment for another person that will exist eternally.

The eternal return shows that the concept of God which depends on eternity can be discarded for you only need eternity to give your life meaning and purpose. It would be irrational to go further.

“The bad news in the doctrine is that you cannot make any event you have lived through not to have happened when you experience your life “again”.”

That is because it only feels like you are repeating your life but you are not. It's fixed. The past cannot be changed.

Here is an offbeat way of thinking that supports of the eternal experience don't accept:

“Mental events are real to you, you can fill your present and future with pleasant dreams. Time is relative. Every person has a different rate of time. This is not crazy philosophy but proven scientific fact as well as psychological. When you are happy, time goes by faster for you. When you are down, time drags on and on. If you pretend that total bliss is yours and have it for a hundred years then this really happens. It seems that this is not that long because of the way we are conditioned by natural law. No matter how bad a life I have had, I can look forward to living my life over again for I can improve it and make the good outweigh the bad.”

This contains much error. You can make time relative for you up to a point. You can make a day fly by by enjoying it but it does not follow that you can experience a second like it was 24 hours. If you can control your perception of time to some extent that does not mean that you can get the experience of 100 years or forever into a second. And also, why is it that you cannot relax and read a long list in a second?

The argument from physics that time is relative is not about such things. What it means is that the faster you go the more you slow down time.

I am tied down to time in such a way that I cannot slow it down to 100 years experientially though not in reality. It only takes a second to prove that.

I can imagine I am experiencing happiness forever but still I will come out of this vision. Thus my imagination is not master of my perception of time.

You can only think or imagine that you can imagine that you are in bliss for 100 years. The experience only lasts for a minute if you imagine for a minute. It is just something that is not 100 years but which you pretend is.

Conclusion

There is something in the theory. If you have had mostly a good life, then why would you fear death even if it is the end? Your experiences still exist in eternity and experiences cannot exist without something to experience them. You will feel as if you have started the same life all over again and it is indeed the same life. Wouldn't it be great if we could get the benefits of believing in an afterlife without believing in an afterlife?