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NIETZSCHE'S THOUGHT OF ETERNAL RETURN
AND THE POWER TO THINK IT

A Lecture

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by

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Nietzsche was an ugly duckling in the pond of intellectual respectability until a countryman of Hans Christian Andersen's began lecturing on him in Copenhagen. Toward the end of Nietzsche's life a note in Nietzsche's handwriting came to this lecturer. It said: "Friend George. After you discovered me, it was no trick to find me. The difficulty is now to lose me" The note was signed, "The one crucified."

Why should it be important to lose him? Could his thoughts realize themselves only in loss? Might Nietzsche's philosophy work its fulfilment the way a tragedy does? If a thinker summons the sense which brings together a world, he creates it as surely as any god. What if there were a creating god who made as his world the cross he would be crucified on? The strength of that creation--solid as wood and nails--would kill its creator. 'God is dead,' its words would say.

How might Nietzsche's thoughts be thought by losing them--by seeming to think on to something other than Nietzsche?

What can a lecture hope to do? Lectures found Nietzsche in the beginning. How can a lecture offer findings it will abandon? In such emptiness how can it speak? What could you hear if you were its audience?

Listen to a question Nietzsche asks:

What if one day or night a demon crept after you into your loneliest loneliness and said to you, "This life, as you now live it and have lived it--you'll have to live it again and countless other times again; and there'll be nothing new about it, but every pain and every pleasure and every thought and sigh and everything unspeakably small and great in your life has to come to you again, and all in the same order--and just like that this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and just like that this moment and I myself. The eternal sandglass of existence is turned over again and again--and you with it, dustspeck of dust!" Wouldn't you throw yourself down and grind your teeth and curse the demon who talked that way? Or have you ever experienced a colossal moment, where you'd answer him, "You're a god, and never have I heard anything more godlike!" If that thought got control over you, it would transform and perhaps crush you, as you are; the question regarding each and every thing "do you want this again and countless other times again?" would lie as the greatest weight of importance on what you did! Or how would you have to do justice to yourself and to life itself, so as to ask for nothing more than this last eternal confirmation and sealing?¹

". . . into your loneliest loneliness": in my most alone aloneness, what I do at that moment has no bond to anything else already done or not yet done. It does not beg elsewhere for a context. It stands up by itself. All by itself, it does not have to clutch at other moments. It can leave them alone. They appear now alone too, free from any need for an earlier cause or later destination to give them definition. Since no further moment has the authority to limit them, they seem unstoppable. They can come again and again--eternally. What could ever end the world they act out?

Go into the moment where what you are living through gets most alone. You'll feel it happen at a time when but a lone thing occurs. Happening one at a time, moments have the power to survive. Power to survive speaks of my sense 'now' submerging other possibilities and holding them at the distance which belongs with what goes on now. Some things recede in a past; others press forward in promise. The power in aloneness throws out a line into past and into future. Eternal return means the course of one-at-a-time events happening earlier, then later, along a line. Since they repeat inexorably, the line has no end. It curves as a circle into itself. The thought of eternal returning does not think what came last. It cannot see a finish to the sequence and its fresh beginning.

There is, furthermore, no single sequence holding everywhere. Each lone 'now' empowers other moments to fall into line. The line of eternal return is alive, and you live your life right now, at every moment.

Could you for a moment right now get lonely? Could you let what you're aware of have its own way? That means letting go of earlier and later moments straining to keep a grip on this one. Quiet down any preconceived ideas about what ought to be happening here. Don't encourage their restless questions to ruffle this water now maybe becoming still. Don't try anything: effort will tell of something outside of here fighting to get in. Enjoy what effortlessly seems to fit. This now might be questions, doubts, the strain of finding a comfortable place in a fundamentally uncomfortable chair. Don't resist those things. Live in them. You don't need to stand outside. You don't have to be the most careful and responsible when you reach from outside onto what's there, as a kind of detached observing.

Can you balance, with right now as your center? In that balance, you won't need to grab for what you already know or for what imaginable end this moment might be serving. Your sense of things now can be full. It can offer enough richness to fund a decision. You could decide to move your arm, to say a word. A resolve to end or begin something could grow out of what you have--and are--right here. This moment could overflow into others. Its sense gives them a point. Since their appropriateness belongs to this moment's strength to stand alone, its reach out to include them tells how far its strength can carry. Now its including them seems like a power. They enter with relevance instead of intruding haphazardly and destructively. The present moment invites them into connection with it by a manner of power over them. Its own strength gives them a place to be relevant and empowers them to have meaning.

In beginning from here, I am not needy but powerful. My living at this moment stretches toward more not because it has to. It is, remember, alone. Its aloneness lets other moments be on their own. In offering them a home of significance where they might live too, my moment does no violence to them. I don't manipulate. Yet since the motion of reaching arises not through insufficiency, but in strength, it looks more like cause than effect. It commands rather than obeys. Its power takes grip in what acts like will. Power includes willing.

Starting from being alone, its lines outward do not simply reflect its own necessary, inevitable implications. It invites other things to belong. When it need not include them but does anyway, doesn't it just want them?

So now, how do we think the thought of eternal return? It cannot enter the solitude in which it alone makes sense, unless it is invited. I do not think the thought until I want everything to return. Nietzsche cannot speak of his idea without also speaking of the person "who has not only learned to reconcile himself with and endure what was and is, but also wants to have it, as it was and is, again, into all eternity . . ." ² To will it all to return means wanting the power each moment must have in order to be the final authority. Without that authority nothing guarantees its right to come back: it could have an end. Eternal return is thought by and in a will to power.

Willing comes from the here and now where solitude lives. If the shape of an 'I myself' forms the place of here and the time of now, will implicates me. I cannot escape taking responsibility for what emerges into relevance through my power. Whatever can be important says what I have willed and consequently where I reach. My own scope shows itself: I build myself in the matters I let matter. Will to the power of eternal return puts me on the line in everything I live through. Nothing comes casually now. Things make a difference. The responsibility rings like an alarm clock rousing me into the wakefulness I can now have. I can be sensitive and careful about what happens around me. Nietzsche lets his thought hold as a keel holds a boat from slipping sideways: ". . . the question regarding each and every thing 'do you want this again and countless other times again?' would lie as the greatest weight of importance on what you did!" You would entertain things in such a way that they would be worth repeating. You would affirm yourself by finding your own scope valuable enough to continue. Your 'self' spills, though, into everything which counts--that is, into everything your life touches. Nietzsche hears in this moment " . . . the ideal of the most spirited, lively, world-affirming person." ⁴

I have responsibility when things begin here and now. My will lets more grow than the point of beginning. Starting announces that more which is on the way. When I will responsibly, I open up a future. Wanting something forbids it from being seamlessly already here: willing needs the space of a not-yet to reach into. Nietzsche lays the foundation of his thought in the words ". . . we

must take the future as decisive /massgebend/ for all our evaluation--and not seek behind us the laws of our acting!"⁵ How a moment yet to come comes out--that will give my responsibility something to answer for. My moment now turns into opportunity. Called to by the meaning which dawns as a future, I can have the power that brings me to life. Eternal return is at once the will to power and the will to live. Only as opportunity before what may come am I awake enough and do I care enough to keep my action on an even keel. Resorting to the past ties into justifications, grounds, causes, explanations. 'I' disappear. Responsibility reverts to the earlier basis which as cause makes this moment but an effect. Impaled on some condition for my possibility, I sink into those grounds--where I am buried like any corpse. I don't want that. I don't want to die yet. A time may come when I do. Then I will find it vital. Dying will close the sentence my life will have written. I can own up to my meaning. My ending will feel so right I can want it too to return again and again.

If I stand my own ground exuberantly enough to make myself into an opportunity, how do I incline toward the future my opportunity implies? Could I perhaps begin to serve it as lifelessly as grounded possibilities serve the past? Does my future use me like a dead tool? Nietzsche answers:

"I want heirs, so speaks everybody who suffers, I want children, I don't want me"--

But enthusiasm /Lust/ doesn't want heirs, doesn't want children--enthusiasm wants itself, wants eternity, wants return, wants everything-eternally-the-same-with-itself.⁶

If what's to come doesn't replace me with children when I'm lively, what does it do? How can my will invite the future into a meaning which does not close out my life?

I want future to have the meaning of 'ability'--what I can do. Standing here now and looking back at where these words of mine have been, it looks as though everything said has clustered around a sense of capacity. Nietzsche's original thought of things' coming back grew into will and power. These told the scope of the here and now that I am. 'Scope' emphasizes the farther reach extending from what I have right here with me in the present. Couldn't 'ability' have that side to it too? If someone himself speaks, and he speaks German, we'll

feel he can speak it. He still has the ability even when he's not actually talking. He could talk, though, any time he wanted to. His being-able takes root in the room for will and its spill into future moments. He can speak German when his present moment promises future utterances in German. In ever opening into the not-yet, ability never collapses into behavior. Behaviour is no more than what I do now--or what comes out in that lifeless replication of present action called 'habit.' When any of us subsides into habitual behavior, he loses responsibility for his life. He goes on living because it's what he's used to. To give it up would be as hard as to stop smoking. That way of habit will kill you as fast as cigarettes. Since I am as alive, the sense of an 'I' growing in will and power gives me the will to live. I cannot stay alive if habit drowns me in an endless present. Without the future in my being able to do things, I do not survive.

More: when my room to have ability shrinks to nothing, does anything assure that I am even there in the behavior someone observes? Without my responsibility, what is done may belong to something else which possesses me. When I am gone, whatever is responsible has to be something other than me. Perhaps some cause. In belonging to a prior basis, actions cease to be mine. As any effect, they speak only through the ventriloquism of their cause. The figure of possession suggests that ability enables me to be who I am. Then who am I? Do I know? Unless behavior shows proof, nothing determines what I can really do. I need actually to do things, but even then, I am myself my being-able. And ability does not coincide with deeds. How can I acknowledge deeds without becoming only those things done? What meaning can I most responsibly invite deeds to have?

The question spreads wider. 'Things done' do not limit themselves to what I in the narrow sense of an individual person do. Trees stand. Sunlight brightens, then darkens. Cups hold water in the hollow of themselves. I the individual seem a thing like them, but as separate from them as one thing from other ones. Leave this picture behind now. Keep instead to the shape of an I-myself that marks a here and a now. A tree scrapes with its bark. It shades what comes under the protection of its branches. It calls to climbers of all species. Among the beings it can scrape, shelter, and support it commands a respect. The tree does for them things they cannot do for themselves. By showing limitations they have, the tree earns independence from them. It seems now able

to stand on its own even when they come nowhere near it. Through clearing a place for the tree to have its impact, they grant it the authority to exist alone. Could there be a receding train of such granting which begins here with me? What immediately affects where I am here in this moment takes on the right to be on its own. It exists in how it strikes me--as a hammer a gong. Here it has its relevant shape and has in that shape its independence. The fact or deed of its existence reflects the significance I am able to allow it. That significance in turn--like a squirrel on the ground before me--will lead out lines of invitation toward helping further things to come about. The squirrel can let a tree stand tall by permitting it to carry him far away from the ground, and from me.

Ability beginning in me shines, as the sun, a light in which things show what they are. My ability floats them in the water they make waves in. Yet without their slosh nothing confirms whether I have the depth and breadth to float anything. The question earlier--how do I regard deeds?--now asks, how do I regard anything at all? Any tree, animal, fact, sense, question threatens to have a content--a 'what' that it is or does. In its content it risks sliding into behaviour, also a 'what' that something does. During his philosophical adolescence ore Twentieth-Century mapmaker pictured the world as "everything that is the case." If being the case tells what something's content or behavior is, then the whole world may turn into a deed I have no place in. My power and responsibility may be nothing more than the delusion of one Friedrich Nietzsche, a German emigrant to Switzerland burdened by weak eyes and eternally recurring headaches. I'm asking, am I possessed by whatever turns the world into behavior? If I am, can any sacred words exorcise that alien presence?

It will not do, just to declare whether there is or is not a rite of exorcism I could invoke. Sacred rites have their power in their actual practice. The particular activities I do there put me in a kind of touch I would not have without them. Their inert, outer appearance has no more significance than a ceremonial mask hung on display in a museum. The rite sets me doing. In that, it joins another kind of practice: the work I do to increase my ability somewhere. When I practice with clay and wheel to throw pots, the emerging figures serve but to point out my progress. In themselves they are empty, and I in my growing capacity understand enough to live with their emptiness. They do tell me what I can make. But they speak up only at the moment of my filling with ability.

My fullness, which brings them to be, sounds where they have vanished.

Can I do that with the things in what some call the 'world'? I would then make everything the studio of my practicing. Increasing my power, I would save my presence. Possession by forces outside me could no longer shut me out of myself. My practice could turn encounters with things into rites of exorcism. Might the daily things I do widen as doorways into the sacred? Maybe the sacred itself nears when power I have part in begins to be released from bondage to things as mere, trivial behavior. The holy enfolds me perhaps at the moment when I most fully, bottomlessly belong.

For me to stay in practice, what I meet has to empty itself. How can it? So much bludgeons me with a wood-rigid solidity--this floor holding me up, a mathematical proof, a bludgeon. I myself so often bristle with sharply defined ideas and aims. I settle into a finished certainty which closes me off from any openness to further skills not yet mine. Then I can't practice, because there seems no need to. I see what I want--that's at least clear, even if I'm not yet in a position to get it. Here my gaze stands complete. I don't have to see any more deeply--my ability to look has gone as far as it needs to. Staying in practice dissolves these sides of myself I have been sure of. When they present themselves as a manner of content, dissolving them stops me from containing anything. I myself now become empty. Heavy with the growing capacity practice brings, I am most void of anything to hang onto about myself. A cup is most capable of holding water when it has nothing in it.

Ability grows as I let matters test me. They pull me to my utmost in the ways my power lets them have the significance for me they have. The action they gather keeps me as close to the edge of what I can entertain as does any musical exercise a musician really tries himself out on rather than just lazily repeats. Whatever I bring to the encounter is put to the test. Some approaches survive, others fall away. The empowering dialogue between me and what I practice draws out the direction my ability takes. I couldn't have known it beforehand. In my attitude of practice I am open to grow. The openness watches and keeps me awake. Not asleep, I am aware. Nietzsche mentions me in that moment of testing when he thinks how life itself might be "an experiment of the person who is aware."⁷ Experimenting strips away my clumsiness. It prunes those gestures I have which

stand in the way of successfully bringing off the thing I'm working to let happen. Practicing pares me down to the pure figure itself that I practice.

Before, ability seemed like mine--an affair which an I here and now could command. Now it joins itself into the course of the thing or matter under practice. There used to be a firmer 'me,' earlier than what I meet and distant from it. Now that 'I' begins to slip from thought's grasp. Capacity needs the figures it tries itself out in. The strength to be feels as though it rests with them. No longer does anything ego-like claim to authorize them. They are power--but in the emptiness of an 'I,' a void which they too resound in. Only as empty do they show the capability of being there. A guiding will has nowhere to take hold. Nietzsche's further word can make itself heard: "Non-freedom or freedom of will?--There is no 'will': that is only a simplifying conception by the understanding, like 'matter.'"⁸ Responsibility for what I can meet turns into responsibility to what meets me. It gives a matter for practice, and out of practice emerges the ability in which that matter comes to life. Whose ability is it now? The things themselves have as much say in the skill as the 'I' practicing. Does that mean they radiate ability now?

A cup can hold water and offer it. The cup's ability rests where the cup itself cannot be seen or located. Whoever looks for it sees its hard, porcelain part--its outside. Sight sees but the outside of things. Only where the outside isn't, does the cup have the hollowness which lets water in. Let a cup speak for things in their ability. They have that emptiness of a not-yet when they can do or be something. Without the hollowness they would be transformed into the visible, knowable surface which has been heard in the word behavior. Now empty, they have an opening within, behind what shows itself to eyes of any sort. In their openness might they not share the kind of concavity I had when I spoke of trying myself out in moments of practice? If I don't know for sure what I can do, can things be known any better in their ability? Might they not be in practice too?

To practice, a thing must at least have the room to be more than what it began as. It must be subject to change. When the sun can brighten, it has to have a place void of brightness out of which it may escape. Or may not. The capacity to shine means room for darkness. The darkness we perceive comes in the power of the sun to shine. Could one perceivable state of things--or any affair at all we notice--darken another by overshadowing it? Looking into one matter makes another one hard to see. In change from one thing to another there is darkness and light.

When dark seems empty, and light, full; then the emptiness ability reverberates in announces itself in the way things change. Matters meet each other--like billiard balls, like light and dark at twilight, like fire and wood, like color and canvas, like water and cup, like water and pebble, like relevant and true, like yes and no, like West and East. Standing so as to cast shadows on each other, yet not quite obscuring each other completely, they have a meeting like dark and light at twilight. They are each other's darkness and provoke each other in their capacities. Change of one thing to another now invites as a pathway of meeting. An experiment occurs in that confronting which darkens without destroying. The way of meeting sheds a dim half-light where matters can try themselves out before each other's challenge or welcome. Along the way that each is questioned by the other, they practice themselves into the capacity to command a presence.

Change now does not work simply in replacing one moment with another. That would have the effect of disconnecting moments: that is, only when one were gone could another arrive. Here each comes forward in its ability, and it has no ability without the darkness of chance for change which opens in the shadow of another moment. Linked into another thing, the matter itself has the possibility of change. Change connects. The connection brings about the meeting which unfolds as experiment. Things evolve experimentally their capacities. Change then ties moments into each other along the way they can be what they are. What they are cannot be separated from what they change to. Matters balance now as if in counterpoise to each other in the changes which enable.

What can change mean? Saying 'everything changes,' do I take up a position outside everything that happens and group it all into a process? A process is one moment even if it consists of smaller parts. It runs through everything as a principle. Now I have been able to mean something which does not change. But have I really? I am, in the ability where responsibility is mine, and I begin to disappear when the dark emptiness of practice fills with unchangeable content clear right now. Without the shadows changing things cast, capacity dries up.

Perhaps I cannot mean change except through keeping open what fills my moment of 'now.' In its hospitality toward what may come, it exposes itself. That risk creates the vulnerability in which change is felt, not merely asserted or advertised. Does 'ability' now veer toward 'vulnerability'? Might being vulnerable be the road not only to feeling change, but to any sensing at all?

To pick up the warmth of a fire or a friend, I go to meet them. How I was greets how they come toward me. Unless we greet each other across a distance between us, I simply get hot--like bread rising and baking in an oven. I don't have to feel anything any more than the bread does. Sensation highlights me, by myself, yet in light of whatever fire I sense. Feeling warm, I rise to its occasion. Giving me a way to be, it puts a firmer, browner crust on what of me was, before but pallid and dough-soft--liable to be any way, or no way--numb.

In sensing, I am bread become metaphorical. Just as, when cold, I became more in face of the fire, so did bread become more in face of me. It is, so to speak, the organ of sense through which I can grow more aware of what my sensing might be. We have our differences, of course,--bread and I. But difference is the air metaphors breathe. Things too close to each other to provoke real change don't spark images. Bread's being food does not open eyes as wide as when bread is itself an eye to see with. The farthest metaphor reachable now could call sensation metaphor. Then bread--and wine--and flesh--and blood--could begin to sense each other: they would note each other's presence. Through them as a beginning, hear how the wider earth of things could awaken to each other.

As thing transforms itself to further thing, images are born in the spark gap between. Across change grows the life of sense: both awareness and meaning; for these two now coalesce. Nietzsche's thought of eternal returning fades into ability in practice, empty as a cup where it can take in water. Nietzsche's jutting will to power changes to a yielding language spoken in the hollow between hills and along that softer way. German turns into a sound to some ears like the Chinese of Laotse. Eternal sameness becomes the water flow of change. West moves eastward. An earth gathers together.

Can you begin to hear in this way of metaphor? Do you feel yourself floating at all free from the jagged reefs of established matters and habits of fact? Is your ability to sense any slightest bit wider?

You might now hear that my words themselves say nothing. They bespeak an ability trying itself out in practice. Ability alone matters--skill, not impregnable conclusions. You'll know how to treat whatever may have resembled conclusions. Use them to judge the capacity--if any--that's been shown tonight. Judge, lest ye be not judged. You yourselves must have skill, or you cannot hold yourselves up to cast a verdict. Unless you expose yourselves constantly to

judgment, you yourselves slip out of practice into the stale clumsiness of disuse. Stay critical, and keep yourselves in that power by yourselves risking criticism. Question by keeping yourselves alive as a question.

As only signs of practice, the words from this platform have lost themselves in their own emptiness. Nothing is speaking up here.

It's time to say that louder.

NOTES

1. Citations are to Friedrich Nietzsche, Werke in Drei Banden, ed. Karl Schlechta (Munich, 1966), my translation. I quote here The Merry Science. No. 341.
2. Beyond Good and Evil, No. 56.
3. The Merry Science, No. 341.
4. Beyond Good and Evil, No. 56.
5. Aus dem Nachlass der Achtzigerjahre, Werke, Vol. III, p. 439.
6. Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Fourth and Last Part, "The Drunken Song," Section 6.
7. The Merry Science, No. 324.
8. Nachlass, Werke, Vol. III, p. 913.