Temporality and Self-Affirmation: A Kierkegaardian Critique of Nietzsche's Doctrine of the Eternal Recurrence of the Same

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Introduction

The doctrine of the eternal recurrence is, according to Nietzsche "*Das grösste Schwergewicht*" – the heaviest burden, the greatest weight, the greatest stress.[1] The burden is, however, a paradoxical one, for it is a burden which liberates those few who are able to bear it. The eternal recurrence of the same, the most terrifying of thoughts when viewed by one who lacks the strength to think it as his own, becomes the most liberating of thoughts for those who make it their own, for it opens up to them the path to complete affirmation of both self and world. That which is a threat to the nay-sayers to life becomes in Nietzsche's eyes a joyous thought for those who have said "yes" to life.[2] The doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same is in this sense for Nietzsche a way of interpreting existence, a thought experiment,[3] which opens up the possibility of a total affirmation of life in the moment.

If the doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same is interpreted in this fashion, its existential significance comes to the fore and we see the question to which it is a possible answer. How, Nietzsche is asking, is it possible to affirm life completely? His answer is: by thinking and willing life as an eternal recurrence of the same. Although this is by no means the only possible interpretation of the significance of the doctrine of the eternal re-

1 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Werke*, Kritische Gesamtausgabe herausgegeben von Giorgio Colli und Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter Verlag, 1973), Fünfte Abteilung, Zweiter Band, p. 250 = *The Gay Science,* translated by Walter Kaufmann, IV, § 341, pp. 273–74. Unless otherwise indicated, all references to the German edition of Nietzsche's works will be to the Colli and Montinari critical edition, cited according to section and volume, manuscript number for the notebooks, and then page number.

2 *Werke,* V/2, p. 201 = *The Gay Science,* IV, § 276, p. 223: "someday I wish to be only a Yes-sayer!"

3 *Werke,* V/2, pp. 230–31 = *The Gay Science,* IV, § 319, p. 253: "... we, we others who thirst after reason, are determined to scrutinize our experiences as severely as a scientific experiment – hour after hour, day after day. We ourselves wish to be our experiments and guinea pigs."

currence of the same in Nietzsche's philosophy, and although I do not by any means think that this interpretation exhausts the range of philosophical problems raised by a consideration of the problem of the eternal recurrence of the same in its own right, I do think that situating the doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same within the context of this question leads to a clear understanding of the issues at stake in Nietzsche's defense of this doctrine and offers a framework within which the adequacy of the doctrine can be judged; moreover, as I shall show below, such an interpretation has ample textual justification.

Thus the question which will form the focal point of our inquiry here is this: does thinking and willing life in terms of the eternal recurrence of the same bring about the complete affirmation of life that Nietzsche claims for it? In the following remarks, I shall first develop and substantiate this approach to the problem of the eternal recurrence of the same in Nietzsche's philosophy and then turn to an inquiry into the adequacy of Nietzsche's position by developing a Kierkegaardian critique of the doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same. The purpose of such a critique is not that of presenting a "refutation" of Nietzsche's position through arguments drawn from Kierkegaard, but rather that of developing more fully the dimensions of a philosophical problem common to both Nietzsche and Kierkegaard: the problem of the limits of self-affirmation in light of the necessary temporality of human existence.

The Eternal Recurrence of the Same

The doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same is introduced in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* specifically within the context of the question of the inaccessibility of the past to the creative will and the consequent restriction which this imposes upon the possibility of genuine redemption. Zarathustra speaks to his disciples in the following terms:

> "To redeem those who lived in the past and to recreate all 'it was' into a 'thus I willed it' – that alone I should call redemption. Will – that is the name of the liberator and joy-bringer; thus I taught you, my friends. But now learn this too: the will itself is still a prisoner. Willing liberates; but what is it that puts the liberator himself in fetters? 'It was' – that is the name of the will's gnashing of teeth and most secret melancholy. Powerless against what has been done, he is an angry spectator of all that

> is past. The will cannot will backwards; and that he cannot beak time and time's covetousness, that is the will's loneliest melancholy.[4]

Redemption is an *Erlösung* – a loosening or untieing (*Lösung*) from that which binds. The past, however, binds us, chains the creative will in the present while remaining inaccessible to that will. Frustrated by its inability to change the past and thereby become completely free in the present moment, the creative will takes its revenge by venting its wrath in the present: "... on all who can suffer he [the liberator, the creative will] wreaks revenge for his inability to go backwards."[5] We then call this revenge "punishment," thereby attempting to justify it, to create a good conscience by means of a hypocritical lie. The lie is eventually raised to the level of a general view of life itself in which the creative will comes to see its own creativity as a punishment justified by the law of time itself; redemption thereby comes to be seen as incompatible with willing creatively.

All of this, Zarathustra declares, is the fable of madness, even if such madness passes as conventional wisdom. Revenge, disguising itself as punishment, can never annihilate the deed which has sunk into the past. The attempt to do so merely places one more deed in the irretrievable past which cannot be annihilated. Existence becomes a *circulus vitiosus* of deed, guilt and revenge. Against this, Zarathustra holds out the possibility of *creatively willing the past.* Thus he preaches a new message to his disciples.

> "I led you away from these fables when I taught you, 'The will is a creator.' All 'it was' is a fragment, a riddle, a dreadful accident – until the creative will says to it, 'But thus I willed it.' Until the creative will says to it, 'But thus I will; thus shall I will it'."[6]

Although he is willing to admit that no creative will has yet been able to affirm the past in such a manner, Zarathustra maintains that such an act is within the reach of the will to power – indeed, Zarathustra himself may have

4 *Werke,* VI/1, pp. 175–176 = *Thus Spoke Zarathustra,* translated by Walter Kaufmann New York: The Viking Press, 1966), II, "On Redemption," p. 139.
5 *Ibid.,* p. 176 = *ibid.,* p. 140.
6 *Ibid., p. 177* = *ibid.,* p. 141.

reached this level.[7] Thus complete redemption is open to the creative will insofar as it is able to have willed the "it was" in the past, to be willing it in the present, and to continue to will it in the future.

There is, however, an ambiguity in this formulation which is rooted in the vagueness of the term "it was," and this ambiguity gives rise to two possible interpretations of the idea of creatively willing the "it was." First, it is possible to maintain that Zarathustra is advocating here an affirmation of the facticity of one's personal history as the necessary context within which creative willing must occur and simultaneously maintaining that only through creative willing is this facticity of personal history made meaningful, i. e. constituted as *my history.* In this case, the "it was" would refer to those prior events which constitute the personal history of the willing subject. Once they are willed – in the past, present, and future – they are appropriated by him as *his own,* thereby ceasing to be fragmentary, accidental. They are brought under the unity of a single, willing subject who recognizes himself as their author.

The second possible interpretation would broaden the extension of the "it was" to include *all* prior events as such, not merely those which immediately constitute the personal history of the willing subject. In this case, the creative willing which Zarathustra recommends would not be limited to an appropriation of one's personal history, but would extend to history as such – indeed, it would be cosmic in scale.

These two interpretations are rooted in the two different extensions of the term "it was," but they are not mutually exclusive in principle; rather, the first is a more limited version of the second. If the second is possible, then the first will also be possible. In itself, the impossibility of the second does not exclude the possibility of the first kind of willing of the "it was." If, however, the first necessarily entails the second, then the first is possible if and only if the second kind of willing of the "it was" is possible.

These two senses of creatively willing the "it was" are inextricably inter-

7 The problem of indirect communication, especially in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra,* is almost as great as it is in the works of Kierkegaard. At the end of this passage, the drawf asks Zarathustra why he speaks otherwise to his pupils than to himself, and Zarathustra does not refute the charge. How is this to be interpreted? Does it refer to all or only a specific part of Zarathustra's speech? Because it is not refuted, is it thereby to be taken as true? Since there is independent textual evidence to support Nietzsche's adherence to the doctrine of the eternal recurrence, I have interpreted the question as referring to the issue of whether everyone has been able to will the eternal recurrence.

twined in Nietzsche's thought and give rise to the two distinct levels on which he advanced the doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same: (1) on the level of personal existence, and (2) in relation to the cosmos as a whole. For the purpose of the following discussion, I shall refer to the first level as the *existential* doctrine of the eternal recurrence and the second level as the *cosmic* doctrine of the eternal recurrence. I shall now examine the doctrine on each of these two levels, in each case focusing the discussion around a single passage which will serve as a *locus classicus* of the statement of the doctrine on that level. Then I shall show why the existential doctrine necessarily entails the cosmic doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same for Nietzsche. Once this foundation has been established, I shall then turn to the Kierkegaardian critique of Nietzsche's position.

The existential doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same. Although the doctrine of the eternal recurrence appears again in *Zarathustra*,[8] I would like to consider an earlier passage in *The Gay Science* which contains many of the elements of the description in *Zarathustra* without involving us in the difficulties of interpretation which spring from the poetic character of the latter work. Even in *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche does not present the eternal recurrence as a literal truth, but rather poses it as a *question* to the reader. The context suggests that Nietzsche sees the importance of the doctrine to be located in the questions that it raises about the value of each moment of the individual's life – specifically, about whether he is willing to affirm each and every moment of his own life in an unconditional fashion. The passage reads as follows.

> *The greatest weight.* 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, speak of dust!"

8 Cf. *Werke,* VI/1, pp. 195–98 = *The Spoke Zarathustra,* "On the Vision and the Riddle," 2, pp. 157–60.

> Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: "You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine." If this thought gained possession of you, it would change you as you are or perhaps crush you. The question in each and every thing, "Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?" would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight. Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life *to crave nothing more fervently* than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?[9]

Thus the existential significance of the doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same emerges clearly from this passage: the demon's message is the occasion for asking ourselves whether we are willing to affirm ourselves unconditionally in each moment, to give each moment "this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal." This affirmation of the moment in its eternal validity is two-fold: (1) an affirmation of *self,* specifically of self as creative will, and (2) an affirmation of *life*, specifically of the facticity out of which this self creates itself, of the self's *world.* Viewed in this manner, the existential doctrine of the eternal occurence of the same stands in sharp juxtaposition to all doctrines which would negate self or world. In particular, it would be directed against the Christian moral interpretation of the world and any metaphysical expressions thereof, for these create an "other world" which negates the moment and the value of "this world" and thereby paves the way for the emergence of nihilism. The question of the eternal recurrence of the same leads to the question of the radical affirmation of the *Diesseits* of both self and world, the question of whether we are willing to choose and affirm ourselves absolutely in the moment.

Interpreted in this fashion, the existential doctrine – more precisely, the *question* – of the eternal recurrence of the same does not involve any ontological commitment to the nature of the cosmos as such, but is rather an instance of indirect communication intended to raise the existential question of whether we are willing to affirm absolutely both ourselves and the world in the moment. As such, it leads us to the further question: granted that we are willing to affirm both ourselves and our world absolutely in the moment, it is *possible* to do so? What would be the necessary conditions of the pos-

9 *Werke,* V/2, p. 250 = *The Gay Science,* IV, § 341, pp. 273–74.

sibility of such an act of absolute affirmation of self and world? This question brings us back to the issue raised in *Zarathustra*: as long as the past remains inaccessible to the creative will and yet affects the present, is it possible to affirm the present moment absolutely? Must not only this moment, but *all* moments be affirmed absolutely? In his final notebooks, Nietzsche gives us a clue to the transition from the existential to the cosmic doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same.

> A certain emperor always bore in mind the transitoriness of all things so as not to take them too seriously and to live at peace among them. To me, on the contrary, everything seems far too valuable to be so fleeting: I seek an eternity for everything: ought one to pour the most precious salves and wines into the sea? – My consolation is that everything that has been eternal: the sea will cast it up again.[10]

In Nietzsche's eyes, the necessary condition of the possibility of an absolute affirmation of the moment (as encompassing both self and world) is that every moment be given an ultimate confirmation and seal. He seeks to give an eternity to all moments through his cosmic doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same, the affirmation of which is a necessary condition of the affirmation of any given moment.

The cosmic doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same. Nietzsche's presentation of the doctrine of the eternal recurrence at this level is somewhat tentative in that most of the discussions of it are confined to his notebooks, where it is advanced as an alternative both to mechanistic world-views and to religious doctrines of creation and teleology. Nevertheless, judging from several outlines of a projected major work and from the content of the passages in which the doctrine is discussed, one can be rather certain that he attached great importance to it in his final years. In a notebook entry entitled "The New World-conception," Nietzsche presents his clearest statement of the doctrine and its proof. He argues as follows.

> If the world *may* be thought of as a certain definite quantity of force and as a certain definite number of centers of force – and every other representation remains indefinite and therefore *useless* – it follows that, in the great dice game of its existence, it must pass through a calculable number of combinations. In definite time, every possible combination would

10 *Werke*, VIII/2, 11 (94), p. 285 = *The Will to Power*, § 1065, pp. 547–48.

> at some time or another be realized once; still more: it would be realized an infinite number of times. And since between every combination and its next recurrence all other possible combinations would have to have taken place, and each of these combinations conditions the entire sequence of combinations in the same series, a circular movement of absolutely identical series would thus be demonstrated: the world as a circular movement that has already repeated itself infinitely often and plays its game *in infinitum*.[11]

The doctrine of the eternal recurrence is no longer presented in the poetic form of one of Zarathustra's sermons or as a question posed by a demon. Granting its subjunctive mood and the fact that it is found in the notebooks rather than in the works Nietzsche was able to publish himself, we must nonetheless admit that the doctrine is now asserted here in a fundamentally different manner than in the previous occurrences. It is now advanced as an explanation of the cosmos as such, laying claim to as much validity as is possible for any such theory within Nietzsche's perspective. It is no longer a question of the appropriation of the events which constitute an individual's past history, but an absolute affirmation of *all* events. Thus the affirmation of the cosmic doctrine entails the affirmation of the broader extension of the "it was" discussed above.

In approaching the cosmic doctrine of the eternal recurrence in this fashion, I have tried to sketch out a plausible explanation of how Nietzsche moved from the attempt to fully affirm the moment to the cosmic doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same. The move from the existential to the cosmic version of the doctrine can, of course, be explained in terms of Nietzsche's concept of the will to power. The doctrine of the will to power commits Nietzsche to the necessary interconnectedness of all events: every instance of the will to power, every quantum of force, is necessarily related to all other quanta force.[12] Insofar as this is the case, all moments are interrelated; so, too, are all events. Yet if all moments are interrelated and interdependent, then an absolute affirmation of one moment must include an affirmation of all moments; similarly, an absolute affirmation of the events of one's personal

11 *Werke,* VIII/3 14 (188), p. 168 = *The Will to Power,* translated by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967), § 549. (Changes made in Kaufmann's translation.)

12 *Werke,* VIII/2, 10 (138), p. 201–02 = *The Will to Power,* § 639, p. 341.

history entails an affirmation of all prior events (i. e., of the broader extension of the "it was"). Consequently, given the premises of Nietzsche's position (i. e. his notion of the will to power), his attempt to give an ultimate eternal confirmation and seal to the moment necessarily leads him to assert the cosmic doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same.

The cosmic doctrine is not, however, advanced as a realist's thesis about the world as such. Any attempt to interpret it in this fashion clearly ignores Nietzsche's own views on knowing, thinking and willing. Moreover, although the "proof" given in the notebook passage cited above is clearly fallacious,[13] the significance of the doctrine is not primarily dependent on the validity of that proof. An adequate exposition of Nietzsche's theory of knowledge would take us far beyond the confines of this paper, but in should be noted that naming, the creation of meaning, thinking, and willing are all instances of the will to power.[14] The cosmic doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same is not something which Nietzsche is claiming to have *discovered* about the world, but a form or structure he is choosing to *impose* upon existence through the exercise of the will to power. "All meaning is will to power."[15] In this sense, the assertion of the cosmic doctrine of the eternal recurrence is a creative act, an attempt to impose the character of being upon the world of becoming.[16] However, the cosmic doctrine is not merely a *thought*-experiment – life itself is the experiment whose question is how far such truth can be embodied.[17] Thus the central question for Nietzsche is not one of the "objective truth" of the doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same, but rather a question of whether we can – in thought as well as in action – *impose* the cosmic doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same on existence. We then return to the existential level and attempt to make the cosmic doctrine true by embodying it.

13 Cf. Georg Simmel, *Schopenhauer und Nietzsche: Ein Vortragszyklus* (Leipzig: Duncker und Humblot, 1907), pp. 250 ff.; Milic Capek, "The Theory of the Eternal Recurrence in Modern Philosophy," *Journal of Philosophy,* LVII, 9 (April, 1960), pp. 289–95.

14 See, for example, the fragments collected in *The Will to Power,* Book III, I: The Will to Power as Knowledge, §§ 466–617, pp. 261–331.

15 *Werke,* VIII/1, 2 (77), p. 95 = *The Will to Power,* § 590, p. 323.

16 *Werke,* VIII/1, 7 (54), p. 320 = *The Will to Power,* § 617, p. 330: "To impose upon becoming the character of being – that is the supreme will to power.... That *everything recurs* is the closest *approximation of a world of becoming to a world of being:* – high point of the meditation."

17 *Werke,* V/2, p. 149 = *The Gay Science,* III, § 110, p. 171: "To what extent can truth endure incorporation? That is the question; that is the experiment." Also see § 372.

The Problem. The circle is now complete. We have seen the way in which the existential doctrine of the eternal recurrence, given Nietzsche's theory of the will to power, entails the cosmic doctrine; moreover, we now see the way in which the cosmic doctrine, given Nietzsche's view of knowing as a creative act of the will to power, brings us back to the existential level; thus the eternal recurrence of the same must be embodied, lived out in some way. If the interpretation given above of "The Greatest Weight" in *The Gay Science* is indeed sound, then the problem which gives rise to the doctrine of the eternal recurrence is the question of how it is possible to affirm one's actions completely and to affirm "life" absolutely. If the doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same is to be judged adequate from Nietzsche's own standpoint, it would have at least to allow, even if it does not necessarily entail such an affirmation. If, on the other hand, the willing of the eternal recurrence of the same precludes the possibility of the affirmation which it was originally intended to bring about, then it is clearly inadequate even within Nietzsche's own perspective. I would now like to turn to an explicit consideration of the adequacy of Nietzsche's doctrine by discussing it in light of Kierkegaard's views on the constitution of the self and the problem of temporality. The purpose of such a consideration is not to show that Nietzsche's position does not meet Kierkegaard's criteria, but rather to raise the question, by means of Kierkegaard's arguments, of whether Nietzsche's doctrine of the eternal recurrence offers an adequate solution to Nietzsche's own problem.

The Kierkegaardian Critique

The problem of the absolute affirmation of the self and temporality dominates many of Kierkegaard's works, especially those concerned with the aesthetic and ethical modes of existence. In the course of developing this problem, Kierkegaard raises a number of questions which are of especial importance in attempting an evaluation of Nietzsche's doctrine of the eternal recurrence. In the following comments, I shall develop Kierkegaard's analysis of the problem of temporality and the absolute affirmation of the self through the three primary modes of the existence – the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious – and show the way in which Kierkegaard's analysis of the problem raises serious difficulties about the tenability of Nietzsche's doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same.

Temporality and Aesthetic Existence. The question which dominates

Either/Or, especially the first volume, is this: what are the consequences of attempting to affirm human existence purely as aesthetic? In Kierkegaard's eyes, it is clear that "a single, coherent, aesthetic view of life can scarcely be carried out."[18] The attempt to do so inevitably leads to contradictions culminating in the dissolution of the self. The following analysis of these contradictions will show the impossibility of maintaining the doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same on the level of aesthetic existence, of attempting to say "yes" to life as purely aesthetic existence. The aesthete inevitably encounters the problem of the "it was," and it becomes its most secret melancholy which it cannot overcome. Let us consider this in relation to the three basic attempts to affirm existence as aesthetic which are presented in *Either/Or:* Don Juan, the reflective seducer, and "A," the pseudonymous author of most of the first volume. Don Juan and the reflective seducer are, respectively, the ideal *terminus a quo* and *terminus ad quem* of the concrete aesthetic existence which A himself attempts to live out.[19]

Don Juan is the artistic representation of pure sensuousness, and as such he is possible only as *art* – indeed, as non-representational art, for Don Juan is fundamentally musical. Any attempt to translate the story of Don Juan into conventional dramatic form makes Don Juan into a comic figure; only Mozart's opera has captured his true essence as absolutely musical. In stressing the absolutely musical character of Don Juan, Kierkegaard wants to stress the way in which pure sensuousneses, even in its artistic representation, is inaccessible to reflective thought. The figure of Don Juan is in many respects similar to Nietzsche's Dionysus in *The Birth of Tragedy.* Both Nietzsche and Kierkegaard recognize that it is in music that the principle of individuation is overcome most completely. The contrast between Dionysos and Apollo is the contrast between immediate sensuousness and reflective thought – a tension which Nietzsche saw to be at the heart of Greek tragedy. Moreover, just as there is an abyss lurking behind the artistic representation of Don Juan, so, too, in Nietzsche we find the threat of nothingness lurking behind the serenity of Greek thought, behind its alleged equilibrium. Finally, both Don Juan and Dionysos are thoroughly immersed in a world of becoming to such

18 Sören Kierkegaard, *Either/Or,* translated by David F. Swenson and Lillian Marvin Swenson, Volume One (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 13.

19 Cf. Louis Mackey, "The Poetry of Inwardness" in *Kierkegaard: A Collection of Critical Essays,* edited by Josiah Thompson (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1972), p. 24.

an extent that it is almost impossible to speak of individual actions in either case.

The problem of the eternal recurrence of the same also arises for Don Juan. As one who desires sensuousness pure and simple, he exists purely in the moment. To see a woman is for him to love her: "it is in the moment, in the same moment everything is over, and the same thing repeats itself endlessly."[20] Indeed, the sameness here refers to both self and world: being totally at one with the moment, there is no element of difference introduced into either Don Juan himself or his world. This is why Don Juan is essentially faithless, both to himself and to the world except insofar as these exist purely in the moment. However, the consequence of this is that neither self nor world possesses a history; both consequently lack any continuity – indeed, neither are constituted as such. (In a similar manner, there is no history for Dionysos, only an immersion without end in the primordial contradiction of existence.) Thus for Kierkegaard, a complete affirmation of the moment as pure sensuousness on an artistic level results in an eternal recurrence of the same, but this sameness – pure sensuousness – excludes the possibility of the constitution of either self or world. On this level, pure sensuousness does not contain the moment of difference – first posited through the distinction between self and world – necessary for the constitution of the self and of the world.

There is, of course, an additional argument against the possibility of such an existence: Don Juan is possible only as art. His is an impossible project which cannot be lived out, but only represented musically. The world itself is not so constituted as to offer immediate gratification of one's desires. Moreover, if it *were* so constituted, Don Juan would encounter another problem – boredom. As an artistic creation, Don Juan escapes this problem, but it becomes a serious one for one who attempts to live out the aesthetic choise, as we shall see below in our consideration of "A."

The affirmation of aesthetic existence on the level of art thus involves an affirmation of the eternal recurrence of the same, an endless return of the sensuous as such. On the artistic level, the same moment repeats itself endlessly. Such an affirmation is, however, only possible as art – it cannot be lived out. Thus the affirmation of the eternal recurrence of the same on the artistic level in this sense is an affirmation which does not meet Nietzsche's

20 *Either/Or,* I, p. 93.

own standards insofar as his doctrine of the eternal recurrence was clearly one which was to be lived out.

It is in the figure of the reflective seducer that we find the clearest instance of an attempt to live out the aesthetic mode of existence to its final conclusion. "The Diary of a Seducer" in *Either/Or* records the reflective seducer's progress in capturing, not a woman's body, but her *spirit.* It becomes evident that his craft consists of self-concealment and self-denial – indeed, he sees his task to be such that he must transform his appearance into whatever will be the most effective in terms of his goal of seduction. He becomes a *poseur* obsessed with his own skill in maintaining the appropriate mask. However, the reflective seducer is also caught in a contradiction. Throughout the process of seduction, he must deny himself and thereby his own immediacy – he must live in service of the idea.[21] But in the moment in which the seduction is completed, he finds himself at a loss – the moment of fulfillment is the moment at which the relationship must be terminated.[22] He desires to seduce the *free spirit* of another, but the moment in which the seduction is successful that spirit is no longer free and thus no longer capable of giving that which was sought. The attempt to live out the choise of the reflective seducer leads inevitably to the dissolution of the self, for even the moment of self-fulfillment is destroyed in its very achievement. He is involved in a never-ending circle from which he cannot escape,[23] a circle in which he continually moves from self-denial to a fulfillment which destroys itself in the moment.

The reflective seducer illustrates the difficulties encountered in any attempt to live out to its final consequences an affirmation of the aesthetic mode of existence. The prefatory comments to the "Diary," A's comments on a diary which may actually be his own,[24] reveal that A is indeed repulsed by this vision of the ultimate possibility of his own existence. In one sense, it matters little whether A is actually the author of the diary; it is sufficient that he *could* have been, that this is his ultimate destiny. The reflective seducer is the final outcome of the aesthetic man's attempt to *affirm the moment.* In order to see more clearly the problems lurking behind the facade of the reflective

21 *Ibid.,* p. 432.
22 *Ibid.,* p. 439.
23 *Ibid.,* pp. 304–05.
24 *Ibid.,* p. 13.

seducer's existence, we must look more closely at the aesthetic man himself, A, and specifically at the method he uses for affirming his existence.

The aesthetic man, A, wants to live fully in the moment, but the attempt to affirm the moment completely leads him into a dilemma. That which stands in the way of a complete affirmation of the moment is any kind of commitment, whether to the past, future or present. In order to live completely in the moment, it becomes necessary for him to sever any necessary connection with the past, including his own personal history. He must therefore bring *remembering* and *forgetting* under his own control, thereby breaking necessary identity with his own past. Not only must he distance himself from his own past, but he must also avoid immersing himself completely in anything in the present, since "enjoying an experience to its full intensity to the last minute will make it impossible either to remember or to forget."[25] Finally, he must also prevent himself from *hoping*, for if one hopes then one measures the moment in terms of some future goal, thereby devaluating the moment and seeing in it only that which contributes to the attainment of that future goal. This is indeed the paradoxical outcome of the aesthetic man's attempt to affirm the moment absolutely: he distances himself not only from past and future, but must even distance himself from the moment itself, lest it gains too strong a hold on him. In this sense, the greatest threat to the aesthete's existence is that he might encounter something or someone to which he becomes committed, for that would undermine his attempt to live in the moment.

The method which the aesthete employs in order to avoid this danger is described by A as the rotation method. It consists of cultivating the power of remembering and forgetting as one of the means of getting into "a position to play at battledore and shuttlecock with the whole of existence."[26] In A's eyes, this makes possible the realization of a complete freedom, but that freedom is bought at the price of negating all commitment – even to one's self. One must constantly vary everything, not only external objects and one's perspective on them but "one must also constantly vary himself."[27] The result of this is an affirmation of arbitrariness and chance: the self is affirmed as arbitrary, and the external world is viewed only under the category of the accidental. In his "Ecstatic Lecture," A maintains that he sees everything

25 *Ibid.*, p. 289.
26 *Ibid.*, p. 290.
27 *Ibid.*, p. 294.

aeterno modo, and indeed this is the result of his own affirmation of the moment: each moment is given an eternity, but in the process *temporality* as the continuity of moment is lost.

If the possibility of forming a commitment is the danger which constitutes one side of the aesthete's dilemma, the rotation method is intended to guard not only against that but against the other horn of the dilemma: boredom. The constant variation achieved by means of the rotation method should overcome this boredom, but it is questionable whether this is in principle possible. Boredom, A maintains, "depends on the nothingness which pervades reality."[28] This is, in other words, the threat of nihilism, and the nothingness which we encounter here pervades both self and world. Its roots, however, are primarily in the self, for the aesthetic self is a *nothing*;[29] consequently the world constituted by that self must be pervaded by nothingness. With the self as arbitrary and the world as accidental, reality becomes a series of discrete moments bearing no essential relation to one another, lacking any significant continuity. Thus the arbitrary and the accidental continually repeat themselves. In his lecture to the Symparanekromenoi on "The Unhappiest Man," A concludes by telling his listeners to arise: "The night is spent, and the day begins its unwearied activities, never weary, it seems, of everlastingly repeating itself."[30]

The rotation method functions for the aesthetic man in a manner which is quite similar to the way in which the doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same functions for Nietzsche. Both are attempts to think about and live out existence in such a way as to affirm the moment completely. Both involve giving an eternal seal and confirmation to every moment, living *aeterno modo*. The aesthetic man affirms everything in the world as accidental, and this indeed corresponds to Nietzsche's own descriptions of the cosmos as an eternally recurring play of forces without any goal.[31] Indeed, the aesthete plays with the whole of existence, as does Nietzsche's free spirit. However, our consideration of the aesthete's mode of existence raises a question not only of the aesthete but also of Nietzsche. If, in order to affirm the moment completely, one must deny any necessary temporal continuity to both self and

28 *Ibid.*, p. 287.
29 *Ibid.*, pp. 28 ff.
30 *Ibid.*, p. 228.
31 *Werke*, VII/3, 38 (12), pp. 338–39 = *The Will to Power*, § 1067, pp. 549–50.

world, then does not nothingness come to pervade reality? If one affirms one's self as arbitrary and the world as accidental, then existence (in which self and world come together) becomes meaningless, and this meaninglessness is the foundation of nihilism. Each moment becomes an eternity unto itself, and both self and world lack the continuity necessary for creating and sustaining meaning. Both the rotation method and the thinking and willing of the eternal recurrence of the same free us from the "it was," but the price of such freedom is the continuity necessary for meaning to emerge.

Is, however, Nietzsche's doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same to be equated with the aesthete's rotation method? Here two interpretations are open to us. If we followed the cosmic doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same, we would be led to thinking that the eternal recurrence involved some form of determinism: if everything recurs eternally the same in the cosmos, then the individual is but a toy buffeted by the waves of this eternal play of forces. In a sense, this is what the aesthete turns himself into, for the aesthete, since he never chooses to become anything but rather simply to be, must continually react rather than act. However, in Nietzsche's presentation of the doctrine of the eternal recurrence, this doctrine is one which the individual chooses to affirm, imposes upon existence. It is not meant as a descriptive statement, but rather as an existential category for the structuring of the individual's experience and action. If we follow this interpretation of the eternal recurrence, then there appears to be a way out of this dilemma: through his *choice* to impose the structure of the eternal recurrence on existence, the individual thereby imposes a continuity which was beyond the reach of the aesthetic man. The aesthetic man refused – almost resolutely – to choose himself, but in this interpretation of the eternal recurrence the individual would indeed be choosing himself. However, once the issue of choice is raised we enter the realm of the ethical for Kierkegaard.

Before turning to a consideration of the ethical, let us summarize the result of our discussion about the aesthetic. The case of the aesthetic man shows that a complete affirmation of the moment as such is only possible if the moment is severed from any essential connection with other moments past or future. If this is done, both self and world become discontinous, the self becoming arbitrary and the world accidental. If this is done, existence becomes meaningless, a mere series of discrete moments. Moreover, it even becomes necessary to distance oneself from each moment, lest one thereby becomes

so involved that forgetting is impossible. Clearly, this attempt to say "yes" completely to the moment is inadequate, for if lived out it leads to the dissolution of both self and world.

Temporality and Choice: Ethical Existence. The movement from the aesthetic to the ethical level is accomplished in the moment in which the individual chooses to *become* himself.[32] For Judge Wilhelm, the pseudonymous author of the second volume of *Either/Or*, this involves choosing oneself in one's eternal validity.[33] The ethical man affirms himself *as choosing*, and as therefore responsible for his own actions. He thereby constitutes himself as historical, as having both a past and a future. He relates to that past under the category of *repentance*[34] and to his future under the category of *duty*.[35] The task of the ethical man is thus to become himself by permeating his concreteness with the universal.[36] In this process, the aesthetic is taken up and transformed, for "in choosing itself the personality chooses itself ethically and excludes absolutely the aesthetic, but since he chooses himself and since he does not become another being by choosing himself but becomes himself, the whole of the aesthetic comes back again in its relativity."[37] If we look only at Judge Wilhelm's description of the ethical life, it seems to offer an equilibrium in which the particular and the universal are indeed in harmony and in which both the moment and eternity are preserved. If Judge Wilhelm is to be believed, it seems to be within man's power to choose himself in his eternal validity.

There are, however, problems with the ethical life which the Judge is not willing to admit. In the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* Kierkegaard – as Johannes Climacus – suggests that, "I think that the Judge, supposing I could get hold of him and whisper a little secret in his ear, will concede that there are difficulties he did not take into account."[38] Some of these difficulties had already been suggested in *Fear and Trembling*, where Kierkegaard – as Johannes de silentio – maintains that the individual's ethical task is "to abolish

32 Sören Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, Volume II, translated by Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), pp. 170–71.
33 *Ibid.*, p. 215.
34 *Ibid.*, p. 229.
35 *Ibid.*, pp. 256 ff.
36 *Ibid.*, p. 260.
37 *Ibid.*, p. 182.
38 Sören Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, translated by David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 161.

his particularity in order to become the universal."[39] The argument in these works is that it is impossible to transform the aesthetic fully into the universal, that it is impossible to achieve the equilibrium which Judge Wilhelm claims to have attained. The argument is already presaged in the sermon of the Jutland parson which stands at the end of *Either/Or.* The argument here can be developed in several ways. First, it is impossible to permeate all of one's particularity, one's immediacy, with the universal. In the order of time, the immediacy precedes the self-choice and one can only reappropriate past immediacy through repentance; but to do so is to acknowledge that it was *not* originally chosen. Second, the refuge of the *practical* ethical man – Judge Wilhelm, for instance – is that one does one's best, one does what one can.[40] However, and this is the question raised by the Jutland pastor, can we *ever* be certain that we have done the best that we can? Moreover, even if we could be certain of that, how are we to deal with those cases in which the "best" was simply not enough? The hidden presupposition of the Judge's view is that there is a pre-established harmony between the particular and the universal, between the aesthetic and the ethical, which is at least in principle attainable for man, but it is precisely this for which there is no guarantee, for only God is in a position to answer that question. Thus the ethical man, when pushed to the final consequences of his position, must maintain with the Jutland pastor that "as against God, we are always in the wrong,"[41] or, in the language of *Fear and Trembling*, he must give himself over to infinite resignation, however, leaves the individual powerless to regain his own immediacy: "... by my own strength I am not able to get least of the things which belong to finiteness, for I am constantly using my strength to renounce everything."[42]

Kierkegaard's analysis of the dilemma of the ethical man raises anew the question of the "it was" which we encountered in *Zarathustra* and leads us into the heart of the problem of the eternal recurrence of the same. The problem here is simply this: given the larger extension of "it was," the affirmation of the eternal recurrence of the same destroys the distinction between self and world. By affirming all "it was" as a "thus I willed it" and

39 Sören Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling; Sickness unto Death,* translated by Walter Lowrie (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1954), pp. 64–65.
40 *Either/Or,* II. pp. 343–56.
41 *Ibid.*
42 *Fear and Trembling,* p. 60.

"thus I will it," one obliterates the distinction between those actions which I as an individual did in some significant sense choose to do, those actions of which I was the author, and all other events in the world. Without that distinction, there is no difference between self and world: if I will *everything*, then I am coextensive with the world itself. Indeed, this is why Nietzsche's position can so easily turn into a determinism: the implied identity of self and world can lead just as easily to seeing the self as merely a partial manifestation of the world. The doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same contains precisely this ambiguity: because it implies an identity of self and world, it can be either a doctrine of absolute freedom (reducing the world to the self) or one of absolute determinism (reducing the self to the world). Only with the introduction of an element of *difference* is it possible to avoid conflating self and world, but the introduction of difference would seem to exclude the possibility of affirming the doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same.

Would, however, Nietzsche shrink from these conclusions? Would he perhaps not only accept but indeed gladly affirm these consequences? There is much to be said in favor of this view. Nietzsche clearly rejects any traditional view of a substantial self,[43] as well as any doctrine of the free will as a faculty.[44] Moreover, he clearly questions whether we can have adequate knowledge of the antecedent conditions of our actions or of their subsequent effects.[45] In addition to this, the doctrine of the necessary interconnectedness of all events as expressed in the will to power is itself open to a deterministic reading, for it becomes a matter of perspective which event is labelled "cause" and which "effect" – indeed, such labels become meaningless for Nietzsche.[46] Finally, Nietzsche's comment about being an immoralist, about going beyond good and evil, indicate that he would indeed reject the ethical mode of existence, although he surely understood the ethical in a different way than Kierkegaard did in many respects. All of this would seem to indicate that Nietzsche might well accept the conflation of self and world as a consequence of the doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same and maintain

43 *Werke,* VIII/1, 2 (152), p. 139 = *The Will to Power,* § 556, p. 302.

44 *Werke,* V/2, p. 261 = *The Gay Science,* V, § 345, p. 285; *Werke,* VI/3, pp. 89–90 = *The Twilight of the Idols,* in *The Portable Nietzsche,* edited and translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Viking Press, 1954), 499–500.

45 *Werke,* V/2, pp. 272–75 = *The Gay Science,* V, § 354, pp. 297–300.

46 *Werke,* VIII/3, 14 (98), pp. 66–68 = *The Will to Power,* § 551, pp. 295–97.

that this is a *higher* stage of existence. There is, I would suggest, yet another level on which we can explore the meaning of Nietzsche's doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same – a level which can be more fully explored if we first turn to a consideration of Kierkegaard's solution to the contradictions of ethical existence.

The Knight of Faith and the Free Spirit. Kierkegaard did not exclude the possibility that there might indeed be a harmony between the universal and the particular, between man and nature and between man and God; but the thrust of his arguments, especially in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, is what we certainly can never *know* that such a harmony is possible. Such knowledge would only be possible if we were able to see the world from God's point of view, but precisely this is impossible for an existing individual. Part of the presumptuousness of Hegelian philosophy is that it lays claim to a divine point of view which is in principle beyond the reach of man. Perhaps an ultimate reconciliation of these opposites is possible, but since we can never know that, and since our lives depend on it, we can only live in fear and trembling with the objective uncertainty about the ultimate meaning of our own existence. Thus the religious man lives in a paradoxical faith in which he believes that in God all things are possible, but confesses to his ignorance as to how they indeed are possible. The absurd becomes the primary category for the religious man's encounter with reality.

Kierkegaard's rejection of the possibility of objective knowledge on the level of religious existence is not, however, based solely on his arguments against a Hegelian *Identitätsphilosophie.* In the opening chapters of the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* he argues against the possibility of adequate historical knowledge of the truth of Christianity by maintaining that the nature of historical knowledge is such that it can never yield more than an *approximation* which is incommensurable with the infinite interest which the inquirer has in the object. The third main argument he advances centers around the impossibility of objective knowledge of an absolute *subject.* Since God is not an object but rather an absolute subject, the attempt to obtain objective knowledge of him is doomed to failure, for objective knowledge is only possible as knowledge of an object. All attempts which claim success in this realm have indeed only succeeded in turning God into something he is not – into an object rather than a subject. To this we could add a fifth argument from *Fear and Trembling*: the nature of thought and language is such

that it can deal only in terms of the universal, but God as an absolute particular is above the universal and cannot be apprehended in terms of it. This argument can be viewed as a variation on the fourth argument.

The sixth and perhaps most important argument against the possibility of objective knowledge in the religious sphere of existence centers around Kierkegaard's doctrine of truth as subjectivity. Briefly, he maintains that the quest for objectivity always leads *away from* the subject and thus culminates in a denial of the importance of subjectivity.

> The way of objective reflection makes the subject accidental, and thereby transforms existence into something indifferent, something vanishing. Away from the subject the objective way of reflection leads to the objective truth, and while the subject and his subjectivity become indifferent, the truth also becomes indifferent, and this indifference is precisely its objective validity; for all interest, like all decisiveness, is rooted in subjectivity. The way of objective reflection leads to abstract thought, to mathematics, to historical knowledge of different kinds; and always it leads away from the subject, whose existence or non-existence, and from the objective point of view quite rightly, becomes infinitely indifferent. Quite rightly, since as Hamlet says, existence and non-existence have only subjective significance. At its maximum this way will arrive at a contradiction, and insofar as the subject does not become wholly indifferent to himself, this merely constitutes a sign that his objective striving is not objective enough. At its maximum this way will lead to the contradiction that only the objective has come into being, while the subjective has gone out; that is to say, the existing individual has vanished, in that it has made an attempt to become what in the abstract sense is called subjectivity, the mere abstract form of an abstract objectivity. And yet, the objectivity which has thus come into being is, from the subjective point of view at the most, either an hypothesis or an approximation, because all eternal decisiveness is rooted in subjectivity.[47]

Insofar as it necessarily leads away from the subject and makes that subject inessential, and insofar as it is the case that Christianity necessarily involves a decisive *commitment* on the part of the subject, the quest for objective knowledge in relation to Christianity will always lead away from Christianity for it leads away from the subject as such, away from the existing individual.

47 *Concluding Unscientific Postspript,* p.173.

This turn toward truth as subjectivity entails a number of consequences for Kierkegaard's position which are of direct relevance to our enquiry. These center around Kierkegaard's definition of the relationship of the man of faith to God. It is, as his discussion of the knight of faith illustrates, an absolute relation between the individual and God. The individual is thereby isolated from all that which surrounds him, even other men of faith.[48] The world historical becomes inessential to this relation.[49] Language and thought are unable to deal with this relation adequately.[50] Indeed, despite Kierkegaard's protestations to the contrary, even the world itself is lost and he falls into acosmism.[51] The sole criterion governing this relation is that of passion, of *inwardness.* The task of life is to become subjective to the highest possible degree, to achieve the maximum of inwardness. Thus Kierkegaard contrasts two cases:

> If one who lives in the midst of Christendom goes up to the house of God, the house of the true God, with the true conception of God in his knowledge, and prays, but prays in a false spirit; and one who lives in an idolatrous community prays with the entire passion of the infinite, although his eyes rest upon the image of an idol: where is there most truth? The one prays in truth to God though he worships an idol; the other prays falsely to the true God, and hence worships in fact an idol.[52]

The essential aspect of religious existence is not that of the "objective truth" of the one who is worshipped, but rather of the degree of inwardness on the part of the worshipper. Without this passion of inwardness, the true God is turned into an idol; with it, whoever is worshipped is thereby transformed into the true God if the act of worship involves the entire passion of the infinite.

Kierkegaard's attacks on attempt to establish the objective truth of Christianity are thus founded on his notion of truth as subjectivity. The point of those attacks is to increase the objective uncertainty about Christianity precisely in order to bring about an increase in subjectivity, inwardness, by

48 *Fear and Trembling,* pp. 90–91.
49 *Concluding Unscientific Postscript,* pp. 25–47.
50 *Fear and Trembling,* pp. 91–129.
51 See Louis Mackey, "The Loss of the World in Kierkegaard's Ethics," *Kierkegaard: A Collection of Critical Essays,* pp. 266–88.
52 *Concluding Unscientific Postscript,* pp. 179–80.

increasing the *tension* between the finite and the infinite – by increasing "that true hypertension of the infinite in the spirit of man" which is already present in genuine ethical consciousness.[53] However, we now appear to have come full circle in our investigation, for what Kierkegaard is saying here is that the affirmation of the paradox of Christianity with the entire passion of the infinite in faith is *das grösste Schwergewicht* – the greatest stress, the heaviest burden. The affirmation in faith of the paradox of Christianity and the affirmation of the eternal recurrence of the same both serve to establish the highest possible tension in man, the tension between the finite and the infinite, between the temporal and the eternal.

Let us examine the matter more closely. The criterion of inwardness is not objective truth – indeed, quite the contrary. Objective uncertainty is a necessary condition of truth as subjectivity for Kierkegaard. The criterion of inwardness is rather the degree of tension, the degree to which the passion of the infinite is present in a finite being. However, this was also the case for the existential doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same. Indeed, even in its cosmic formulation, it was not presented as objectively certain, but rather as something the individual imposed upon the chaos of existence through his will to power as interpretation. The individual *gives* an eternal confirmation and seal to each moment; indeed, the highest expression of the will to power is the imposition of the character of being on the world of becoming.[54] Just as the paradox of Christianity is not to be judged in terms of its objective truth for Kierkegaard, so, too, eternal recurrence of the same is not for Nietzsche to be judged in term of its objective truth. In regard to both doctrines, their essential truth is the truth of inwardness.

Given inwardness as the criterion of the truth of the eternal recurrence of the same, one could argue in a Kierkegaardian mode that Nietzsche lost sight of his own insight when he attempted to "prove" the doctrine, for such an attempt signals a turning away from the doctrine: an increase in inwardness. Moreover, any attempt to draw conclusions from the doctrine which have some claim to objective validity – if indeed that is even possible within Nietzsche's framework – would involve a misunderstanding of the doctrine. It cannot function as a supreme principle from which conclusions can be

53 *Ibid.*, p. 123.
54 *Werke*, VIII/1, 7 (54), p. 320 = *The Will to Power*, § 617, p. 330.

drawn, for it does not claim to objective validity, that is, it is not meant as an assertion about *objects.* Insofar as the cosmic doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same is interpreted as an assertion about objects, then it is to be verified by looking at those objects; this in turn involves a turning away from the self and a decrease in the tension it was originally intended as an existential doctrine to establish. It then becomes a fable of madness in Kierkegaard's sense as an attempt to embrace some sort of objectivity with the passion of the infinite.[55]

A far more serious objection could be raised to the doctrine of the eternal recurrence from a Kierkegaardian standpoint: not only is it madness to embrace some kind of objectivity with the passion of the infinite, but one must embrace *only* the infinite and the absolute with this kind of passion. Such passion can only be directed toward an infinite and absolute object, i. e. God. To do anything less than this is contradictory, for only an absolute and infinite subject is worthy of such passion. With this, howewer, we reach the most fundamental point of divergence between Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. For Nietzsche, the affirmation of the eternal recurrence of the same is an affirmation of *man* as the infinite and absolute subject. Thus the death of God opens up the possibility of an "open sea" for man.

> Indeed, we philosophers and "free spirits" feel, when we hear the news that "the old god is dead," as if a new dawn shone on us; our heart overflows with gratitude, amazement, premonitions, expectation. At long last the horizon appears free to us again, even if it should not be bright; at long last our ships may venture out again, venture out to face any danger; all the daring of the lover of knowledge is permitted again; the sea, *our* sea, lies open again; perhaps there has never yet been such an "open sea." – [56]

The affirmation of the eternal recurrence of the same is in this sense a relation an infinite and absolute object, but this subject is not the Kierkegaardian God but rather the possibilities contained in man. This is for Nietzsche an affirmation which is made – as is the Kierkegaardian leap of faith – in the face of objective uncertainty, but made with the next cheerfulness of the free spirit rather than the fear and trembling of the religious man.

55 *Concluding Unscientific Postscript,* p. 174.
56 Werke, V/2, p. 256 = *The Gay Science,* V, § 343, p. 280.

> ... one could conceive of such a pleasure and power of self-determination, such a *freedom* of the will that the spirit would take leave of all faith and every wish for certainty, being practized in maintaining himself on insubstantial ropes and possibilities and dancing even near abysses. Such a spirit would be the *free spirit* par excellence.[57]

This is both the subject and object of the absolute affirmation of the eternal recurrence of the same in Nietzsche's philosophy: the free spirit par excellence, the overcoming of man as he merely is, the emergence of the *Übermensch* as the overcoming of man.

Conclusion

To what point have we been brought in this rather tortuous investigation into Nietzsche's doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same? We began with Zarathustra's statement of the problem: is it possible to affirm all of existence, to transform even the past, the "it was," into a "thus I willed it?" The doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same emerged as Nietzsche's attempt to say "yes" to all of existence. On the existential level the doctrine presented itself as a *question* that was intended to put man in the highest state of tension by imposing upon him the greatest burden, the burden of affirming all of existence. This involved the cosmic doctrine of the eternal recurrence of *all* events, and there was some evidence to suggest that Nietzsche thought the doctrine could be demonstrated as necessary on this level. However, given Nietzsche's conception of the will to power as meaning and interpretation, such attempts at proof must be viewed as attempts to create rather than discover meaning, as exercises of the individual's will to power as interpretation.

The Kierkegaardian critique then centered on the problem of temporality and the affirmation of self and world. It was argued that the moment could never be affirmed in isolation without a destruction of both self and world and that the rotation method of the aesthetic man, which does indeed bring about an eternal recurrence of the same in one sense, destroyed the continuity of both self and world. Thus it was shown that the eternal recurrence of the same cannot be willed purely on the aesthetic level through the rotation

57 *Ibid.*, p. 265 = *ibid.*, V § 347, pp. 289–90.

method. It was then shown that the continuity necessary for the constitution of self and world could be achieved through the resolute self-choice of the ethical man, but this self-choice necessarily posited a distance between self and world by drawing a distinction between that which I have willed and that which I have willed and that which I have not willed. Such a distinction, hovewer, precludes the possibility of affirming all of existence as a "thus I willed it;" consequently, it precludes the possibility of affirming the eternal recurrence of the same. We were then left with the problem that the eternal recurrence of the same seemed to be incompatible with an affirmation of the distinction between self and world, for the affirmation of the eternal recurrence of the same seemed to destroy any meaningful distinction between self and world.

In turning to a consideration of religious existence, we then saw that there was a fundamental similarity between the paradox of faith in Kierkegaard's position and the doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same in Nietzsche's philosophy. Both place the greatest burden on human existence in order to bring about the greatest possible increase in the passion of inwardness. Neither lay claim to objective truth, but rather hold firm to their objective uncertainty in order to heighten the tension which is indeed their truth. However, whereas Kierkegaard's position involved an absolute relation of the individual to God, Nietzsche's standpoint is intended to bring the individual into an absolute relation to man in his infinite possibilities.

However, as the Kierkegaardian critique has shown, the doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same can never have objective validity. Indeed, its objective uncertainty must always be kept clearly in mind. The failure to do so leads inevitably either to the dissolution of both self and world into a series of discrete moments as shown in our consideration of aesthetic existence or to the conflation of self and world which we discussed in relation to ethical existence. In the final analysis, the doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same cannot be a doctrine at all; it can only be an *existential question* – the question of whether the individual is willing to affirm man and all his possibilities absolutely as man's alone. The affirmation can never be complete, however, for the "answer" to the question is the existential task of living out that affirmation in the face of an objective uncertainty, an affirmation in which the individual maintains himself on insubstantial ropes and possibilities, giving up all faith and every wish for certainty, dancing even near abysses.

Such an individual is Nietzsche's free spirit, playing naively beyond good and evil.

> Another ideal runs ahead of us, a strange, tempting, dangerous ideal to which we should not wish to persuade anybody because we do not readily concede *the right to it* to anonyme: the ideal of a spirit who plays naively – that is, not deliberately, but from overflowing power and abundance – with all that which hitherto called holy, good, untouchable, divine; for whom those supreme things that the people naturally accept as their value standards, signify danger, decay, debasement, or at least recreation, blindness, and temporary self-oblivion; the ideal of a human, superhuman well-being and benevolence that will often appear *inhuman* – for example, when it confronts all earthly seriousness so far, all solemnity in gesture, word, tone, eye, morality, and task so far, as if it were their most incarnate and involuntary parody – and in spite of all this, it is perhaps only with him that *great seriousness* really begins, that the real question mark is posed for the first time, that the destiny of the soul changes, the hand moves forward, the tragedy *begins*.[58]

58 *Ibid.*, pp. 318–19 = *ibid.*, V. § 382, p. 347.