

THE TRUTH OF EXTINCTION: NIETZSCHE'S FABLE



Once upon a time, in some out of the way corner of that universe which is dispersed into numberless twinkling solar systems, there was a star upon which clever beasts invented knowing. That was the most arrogant and mendacious minute of 'world history', but nevertheless, it was only a minute.

After nature had drawn a few breaths, the star cooled and congealed, and the clever beasts had to die. – One might invent such a fable, and yet he still would not have adequately illustrated how miserable, how shadowy and transient, how aimless and arbitrary the human intellect looks within nature. There were eternities during which it

*did not exist. And when it is all over with the human
intellect, nothing will have happened.*

(Nietzsche)

*Let us guard against saying death is the opposite of
life; the living creature is simply a kind of dead creature,
and a very rare kind.*

(Nietzsche)

Nothing will have happened: Nietzsche's 'fable' perfectly distils nihilism's most disquieting suggestion: that from the original emergence of organic sentience to the ultimate extinction of human sapience 'nothing will have happened'. Neither knowing nor feeling, neither living nor dying, amounts to a difference that makes a difference – 'becoming aims at *nothing* and achieves *nothing*'. Yet Nietzsche's entire philosophy is dedicated to overcoming this nihilistic conjecture. It is nihilism understood as the triumph of indeterminate negation, as assertion of the ultimate indifference or convertibility of being and becoming, truth and lie, reality and appearance, that Nietzsche seeks to vanquish by affirming the coincidence of being (identity) and becoming (difference) in a gesture that would simultaneously overthrow both their metaphysical distinction and their nihilistic indistinction.

The instrument of this overturning and the focus of this affirmation are provided by the hypothesis of eternal recurrence, Nietzsche's 'thought of thoughts', which is poised at that 'mid-point'⁵ of (Western) history marking not only the culmination of European nihilism, but also the possibility of

its overcoming.

According to Nietzsche, nihilism reaches its apogee in the pivotal moment when truth, hitherto the supreme value, turns against itself – for it is ‘truthfulness’ itself that calls the value of ‘truth’ into question, thereby subverting all known and knowable values, specifically the valuing of reality over appearance and knowledge over life.

But truth, the venerable guarantor of value, is also the patron of belief, since for Nietzsche every form of belief is a ‘holding-something-true’.

Consequently, the self-undermining of truth calls the very possibility of belief into question: ‘The most extreme form of nihilism would be the view that every belief, every holding-something-true is necessarily false because there is no *true world*’ (§15). Yet as Nietzsche recognized, the collapse of belief in the true world also entails the dissolution of belief in the apparent world, since the latter was defined in contradistinction to the former.

Disbelief in any reality beyond appearance cannot be converted into belief in the reality of appearance. Since the collapse of the reality–appearance distinction undermines the intrinsic connection between belief and truth, it is not something that can be straightforwardly endorsed or ‘believed in’. Thus nihilism appears to undermine itself because it is incompatible with any belief – it seems that it cannot be believed in, for if nothing is true, then neither is the claim that ‘nothing is true’. As a self-proclaimed ‘perfect

nihilist', Nietzsche refuses to retreat from this aporia and insists that it must be traversed, for nihilism can only be overcome from within. How then are we to think the apparently unthinkable thought that nothing is true, which, for Nietzsche, looms at the nadir of nihilism, yet also harbours the key to its overcoming?

For Nietzsche, this aporia of nihilism is simultaneously crystallized and dissolved in the thought of eternal recurrence.¹⁰ The thought of recurrence is at once the ultimate nihilistic conjecture – 'existence as it is, without meaning or aim, yet recurring inevitably without any finale of nothingness' – and what vanquishes nihilism by turning momentary transience into an object of unconditional affirmation and thereby into a locus of absolute worth:

Becoming must be explained without recourse to final intentions;

becoming must appear justified at every moment (or incapable of

being evaluated, which comes to the same thing); the present must

not be justified by reference to the future, nor the past by reference

to the present. [...] Becoming is of equivalent value at every moment;

the sum of its values always remains the same; in other words, it has

no value at all, for anything against which to measure it, and in relation

to which the word 'value' would have meaning, is lacking. The total value of the world cannot be evaluated [...]

Accordingly, the affirmation of recurrence coincides with the *transvaluation* of all existing values. Transvaluation should not be understood as an operation of inversion, the substitution of the lowest and least valued for the highest and most valued and vice versa. Rather, as Deleuze points out in his ingenious (although controversial) *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, transvaluation points to a fundamental *qualitative* transformation in the will to power – the 'differential genetic element' which produces values.

Since all known (and knowable) values consecrated by Judeo-Christian culture are a function of those reactive forces animated by the negative will to nothingness, whose evaluations are governed by the norm of truth, the affirmation of eternal recurrence is at once the annihilation of all known values and the creation of unknown values. It exterminates all known values because it is the assertion of absolute eternal indifference, without even a 'finale of nothingness' to punctuate the sequence or to distinguish between beginning and end. In this regard, eternal recurrence is a 'demonic' hypothesis precisely insofar as it entails the evacuation of all meaning and purpose from existence, and hence the recognition of its ultimate valuelessness.

Yet at the same time it also marks the discovery of a previously inconceivable kind of value because it asserts the absolute, invaluable worth of every moment of existence as

such – it is no longer possible to separate one moment from another or to subordinate the value of the vanishing present to that of a cherished past or longed-for future. The transitoriness of the instant which was considered worthless in the old mode of valuation, where becoming was deemed deficient with regard to the transcendent value of eternal being, becomes the focus of ultimate worth in the new one – transcendence is revoked and with it the possibility of appraising the worth or worthlessness of existence from some external vantage point.

Accordingly, nihilism is overcome through a transvaluation whereby the pointlessness of becoming is embraced beyond its opposition to the supposed purposefulness of true being – aimlessness is affirmed in and for itself, without appeal to extrinsic justification. Thus the affirmation of eternal recurrence marks the coincidence of ‘midday and midnight’ 14: it is at once the apex of affirmativeness – the eternalization of transience – and the nadir of negativity – the negation of all purposefulness.

Yet as Deleuze and Heidegger both underline, despite their otherwise incompatible interpretations of Nietzsche, this is a conjunction of opposites which refuses the conciliatory mediation of dialectical negativity: rather, it affirms the immediate, irreconcilable coincidence of absolute value and valuelessness, affirmation and negation, immanence and transcendence.

Moreover, this discordant conjunction of opposites finds expression in the antinomy inherent in the attempt to believe

in recurrence, or 'hold-it-as-true'. For the assertion of recurrence claims that the world is nothing but ceaseless becoming, without rest or fixity, and hence that there is no cognizable being underlying becoming, no final truth upon which belief could find a secure footing. Since Nietzsche identifies truth with permanence, and permanence with being, it follows for him that to believe that the world is nothing but becoming, without ever becoming something, is to believe that there is no truth and therefore to 'hold-it-as-true' that nothing is true. It is in fact a contradictory belief, one that cancels itself out, and as such is equivalent to the *unbelief* which refuses to hold anything as true.

This is why the thought of eternal recurrence is an expression of what Nietzsche himself calls 'the most extreme form of nihilism'. Belief in eternal recurrence provides the definitive expression of the nihilistic belief that nothing is true; more precisely, it is the only way of holding it- as-true that nothing is true. The paradoxical structure of this belief in the impossibility of belief betrays a fault-line in the folk-psychological construal of rationality; one which already prefigures the paradox of eliminativism we encountered in Chapter 1.

We saw there how the apparent contradiction inherent in the 'belief' that there are no beliefs vanishes once it is understood that belief is neither the substrate nor the vehicle of this assertion. Moreover, it is precisely insofar as the critique of FP introduces a reality–appearance distinction into the phenomenal.

