

# THE TRUTH OF EXTINCTION: THE DISCIPLINE OF SUFFERING



This fundamental deficit between our susceptibility to pleasure and our vulnerability to pain vitiates the attempt to commensurate them.

Indeed, the assumption that humans possess a limitless sensitivity to physical pleasure, or an inexhaustible capacity for psychological enjoyment, is an unfounded spiritualist conceit. In this regard, Nietzsche's insistence that 'joy is deeper than heart's agony 331) implies that in affirming the recurrence of any moment of joy, the finite human organism transcends its own determinate psychophysical constitution.

Thus, the affirmation of recurrence is the moment when finite lunar joy eclipses boundless solar pain. Yet Nietzsche provides no explanation of what makes this transcendence possible, other than saying that it is a function of some sort of 'strength' and/or 'power', while leaving the source of this 'strength' or 'power' completely indeterminate, apart from

attributing it to an inherent 'superiority' in the character of the will.

But given that the capacity for withstanding and surmounting pain is part of Nietzsche's definition of 'superiority of will' – a 'will' whose psychophysical basis remains wholly indeterminate – it is difficult to see how this superiority, which is cashed out in terms of wholly traditional virtues such as fortitude, resilience, and resourcefulness, differs from the venerable definition of *spiritual* superiority: 'The discipline of suffering, of *great* suffering – you do not know that it is *this* discipline alone which has created every elevation of mankind hitherto?' ( §225).

This is simply to endorse, rather than undermine, the spiritualization of suffering; indeed it is difficult to see how it differs from familiar Judaeo-Christian paeans to the spiritually edifying virtues of suffering. Either one ascribes a redemptive function to suffering itself, as does Christian dolorism, or one reintroduces a spiritual economy of means and ends, where the experience of woe is compensated for by some past remembrance or future expectation of bliss. Neither option can be reconciled with the stated aim of Nietzsche's transvaluation, which was to overthrow the Judaeo-Christian register of evaluation altogether.

Moreover, to insist that the human organism is always capable of transcending suffering in principle, even if it does not do so in fact, is to stipulate an ethical norm which implicitly assumes the 'soul-superstition' according to which humans have been endowed with an infinite reservoir of spiritual energy which furnishes them with an inexhaustible capacity for physical resilience. Ultimately, it is difficult to divorce

the positive evaluation of suffering from the claim that suffering *means* something, in accordance with the strictures which the manifest image imposes upon our understanding of meaning.

But to invest suffering with the varieties of 'meaning' concomitant with the manifest image is to automatically reinscribe woe into a spiritual calculus which subordinates present suffering to some recollected or longed-for happiness. By way of contrast, to acknowledge the meaninglessness of suffering is already to challenge the authority of the manifest image, since it is precisely its senselessness that renders woe resistant to redemptive valuation.

Once the senselessness of suffering has been acknowledged, it becomes more apposite to insist that 'woe is deeper than heart's ecstasy'. This of course would be contrary to the explicitly stated goal of Nietzsche's transvaluation, viz., that suffering no longer be counted as an objection to life. Nevertheless, unlike its affirmative antithesis, to which, as we shall see below, Nietzsche attributes a redemptive function vis-à-vis suffering, it is precisely the refusal to affirm or redeem woe that challenges the authority of the manifest image.

The second difficulty in Nietzsche's attempted transvaluation of joy and woe follows on from the first. For whether woe is eclipsed by joy, or joy outweighed by woe, the question remains: whose joy; whose woe – mine or others? Construed as a test designed to effect the selection between noble and ignoble varieties of individual will, the hypothesis of eternal recurrence is fatally underdetermined. If the selection is confined to the individual level, then it has to be

acknowledged that any able-bodied, materially privileged epicure who has successfully maximized pleasure over displeasure in his or her existence will be eager to embrace eternal recurrence.

Even the 'last man', whose 'miserable ease' ensures the preponderance of pleasure over displeasure in existence, might prove as likely to opt for eternal recurrence as the overman, whose affirmation of the entwinement of joy and woe is ostensibly an act of self-overcoming.

Nietzsche seems not to have envisaged the possibility that the noble individual might not be the only one capable of welcoming the 'demonic' hypothesis of recurrence; he did not anticipate its potential appeal to the bovine hedonist, whose coarseness effectively inures him or her to the demonic aspect of the thought.

Accordingly, the ethical-psychological interpretation of recurrence as selective hypothesis is only viable if it is the individual's acceptance of his or her own allotment of suffering that the affirmation of recurrence invites, rather than the suffering of others – otherwise sadists and sociopaths would be as eager to embrace it as the noble types supposedly envisaged by Nietzsche. Yet even if we specify that only the individual is qualified to affirm his or her own suffering, ambiguity persists.

For who is to say what proportion of joy and woe affirmed in an individual life constitutes the appropriate measure of

magnanimity and courage required in order to distinguish the noble from the ignoble?

How much suffering, and of what kind, should an individual be capable of enduring, without rancour or resentment, in order to qualify as courageous, rather than merely hardened? How much joy should an individual be capable of experiencing, and under what circumstances, for his or her delight in existence to be deemed a sign of spiritual munificence, rather than a symptom of indulgent libertinism?

So long as the selection effected by the thought of recurrence is construed ethically and/or psychologically, and confined to the individual level, then its selectiveness remains vitiated by indeterminacy. Ultimately, the scope of the affirmation required by the thought of recurrence cannot be commensurated with any apportioning of joy and woe concomitant with the realm of individual human existence. For even when construed as a reformulated categorical imperative, as it is by Deleuze – *whatever you will, will it in such a way that you also will its eternal return* – the doctrine of recurrence furnishes no criterion that would allow us to discriminate between the ignoble will of the privileged libertine, whose affirmation of 'all woe' is a symptom of insouciance, and the noble will of the spiritual aristocrat, whose affirmation of 'all woe' is a sign of munificence.

This is why Deleuze and Heidegger are right to insist that the differentiation operated by the affirmation of recurrence is epistemological and ontological, rather than psychological and anthropological. It does not select between noble and ignoble

varieties of human will, but between the willing that is subordinated as a means for the fulfillment of ends, and the willing which abjures the economy of means and ends and has no other object than itself.

The will that wills the recurrence of the instant is the will that wills the recurrence of everything, but in willing the recurrence of everything, the will simply wills itself: '[W]hat does joy not want! It is thirstier, warmer, hungrier, more fearful, more secret than all woe, it wants itself; it bites into itself, the will of the ring nestles within it' (Nietzsche332).

Accordingly if, as Nietzsche claims, 'knowledge in-itself in a world of becoming is impossible' (§617), then the will that evaluates and interprets becoming in the thought of eternal recurrence is no longer evaluating and interpreting under the aegis of truth and knowledge, but rather affirming the intrinsically dissimulatory character of its own *ratio essendi* – the fact that it has no cognizable essence – and thereby creating itself by overcoming its own will to know. In so doing, the quality of the will undergoes a transformation from negative to affirmative – by willing becoming as creativity, the will wills itself and thereby becomes positive. It usurps truth and becomes autonomous or *causa sui*.

Thus the only aspect according to which the will (becoming) is is that of affirmation.

Consequently, for Deleuze's Nietzsche, it is no longer a

matter of affirming what is (in the manner of Zarathustra's braying ass),but rather of creating what is affirmed. Or as Deleuze puts it, it is not being that is affirmed via eternal recurrence, but the affirmation of eternal recurrence that constitutes being.