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## The Death of God and Eternal Return in Nietzsche: Metaphysical and Religious Considerations

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### ABSTRACT

*Nietzsche accuses Christianity of promoting fatalism and proclaims the death of God to obliterate the idea of God from people's minds. He also introduces the doctrine of eternal return as a replacement of the metaphysical world. He claims that the death of God and eternal return entail an affirmation of life which will restore value and meaning to human life. This paper argues that the idea of God is what gives meaning and value to human life. The study employs the method of analysis to expose and examine Nietzsche's concepts. The study finds that people tend to affirm life positively, joyfully, and live authentically not because their life would be repeated eternally, but because they owe their existence to the Supreme Being, the Creator. If one's horrible and tragic life will recur innumerable times, then one is condemned to purposeless, meaningless and endless suffering, thereby leading to fatalistic approach to life which Nietzsche accuses Christianity of engendering. The paper concludes that the idea of God, and not the thought of eternal return, necessitates the acceptance of the horror of human existence, the love of one's fate and a continuous striving for self-actualization.*

**Keywords:** *Nietzsche, death, God, eternal return, Christianity.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Eternal return is a doctrine that every event in the universe will recur innumerable times the same way it has happened previously. The doctrine is not a new idea in the western philosophy, although the concept is ascribed to Nietzsche in the development of western philosophy. It can be traced back to the earliest thinkers in the West, the pre-Socratics like Pythagoras and Empedocles. Pythagoras and Empedocles hold that the features of the cosmic history would happen again and again the same way they have occurred infinite times in the past. Pythagoras, who believes that the numbers are the ultimate reality, maintains that everything would recur eventually in the self-same numerical order. He explains continual conflict or opposites in things in terms of odd and even numbers in mathematics.

For Empedocles, there are four unchangeable fundamental realities: fire, air, water and earth that make all structures in the world. He explains change as the combination and separation of these unalterable substances. Nothing new comes or can come into being. The existing universe emerges from the aggregation and segregation of the four elements. He explains that changes in the world occasioned by the mixture and separation of the substances are not governed by any purpose, but only by chance and necessity. There is a cycle: when the substances have been thoroughly mixed by Love, Strife gradually sorts them out again. When Strife has separated

them, Love gradually reunites them again. Thus, the primordial sphere of the universe continuously undergoes cycles alternatively under the dominance of the antithetical principles of Love and Discord which break and reconstruct it periodically.

Nietzsche follows these ancient philosophers in maintaining that the world is going through a process of eternal recurrence – an endless process of repetition of the same things in a circle. For him, the idea of being is becoming. Eternal return and the will to power provide the possibility of becoming. He makes reference to Heraclitus' river, a symbol of change and becoming. The eternal return of the same depicts "the sameness and repetition of the motion and beats of waves" (Pfeffer 1965: 290) in Heraclitus' river. Nietzsche introduces the doctrine of eternal return in order to undermine the Christian notion of transcendence and sustain his idea of the death of God. He thinks that in so doing Reality would no longer be explained in terms of supra-sensory and unchangeable world. The metaphysical world would be replaced with the physical world of thoughts and the mankind would be rescued from nihilism created by the death of God. For him, eternal return and the death of God entail an affirmation of life and existence continuously.

However, eternal return of the same suggests that people who are currently experiencing horrible and tragic life will inevitably re-live it endlessly without any purpose. They are therefore condemned to endless suffering. The purpose of this study is to contend that the idea of God, which Nietzsche seeks to obliterate from people's minds, is what makes human life purposeful and meaningful. The paper explores the Nietzsche's concepts of the death of God and eternal recurrence. It thereafter examines both concepts from the metaphysical and religious perspectives.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The method of analysis is used in this study. Strawson (1992:2) explains that analysis is "a kind of breaking down or decomposing of something. So we have the picture of a kind of intellectual taking to pieces of ideas or concepts; the discovering of what elements a concept or idea is composed and how they are related." This method enables the researcher to expose Nietzsche's concepts under discourse and examine them from metaphysical and religious perspectives. The sources of data are both primary and secondary. Data are collected from textbooks and journal articles.

## 3. GOD IS DEAD

For Nietzsche, the decisive event in the change of truth in the modern age is the death of God. In his book, *The Gay Science*, he states:

Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly, "I seek God! I seek God!" As many of those who do not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter. Why did he get lost? , said one. Did he lose his way like a child? , said another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage or emigrated? Thus they yelled and laughed. The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his glances. "Whither is God"

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he cried. "I shall tell you. We have killed him – you and I. All of us are his murderers (Nietzsche, as cited in Heidegger 1977: 59).

This event does not mean the demise of all forms of religious worship in the West but only that the Christian God has ceased to be foundation of reality. This implies that the Christian this God is no longer the fundamental norms of the laws of reality in the West.

Nietzsche sees belief in God as the bedrock of European civilization. The whole of European civilization was based on belief in God as taught by Christianity – a religion which, for him, stifles and destroys man's intellectual development. That God has died means, for Nietzsche, precisely that the very source of metaphysical understanding of reality is no longer existed as God is truth. This means that there is no longer truth at least from the perspective of metaphysical truth. It is the announcement of the fundamental change of truth, the essential aspect under which human beings present themselves in the western historical epoch.

In Nietzsche's thinking, the death of God is primarily a metaphysical event. This event, for him, is equivalent to the collapse of metaphysics itself as that primordial truth whereby the visible things hold their being from the invisible. The term "Christian God" designates the supra-sensory world, for Nietzsche. The realm of the supra-sensory world has been considered since Plato to be the true and genuinely real world (Heidegger 1977: 6).

For Nietzsche, the supra-sensory world is the metaphysical world. The announcement that God is dead means that the supra-sensory world is without power any longer; it bestows no life. For him, western philosophy, which is Platonism, is at an end. He views his own philosophy as a counter-movement to metaphysics and that means, for him, a movement in opposition to Platonism (Heidegger 1977:61). Thus, the death of God is the collapse of the Platonic Christian interpretation of reality. It is the death of metaphysics that is rooted in Platonic Christian tradition in which being is viewed as unchanging and transcendent. The death of God means that the Christian idea of God, "as revealed in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, no longer possesses any validity" (Copleston 2003: 175). The idea of God has loosened its grip on men's minds.

In Nietzsche's view, therefore, with the demise of Platonic Christian God, the metaphysical understanding of human reality crumbles and the possibility of assimilation of human beings to God through faith collapses. What is left now is the natural man with its animalistic tendency. For Nietzsche, the animality relates with the physical, but the rationality relates with the supernatural world. He believes that the dead of God has liberated man from the shackles of divine commands and prohibitions. For him, Christianity, through its 'slave-morality' renders humans weak, coward, resigned and humble. "It either prevents the growth of superior individuals or ruins them, as in the case of Pascal" (Copleston 2003: 404). God is therefore "an enemy of human progress, for He never wanted man to develop (Omeregbe 1993:244).

The idea of God, for him, is hostile to life and so the belief in the Christian God is antithetical to affirmation of life. Copleston (2003:403) sums it up thus:

The death of God and disbelief in all Christian values open the way for man creative energies to develop fully, the Christian God, with his commands and prohibitions, no longer stands in the path; an man's eyes are

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no longer turned towards an unreal supernatural realm, towards the other world rather than towards this world .

The announcement that God is dead is, for Nietzsche, “Good news” to all who love freedom and life. He writes thus:

In fact, we philosophers and ‘free spirits’ feel ourselves irradiated by a new dawn by the report that the old ‘God is dead’, our hearts overflow with gratitude, astonishment, presentiment and expectation. At last the horizon seems open once more (Nietzsche 1887: sec. 343).

However, “if God as the supra-sensory ground and goal of all reality is dead, if the supra-sensory world of the ideas has suffered the loss of its obligatory and above all its vitalizing and upbuilding power, then nothing more remains to which man can cling and by which he can orient himself” (Heidegger 1977:61). The metaphysical world ceases to exist when the very source of metaphysical understanding of reality is dead. This, for Nietzsche, engenders nihilism. In other words, that nothing remains leads to nihilism, a situation where man has nothing to cling to.

The death of God suggests that human existence has lost its meaning. Man’s life is now meaningless and empty. The nothingness and emptiness of human existence, which is formerly filled with faith in God, becomes exposed. For Omeregbe (1991: 171), it implies that “the world horizon has been wiped out, and the foundation has been destroyed. What formerly gave meaning and sense of direction to human existence is no longer there. Men are now left simply with nothing, with emptiness and a meaningless existence.” Therefore, nothingness, emptiness and nihilism of human existence are, for Nietzsche, the corollaries of the death of God.

#### 4. ETERNAL RETURN

Nietzsche popularizes the concept of eternal return of the same which is not new in the western philosophy. For him, it is an ‘abysmal thought’, which the German calls *Gedanke*. The doctrine claims that all aspects of life return infinite times in an identical fashion. The world is endlessly becoming without producing new states of affairs. The world is a cycle that repeats itself infinitely over and over – the same events or situations recur endlessly.

The doctrine of eternal return is the fundamental thought of Zarathustra who is the teacher and advocate of the doctrine. In the Gay Science Nietzsche (1974:6) writes:

The greatest weight? What if some day or night a demon was to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say: This life as you now live it and have 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.

Nietzsche wishes that eternal recurrence is not only believed but loved. He presents his doctrine to propel humans to assess their attitudes towards their present life: whether they love their present life to the extent that they would love to live it again. Nietzsche's concern is the affirmation of life and existence. According to Pfeffer (1965:276), eternal return is to Nietzsche less an idea than an experience, an experience of joy in which the powerful man affirms life in its totality, backward, forward and in all eternity."

In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* Nietzsche presents eternal recurrence in terms of the event of the moment (*Augenblick*) which would be experienced as the same over and over again. It entails a dynamic repetition of the cycle that unites two opposites' paths. In the light of this he writes:

O Zarathustra, far indeed have you thrown the stone, but it will fall back on yourself. Then the dwarf fell... Behold this gateway dwarf! I continued. It has two faces. Two paths meet here; no one has yet followed either to its end. This long lane stretches back for an eternity. And the long lane out there, that is another eternity. They contradict each other, these paths... and it is here at this gateway that they come together. The name of the gateway is inscribed above: 'Moment'.... 'All that is straight lies, the dwarf murmured contemptuously. All truth is crooked; time itself is a circle (Nietzsche 1966:198-200).

Zarathustra therefore teaches eternal return as a cycle of opposites which are blended into a new unity. It is a Nietzsche's attempt to "unite myth and philosophy through the transformation of an originally Romantic mythological idea into its opposite, and adoption of a symbolic and 'mythic' style of expression" (Yelle 2000: 175).

Nietzsche views eternal return not as a truth in the traditional sense but as a myth which drives home a message. It is myth designed to save mankind from nihilism which the death of God engenders. In his book, *The Birth of tragedy*, myth is conceived of as an Art (*Kunst*) at the level of thought. Every culture loses its power of creativity without myth. Hence, he asserts: "Myth alone saves all the powers of imagination and of the Apollonian dream from their aimless wanderings" (Nietzsche 1967:135). The truth of eternal return is the self-inwardness of the world. It is not true in the sense of the western notion of truth as the correspondence of the mind with reality. It is concerned with the creativity of truth, rather than the objectivity of truth. In other words, truth in this case is seen as creativity.

The myth of eternal return is expressed as becoming whose appearance recurs in the same way. What returns in eternal return is time which is moved by the will to power. Nietzsche understands time in terms of the moment which he conceives as an instant which does not lie outside the time. The moment is an aspect of time in which succession appears unchanging. Time as a whole is conceived as an eternal return; it has nothing to do with the present, past or future. The thought of eternal return implies an eternal return of the will to power which is an affirmation of the world continuously. In this way, we are always moving in a cycle of eternal return. For Nietzsche, there is nothing like being; the idea of being is becoming. Being/Reality is

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an illusion, for him. Ultimately, as an essential feature of the eternal return, the will to power is grounded in becoming. The eternal return and the will to power share in common the element of becoming.

On the whole, the doctrine of eternal recurrence is Nietzsche's effort to replace the metaphysical world with the physical world of thoughts. It expresses Nietzsche's resolute will to 'this-worldliness' (*Diesseitigkeit*). Eternal return is the affirmation of the movement towards the Superman; it is the affirmation of the active force of the overcoming man, the Over man. Both eternal return and the death of god entail affirmation of life and the existence of this world to the exclusion of another world. For Nietzsche, they are paths to Amor fati – love of fate.

## 5. METAPHYSICAL AND RELIGIOUS CONSIDERATIONS

Nietzsche announces that God – the metaphysical understanding of reality – is dead to make the idea of God loosen its grip on the minds of human beings. He thinks that the announcement will obliterate the metaphysical world, which, for him, the concept of God designates. Nihilism therefore ensues from the event of death of God as man has nothing to cling to. However, one thing that binds virtually all religions of the world together is the belief God as the Supreme Being, the Creator. For example, Islamic religion acknowledges God (Allah) as the Creator, the Source of Life. The Koran is seen as the revealed message of God from whom all good things come.

Hinduism has a belief in God which can be thought of as a Supreme Soul, a Universal Soul. For the religion, the ultimate goal of human life is to get closer to God, to realize one's relationship with God. African Traditional Religion (ATR) believes in the existence of the Supreme Being – the Absolute Controller of the universe. He is regarded in Africa as a High God, a Withdrawn and Transcendent God. Today, there are lots of Buddhists who believe in God as the First Cause, though the teachings of the Buddhists are centred on human suffering and other conditions and never say anything about the God of Christians. The fact is that man is a being towards God. Mankind has a Source, God, from which it comes and to which it will return, regardless of whether man professes any religion or not. The recognition of God as the foundation and goal of reality is therefore not an exclusive preserve of Christianity.

Secondly, Man is being-for-itself, a conscious being who has a gap, an emptiness in his being. He is essentially in need of completion and always strives to overcome this emptiness of which he is constituted. But this is only possible by clinging to being-in-itself characterised by completeness, fullness. It is the being-in-itself that can fulfil that which being-for-itself typically lacks. Man actualizes his self-transcendence in liaison with the Supreme Being who is complete in himself. Thus, human beings will continue to have recourse to their Creator in dealing with the vicissitudes of their life. The idea of God gives meaning and purpose to human life. Given that God is invisible; the metaphysical world to which the idea of God refers would never sink into oblivion.

Again, Nietzsche claims that Christianity render man resigned to his present situations which prevents him from developing his potentialities freely. But Christianity helps human to live authentically and achieve their full potential through its noble values of perseverance and optimism. In contemporary societies today, for instance, there is an alarming increase in suicide

borne out of frustration. The role of Christianity in stemming this wave of suicide cannot be overemphasized. There are many Christians today who are passing through a great deal of misfortunes and miseries that could plunge them into suicide. But the Bible teachings continue to offer hope to Christians. They have learnt to struggle against the odds with perseverance and hope, knowing full well that the odds could be overcome, for no condition is permanent.

For instance, the Bible states that “he who endures to the end will be saved” (Matthew 24:13, 10:2; Mark 13:13, Luke 21:19). In another passage, the Bible charges us to “rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us...” (Roman 5: 3-5). Thus, Christianity does not make its adherents approach their unpleasant conditions with resignation, but rather spurs them to take the bull by the horns and strive to come through their untold misery and hardship. The Christian slogan: ‘No cross, no crown’ inspires Christians to show resilience in distress and continue to strive hard for self-actualization.

Besides, Nietzsche adopts the doctrine of eternal return to replace the metaphysical world with its principles and to ensure endless affirmation of life by the Overman. He believes that by virtue of the doctrine, people will have a positive attitude to life, living joyfully and not in despair. In his thinking, the thought of eternal recurrence will propel humans to love their present life and conditions and affirm the world continuously. However, it is implausible to assume that the doctrine will bring about a positive attitude to life generally. The attitude one adopts in the event of one’s life repeating over and over again depends on one’s status quo. Naturally, man is a pleasure seeking and pain avoiding animal. He always desires to avoid pain and maximize pleasure. For instance, the well-to-do who live in opulence will love their present life and conditions and will ever want to re-live the same life endlessly. But people who live in deplorable conditions and are experiencing untold hardships will never desire the repetition of the same condition infinitely.

What is more, the thought of eternal return tends to engender a mood of fatalism or resignation. People may feel that some people are chosen to succeed and achieve greatness, while others are condemned to a life of suffering and misery. But is there any justification for choosing some people for success, while others for failure? What have those who are destined for success done to deserve their being chosen? And what have those who are doomed to failure done to deserve their being chosen? Indeed, many people have been persistently making some efforts in life without success, yet they remain optimistic. They keep striving that their ill fortune may swing in their favour; that things may work in their favour some day.

However, with the thought of eternal return, peoples’ hopes are dashed. A mood of despair sets in. The courage and resilience to maintain a sustained effort, especially when the chips are down, begin to wane. Life becomes meaningless, purposeless and humdrum. One is therefore preoccupied with the thought of eternal recurrence and any attempt to make further efforts is seen as an exercise in futility. Events of one’s life will inevitably reoccur innumerable times and there is nothing one can do about the recurrence; it is beyond one’s control. It is fated to happen. One cannot but resign to it. The implication of this is that humans are no longer responsible for their thoughts, actions and decisions. Everything is necessarily determined by the external forces of eternal return operating in the world.

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## 6. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

We have stated that the death of God and eternal return are employed by Nietzsche to eliminate all forms of metaphysical and absolute values which, for him, prevent the affirmation of life and will to power that provide the possibility of becoming. He maintains that human existence has become goalless in the event of God's death, but by the thought of eternal return humanity obtains a goal again beyond itself without any recourse to metaphysical world. The eternal return, for Nietzsche rescues mankind from nihilism and ensures that human beings do not subscribe again to the idea of God which designates the supra-sensory world. This metaphysical world, for him, bestows no life. The thought of eternal return implies the eternal return of the will to power which is an affirmation of the world continuously. With the eternal return, the nihilism, which the death of God ushers in, is overcome by the superman that wills to power. In these ways, Nietzsche thinks that his eternal recurrence would restore meaning and value to life.

On a positive note, Nietzsche wants humans to examine their present life and assess the degree of their positive attitudes towards life. The thought of eternal return helps to determine how people feel and will react to their present life, whether they are living in an affirming way or not. To desire the return of one's present life infinitely is to affirm life, to have a 'yes-saying' attitude to life. But not to want the infinite repetition of one's own life is to have a no-saying attitude to life. So, basically, when one loves eternal recurrence, one is affirming what one has already affirmed, for one affirms life, loves it completely when one desires its return. The thought of eternal return is therefore a litmus test of one's attitude to life. The doctrine poses the ultimate question of whether we wish to experience the life we live now again and again: Do I wish that the totality of what I do and experience presently re-occur in an infinite number of times? Do I want to become the person that I am? Through his doctrine of eternal return Nietzsche provides us with a means to discover how we can test our desire to live and the manner in which this testing and recognition might be practised" (Pearson 2005:10). What actually matters is not whether eternal return is actually true, whether one's life will actually return, but that thinking about the possibility of eternal return propels one to develop a positive attitude towards one's life – to love every details of one's life. It encourages authentic living since everybody has their life to live and so life must be faced squarely.

However, it remains to be seen whether mankind will love its fate in the midst of meaningless suffering and the absurdity of life which the eternal return will plunge humanity into. This is because the eternal return implies that "suffering just happens, it repeats eternally, it is fated. There is no plan, no purpose, no reason for it" (Kain 2007:59). If human suffering is meaningless, then life is not worth living. Hence, there is no justification whatsoever for one to continue to affirm one's present life and maintain a positive attitude to life. Even the Nietzsche's Superman would be denied of his freedom to innovate, discover and create things for his self realization when his thoughts, actions and decisions are caused, influenced and controlled by forces of external recurrence. In other words, the Overman cannot will freely when he cannot take responsibilities for his thoughts, actions and decisions geared towards the actualization of his potentialities. The will to power is thus killed when the individual cannot take credit or blame for his actions.



Nietzsche claims that the eternal recurrence provides the basis for saying 'yes' to life as it is and not giving up to despair. However, it seems implausible to assert that all humans will affirm and embrace life fraught with hardness, darkness and horror, by adopting 'yes-saying' attitude to life, if one's life will eternally repeat itself. The fact is that people would like their present life to be repeated over again because they love it and consider it valuable. However, an infinite repetition of the present life is unwarranted if one does not consider one's present life valuable. While those who are fortunate and highly successful in life will love the repetition of their present life for eternity, unfortunate people would never desire the eternal return of the same. Man naturally avoids pains and seeks pleasure in all his actions. Thus, with the thought of infinite re-occurrence of one's unpleasant life, one tends to surrender to despair, boredom, ennui and restlessness due to one's unending, inevitable and purposeless suffering. The doctrine of eternal return is deterministic and so encourages the fatalism of human existence. Nietzsche is therefore guilty of fatalism he accuses Christianity of promoting.

In conclusion, the announcement of death of God and the doctrine of eternal return cannot lead to meaningful and purposeful life Nietzsche is anticipating. The horror of human existence has meaning and value not because of the thought of eternal recurrence, but because the universe is ordered and planned; it is not purposeless. God is the Architect of the universe and Source of life. Humanity owes their existence to this First Cause and continues to cling to Him for self-realization. It is this idea of God that informs the acceptance of suffering by Christianity and some other religions as a means of achieving human perfection and happiness. Contrary to Nietzsche's claim that Christianity promotes fatalism, Christian religion, through its noble values of perseverance and optimism, continues to instil in its adherents the spirit of resilience and dogged determination to succeed despite great difficulties. Therefore, the idea of God, and not the thought of eternal return, necessitates the acceptance of the horror of human existence, the love of one's fate and a continuous striving for self-actualization.

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