THE ETERNAL RECURRENCE
BY R. FREDERICK HESTER

My doctrine is: Live so that thou mayest desire to live again—that is thy duty—for in any case thou wilt live again!..."

So spake Nietzsche. Literally, it is a colossal doctrine, and at a first glance no more and no less than the theological immortality. But Nietzsche meant something quite different. He had in mind the "mightiest of all thoughts"—eternal recurrence.

It is strange that this doctrine has rarely been treated with that depth and sympathy to which it is undoubtedly entitled. This negligence is, perhaps, chiefly attributable to the fact that Nietzsche himself failed to elaborate the idea, which, as he conceived it, caused him to "turn pale" with mental perturbation; but the negligence is also partly attributable to an apparently general subordination of the idea, as nothing more than a mere metaphysical hypothesis forever unverifiable upon either empiric or scientific grounds.

The fundamental idea of eternal recurrence, however, was not original with Nietzsche, although his eminence gave it the greatest impetus. Louis Blanqui and Gustave Le Bon almost simultaneously conceived it, essentially if not precisely as did Nietzsche. Le Bon assumed the exactly analogous, equally stupendous, and to date the equally undemonstrable hypothesis of infinite duplications of all existences in space as in time. The idea—more or less embryonic—had also emerged before Nietzsche, Blanqui, or Le Bon.

What is the exact significance of this "mightiest of all thoughts"? Apparently it is not the ultimate horror, the eternal, inescapable imprisonment in space-time as conceived by Nietzsche. The doctrine of eternal recurrence assumes the exact duplication of all forms and qualities of existence an infinite number of times in eternity. Analogously Le Bon's doctrine of infinite duplication—in space as distinct from time—posits the simultaneous, infinite duplication of all possible existences in the spatial universe. In this presentation the terms "eternal recurrence" will embrace both hypotheses.

These doctrines may confuse and dazzle the non-philosophic mind; and whether or not we may "believe" them, we at least must admit the surpassing grandeur of their conception. And when
merged into unity—as our late relativistic concepts render necessary—it may indeed be regarded as the mightiest of all concepts so far attained.

But it need not be so regarded in the strictly Nietzschean sense. On the contrary, a fundamental and vital error in this concept, which will presently be considered, alters the aspect of eternal recurrence very pronouncedly indeed, and renders it either highly attractive or the exact opposite, as determined by the value set upon existence by the person considering the doctrine.

Says Zarathustra:—

The plexus of causes returneth in which I am entwined—it will again create me! I myself pertain to the causes of the eternal return.
I come again with this sun, with this earth, with this eagle, with this serpent—not to a new life or a better life: I come again eternally to this selfsame life, in its greatest and in its smallest, to teach again the eternal recurrence of all things....

And again, in his notes on "Eternal Recurrence," Nietzsche says:—

Ye fancy that ye will have a long rest ere your second birth takes place—but do not deceive yourselves! 'Twixt your last moment of consciousness and the first ray of the dawn of your new life no time will elapse—as a lightning flash will the time go by, even though living creatures think it is millions of years....

True enough—if we grant the continuity of the selfsame consciousness, with memory, in the infinite concatenation of duplicate existences. But this is the vital consideration we need not and in fact cannot grant. Well indeed might Nietzsche have turned pale at the thought if his concept had been correct! For an eternal recurrence of conscious existences—of the selfsame consciousness—in a universe essentially irrational, hostile and more or less disagreeable, with no possibility of escape from the prison of infinity, so to speak—this were indeed the last word in tragedy.

But we may spare ourselves any anxiety. There are no grounds
whatever, intuitive or rational, upon which to base agreement with Nietzsche in this concept. The complete absence of any memory of any previous existence of our consciousness in the infinite chain is an adequate antidote to the startling assumption of Nietzsche; for without memory in the chain every horror, every unpleasantness that might otherwise be connected with it becomes nil. The point of vital importance—which appears to have been overlooked by Nietzsche—is that duplicates of an existence, albeit perfectly exact, if they exist, are not by any means identical with that existence. In space and in time they are as separate and distinct as the most dissimilar existences.

But we may ask, not only whether exact duplication of any existence is scientifically or empirically verifiable, but whether or not it may be regarded as possible. Its impossibility is assumed by some commentors; but, I believe, upon inadequate grounds. In this connection, Nietzsche says:—

If we grant eternal time, we must grant the eternal change of matter....Whatever state this world [and of course all existences in it] could have reached must ere now have, been already attained, and not only once but an infinite number of times....At this moment an infinity has already elapsed, that is to say, every possible evolution must already have taken place. Consequently the present process of evolution must be a repetition, as was also the one before it, as will also be the one which will follow. And so on, forwards and backwards.

In the absence of any evidence of any nature to the contrary, and in view of the essential rationality of this hypothesis, I personally agree with Nietzsche. No matter if the emergence in evolution of any possible existence should require a trillion sextillions of centuries, as we measure time, it must be borne in mind that this period has elapsed an infinite number of times already, and must elapse an infinite number hereafter. This is of course in strict consonance with the hypothesis of infinite time—and there is no legitimate contrary hypothesis.
Thus it is obvious that to comprehend the idea of eternal recurrence at all it is emphatically necessary to bear constantly in mind the meaning of infinity. We are unable to conceive of infinity, but we may easily conceive of its possibility or necessity. To approach a proper conception, let us assume that an exact duplication of a given existence on our planet is possible and actual, but that the nearest exact duplicate exists, say, a sextillion light-years distant: that another duplicate existed a sextillion millenniums ago at a point in space distant from the present location of the given existence a sextillion times the distance just mentioned: assuming even this unnecessarily-extreme sparseness of duplicates, by the same token we assume the infinite duplication of the given existence in both space and time. For we may logically say that there is an infinity of infinities in space and time, in consonance with the idea of eternal recurrence; and the terms I have employed to set forth distances and periods of time are obviously of no greater significance in spatial or temporal infinity than a fraction of an inch or a single instant, respectively.

Here it will no doubt be objected by some members of the relativistic school that, unfortunately for eternal recurrence, there is no infinite spatial or temporal extension—that the universe is "finite but unbounded." What shall we say of this late hypothesis? Personally, I am almost infinitely removed from agreement with the relativists in this idea. I consider it so far beneath eternal recurrence in significance and in rational or intuitive validity as to relegate it to oblivion by comparison. The so-called "analogy" between the experiences of a two-dimensional being on a spherical surface and those of a three-dimensional being on the "surface" (if you please) of space-time, much resorted to by defenders of this hypothesis as evidence—or as an aid to conception—of the "universal finiteness," is mere empty rhetoric, there being not even a remote possibility of an analogy in the case. Those who have due regard for what we may call rational and logical actualities in space-time may do well to leave the distinct mathematicians to their juggleries. As Professor Einstein admits, there may not be any practical means of proving that some mathematical equations are borne out in the spatial universe; and in fact some of the most
sweeping hypotheses of Einstein have not been, and apparently never will be, so borne out.

It seems to be perfectly logical and rational, however, to postulate the infinite duplication of any possible existence on the very simple ground that the original existence itself has emerged in evolution. Can we do otherwise than conclude, with Nietzsche, that the number of states and qualities of existence is necessarily limited, and that, being so, they must be repeated endlessly in the cycles of evolution? Like causes producing like effects; and the number of possible causes being limited, as it appears we are forced to conclude, then their repetition must be taken for granted as a matter of course; and the resultant effects, obviously, are likewise repeated. (That "effects" are also "causes," and vice versa, in macrocosmic concepts, is borne in mind). But even the limited number of possible existences in space-time comprises such a vast variety of states and qualities as to be practically incalculable, and hence must be regarded as virtually equivalent to infinity, but not actually so. In this connection, it may be helpful to remember the millions of combinations possible even to the fifty-two units of a deck of playing-cards, and that the total is no doubt infinitesimal relative to the possible varieties of existence emerging in evolution.

If it could be proved, however, that the states and qualities of existences were not limited, this would not disprove eternal recurrence, inasmuch as infinite duplication would still be possible.

It follows from the foregoing, as an inescapable postulate, if the fundamental idea of eternal recurrence be held valid, that there are also infinite duplications of the gradations of near-duplication. For instance, if there are infinite, exact duplicates of ourselves in space-time, there are also infinite duplicates of beings who are exactly like us in every particular save one—their crania are not exactly the same shape as ours, and so on, ad infinitum! Is this a reductio ad absurdum? By no means. It is a strictly logical and rational development of the idea of eternal recurrence.

If, however, it be contended that of the approximately two billions of humans on earth, no two of them are exactly alike, we may reply that this theory is neither proved nor practically provable: that, further, even if it were proved, this would have little or no sig-
significance in disproving eternal recurrence, since a mere two billion existences is too trivial a number to have much weight when considered in relation to an infinity of numbers.

As a further consideration for those who deny the possibility of such duplication, it is generally recognized that there is even some truth in the old adage that "history repeats itself." It never does so exactly, of course, in our very limited experience of a few thousand years: but if there may be observed essential repetition in such a brief period of time, what shall we say of the possibilities in eternity? Given an unlimited series of historical eras, of any given outstanding features, and exact repetitions must inevitably follow—an infinite number of times. And let it be steadily borne in mind that the periods of time elapsing between such repetitions—no matter how stupendous—are absolutely negligible. There might be no exact repetition in a quadrillion years—no matter; it would follow after another second in eternity—a sextillion centuries.

Once we accept the idea of eternal recurrence, there are some further interesting consequences. One is that the "becoming God" of Bergson, Bernard Shaw, Professor Alexander, and other moderns, must be eliminated from the calendar. Another—and more interesting, perhaps—is that the "running down" universe of Sir James Jeans, et al, is halted.

Taking these hypotheses in order: what is a "becoming God"? He is a consideration intimately bound up with the universe—part and parcel of its evolution: but in a manner that is not very clear, except perhaps in the minds of His advocates. It appears that in their conceptions, this embryonic God is now undergoing a process of evolution somewhat similar to—or identical with—the process being undergone by man. He is not, strictly, a God at this time, but will ultimately attain Godhood. This is not the same idea as Nietzsche's superman, since this evolutionary product would not embody any attribute of the supernatural.

The fatal point in connection with this idea is that if Godhood were possible, it would already have been attained once—or an infinite number of times in the past eternity. And we have no legitimate excuse whatever for the absurd notion that if Godhood had
ever been once attained, it would ever have relinquished its lofty estate—stepped down, as it were, but into impotence and oblivion in order that the stupendous drama might be repeated. Or were all past Gods so puny as to have been forced to such an ignominious fate? Then they could not have enjoyed the common theistic attribute of "omnipotence." It appears that the "becoming God" is but a negligible fancy, announced by those whose conceptions of the universe and its mysterious career through eternity are rather restricted; or, if they have ever considered eternal recurrence, they must either reject it or fail to understand it.

Now, as to the idea held by Jeans and others, that the potential energy of the universe is limited, and that at some remote future date all this energy will have been expended, and that the curtain will then descend upon the universal drama for the rest of eternity—this is similar to the "becoming God" hypothesis in its limited conceptions. Rather tragic—this idea, that the universe is entitled only to one dance, and, finishing it, must sit down in utter exhaustion forever!

Not so, says Nietzsche:

The time in which universal energy works its changes is infinite—that is to say, energy remains eternally the same and eternally active...But it is not able eternally to create new forms, it must repeat itself: that is my conclusion.

And must, in my opinion, be the inescapable conclusion of any strictly logical and rational consideration of the problem. The truth seems to be that Sir James and his confreres are yet more or less befuddled by the idea of supernatural "creation." On that hypothesis, indeed, the universe might ultimately "run down" and expend all of its energy into absolute impotence—provided that its creator, then existent, should ordain such a catastrophe. But, as so frequently is the case, a proper premise at the bottom of this hypothesis is lacking.

However, if Sir James is no gargantuan philosopher, he is at any rate an excellent astronomer; and we may have patience with his philosophy while delighting in his astronomy. And in consider-
ing the Nietzschean aspect of eternal recurrence, we may well re-
member the philosopher's essentially poetic and rhapsodic tempera-
ment, and excuse him for his error. Certainly this error need not
be attributed in any degree to psychopathic degeneration, as by
certain of Nietzsche's biased and more or less superficial critics:
the idea first occurred to him long before the production of *Thus
Spake Zarathustra*, and in a period of his keenest perspicacity.

Finally, whatever the doctrine of eternal recurrence may mean
to us, and whether or not it may affect our practical lives in any
respect—and it need not do so, except so far as it may broaden our
views of the universe in which we exist—we may rest assured that
it is no trivial metaphysical air-castle, and that, indeed, it is a far
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