

The Godless Societies of  
Friedrich Nietzsche, and the  
Epicurean Philosophers and Their  
Consequences Upon The Good Life

Sam Frazier

Honors Thesis

3 - 31 - 97

When one first encounters their works, the Epicurean philosophers and Friedrich Nietzsche appear to have a great deal in common. Their physics and conception of the universe seem quite similar and both reach the conclusion that this world, our world, is all that man has. There is no possibility, then, of an afterlife of any sort. Accordingly, both philosophies make enemies of religion. Having only this one world, both schools of thought consider man free from restraint and able to live truly and fully in this world. The issue then becomes what one ought to do, and thus an ethics is formed out of a concern for this world. Such is the good life of each philosophy, a consideration of what one can do and what one ought to do. What is striking is that Nietzsche and the Epicureans espouse lives that are nearly exact opposites. The Epicureans believe in a simple, uncomplicated, and peaceful life. Nietzsche, on the other hand, extols the virtue of a risk-taking and adventurous life. In my analysis of these philosophies I hope to show: 1) that an ethical system can be formed out of a godless environment, 2) how each of these two philosophies achieves this, 3) how such divergent prescriptions can come from a seemingly common starting point, and 4) which philosophy's good life has a greater claim to truth.

Before I begin my inquiry, it is first important to state who exactly are our subjects. In discussing the Epicureans, I

will restrict myself to the works of Epicurus and Lucretius. They are, after all, its two most important figures. Though there is tremendous adherence to the principle tenets of this philosophy throughout the centuries of its existence,<sup>1</sup> we are wise to keep to its founder and the writer of its most complete descriptive exposition. With Nietzsche, we are faced with many tasks in understanding his philosophy. He was a prolific writer, and unlike his Epicurean counterparts, his message is not always clear and consistent. To combat this problem, greater weight is given to works and passages which I interpret as more primary or central to his thinking, and secondary sources are used to aid in this effort. In this way, I hope that a clearer conception of the Epicureans' and Nietzsche's philosophy is provided.

#### **A Godless Ethical System**

Both of these philosophies attempt to make a system of ethics out of a world lacking in divine influence or concern for divine consequences. Such attempts are contrary to the religious systems based on these criteria, with Christianity and the ancient Greek religious cults as paradigm examples. The mode of such thinking is that there is a divine presence in the world, man has a purpose in his relation to it, and man has consequences

---

<sup>1</sup> Richard W. Hible, Happiness Through Tranquillity: The School of Epicurus (London: University Press of America, Inc., 1984), ix.

for his life in an afterlife according to his relations with the divine. If man behaves well in this world he will be rewarded in the next, if not then he will be punished. The religious and moral life here equals the ethical life. Nietzsche and the Epicureans reject this thinking and its other-worldly concerns. Instead, they place man in this world and relate what he ought to do in it. As stated, they create, each in their own way, an ethical system with respect only to this world. Both Nietzsche and the Epicurean philosophers were aware that in smashing these long-held beliefs man might fall into despair. Such reasoning, in their view, constitutes a misunderstanding of their philosophy. The goal of both philosophies is to free man from these otherworldly and divine worries. These concerns, as both philosophies will show, are false and hinder life. Therefore, instead of a feeling of loss for this aspect of his life, man should feel enhanced and exhilarated by gaining freedom in this world. Understood this way, both philosophies attempt to give a value to this life despite the loss of divine figures and afterlives.

In comparing the Epicurean philosophers' and Nietzsche's physics or conception of the universe, it is revealed that the two share many concepts. Yet, it also becomes apparent that they do not start from a common point, but arrive at one for a short

period of time. The analogy could be made to two paths which start near each other, intersect, but then lead off in strikingly different directions. To demonstrate this assertion, a description of the Epicurean physics leading up to the point of intersection should first be given. Afterwards, a similar analysis of Nietzsche will be provided.

### The Epicurean Path To Intersection

The Epicureans claimed that all that there is in existence is void, or emptiness, and minute particles.<sup>2</sup> Referred to as primordia, these particles are extremely small,<sup>3</sup> infinite in number,<sup>4</sup> and are eternal and indivisible.<sup>5</sup> The primordia are the building blocks of things and are able to combine and form all that is in existence.<sup>6</sup> This is accomplished because primordia move of their own accord in random swerves<sup>7</sup> and are always in motion. As Epicurus writes, "Primary particles are in continual motion all through eternity."<sup>8</sup> The moving primordia, varying in

---

<sup>2</sup> Lucretius, De Rerum Natura, Book I lines 430- 448. This and all other direct quotations of Epicurus and Lucretius are taken from the John Gaskin translation listed in the Works Cited. Book, line, and section are provided to texts which include them. In all other cases the arabic numerals refer to page numbers in Gaskin.

<sup>3</sup> Epicurus, "Letter to Herodotus," 19.

<sup>4</sup> De Rerum Natura, Book I lines 1008- 20.

<sup>5</sup> De Rerum Natura, Book I lines 483- 502.

<sup>6</sup> De Rerum Natura, Book I lines 449- 58.

<sup>7</sup> De Rerum Natura, Book II lines 184- 250.

<sup>8</sup> Epicurus, "Letter to Herodotus," 15.

shape and size,<sup>9</sup> run into each other and become linked for a time. In this way a body is formed.<sup>10</sup> Void provides space and relative density.<sup>11</sup> However, since the primordia are always in motion, all unions of primordia will break up in time and the individual primordia will be free to combine again.<sup>12</sup>

The human body is likewise subject to all these rules, the Epicureans claim. All beings with sensation have this quality because of primordia grouped in the right manner,<sup>13</sup> and all these beings themselves are also simply right ordered primordia.<sup>14</sup> Further, because our whole being is composed of primordia, our mind, body, that which works in accordance with these, and anything which may resemble a soul, must also be right ordered primordia. Thus, when the primordia's union grows weak with old age and breaks apart, death occurs. All that is us is lost as our primordia go free. This happens because we are the union of body, mind, and that which works throughout the body with the mind, which Epicurus refers to as anima. Lucretius draws the conclusion that our mind and anima are lost with death because these parts of us are linked to the body. As evidence of this

---

<sup>9</sup> De Rerum Natura, Book II lines 333- 41.

<sup>10</sup> De Rerum Natura, Book I lines 483- 502.

<sup>11</sup> De Rerum Natura, Book I lines 511- 19.

<sup>12</sup> De Rerum Natura, Book I lines 215- 24.

<sup>13</sup> De Rerum Natura, Book II lines 865- 930.

<sup>14</sup> De Rerum Natura, Book II lines 931- 43.

claim, Lucretius cites the mind and body's mutual development, susceptibility to outside stimuli, and eventual decay.<sup>15</sup>

Lucretius provides many other proofs and examples to add weight to this theory regarding human identity and death, but this is the core of his argument.

Understood this way, death is nothing to be feared. Death cannot be a painful state because it is the loss of the possibility of sensation that our primordia provided. As Epicurus writes, "Death is nothing to us; for the body, when it has been resolved into its elements, has no feeling, and that which has no feeling is nothing to us."<sup>16</sup> We should then not imagine ourselves in death as we are in life and should also abolish thoughts of eternal punishments and damnation as is Sisyphus's fate.<sup>17</sup> In this way, the Epicureans hope they have banished the human fears of death and an afterlife by showing their erroneous foundation.

The Epicureans have placed us in a world where things are formed, blossom, come to maturity, wither, and die as the primordia break their union and are set free. Likewise, even we must die so that others can live. In a message to the elderly reluctant to die, Lucretius writes, "Yet now give up all these things so ill-fitted for your years, and with calm mind, come,

---

<sup>15</sup> De Rerum Natura, Book III lines 445- 525.

<sup>16</sup> Epicurus, "Principle Doctrines" # 2

<sup>17</sup> De Rerum Natura, Book II lines 870- 93.

yield them to your sons; for so you must."<sup>18</sup> He writes further:

There must needs be matter that generations to come may grow; yet all of them too will follow you when they have had their fill of life. Yes, just as you, these generations have passed away before, and will pass away again.<sup>19</sup>

This is the nature of the universe and it, like the individual primordia, is everlasting and continuous.<sup>20</sup>

A consequence of these atomic laws is that there must exist other worlds much like our own. The same conditions which produced us and our world must, in all likelihood, be present elsewhere in the universe. In fact, they must exist not merely once, but many times over. Epicurus explains:

Moreover, there is an infinite number of worlds, some like this world, others unlike it. For the fundamental particles being infinite in number, as has been proved, are borne ever farther in their course. For the particles out of which a world might arise, or by which a world might be formed, have not all been expended on one world or a finite number of worlds, whether like or unlike this one. Hence there will be nothing to hinder an infinity of worlds.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, the moon, the planets, the oceans, and everything which we see are not unique but exist in countless numbers.<sup>22</sup> This is

---

<sup>18</sup> De Rerum Natura, Book III lines 960- 62.

<sup>19</sup> De Rerum Natura, Book III lines 967- 70.

<sup>20</sup> De Rerum Natura, Book I lines 951- 67.

<sup>21</sup> Epicurus, "Letter to Herodotus," 15- 16.

<sup>22</sup> Elizabeth Asmis, Epicurus' Scientific Method (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 311.



known as the Epicurean notion of the infinity of worlds.

Another consequence of their conception of the universe is that of a repetition of all things in time. Given the infinite nature of time, the Epicureans believe that all things which have broken into their individual primordia will reform in exactly the same way. Everything, ourselves included, will appear again in exactly the same form as they are now. Lucretius writes:

For when you look back over all the lapse of immeasurable time that now is gone, and think how manifold are the motions of matter, you could easily believe this too, that these same seeds, whereof we now are made, have been placed in the same order as they are now;<sup>23</sup>

We have this result because the Epicureans believe that whatever can happen in nature inevitably will happen.<sup>24</sup> Epicurus writes on this subject, "Nothing new happens in the universe, if you consider the infinite past."<sup>25</sup> Repetition is then a fact of the universe.

The Epicureans further speculate that everything can be accounted for by a natural explanation, and they use the theory of primordia as the first step in this process. All events from man's origin and development,<sup>26</sup> the weather,<sup>27</sup> celestial

---

<sup>23</sup> De Rerum Natura, Book III lines 854- 58.

<sup>24</sup> Asmis, 311.

<sup>25</sup> Epicurus, "Fragments from Epicurus Quoted in Greek Literature," # 55.

<sup>26</sup> De Rerum Natura, Book V lines 772- 1010.

<sup>27</sup> De Rerum Natura, Book VI lines 96- 534.

movements,<sup>28</sup> and the universe can be understood in this system.

Lucretius writes in verse:

But Hell's dark regions nowhere do we meet,  
Though now the Earth doth all transparent  
shine; To science works in space beneath our  
feet Reveal their every action and design.  
There settles on my life a joy divine, A  
thrill withal of more than human awe, That,  
guided by that wondrous pow'r of thine, Which  
Nature's every secret movement saw. I view  
the clear expanse of universal Law.<sup>29</sup>

Accordingly, they hold that their science can explain everything in the universe.

Entailed in this belief is the notion that no divine influence is placed in the workings of the universe. The gods both had no need to bother with creating the world, nor were they able to do so if they should have wished.<sup>30</sup> They have neither knowledge nor concern for us.<sup>31</sup> Gods do exist, then, but they do nothing which could ever concern us.<sup>32</sup> Accordingly, we should relinquish our fear of the gods and religion in the same manner in which we learned to dismiss death.

At this moment, the Epicureans likely would entreat us to reflect upon what we have learned. If we recognize the basis of our fears, we are in a position to learn something. If we accept

---

<sup>28</sup> De Rerum Natura, Book V lines 509- 779.

<sup>29</sup> De Rerum Natura, Book III lines 22- 30.

<sup>30</sup> De Rerum Natura, Book V lines 146- 94.

<sup>31</sup> De Rerum Natura, Book V lines 165- 84.

<sup>32</sup> Epicurus, "Letter to Herodotus," 26.

that death, the gods, and religion are of no concern or worry to us, and banish our fears for an afterlife wrought with divine vengeance, we have removed the greatest impediments to life.<sup>33</sup> The center of our focus would be on this world. We would recognize that no other world or afterlife exists. Thus, we are free to live and have arrived at the aforementioned crossroads. Now we look to see how Nietzsche will arrive at this same point.

### **Nietzsche's Path To Intersection**

The heart of Nietzsche's concept of the workings of the universe is the Eternal Return or the Eternal Recurrence. Indeed, this concept is among the most important of his philosophy. At best the Eternal Return is a difficult concept to grasp. Indeed, it may not be possible to do so logically since it lies outside of logic. For this reason, Nietzsche uses analogies, stories, and verses to describe this most important of his ideas. It is likely that the only way to properly grasp the meaning of Nietzsche's writing is to read it for oneself. To approximate such an immersion, extensive quotations are provided here in addition to a scientific summary furnished as a preface. Yet, to understand the concept of the Eternal Return it should first be described on a simplistic level in logical terms. Later we will see why this scientific description is overly simplistic and insufficient to

---

<sup>33</sup> John Gaskin, The Epicurean Philosophers, (London: Everyman, 1995), xi.

fully grasp the meaning of the Eternal Return. At that time we will expand our explanation.

On the preliminary scientific level, the Eternal Return is similar in many ways to the Epicurean repetition. It is the description of Rose Pfeffer, a critic of Nietzsche's, that best explains the origin of the Eternal Return from scientific beginnings. She points to Nietzsche's citing in his Nachlass the following laws of nature as the basis for this concept: 1) time is eternal and infinite, 2) space is finite, and 3) the amount of matter in the universe is limited. Nietzsche, she says, arrives at the conclusion that there are a limited number of configurations of matter in time and that these configurations will return:<sup>34</sup>

The present configuration must be a repetition and also the one which bore it and the one which originates from it and so backwards and forwards eternally. . . . An infinite number of new changes and combinations of a limited energy is a contradiction. . . . there are no infinitely new changes, but a cycle of a limited number of the same recurs again and again. Activity is eternal; the number of its products and configurations is limited.<sup>35</sup>

This seems an accurate account. It is in harmony with Nietzsche's concise statement, "The law of conservation of energy demands

---

<sup>34</sup> Rose Pfeffer, Nietzsche: Disciple of Dionysus (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1972), 137.

<sup>35</sup> Pfeffer, 137. As cited from Nietzsche, Nachlass, vol. XVI 397.

eternal recurrence."<sup>36</sup> The Eternal Return then follows from the law stating that energy and matter can neither be created nor destroyed.

Nietzsche's point here is, from a scientific perspective, very similar to the Epicurean notion of infinity of worlds. The physics stated earlier demands that when our world ends it will be replaced by another one, and so on eternally, but the new world is not necessarily the same as the one previous. William Salter, an scholar of Nietzsche's work, states this concept:

After one ending [of a world] there will in time be another beginning- so that, if we go far enough along this line, we gain the idea of a succession of worlds or cosmic orders. . . It by no means follows, he [Nietzsche] thinks, that because these worlds follow one another they will be like one another. . . .<sup>37</sup>

Many different worlds are possible and all are created within time. Yet, because these possible worlds are limited in number, each one must return under the context of limitless time. When this inevitable event will occur is a matter of chance. To illustrate this concept, imagine tossing a set of dice for a long period of time. Eventually, every possible combination will occur. Once we reach this point, nothing else could happen but

---

<sup>36</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, The Will To Power, ed. Walter Kaufmann, (New Ycrk: Vintage Books, 1967), sec. 1063.

<sup>37</sup> William Mackintire Salter, Nietzsche The Thinker: A Study (New York: Fredrick Unger Publishing Co., 1968), 165.

for these same combinations to recur. Likewise, our world is subject to these laws and it, too, will return exactly as it is now and will do so infinitely. It follows equally that earlier editions of our world have existed infinitely into the past. Thus understood, there is an infinite recurrence of worlds forwards and backwards in time.<sup>38</sup>

Following this rationale, a common sense explanation of the Eternal Return can be provided. Although Nietzsche would find it simplistic, the analogy could be made to a computer screen saver which produces geometrical figures bouncing about the screen. If the computer were allowed to run long enough, all possible geometrical figures would be formed and would have appeared on every part of the screen at some time. Should the computer be left on still longer, this process and its patterns and figures will recur, though the time required might be quite great.

With this rough explanation in mind, one turns to Nietzsche's own words to engender a better understanding of his concepts. Nietzsche describes the Eternal Return through the epiphany of his character, Zarathustra. Zarathustra is standing before a great gateway, speaking to the dwarf beside him:

Must not whatever can walk have already  
walked on this lane before? Must not whatever  
can happen have already happened, have been

---

<sup>38</sup> Salter, 165- 68.

done, have passed by before? And if everything has been there before-- what do you think, dwarf, of this moment? Must not this gateway too have been there before?<sup>39</sup>

He sees our lives and all human lives as part of this condition of eternal or continuous recurring. Nietzsche states this explicitly:

This life, as you 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 every sigh, and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence. . . .<sup>40</sup>

This amounts to a rough outline of Nietzsche's concept of the fundamental nature of the universe.

Within the framework of the Eternal Return is the concept of the will to power. To grasp the notion of the will to power, it too will be expressed initially on a logical and scientific basis. Like the Eternal Return, it will be fully revealed later as a philosophical concept apart from science.

Arnold Zuboff best describes how the will to power is the energy which was previously mentioned as eternal and indestructible. He refers to the will to power as "power quanta"

---

<sup>39</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, ed. Walter Kaufman (New York: Penguin Books, 1966), Third Part, "On The Vision and the Riddle," sec 1.

<sup>40</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, The Gay Science, ed. Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), sec. 341.

or "finite power centers." He maintains that through the interaction of these energies, all things in the universe are made and can be explained. All of reality is "solely in the struggle of these finite power centers." In this way, change in the universe is accounted for. Further, these centers of energy compose all space and are all space in the world. One might add that the notion of the will to power, in comparison to Epicurean thought, functions as both the primordia and the force that determines its motion. As such, the will to power consists of the elements of composition as well as change and evolution in the Eternal Return.<sup>41</sup>

Having attempted to examine the will to power scientifically, it should now be expressed in terms Nietzsche would deem more appropriate to elucidating his intention. The will to power is the natural and inherent drive of every person to be master over something, especially over oneself, or to carry out his or her will.<sup>42</sup> Heavy is the emphasis here on creating and overcoming. Thus, a composer or artist can produce a great work, but he is still driven to create more and produce something better than his previous effort. Likewise one should strive continuously to overcome or surpass oneself, for this is our

---

<sup>41</sup> Arnold Zuboff, "Nietzsche and Eternal Recurrence," Nietzsche: A Collection of Critical Essays ed. Robert C. Solomon (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1973), 355.

<sup>42</sup> Nietzsche, Zarathustra, Second Part "On Self-Overcoming."



nature. Nietzsche describes this phenomenon through Zarathustra:  
"And life itself confided this secret to me: 'Behold,' it said,  
'I am that which must always overcome itself.'"<sup>43</sup> The will to  
power then must be seen as man's inherent drive.

On a higher level, the will to power is responsible for the  
creation of the world and all that exists. Nietzsche writes,  
"This world is the Will to Power-- and nothing besides!",<sup>44</sup>  
meaning the previous notion that the will to power composes the  
universe and creates the changes which occur and recur within it.  
Nietzsche expounds:

This world: a monster of energy without  
beginning, without end. . . as a play of  
forces and waves of forces. . . a sea of  
forces flowing and rushing together,  
eternally changing, eternally flooding back,  
with tremendous years of recurrence. . . .<sup>45</sup>

Certainly these forces and energy can be nothing other than the  
will to power. Under this theory, all that is in existence is  
simply the will to power.

The will to power also explains the origin of many  
constructions of man which are impediments to his life. It is  
Nietzsche's claim that all values, including what is good and  
evil and all of morality, are false constructions and swindles,

---

<sup>43</sup> Nietzsche, Zarathustra, Second Part "On Self-Overcoming."

<sup>44</sup> Nietzsche, The Will To Power, sec. 1067.

<sup>45</sup> Nietzsche, The Will To Power, sec. 1067.

since they are only creations of our will to power.<sup>46</sup> Religion and the belief in God are included in this package of concepts, because they are also products of psychology.<sup>47</sup> These beliefs owe genesis to the common and disadvantaged man who could not exert his will to power in this world. This man, unable to extend his will externally, turns the will back upon himself.<sup>48</sup> He creates a new dishonest set of morals,<sup>49</sup> and attempts to make himself superior in light of these supposed truths. All of this is an act of revenge done to satisfy him and his need to exert his will.<sup>50</sup> Yet, in time this constructed lie is believed. Nietzsche explains:

We find a species of man, the priestly, which feels itself to be the norm, the highest point and supreme expression of the type man: this species derives the concept "improvement" from itself. It believes in its own superiority, it will itself to be superior in fact: the origin of the holy lie is the *will to power*--<sup>51</sup>

Christianity is a paradigm example as it creates its own morality, a God, a heaven as its followers' reward-- and eternal

---

<sup>46</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, On The Genealogy of Morals, ed. Walter Kaufmann, On The Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), n6 & I sec. 17.

<sup>47</sup> Nietzsche, The Will to Power, sec. 135- 36.

<sup>48</sup> Nietzsche, Genealogy of Morals, II sec. 16.

<sup>49</sup> Nietzsche, The Will To Power, sec. 5 & 43- 44.

<sup>50</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, The Anti-Christ, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ (London: Penguin Books, 1990), sec. 58.

<sup>51</sup> Nietzsche, The Will To Power, sec. 142.

punishment for those who have wronged them.<sup>52</sup> Yet, all of this too is a construct. In this way, he argues, all religion is a product of psychology and an act of revenge.

It is Nietzsche's hope that we will recognize the false origin of all these values and appropriately dismiss them. He finds evidence that this is happening and proof of the existence of the will to power in the decline he perceived in religious belief.<sup>53</sup> He believes that the greatest of these burdensome fears, that of religion, should disappear as we realize we created God. In the recognition of this, God then is dead, or at least the concept of him is dead because the entity never existed. The death of religion in general (and Christianity in particular since it was Nietzsche's most prominent enemy at the time) is a cure for man's illness in his eyes. He believed these institutions were both life denying and against nature. Their morality and desire for a world beyond this one serves as evidence for this claim. Nietzsche writes:

The concept of "God" was invented as the counter concept of life-- everything harmful, poisonous, slanderous. The concept of "God" was invented as the counter concept of, the whole hostility unto death against life synthesized in this concept in a gruesome unity!<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> Nietzsche, The Genealogy of Morals, I sec. 10 & 13.

<sup>53</sup> Nietzsche, The Genealogy of Morals, III sec. 27.

<sup>54</sup> Nietzsche, Ecce Homo, "Why I Am a Destiny," sec. 8.

Ultimately, we forsake our bodies, our world, and all we have for illusions and false tomorrows:

The concept of the "beyond," the "true world" invented in order to devalue the only world there is-- in order to retain no goal, no reason, no task for our earthly reality! The concept of the "soul," the "spirit," finally even and last of all the concept "immortal soul" were invented in order to despise the body, to make it sick, "holy" to oppose with a ghastly levity everything that deserves to be taken seriously in life. . . And all of this was believed, as morality.<sup>55</sup>

The will to power is then used as evidence against these dishonest constructs detrimental to life.

Viewed in its totality, the Eternal Return, with the will to power operating within it, is a system that marks the end of concerns outside this world. All that is in existence is explained by this system. As a consequence, there cannot be a divine presence shaping or moving things. The Eternal Return puts "an end to all other-worldliness."<sup>56</sup> In this way, Nietzsche claims to set us free from the yoke of false values, religion, morality, and concern for other worlds or afterlives, and has placed us free to live in this world.

Nietzsche, like the Epicureans,<sup>57</sup> was aware that a

---

<sup>55</sup> Nietzsche, Ecce Homo, "Why I Am a Destiny," sec. 8.

<sup>56</sup> Lawrence J. Hatab, Nietzsche and Eternal Recurrence: The Redemption of Time and Becoming, (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, Inc., 1978), 110.

<sup>57</sup> Gaskin, xxxi- xxxii.

misinterpretation of his writing was possible and, in fact, quite likely. He feared that many would despair of their lot, finding that religion, morality, an afterlife, and everything they had believed in, was lost. They would find nothing in the world to live for and think to themselves that all is for naught.

Nietzsche defined this theory as "the radical repudiation of value, meaning, desirability [in the world]."<sup>58</sup> He was right to be so concerned; because this logic became a movement, known as nihilism. It first appeared during Nietzsche's lifetime, but reached its zenith in popularity during a period of time after his death. This conception, however, is the exact opposite of Nietzsche's intended message. He pointed out that religion's creation of another world made this one unlivable and miserable. Instead, Nietzsche sought to affirm our world. He describes this yes-saying to life or affirmation of life:

I was the first to see the real opposition:  
the degenerating instinct that turns against  
life with subterranean vengefulness  
(Christianity. . . and all of idealism as  
typical forms) versus a formula for the  
highest affirmation, born of fullness, of  
overfullness, a Yes-saying with out  
reservation, even to suffering, even to  
guilt, even to everything that is  
questionable and strange in existence.<sup>59</sup>

In this way, Nietzsche is an optimist because he has hope and

---

<sup>58</sup> Nietzsche, The Will To Power, sec. 1.

<sup>59</sup> Nietzsche, Ecce Homo, "The Birth of Tragedy," sec. 2.

faith in this world and has shown us how to live freely in it.

In comparing their concepts of the universe, it is clear that Nietzsche's and the Epicureans philosopher's notions are not identical but arrive at many of the same ideas. Nietzsche has brought us along differently, but to the same point as the Epicureans. This world, he says, is the only reality-- there is no other. Moreover this world will return or recur. Now, one should examine how the path forks into radically different directions.

### **The Random Swerve Of Particles Versus The Will To Power**

#### **Distinction: The Epicurean Swerve And Good Life**

The point that separates these two philosophies is the difference in meaning of the Epicurean swerve of primordia and Nietzsche's will to power. The swerve for the Epicureans is a completion of their purely scientific outlook. We have seen how it explains the motion of primordia and accounts for the construction of all things in the past, present, and future. It provides the notion of randomness in the universe. With such an outlook, there is nothing beyond this explanation and science. The human role in this process is non-existent. Man is simply a by-product or result of the system. Accordingly, when we die we are merely dead. We have no connection to future events. There is nothing of ourselves left over when our primordia break apart.

This purely scientific conception leads to the conclusion that the future replication of our physical selves in the Epicurean repletion is not the same as the reconstruction of our personal identity.<sup>60</sup> As Lucretius writes:

And even if the nature of mind and the power of anima has feeling, after it has been rent asunder from our body, yet it is nothing to us, who are made one by the mating and marriage of body and anima. Nor, if time should gather together our substance after our decease and bring it back again as it is now placed, if once more the light of life should be vouchsafed to us, yet, even were that done, it would not concern us at all, when once the remembrances of our former selves were snapped in twain.<sup>61</sup>

The argument is that for this future token of ourselves to be ourselves it would have to exist in the same place and in the same time as now.<sup>62</sup> Yet, this is not possible because this token is a future instance of ourselves, not an initial instance. Thus, the place is the same but the time is certainly different. The analogy could be made to the Heraclitean notion that you can never step into the same river twice because you are different every time. In completing this scientific system and allowing for no willful concern for future events following death, the swerve dictates that future tokens of ourselves are not we and are of no

---

<sup>60</sup> De Rerum Natura, Book III lines 843- 69.

<sup>61</sup> De Rerum Natura, Book III lines 843- 51.

<sup>62</sup> De Rerum Natura, Book III lines 862- 69.

concern to us.

The Epicureans then devise a system of behavior which is appropriate for our one and only life upon this world. They believe that the goal of our lives should be happiness.<sup>63</sup> We need, however, to protect ourselves and our life, because it is the only one that we will ever have. Accordingly, happiness is found in tranquility or peace of mind,<sup>64</sup> and to achieve this state, one's mind must be free from worries, distractions, and unfounded fears.<sup>65</sup> One then seeks happiness, or eudaemonia as they write, through peace of mind, or ataraxia.<sup>66</sup> Their scientific conception, as we have already seen, served this purpose by disposing of these distractions to life.

The Epicurean notion of the good life is hedonistic in its approach to life, but not in the traditional meaning of this word. Pleasure is to be our guide in decision making and we should choose our actions in light of this and in weighing the possible pain that may come with an act.<sup>67</sup> Pleasure, as such, necessitates the avoidance of pain. As is stated in Epicurus's Third Principal Doctrine, "The magnitude of pleasure reaches its limit in the removal of all pain. When pleasure is present, so

---

<sup>63</sup> Epicurus, "Letter to Menoecus," 44.

<sup>64</sup> Epicurus, "Letter to Menoecus," 44.

<sup>65</sup> Epicurus, "Letter to Menoecus," 44-45.

<sup>66</sup> Hibler, 26.

<sup>67</sup> Epicurus, "Letter to Menoecus," 44.



long as it is uninterrupted, there is no pain either of body or of mind or of both together."<sup>68</sup> Epicurus elaborates:

By "pleasure" we mean the absence of pain in the body and turmoil in the mind. The pleasurable life is not continuous drinking, dancing, and sex; nor the enjoyment of fish or other delicacies of an extravagant table; It is sober reasoning which searches out the motives for all choice and avoidance, and rejects those beliefs which lay open the mind to the greatest disturbance.<sup>69</sup>

This is wise advice, for "No pleasure is in itself evil, but the things which produce certain pleasures entail annoyances many times greater than the pleasures themselves."<sup>70</sup> Among these pleasures which lead to great woe are excessive drinking, dancing, sex, and elaborate meals.<sup>71</sup> We would be foolish, therefore, to lead wild lives with no concern for tomorrow because such living is not as a whole pleasurable and could cause us to lose that which we hold most dear, namely our lives.

We often are wise, nevertheless, to choose a pain over a pleasure because the latter leads to greater pleasure in the long run. Epicurus writes that every pleasure is inherently good and all pain evil, yet not all pleasures should be experienced nor all pains avoided. He writes:

---

<sup>68</sup> Epicurus, "The Principal Doctrines," # 3.

<sup>69</sup> Epicurus, "Letter to Menoeceus," 45.

<sup>70</sup> Epicurus, "The Principal Doctrines," # 8.

<sup>71</sup> Epicurus, "Letter to Menoeceus," 45.

For this reason there are many times when we do not choose every pleasure, but avoid those which lead to unnecessary discomfort in the long run. Furthermore, we consider certain states of pain to be preferable to pleasure when greater satisfaction results as a consequence of the submission to pain.<sup>72</sup>

Hedonism for the Epicureans is then understood as the careful pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain.

When we weigh the pleasures and pains, the Epicureans claim we will find that it is best to live simple lives. Such a life is a somewhat ascetic existence. We are to mimic Epicurus in his practice of limiting desires and a reduction to all but that which is natural and necessary for a healthy life.<sup>73</sup> We have already seen many of the extravagant activities which we are wise to avoid. We ought to keep out of the limelight of such activities as politics, so that we are not weighed down with responsibilities.<sup>74</sup> Rather, one should live unnoticed<sup>75</sup> and withdraw from the world to the company of but a few like-minded friends.<sup>76</sup> We should restrain our greed for wealth and possessions because it spurs the envy of one's neighbors and attracts the attention of thieves.<sup>77</sup> Further, such practices

---

<sup>72</sup> Epicurus, "Letter to Menoecus," 44- 45.

<sup>73</sup> Strodach, 75 & 77.

<sup>74</sup> Epicurus, "Fragments," # 85 & 87.

<sup>75</sup> Epicurus, "Fragments," # 86.

<sup>76</sup> Epicurus, "Letter to Menoecus," 46.

<sup>77</sup> Epicurus, "Vatican Sayings," LXXXI.

inevitably end in misery.<sup>78</sup> Yet, more importantly, one should be content with what one has and be empty of envy for one's neighbor's lot.<sup>79</sup>

In place of wild and unnecessary desires, we should take pleasure in what is simple and basic in life. Our possessions will be few and easy to manage,<sup>80</sup> our diets simple and lacking in such things as meat or wine,<sup>81</sup> and our friends will be close and of like thinking. With these friends we will engage in intellectual pursuits,<sup>82</sup> not in a burdensome toil in drudgery, but rather a joyous and leisurely experience and investigation for the truth.<sup>83</sup> The value of the company of these friends can hardly be overestimated in the Epicurean life. Epicurus writes, "Of all the means which are procured by wisdom to ensure happiness throughout the whole of life, by far the most important is the acquisition of friends."<sup>84</sup> They are the greatest gift to life as they help us achieve peace and security in a hostile world.<sup>85</sup> Such is the simple life of plain living and high thinking which constitutes the Epicurean exhortation of the good

---

<sup>78</sup> Epicurus, "Fragments," # 72 & 73.

<sup>79</sup> Epicurus, "Letter to Menoeceus," 45.

<sup>80</sup> Epicurus, "Letter to Menoeceus," 45.

<sup>81</sup> Strodach, 79.

<sup>82</sup> Stodach, 79.

<sup>83</sup> Hibler, 45 & 55- 56.

<sup>84</sup> Epicurus, "The Principal Doctrines," # 27.

<sup>85</sup> Hibler, 43- 44.

life.

Though they have neither knowledge nor concern for man, the gods are the paradigm example of the Epicurean good life. The Epicureans held that gods, being perfect creatures, are always at ease and cannot be understood as being "troubled, burdened, or unhappy" in any way. Since they are at ease, they cannot be engaged in any strenuous affairs. Man should then think of the gods as, "idle, as taking delight purely in being themselves." This state must be the pinnacle of existence because the gods are divine and perfect. Man should, therefore, attempt to mimic this condition of the gods. The gods, then, have significance to man as his ethical ideal.<sup>86</sup>

#### **The Will To Power And Nietzsche's Good Life**

Nietzsche, on the other hand, prescribes a life diametrically opposed to that of the Epicureans. He does so because of his use of the will to power rather than the Epicurean swerve. Here a final investigation of the will to power and the Eternal Return on a still deeper level must be undertaken to relate these concepts and their importance. Borrowing heavily, as cited, from Lawrence J. Hatab's account, the attempt will be made to explain these matters on their deepest level.

The will to power, the Eternal Return, and Nietzsche's famous

---

<sup>86</sup> Preuss, 48-49.

overman are best illustrated in relation to each other. Hatab writes that if one accepts any moment in time and finds pleasure in it, then one wills it to return and be accompanied by all other moments preceding and anteceding it. He cites Nietzsche:

Have you ever said Yes to a single joy? O my friends, then you said Yes to *all* woe. All things are entangled, ensnared, enamored; if ever you wanted one thing twice, if ever you said, "You please me, happiness! Abide, moment!" then you wanted *all* back. All anew all eternally, all entangled, ensnared, enamored,-- oh, then you *loved* the world. Eternal ones, love it eternally and evermore; and woe too, you say: go, but return! *For all joy wants-- eternity.*<sup>87</sup>

Each moment is connected to the next, so that if one must return, then all must return. Nietzsche explains, "And are not all things knotted together so firmly that this moment draws after it *all* that is to come?"<sup>88</sup> Combining all these moments, we have the return of all that is in existence. As the entire world is thus willed to return exactly as it is now, the Eternal Return too is willed and must be seen as "self-produced." Accordingly, the world and the Eternal Return are creative emergences stemming from the will to power.<sup>89</sup>

Suppose that a mysterious and wonderful event occurs when

---

<sup>87</sup> Nietzsche, Zarathustra, Fourth Part "The Drunken Song," sec. 10.

<sup>88</sup> Nietzsche, Zarathustra, Third Part, "On the Vision and the Riddle," sec. 2.

<sup>89</sup> Hatab, 100- 101.

one faces the Eternal Return and wills it. Borrowing again from Hatab, his notion is that the Eternal Return comes in a revelation or a vision, not in a subjective or objective experience, and a willful acceptance of the world rather than an intellectual decision.<sup>90</sup> From this basis, it seems that such an event is possible. The person who stands before this moment, as Zarathustra did at the gateway called Moment, first reaches the epiphany that he is a will to power. A recognition then takes place that this is his inherent drive and nature. This person then realizes that everything-- this world and all that is in it-- is also the will to power. The will to power is thus the nature of our world.

Perceiving this clearly and willing that this is the case, he realizes that he is also willing the return of these things. He wills the Eternal Return and himself along with it. Yet, all these things come to this person at once or immediately at the same time in a vision. Borrowing again from Hatab, the acceptance of the vision of the Eternal Return is an affirmation of ourselves and our world.<sup>91</sup> In this shining moment, this person becomes clear on his true identity and through this, the entire world. For the first time he sees himself and his place in the

---

<sup>90</sup> Hatab, 103 & 105.

<sup>91</sup> Hatab, 94.

universe and the order of things. All doubts, worries, thoughts, and fears which man typically harbors, such as ascetic ideals, morality, and afterlives, are now revealed in their true nature as constructed by man and false. This vision replaces a person's use of contemplative thinking with instinct, or an inherent and non-reflexive feel for what is right. If this mental state's integrity is to be maintained, it must remain as instinct, not returning to contemplation. For this reason, the will to power and the Eternal Return cannot be thought of rationally, because the only place where they are understood is outside of and the contemplative thinking.<sup>92</sup> The possessor of such a view has truly turned out well and, in surpassing his former self, he should be referred to as the overman.

By willing the Eternal Return, the overman finds his place in the universe-- a universe where he plays an active part. One has just seen how man's willing or exercise of the will to power

---

<sup>92</sup> Hatab supplies a similar view in positing his theories on this matter. He writes that the will to power leads to the Eternal Return, the Eternal Return is "self-produced" or willed to existence and return, the only causality is causality of the will, and hence mechanistic explanations for the universe are ruled out. In my opinion, however, this description is insufficient. Hatab does not reach this conclusion through the overman, and this is the only way these concepts are to be understood. The overman alone fully grasps them. Accordingly, Hatab is deficient in not accounting for the individual realizations in the vision, and the resultant state of instinctual thinking of the overman which prohibits contemplation and reason.

leads to the Eternal Return. Yet, he is not something that lies outside of this system. Nor is he a by-product of it, as he is in the Epicurean notion. Man is the will to power in his role as causing the Eternal Return's existence. He has always existed within it. The concept is similar to Heidegger's notion of man as a being-in-the-world rather than an entity apart from the rest of the world. Accordingly, for Nietzsche, man is a part of nature and it is inappropriate to conceive of one without the other.

The importance of the Eternal Return to man lies in his reaction to it. Indeed, it is the greatest test for man and the thought of greatest weight because it will either change or crush him. Nietzsche writes of the reaction of the person who faces the Eternal Return as it is related to him by a demon:

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.<sup>93</sup>

We have already seen how our acceptance of it and its repetitions is an affirmation of the world and ourselves. Hatab adds that this also gives meaning to our lives and this world.<sup>94</sup>

---

<sup>93</sup> Nietzsche, The Gay Science, sec. 341.

<sup>94</sup> Hatab, 98 & 106.



For those who accept the Eternal Return, the world is an immeasurable joy and the notion of its recurrence is welcome and most desired.<sup>95</sup> If one truly affirms the world, then its recurrence is not a terror, bore, or burden; it is pleasure and joy.<sup>96</sup> Nietzsche conveys this joy in the story of a shepherd who, while lying asleep in the field, was bitten by a snake. The snake had crawled inside the shepherd's mouth and with his fangs held fast inside the shepherd's mouth and throat. Upon finally seizing the initiative to bite off the serpent's head, the shepherd freed himself and leapt to his feet. Zarathustra describes witnessing this event:

Far away he spewed the head of the snake--and he jumped up. No longer shepherd, no longer human--one changed, radiant, *laughing!* Never on earth has a human being laughed as he laughed.<sup>97</sup>

This condition is what Nietzsche admiringly referred to as "Involuntary Bliss".<sup>98</sup> Such is the unparalleled joy Nietzsche subscribes to in the acceptance of the Eternal Return.

Yet, one who rejects the Eternal Return finds in it despair and the loss of all meaning in the world. Such a person has lost the meaning in his existence that he found in beliefs of other

---

<sup>95</sup> Zuboff, 344.

<sup>96</sup> Hatab, 128.

<sup>97</sup> Nietzsche, Zarathustra, Third Part, "On the Vision and The Riddle," sec. 2.

<sup>98</sup> Nietzsche, Zarathustra, Third Part, "On Involuntary Bliss."

worlds and his position relative to some divinity. Nietzsche writes of this thinking, "let us think this thought through in its most terrible form, existence as it is, without meaning or aim, yet recurring inevitably without any finale of nothingness."<sup>99</sup> Man's acceptance or rejection of the Eternal Return is either a happy acceptance of this world and himself or a rejection of both brought out in misery.

It is important to recognize the world which Nietzsche has given us. Hatab, among other critics, best describes it as a system of constant change and becoming. He posits that as the will to power is constantly willing for more and increase and is constantly creating, it is always active and willing change.<sup>100</sup> The will to power is itself becoming and hence there is a world or process of becoming.<sup>101</sup> Affirming this becoming, "involves the release into the creative process, i.e. the affirmation of Becoming and the subsequent surrender of substantiality, and therefore objectivity."<sup>102</sup> One could add to Hatab's account that this world of becoming, with its notion of creativity, lies in contrast to the Epicurean description of the being of the universe. For the Epicureans the universe merely exists and can

---

<sup>99</sup> Nietzsche, The Will To Power, sec. 55.

<sup>100</sup> Hatab, 100.

<sup>101</sup> Hatab, 100.

<sup>102</sup> Hatab, 106.

be explained and described. Nietzsche adds that we play an active part in it in engendering its becoming. Understood this way, the will to power mandates a world of becoming, whereas the Epicurean swerve requires a world of being.

In Nietzsche's conception of the universe, we are the previously mentioned future tokens. That Nietzsche clearly intends this message is evidenced by his previously mentioned claim that, "This life, as you live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more."<sup>103</sup> The emphasis here is on 'you', for it is a personal pronoun and is used here to refer to the past, present, and future tokens. In comparison, the Epicureans refer to these tokens as replicas, avoiding terms of a personal nature. In Nietzsche's world we have concern for our future selves because they are us, in the same place and in the same time. For Nietzsche, time is essentially circular. He viewed time as the repetition of identical cycles,<sup>104</sup> with neither a beginning nor an end.<sup>105</sup> For this reason, our existence in this world is at every recurrence the initial occurrence because time has begun again. It would be inappropriate to conceive of the place as the same and yet the time different because there is no criterion for measuring time linearly. It exists only circularly. The analogy

---

<sup>103</sup> Nietzsche, The Gay Science, sec. 341.

<sup>104</sup> Hatab, 14.

<sup>105</sup> Nietzsche, Zarathustra, Third Part "On the Vision and The Riddle," sec. 2.

can be made to the use of a face clock without the aid of a calendar to mark each passing day. Under this concept, we are seen as always the first instance of ourselves. Understood as such, it is always we who return to the world and play an active part in it in willing its return.

Nietzsche's entire system of the will to power, the Eternal Return, and the overman find an analogy in the conflict of Dionysian and Apollonian elements in Greek tragedy. Pfeffer provides the best account of this notion. She writes that Dionysus is the god of destruction and chaos, whereas his counterpart, Apollo, rules over productivity, order, and form. The interplay between these gods reflects the workings of nature in its eternal and circular process of destruction and perishing followed by creation and birth. Later in Greek tragedy, the elements of both Dionysus and Apollo were unified in Dionysus. This conception of Dionysus has him as the will to power, for he is the will to create, to overcome, and to affirm. His change from one state to the other and back again is the Eternal Return. The world is then tragic in nature and it provides an excellent summary of Nietzsche's philosophy.<sup>106</sup>

We ought to lead our lives according to this Dionysian example. This is a yes-saying to ourselves and this world, born

---

<sup>106</sup> Pfeffer, 30-36.

of an "overfullness of life," from our creative power and joy.<sup>107</sup> We should live as though we would wish our actions to be repeated, for they most assuredly will be,<sup>108</sup> and embrace our will to power in engaging in the world. Our goal is overcoming and Nietzsche challenges us: "Overcome thyself!"<sup>109</sup> Only in this way can we transform ourselves into the overman. Such a life is adventurous and clearly involves risk-taking and encountering many adversities. We are to lead a dangerous life as did ancient Greek heroes such as Heracles and Achilles. As Nietzsche describes it, the greatest happiness is in such a life.

All this happiness in overcoming must be accompanied by failure and great pain, for not all endeavors can meet with success. Nietzsche acknowledges this truth, "for happiness and unhappiness are sisters and even twins, that either grow up together," or shall "*remain small* together" if one does not lead an adventurous life.<sup>110</sup> Yet, we should rejoice in pain and suffering under Dionysus because it "becomes a creative experience, a feeling of life and strength," for only in this way does man reach his highest potential.<sup>111</sup> Suffering is also necessary to allow for destruction, from whence creation is

---

<sup>107</sup> Pfeffer, 46-47.

<sup>108</sup> Nietzsche, The Gay Science, sec. 341.

<sup>109</sup> Nietzsche, The Gay Science, sec. 304.

<sup>110</sup> Nietzsche, The Gay Science, sec. 338.

<sup>111</sup> Pfeffer, 50.

possible.<sup>112</sup> Moreover, failure is inevitable in the end as death cannot be forever cheated. This too is present in the Dionysian example. Death, however, is also nothing to fear and should be embraced by those who have lived as they should.

Nietzsche relates this message through the story of a tightrope walker who has just fallen, has badly injured himself, and is speaking his last words to the kneeling Zarathustra by his side:

I have long known that the devil would trip me. Now he will drag me to hell. Would you prevent him?"

"On my honor, friend," answered Zarathustra, "all that of which you speak does not exist: there is no devil and no hell. Your soul will be dead even before your body: fear nothing further!"<sup>113</sup>

Later Zarathustra consoles the tight rope walker and shows his respect for his life, for there is no shame in failure and death in striving to affirm you true self: "You have made danger your vocation; there is nothing contemptible in that. Now you perish of your vocation: for that I will bury you with my own hands."<sup>114</sup> In this way, Nietzsche has given an additional explanation why death is nothing to be feared. This fear removed, man should be able to engage in Nietzsche's good life in following the

---

<sup>112</sup> Pferrer, 50.

<sup>113</sup> Nietzsche, Zarathustra, "Zarathustra's Prologue," sec. 6.

<sup>114</sup> Nietzsche, Zarathustra, "Zarathustra's Prologue," sec. 6.

Dionysian example.

### **The Random Swerve Of Particles Versus The Will To Power As The Point Of Separation**

It is clear that the distinction between the will to power and the swerve causes the differing notions of the good life for Nietzsche and the Epicurean philosophers. Reflection upon their conceptions of the universe shows that no other aspect of it can account for this divergence. There is no other way to explain the differing concepts than to examine the philosophers' notions of happiness.

One could claim that Nietzsche and Epicurus were motivated to create their systems of ethics around what each took as the greatest happiness and pleasure. One could say that their philosophies of the good life result from these opinions. Indeed, this is an interesting subject, and one that Nietzsche himself explored in postulating that Epicurus's philosophy results from his rough life and chaotic environment,<sup>115</sup> but this is a matter of psychology, not philosophy. Such psychological considerations are inappropriate to and aid little our philosophical discussion. One must take these works as they are, ignoring what psychological motive its author has for its creation. In dismissing this

---

<sup>115</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, The Gay Science, ed. Walter Kaufmann, (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), sec. 45.

concern, we have reached another of our goals in explaining how the Epicureans' and Nietzsche's advice for the good life differ so vastly despite sharing many of the same precepts.

We should recognize that Nietzsche and the Epicureans' physics differ mostly in the theme of activity and involvement which the will to power provides. Accordingly, it should hardly be surprising that these philosophies have led us in different directions because they began from slightly different points and met only as they crossed each other.

### **The Search For Ethical Truth**

The final matter of our discussion is to examine which philosophy has a better claim to the ethical truth. This inquiry will be pursued first through a mode of discourse between the two schools of thought and then through an examination employing a formula for ethical validity.

Nietzsche wrote of the Epicureans often and had great respect for them. Their greatest contribution, he wrote, was in dispelling concerns for other worlds and returning importance to this world. Nietzsche finds comfort and support in the Epicureans when he attacks the beliefs of Christianity, which he describes as the most corrupt and life-denying of religions. He writes:

[Christianity is] the same species of religion on whose antecedent form Epicurus had already made war. One must read Lucretius to understand what it was Epicurus opposed:



not paganism but 'Christianity', which is to say the corruption of souls through the concept of guilt, punishment and immortality.-- He opposed the subterranean cults, the whole of latent Christianity-- to deny immortality was already in those days a real redemption.<sup>116</sup>

Nietzsche admired "Lucretius's courage and outrage at the oppressions afflicting mankind."<sup>117</sup> Further, Nietzsche respected and was attracted to the Epicurean notion of happiness in tranquility. He writes of his imitation of Epicurus, "I live. . . with my soul very calm and patient and yet contemplating life with joy."<sup>118</sup> As a result, it can be said that Nietzsche felt a great affinity for the Epicureans.

At the end of the day, however, Nietzsche had to reject the Epicurean conception of the good life. Nietzsche could not deny the will to power and its elements of energy and passion.<sup>119</sup> He writes, "I have presented such terrible images to knowledge that any 'Epicurean delight' is out of the question. Only Dionysian joy is sufficient."<sup>120</sup> The Epicurean good life then is seen by Nietzsche as decadence because it denies, with its ascetic lifestyle, the essential drive of man. Nietzsche glorifies those

---

<sup>116</sup> Nietzsche, The Anti-Christ, sec. 58.

<sup>117</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, Unmodern Observations, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), "Schopenhauer as Educator," sec. 8.

<sup>118</sup> Nietzsche, The Gay Science, sec. 45n.

<sup>119</sup> Nietzsche, The Gay Science, sec. 45n.

<sup>120</sup> Nietzsche, The Will To Power, sec. 1029.

with an "over-fullness of life-- they want a Dionysian art and likewise a tragic view of life, a tragic insight," and condemns "those who suffer from the *impoverishment of life* and seek rest, stillness, calm sea, redemption from themselves."<sup>121</sup> Clearly, the Epicureans fit into Nietzsche's latter description. Worse still, they in effect deny the will to power. Nietzsche claims a broader vision than the Epicureans because he embraces all of life, while the Epicureans withdraw from much of it. One can see easily that Nietzsche would object to the Epicureans' simple life. He would argue that it may slow, or even block, the coming of the overman, which is the good life and happiest state for man. Nietzsche's belief in the will to power impels him to reject the Epicurean life.

Because they predate him, the Epicureans do not have the benefit of directly addressing Nietzsche, but one could imagine many of the arguments that these intellectually minded souls might put forth. To begin with, they likely would deny the will to power as the inherent drive of man. As lovers of science, they would want proof or evidence of some sort for this assertion. Further, they might question the validity and significance to man of the Eternal Return. Having already posited that future tokens are not the replications of identity because the time of the

---

<sup>121</sup> Nietzsche, The Gay Science, sec. 370.

recurrence is different, the Epicureans claim that the Eternal Return is invalid, based on their conception of non-circular time. With regard to the significance of this notion, they likely would point out that since man's consciousness is broken at death, he would have no connection to his past or future consciousnesses. If so, then the infinite recovery of his pains, decisions, and other selves are irrelevant and indifferent to him.<sup>122</sup> The Eternal Return would then add nothing to man's understanding of existence.<sup>123</sup> One could then summarize the Epicureans' argument that without recollection, repetition is meaningless and irrelevant.<sup>124</sup> Next, Epicureans would want to ask Nietzsche why man should resign himself to an unhappy life and bother with avoidable pains and dangers when all things will happen again and each man has no connection to them. Finally, the Epicureans might question Nietzsche's notion of the good life by espousing the argument of many critics that Nietzsche's system is deterministic. William Salter, a prominent critic of Nietzsche, argues that there is no room or possibility for man to strive and exert himself in Nietzsche's system because of its deterministic nature. If everything is fated to return exactly as it was before and nothing will be different, then how

---

<sup>122</sup> Soll, 340 & 42.

<sup>123</sup> Zuboff, 348.

<sup>124</sup> Alan White, Within Nietzsche's Labyrinth (New York: Routledge Press, 1990), 67.

could man actually have free will in such a system? Should not one resign oneself to fate, as Oedipus did? What reason would we have for risking the only life we have in strenuous efforts?<sup>125</sup>

Nietzsche defends the will to power and Eternal Return, though he does not employ reason in the process. One might expect him to support the will to power by pointing out how well it accounts for such things as morality, religion, belief in an afterlife, and ascetic ideals. He might regard this as inductive evidence of the will to power's universality. Yet, it was never Nietzsche's intention that these concepts should be considered in this context. Earlier, it was argued that they can only be understood by experience through a vision or revelation, not through intellectual study and contemplation. Hatab explains that the Eternal Return and the will to power are not rational or objective notions nor scientific theories, and thus are not subject to the criteria of true or false or scientific verifiability.<sup>126</sup> The Eternal Return is not true but made true by the will to acceptance.<sup>127</sup> These concepts lie outside of reason and science.<sup>128</sup> Hence, one could hardly expect Nietzsche to appeal to reason in defending himself as it would destroy the point to

---

<sup>125</sup> Salter, 174- 75.

<sup>126</sup> Hatab, 94 & 108- 109.

<sup>127</sup> Hatab, 105. *The Genealogy of Morals*, II vol. 3 & III vol. 23

<sup>128</sup> Hatab, 109. As cited from Stambaugh, "Nietzsche's Thought of Eternal Return," p. 30.

his work. Understood in this manner, attacks which appeal to reason and science simply are inappropriate to Nietzsche's Eternal Return and will to power.

Nietzsche has an additional response to attacks on the will to power and the Eternal Return. He would claim that the demand for proof of these concepts is an expression of the will to power. Science and logic, he maintains, are only products of the will to power.<sup>129</sup> As such, these modes of thinking are derivative and inappropriate for analyzing Nietzsche's concepts of the will to power and the Eternal Return. Understood as such, the will to power is only verified by its own recognition, not through logic or science.

Nietzsche defends against the attack of his alleged determinism in much the same way that he dismissed the prior two. Resignation to fate is again a misunderstanding of his system of thought. Joan Stambaugh, a student of and commentator on Nietzsche, explains, "It makes no sense for man to prostrate himself on the ground before fate, because he, himself, belongs to, is that fate. To prostrate oneself before oneself is comic."<sup>130</sup> Salter elaborates in citing Nietzsche's response to this attack:

---

<sup>129</sup> Nietzsche, The Genealogy of Morals, II sec. 3 & III sec. 23.

<sup>130</sup> Ouden, 113. As cited from Stambaugh, "Nietzsche's Thought of Eternal Return," p. 56.

Thought and belief are a determining influence along with other influences that press upon you, and are more of an influence than they. You say that food, place, air, society change and determine you? Now your opinions do it still more, for they determine you to this food, place, air, society. When you incorporate in yourself the thought of thoughts [eternal recurrence], it will transform you.<sup>131</sup>

Hence, the thought or belief, which is essentially the same as the individual, is itself a part of fate or the deterministic chain.<sup>132</sup> Questions of fate and determinism constitute a misunderstanding of Nietzsche's unity of man and world and also are inappropriate responses.

#### **A Formula For Ethical Validity**

An ethical test should now be employed to determine which school's good life has a greater claim to the ethical truth. This ethical analysis considers these notions of the good life under the context of personal self interest, desire to make universal behavior, and the greatest good for the greatest number. The hope is that by considering these issues from as many perspectives as possible, one will be in a position to discern the best life.

The first of these views is self interest. It should be

---

<sup>131</sup> Salter, 175. As cited from Nietzsche, Werke, XII, sec. 64, line 117.

<sup>132</sup> Salter, 175.

noted that this perspective is useful mostly in bringing out further considerations germane to the issue at hand and should never be of primary concern in making ethical decisions. Both Nietzsche and the Epicureans theorize that they satisfy this concern. Each contends that its conception of the good life is the greatest happiness for man. Both would claim such happiness to be of the greatest self interest for the individual. Self interest, then, does little to resolve this issue.

One ought also to consider whether one would wish these schools' offerings of the good life to be made universal behavior. It is clear that the Epicurean life is pleasurable and attractive to some. However, to make it universal may lead to a disastrous end. If everyone were to withdraw from the crowd and attempt to lead a simple life, the state or government would have immense difficulties operating. Should no one engage in the workings of the government, how could there be a state? Without the protection of the government and the division of labor which it provides, it is questionable whether Epicurus' simple and subsistence life would be possible. Lacking such an order giver in the state, the system itself might collapse and chaos ensue. Further, the point could be made that the Epicureans are examples of poor ethical behavior because they leave these responsibilities for others. After all, Epicurus' Garden never

had to face many of these realities of nature because it existed under the protection of wealthy benefactors from nearby Attica.<sup>133</sup> Considered in this light, the Epicurean life may be advisable for some but is likely unsustainable and a poor universal.

Determining whether one would wish Nietzsche's good life to be universal is a difficult matter in the extreme. The matter hinges from the start on the existence of the will to power. If it is man's inherent drive, we would want to affirm it. We would want to lead dangerous lives and overcome ourselves. To deny the will to power and this lifestyle would be denying our world and acting untrue to ourselves. Yet, if it is man's inherent drive then it must be seen as already universal. It is always active and practiced by all people. The question would then not be whether we would wish it universal but rather whether it is already. However, considering this matter under Nietzsche's context, an interesting thing occurs. Our wishing the dangerous life to be universal is, in Nietzsche's eyes, willing the will to power. That affirmed, we also will the Eternal Return. Contemplating the issue begs the question. Here we see the inherent problems in analyzing Nietzsche's work in its non-rational nature. Yet, it is clear that the existence of the will to power determines whether we would desire the risk-taking life

---

<sup>133</sup> Hibler, 90.



to be universal.

The final perspective is that of the utilitarians. We have already seen that the Epicurean life is often good and pleasurable for the individual, but its universality negates it in the long run. Clearly, this does not serve the greatest good. Further, one could take issue with the Epicurean definition of happiness. There may well be many people for whom the simple life leads to boredom and revulsion, rather than happiness. These people find pleasures instead in taking chances and living much as Nietzsche advises. Their best wishes would be disregarded and their lives made miserable should they be forced to live under an Epicurean ideal. Whether this would best serve society is a moot point. Considering Nietzsche from the same context, the issue again is the existence of the will to power. Assuming it is man's inherent drive, great benefit would be found for the many in striving and living recklessly. People on a large scale would be given the possibility to reach their highest potential, overcome themselves, and affirm this world. A side effect would be the inevitable failure of those who suffer as their efforts meet with failure. Nevertheless, these people would experience worse torment if they had denied this part of themselves. However, if the will to power is not the inherent and dominant human drive, then all this suffering would be unnecessary. Once again, this

matter hinges as a whole on the existence of the will to power.

Looking back upon this formula, one sees that it is applicable to the Epicureans' philosophy but not Nietzsche's. This is exactly the type of thinking Nietzsche wanted to avoid. The logic to which this formula appeals is one of the values which he wished to reevaluate. Further, one has already seen that Nietzsche considers this type of thinking derivative. Accordingly, this ethical test does not apply to Nietzsche's work and does little to aid the study of it.

Reflecting upon our last effort to discern the rival claims of ethical truth, we must recognize that it meets largely with failure. It is evident that the Epicurean life is appropriate for certain individuals, though not sustainable in universal practice. Perhaps its best place is as Epicurus had it, on the outskirts of and under the protection of a larger state. One can neither logically affirm nor condemn Nietzsche's good life ethically. Since one cannot prove, disprove, or rationally discuss the will to power, one cannot pass judgment on a concept of the good life based on it. Nevertheless, one can recognize that this is the issue on which all considerations hinge.

#### **A Final Attempt To Discern The Greatest Claim To The Truth**

A further reflection on what we have seen may yet bring us closer to our goal. The Epicureans have placed us in this world,

with no concerns for anything outside of it. Our sole goal is the pursuit of happiness. Yet, we have already seen how the Epicurean definition of it may be mistaken. More precisely, it may be happiness for some but repulsive and horrifying to others. The Epicurean good life is then reducible to personal preference of happiness. Such a philosophy is nothing more than advice for those who already find this type of life pleasing. What purpose then does this philosophy serve other than a reminder to those who are predisposed to it?

Nietzsche's good life is immune to such attacks because happiness is a result, not the only goal, of his philosophy. Further, one could ask why the Epicureans go to such great lengths to affirm this world when one is then advised to withdraw from it. Why give so great a present if it is never to be unwrapped? Could the explanation be similar to the notion that some people find great pleasure in keeping a classic sports car or a fine bottle of wine but never driving the car or drinking the wine? There is an analogy here as one risks damage to the car in driving it and certainly loses the bottle of wine once it is drunk. Similarly, one risks one's life in experiencing it actively. Yet, the analogy is not direct. The pleasure in keeping the car and the bottle on display unused but is in considering these objects too good to be used. Yet, one experiences great

pleasure in thinking what it would be like to use them. This notion is lacking in the Epicurean model as the withdrawing from life is not done because of supreme reverence for it, but rather to avoid the pain it entails. The question arises again as to what this philosophy actually gives to us.

I also find problems in Nietzsche's philosophy with respect to the good life. The scientific basis of the Eternal Return is, in my opinion, questionable. Returning to the notion of tossing dice, there is no guarantee or necessity that certain combinations will ever occur, or for that matter, recur. Each toss of the dice is a new game and the chances of any combination occurring is the same as any other. Though it is extremely likely that all combinations will happen, it is by no means mandated. By a freak chance, it is possible that one combination or another would never appear. Making reference to Nietzsche's centers of energy, it is extraordinarily probable that they will reform in infinite time to create the exact replica of us and our world, but there is no necessity for this contained in the laws of the conservation of matter and energy. Understood as such, the scientific basis for the Eternal Return is shaken.

I can foresee Nietzsche's defense to this attack, that his are not scientific or rational concepts. Further, he would argue that I am criticizing with reason, a derivative concept, notions

which are beyond reason. To this I also have a response. Nietzsche's claim to non-rationality through his vision, or revelation, of the Eternal Return is too easy a claim and too weak a reason to support his ideas. Anyone could use this method to support any number of ridiculous notions. Do not the madmen we sometimes encounter on the streets often speak in such ways and provide such proof for their statements? What more reason does one have to accept Nietzsche rather than the lunatic? Perhaps this is one reason why Nietzsche is thought by many to have already gone mad when he proposed the Eternal Return. Nietzsche's support of the Eternal Return then appears tantamount to the emperor's appeal to the beauty of his new clothes.

I then ask what further support Nietzsche could offer for his philosophy. I have always held that he sought proof of his notions through the reactions of his readers. One is to read his assertions and through reflection, often in anger at his claims, realize that they are true. Yet, what if one's reflecting on these subjects does not yield the result Nietzsche desires? He would likely say that this person is so ingrained with slave mentality that he cannot recognize these things. I suggest that this defense necessitates nothing and provides no proof to his claims. Yet, I still cannot disprove it. Such efforts on my part would entail reason, and his is not a rational defense. The proof

of my suggestion, as well as all of Nietzsche's philosophy, again is unattainable. Life can neither be proved nor disproved.

Looking back upon my intended goals, I notice that many of them have been actualized. One sees that a system of ethics can be formulated in the absence of a God or notion of divinity. The good life that is formed of this system depends heavily upon the philosophers' presuppositions. The distinction between Nietzsche's will to power and the Epicureans' swerve of particles reveals itself as the greatest of these considerations. It explains Nietzsche's advice for dangerous and adventuresome living as opposed to the Epicureans' quiet and safe life. Accordingly, the good life is a dispute between the models of the Epicurean gods and Nietzsche's overman. The question of which has the greater claim to the truth of the ethical good life is a matter not easily discerned. My attempts to do so show the Epicureans' concept as good within a small environment, but surely unattractive to many and also dangerous and unsustainable in a larger scale. Further, one must question what it is they actually grant to us in their philosophy that we either already had or bear no desire for. Nietzsche's claims simply are beyond rational verification, but not thereby automatically invalid. They must be explored and verified, if at all, on another plane. I raise objections which I believe do damage to his arguments,

but the issue surely is not yet resolved. In this way, Nietzsche's good life can neither be proved nor disproved. The true ethical life in a world lacking in divinity may not have been found in this inquiry, but it has been discovered that one is possible and that its format is heavily dependent upon the point from which one starts and one's beliefs regarding the structure and nature of the universe.

Epicurus. "Fragments from Epicurus Quoted in Greek Literature."

---. "Letter to Herodotus."

---. "Letter to Menecemus."

---. "The Principle Doctrines."

---. "Vatican Sayings."

Lucretius. *In Roman Helios*.

Natan, Lawrence J. *Mysticism and Eternal Recurrence: The Redemption of Time and Being*. Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, Inc., 1978.

Nibler, Richard W. *Happiness Through Tranquillity: The School of Epicurus*. London: University Press of America, Inc., 1984.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Anti-Christ, In Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ*. Ed. M.J. Hollingdale. London: Penguin Books, 1960.

---. *Ecce Homo*. In *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*. Ed. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books, 1969.

---. *The Gay Science*. Ed. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books, 1974.

---. *On the Genealogy of Morals*. In *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*. Ed. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.

---. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Ed. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Penguin Books, 1966.

---. *Unmodern Observations*. Ed. William Arrowsmith. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.

---. *The Will to Power*. Ed. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books, 1967.

Pfeiffer, Erwin. Nietzsche: The Dionysian. Lewisburg:  
Bucknell University Press, 1977.

Salter, William Mackintire. George The Thinker: A Study. New  
York: Fredrick Ungar Publishing Co., 1963.

Solomon, Robert C., ed. Selections from Nietzsche's Collection of Critical  
Essays. Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1966.

### Works Cited

Asmis, Elizabeth. Epicurus' Scientific Method. Ithaca:  
Cornell University Press, 1984.

Gaskin, John, ed. The Epicurean Philosophers. London: Everyman,  
1995.

Epicurus. "Fragments from Epicurus Quoted in Greek  
Literature."

---. "Letter to Herodotus."

---. "Letter to Menoeceus."

---. "The Principle Doctrines."

---. "Vatican Sayings."

Lucretius. De Rerum Natura.

Hatab, Lawrence J. Nietzsche and Eternal Recurrence: The  
Redemption of Time and Becoming. Washington, D.C.:  
University Press of America, Inc., 1978.

Hibler, Richard W. Happiness Through Tranquillity: The  
School of Epicurus. London: University Press of America,  
Inc., 1984.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. The Anti-Christ. In Twilight of the  
Idols and The Anti-Christ. Ed. R.J. Hollingdale.  
London: Penguin Books, 1990.

---. Ecce Homo. In On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce  
Homo. Ed. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books,  
1989.

---. The Gay Science. Ed. Walter Kaufmann. New York:  
Vintage Books, 1974.

---. On The Genealogy of Morals. In On The Genealogy of  
Morals and Ecce Homo. Ed. Walter Kaufmann. New York:  
Vintage Books, 1990.

---. Thus Spoke Zarathustra. Ed. Walter Kaufmann. New York:  
Penguin Books, 1966.

---. Unmodern Observations. Ed. William Arrowsmith. New  
Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.

---. The Will To Power. Ed. Walter Kaufmann. New York:  
Vintage Books, 1967.



Pfeffer, Rose. Nietzsche: Disciple of Dionysus. Lewisburg:  
Bucknell University Press, 1972.

Salter, William Mackintire. Nietzsche The Thinker: A Study New  
York: Fredrick Unger Publishing Co., 1968.

Solomon, Robert C., ed. Nietzsche: A Collection of Critical  
Essays. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press,  
1973.

Soll, Ivan. "Reflections on Recurrence."

Zuboff, Arnold. Nietzsche and Eternal Recurrence."

White, Alan. Within Nietzsche's Labyrinth. New York: Routledge  
Press, 1990.