

NIETZSCHE ON LOVING NECESSITY

Nina Han

West Virginia University

The irreversibility of the past is a naturally frustrating and agonizing aspect of human life. Once something has occurred, it becomes a permanent part of the past that cannot be modified in any way. Because of this, the past is often interpreted as a necessary aspect of life that we all must simply deal with and suffer from. However, in §276 of *The Gay Science*, German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche expresses a desire to “learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things.” Nietzsche desires to see the necessary aspects of life, such as the past, as beautiful: “*Amor fati* [love of fate]: let that be my love from now on!” But alas, this proves to be no easy task.

Moments of regret or missed opportunities are inevitably a part of everybody’s past, making it difficult to accept, and even further, *love* everything that has happened. It is not easy to perceive the past as beautiful; therefore, coming to this sort of conclusion is not something one simply awaits or finds off-handedly. An active effort must be made in order to see the past as beautiful, and acceptance is a first step towards this.

--

In §290 of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche introduces the idea of “giving style”:

“Giving style” to one’s character – a great and rare art! It is practiced by those who survey everything that their nature offers in the way of strengths and weaknesses, and then fit them all into an artistic plan, until each thing appears as art and reason, and even the weakness charms the eye.”

Here, Nietzsche is encouraging the reader to assess the kind of person they are by acknowledging their unique multitude of strengths and weaknesses, big and small. Following this assessment, these strengths and weaknesses should be formulated into an “artistic plan” of one’s life in a way where the strengths will shine and any weaknesses will not hinder one’s ability to succeed.

For example, I may have strong conflict management skills and pursue a successful, fulfilling career as a United States ambassador. On the other hand, public speaking may be my biggest weakness, but it is a weakness I can overcome by taking public speaking classes or simply pursuing a career in which I will rarely need to speak in front of large crowds. In the same way that an artist will assess the art supplies they have available and plan for a finished work of art based on this assessment, Nietzsche is encouraging us to assess our past and resulting nature to plan for a successful future.

This assessment of one’s nature is important to Nietzsche’s desire to “learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things” because many of one’s strengths and weaknesses can be attributed to an experience from the past. I may have strong conflict management skills because my parents argued often when I was young, and I would regularly help them resolve their issues. Additionally, I may be afraid of speaking in front of crowds due to an embarrassing experience from elementary school in which I fainted during a presentation. Because many aspects of my nature can be attributed to my past, giving style to my character and coming to terms with “everything that [my] nature offers,” signifies that I am accepting my past and the person I am today.

It is important to note that giving style to one’s character is neither an easy task nor implying that one’s fate is trapped by their past. The past has certainly had a substantial impact on the way one’s life has turned out; however, it is important not to idly stand by and let fate “do its thing.” Conscious

work is necessary, for the past is not something one actively assesses in day-to-day life. In order to accept my nature and work alongside it in my “artistic plan,” I must change what the past means for my future. What has happened in the past is set in stone, but its significance on my future is not. Growing up with argumentative parents may have fostered an anxious childhood, but I can take what I have learned from past experiences and transform it into something fulfilling. And by leading a fulfilling life despite unpleasant memories and their accompanying outcomes, I am in turn redeeming my past and the nature that it has provided me.

Nietzsche, at the end of §290 of *The Gay Science*, states that “one thing is needful: that human beings *attain* satisfaction with themselves.” Though one may have come around to accept their nature, there is a difference between an acceptance of one’s nature and attaining satisfaction with oneself. Accepting my flaws and the past along with it means that I have come to acknowledge that the past has influenced the person I am today, and I am able to move on with my life in a fulfilling manner. But to be *fully self-satisfied* with the person I have become is a step further. How can I know that I have truly reached self-satisfaction?

--

In §341 of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche introduces his famous scenario of eternal recurrence:

“What if one day or night a demon slinked after you into your loneliest loneliness and said to you: “This life, as you now live it now and as you have lived it, you will have to live once more and countless times more. And there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every pleasure, and every thought and sigh, and everything unspeakably small and great in your life must come back to you, and all in the same series and sequence – and likewise this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and likewise this moment and myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned over again and again – and you with it, you mote of dust!”

In response to eternal recurrence, Nietzsche offers this first reaction: “Wouldn’t you throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and damn the demon who spoke this way?” Producing this sort of reaction implies that there are many aspects of my life that I hold deep regrets for and would dread re-living. The demon has approached me in my “loneliest loneliness,” where I have nothing to think of but the life I have lived thus far. By “damning the demon who spoke this way,” while pondering my past, I clearly emote a lack of the self-satisfaction that Nietzsche deems needful and do not see the past as beautiful.

Next, Nietzsche offers a differing response to eternal recurrence: “Or have you experienced a prodigious moment in which you would answer him: “You are god and I have never heard anything more godlike!” Believing the idea of eternal recurrence to be “godlike” implies that the past and everything that it encompasses is beautiful. This person would, even further, *long* for eternal recurrence: “How benevolent would you have to become toward yourself and toward life in order to *long for nothing more ardently* than for this ultimate eternal sanction and seal.” To long for nothing more than eternal recurrence is to be fully self-satisfied, for I have come to see my past, every decision that composes it, and who it has shaped me to become as something to love and relive. The past, to me, is now beautiful. I have given style to my character, attained self-satisfaction, and achieved *amor fati*.

It is worthy to note that self-satisfaction may not be truly attainable. If I am completely satisfied with myself, it suggests a content, smug attitude that I am done evolving as a human being. Nietzsche states in §270, “*What does your conscience say?* – You shall become who you are.” If we are to become who we are, “who we are” is equivalent to “who we will become,” which in turn implies that

we will never stop becoming until our death. It is at one's death, and at no point before, that the artistic plan becomes a finished work of art.

Because self-satisfaction may not be truly attainable, it is arguable that no one would immediately jump to joy if presented with the idea of eternal recurrence. However, by creating an artistic plan for one's life, one can accept their strengths and weaknesses and in turn accept the past as it has happened. Then we may one day achieve *amor fati*, so that if presented with the fate of eternal recurrence, we may simply be able to stomach the idea of it becoming true.