

An Atheist's Eternity

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Abstract

If death is a deep sleep, then eternity is as one night—Plato. This philosophical letter offers atheism a solace for death based on recent support for the multiverse—a set of multiple universes. Contemporary physics aligns smoothly with the doctrine of the eternal return suggested by Nietzsche *et al.*, and offers an alternative to the doom and gloom of nonreligious existentialists.

Keywords

Religious Existentialism, Nietzsche, Eternal Return, Quantum Mechanics, Eternity

1. Introduction

Recent developments in physics can be paired with philosophical insights to provide an alternative pathway to religious conceptions of eternal life. Scientific discoveries and classifications have altered many religious-based conceptions of the origin, process, and diversity of life, but philosophical understanding and alternative views of life-after-death have been less informed by scientific discoveries—particularly quantum mechanics. I argue that Friedrich Nietzsche's elaboration of "the eternal return" offers a model that is compatible with recent discoveries about multiple universes. I draw on several philosophical traditions to guide my quest, but ground my argument in work by selected existential thinkers. I seek an alternative of "An Atheists Eternity" to a religious or "God" based assumptions about life, death, and the cosmological order. The foundation of this logic follows. I settle on three certainties for living, dying, and believing. First, to establish the essential truth claims of my thesis, it is necessary to set forth my basic assumptions about three "certainties." Second, the compatibility of the multiverse for the doctrine of "the eternal return" is discussed. Third, the implications of an eternal cosmology for an alternative view of Existentialism are offered.

2. Three Certainties

In order to find our first certainty, I must choose certainty as my test of truth. (Of course, there are other tests of truth such as the correspondence, the coherence, and pragmatic tests of truth and they all have their problems.) A problem of certainty as a test of truth is that there is only one thing I cannot doubt; therefore, there is only one thing of which I am certain. And that one thing/phenomenon is my existence; I cannot doubt that I exist. For example, when I have a toothache, I cannot doubt the pain, and although my hurting could be a dream, a hallucination, or a thought in the mind of God, I cannot doubt that I, in some sense, exist. Thus, our existence is our first certainty.

In order to find a second certainty, I must accept a fact/conclusion from inductive logic, which dictates that I shall most surely die, that death is certain. Because I was born, I owe nature a death. This is our second certainty.

A consequence of this second certainty is that, because I'm an old man, death is near and in order to transcend my fear of death. I need to make sense of the corporeal demise, including purpose, consequences, or what happens next. Many religions provide all this, but my quest is more secularly based, and as a rational being aware of science and developments and contemporary physics I need an absolute belief about the nature of eternity; I need a view of the universe which is supported by science, so I'm able to believe in it. Therefore, I need a third certainty. But the situation in science is tragic for mankind stands between the infinity of the microscope and the infinity of the telescope and between them is dark matter, about which science knows very little.

Hence, in order to find a third certainty, we must utilize psychology; therefore, our third certainty is of a psychological nature. While many thinkers have sought philosophical clarity through human perceptions and limitations, I choose Nietzsche's dictum: "Pain says go away, but all joy wills eternity, deep, profound eternity" (Nietzsche, 1954: p. 365). In other words, people seek pleasure and joy but try to avoid pain. Thus, I take my existence, which is the only phenomenon I cannot doubt, and will it to eternally return. I choose to embrace life, my existence, my body and the earth, and to give life the ultimate affirmation. The eternal return is the ultimate imprint of the world of being upon the world of becoming (Nietzsche, 1967).

By affirming life, I affirm my selfhood. Authenticity of selfhood is embracing one's self and one's world (Heidegger, 1979). Therefore, in my quest to love life, to embrace it, and give it the ultimate affirmation, I choose to live the very same life over and over again eternally. "Everything returns, including everything miserable, evil, and vile" (Nietzsche, 1954: p. 174). But all the joys of life also return such as those moments which "take your breath away." This is the doctrine of the eternal return or eternal recurrence.

I have an absolute belief that I have already eternally lived my life and shall continue to do so. In fact, I argue that my "De Ja Vu experiences" are a glimpse into a past life and a consequence of having lived the same life numerous times in the past. This belief reduces the "sting of death." If one has an absolute belief

about death and about what awaits one in eternity, then death is not so terrifying and death can be seen as a friend, as the path to the ultimate authenticity of selfhood.

This is where I find intellectual solace in science. Recent developments in science support the eternal return with the exception that small differences can exist between our lives; in fact, we could be living the same life—with small differences—in other universes right now (Greene, 2007). So, what are the recent developments in physics which both support and modify the eternal return?

3. The Multiverse

Now just because eternal recurrence is consistent with psychology—all joy wills eternity—does not prove its physical reality. However, if we live in a multiverse, where many universes exist, then the physical reality of the eternal return becomes a logical conclusion because finite elements through an infinite amount of time will recreate past combinations of atoms to reproduce my life, my universe. For example, imagine I am playing poker (5-card draw) and I'm dealt 5 random cards; eventually, if I play long enough, I shall get the same 5 cards again. And the identical argument can be made for living “this life” one more time: there are a limited number of elements in the universe which are interacting through an unlimited amount of time (Greene, 2007). (Indeed, the de ja vu experience is consistent with the multiverse and supports the doctrine of eternal recurrence).

Beliefs about eternal life have been tied to cosmologies of the day. For centuries people believed that the earth was the center of the universe and that the sun revolved around the earth. Today we now believe the earth revolves around the sun, and our solar system is part of a galaxy which is merely one of many galaxies. We do not even question this cosmology today and I believe that someday this will be true of the multiverse as well: it will be accepted as a fact. Humanity was once the center of creation, then humans were on a planet in the corner of the universe, and now our universe is not the sole universe. Humans were in error to think that our universe is the sole universe. What evidence points to a multiverse?

First, changing ideas about time is another critical development for conceiving of the multiverse. But what is time? We can only measure time by some type of repetitive process (Greene, 2007). Since time repeats itself, my being will repeat itself in time. To make things truly bizarre, space probably is in “reality” a two-dimensional hologram on the surface of a black hole, in addition, our everyday experience of time and space is an illusion because the past is not over yet and the future is already here. Einstein said our experience of time is an illusion (Einstein, 1961). Therefore, because the past is not over yet and because the future is already here, the experience of time is an illusion (Greene, 2007).

This is very important for the Nietzsche's view of the eternal return. It means that “this moment”, as you read these lines, you are determining your past as well as your future because the past is not over yet and because the future is already here. Thus, “this moment” is key in understanding eternal recurrence:

through “this moment” one creates one’s past and future.

Second, further support for the multiverse comes from developments in physics. In science, the multiverse is the only explanation for “the big bang.” Regarding the multiverse, Professor Susskind said, “It’s a hypothesis; there is no other hypothesis” for the big bang (Greene, 2007). At least three developments support the multiverse: Inflation, dark energy and string theory, which, essentially encompasses the first two. (String theory is an attempt to create the unified-field theory.)

The multiverse is the only hypothesis which explains string theory, the actual and surprising measurement of negative gravity, which drastically varies from its prediction by atomic theory, and inflation. Inflation is “the bang” and in “the big bang” (Vilenkin, 2011). About 14 billion years ago, our universe began when the big bang exploded geometrically with an unimaginable force, and then stopped, and then the universe continued to expand at a slower rate while gradually increasing its speed of expansion. This initial explosion is called inflation. However, since inflation did not stop everywhere at once, in the mathematical equations for inflation were also the equations for a multiverse. Because inflation did not stop everywhere simultaneously, Russian physicists showed that the math indicated that big bangs were continually occurring. Professor Susskind states in the Fabric of the Cosmos, “Scientists follow the logic and the logic seems to lead to a multiverse” (Greene, 2007).

However, before the multiverse could be accepted as a “reasonable” hypothesis, it had to wait for support from the measurement of negative gravity and from string theory. The third leg of the stool supporting the multiverse is string theory. String theory is a theory of everything, that behind the sub-atomic particles are little vibrating strings and the vibration of the string determines the particle’s properties. Although string theory explains everything, it also predicts other dimensions, which is to be expected if we live in a multiverse (Greene, 2007). The actual measurement of negative gravity—a decimal point followed by 122 zeros and a 1—is much less than that predicted by atomic theory; the small measurement of negative gravity in space confused scientists because the space within the atom contains a lot of energy. Presently, the multiverse is the only explanation for the small amount of negative gravity in space. There is no other explanation just as there is no logical explanation why the earth is 93 million miles from the sun; if this were not the case, then human beings would not be here to talk about it. (Kepler tried all this life to try to find out why the earth is 93 million miles from the Sun) (Greene, 2007). And it’s the same with negative gravity as it is with earth’s distance from the sun; if they were not what they in fact are, we would not be here to talk about them; but if a great number of universes were to exist, one would expect to find such a number for negative gravity somewhere in some universe. Thus, the multiverse is supported by inflation, dark energy, and string theory. The math points to a multiverse. Indeed, theory and mathematics predicted the existence of “black holes” before they were actually observed.

I welcome the multiverse because it provides support for the doctrine of the eternal return. I am an old man and I must have absolute certainty about the nature of eternity in order to counter the sting of death. The multiverse indicates that I shall relive my life and I'm possibly currently living it in another life with small differences which means one can improve one's life in small ways during "reincarnation."

4. Beyond Existentialism

The multiverse and the doctrine of eternal recurrence require a revision of existentialist tenets. According to existentialism, there is no absolute knowledge and life only has the meaning we give it. The world is essentially meaningless and human existence is simply a brute fact, it is stupid and absurd because there is no reason for it (Sartre, 1993). Human existence is just something that happened in an unintelligible or irrational universe and life has no meaning other than that given it by the existing individual; the world is essentially meaningless (Lyman & Scott, 1989). There are no absolute values; God is dead and mankind itself is in an intellectual desert (Nietzsche, 1981).

However, if the multiverse were proven to be true, this would change our view of life and death and, therefore, the meaning we give them would be more objective in the sense that science tells us that this universe is not the only universe and this life is not the only life. Our cosmology would change. Death would not be the end of all things. If we knew that the multiverse is an actuality and, therefore, this life is not our only life, then Sartre is incorrect in claiming that mankind has no nature but only a history, that mankind has no essence but only existence, that existence precedes essence. It appears the multiverse turns existence precedes essence upside down to essence precedes existence and mankind has the nature of eternally returning.

5. An Atheist's Eternity

As a nonreligious existentialist, I view this human existence as the eternal return because I know of only this existence and because it is the ultimate stamp of being on the world of becoming (Nietzsche, 1967). We atheists will find the eternity of the eternal return very refreshing compared to the doom and gloom of the nonreligious existentialists and the intellectual suicide of the religious existentialists. After all, is not the eternity promised by the eternal return better than no eternity at all? Is not the eternal return preferable to "death is the end of all things?" As Professor Richard Tursman stated in a lecture on 19th century philosophy, we no longer need to shudder at the fairy tale: "Once upon a time in the corner of the universe there existed a planet called earth, upon which intelligent animals lived and invented knowledge and the earth breathed a couple of times and passed out of existence" (personal class notes, Central Washington University, 1966).

That is a choice for the individual to make. I suspect that many people will prefer the heaven of the world's major religions to that of the eternal return. But

at least now the atheist has the choice of the eternal return as well as broken bits of eternity, of nothingness. I choose the eternal return!

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