

The Will to Metaphor
Kundera's New Angle of Nietzsche's Eternal Recurrence: A Theme with Variations
Kiran Sampath

Abstract

This paper is a tango between the German Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche and the Czech writer Milan Kundera. Nietzsche describes existence as a creative endeavor, an exertion of the creative-will. Human life, Kundera describes, embraces either existential lightness or existential weight. I argue that the creative-will collapses in the embrace of either. If we embrace lightness, meaningless conditions breed emptiness, moral perversity, and Nihilism, and our will is discouraged. If we embrace weight, put forth here as Eternal Recurrence (ER), our will is either crushed by the unbearable weight of responsibility, or contradicted through the simultaneous embrace of fatalism. Taken together, Nietzsche and Kundera draw an impossible situation for the creative-will. As such, my resolution is a new kind of ER, Recurrence as a Theme with Variations (inspired from Kundera's novel, *Immortality*). I locate self-creation within a Theme with Variations as "the will to metaphor."

Einmal ist Keimmal

The lighter concept of time is linear and transient. Chronophobia, the fear of time, then, is the condition of a species always in the sunset of dissolution. "One nearly dies [of chronophobia]," from "longing at the idea that [this time, and with it, all which possessed meaning, has] passed forever" (Nietzsche, 148). Eventually the will contemplates that since everything passes forever, nothing has any purpose, and embraces Nihilism, "the absolute repudiation of worth, purpose, desirability" (Nietzsche, 111). A life that occurs once and only once, is *unbearably light*, "and whether it was horrible, beautiful, or sublime, its horror, sublimity, and beauty mean nothing" (Being, 3). Kundera's characters who embrace existential lightness, are left empty. Recognizing the meaninglessness of everything, the will is dead in advance, and when it acts, its actions are morally perverse (infidelity, abandonment, etc.): "for in this world everything is pardoned in advance and therefore everything is cynically permitted" (Unbearable, 4). "A life which disappears once and for all, which does not return," kills the creative-will, since the will knows all to be volatile, evaporating just as it is being grasped: we need not exert our will (Being, 3).

Das schwerste Gewicht

The lighter concept of time – time as linear and irretrievable, the provocateur of chronophobia and Nihilism – is altered by Nietzsche, the author of Eternal Recurrence. "*The Heaviest Burden*," begins his insight, "[is that] this life... thou must live it once more, and also innumerable times; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and every sigh, and all the unspeakably small and great in thy life must come to thee again" (Nietzsche, 147). And so, the "precious," fleeting moments we lose to the sea of time are not due mourning: "[his] consolation is that everything that has been is eternal: the sea will wash it up again" and "transitoriness [will sing] her brief song again and again" (Nietzsche, 148 & 151). Our lives recur in the same sequence and succession for all eternity.

If we are to accept ER, we continue in one of two ways: as carriers of an unbearable weight; or, as fatalists. Kundera illuminates the former situation. In accepting ER, he tells us that the weight of unbearable responsibility lies heavy on every move we make. We trade unbearable lightness for unbearable weight: “we are nailed [to each choice we make for] an eternity just as Jesus Christ was nailed to the cross” (*The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 5). Nietzsche’s great consolation, ER, remedies chronophobia, only to replace it with cleithrophobia, the fear of being crushed, trapped, unable to leave. ER requires that we embrace existential weight, but eternity paralyzes the creative-will just as meaninglessness does. We are trapped in the eternal sand-glass of existence, forever wanting “To Leave the ground for once! To soar! To stray! To be mad!” (Nietzsche, 43). For Kundera’s characters who embrace existential weight, “the heaviest of burdens crushes [them], [they] sink beneath it, it pins [them] to the ground” (unbearable, 5).

If we are to accept ER, without the weight of unbearable responsibility, we must accept fatalism. Yet, there is a paradox between the fatalistic interpretation of ER finds and self-creation. Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*, the ideal man, is the master of self-creation, the poet of his own life, a being constantly overcoming and discovering the world anew. Though if fate is sealed, if nothing different or new can occur, the *Übermensch* can no longer self-create, discover, overcome. For the creative-will to act, it must believe itself to be free. Kundera’s characters who live under the motto “*es muss sein*” (it must be), excuse their lives as fated, and never will for anything other than what is.

Der schwer gefasste Entschluss

No matter what we embrace in Kundera’s lightness/weight opposition, “[his] most mysterious, most ambiguous [opposition] of all,” the creative-will cannot exert itself (Being, 6). And so, my difficult resolution is founded upon a passage in *Immortality*, a novel Kundera wrote six years after *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. The passage begins with an explanation of astrology: “the unrepeatability of the stars at the moment of your birth forms the permanent theme of your life, its algebraic definition, the thumbprint of your personality” (*Immortality*, 282). While, Kundera says, we often interpret astrology as fatalistic (you cannot escape your fate), cosmological patterns say something far more subtle: you cannot escape your life’s theme. In parallel, what Kundera invokes is something far more subtle than Nietzsche’s Eternal Recurrence: life resembles a composition that musicians call a theme with variations (*Immortality*, 283). Unlike ER every detail, “and this similarly this spider and that moonlight among the trees, and similar this moment, and I myself,” does not necessarily recur; however, “your life will always be built from the same materials, the same bricks, the same problems, and what will seem to you at first ‘a new life’ will soon turn out to be just a variation of your old existence” (*Immortality*, 285). Time is a circle, he insists, but when the shore washes up again, composed of the the same emotions, the same thoughts, the same eternal essence, life reveals itself in new forms.

This resolution, a Theme with Variations, revives the creative-will, which exerts itself through the embrace of metaphor. Metaphors, Nietzsche says, are our primary vehicles for exploring the world: “the drive toward the formation of metaphors is the fundamental human drive, which one cannot for a single instant dispense with in thought, for one would thereby dispense with man himself” (On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense). Driven toward the formation of metaphors, we will language into existence. Language is nothing but “a mobile army of metaphors” (On Truth...). Words possess no truth-value in and of themselves, but rather all language acts as an imperfect, “willed” metaphor meant to reveal true relationships and express real sentiments. Understanding the-will-to-language as an embrace of metaphor, we can further understand that material life is only a temporary metaphor for our life-theme, a variation

enacted by our creative-will. The same wants, the same burdens, the same souls, will come to us again and always, but in variations we will into existence.

Conclusion

Above I attempted to reconcile a series of concepts from Friedrich Nietzsche and Milan Kundera – among them, creative-will, existential lightness, existential weight, eternal recurrence, a theme with variations, and metaphor. In doing so, I presented the framework for a coherent conception of time, one which allows for Nietzsche's creative-will to exert itself through the embrace of metaphor.

Sources

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Abstract

This paper is a tango between the German Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche and the Czech writer Milan Kundera. Human life, Kundera defines the human condition as a tension between existential lightness and existential weight. The problem with existential lightness, both Nietzsche and Kundera reveal, if our lives are lived only once, all our choices are meaningless, is that it is both a call to nihilism and presupposes a world that is morally perverse: we experience the unbearable lightness of being. Nietzsche's insight of Eternal Recurrence, a circular conception of time in which all the details of life repeat ad infinitum. For Kundera, Nietzsche's Eternal Recurrence replaces existential lightness with weight, but not without consequence. If we are to accept Eternal Recurrence, each word we speak, each thought, becomes unbearably heavy: "we are nailed [to each for] an eternity just as Jesus Christ was nailed to the cross" (The Unbearable Lightness of Being, 5). Thus, both existential lightness and existential weight are unbearable, and one is paralyzed in fear of either (chronophobic or cleithrophobic). If we are to accept Eternal Recurrence, choices are either unbearably heavy, or completely determined. Drawing from Kundera's novel, *Immortality*, I present the possibility of a theme with variations, a circular account of time without recurrence of the same. I explain how Kundera's new angle suggests "the will to metaphor," which allows for self-creation through choice of metaphor.

Einmal ist Keinmal

The transient nature of the present moment is an encounter with unbearable lightness. This room, this paper: all is volatile, and evaporates as we reach out to grasp. Chronophobia, the fear of time, then is a condition of a species that is always in the sunset of dissolution. The omnipresence of chronophobia is a central theme to many writers, from Proust to Woolf, who by aestheticizing this transient nature, evoke the emotional suffering it causes: "one nearly dies from longing at the idea that it may have passed forever" (Nietzsche, 148). Kundera, less than capturing transient moments, aestheticizing nature in the sunset of dissolution, plays with the belief in a life that occurs once and only once: he writes, "a life which disappears once and for all, which does not return, is like a shadow, dead in advance, and whether it was horrible, beautiful, or sublime, its horror, sublimity, and beauty mean nothing" (Unbearable, 3). What becomes salient of his existentially light characters is their own emptiness. Intellectually we come to identify as Nihilists, believers in "the absolute repudiation of worth, purpose, desirability" (Nietzsche, 111). In its wake, we renounce all meaning, responsibility, and accept moral perversity: "Doubt in morality is the decisive factor. The downfall of the moral interpretation of the universe, which loses its *raison d'être* once it has tried to take flight to a Beyond, meets its end in Nihilism. 'Nothing has any purpose' (the inconsistency of one explanation of the world, to which men have devoted untold energy, – gives rise to the suspicion that all explanations may perhaps be false)" (Nietzsche, 111). Moreover, Kundera reveals "the moral perversity of a world that rests essentially on the nonexistence of return, for in this world everything is pardoned in advance and therefore everything is cynically permitted" (Unbearable, 4). Nietzsche and Kundera both reveal how this existential lightness Kundera and other authors describe can only, Nihilism "comprises a denial of a metaphysical world, and which forbids itself all belief in a real world." (Nietzsche, 116).

Das schwerste Gewicht

Our regular concept of time – linear and irretrievable, the provocateur of chronophobia and Nihilism – is altered by Nietzsche, the author of Eternal Recurrence. “*The Heaviest Burden*,” begins his insight, “[is that] this life... thou must live it once more, and also innumerable times; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and every sigh, and all the unspeakably small and great in thy life must come to thee again” (Nietzsche, 147). Our lives recur, and have recurred, in the same sequence and succession for all eternity, and all eternity past. If we are to accept Eternal Recurrence, we continue in one of two ways: as if this is our first cycle; or, as if this cycle is fully determined. If we assume this is our first cycle, Kundera reveals that we trade unbearable lightness for unbearable weight: now, the weight of unbearable responsibility lies heavy on every move we make. If, instead, we assume absolute determinism, we find that Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence, contradicts his belief in self-creation and responsibility

We need not mourn all that is fleeting, as we shall get it for an eternity: “ought one to pour the most precious salves and wines into the sea? My consolation is that everything that has been is eternal: the sea will wash it up again” (Nietzsche, 151). Eternal Recurrence does soothe chronophobia; we are relieved that however transitory the moment, “transitoriness [will sing] her brief song again and again” (Nietzsche, 148). But, in Kundera’s language, we escape unbearable lightness only for unbearable weight. However, chronophobia, fear of time, is replaced by a new kind of fear: cleithrophobia, the fear of being crushed, trapped, unable to leave. We are trapped in the eternal sand-glass of existence; we pray, “To Leave the ground for once! To soar! To stray! To be mad!” (Nietzsche, 43). Nietzsche presents eternal recurrence as “heavy,” but he believes that our belief in it will better our life. Kundera rationalizes that while necessity, weight, and value are three concepts inextricably bound, the weight of recurrence is as unbearable as the lightness of present; in this way unbearable weight crushes us, and it perhaps as paralyzing as lightness and Nihilism. While Nietzsche wants us to embrace the concept of weight, we cannot possibly accept responsibility for our every thought and decision as an eternal solid mass. For Kundera’s characters who embrace existential weight, “es muss sein” (it must be), “the heaviest of burdens crushes [them], [they] sink beneath it, it pins [them] to the ground” (unbearable, 5). Our choices crush us.

But alternatively, living it any other way causes us to live it deterministically, unable to possibly change, causing internal contradiction in Nietzsche’s own philosophy. There is a contradiction between eternal recurrence and self-creation and responsibility. Much of Nietzsche’s imperative is creating ourselves. The *Übermensch*, the goal Nietzsche sets for humanity, is the master of self-creation, who is constantly creating the world anew and overcoming. But if we are to accept Eternal Recurrence, we must too accept that nothing different or new can occur, everything is sealed, so how can we overcome, self-create, self-determine, and become? Just as Kundera frames how living life once excuses everything morally, living the same again and again, excuses everything as “fated.” Kundera’s characters when coming to terms with “es muss sein,” it must be, Thomas knows that time and time again he will abandon his family and go off with Tereza. If we act as if our acts are all fated, how do we exert will over this one life, this one recurrence, able to fall back on all the rest of eternity. Thus, in accepting Eternal Recurrence we meet one of two unfavorable situations. We believe we have no choice.

Der schwer gefasste Entschluss

Kundera defines our condition as trapped between unbearable lightness and weight, two undesirable and all consuming fears: “The lightness/weight opposition is the most mysterious, most

ambiguous of all” (Unbearable, 6). The difficult resolution is drawn from a chapter in *Immortality*, a novel Kundera wrote six years after *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. The chapter begins with an explanation of astrology: “the unrepeatable configuration of the stars at the moment of your birth forms the permanent theme of your life, its algebraic definition, the thumbprint of your personality” (Immortality, 282). Often, we recognize astrology as fatalistic, we cannot escape our fate; however, Kundera argues that the cosmological patterns say something far more subtle: you cannot escape your life’s theme: “Your life will always be built from the same materials, the same bricks, the same problems, and what will seem to you at first “a new life” will soon turn out to be just a variation of your old existence” (Immortality, 285). What Kundera invokes is something far more subtle than Nietzsche’s Eternal Recurrence; life “resembles a composition that musicians call a theme with variations” (Immortality, 283). Time is a circle, he insists, but when the shore washes up again, composed of the the same emotions, the same thoughts, the same eternal essence, life reveals itself in new forms.

Reconceiving Eternal Recurrence as a theme of variations, causes us to embrace metaphor more critically and more completely. The concept of metaphor was important to Nietzsche, and one he talked about extensively in *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*. In general, Nietzsche saw metaphor as the vehicle for exploring the world via language and perception. Metaphor has a truth value detached from the metaphor itself. Take for example the literary metaphor, “Sabina is a tigress.” If Sabina is a woman, she is not a tigress, but still the sentiment that she is a tigress might be true. Introducing agency and Nietzsche’s concept of will in combination with metaphor then, creates space for exerting the will-to-power as the choosing of metaphor of an inescapable life-theme. Just as Nietzsche presented language as composed only of imperfect metaphors, so to life itself is an imperfect metaphor representing something eternal and absolute – the theme of a life. Nietzsche himself said on metaphors that, “the drive toward the formation of metaphors is the fundamental human drive, which one cannot for a single instant dispense with in thought, for one would thereby dispense with man himself” (On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense). while Nietzsche sees the drive to metaphors in the creation of art, it is actually in one’s action in the world where the drive towards metaphors might be seen, as one acts representing something else, something greater, and eternal and absolute. Kundera’s characters too are drawn to metaphors, and obsessed with interpreting motifs – I think because the symbols, the emotions, some authentic essence is what recurs rather than the exact sequence of events. Nietzsche describes, our agency in life is that we can represent those materials, the recurring emotions, tonality, substance of our lives, in novel ways. “What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors...–in short, a sum of human relations which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically...metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power”. “The conceptual edifice is an imitation of temporal, spatial, and numerical relationships in the domain of metaphor”. The metaphors are revealed in art, but perhaps if we reconceptualize Eternal Recurrence, the metaphors are the manifestation of our each cycle. Everything joy and every pain and all the sources of meaning and suffering in your life will come back to you, but perhaps in new ways. Like how every function has infinite derivatives, when the eternal-sandglass flips, who can ensure the grains fall in the way.

Conclusion

Reading Nietzsche alongside the novels of Milan Kundera, I have commented to existential lightness, existential weight, and re-conceived of eternal recurrence not of the same but as a theme with variations. In the case of lightness, our choices become meaningless, as all is lost to the past and forever

irretrievable. If we are to accept the heaviest burden, Nietzsche's Eternal Recurrence, our choices either crush us, or do not exist, as we believe all is fully determined. In each case self-creation, and existential "okay-ness" appear impossible. However, if we rework Eternal Recurrence as not "the same" but "a theme with variations," we find that our lives have eternal meaning, but we have choice in manifestations of that meaning, through the formation of metaphors.

On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense

<https://www.kth.se/social/files/5804ca7ff276547f5c83a592/On%20truth%20and%20lie%20in%20an%20extra-moral%20sense.pdf>

volatility of the present

- Chronophobia → the fear of time/ hypersensitivity to the volatility of present
 - Eternal return as an answer to chronophobia, all will be re-lived, revisited, no need of subscribe of the unbearably light
 - “A life which disappears once and for all, which does not return, is like a shadow, dead in advance, and whether it was horrible, beautiful, or sublime, its horror, sublimity, and beauty mean nothing” (Unbearable, 3)
 - Hitler and the Guillotine illuminated by nostalgia/ everything illuminated by nostalgia in the light of dissolution → “the reconciliation with Hitler reveals the profound moral perversity of a world that rests essentially on the nonexistence of return, for in this world everything is pardoned in advance and therefore everything cynically permitted” (Unbearable, 4)
 - *Einmal ist keinmal* → what happens but once, might as well not have happened at all
- Fear of the heaviness of time, the heaviest burden
 - “We are nailed to an eternity as Jesus Christ was nailed to the cross” (Unbearable, 5)
 - “It will become a solid mass, permanently protuberant, its inanity irreparable” (Unbearable, 4)
 - “*Das schwerste Gewicht*” → the heaviest of burdens
 - Heaviest burden is fulfilling, our lives are closer to earth, more real and truthful, but the heavier burden is a crushing weight at the same time
 - “Necessity, weight, and value are three concepts inextricably bound: only necessity is heavy, and only what is heavy has value” (Unbearable, 33)
- We cant escape the fear between lightness and weight, both undesirable, what can we do?
 - Caught between two consuming fears
 - “The lightness/weight opposition is the most mysterious, most ambiguous of all” (unbearable, 6)
- Kundera’s response to this: a theme with variations
 - *Der schwer gefasste Entschluss* → the difficult resolution
 - Time is a circle
 - “The unrepeatable configuration of the stars at the moment of your birth forms the permanent theme of your life, its algebraic definition, the thumbprint of your personality” (Immortality, 282)
 - “And that’s life: it does not resemble a picaresque novel in which from one chapter to the next the hero is continually being surprised by new events that have no common denominator. It resembles a composition that musicians call a theme with variations” (Immortality, 283)
 - “Supposedly, astrology teaches us fatalism: you won’t escape your fate! But in my view, astrology (please understand, astrology as a metaphor of life) says something far more subtle: you won’t escape your life’s theme! From this it follows, for example, that it is sheer illusion to want to start all over again, to begin “a new life” that does not resemble the preceding one, to begin, so to speak, from zero. Your life will always be built from

the same materials, the same bricks, the same problems, and what will seem to you at first
“a new life” will soon turn out to be just a variation of your old existence” (Immortality)

- Tie in the idea of metaphor...
 - To Nietzsche the idea of metaphor is very important, and central to the reproduction of these “variations”
 - The moon is now the moon, and then the moon is the dancer,
 - Multiplying metaphors
 - Can you choose your motifs?
 - Nietzsche’s return to semiotics, sign language...