

Nietzsche's Eternal Recurrence (Eternal Return) In Relation To Lucretius

Post by "Cassius" of June 22, 2026 at 8:34 PM

Today I finally made some progress in reviewing the book "Nietzsche and Epicurus." I am probably only about half way through it. While there is definitely a lot of useful information in it, at least at the present I would not recommend it.

Here's an example, which I find to be a reprehensible outlook, but also an outlook that is indicative of people who want to place "relief from pain" as the center of Epicurean philosophy rather than pleasure. Because of course if relief from pain is your main concern, you wouldn't want to live forever (because you'd just keep encountering more pain and suffering).

And you would want to experience eternal recurrence, whether you could remember yourself from lifetime to lifetime or not, because of course by golly that would mean that you or someone else was experiencing the pain and suffering of being alive.

To repeat I find this to be both profoundly inaccurate and truly reprehensible ---totally opposite to both the spirit of Epicurean philosophy and the specific statement of Epicurus in the letter to Menoeceus that life is desirable.

But this is where you get to when you analyze Epicurus from an essentially negative / Buddhist perspective and conclude that the most important thing for any Epicurean is to avoid even a moment of pain. Truly a death-wish and death-worship:

Quote from Epicurus and Nietzsche Chapter 6 - Eternal Recurrence - Epicurean Oblivion, Stoic Consolation.... - Michael Ure and Thomas Ryan

Let us sum up the Epicurean treatment of the doctrine of eternal recurrence. Lucretius claims that a proper grasp of recurrence demonstrates the irrationality of our anxiety about future recurrences. We believe that we have grounds for anxiety about our future selves because we assume that this recurrence of the same configuration of atoms means we will once again experience the same sufferings we presently endure. Yet, Lucretius argues, we ought to have no fear for the future because we are psychologically insulated from our future selves. Just as we will not be there when we die, so too Lucretius claims we will not be there when we recur. As we have seen, Lucretius' argument is flawed on two separate fronts: on an 'identity' reading, Epicurean metaphysics does not warrant the non-identity of recurrent individuals, and on a 'concern' reading, it provides non-mnemonic grounds for anticipating or fearing future recurrences

Indeed, against Lucretius, it seems that the Epicurean notion of recurrence must compound my present suffering. Epicurean physics requires that I must admit that I will suffer again, rather than sink into eternal oblivion at the moment of death. The knowledge of my return must intensify and compound my present suffering because I know that I will experience it again and again. I cannot live tranquilly in the knowledge of eternal oblivion, but I must suffer in anticipation of the repetition of my past, present and unknowable future sufferings.

Lucretius' Epicurean therapy aims to show that death is redemption from the recurrence of life. Epicureans do not want recurrence (the return to life) or, indeed, immortality (the extension of life). To Lucretius the prospect of definitive death is preferable to immortality or recurrence because it eliminates all possibility of pain and sorrow. Since the only pleasure Epicureans value is the absence of all pain, death delivers this end definitively. Lucretius suggests that death is not terrifying since it is like a restful sleep, except it is an eternal, unbroken sleep in which 'no longing for ourselves [will] trouble us' (3.920).