

**Nietzsche's Overman, the Will to Power, and the Absolute Telos**

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Nietzsche focuses on the idea of the ideal individual as an underlying and vital theme in all of his writing. He examines the question of how man should live his life in this world. His answer encompasses his critique of moral systems, his declaration that God is dead, his revaluation of values, and his eventual presentation of the individual and the overman, in conjunction with the will to power and the eternal return of the same. Although many fail to detect a common theme in the writings of Nietzsche, all of his work is a projection of how a life ought to be lived, and how the ideal individual would regard living in this world.

The study of the ideal individual must begin with an examination of the background forces which he believes control man's existence and lower him to weakness and common status. From these depths, a higher being arises; an individual who is driven from within. What is it that drives such a man? How does Nietzsche, using the ideas of the will to power and the eternal return, conceive of an individual who can exist in the face of the fact that God is dead? Nietzsche presents the will to power as the idea of continuous self-overcoming, a never ending search that exists both internally and externally for the individual. This will to power is the motivating force for such a man. What, then, is this man striving for?

It is a common misconception among Nietzsche readers that he believed in striving for power, simply for the sake of having it. Nietzsche uses power as a relation, as the enabling force for his overman to reach the ideal existence, but also as the very essence of

existence itself. This self-overcoming is the basis of the continual search which Nietzsche presents as the focus of the life of the individual. Nietzsche espouses the ideal of the search, and disdains man's stagnation and complacency. With this in mind, we must ask if Nietzsche has a higher goal which the overman must have in mind as he searches perpetually. This must be a goal that would define and shape an entire life, yet never be realized. To borrow a term from Kierkegaard, must the overman have an absolute telos? What sort of goal would be appropriate for such an individual? In what way must he live his life to achieve this goal?

To begin the search for the ideal individual, it is essential to regard the society from which Nietzsche believes he must arise. Thiele explains this position in society, "The overman is the hero of an atheistic and morally destitute world; he presents the paradox of the avid pursuit of greatness when no transcendental standards exist. He must embody his own justification."<sup>1</sup> In the Genealogy of Morals, Nietzsche presents an in depth examination of his statement that "God is dead", which he makes in Thus Spoke Zarathustra. This is his scrutinizing analysis of our society, in which the idea of God had been corrupted and finally destroyed. Nietzsche outlines what he believes to be the destruction of moral foundations by examining the religious and social roots of the values to which many adhere. This "aesthetic and morally destitute" world exists because of a shift in values which Nietzsche observes. He sees that, generally, society's morals and values moved from a focus on good and bad to a focus on good and evil. In this shift, the

notion of the good changed dramatically, as did the notion of the moral individual.

Nietzsche claims that the overman will have to rise up out of society's mistaken notions of good and evil, defying such standards.

In the first essay of the Genealogy, Nietzsche outlines the shift from bad to evil, a shift that he considers as the downfall of morality throughout history to the present day.

Nietzsche parallels this shift in morality with a dramatic change in the definition of the

word "good". In the first era of morality, the word "good" was used to signify "with aristocratic soul", "noble", "with a soul of high order", and "with a privileged soul"<sup>2</sup>.

These definitions imply an inherent superiority in the fundamental nature of the "good"

individual. "Bad", then, was expressed as the direct opposite, with words such as

"common", "plebeian", and "low"<sup>3</sup>. Nietzsche uses these definitions to support his thesis

that in the past, the virtuous and just individual was also the strong and powerful figure in

society. Virtue implied a type of purity of soul that necessitated honesty and authenticity,

but also permitted force when required. Nietzsche blames the shift from "bad" to "evil" in

morality on the influence of the "priestly caste" and on the notion of guilt and bad

conscience as determining factors in an individual's action. This shift, which he titles the

"slave revolt", occurs when the weaker members of society, the common mob, band

together to overthrow the morality of the strong. Nietzsche claims that "the slave revolt in

morality begins when *ressentiment* (resentment) itself becomes creative and gives birth to

values: the *ressentiment* of natures that are denied the true reaction, that of deeds, and

compensate themselves with an imaginary revenge.<sup>74</sup> Instead of the life affirming morality of the nobility, of good and bad, the slave morality brings in the notion of evil. This evil represents all that is different or contradictory to the doctrines of the mob. It is reactive, rather than active, and lashes out at strength and power. This morality generates a religious ideal of purity which claims that all deviations from the prescribed behavior are sins. The priestly caste initiates and feeds into this denunciation by using the religious ideal of the weak man as the humble and preferred servant of God. The common man is taught that the ultimate value is purity of spirit, and the ultimate sin is the overcoming of one's fellow man. For this reason, the individual becomes overwhelmed with Nietzsche's notion of resentment, and the building anger grows into the foundation of the new values which condemn the individual who does not feel this bitterness. The strong man is punished for his strength, simply because the new concept of "good" dictates that he should be submissive and reactive.

The notion of reactivity is necessary in the slave revolt morality. Nietzsche claims that the "inversion of the value-positing eye" against the "hostile external world" and not inward on oneself is the essence of the resentment that breeds evil in the slave revolt morality. In section ten of the First Essay, he discusses how this is the exact opposite of the noble mode of valuation. He claims that in the noble morality, one sought other men of action, those of equal strength, and relished any competition with such superior beings. In the noble morality, the individual would respect, not resent, those who were stronger than

himself. The noble man would feel only disdain for the morally weak and impotent. He uses the example of the Greek nobility, who distinguish the lower classes with words that indicate pity and forbearance, as the nobles recognize their superiority and, out of compassion, regret that all men can not be as strong as themselves.<sup>5</sup> Nietzsche glorifies the noble morality's emphasis on action as its most vital characteristic. Any resentment or bitterness within this individual would be immediately eradicated through his own action to resolve it. He acts and forgets, not living on grudges and stagnating bitterly. His best description of what makes a man noble occurs in The Gay Science.

The passion that attacks those who are noble is peculiar, and they fail to realize this. It involves the use of a rare and singular standard and almost a madness; the feeling of heat in things that feel cold to everybody else, the discovery of values for which no scales have been invented yet; offering sacrifices on altars that are dedicated to an unknown god; a courage without any desire for honors; a self-sufficiency that overflows and gives to men and things.<sup>6</sup>

The noble man would be all of these things, as well as honest and upright, fully able to direct his moral criticism inward to examine his own flaws before condemning his enemies.

This is quite the opposite of the "man of *ressentiment*" who is constantly looking outward for faults and flaws. Nietzsche describes this individual as a festering sore, inactive and bitter.

His soul squints; his spirit loves hiding places, secret paths and back doors, everything covert entices him as his world, his security, his refreshment; he understands how to keep silent, how not to forget, how to wait, how to be provisionally self-deprecating and humble.<sup>7</sup>

Nietzsche's man of resentment is cunning and clever, full of repression and malice. The irony of this shift is that such a man will maintain that his spirit is far purer than the noble and active individual. Nietzsche again attributes this irony to the influence of the priestly caste. He claims that the religious mentality is life negating, encouraging individuals to become weak, band together, and wallow in their hatred of vitality. The followers, or members of this herd, are indoctrinated with the notion that "the meek will inherit the earth" and that any display of strength of the individual will is a display against the will of God. Their efforts to negate the will of the individual stems from their own lack of will and their dependence on the mob for strength. Nietzsche claims that this contradiction is antinatural, and that the strength of the few truly moral individuals will triumph.

To demand of strength that it should not express itself as strength, that it should not be a desire to overcome, a desire to throw down, a desire to become master, a thirst for enemies and resistances and triumphs, is just as absurd as to demand of weakness that it express itself as strength.<sup>8</sup>

This quotation exemplifies Nietzsche's own belief of what should constitute true virtue and morality. He believes that any attempt to suppress the will of the strong man is absurd, and that the weak man of inaction is incapable of holding a position of power in a moral society. His morality is based on a strong recognition of the autonomy of the will and an emphasis on the concept of man as a being with the desire to strive and achieve. He considers the ultimate sin to be stagnation, and the ultimate virtue to be the constant overcoming of oneself and one's obstacles. It is out of the convoluted moral structure of good and evil that his overman must rise to maintain his own standard of virtue.

Nietzsche presents this genealogy of morals as a companion theory for his ideas of the overman. These ideas represent the prevailing sentiments which the overman must overcome within himself to be truly noble, honest, and authentic. A discussion of Nietzsche is not complete without an examination of the nihilism he presents, both active and passive. Passive nihilism is the life negating belief that everything is without value or purpose, it is the "will to nothingness".<sup>9</sup> Active nihilism is more outspoken and destructive in the execution of these beliefs, whereas passive nihilism is more stagnant, simply denying life without filling that void with any activity. Nietzsche uses the lifestyle of the ascetic monk to represent this active nihilism. The ascetic life lacks creativity and individuality, it is spent trying to exorcise those characteristics from the individual through every means possible. The monk represses his every physical and emotional desire in an attempt to attain a purity sufficient to win him God's favor. This is the ideal example of how the rejection of all egoistic actions has become a value in itself, although in this situation it is to no one's benefit. The monk, one of the leaders of the "priestly caste," promises better things to come after this world, if one only denies oneself temporal pleasures and desires. Nietzsche claims that this denial of life was contorted into a value by the members of this caste in order to initiate the transition from bad to evil. This nihilism claims purity of soul is achieved as the individual denies himself for a higher goal, that is God and the afterlife. In this system of morals, true believers are those who are weak and find themselves deserving of pity. They are members of the common mob; sheep who follow the every



command of their leader as their path to “salvation”. They sell their souls and their lives to this nihilism, denying any scrap of individuality or self-interested motivation they may feel. This system originated among the “common” people who recognized their weakness and felt themselves inferior to the nobles and therefore deserving of pity. As time progressed, this group transformed their weakness into a virtue in the eyes of God. By idealizing their submission and life negating attitude, they justified their behavior and eventually called for a condemnation of the values which had once reigned, those of the strong man.

Nietzsche recognizes the chief distinction in these systems of value, the changing definition of what constitutes purity of spirit. He explains, “While the noble man lives in trust and openness with himself (*gennaios* ‘of noble descent’ underlines the nuance ‘upright’ and probably also ‘naive’), the man of *ressentiment* is neither upright nor naive nor honest and straightforward with himself”.<sup>10</sup> For his overman, purity is the embodiment of this uprightness and straightforward honesty. The overman can’t be expected to subject himself to the will of another; it is not in his power. He rises out of this nihilism with his own life affirming values, derived from within himself. The overman rejects religion; he realizes that “God is dead.” He understands that this death stems from the life-negating properties forced upon religion by the priestly caste, in an effort to justify their own weakness. His purity of values lies in the fact that they come from within himself; he is a completely autonomous moral agent.

Nietzsche presents the overman’s value system as a combination of reason and

passion, intuition and self-serving greed. The overman will not bow to the will of another, but will use his own judgment in every matter. The noble man does not shirk from conflict or violence, but he does not seek them either. He simply moves along his course, his enemies being those who obstruct his path. "To be incapable of taking one's enemies, one's accidents, even one's misdeeds seriously for very long -- that is the sign of strong full natures in whom there is an excess of power to form, to mold, to recuperate, and to forget. Such a man shakes off with a single shrug many vermin that eat deep into others."<sup>11</sup> The strong man is devoid of the bitterness and resentment that rot to the core of the weaker man. He is able to confront his enemies, as well as his mistakes, with the full confidence that he is strong and correct. He does not wallow in the past, nor resent others, because he has the life-affirming belief that he himself is powerful as an individual.

In a society of morals that values nihilism, self-deprecation, and asceticism, the overman would seem egotistical and arrogant. His acts would appear greedy and thoughtless, when in reality they would be the most thoughtful of all. The morality that Nietzsche's overman possesses is often mistaken for selfishness and cruelty. Because society rejects any individual who exerts or expresses his power over others or himself, as in the process of self-overcoming, the overman is considered a sinful and antisocial creature. Instead, Nietzsche claims that it is absurd for us not to expect the strong man to exhibit his strength, to impose his will upon the weaker, and to use his power to reach his ends. He gives the example of lambs, who dislike the birds of prey who feed on them. The

lamb then believe that the birds are evil, and all that is opposite of the bird is necessarily good. Nietzsche claims that society fictitiously supposes that “the strong man is free to be weak and the bird of prey to be a lamb-for thus they gain the right to make the bird of prey accountable for being a bird of prey.”<sup>12</sup> In this example, Nietzsche brings out one of his primary ideas, that every individual has a will which can't be suppressed. The weak man, bitter towards his condition, is still subject to this willing, which he transforms into resentment. “*A will to nothingness*, an aversion to life, a rebellion against the most fundamental presuppositions of life; but it is and remains a *will!*...And, to repeat in conclusion what I said in the beginning: man would rather will *nothingness* than *not* will.”<sup>13</sup>

Nietzsche finds that every human being has a will from which he can not escape. In the weak man, this will is turned inward upon itself, manifested as asceticism and a denial of life, and displayed in nihilism. In contrast, the strong man turns his will outward. Like the bird of prey, he doesn't overpower the weaker simply because of their weakness, they are of no concern to him since he is aware of his superiority. The will of the strong man provides the basis for his own individual moral system, and is the motivating force for his every action.

Nietzsche sees the overman as a constantly active individual. Instead of the resentful stagnation of the ascetic, the overman is continually moving forward. Nietzsche presents this constant focused activity as the will to power. He believes that every individual possesses a will, and the direction in which it is turned determines some aspect

of that individual's character. For the overman, it must arise from his overcoming of resentment and bad conscience, and raising himself out of the morality of evil. The overman's will stems from within himself, and is constantly directed outward, but always related in some way back to himself. This relation brings about the distinction which is often glossed over by those who study Nietzsche. The will to power is not simply the raw exercise of power over others, but a will directed on a certain course by the overman himself. This will can be described as a constant self-overcoming, a continuous change and activity within and outside of the individual.

When addressing the notion of the will to power, three separate issues must be regarded in clarifying this idea. What is the will to power? Why is the will to power a necessary aspect of the overman's being? How is it possible to explain the will to power in the sense of pure "becoming", without regarding future intentions or goals? With the clarification of these three issues, it will be possible to proceed to a discussion of the eternal return, and an examination of how these two ideas are compatible.

Such clarification will also answer the question of how the overman can search perpetually, and with what goal in mind. The will to power is an idea posited by Nietzsche about how certain individuals ought to live. This standard of living is in sharp contrast with his analysis of morality, specifically the slave-revolt morality, which describes the society from which such individuals would arise. How is it possible for such an individual to develop his own will to power when his environment is telling him that to be a strong

willed individual is a sin? Is such strength innate within certain characters? The will to power is the essential element in the character of the individual, and it is necessary to examine how his own will shapes his life, his behavior, and his character.

The "will to power" is a misleading term for the idea Nietzsche intends it to represent. It does not signify the desire for power, physical or social, over others. Instead, the will to power is the will which is the inseparable basis of the individual and his thoughts, and which manifests itself externally as decisive action.

"All 'purposes,' 'aims,' 'meaning' are only modes of expression and metamorphoses of one will that is inherent in all events: the will to power. To have purposes, aims, intentions, *willing* in general, is the same thing as willing to be stronger, willing to grow -- and, in addition, willing the means to do this."<sup>14</sup>

Any man that acts is using his will to power. In its simplest form, the will to power is what keeps man alive, it stands behind his every action, and promotes the individual's existence. It is the will to power that is squelched when the slave revolt morality takes hold. Man is encouraged to act not for himself but for others; he is told to deny his own passions and desires. The will to power, in contrast, encourages man to create his own path and bring about his own personal achievements. This description of the will to power only scratches the surface of the meaning Nietzsche intended for this phrase.

The will to power is not merely the will to remain alive, but extends much further into every single action of man. "A living thing seeks above all to *discharge* its strength -- life itself is *will to power*; self preservation is only one of the indirect and most frequent *results*."<sup>15</sup> The will to power is the will for a continuous self overcoming, a constant

becoming. The overman does not find his pleasure in an escape from or denial of this will, but in accepting the challenge of the will and allowing it to experience itself.

“It is *not* the satisfaction of the will that causes pleasure (I want to fight this superficial theory -- the absurd psychological counterfeiting of the nearest things), but rather the will’s forward thrust and again and again becoming master over that which stands in its way. The feeling of pleasure lies precisely in the dissatisfaction of the will, in the fact that the will is never satisfied unless it has opponents and resistance. -- ‘The happy man’: a herd ideal.”<sup>16</sup>

Nietzsche strongly rejects the idea that the goal of the will is to bring happiness to the individual. He claims that such happiness would only cause stagnation and inaction, and therefore turn the will against itself. The will constantly seeks new challenges to master and new enemies to conquer. Nietzsche is deliberately vague about the nature of these challenges. He never alludes to the idea that the overman is a bully or a menace to society, simply out for a good fight. The overman is also a thoughtful and purposeful individual, who would undoubtedly resist senseless violence as a mere physical challenge. The overman’s greatest conquests are derived from within himself. He would savor the highest tests of his own bravery and courage. He does not seek to prove himself to others in society, the esteem of his inferiors means nothing to him. Instead, he surpasses himself, again and again. As soon as he satisfies one challenge, he moves on to a greater one. The overman derives very little pleasure simply from savoring his successes. It is this sense in which Nietzsche uses the word “power”. He means to imply the force with which the overman pushes himself further and further, mastering everything in his path. This power is described in relation to pain and pleasure as Nietzsche seeks to define the latter terms as

reactions, rather than ideals that we seek.

“Pleasure and displeasure are mere consequences, mere epiphenomena-what man wants, what every smallest part of a living organism wants, is an increase of power. Pleasure or displeasure follow from the striving after that; driven by that will it seeks resistance, it needs something that opposes it-Displeasure, as an obstacle to its will to power, is therefore a normal fact, the normal ingredient of every organic event; man does not avoid it, he is rather in continual need of it; every victory, every feeling of pleasure, every event, presupposes a resistance overcome.”<sup>17</sup>

Nietzsche explains that the individual seeks power, rather than pleasure. He believes that the feeling of pleasure is only obtained after the overcoming of some obstacle; it is not a simple physical sensation. The will to power, then, is the will to overcome the challenges which the will assigns to itself, which represents a life being lived fully. Nietzsche uses the example of the artist who is continually creating, and who is driven by his passion, to express the manifestation of the will to power in the individual. The artist experiences this constant self overcoming in his constant creativity and production, which forces him to continue meeting new and greater challenges. The overman would experience the will to power as this constant overcoming, because he is the man of action. The weak man would deny and ignore this will, in an attempt to destroy it, which would lead to him resenting and condemning those who exercised their own will. This exercise of the independent will would be labelled by bitter adherents to the slave morality as a sin, because it would bring harm to those who were too weak to accept their will and face the overcoming. The overman, as he pushed the weak men aside, would be recognizing them as weak, rather than praising them for their humility. Such concrete evidence of the superiority of the

overman is unacceptable to the priestly caste, as they exercise their own resentful will in wanting all men to be weak and guilt ridden in the eyes of God and their fellow man.

Hence, the will to power is often labelled as a barbarian exercise of violence over others.

Instead, it is one strong individual experiencing the constant process of becoming and striving as he overcomes himself and the obstacles which he must face.

The next question to recognize is why is the will to power a necessary and defining aspect of the overman's character. The overman is, simply, the human embodiment of the will to power in action. The overman is characterized by his strength of mind and spirit, his determination, his purposefulness and purity of values. The will to power is the driving force behind all of these characteristics. It is the overman himself.

Heidegger illuminates Nietzsche's teaching on the commanding will when he writes that the person who commands has at their conscious disposal the means for effective action. In other words, the commanding will is a self-reflective will and can be nothing other. The commanding will is a will which has the power to actualize itself. This leads Heidegger to argue that what the will *wills* in will to power is not something it merely strives after because it is simply lacking in this something (namely, power), but rather what the will wills it has already for the will wills *itself*.<sup>18</sup>

This explanation of the will to power makes it most explicit and indicates why it such a necessary part of the overman himself. The will to power is not just a drive for strength or power, but a self-reflective will, as Heidegger claims. It is the will of the individual willing itself, affirming itself and therefore, affirming the life of the individual. Only the life of the overman would be so affirmed, because that is the only life in which the will is accepted and allowed to flourish in this acceptance of self. Only the overman has the will to action



and decisive change. For this reason, he is the only one who is capable, when regarding his own life, of affirming what he has done as moral and 'good', and therefore willing its continuance. From these ideas, it must be accepted that the overman must escape from the slave morality presented by Nietzsche and found in our society. The adherents to such a morality, when reflecting on their lives and deeds, would be filled with bitterness, regret, and resentment, and would not be capable of the self-affirmation of the will which Nietzsche presents as fundamental to the will to power. In the process of self-reflection, they would wish to annihilate their past deeds, and condemn the will that had made them act as they did. They could not affirm their actions and choices, nor could they fully affirm their own lives as they had chosen to live them in this world. This distinction highlights the overman as unique. He is the only one whose will affirms itself. In many ways, the ideas of the will to power and the overman are circular. The overman performs acts of decisive strength and thoughtfulness (in the sense of great thinking, not generosity), and is then able to be pleased with himself, if only momentarily, as he reflects on these acts. Because he is able to feel this pride, his will to power strengthens, willing itself to a greater degree. As he further affirms his own will, he is provoked to greater decisive action and passion. This circularity is again reflected in the notion of the constant becoming of the will to power. This is a continual process which will never be completed.

"If the motion of the world aimed at a final state, that state would have been reached. I seek a conception of the world that takes this fact into account.

Becoming must be explained without recourse to final intentions; becoming must appear justified at every moment (or incapable of being evaluated; which amounts to the same thing); the present must absolutely not be justified by reference to a future, nor the past by reference to the present. 'Necessity' not in the shape of an overreaching, dominating total force, or that of a prime mover; even less as a necessary condition for something valuable."<sup>19</sup>

It is here that Nietzsche enters the heart of his discussion of the will to power and the overman. He explains that we must regard the overman's state of continual becoming as an infinite journey, without a defined conclusion. This idea raises the questions which lie at the heart of this thesis. What, then, should the overman strive for? Without justifying his present actions through reference to the future, how can he have any strong feelings whatsoever? Must he have an absolute end in sight, although he'll never reach it, or does this defy Nietzsche's definition of constant becoming? These questions can only be answered with a thorough examination of how Nietzsche's idea of the eternal return affects the will to power and therefore the life of the overman.

First, though, it is essential to clarify the state of constant becoming which Nietzsche presents. He claims that the will's overcoming of itself is a continual process of becoming, one that will never reach a final state. The individual will never reach a perfect nirvana, but will always feel the self-reflective affirmation of his action through the will to power. He will continue to act decisively, although he never knows the full potential he may reach. When Nietzsche claims that "the present must absolutely not be justified by reference to a future, nor the past by reference to the present," his meaning is unclear. It is

possible that he is declaring that the individual should live with only the present in mind, not planning for the following day or week, nor reflecting at all on his past. It is more likely that Nietzsche is prescribing a course of behavior that dispells stagnation, which arises from excessive reflection but lack of decisive action. Nietzsche's ideal example of justifying the present by reference to the future is the ascetic monk. The monk determines his every action in this life only after careful reflection about how it would affect him in the next. He becomes mired in speculation over the most "holy" behavior, the one which will bring him the greatest rewards after his death, and is unable to act decisively. He denies this life for the sake of the next, thus also denying his own will to power and his individual self. The same problem occurs with those who justify the present by reflecting on the past. They fall into the trap of the constant "what if", and fail to accept the present as it is. They are the ones who cry out that they are not at fault, but are victims by virtue of their weakness. These individuals, which Nietzsche refers to as the "common" or "weak" in his discussion of morality, are incapable of decisive action. They simply follow the prescriptions of the herd and live blindly. The overman must live in this state of constant becoming, but it must be a state of constant action as well. He must live with a decisiveness and passion which controls his every action. Nietzsche speaks of the "value of life", meaning the values by which the overman must live his life. "Life is a unique case; one must justify all existence, and not only life-the justifying principle is one that explains life, too. Life is only a *means* to something; it is the expression of forms of the growth of

power.”<sup>20</sup> Initially, this statement seems contradictory to Nietzsche’s idea of the constant becoming which is the foundation of the will to power of the overman. Instead, this idea of justification must be regarded as a higher, more internal and personal, form, unlike the justification of the ascetic monk. Nietzsche states that one must justify all existence, not simply one’s own life. Therefore, the will to power of the overman must be more than a simple motive behind his actions leading to an end such as a place in heaven in the afterlife. What is this justification of which Nietzsche speaks? What makes it different from the prohibited justification which refers ahead to the future and back to the past? Nietzsche claims that “becoming must appear justified at every moment”, but also that one must justify “all existence and not only life”. How are these justifications compatible, and in what way are they related?

It is essential to examine Nietzsche’s idea of the eternal return of the same for answers to these seeming contradictions. Through the combination of the eternal return and the will to power, two seemingly opposed notions, Nietzsche comes to a resolution. He clarifies, although not explicitly for the reader, exactly what the justification of the life of the overman is. The eternal return is conceptually the most difficult of Nietzsche’s ideas to grasp. The eternal return is the idea that every action and every aspect of life will be repeated, exactly as it occurred, for an eternity. The eternal return is not a concept of an after life, nor does it imply that our lives are part of a film that will be replayed over and over. The force of his theory is that we will relive our lives, from start to finish, exactly as

we are living them now, and exactly as we have lived them innumerable times in the past. It is unclear whether Nietzsche presents this theory as a metaphysical possibility, or as a thought exercise for the individual, in his process of understanding the justification of will to power and of action. In either case, he intends the eternal return to be an idea with shocking force, that jogs the reader out of regarding life as either a foundation for something higher, or an experience to be passed over unthinkingly.

Kaufmann outlines what he believes to be the four primary facets of the eternal return in his introduction to the Gay Science.

Nietzsche's associations with this doctrine are complex, but they cannot be understood unless one realizes that (1) his primary reaction is that no idea could be more gruesome. Nevertheless, (2) he takes it for 'the most *scientific* of all possible hypotheses' and feels that any refusal to accept it because it is such a terrifying notion would be a sign of weakness. Then (3) he discovers that there are moments and perhaps even ways of life that make this idea not only bearable but beautiful, and (4) asks whether it might not serve a positive function.<sup>21</sup>

Nietzsche confronts the idea of "weightlessness", or nihilism, which is the notion that nothing at all has value. He presents the eternal return as the ultimate contrast, giving every action "the greatest weight" because it will be repeated eternally.<sup>22</sup> Nietzsche himself presents the idea of the eternal return in one of the most thoughtful and compelling passages in all his writing, section 341 of The Gay Science.

*The greatest weight.* -What, if come day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: 'This life as you now 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 sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence-even this spider and this moonlight between the

trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!’

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. The question in each and every thing. ‘Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?’ would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight. Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life *to crave nothing more fervently* than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?<sup>23</sup>

Nietzsche presents the possibility of the eternal return evoking either ultimate horror or ultimate joy in the reader. He believes that, when presented with this notion, the individual will reflect on life and come to the realization that he has been living weightlessly, without concern or passion in his actions. As Kaufmann says, there are four aspects of the theory which must be regarded. Firstly, the horror at such a “gruesome” theory. When one reflects on the reality of a lifetime repeated eternally, every action is put in a different light. A lifetime repeated eternally seems like a hellish torture, dull, repetitive, and without any significance. Kaufmann then claims that the denial of this idea is a sure sign of weakness. Any individual who is unwilling to accept the possibility of the eternal return, according to Nietzsche, is unable to contend with this theory as a reality. For such a weak individual, repetition of a single lifetime would be the ultimate torture. As the weak man, he would have to be constantly confronted with the fact that he would have to endure his own weakness for an eternity, and be perpetually caught in a lifetime badly lived. On the other hand, some might find this idea not only bearable but the most desirable of all. According to Nietzsche, these individuals would have experienced, at one point in their lives, a

moment so tremendous that it provided the justification for the eternal repetition of their lifetime. The positive aspect of this repetition lies in the fact that it does provide the justification which was lacking in Nietzsche's theory of the will to power. The eternal repetition of the "tremendous moment" would be the ultimate experience of joy for the individual.

Nietzsche presents the same idea in a very different context in Thus Spoke Zarathustra. He gives a more physical and tangible expression, using a conversation between Zarathustra and the dwarf.

"Behold this gateway, dwarf!" I continued. "It has two faces. Two paths meet here; no one has yet followed either to its end. This long lane stretches back for an eternity. And the long lane out there, that is another eternity. They contradict each other, these paths; they offend each other face to face; and it is here at this gateway that they come together. The name of the gateway is inscribed above: 'Moment.' But whoever would follow one of them, on and on, farther and farther-do you believe, dwarf, that these paths contradict each other eternally?"

"Behold," I continued, "this moment! From this gateway, Moment, a long, eternal lane leads *backward*: behind us lies an eternity. Must not whatever *can* walk have walked on this lane before? Must not whatever *can* happen have happened, have been 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? And are not all things knotted together so firmly that this moment draws after it *all* that is to come? Therefore-itself too? For whatever *can* walk -- in this long lane out *there* too, it *must* walk once more."

"And this slow spider, which crawls in the moonlight, and this moonlight itself, and I and you in the gateway, whispering together, whispering of eternal things -- must not all of us have been there before? And return and walk in that other lane, out there, before us, in this long dreadful lane -- must we not eternally return?"<sup>24</sup>

But the dwarf was gone. Zarathustra was left to face the eternal return himself. The dwarf in this passage represents nihilism, which is banished by the "greatest weight" of the

eternal return. Nietzsche presents the idea of the two paths, stretching eternally in either direction, but meeting at the moment, where Zarathustra stood. The depiction of the moment has a double significance in this passage. In one sense, the moment represents the present time. No matter how long and far Zarathustra walks on either path, he will always be at the gateway of the moment, because he will always be in the present time. The second significance of the moment in this passage is one of realization. It is at this time that Zarathustra understands the eternal return, and therefore this very specific "moment" in his life will have tremendous and decisive importance for him. Just as if the demon had come to speak to him, he feels the "greatest weight" of eternity now present in his life. Both of these expressions of the eternal return represent the same idea. They show how the "ultimate eternal confirmation and seal" on a lifetime can be either the most terrible or the most joyful thought for an individual. In *Nachlass* (XIV:306), Nietzsche himself says "The moment is immortal in which I produced return. For the sake of this moment I bear return."<sup>25</sup> In this statement, Nietzsche makes clear his own feelings about the theory of the eternal return and the moment. He is both joyful and terrified at the idea he has presented. He claims that the moment in which he produced the notion of the eternal return is so magnificent that it makes the entire concept bearable. This is the ideal example of the "tremendous moment" he speaks of in The Gay Science; a moment which justifies an entire lifetime, as well as all of eternity.

Nietzsche describes the moment he realized the eternal return as the moment which



justified his lifetime. He believes that, for the overman, the realization of such eternal repetition would be a joyful experience, but not necessarily the moment which *justifies* this repetition, as it was for him. Rather, the overman would already have certain moments or experiences in his life which were so overwhelming and decisive that they provide the justification for the endless repetition. Therefore, Nietzsche is not claiming that the moment of realization is not the moment which justifies a lifetime. Instead, he posits that if one already experienced tremendous moments, the moment of realization would be equally joyful because the individual would have the "ultimate eternal confirmation and seal."<sup>26</sup>

The theory of the moment is conceptually very difficult. Nietzsche presents the idea that all of eternity will be repeated endlessly, and we will live our lives over and over infinitely. He accepts that this proposition is frighteningly terrible for most individuals, they would find themselves trapped reliving a life which they lived unthinkingly. He then asks whether there has ever been a moment in our lives which was so tremendous that it would justify this endless repetition for all of time. In his theory of the overman, Nietzsche presents the ideal individual, one who would have a lifetime of decisive and passionate moments. Nothing would give this individual more joy than to have such a lifetime repeated for eternity. He would have lived a lifetime in which he was completely and fully his own person, and the repetition of this would give immortality to his personal will. By affirming the moment, the individual affirms all of eternity which has contributed to the making of this single instance. He affirms not only his own life, but every event that has

ever transpired and will ever occur for the remainder of eternity, because the combination of these events brought about his existence as he knows it. The moment must be so magnificent and life shaping that it justifies any and all things that came before it and will come after it, as well as the eternal repetition of these occurrences. This raises the most important question of all. What sort of a moment could be so provocative as to provide the justification of all eternity? This moment must be an individual experience; therefore, the justification is only for the one who experienced it. Only he can make this justification, which in no way affects others around him. The justification of eternity, at least conceptually, is life shaping experience beyond compare. Nietzsche believes that the life of the overman would be composed of some such moments. He would be in a constant state of affirming not only his life but the whole of time. What sort of a lifestyle could one lead which would be filled with such tremendous moments? What pursuits are appropriate for the overman, and what sort of a life should he lead?

Although Nietzsche realizes that a lifetime of these moments is, for most, an ideal, rather than a possible reality. He states his goal (In *Nachlass* XIV:306.) "to attain the overman for one moment. *For this* I suffer everything!"<sup>27</sup> In this excerpt from his notes, he presents the overman as a mode of being which can be "attained", almost as one attains a state of higher consciousness as a result of meditation in Zen Buddhism. The use of the word "attained" makes it clear that the status of overman is something one should strive for, it is not passively conferred on those lucky enough to receive it. Every individual has the will to

power, and therefore every individual is capable of attaining this status, provided he has the strength and courage to do so. Nietzsche presents his overman as the ideal to strive for, not as an easy example to follow. If individual decisiveness and will are to be the ultimate goal for the seeker, Nietzsche has presented his reader with a viable "telos". The "telos" is an end, and this telos can be considered absolute. An absolute telos is an end for which one's life is the means, it has intrinsic value and functions as the highest object of one's will. In this theory, though, the end would not occur at the end of an individual's life, it were to occur at all, but would be a continual process. For a better understanding of this idea, it is interesting to examine the writings of Soren Kierkegaard, who presents the idea of the absolute telos in his writing.

Although Kierkegaard never read Nietzsche, they share many ideas in common. Both are concerned with the individual and his subjective self-reflective character. Kierkegaard, unlike Nietzsche, sometimes writes from the viewpoint of a Christian. Although this would seem to present an unbridgable gap between the two writers, this is not so. Kierkegaard writes of the paradox, as well as his own conception of the decisive moment. He presents the importance of honoring one's own subjectivity, and the individual's relation with himself as a foundation of his thought. Kierkegaard presents the idea of the absolute telos, the ultimate goal and focus of an individual. He presents the absolute telos in the context of an appropriate lifestyle for a Christian, but Kierkegaard's perspective of Christianity is very different from the religious notions which Nietzsche

condemns. Kierkegaard disdains the trappings and falsities of organized religion and presents an individual and subjective direct relationship with the Teacher (Christ) as the only way in which one can live a truly religious lifestyle. This lifestyle is characterized by an inwardness and reflection, but not a stagnation or asceticism. The truly religious individual, according to Kierkegaard, would be active rather than reactive. In The Present Age, Kierkegaard contrasts two ages, revolution, characterized by passion, and reflection, characterized by thinking, and presents his ideas of the individual who would be a hero in each age. The authentic individual would be considered a hero in the age of revolution, much as Nietzsche's noble man before the slave morality took hold. In a revolutionary age, people's actions were characterized by passion and decisiveness. An authentic individuality, as he calls his hero, was distinguished as one who was completely aware of himself through inwardness. This individual might have the idea of the Christian absolute telos, and he would definitely have a life passion to which he devoted himself. Kierkegaard remarks that this figure would be admired by the public, rather than envied, as he would be in an age of reflection. This, again, bears a striking similarity to Nietzsche's ideas of how the noble man is perceived in our age of false morality. Kierkegaard illustrates the formula by which the individual should live in order to maintain his authentic individuality. He claims that this individual must "dominate himself, content as priest to be his own audience, and as author his own reader."<sup>28</sup> Kierkegaard's authentic individuality is self-centered, self-aware, active and passionate, much like Nietzsche's overman. When

presenting this authentic individuality as a Christian, Kierkegaard discusses the absolute telos. This is the absolute willing of the absolute, the infinite, eternal life. Although Nietzsche's overman is certainly not willing the Christian ideal of heaven, he is, in a vivid sense, willing eternal life when he wills the eternal return. Further examination of the absolute telos as the willing of the eternal is vital in this analysis, because it clarifies the chief question. What is it that the overman wills?

When Nietzsche's theory of the overman is regarded in conjunction with the idea of the absolute telos, many seeming contradictions are raised. The overman lives by the will to power. He is constantly affirming all of his life, but it is only the present moment which the motivation for this affirmation.. Stambaugh claims that Nietzsche forces the overman to live only in the present when he presents the idea of the moment.

"No moment exists for the sake of another. Nothing is put off or deferred for the sake of some future time which may never be realized. This is perhaps the most basic meaning of Nietzsche's phrase. The present moment is to be lived fully and at once. It is never to be postponed or even neglected for some reminiscence of the past. Either one lives in the present or one does not live at all."<sup>29</sup>

Stambaugh raises a valid point, worthy of thorough examination. How is it possible that such an isolated, unconnected moment can shape a lifetime? How can the life of the overman be filled with such moments, which would lack any greater purpose or harmony?

Underlying these questions is the most basic, must the overman have some absolute telos, and does this telos contradict the moment or correspond with the theory of the will to power?

In reexamining Kierkegaard's analysis of the absolute telos, it is evident that this willing of the eternal is not characterized by a specific life goal, such as attaining heights of purity or asceticism. Rather, it is a willing in the purest and highest sense, exactly like Nietzsche's will to power.

All relative willing is distinguished by willing something for something else, but the highest telos must be willed for its own sake. And this highest telos is not something, because then it relatively corresponds to something else and is finite. But it is a contradiction absolutely to will something finite, since the finite must indeed come to an end, and consequently there must come a time when it can no longer be willed. But to will absolutely is to will the infinite, and to will an eternal happiness is to will absolutely, because it must be capable of being willed at every moment.<sup>30</sup>

This quotation provides insight on the answer to the most pressing question, what is it that the overman, or the authentic individual, wills? Kierkegaard claims that the only thing for him to will is the infinite, eternal happiness. To will anything less would be impossible, because a tangible earthly telos would be willed relatively, that is for the sake of something else. It would be a goal that could be accomplished in this lifetime, a characteristic that is inappropriate for both Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. Both Nietzsche and Kierkegaard have the idea of a life lived with an eternal and infinite end, and a constant striving toward that end. Nietzsche expresses this in his conjunction of being and becoming, the basis of the will to power. Kierkegaard has a similar analysis of this constant striving.

One who is existing is continually in the process of becoming; the actually existing subjective thinker, thinking, continually reproduces this in his existence and invests all his thinking in becoming. This is similar to having style. Only he really has style who is never finished with something but 'stirs the waters of language' whenever he

begins, so that to him the most ordinary expression comes into existence with newborn originality.

To be continually in the process of becoming in this way is the illusiveness of the infinite in existence. It could bring a sensate person to despair, for one continually feels an urge to have something finished, but this urge is of evil and must be renounced. The perpetual process of becoming is the uncertainty of earthly life, in which everything is uncertain."<sup>31</sup>

Kierkegaard's statement has three aspects which shed light on Nietzsche's notion of the overman and his ideas regarding how such a life should be lived. He pronounces that the process of continual becoming, or the exertion of the will, is a means of having style. This is an idea found throughout the works of Nietzsche as well. The second issue that he raises is the idea of uncertainty in earthly life. This uncertainty, while sometimes frightening, can be looked at in the positive context of possibility. Most important, Kierkegaard speaks of becoming in relation to the absolute telos, which is an unreachable end. The conjunction of these three ideas leads to the answer to the question of the overman. By examining these issues in Nietzsche's writing, it becomes clearer exactly how he envisions a lifetime worthy of eternal repetition, therefore having an absolute telos, but nevertheless, a life of constant becoming toward a goal which is never reached.

Style is the external manifestation of the will to power of the overman. It is a manner of comporting oneself which would indicate to the outside world that one is a decisive and passionate individuality. The overman imposes an order and structure upon himself and his behavior, much like a mask which he presents to the outside world. It indicates the measure of his control and will. His idea of style is also a denial that the

overman must or can live with any specific and worldly telos in mind.

To stylize one's life, to make of one's life a work of art, is not to sculpt oneself into some preconceived form. It is not a process of methodically molding oneself to match a foreordained ideal. Such activity would remain entangled in teleology. The ends depreciate the means; having a goal for life makes actual living of secondary, purely utilitarian value. One lives aesthetically not to arrive at an end called the self-as-art, but because only life lived aesthetically yields its fullest realization at every moment. There is no purpose to life as a whole, and Nietzsche did not suggest that we install an artificial one.<sup>32</sup>

In this passage, Thiele addresses a number of important aspects of style. He expresses it as the life as a work of art, but not an obsessive molding of oneself into a contrived form. To do this would be a rejection of the absolute telos, through adherence to a relative telos. The individual trying to sculpt himself would be so caught up in his efforts that they would become his chief focus, rather than the overall affirmation of life and himself. This stylization could never be willed eternally. It lacks the substance and authenticity which would be necessary to justify a lifetime of such behavior. An individual who attempted to contort himself into an artificial mold would lack the integrity and self-knowledge which would lead him to a lifetime which merited eternal repetition. In contrast, living aesthetically is a chief aspect of the life which can be willed eternally, the life of the overman. For Nietzsche, the artist in the activity of creating often epitomizes the ideal individual, because his life is the basis for his art, which is the expression of his will to power. The artist can live aesthetically, regarding himself as a work of art. Because of this, he has the will to power which enables him to produce and create from within himself. Style is a natural feature of this individual's art, as well of all characters with the qualities



of the overman. It is not a goal one achieves, but simply the external by-product of the focused will and the "well ordered soul", or at least the soul striving for order.

Just as style is an essential aspect of the overman's character, so is possibility.

Kierkegaard discusses the perpetual process of becoming as the "uncertainty of earthly life, in which everything is uncertain." He presents the possible response of fear to this

insurmountable uncertainty, but also opens the door to the idea of possibility. The eternal return is often misread as a doctrine of determinism, claiming that if everything happened infinitely in the past then the individual has no control over his life, it is predestined. The mistake in this interpretation is that it assumes a linear conception of time which Nietzsche does not follow in his concept of the eternal return. He describes it as a pathway leading in both directions, but he never claims that our lives are irrevocable prescribed and our choices are irrelevant. This idea would completely destroy any will that the individual might have, as well as destroying the will to power.

Instead, he agrees with Kierkegaard in saying that life is uncertain, never prescribed, and is therefore full of possibility as well as risk. This concept is frightening in the same manner as the idea of the moment, it attaches great importance and significance to a single life. It also brings about the idea that the individual has the possibility or potentiality to act, and therefore reinforces the will to power. Without the idea of possibility, the will to power would be meaningless, because the notion of striving and continuous self-overcoming would be fruitless. One would be cast out at birth as a completed soul, willing

any change would be absurd. Instead, possibility justifies the will to power because the individual recognizes that his own will is active and his passion is a tangible force with which he must shape his life.

Both style and possibility come together in the idea of constant becoming in conjunction with the will to power. With all of these characteristics of the overman in mind, many things now become clear. Both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche agree that there is no possibility of a reachable, earthly, relative telos for the individual who lives the life of constant becoming. Nietzsche has already discounted the religious as the possibility for an absolute telos, so we must move beyond Kierkegaard to discover exactly what it is that this individual has constantly in mind throughout his life. It is also nonsensical to claim that the will to power is simply a preoccupation with the present, without any thought to the past or future. This idea is discounted altogether by Nietzsche's inclusion of style and possibility, the two factors that posit the individual as the author of his own life, and give him the direction to order his soul. He does not strive for happiness, as Nietzsche has already stated, because this would lead to contentment followed by stagnation, unacceptable in the face of the will to power. To clarify this question once and for all, we must turn back to the idea of the moment. Nietzsche glorifies this experience beyond all others, he believes that one moment of such magnitude can, in fact, justify an entire lifetime as well as all of eternity.

If we affirm one single moment, we thus affirm not only ourselves but all of existence. For nothing is self-sufficient, neither in us ourselves nor in things; and if

our soul has trembled with happiness and sounded like a harp string just once, all eternity was needed to produce this one event-and in this single moment of affirmation all eternity was called good, redeemed, justified, and affirmed.<sup>33</sup>

The absolute telos toward which one strives is, in part, one's own authenticity. The individual must be fully and completely himself before he could ever have such a moment. Therefore, Nietzsche outlines the course he must follow. Most important, his will must constantly be in the process of self-overcoming, he must continue striving passionately within himself for that authenticity. Only when the individual has reached this point, and he must only reach it for a single moment, can he be in the position to justify eternity and his life. Nietzsche's ideal man would have a life full of such moments, and would be in a constant state of active striving as well as passionate affirmation of the eternal return. This would be his only goal.

1. Leslie Paul Thiele, *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of the Soul* (Princeton: Princeton

Univ. This world: ...out of the simplest forms striving toward the most complex, out of the stillest, most rigid, coldest forms toward the hottest, most turbulent, most self-contradictory, and then again returning home to the simple out of this abundance, out of the play of contradictions back to the joy of concord, still affirming itself in this uniformity of its courses and its years, blessing itself as that which must return eternally, as a becoming that knows no satiety, no disgust, no weariness: this, my *Dionysian* world of the eternally self-creating, the eternally self-destroying, this mystery world of the twofold voluptuous delight, my 'beyond good and evil,' without goal, unless the joy of the circle is itself a goal; without will, unless a ring feels good will toward itself-do you want a *name* for this world? A *solution* for all its riddles? A *light* for you, too, you best-concealed, strongest, most intrepid, most midnightly men? - *This world is the will to power - and nothing besides!* And you yourselves are also this will to power-and nothing besides!<sup>34</sup>

Nietzsche (New York: Random House, 1992) 474.

8. *Ibid.*, 181.

9. *Ibid.*, 599.

10. *Ibid.*, 474.

11. *Ibid.*, 483.

12. *Ibid.*, 481.

13. *Ibid.*, 599.

14. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, (New York: Random House, 1968) 356.

15. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, *The Basic Writings of Nietzsche* (New York: Random House, 1992) 311.

16. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, (New York: Random House, 1968) 370.

17. *Ibid.*, 373.

18. Keith Ansell-Pearson, ed., *Nietzsche and Modern German Thought* (London: Routledge, 1991) 178.

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3. Ibid., 464.
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5. Ibid., 473.
6. Friedrich Nietzsche, The Gay Science (New York: Random House, 1974) 117.
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8. Ibid., 481.
9. Ibid., 599.
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20. Ibid., 375.
21. Friedrich Nietzsche, The Gay Science, ed. Walter Kaufmann, "Translator's Introduction" (New York: Random House, 1974) 17.
22. Ibid., 18.
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30. Soren Kierkegaard, Concluding Unscientific Postscript to *Philosophical Fragments* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) 394.
31. Ibid., 86.
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