

From the Eternal Return to the Resurrection

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ABSTRACT: The old theory of the eternal return says that your life is repeated over and over again in one cosmic epoch after another. Your future recurrence counterparts exactly live out your life. But why settle for pointless repetition? A more interesting theory says that each of your future counterparts lives a better version of your life. This is linear revision. Linear revision is a resurrection theory. Yet even this is not the whole story. There are many ways your life can be improved. We can change linear revision into branching revision: for every way your life can be improved, you have some future resurrection counterpart whose life is improved in that way. You are the root of a branching tree of ever-better resurrection counterparts.

1. The Eternal Return of the Same

Some philosophers have argued that physical actuality has a cyclical pattern. As the result of some basic law, the same pattern of events repeats itself over and over. This theory of cyclical repetition is known as the eternal recurrence of the same. Eternal recurrence is an old idea. The ancient Greek philosopher Eudemus tells his students: "If one were to believe the Pythagoreans, with the result that the same individual things will recur, then I shall be talking to you again sitting as you are now, with this pointer in my hand, and everything else will be just as it is now" (Kirk & Raven, 1957: Frag. 272).

Since it entails a linear series of type-identical epochs, we refer to it as *linear recurrence*. We can think of each epoch as a little *universe*. The lives of bodies are repeated exactly from each previous universe to each next universe. Each body carries information about its counterparts on previous cycles. You survive in your next life. Nietzsche uses his character Zarathustra to talk about linear recurrence. Zarathustra has two animals, an eagle and a snake. They tell him that they understand his theory of linear recurrence:

Behold, we know what you teach: that all things recur eternally and we ourselves with them, and that we have already existed an infinite number of times before and all things with us. You teach that there is a great year of becoming, a colossus of a year: this year must, like an hour-glass, turn itself over again and again, so that it may run down and run out anew. So that all these years resemble one another, in the greatest things and in the smallest, so that we ourselves resemble ourselves in each great year, in the greatest things and in the smallest. And if you should die now, O Zarathustra: behold, we know too what you would then say to yourself . . . "Now I die and decay" you would say, "and in an instant I shall be nothingness. Souls are as mortal as bodies. But the complex of causes in which I am entangled will recur -- it will create me again! I myself am part of these causes of the eternal recurrence. I shall return, with this sun, with this earth,

with this eagle, with this serpent -- not to a new life or a better life or a similar life: I shall return eternally to this identical and self-same life, in the greatest things and in the smallest, to teach once more the eternal recurrence of all things." (Nietzsche, 1978: III: 13/2)

2. Linear Revision

Whether or not linear recurrence is true, we might wonder why it insists on the repetition of all the imperfections of our lives. We can easily change the doctrine of linear recurrence into a doctrine of *linear revision*. As with linear repetition, there is a series of cosmic epochs (universes). Perhaps each begins with a Big Bang and ends with a Big Crunch. But the universes are not exactly the same. As the result of some basic law, for every body in any universe, the life of that body is slightly improved in the next universe. The next universe is as similar as possible to the last universe except that the life of every body is made better in some small way. The revisions are small for the sake of continuity. Each next body has better strategies for realizing its goals.

The improvements can be *medical*: a genetic defect is made normal; an injury or infection fails to occur; etc. The improvements can be *moral*: vices are weakened or virtues are strengthened. The improvements can be *social*: you are born into a more just society. The improvements can be *environmental*: the earth is slightly more biologically friendly to human animals. The improvements can be *physical*: the computational grain of the universe is refined so that the same volume of space-time can run more detailed biological computations. Every body is followed by a counterpart in the next universe. It is followed by a successor. The successor of a body is defined in terms of and depends on its predecessor. It carries information about its predecessor. So you survive in your counterpart in the next universe.

3. Branching Revision

Whether or not linear revision is true, we might wonder why it allows each life to be improved in only one way. After all, there are many ways to improve any life or group of lives. We can easily change the doctrine of linear revision into a doctrine of *branching revision*. Branching revision says that each universe is followed by many next universes. Every universe is like a parent with a plurality of offspring. Perhaps after each Big Crunch the next Big Bang undergoes turbulent inflation in which dense regions split apart to form a plurality of offspring universes. As the result of some basic law, for every body in any universe, for every way the life of that body can be improved, there is some offspring universe in which the life of that body is improved in that way. And just as the life of a single body can be improved, so the lives of many interacting bodies can be collectively improved. Whole societies are improved from one universe to the next.

Branching revision entails that every earthly body is the root of a branching tree of bodies. Every body in this tree is followed by a plurality of future counterparts. Every

future counterpart has a unique past predecessor in the tree. Since each future counterpart depends on (is defined in terms of) its predecessor, every body in the tree survives in its future counterparts. Any linear path through this tree contains an infinitely long series of bodies. The lives of later bodies are always better and longer. This theory can be extended to the infinite. Every linear path of improved bodies converges to an infinitely perfected body with an infinitely perfected life. Each body lives in a society in a universe. Every linear path of bodies goes with a linear series of better universes. The series converges to an infinitely perfected universe – a paradise or heaven.

4. The Resurrection of the Body

The doctrine of branching revision is intended generally as a theory of immortality that falls within the scope of Western philosophical theology. It is intended specifically as a theory of resurrection. We refer to it as the *revision theory of resurrection* (RTR; Steinhart, 2008). One great advantage of the RTR is that it allows each universe to fully follow its own natural laws. It requires no miracles. The RTR values consistency with modern science. It seeks and receives support from the scientific conception of the human animal. And, as a resurrection theory, the RTR also seeks support from interpretations of Scripture that are consistent with modern science. The RTR receives surprisingly good support from Scripture. It is supported by Biblical passages that imply that (1) that death is literally extinction; (2) that resurrection is the end of an old life and the beginning of a new life; (3) that the new life begins with birth; (4) that the new life is lived in a new environment (a new heaven and earth); and (5) that the new life is a glorification of the old life.

References

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