The Moment in Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

KIERSTEN BATZLI, American University

ABSTRACT: A close reading of Nietzsche’s description of the Moment in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* illuminates the way that we ought to think about the eternal recurrence. The Moment, as Nietzsche develops it as both a temporal and spatial entity, helps to illustrate the eternal recurrence of a perpetual reaffirming of the self.

“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.’”

- Nietzsche

In this paper I will examine the idea of the Moment in Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and its connection to the eternal recurrence. Nietzsche’s discussion of the Moment and eternity hint at, but do not fully illustrate, the complexity of these ideas and their relation to the eternal recurrence. When explored further, the Moment and eternity can be used to better understand the eternal recurrence as a means of affirming the self, which leads to a perpetual yes-saying to life that can be interpreted as eternal return.
The way that Nietzsche describes the gateway called the Moment and the paths stretching out to eternity on either side of the gateway is a clear metaphor for a moment in time. It is important to take notice of the way that instead of describing the Moment as a non-physical and merely temporal thing, Nietzsche chooses to create an explicitly spatial metaphor for the Moment. The Moment, then, cannot be taken to be merely existent in time, but also in space. This is evidence in his discussion of physical objects and beings as existing within the Moment composed of both time and space.

Nietzsche’s description of the gateway as a physical object at the junction of two opposing paths is a good metaphor for a moment in time that allows the reader to contemplate the idea of moments as temporal and spatial, and also serves as an introduction of eternity. There is a path that extends in either direction away from the center point, the gateway called ‘Moment.’ Zarathustra conjures the length and depth of the paths by saying “from this gateway, Moment, a long, eternal lane leads backward; behind us lies an eternity” (Nietzsche 270). This is an important choice of wording that is suggestive of the blend of temporal and spatial ideas that Nietzsche wishes to invoke in the Moment. Since the paths are physical objects within the text, it would be more appropriate to say that the paths extend infinitely, rather than eternally. Eternal is an adjective that describes a measure of time, while infinite is a measure that can be applied to physical entities. The path might be considered eternal if the adjective is meant to refer to the existence of the path through time. Infinite would be a better choice if Nietzsche wishes to describe the path as extending through space. This mixing of spatial and temporal wording joined with the metaphor of the physical Moment suggests that understanding the Moment as not just existent in time is critical to an understanding of Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence.

Zarathustra recognizes the Moment as not only the intersection between the past and the present but also as a progressive eternity of moments occurring in succession. It is our ability to reinvent ourselves from moment to moment and yet still recognize ourselves as ourselves that we are able to exist in time. Lingis, citing the often-heard cliché regarding the uniqueness of snowflakes, writes that “each appearance diverges from the preceding one; no two snowflakes that fall are identical, and no two scintillations of one snowflake are identical” (Lingis 38). Though we perceive ourselves and other beings as constant in time and unvarying from one moment to the next, this is only an illusion. Every being is different from one moment to the next and it is our ability to imagine beings and objects as the same in time that allows us to function as well as we do—to remember things from the past and to look ahead to the future. The ability to continually create oneself within a moment is the essence of a being, and according to Lingis, “each appearance generates the next appearance, divergent from itself. Each is by generating difference from itself” (Lingis 43). The being literally is because of its ability to become from moment to moment. Lingis writes that it is the “reiteration of the same ideal terms—the essences, the self-identical unities—that make it possible for there to be a display of ever difference and ever similar appearances across time and space” (Lingis 39).

The language Zarathustra uses when talking to the spirit of gravity about the Moment raises important questions about necessity and recurrence. He asks, “[M]ust not whatever can walk have walked on this lane before? Must not whatever can happen have happened before? And if everything has been there before—what do you think, dwarf, of this moment?” (Nietzsche 270). His use of the term “must” recognizes the requirement that for something to exist through time it must will itself to do so and affirm itself as it moves from moment to moment. However, Nietzsche places the emphasis on the italicized can rather than must. This suggests that there is a choice in this, or, in an alternative reading of the word can, a requirement of ability. One chooses to affirm oneself in each consecutive moment, if one is capable of the act and the choice.
Zarathustra’s dialogue about the moment also includes references to an interdependence of beings and events such that everything is tied together by inexplicable connections and that everything is influenced by everything else. In some places, Nietzsche seems to refer to life and creation as a deterministic system in which events and occurrences are sensitive to the initial conditions that set a system into a predictable motion. He asks, “[A]re 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” (Nietzsche 270).

This too seems to be a contradiction, as previously the importance in the Moment was the affirmation of the individual. However, we must recognize that the affirmation of the individual will have an effect on other things in existence within the moment, as the individual recognizes and affirms both himself in time as well as those who are also in his conception of the Moment. The spider that Zarathustra remarks on in the Moment is included because Zarathustra recognizes and affirms its existence within the Moment. Zarathustra’s recognition of the elements that compose the Moment allows him to recognize the occurrence of the Moment in time.

The connectedness of moments—that one must follow after another in an exact procession—is clear, as is a related idea about the progression of events in time. Events must occur in a more or less orderly fashion so that the progression of moments play out like an action film in which film strips follow one after another so that an action is well defined. If events did not occur in this linear—and to some extent predictable—fashion, life would not make sense. What must be clarified is the idea that what happens in a moment must have also happened before. A contradiction of sorts has set up in which it seems that though everything must be different from moment to moment, everything that has happened must also have occurred before. The contradiction is apparent here if one assumes that everything that happens again must happen exactly as it has in the past, leading to questions regarding the true significance and nature of the Moment and the relation of all beings to the progression of time.

In order for an event to occur again in time, the same external factors and events that lead to this event must also occur. This circular idea of time seems symbolic of Nietzsche’s idea of eternal recurrence, but it also contradicts the notion of the linearity of time that is developed in order to make sense out of actions and events. Zarathustra evokes the idea of causes that recur and spur events again and again, saying, “the knot of causes in which I am entangled recurs and will create me again” (Nietzsche 333). Though the circularity of time is suggested in the idea of eternal recurrence, Zarathustra rebukes the spirit of gravity in its dwarf-form when he suggests “all truth is crooked; time itself is a circle,” saying, “do not make things too easy for yourself” (Nietzsche 270). Perhaps this rebuke is only directed at the spirit’s apparent rejection of the ‘Moment’ as the meeting point of the past and present. This Moment will not itself be repeated, but the events that occur within it may re-occur in many different forms. In fact, since beings are differentiated from themselves between moments, each moment can be similar to the next but cannot be the same. Zarathustra’s continued insistence that everything that is held within the current Moment at the gateway must have happened before and must also happen in the future reaffirms the idea that in order to eternally return to a moment, there must be some circularity to life and time, so that by moving forward one will eventually end back where one has been before.

Zarathustra’s disagreement with the spirit of gravity’s assertion that time is circular can also be considered an indication that the eternal recurrence is not a literal recurrence. The idea of recreating oneself from moment to moment is related to the idea of eternal recurrence in that one will find oneself in the same situation as each moment passes only if one can maintain a sense of self and continuity in time despite the changes that occur with the passing of each moment. It
is this eternal affirmation of the self that Nietzsche refers to when he discusses the eternal recurrence, not necessarily a literal recurrence of the self in time or after death, but instead an eternal affirmation and creation of the self from moment to moment, such that one would will oneself to return to this Moment over and over again without regret. Lingis writes that “the circle of the Eternal return is thus the sign…willing without remorse and without regret all forms of itself, the whole succession of forms of itself passing, dissolving, and forming anew” (Lingis 60). The role of the individual in the idea of eternal recurrence is emphasized when Nietzsche writes, “I myself belong to the causes of the eternal recurrence” (Nietzsche 333). This indicates the eternal recurrence is not something that happens to passive individuals such as an unwilling requirement to relive each moment over and over would be. Instead this suggests that we are correct in thinking that the eternal recurrence is instead something the individual takes an active role in and in fact is the individual taking an active role in life by affirming themselves at each moment.

Similarly, Lingis notes that a being in time must affirm itself in one moment and in the next affirm this affirmation of the self, so that it is like “light reiterating itself infinitely from the start on mirror surfaces facing one another. Such is the Nietzschean experience of eternity—not an eternity in extension, the endurance of a stagnant moment without past and without future, stretched out linearly without end, but an infinity in the present moment, an eternity in intensity—the “deep, deep eternity”’ (Lingis 60). Nietzsche’s idea of the eternal recurrence is such that eternity is experienced in each moment as one affirms oneself and becomes oneself from moment to moment. It is only in this affirmation of the self that one’s life takes on meaning and is more than just a set of jumbled images or events with no cohesion. Only with such affirmation and meaning of life can one be authentically oneself despite the inevitability of differences in the self in each moment. Additionally, it can only be with such affirmation that one can live their life such that they would choose to live it over and over again to eternity.

Nietzsche’s attention to the Moment indicates its importance to the crucial theme of eternal recurrence. By examining the ways in which Nietzsche describes a Moment and eternity, we are led to conclude that eternal recurrence is not as literal as we might initially assume but is in fact a much deeper idea. Instead of being a literal reliving of a moment in time, the eternal return that Nietzsche describes is instead an important individual act in which a being affirms oneself through time and in doing so lives as if one would live the same events again and again. Instead of one individual or event repeating itself ad infinitum, the being must perpetuate oneself through time by willing oneself and creating oneself, new and different and yet the same in order to be.

Works Cited
