THIS MOMENT

There is a great philosophical device that will help us better understand this duty to care. Widely credited to Friedrich Nietzsche (although certainly not the first time something like this has entered human history), the concept of the *eternal recurrence* or *eternal return* was first posited in his book, *The Gay Science*—though I want to draw from a small section in Nietzsche’s novel, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. The *eternal return* is, in short, the idea that time is cyclical and everything that ever was will once again return, ad infinitum.

Nietzsche uses this philosophical device to demonstrate the importance of questioning one’s actions in the world, so that one may strive to create meaning in their own life. To Nietzche, human flourishing is only achievable by creating your own potential and in seeking what it is calls out to you. There is no inherent meaning in the world, so humanity must find it in themselves. We’ve seen this echoed in the likes of other existentialists, and certainly in Camus’ work as well. The eternal return, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, is a central theme throughout the piece but is visualized once in the form of a physical structure.

Zarathustra, telling a story to fellow shipmates, recounts his encounter with this structure in the *Third Part - XLVI: The Vision and the Enigma*. Curiously, he encounters a dwarf on a wooded path, antagonizing him as he continues. The dwarf isn’t really all that important, but it does talk a bit, providing some good quotes, so I thought I might as well include them. Anyway, Zarathustra and the dwarf stop before a gateway in the path, noting its two diverging pathways.5 Both pathways extend backward, seemingly forever; “They are antithetical to one another, these roads;” spoke Zarathustra, “they directly abut on one another:—and it is here, at this gateway, that they come together. The name of the gateway is inscribed above: ‘This Moment.’”6 We see that, through both paths, each end up converging back at the start of the gateway. This paradox confuses Zarathustra, as he tries to reason with the nature of This Moment.

In standing before This Moment, a choice is to be made—what path do you take? Though, in looking beyond the gateway, it is evident that the paths will terminate right back where he stands now, before This Moment. “All truth is crooked;” the dwarf cracks, “time itself is a circle.”7 This Moment, therefore, represents our experience in the present—the lived experience of humanity, and the nature of meaning to our lives. In the face of the gateway, hope seems futile; is this an affirmation of determinism? In knowing anything of Nietzschean philosophy, this seems unlikely.

Instead, This Moment presents us with a clear idea of consequence and the brevity of life within the eternity of history. In positing this question—”must we not eternally return?”8—Nietzsche calls us to consider more carefully the actions of our present. If we are truly to return to This Moment, shouldn't we want to choose what is best for us? Shouldn’t we want to follow the path that lends us the most joy? The most beauty? The most good? For what is the point of choosing a path that will lead us to regret if we are to wind up coming back to live that choice over and over again?

This is the ultimate point of the *eternal return*—to truly think about the way we act and the decisions we make. More simply put, what we are doing is paying attention to what we pay attention to, or *thinking about thinking*. This is something Martin Heidegger gets into more in *Being and Time*, but This Moment is such an effective way of visualizing the concept, I felt it more appropriate to use in this case (also I haven’t read all of *Being and Time* yet). This Moment sets us up for the basis of challenging our thoughts and asking ourselves, “Well wait a minute, why do I think that? What good is that really going to do?” This has application not only in everyday social situations but indeed in each and every pervasive thought we encounter.

Thinking about thinking is often a strategy employed by those that are trying to reason with their anxious brains, for when it becomes so loud, oftentimes it is just easier to believe what it tells you and do what is easiest. The brain, in trying to rationalize a situation, will come to any number of conclusions to fill that need for an explanation. But in hindsight, we see that the assumptions it comes up with are simply not grounded in reality. To fight this, one has to stop and ask themselves, “Ok wait… But why do we think this or that happened? Maybe it’s because it’s what we want to happen, or maybe some trauma has conditioned us to interpret it this way or that...” The point is if we just go along with whatever comes to mind, without challenging where that belief or action comes from, can we really ever claim to be living an authentic life?

This is not to say that avoiding action without rational reasoning becomes easy—far from it. I can tell you from experience, the hardest part about trying to employ this in your life is actually remembering to do it. At first, you have to constantly remind yourself to approach things with this in mind. Otherwise, you will likely forget and just continue living life as you have been. *Only until it becomes integrated into the automatic processes of thought will it become a part of who you are and how you act.*