

# Nietzsche Contra Schopenhauer: The Construel of Eternal Recurrence

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Several years after the completion of his chief work, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and shortly before his final mental collapse, Nietzsche pinpointed in retrospect its central concern: "the fundamental conception of the work, the idea of eternal recurrence, the highest form of affirmation which can possibly be attained" (6: 335). To have admitted that the most important philosophical project of his life was the construction of a formula which could overcome nihilism and affirm life, betrayed not only what he believed to have been his greatest achievement. It also shows to what extent he was influenced by one of his idols and at the same time one of his greatest philosophical enemies: that philosopher of the "denial of life," Schopenhauer.

It is clear that Schopenhauer remained for Nietzsche a lasting object of [admiration](#) and profound [ambivalence](#). The theory of art propounded in *The Birth of Tragedy* was obviously, as Nietzsche himself conceded, built on Schopenhauer's aesthetics, although it parted company with the latter on its idea of the ultimate function of art. He dedicated one

of his Untimely Meditations to Schopenhauer, his "philosophical educator," though he was later to reject Schopenhauer's epistemological and aesthetic doctrines. He came in the end to criticize Schopenhauer, along with Christianity, calling them "enemies of life" in their fundamental pessimism. Although in his late writings Nietzsche called Schopenhauer "nihilistic and decadent," he simultaneously praised him with the words: "he is the last German to be taken seriously...a European event, equal to Goethe, equal to Hegel, equal to Heinrich Heine" (6: 125). From all this we should be able to see that Nietzsche's attempt to construct a philosophy of affirmation through his idea of eternal recurrence was aimed in Schopenhauer's general direction.

I wish in this short paper to [carry](#) this claim further and show that it has more than merely general validity. The way in which Nietzsche construes his idea of recurrence in *The Joyful Wisdom* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* bears out well that the idea was, in all its details, directly influenced by and specifically marshalled against some of the main arguments of Schopenhauer. Nietzsche was thoroughly familiar with Schopenhauer's writings and a comparison of some of Nietzsche's major published passages on eternal recurrence and some of Schopenhauer's central claims will make clear both Nietzsche's indebtedness to Schopenhauer, and the way in which Nietzsche believed his refutation succeeded in creating what he held to be the "most noble formula of the great affirmation."

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