

Beyond Life and Death: Nietzsche's Thanatology

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- I. Introduction
- II. Reason and Rational Death
- III. Eternal Return to Death *Thus Life*
- IV. Conclusion: Being Human Being

I. Introduction

Death might be the possibility of all impossibilities and the impossibility of all possibilities, and thus the termination and nullification of life, i.e., the opposite of life in the sense that we are hardly immune to the negative impressions such as the fear of no more existence and the absolute despair that no one can be free from death. For Nietzsche, however, death does neither simply imply the opposite of life as the termination of life,¹⁾ nor is it a threshold which leads the dead to the other world where heavenly salvation and hellish punishment might be waiting. This dualistic understanding of life and death based on the transcendent metaphysics and Christian morality is exactly what Nietzsche criticizes; instead, he proposes the “rational death”²⁾ in *Human, All Too*

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1) Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff and Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), §109.

Human. Furthermore, he argues in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* that life is the “consuming death.”³⁾ As far as Nietzsche is concerned, death is in no way understood without a relationship to life, and it is not just the absolute fear that should be avoided through procrastination.

Understanding Nietzsche’s thanatology is pivotal because his understanding of death is closely related to the meaning of life on earth that he ultimately attempts to seek, and thus penetrates the crucial ideas in his critique of religion in general, Christianity in particular, being deeply rooted in transcendent metaphysics. This paper scrutinizes how Nietzsche understands death, which betrays the meaning of life. Nietzsche’s thanatology makes it possible to fathom how and why he attacks the whole cultural and intellectual history of the West, especially Christian morality, which is for him nothing but “Platonism for the people.”⁴⁾ I will first investigate what he means by the “rational death,” which should be understood not from a dismissive view of life, but from an affirmative one. This examination is necessary in order to grasp the reason why Nietzsche denounces the dualistic understanding of life and death. I will then delve further into how Nietzsche resolves and reconciles the issue of life and death through the idea of the eternal return. Finally, the conclusion will demonstrate that Nietzsche’s thanatology holds the possibility of all possibilities and the impossibility of all impossibilities rather than the possibility of all impossibilities and the impossibility of all possibilities. This means that, for Nietzsche, death is not something that simply occurs unwelcomed like a catastrophe, which *impossibilizes* all possibilities, but something welcome like “glad tidings”⁵⁾ and “festivals,”⁶⁾ which *possibilizes*

2) Friedrich Nietzsche, “The Wanderer and His Shadow,” in *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), §185.

3) Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, ed. Robert Pippin, trans. Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 53.

4) Friedrich Nietzsche, “Preface” to “Beyond Good and Evil” in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Arnold Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 1968).

5) Friedrich Nietzsche, “The Anti-Christ,” in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols: And Other Writings*, ed. Aaron Ridley, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge:

all possibilities of human life on earth.

II. Reason and Rational Death

Nietzsche levels a critique that Western philosophy has been deeply, comprehensively based on a *false analysis* since Plato. In other words, to explain something, we separate it into its parts. Nietzsche calls into question the separability of the something that has been taken as a postulate through the history of Western philosophy. Just as Platonism considers body and soul as separate entities, which belong respectively to an *unreal* world of the sense and a *real* world of ideal forms, Descartes distinguishes the body as a material entity, *res extensa*, from the soul/mind, which is itself a non-material entity, *res cogitans*. Both, though not exactly identical, are based on a distinctive dualism of body and soul that entails, for Nietzsche, a dualistic understanding of life and death which has long perverted human existence and, after all, resulted in negating earthly life and this world. Opposing metaphysical dualism, Nietzsche attempts to restore human dignity by criticizing the false analysis in terms of rational death. To understand Nietzsche's thanatology, in this regard, we need to first unravel what Nietzsche means by the rational death.

II-1. A Great Reason and a Small Reason

When it comes to Nietzsche's "Of rational death"⁷⁾ [*Vom vernünftigen Tode*], "reason" [*Vernunft*] should not be understood in the traditional way of Western philosophy; that understanding is precisely what Nietzsche

Cambridge University Press, 2005), §34, 35.

6) Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 53.

7) Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Wanderer and His Shadow," in *Human, All Too Human*, §185.

attacks. According to Nietzsche, while “once the soul gazed contemptuously at the body, and then such contempt was the highest thing,” this soul was just “gaunt, ghastly and starved” because it aspired to “escape the body and the earth.”⁸⁾ Nietzsche challenges the built-in assumption, profoundly rooted in the false analysis, that not only is soul distinctively apart from body, but also the former is decidedly superior to the latter in human existence and reality: centralized, highlighted soul and marginalized, neglected body. This division makes human beings long for heavenly life in the other world, on the one hand and despise earthly life in this world, on the other. To escape from the dualistic pitfall, Nietzsche presents “Body” [*der Leib*], which is different from body, contrasted to soul in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

To the despisers of the body I want to say my words... “Body am I and soul” —so speaks a child. And why should one not speak like children? *But* the awakened, the knowing one says: Body am I through and through, and nothing besides; and soul is just a word for something on the Body. The Body is a great reason...Your small reason, what you call “spirit” is also a tool of your Body, my brother, a small work—and plaything of your great reason. “I” you say and are proud of this word. *But* what is greater is that in which you do not want to believe—your Body and its great reason.⁹⁾

Nietzsche compares a “great reason” [*die große Vernunft*] with a “small reason” [*die kleine Vernunft*] through the eye of a child, a symbol of a naïve one who is free from any self-evidential prejudices, and “the awakened,” the one who overcomes the dualism of body and soul. Nietzsche sees that for a child, “body” is no longer an object of contempt and condemnation, as well as is one of the components of the Body; after all, the child says that “I am body and soul.” However, Nietzsche is not

8) Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 6.

9) *Ibid.*, 22-3. I modified some words in order to distinguish a great reason from a little reason. A capitalized Body refers to *die große Vernunft*, i.e., a great reason. Henceforth, “Body” means a great reason while dualism of “body” and soul is related to a little reason. Italics mine.

satisfied with the naïve eye of the child, although it is unaffected by a soul-centered assumption, because the child's eye is still dependent on a false analysis of body and soul. Nietzsche wants the following to be heard: "Body am I through and through, and nothing besides," as the awakened says, rather than "I am body and soul," as the child says.

An awakened one, presumably represented by Zarathustra, responds to both the despisers of body and the child, who say, "We say I [*Ich*], and are proud of this word" with the following: "But what is greater...is your Body and its great reason."¹⁰ For the awakened, the "great reason" refers to the Body *qua* indivisible human existence and reality, which is never understood from any dualistic, analytic approach, whereas a small reason refers to soul, based on the traditional perspective of metaphysical dualism. In this sense, the Body is equivalent to a great reason, and thus is more than a summation of body and soul; though the Body as a great reason might include soul and body, it can never be divided into the two. As soon as the Body is separated into body and soul, there could be no Body, which cannot be synthesized by any combination of the elements. It is absurd for Nietzsche to separate the inseparable Body into body and soul; thus, despising body is nothing more than despising the Body in its entirety.

Who, then, speaks of a little reason? In other words, who are the despisers of the Body? According to Nietzsche, they are so "angry now at life and earth," that "[their] self itself wants to die and turns away from life."¹¹ Criticizing Christians, priests in particular, who believe that "Culture begins...in the 'soul'," which is nothing but their "disastrous superstition," Nietzsche censures Christianity for "despise[ing] the Body"; thus, it has been the "greatest disaster for humanity so far."¹² Meanwhile, they fabricate the "belief in immortality" in order to "tyrannize the masses and the form of herds."¹³ In this sense, while priests urge the herds to

10) Ibid.

11) Ibid., 24.

12) Nietzsche, "What the Germans Lack," in "Twilight of the Idols," §47.

13) Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Anti-Christ," §42; "On the Genealogy of Morals," in *On*

devaluate “nature and natural values”¹⁴⁾ and hence to surrender Bodies on earth, they promise the eternal life in the Kingdom of God where there might be no more death, trouble, misery or illness. Nietzsche is convinced that this Kingdom is actually invented by priests for their own purpose. He goes on to say that “the enormous lie of personal immortality destroys all reason, everything natural in the instincts,—everything beneficial and life-enhancing in the instincts, everything that guarantees the future.”¹⁵⁾ Furthermore, in “The Anti-Christ,” Nietzsche answers to the question, “Who is really the anti-Christ?” Ironically, though not surprisingly, the true “anti-Christ,” to Nietzsche, are the very priests and theologians who seemingly follow Christ.¹⁶⁾ They are “a parasitical type of person who thrives at the expense of all healthy development of life” in that they preach a sermon on the “Will of God,” which determines the destiny of people; “it punishes or rewards depending on the degree of obedience.”¹⁷⁾

However, Nietzsche’s predominant focus is on humanity in its entirety such as human nature, human life, and human possibility. For Nietzsche, anything—especially, theological “flattery” would get human beings seemingly everywhere but actually nowhere—that oppresses, abuses, and perverts natural human instincts should be suppressed, rejected and checked in order to make them rehabilitated, restored, and rectified. “To translate [human beings] back to nature,” says Nietzsche, “the terrible original text *homo natura*” should be appreciated.¹⁸⁾ The distinction between human beings as *animal rationale* and animals has long been reiterated in Western philosophy, accentuating the fact that the term,

the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1989), §18.

14) Nietzsche, “The Anti-Christ,” §38.

15) *Ibid.*, §43.

16) I do not expound how Nietzsche understands Christ himself, which is not the aim of this paper. In “The Anti-Christ,” the object of Nietzsche’s critique is not Christ himself but Christians, priests and theologians, and Christianity as an institutionalized religion.

17) *Ibid.*, §26.

18) Nietzsche, “Beyond Good and Evil,” §230.

"*rationale*," in *animal rationale* has been privileged in order to discriminate between the two. For Nietzsche, however, *rationale* is contaminated by the theological viewpoint, grounded on a false analysis of transcendent metaphysics; this *rationale* merely refers to a small reason, despising the Body. In particular, Christian morality deeply rooted in transcendent dualism produces these effects; on the one hand, the "dwarfing of man,"¹⁹⁾ which corresponds to the negation of life in this world and, on the other hand, the *giantizing* of God, which accords with an orientation towards another world. Insofar as we attempt to discover the differences between human beings and animals in terms of *rationale*, namely a small reason, as we have seen, it is not possible to escape from the dualistic pitfall.

On the contrary, Nietzsche focuses on the similarities between human beings and animals in terms of *animality*, which explains that "human existence is fundamentally to be construed along the lines of his general account of all forms of organic existence and the world itself"²⁰⁾: "We have stopped deriving humanity from 'spirit,' from 'divinity,' we have stuck human beings back among the animals."²¹⁾ The despisers of the Body, who depend on priests' flattery, negate and devalue nature and earthly life—hence, dampen their passion to be the masters of life in this world—with a delusion about an eternal life of the *beyond* world. In contrast, the life-affirmers hold a great reason coming from animality that allows them to appreciate nature and earthly life, and thus devote themselves to their uniquely creative life. For Nietzsche, human beings and animals share basic animal instincts. In this context, a great reason will be found in the *animal* aspects not in the *rationale* aspects, which makes it possible to appreciate *homo natura* that Nietzsche has in his mind. In opposition to the dualistic perspectives that have reduced human existence to the soul, or even a transcendent world in all its forms such as God, essence, and

19) Martin Heidegger, "Nietzsche: Volume Four," in *Nietzsche: Volumes Three and Four*, trans. Joan Stambaugh, David Farrell Krell, and Frank A. Capuzzi (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1991), 77.

20) Richard Schacht, *Nietzsche* (London: Routledge, 1985), 272.

21) Nietzsche, "The Anti-Christ," §14.

truth,²²⁾ Nietzsche proposes a *holistic* perspective to understand human existence and reality, using the term the *Body* as a “great reason.” As far as a “rational death” is concerned, “rational” should be understood with regard to a great reason, not a small reason.

II-2. Rational Death at the Right Time

I described the meaning of reason [*Vernunft*] in order to see the implication of “Of Rational Death” [*Vom vernünftigen Tode*] in *Human, All Too Human*, which illustrates Nietzsche’s thanatology in terms of a great reason. For Nietzsche, the problems within dualism of body and soul on the coattails of transcendent metaphysics entail the outrageous solution to the questions of death and life. This outrageous solution shows not only why priests deal with death and its fear but also what they offer in order to overcome the fear of death. Priests who have a dualistic understanding of body and soul speak of the vanity and hollowness of worldly life and values—“Vanity of vanities; all is vanity” (Eccl. 1:2)—and the renunciation of them; instead of these vanities, they promise an eternal life in heaven at the expense of earthly life. However, they never say, oddly enough, “Die right now!” or “Kill yourself!”; rather, “Don’t kill yourself whatever happens.” Suicide is an utter blasphemy and a betrayal to God in the sense that human life is given by God as a precious gift. Meanwhile, priests speak of “the concepts of ‘beyond,’ ‘Last Judgment,’ ‘immortality of the soul’” in order to “gain control, maintain control”²³⁾ over the herds. While, ironically, speaking of death, they admonish to delay death.

For Nietzsche, pinning to “get away from all appearance, change, becoming, [and] death” is nothing but a “will to nothingness, an aversion to life, rebellion against the most fundamental presuppositions of life.”²⁴⁾ In

22) Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 148.

23) Nietzsche, “The Anti-Christ,” §38.

24) Nietzsche, “Third Essay,” in “On the Genealogy of Morals,” §28.

spite of the fact that human death is fundamentally rooted in naturalness, from which human beings never escape, priests attempt to seize them within nihilistic existence by dispensing the hope of immortality in other world. This immortality, however, is nothing other than unreal and *counter-natural*. In doing so, priests nullify all the possibilities in earthly life while anticipating all the *impossible* possibilities in “non-earthly” life. In this regard, those who urgently need death are the very priests because they not only long for an eternal life in heaven but also beguile human beings into despising earthly life and values. Nietzsche says that “[m]any die too late”²⁵⁾ who say “[life] is only suffering” and “life is refuted,”²⁶⁾ like priests. Contrarily, there is only one who died too early.

Would that preachers of the *quick* death came!...But I hear only preaching of the slow death and patience with all things “earthly.” Indeed, you preach patience with earthly things?...Truly, too early did that Hebrew die, the one who is honored by the preachers of slow death; and for many it has since become their doom that he died too early...the Hebrew Jesus; then longing for death overcame him. If only he had remained in the desert and far away from the good and the just! Perhaps he would have learned to live and to love the earth—and even to laugh!...He died too early; he himself would have recanted his teaching if he had reached my age! He was noble enough for recanting!²⁷⁾

Whereas Nietzsche curses the too-late death of priests, he regrets the too-early death of Christ. What priests, who preach “the slow death and patience with all things ‘earthly,’” need is the “preachers of the *quick* death.” However, when it comes to Christ’s death, it is too early not only to “[learn] to live and to love the earth” but also to “[recant] his teaching.” Thus, Christ’s death becomes the *archetype* of Christian death because “for many [his death] has since become their doom that he died too early.” Otherwise, his death would have been understood as glad tidings, which is the opposite of the Last Judgment. Nietzsche asserts,

25) Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 53.

26) *Ibid.*, 32.

27) *Ibid.*, 54–55.

furthermore, that the meaning of Christ's death has been distorted and fabricated by his disciples, Paul in particular. Paul interprets Christ's death as a "logical form" in order to make sense of it; for Paul himself, "if Christ did not rise from the dead, then our faith is in vain."²⁸⁾ However, this resurrection is just the "outrageous doctrine" that has nothing to do with reality; Nietzsche says, "Not reality, not the historical truth!"²⁹⁾ In order to "[invent] for [Paul] himself a history of the first Christianity," finally, "[Paul] nailed [Christ] to his own cross."³⁰⁾ Since then, priests have been reiterating immortality of the soul, reminding the individuals of Christ's resurrection, a Great Immortality that seemingly promises them the eternal life in the other world.

Following this outrageous doctrine, the individuals become domesticated, tame, and docile³¹⁾; at last, they come to internalize the *herd instinct* and become uniformed ones among the herds, losing their singular *individuality* and gaining monotonous *mediocrity*. The one and only thing that can sustain their life is priests' flattery, which provides a provisional comfort, as opium does; for Nietzsche, however, it crucially undermines life itself.

28) Nietzsche, "The Anti-Christ," §41.

29) Ibid., §41-2.

30) Ibid. The interpretation of Paul is an intriguing theme that attracts attention of recent scholars. Alfred North Whitehead in accordance with Nietzsche in challenging the universality of Paul in favor of "individuality in community." Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1996), 88. Whitehead, like Nietzsche, ascribes all bad things in historical Christianity to the aftermath of Paul's universalism. Contrarily, Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek acknowledge Paul's universality that enabled him to transform himself from a particular individual to the "universal singular" like the Christ-Event. They consider him as in the history of Christianity the revolutionary feature who was totally free from any given social conditions such as race, region, class and made Christianity "believable" for everyone. Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: the Foundation of Universalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); Slavoj Žižek, "Paul and the Truth Event," in *Paul's New Moment: Continental Philosophy and the Future of Christian Theology* (Michigan: Brazos Press, 2010), 74-99; Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2003). See also John Caputo et al., *St. Paul among the Philosophers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

31) Nietzsche, "'Improving' Humanity," in "Twilight of the Idols," §5.

Just as mediocrities with herd instinct are deprived of the right of decision on life, the right of decision of death is also dependent on priests. On top of that, these priests are haunting every “natural occasions of life, at birth, marriage, illness, death...and [denaturing] them all.”³²⁾ For Nietzsche, mediocrities are just death-waiters whose death is considered “natural death.” Nietzsche contrasts it with “rational death,” using an example of an exhausted machine, in “Of Rational Death” in *Human, All Too Human*:

What is more rational, to stop the machine when the work one demands of it has been completed—or to let it run on until it stops of its own accord, that is to say until it is ruined? Is the latter not a squandering of the cost of maintenance, a misuse of the energy and attentiveness of those who service it?...I am speaking of involuntary (natural) and of voluntary (rational) death...Natural death is the suicide of nature, that is to say the annihilation of the rational being by the irrational to which it is tied.³³⁾

It is “more rational,” for Nietzsche, that just as the “demand of the [machine],” which has been accomplished, should not be used anymore, if there is no reason and will to live, death should be open to voluntary choice. Paradoxically, in no way is natural death *natural* because those who are awaiting natural death have no will to live in this world. Though their body might be passively “lived,” their Body is already dead, like the useless machine, “squandering...the cost of maintenance.” It is as if a great reason itself is entrusted to a small reason. Nevertheless, death-waiters cannot voluntarily choose their deaths, as we have seen. The fact that they cannot decide their deaths means that they have no idea when their own death is coming, which makes them fearsome of the uncertainty of their death. In doing so, they depend more and more on the priests' flattery in order not to wake from a false dream that promises an eternal life in the other world. For them, death is like a crasher who abruptly destroys their life. This type of death is an exhausted death,

32) Nietzsche, “The Anti-Christ,” §26.

33) Nietzsche, “The Wanderer and His Shadow,” in *Human, All Too Human*, §185.

which is good for a coward who is overwhelmed by an unfree death at the wrong time.³⁴⁾

However, unlike natural death, which is reserved for decrepit herds, a rational death is for the courageous who can voluntarily decide their death. In the context of Heidegger's term, on the one hand, they anticipate [*vorlaufen*] death within life in order to conceive of all the possibilities of their life and attempt to consummate it. On the other hand, they retrospectively project [*entwerfen*] death into life in advance in order not to fall into all the impossibilities as the bottomless pit. In this sense, they are so brave that they can freely choose their death in order to consummate their life, which is called "free death" and "the consummating death."³⁵⁾ Thus, the person who can decide freely his death is the one who knows the right time to die. This is why Nietzsche says, "Die at the right time," neither "too late" nor "too early."³⁶⁾ A rational death is not the death that results from reluctantly unnecessary life, but the one that is voluntarily chosen to strive not only against natural death but also for consummating life. As far as a rational death is concerned, death is understood not as the opposite of life that refers to the *possibleness* of all the impossibilities and the *impossibleness* of all the possibilities, but as the consummation of life that bears the *possibleness* of all the possibilities and the *impossibleness* of all the impossibilities.

For Nietzsche, death is only applicable "as a symbol" in that the Kingdom of Heaven is "a state of the heart"; there is nothing "lying 'above the earth' or coming 'after death',"³⁷⁾ as the priests say. In this sense, he says through the mouth of Zarathustra, "Thus I myself want to die, so that you my friends love the earth more for my sake; and I want to become earth again."³⁸⁾ Nietzsche longs for returning to earth even after death—in fact, for him, there is no need to return to earth because

34) Nietzsche, "What the Germans Lack," in "Twilight of the Idols," §36.

35) Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 53.

36) Ibid.

37) Nietzsche, "The Anti-Christ," §34.

38) Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 55.

he is always *there* wherein his existence and reality are essentially rooted. This is the expression of the will that he wants to live in and die on earth. In this way, a dualistic understanding of life and death can be overcome through a rational death; whoever “never [lives] at the right time” never “[dies] at the right time.”³⁹⁾

Then, when is the right time to die? This is where Nietzsche goes into the meaning of death at the communal level. It seems that death is an extremely personal issue because nobody can ultimately take the responsibility for one's death itself. However, Nietzsche's Zarathustra says that “Whoever has a goal and an heir wants death at the right time for his goal and heir.”⁴⁰⁾ One who cares about one's own death cares about others' deaths. One's consummating death is able to make other people's lives and deaths more complete. The remaining people are brought seriously to face with their own death when they witness one who voluntarily makes a decision to die at the right time. This death never gives them comfort, recoiling from the fear of death—for them, death is not the fear that is to be avoided; rather, it gives them an opportunity to care about their own life as well as death. This is another possibility that the death gives at the communal level. This is why death is not an unwanted “crasher” but the welcoming “glad-tidings” and a “festival” of the whole community. Zarathustra, however, says that:

death is not yet a festival. As of yet people have not learned how to consecrate the most beautiful festivals. I show you the consummating death that becomes a goad and a promise to the living. The consummated one dies *his* death, victorious, surrounded by those who hope and promise. Thus one should learn to die; and there should be no festival where such a dying person does not swear oaths to the living!⁴¹⁾

Why is death not yet elevated to a festival? “People have not learned how to consecrate the most beautiful festivals”; in fact, they have never

39) *Ibid.*, 53.

40) *Ibid.*, 54.

41) *Ibid.*, 53.

had a chance to learn it because they have been considering death as the opposite of life and despising earthly life and body—actually, Body in its entirety—with a fantasy of immortality in the beyond world. They do not know how to die as well as how to live; therefore, Zarathustra says that they need to learn to die and live. For them, death cannot become “a goad and a promise to the living” and only call to mind the fear that death is never avoidable. The consummating death, however, is to be a stimulus to the individual life and, simultaneously, to the communal life. The meaning of a personal death is not confined only to the individual level, but extends to the communal level. Consequently, death should be elevated to a festival, which provides life—individual and communal—with all the possibilities in this world. That is a rational death Nietzsche has in mind.

Nietzsche presents “euthanasia” as an example of a type of a rational death which is still problematic today in terms of fundamental human rights and the duty of doctors. Nietzsche defines his position on this issue from the perspective of patients related to human rights and from a viewpoint of doctors with regard to their duty and responsibility.

There should be profound social contempt for the practice of vegetating in cowardly dependence on doctors and practitioners after the meaning life, the *right* to life, is gone. Doctors, for their part, would be the agents of this contempt,—not offering prescriptions, ...Dying proudly when it is no longer feasible to live proudly. Death chosen freely, death at the right time...makes it possible to have a real leave-taking where the leave-taker is *still there*, and a real assessment of everything that has been achieved or willed, a *summation* of life. When you *do away with* yourself you are doing the most admirable thing there is: it almost makes you deserve to live.⁴²⁾

According to Nietzsche, the “most admirable thing” is that one “do[es] away with [one]self” which makes him or her “deserve to live.” As seen in the case of a rational death, one can judge and evaluate one’s own life and voluntarily choose his or her own death at the right time in order to “[make] it possible to have a real leave-taking where the leave-taker is

42) Nietzsche, “What the Germans Lack” in “Twilight of the Idols,” §36.

still there." This is a farewell-sayer who anticipates [*vorlaufen*] death within life and projects [*entwerfen*] death into life. The real leave-takers never take their leaving after death; rather, their death is in life and their life is in death. In this sense, "death chosen freely...makes [one] deserve to live" that is a precious opportunity to reconcile a rational death with life as a whole. Basically, just as the fundamental characteristic of a right is the fact that the right can be voluntarily given up by a right-taker, the right to life should belong to the possessor of it. In the case of euthanasia, thus, there is a right to be killed by an agent who can assist in death insofar as a right-taker wants to die. For Nietzsche, the duty of doctors is not "offering prescriptions" for those who cowardly rely on themselves whose meaning of life is over. Rather, because their meaning of life has been gone, doctors should be "agents" of contempt for them in order to let them choose death at the right time, otherwise their death becomes merely a natural death, an unfree death, a death at the wrong time, and hence a coward's death.⁴³⁾ Thus, doctors vicariously conduct euthanasia in order to accomplish a right-taker's rational death at the right time. For a farewell-sayer, doctors are glad-tidings as agents who assist to realize all the possibilities to consummate his or her life whereas for a coward, they are the crashers who urge to actualize all the impossibilities to terminate his or her life.

I examined Nietzsche's critique of Christian morality in order to see his thanatology so far. It seems, however, that his understanding of Christianity is also based on dualism which is what he actually attacks. In other words, as far as Nietzsche's understanding of Christian morality is concerned, longing for something—or even anything—in the other world would directly entail despising nature and earthly life. To Nietzsche, this longing is like a zero-sum game between this world and the other world; on the one hand, any belief in God results in devaluating this life and values, and on the other hand, God should be dead in order to appreciate the values of life in this world. Is it impossible that hope and longing for

43) Ibid.

the other world build up to this world at all? For answering these questions, we need to look into Nietzsche's idea of the eternal return [*Die Ewige Wiederkehr des Gleichen*].⁴⁴⁾

III. Eternal Return to Death *Thus* Life

It is definite that Nietzsche's idea of the eternal return is not related to the implication of somewhere to go after death that is basically grounded in the dualistic perspective which makes us imagine some other existences and realities that, in fact, have nothing to do with human existence and reality. Nietzsche attempts to overcome this dualistic understanding of life and death through the idea of the eternal return.

The idea of the eternal return is a important yet complicated concept. On the one hand, it is a crucial concept in his thought since Nietzsche defines himself as "the teacher of eternal return," and considers it as the fundamental idea of his masterful work, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.⁴⁵⁾ On the other hand, the reasons why the concept of the eternal return is complicated are due to his writing style and his strategy of criticism. The idea of the eternal return appears sporadically and metaphorically throughout his works. He does not say too much about it—that is, "the will to the economy of the great style"⁴⁶⁾—and uses enigmatic metaphors to

44) *Die Ewige Wiederkehr des Gleichen* is often translated into "the eternal recurrence of the same." Here the eternal return is intentionally chosen because it is much more "misleading." In the interpretation of this idea, the fundamental problem is related to how to construe "*Gleichen*," which seems to clearly have "substantial" connotations. By the same token, the term "return" also bears substantial implication far more than "recurrence"; namely, the issue of "return" entails that of "return of what to what" in a substantial sense. In this regard, the eternal return of the same implies the eternal return of what to what. As we will see, however, what Nietzsche ceaselessly condemns is the very same *qua* a substantial "what" in his idea of the eternal return. Making his critique clearer will make his own intention of critique itself much clearer.

45) Nietzsche, "What I Owe the Ancients," in "Twilight of the Idols," §5. Also Zarathustra is depicted as the teacher of the eternal return in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, (177).

allude to the idea which make it even more mysterious.⁴⁷⁾ It seems that Nietzsche intends to explain it indirectly in order to avoid any impetuous interpretation. In addition, his strategy of criticism for Christianity makes it more difficult to grasp the concept of the eternal return. From the viewpoints of *perspectivism* and *interpretation*, he censures Christian morality for its absolutism, objectivism, universalism and idealism. This does not mean that his solution, including the concept of the eternal return of the same, should not be absolutized, objectified, universalized, or idealized, which might make them less credible, plausible, or solvable to the problems Nietzsche attacks; according to his own logic, his solution is understood as one possible answer among a variety of different possible answers. If it is the case, however, it is a kind of sheer relativism that in turn undermines Nietzsche's answer. Rather, what Nietzsche intends to do with perspectivism and interpretation is to subvert Christianity's absolute idealism; namely, what they disclose is the fact that there is no absolute truth as it is. In fact, any absolute truth is not given by the beyond or "over there" but manipulated by ones who need the very absolute truth. What is urgent to Nietzsche is to *perspectize* and reinterpret it for the sake of debunking its absoluteness.

When it comes to Nietzsche's concept of the eternal return, we need to consider both "eternal" and "return"; they refer respectively to the aspects of time and of space, though not exclusively. As seen above, Nietzsche denounces Christian morality, for it promises the eternal life in the other world. In the first place, for Nietzsche, the concept of the "eternal life" itself is an *oxymoron* because life needs—and should need—death in order to be life. Life is oriented toward death and *vice versa* to make all the possibilities possible and all the impossibilities impossible in earthly life. Priests also know that the eternal life is impossible in this

46) Nietzsche, "Preface" to "The Anti-Christ."

47) In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche allegorically explains the eternal return with examples such as a snake and an eagle in "Zarathustra's Preface," a dwarf, a shepherd, and a snake in "On the Vision and the Riddle," a lyre, an eagle, and a snake in "The Convalescent."

world, and thus manipulate “non-this” world—other, another, next, beyond or whatever which has never been known before. In this regard, there is an abysmal chasm between life and death in terms of time and space, which generates the counter-natural mystery that *seemingly* makes all the impossibilities of heavenly life and values possible at the expense of surrendering all the possibilities of earthly life and values. Finally, the eternal life becomes the supreme promise of all promises given to herds who blindly believe the dream of immortality in the other world. However, for Nietzsche, the promise is totally ridiculous and outrageous because it cannot be originally fulfilled by priests, who also have no idea of what is going on “next.”

Gilles Deleuze dedicates his effort fully to investigating Nietzsche’s eternal return of the same. Applying his own idea of “the body without organs”⁴⁸⁾ to the eternal return, although Deleuze never does, will offer the key to understanding of Nietzsche’s idea. Deleuze’s Nietzsche challenges “all forms of generality,”⁴⁹⁾ that is what priests have wanted to manipulate and what the herds have blindly followed. Deleuze argues that the fundamental character of generality is “exchange and substitution” between particulars; on the contrary, repetition is in no sense exchangeable or substitutable between singulars which have “no equal or equivalent.”⁵⁰⁾ His distinction between generality of the particular and repetition of the singular leads him to pay attention to the Nietzschean idea of the eternal return of the same. The generalization of the particular is governed by the “order of laws,” which not only homogenizes it in order to exchange itself with other particulars—“the qualitative order of resemblances”—but also equalizes it to substitute among others—“the quantitative order of equivalences.”⁵¹⁾ The order of laws is a means for

48) Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 149-166.

49) Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 5.

50) *Ibid.*, 1.

generality to discipline, domesticate, substantialize, and territorialize the particular and thus makes it a body *with* organs, the body *organ-ized* according to the order of laws and *em-body-ing* its generality. In contrast, repetition is a “transgression,” which calls into question the laws of generality and hence emancipates, dismantles, desubstantializes, and deterritorializes a body, “the body without organs” opposed to the body with organs, the organism engendered by the order of laws such as “the judgment of God,” “the theological system,” or anything transcendent.⁵²⁾ The transgression of repetition exposes how a body can be territorialized by the generality of the particular and in turn deterritorialized through the repetition of the singular.

In this context, Deleuze scrutinizes the idea of the eternal return in terms of the transgressive repetition against the order of laws in generality. Whereas the particular, through the passage of generalization, is subsumed under the order and becomes a body with organs among other particular bodies, the singular is neither replaceable nor exchangeable but only repeatable. This repeatability takes place in a body without organs. In its repeatability, the body without organs is the very impetus for deterritorializing a body with organs and yielding other singular bodies through the eternal return. What is returned/returning, for Deleuze's Nietzsche, is not in its essence the same as its outcome; neither are particular ones among others but the singular ones. All the body without organs can do is repetition itself, which repeatedly produces other singular bodies other than itself. The transgressive nature of repetition underlies the non-replaceable nature of the singular, which induces repetition itself as well as the journey of the eternal return of the same.

The transgressive repetition shows how the singular as a body without organs emerges from the journey of the eternal return. In terms of Nietzsche's idea of the eternal return of the same, Deleuze defines the singular as what is eternally returned/returning and its outcome; namely,

51) *Ibid.*, 1-2.

52) Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 158.

he is concerned with the eternal return of *what* to *what*. Deleuze is, however, aware that Nietzsche warns us against the misleading “what,” which has brought about an autonomous and independent agent in a subject–predicate relation to which we have been habituated. Moreover, this relation bears a cause–effect relation in that while attributes of the predicate belong to the “substantial” subject, who becomes the agent *par excellence* “in the act,” the subject as a “doer” is considered as a “causal agent.”⁵³⁾ For Nietzsche, this causal agent results from “false causation” such as “inner facts,” “inner world,” “I,” “thing-in-itself,” and finally, “God” as *causa prima* because nobody has ever “proven [them] factual.”⁵⁴⁾ Consequently, the grammatical habits produce a false *genealogy* among cause, subject, doer, agent, and substance, which are nothing but “completely imaginary causes,”⁵⁵⁾ and tempt us to find something substantial as an independent agent in the act. This is why we need to avoid finding something autonomous and substantial in Nietzsche’s “what.”

For Deleuze, this substantial “what” is none other than a body with organs where the order of laws can be realized and territorialized. In opposition to all the laws of territorialization, the transgressive repetition through the eternal return not only deterritorializes the territorialized organism, but also produces the same out of that which essentially differs rather than that which is similar, identical, and replaceable. There is nothing substantially the same in Nietzsche’s idea of the eternal return. What is at stake to Deleuze’s Nietzsche is not the substantial, static product of returning, but the act of returning, which bring forth *Difference* and *Repetition*. It is the body without organs where transgressive repetition takes place, free from a body with organs in the journey of the eternal return. Deleuze goes on to say:

53) Nietzsche, “The Four Great Errors,” in “Twilight of the Idols,” §3.

54) Ibid.

55) Nietzsche, “The Anti-Christ,” §15. In “Beyond Good and Evil,” Nietzsche also rejects the conditioning “I” as a cause and a conditioned “think” as an effect in the Cartesian doubt. Nietzsche, “Beyond Good and Evil,” §17, 54.

We misinterpret the expression 'eternal return' if we understand it as 'return of the same.' It is not some one thing that returns but rather the returning itself that constitutes being insofar as it is affirmed of becoming and of that which passes. It is not some one thing which returns but rather returning itself is the one thing which is affirmed of diversity and multiplicity. In other words, identity in the eternal return does not describe the *nature* of that which returns but, on the contrary, the *fact* of returning for that which differs.⁵⁶⁾

In this crucial passage, Deleuze alludes to the implication of the same in the eternal return with regard to a body without organs. The same is not a substantial being like a body with organs but the returning itself, which constitutes the very body with organs only when the returning is conducive to multiplicity and difference. This returning is the body without organs whose identity refers to the "fact" of returning itself, not to substantial "nature" of the same. Yet, it is not a "historical fact" but the "historical condition under which something new is effectively produced."⁵⁷⁾ Due to its own energetic returning for that which differs, repetition is the condition for the emergence of "novelty" in the eternal return: "we produce something new only on condition we repeat."⁵⁸⁾ The same is not the body with organs but the body without organs from which the novel multiplicity in its singularity emanates. In this sense, the body without organs is the permeable *topos*, which makes returning itself as novelty, innovation, and creativity in its singularity and which wards off the return of the same to the same in its generality. It is the *ou*-*topos* that repetition takes place, like a haunting ghost with its perplexing secret that by no means substantially actualizes itself in determinate place. However, this *ou*-*topos* is not mere utopia (nowhere) in a literal sense; rather, it can be *pan*-*topos* (everywhere) because of its counter-actualization and indeterminateness. From the perspective of the eternal return, paradoxically, what the eternity of the repetition actualizes is its counter-actualization, and what the return of the same determines is its

56) Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 48. Italics mine.

57) Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 90.

58) Ibid.

indeterminateness. Therefore, it is the haunting topos displaced from its fixed place, yet secretly taking its indeterminate place without full actualization. The topology of the body without organs lies in the fact that what the eternal return of the same yields is not something replaceable, substitutable, and substantial but something non-replaceable, non-substitutable, and simply repeatable as a way of returning for that which differs.

For Nietzsche, in this context, a human being as a life-affirmer is not a static, substantial “I” [*Ich*] but a becoming Body. This singular Body *em-Bodies* the will to power in order to become and be creative through the eternal return. What is at stake here is a “matter of acting,” which makes “repetition as such a novelty.”⁵⁹⁾ What is returned/returning does not mean the same *thing* returning to the same *place* but the “returning itself” as “passage”⁶⁰⁾ and a “crossing over,”⁶¹⁾ which consists in every single moment. In order to return to returning itself at all times, it is essential that life-affirmers should have the will to power to be creative; otherwise, the eternal return would become a vicious circle which makes eternally repetitive drudgery for herds that wait for their death with the fear of it.

Death made by the eternal return does not result from mediocrity’s drudgery. If we die of repetition, repetition heals the repetition, and thus death overcomes death itself so that “the whole theatrical game of life and death”⁶²⁾ can be played through the eternal return. In this case, the eternal is closely related to the moment; for Nietzsche, something eternal does not belong *over there* in the *future*, but right *here* and *now*. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche admonishes through the mouth of Zarathustra the dwarf who says that time is just a circle, “Do not make it too easy on yourself!”⁶³⁾ Zarathustra’s admonishment continues:

59) Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 6.

60) Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 48.

61) Nietzsche, “Zarathustra’s Prologue,” in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, §4.

62) Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 6.

63) Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 125–26.

“See this moment!” I continued. “From this gateway Moment a long eternal lane stretches *backward*: behind us lies an eternity ... And are not *all* things firmly knotted together in such a way that this moment draws after it all things to come? Therefore—itself as well? For, whatever can run, even in this long lane *outward*—*must* run it once more!”⁶⁴

It seems that Nietzsche speaks about in some sense the principal doctrine of Buddhism, “dependent origination” [*pratityasamutpada*], which means that everything is “knotted together” and emerges by “indirect cause” [*hetu-pratyaya*]. While, however, in the doctrine of dependent origination, the focus is on the cause-effect relationship, Zarathustra emphasizes the “itself” in every single “moment.” Zarathustra wants to make the moment *eternal* and, simultaneously, the eternal *momentary* by the eternal return. The eternalized moment and the momentalized eternity are inscribed into the eternal return in order to make room for the haunting topos as the body without organs for the sake of generating a novelty in every single moment and avoiding the return of the same to a substantial “what.” For Deleuze’s Zarathustra, thus, the present is “the most narrow, the most contracted, the most instantaneous, and the most punctual”⁶⁵ rather than the circle of the permanent present in its unalteredness. The inscription of the moment and the eternal in the eternal return splits every present into infinite repetition. This is where repetition takes place, and the moment of eternity *lives* with us and, simultaneously, the eternity of the moment *outlives* us. Zarathustra is the one who incessantly creates meaning of his own life and values with his own will by “achieving perfection and exulting in every moment.”⁶⁶ In doing so, the moment and the eternal converge into right here and right now, which make it possible for life-affirmers to possibilize all the possibilities and to

64) Ibid.

65) Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester and Charles Stival (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 150.

66) Walter A. Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1975), 324.

impossiblize all the impossibilities in this world. For them, just as in the case of life and death, the moment cannot be the moment itself without the eternal, and *vice versa*.

After all, it is impossible for Nietzsche to play any kind of a zero-sum game between “thisworldliness” and “otherworldliness” because there is no clear distinction between life and death as well as the moment and the eternal. What Nietzsche intends to criticize is religion in general, and Christianity in particular, for inventing the zero-sum game and wanting to play with the “herds” for its own purpose. Opposing Christianity, Nietzsche wants the herds to turn back to being individuals who know how to affirm and love their own fate. This is what Nietzsche means by the “formula for human greatness”⁶⁷⁾ in terms of *amor fati*:

I want to learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things; then I shall be one of those who make things beautiful. *Amor fati*: let that be my love henceforth! I do not want to wage war against what is ugly. I do not want to accuse; I do not even want to accuse those who accuse. *Looking away* shall be my only negation. And all in all and on the whole: some day I wish to be only a Yes-sayer.⁶⁸⁾

Amor fati has nothing to do with any nihilistic fatalism that has been encouraged by Christian morality in terms of dualistic understanding of life and death. Zarathustra knows that his fate is never given by something above or beyond; rather, he makes his own fate and creates the meaning of earth by himself due to “learn[ing] more and more to see as beautiful” all of his worldly circumstances. Nietzsche says “No” to everything hitherto in order to say “Yes” to everything henceforth. *Amor fati* is an attitude of a “Yes-sayer” who affirms and loves everything that happens to one’s life. Insofar as a Yes-sayer undertakes and loves his or her own life and death, his or her *fati* belongs not to aimless destiny but to promising contingency in the adventure of the long journey of life.

67) Nietzsche, “Why Am I So Clever,” in “Ecce Homo,” §10.

68) Nietzsche, *The Gay of Science*, §276.

For Nietzsche, human beings have been usurped from their throne by God. Nietzsche attempts to take it back from God in order to restore human dignity. After the death of God, there is nothing left except human beings who take back the role that God has taken for a long time. The death of God does not result in "Lost Sheep" (Matt. 18: 12-3). From the beginning, there is no "Shepherd" as the "Savior" who can lead the sheep to eternal life in the other world; from now on, it is a great opportunity for the sheep to make possible all the possibilities to be Yes-sayers who affirm their life on earth, and thus long for becoming "lovers of their fates" who ceaselessly venture to make their own fates more positive, affirmative, and creative right here and now. This is why *amor fati* is the uppermost affirmative formula for great human beings who know how to seek for all the possibilities for the meaning of earthly life and values.

IV. Conclusion: Being Human Being

The present essay explored Nietzsche's thanatology in order to examine how he understands life and death through criticizing Christian morality. Death might be understood as the opposite of life, which makes all the possibilities impossible and all the impossibilities possible. For Nietzsche, however, this dualistic understanding of life and death based on a false analysis that dominates Christian morality has distorted and fabricated human existence and reality. This dualistic understanding of life and death makes the individuals despise earthly life and values with the hope of immortality in the other world, as Christian priests have preached. In the meantime, the individuals become prosaic members of the herds who lose the will to earthly life and long for an illusory world, waiting for their turn to die on hopeless earth.

In opposition to the nihilistic dualism of life and death grounded in a false analysis, Nietzsche insists on a "rational death" in order to positively affirm earthly life and values from the holistic perspective. For this, he demarcates a great reason from a small reason; that is, while the latter

relies on dualism of body and soul with regard to life and death, the former refers to the Body that overcomes this dualism so that death is not the nullification of life but the consummation of life. That is what Nietzsche means by rational death. When it comes to rational death, death is not the fear of avoiding but instead, “glad tidings.” Death is also the “festivals” that give meaning to earthly life and values at the communal level as well as the individual level. Furthermore, instead of immortality in the other world, Nietzsche would say, “Live in the moment eternalized, and the eternal momentized!” through the eternal return in order to maximize all possibilities and minimize all impossibilities in this world.

As far as Nietzsche’s thanatology is concerned, there can be no life without death, and *vice versa*. However, what is at stake to Nietzsche is not “what is life and death?” but “how to live and die.” His concern for death is nothing but concern for life. Life and death are not some kind of static states that would be distinctively differentiated from each other; rather, human beings are living on the one hand, and they are in the course of dying on the other. In this sense, when it comes to Nietzsche’s thanatology, living and dying would be more appropriate terms than life and death. Finally, his thanatology betrays “how to live and die” in terms of *amor fati*, the uppermost affirmative formula for possibility of all the possibilities of human beings who can even overcome the absolute fear of death.

Key words: Nietzsche, Life and Death, Thanatology, Rational Death, Eternal Return, Critique of Christianity

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<국문초록>

삶과 죽음을 넘어서: 니체의 죽음학

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이 글의 목적은 삶과 죽음의 이분법적 이해에 대한 니체의 비판과 그러한 이분법을 그가 어떻게 영원회귀 사상을 통해서 극복하고자 했는가를 살펴보는 것이다. 니체의 저작들 속에서 죽음의 문제는 체계적이고 구체적으로 다루어지지 않고, 단지 산발적으로만 등장할 뿐이다. 그래서 “신의 죽음”에 대한 연구는 유행처럼 활발하게 진행되어 왔지만, “죽음” 자체에 대한 연구는 주목받지 못해왔던 것이 사실이다. 그러나 니체의 죽음에 대한 이해는 신의 죽음으로 대표될 수 있는 그의 기독교 비판 지점과 맞닿아 있다. 삶과 죽음의 이분법적 이해는 “대중을 위한 플라톤주의”라 할 수 있는 기독교 도덕이라는 토양에 뿌리를 내리고 있다고 니체는 판단한다. 그러나 그에게 죽음은 삶의 종말을 의미하지 않을 뿐만 아니라, 인간은 기독교에서 역설하는 것처럼 현생의 덧없는 삶 이후 내세에서의 영원불멸을 기대하면서 살아야 하는 존재도 아니다. 니체에게 죽음은 “이성적 죽음”이자 “완성하는 죽음”을 의미한다. 삶이라는 것은 내세의 불멸을 위한 준비단계가 아니라, 영원회귀를 통해 삶 자체를 적극적으로 긍정함으로써 현생에서 “운명애”를 구현하고자 하는 삶에의 의지이다. 결국 니체의 죽음학은 현세의 삶을 부정하고 내세 지향적 삶, 즉 기독교 도덕이 추구하는 삶의 태도를 비판함으로써 현세에서의 긍정적이고 적극적인 삶에 대한 열망을 제시한다.

주제어: 니체, 삶과 죽음, 죽음학, 이성적 죽음, 영원회귀, 기독교 비판