

## **PUBLIC LIVES**

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### ***Amor fati***

On a day like this, the beginning of yet another year in time's eternal stream, we may be forgiven for indulging in a bit of philosophical musing. Not everyone may be inclined to write the customary list of personal resolutions for the New Year. Others prefer to take stock of the year just past -- in other than political terms. This is particularly true perhaps for those, who, like me, are getting on in years. At a certain point, you stop trying to change yourself. Instead of wallowing in regret and resentment, you accept who you are, and you try to reflect this in everything you do.

To help us sum up, it is sometimes useful to turn to ideas developed by writers who've spent the longest time pondering life's meaning. My own favorite is Nietzsche's thought experiment about "eternal recurrence."

How would you react, he asks in *The Gay Science*, if a demon appeared to you one day in your loneliest hour with the strangest message: "This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence -- even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!"

If this thought took possession of you, Nietzsche warns, it "would change you as you are or perhaps crush." For, henceforth, in everything you do and in every choice you make in life, you will have to face up to the question: whether you wish this to be repeated countless times more. I don't think Nietzsche meant to confer a scientific status upon this logically

improbable idea, but he took it seriously as a heuristic device, a starting point for the positive phase of his philosophy.

Nietzsche recommended not mere acceptance, but a courageous affirmation of life in the face of such a frightening possibility. In an aphorism aptly titled “For the new year,” he expressed a most unusual New Year’s resolution: “I want to learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things.... *Amor fati*: let that be my love henceforth.” To love one’s fate with all its joys and pains – indeed, to imagine that everything that has happened in one’s life is providential – can anything be more demanding?

Many see this as Nietzsche’s attempt to assert values in a modern world where everything of value seems to have depreciated, so much that individuals no longer know what still matters in life. This condition is what is called nihilism. Ironically, Nietzsche himself gained notoriety as a nihilist because he dared to question the basic moral foundations of his society and time. And yet his philosophy may be read as a sustained attempt to cultivate a positive and hopeful attitude to life in the face of the modern erosion of long-standing beliefs and values.

Far from defending inherited values, Nietzsche saw in modernity the chance to formulate new ones. The release from the old, he said, must not mean that everything is now permissible. On the contrary, it means learning how to live a self-chosen but relentlessly disciplined life. This will not come naturally. One needs to fashion it for oneself through a hit-and-miss process that requires the utmost boldness and sense of adventure. This process is not theoretical or cerebral, or doctrinal. It is eminently practical. Ideas are only starting points; it is the act of living itself that is crucial and ultimately instructive.

“A thinker sees his own actions as experiments and questions – as attempts to find out something. Success and failure are for him answers above all. To be annoyed or feel remorse because something goes wrong – that he leaves to those who act because they have received orders and

who have to reckon with a beating when his lordship is not satisfied with the result.” This is the Nietzsche that offends moralists of all stripes. He not only sought to free himself from inherited moral compulsions. More than that, he resolved to avoid the temptations and pitfalls of moral judgment.

“Yes, my friends, regarding all the moral chatter of some about others, it is time to feel nauseous. Sitting in moral judgment should offend our taste. Let us leave such chatter and such bad taste to those who have nothing else to do but drag the past a few steps further through time and who never live in the present – which is to say the many, the great majority. We, however, want to become those we are – human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves.”

If Nietzsche piously avoided the stance of moral arrogance, even more did he insulate himself from resentment. To him it is one of the most useless emotions. His hero is the person who goes through life with a learner’s eye: he has no time for regret, anger, or resentment. The wisdom he gains from living only makes him dance and laugh.

For obvious reasons, we do not turn to Nietzsche for ideas on how to create a better society. He was not a philosopher of social reconstruction, but a poet of self-creation. He knew that living was dangerous and difficult everywhere, but he hoped for a time when human beings would be able to say “yes to life!” rather than merely endure it.

Here’s to a joyous New Year!

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