

FATE, DESTINY AND ETERNAL RECURRENCE

'Love is our true destiny'

Thomas Merton

Fate and Destiny

The concepts of fate and destiny are often confused. The term "fate" is derived from the Latin word *fatum*, meaning "that which has been spoken." Fate is based on the idea that there is a natural order in the universe or a preordained course of events, which cannot be changed. "Destiny," on the other hand, is derived from the Latin word *destino*, meaning "that which has been firmly established." Unlike fate, there is an element of choice and freedom in destiny – it is something we can potentially shape and alter through free will. Fate is unavoidable and inevitable; destiny can be modified and altered.

Throughout history, philosophers, mystics, poets, statesmen, and even humorists have contemplated the meaning and significance of fate and destiny:

- Marcus Aurelius: "Accept the things to which fate binds you, and love the people with whom fate brings you together, but do so with all your heart."
- The Bhagavad Gita: "It is better to live your own destiny imperfectly than to live an imitation of somebody else's life with perfection."
- Shakespeare: "It is not in the stars to hold our destiny but in ourselves."
- Hafiz: "The place you are right now God circled on a map for you."
- Goethe: "Destiny grants us our wishes, but in its own way, in order to give us something beyond our wishes."
- John Galsworthy: "Life calls the tune, we dance."
- William Jennings Bryan: "Destiny is not a matter of chance. It is a matter of choice. It is not a thing to be waited for, it is a thing to be achieved."
- Ralph Waldo Emerson: "Sow a thought and you reap an act; sow an act and you reap a habit; sow a habit and you reap a character; sow a character and you reap a destiny."
- C.S. Lewis: "Hardship often prepares an ordinary person for an extraordinary destiny."
- Nelson Mandela: "I am the maker of my fate and the captain of my destiny."

- Amy Tan: "If you can't change your fate, change your attitude."
- Groucho Marx: "Man does not control his own fate. The women in his life do that for him."

G.I. Gurdjieff discussed the nature of fate in talks with his students in Russia. He taught that most people are susceptible to the 'law of accident' since they are generally dominated by their conditioned personality. Fate, on the other hand, is related to a person's essence. In *In Search of the Miraculous*, his student P.D. Ouspensky records a conversation in which the difference between personality and essence is explained in regard to fate and the law of accident:

I mentioned before about *fate* and *accident* in man's life. Fate also exists but not for everyone. Most people are separated from their fate and live under the law of accident only. Fate is the result of planetary influences which correspond to a man's type. A man can have the fate which corresponds to his type but he practically never does have it. This arises because fate has relation to only one part of man, namely to his *essence*. It must be understood that man consists of two parts: *essence* and *personality*. Essence in man is what is *his own*. Personality in man is what is 'not his own.' 'Not his own' means what has come from outside, what he has learned, or reflects, all traces of exterior impressions left in the memory and in the sensations, all words and movements that have been learned, all feelings created by imitation – all this is 'not his own,' all this is personality . . . A small child has no personality as yet. He is what he really is. He is essence. His desires, tastes, likes, dislikes, express his being such as it is. But as soon as so-called 'education' begins, personality begins to grow. Personality is created partly by the intentional influences of other people and partly by involuntary imitation of them by the child itself. In the creation of personality, a great part is also played by 'resistance' to people around him and by attempts to conceal from them something that is 'his own' or 'real.' Essence is the truth in man; personality is the false.
(1)

John G. Bennett, also a student of Gurdjieff, elaborates on the concept of fate as it applies to individuals, groups, nations and even planet Earth. In *The Way to Be Free*, he writes:

The pattern of fate is neither causal or future oriented. It accompanies a life throughout as if it were the warp on which the life is woven. It does not compel, but enters into everything that happens. And such patterns apply not only to individual people, but to groups, institutions, and maybe to the whole historical process. We speak of the fate of nations, of the ill-fated city, and Gurdjieff even used the phrase "ill-fated planet" of our own earth. There are also such things as favourable and unfavourable days which are the subject matter of divination. It is possible to discern a pattern of events in very strange

ways, such as throwing yarrow sticks when using the *I Ching*. In times past, people used the flight of birds and other natural phenomena. Common to all these ways is the use of some arbitrarily produced pattern, and the principle must be that all patterns produced without constraint within a region of experience are related. A large-scale pattern will tend to reproduce itself on a small scale and will then look like an organizing influence. Fate is a pattern which exists in the future zone. It is somehow able to make certain events more probable than others. This gives human life a shape it would not have otherwise. Fate is with us all the time and presses in on us. But because it is not causal, there is always the possibility of finding our way round it by means of the immense uncertainty there is in the world. It is very probable that we have more than a single fate and that our lives can change their course. The fulfillment of our destiny may always have to be done through overcoming our fate. (2)

Bennett also makes a further, important distinction between fate and destiny: "Fate is future determined by its own pattern, but only in limited cases, e.g. the fate of an individual or group. Destiny is the concept of personal destiny that is not pre-determined or compulsive, but realized through acts of free choice. Predestination." Destiny is a higher order than fate because it entails free will and conscious choice:

Destiny is a counterpoint to fate. Destiny is the possibility of creation that we have and it is in this creation that we have our essential freedom. In one way, it can be called the freedom to be ourselves that Goethe spoke about, "The striving to become what one already is." To be what we are, we have to find our way through all the influences of future events, of our genetic pattern, and our fate. Destiny is our *dharma*, the part we have to play in the cosmic drama. It is a role we have to create and it is not determined for us. There is a destiny not only for us as individuals but also for the human race as a whole, and our private destiny must in some way be an element in the greater whole. We can put it to ourselves that there are patterns which constrain and patterns which invite and open and are totally permissive. There is nothing in this world that compels us to fulfill our destiny and when we understand that, we can understand what freedom is. If we fulfill our destiny, we have our eternal place. If not, we fall out of that place. (3)

According to Bennett, when a certain subtle energy (*baraka*) is present, it is possible to become aware of our destiny. He employs the term *Hyparxis* to describe the direction of destiny where something needs to be accomplished in the world for a certain given purpose: "When people know how to use it, it produces the action beyond history that we call 'the Work.' It enables things to be prepared and the relation between fate and destiny to be rightly adjusted for humanity, so that things that have gone off the rails can be brought back and new tendencies introduced into human life. To the extent that we can take part in this, we enter into this present moment."

Gurdjieff emphasized that only inner work, guided by a teacher, can release a person from the domination of the personality and the inevitability of the 'law of accident' in determining the arc of their life:

Fate is better than accident only in the sense that it is possible to take it into account, it is possible to know it beforehand, it is possible to prepare for what is ahead. In regard to accident one can know nothing. But fate can also be unpleasant or difficult. In this event, however, there are means for isolating oneself from one's fate. The first step towards this consists in getting away from *general laws*. Just as there is individual accident, so is there general or collective accident. And in the same way as there is individual fate, there is a general and collective fate. Collective accident and collective fate are governed by *general laws*. If a man wishes to create individuality of his own he must first free himself from *general laws*. General laws are by no means all obligatory for man; he can free himself from many of them if he frees himself from 'buffers' and from imagination. All this is connected with liberation from personality. Personality feeds on imagination and falsehood. If these are decreased, personality very soon weakens and a man begins to be controlled either by fate or by a *line of work* which is [directed by a teacher's] will . . . This will lead him until a will of his own has been formed, capable of withstanding both accident and, when necessary, fate. (4)

The Reversibility of Time

In his fictional work *Through the Looking Glass*, Lewis Carroll provides an intriguing depiction of reverse time travel. In her conversation with Alice, the White Queen speaks of her ability to remember future events before they have happened:

"I don't understand you," said Alice. "It's dreadfully confusing!"
"That's the effect of living backwards," the Queen said kindly. "It always makes one a little giddy at first."
"Looking backwards!" Alice repeated in great astonishment. "I never heard of such a thing!"
"But there's one great advantage in it, that one's memory works both ways."
"I'm sure mine only works one way," Alice remarked, "I can't remember things before they happen."
"It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards," the Queen remarked.
(5)

The notion that time can reverse and flow backwards from future to past is an ancient one. In one of Plato's myths, time moves in opposite directions as revealed in the vision of Er: "He saw the Fate of the present spinning one way, the Fate of the future the reverse way, and the Fate of the past now one way and now the other. One set of spirals seems to carry beings

forward through their earthly career, and the other spiral to carry them invisibly *back* to where they started.”

Three examples from life illustrate the possibility of ‘reverse time’:

- In a cinema film, time flows forward from frame to frame, giving the illusion of movement from past to future. However, when the film is rewound and played backwards, time seems to move from future to past.
- When we wake up from a dream, our recollection of the events in the dream are more vivid in memory from the end of the dream rather than the start of the dream.
- When drowning people who survive report experiencing an instantaneous reliving of their lives, it is often in reverse temporal order, from the moment of drowning backwards to their birth.

In his theoretical model of time, Ouspensky identified three movements or directions of time, corresponding to the three dimensions of time:

- Movement into the future – the process of evolution, the growth and development of human groups and humanity as a whole. (first dimension)
- Movement in one spot, in the present. “It is a movement along the circle of ‘eternal recurrence,’ the repetition of life, and the inner growth of the soul which becomes possible owing to that repetition.” (second dimension)
- Movement backward into the past in the form of reincarnation into the past. “In order to admit the possibility of reincarnation into the past, it becomes necessary to presume plurality of existence or co-existence. The life of a human being, while repeating according to the law of eternal recurrence at one ‘place in time,’ *simultaneously* occurs at another ‘place in time’.” (third dimension)

In *A New Model of the Universe*, he expands on the notion of reverse time, the third dimension of time:

In the great stream of life which flows from its source there must necessarily be contrary and transverse currents, just as in a tree there is a flow of sap from roots to leaves and a flow of sap from leaves to roots. In the great stream of life the evolutionary movement must be a movement contrary to the general process of growth, a movement against the current, movement towards the beginning of Time, which is the beginning of All. Bound to his wheel of repeating lives, man would be unable to avail himself of the possibility of a reverse movement against time . . . This is a very strange theory at first glance. The idea of a

backward movement in time is unknown and incomprehensible to us. Actually, however, this idea alone explains the possibility of "evolution" in the true and larger meaning of the word. Evolution, i.e. improvement, must come from the past. It is not enough to evolve in the future, even if this were possible. We cannot leave behind us the sins of our past. We must not forget that nothing disappears. Everything is eternal. Everything that has been is still in existence. (6)

Ouspensky also suggests that an individual who has reached a certain degree of inner development and consciousness may return to the past in order to influence his or her ancestors, or their contemporaries, to make more favourable the conditions of their own birth. Such action creates an evolutionary movement or reverse current in the midst of the stream of life which gradually creates a better and nobler future: "The privilege of the position of reincarnating into the past for the man who remembers what he has learned in his past life is explained by the fact that he *knows the results*, knows what has sprung from the actions of the people of the time in which he reincarnates. This does not mean of course that *everything or many things* can be altered by one man being reincarnated into the past. The possibilities of altering external events are very small, but they must exist."

In *The Theory of Eternal Life*, Rodney Collin, a direct student of Ouspensky, draws a number of inferences from the concept of reverse time:

Let us examine the implications of time running backward in more detail, with the idea that this must be the nature of time in the invisible world. In the first place we must examine what happens to our idea of cause and effect. Cause and effect is simply a description of different stages in a temporal sequence; what goes *before* is taken as cause, what follows *after* is taken as effect. But if time were reversed then effect would become cause, and cause effect . . . What does it all mean? It means that the universe is all one, and that every part depends upon every other part, every phenomenon is connected with all other phenomena, nothing can be changed without the whole changing. It is this knowledge that gives rise to the feeling in the great saviours of humanity that they are *responsible* for all the evil and suffering in the world. In that perception which belongs to the invisible world, they know that they and this vast sea of suffering are inseparable. They know that they are responsible for all that *was* before them. They know that no permanent satisfaction can be achieved by them as individuals, until the whole level of humanity is raised, until all mankind is regenerated in the *past* as well as in the future . . . Only with the idea of reversed time can we see the true significance of the vow of the Bodhisattva, not to enter Nirvana until all sentient beings shall be saved, and all creatures everywhere be set upon the path of Buddhahood. For this vow must arise from the sight of the universe as it is, that is, in reversed time and above time. Only confined to our ordinary illusion of a one-way flowing time could men and women believe in a personal salvation and paradise independent of others and the past. (7)

Eternal Recurrence Throughout History

The Merriam-Webster definition of eternal recurrence is “the infinitely cyclical repetition of all things and situations with respect to a finite universe.” The concept of repetition or recurrence of events is an ancient one. Most people have experienced a strange feeling of familiarity or awareness of a previous experience. This is sometimes referred to as *déjà vu*: “We see a place for the first time and yet know that we have seen it before. We have the sensation of living momentarily in another part of our lives, as if we re-entered the past, yet we feel certain that we have been in that place or done that thing before.” This experience suggests that time may be circular and that all things come around to the same point again:

If all process in time is ‘curved’ everything will come back to its starting-point. *The life will recur.* The life is a circle. We will come once more to the same points in the life, to the same experiences. But we cannot believe that the realization that this is so belongs to our ordinary level of consciousness any more than does the feeling of the living existence of all the life, or the pure feeling of *I*. Let us remember that the knowledge-value belonging to higher levels of consciousness cannot be the same as that which characterizes our ordinary level. What is merely theory to our ordinary consciousness can be the direct cognition of real fact on a higher level. Now the *idea* of recurrence is a very old one, and I would explain its persistence, in a historical sense, as due to it being cognitive *fact* at a higher level of consciousness. (8)

The reality of eternal recurrence is supported by the experiences of certain people to whom the mysteries of time and eternity have been revealed, and various metaphysical and spiritual teachings throughout the ages:

Why did not people long ago come to the idea of eternal recurrence? But they did indeed come to it long ago. I have pointed to the teachings of Pythagoras, to Buddhism, to theories of reincarnation and transmigration of souls, which, in their modern forms are actually only a distortion of the idea of eternal recurrence. Many other ideas of the future life, various illusions in occult teachings, for instance, the very strange idea of the possibility of *changing the past*, various popular beliefs, such as the cult of ancestors – all these are connected to the idea of recurrence. It is quite clear that the idea of recurrence cannot be popular in its pure form, primarily because it seems absurd from the standpoint of ordinary logic, since there is nothing similar to it in the world of “three-dimensional” sensations or in the usually accepted “time.” The usual view of time leaves no place for recurrence. On the contrary, according to the ordinary wisdom of the world “nothing ever returns.” So even in those teachings in which originally the idea of recurrence undoubtedly existed in its pure form, as for example in Buddhism, it has become distorted and adapted to the usual understanding of time. (9)

The idea of cyclical time and recurrence – that the events and experiences of one's life have all happened before, not only once but many times – have appeared in myths, legends, stories and philosophical teachings in countless cultures and different time periods:

- Ancient Egypt ('eternal renewal')
- Pythagoras ('repetition of existences')
- Hindu myths and symbols
- The Buddhist 'wheel of life'
- Greek philosophers Empedocles and Zeno of Citium
- Plato's *Republic*
- Mayan and Aztec cycles of time
- Teutonic legends of fate and destiny
- Sufi teaching stories of non-linear time

In more recent times, the idea of eternal recurrence is usually associated with the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. He believed that each person must accept all the events and experiences of their life – no matter how joyful or sorrowful – and understand that if anything had been different then the current conditions and circumstances of their life would also be different. What one *is* at any moment encompasses all of one's experiences, both past and present. In *Gay Science*, he wrote: "This life as you now live and have lived it you will have to live once again and innumerable times again; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unspeakably small or great in your life must return to you, all in the same succession and sequence – even this spider and this moonlight, and even this moment and I myself."

In order to avoid repeating the same life over and over again, making the same choices and actions, Nietzsche argues that we must gain self-awareness and self-mastery in order to truly become authors of our own life and destiny. The affirmation and acceptance of the totality of one's life was called *amor fati* (love of fate) by Nietzsche.

W.B. Yeats also alludes to the idea of recurrence or repetition in his poem "A Dialogue of Self and Soul":

I am content to live it all again
And yet again . . .
I am content to follow to its source
Every event in action or in thought;
Measure the lot; forgive myself the lot!
When such as I cast out remorse
So great a sweetness flows into the breast
We must laugh and we must sing,
We are blest by everything,
Everything we look upon is blest.

Like Nietzsche, P.D. Ouspensky was fascinated with the concept of eternal recurrence. He even wrote a manuscript on that theme during his life, which was subsequently published as *Strange Life of Ivan Osokin* following his death in 1947. The essence of his understanding of eternal recurrence is that following death a person is born again and again into the same life circumstances, repeating the same mistakes, while remembering past existences less frequently and with less and less remorse. "The future will be the same as the past. But he is unable to act intelligently in the light of his knowledge, because at crucial moments he forgets, he cannot remember, he cannot follow. It is neither his perceptions nor his intelligence which needs special attention, it is their lack of relation with his everyday behavior and actions. In a word, he needs to learn to *live*."

Ouspensky's novel is set in turn-of-the-century Russia where an embittered young man, Ivan Osokin, visits a magician and is given the chance to relive twelve years of his own life. When he magically returns to his youth, he relives the same experiences again. Caught in the cords of time, he repeats the same mistakes of his past, preventing him from living consciously with aim and purpose: "What a strange sensation. Has all this happened before? It seems to me just now that at some other time I have sat here. Everything was exactly the same, and I was saying the same words."

Again and again, out of boredom more often than anything else, Osokin watches himself behave in a way that limits and eventually ruins his future, contradicting his own perceptions of intelligent action. He notices that he is interested in everything except what actually concerns him. He doesn't want anything good for himself. Events happen around him but not to him, as if life was a dream in which he did not really exist. Again and again this sensation of indifference to himself clears up and he sees how his life can take a sensible direction; but as each new turning-point appears, the opportunity is missed. From a distance he can remember the whole pattern, but as events come close, he can see only the separate details so that, not all at once, but little by little, the trap called life closes in on him. (10)

The magician offers a path out of Osokin's impasse and inability to control his thoughts, feelings and actions. He tells Osokin that he must make voluntary sacrifices and "give his life entirely to the magician, at least for ten or fifteen years." The magician spells out the attitude and conditions necessary for an actual change of understanding and being which would allow Osokin to escape from the circle of repetition – the web of mechanical behaviour that prevents conscious choice and actions. "In order to know, one must learn; and in order to learn one must make sacrifices. Nothing can be acquired without sacrifice. This is the thing you do not understand, and until you understand it, nothing can be done."

In order to change anything, you must first change yourself. And this is much more difficult than you think. It requires constant effort for a long time and much knowledge. You are incapable of such effort and you do not even know how to start. No one is capable of it by himself. People always repeat the same

mistakes. At first they simply do not know that they move in a circle; and if they hear about this idea, they refuse to believe it. Later, if they begin to see the truth of it and accept it, they think that this is all that is necessary; they become fully convinced that they know all they need to know and that they can change everything. And immediately they find charlatans who assure them that everything is very easy and simple. This is the greatest illusion of all. In this way men lose the chances which they have acquired through much suffering and sometimes even through great effort. You must remember that one may know many things and be unable to change anything, because changing requires different knowledge and also something which you do not possess . . . You must realize that you yourself can change nothing and that you must seek help. And it must be a very deep realization, because to realize today and forget tomorrow is not sufficient. One must live with this realization. (11)

The Architecture of Eternal Recurrence

Because our normal experience of time passing is linear, from past to future, it is difficult to visualize or 'prove' the existence of other time dimensions, including eternal recurrence. In *A New Model of the Universe*, Ouspensky details this conundrum:

In speaking of the idea of eternal recurrence, it is necessary to understand that it cannot be proved in the ordinary way, that is, by the usual methods of observation and verification. We know but one line of time, the one on which we now live. We are one-dimensional beings in relation to time; we have no knowledge of parallel lines. Suppositions as to the existence of parallel lines cannot be proved so long as we remain on one line. Our position in relation to time is exactly the same as beings in a one-dimensional universe. Everything that exists must occupy a certain place in time, either in front of us (future) or behind us (past). There can be nothing parallel to us. This means that we cannot prove the existence of anything parallel so long as we remain on one line. But if we attempt to break away from ordinary views and bear in mind that the supposition of the possible existence of other lines of "time" parallel to ours is more "scientific" than the usual naïve one-dimensional conception of time, then the conception of life as a recurring phenomenon will prove to be easier than we imagine. (12)

Ouspensky's notion of eternal recurrence or repetition of lives is based on cyclical time: one life ends and another begins at the same point of birth, and the same life is relived again. This would explain the common feeling of *déjà vu* experienced by people, especially in childhood, that *this has happened before*:

This means that if a man was born in 1877 and died in 1912, then, having died, he finds himself again in 1877 and must live the same life all over again. In dying,

in completing the circle of life, he enters the same life from the other end. He is born again in the same town, in the same street, of the same parents, in the same year and on the same day. He will make the same mistakes, laugh and cry in the same way, rejoice and suffer in the same way. And when the time comes he will die in exactly the same way as he did before, and again at the moment of his death it will be as though all the clocks were put back to 7:35 a.m. on the 2nd September 1877, and from this moment started again with their usual movement. The new life begins in exactly the same conditions as the preceding one, and it cannot begin in any other conditions. The only thing that can and must be admitted, is the fact of the strengthening with every life of the tendencies of the preceding life, of those tendencies which grew and increased during life, both good and bad tendencies, those which were a manifestation of strength and those which were a manifestation of weakness. There exists, indeed, much more psychological material for the idea of eternal recurrence than is supposed. But the existence of this material is not fully realized by scientific thought. (13)

In his exposition of eternal recurrence, Ouspensky makes a point of emphasizing that when we relive our life it may *not* be exactly the same as our current life – there is the possibility of choice and change, whether for better or worse:

Is very difficult to accept the idea of the absolute and inevitable repetition of *everything*. It seems to us that if we were to remember at least something, we should be able to avoid some of the most unpleasant things. Moreover, the idea of absolute repetition does not agree with the idea of growing tendencies which is also necessary. In this connection it must be realized that as regards the character of the repetition of their lives people fall into different types or categories. There are people of absolute repetition, in whose case everything, both big and little, is transmitted from one life to another. There are people whose lives have each time the same beginning, but go on with slight variations, upwards or downwards, coming to approximately the same end. There are people in whose case lives go with a definitely ascending tendency, becoming richer and stronger *outwardly*. There are people whose lives, on the contrary, display a clearly marked descending line, which gradually destroys all that is alive in them and reduces them to nothing. And there are people whose life contains an inner ascending line, which gradually leads them out of the circle of eternal repetition and causes them to pass to another plane of being. (14)

The idea of repetition or recurrence suggests that traces or imprints of previous cycles may exist in higher dimensions of time. But unless there is a conscious effort in the direction of inner growth, it may be impossible to access this information and use it for one's own benefit. In *Living Time*, Maurice Nicoll, a student of both Gurdjieff and Ouspensky, writes: "In the spiral of our lives we may turn ceaselessly in one circle, in absolute recurrence. All that is possible, potential, will remain unrealized. It exists, but does not exist – for us. There is the *already-thereness* of everything in higher space and the lack of individual realization of it in oneself."

If we leave a trace perhaps we may, in recurrence, meet people earlier or later than before; or even the order of things may be changed. Parts of our lives from which we have got all that is possible, or parts that have no significance, may be looped up, so to speak, so that the life is joined together in a new way, some parts being shortened, others prolonged. I believe that people who are really very significant to us are met with just *when it is possible* to meet with them – that is, when we are ready. If the life as a whole grows, we may meet them earlier – *if this is possible* or *as soon as it is possible*. We must remember that there are different 'times,' or periods, on different scales, finally involving cosmic processes; and all this turning machinery of wheels within wheels must sometimes render things possible and sometimes impossible. (15)

The idea of repetition of lives challenges our contemporary notion of free will and choice. In *Time and the Soul*, professor of philosophy Jacob Needleman explores this seeming contradiction between a life of recurrence and one of free will:

Taken by itself, the idea of recurrence or destiny seems at first to do away with the normal human experience of free will and choice. As such, it is unacceptable to most of us. Every day, every hour, sometimes even every minute of our lives, we are faced with choices and decisions about great or small things. The idea of recurrence and destiny seems to make human life too passive, too accepting in a weak and ignoble way. Yet wherever the idea of destiny is seriously offered, it is accompanied by promptings involving choice and struggle. It is a complete misunderstanding to think of this idea as urging a weak passivity. The teachings of wisdom never lead us away from the active principle in human nature. On the contrary, always and in everything wisdom calls us to *choose*, to decide, to sacrifice, but always with an intensive, active attention. It is a serious misunderstanding ever to read the great metaphysical traditions as counsels of passivity. But is this not a blatant contradiction? How can one entertain the idea of recurrence and destiny and still hold to the idea of free will? No authentic expression of the idea of destiny ever seeks to mitigate this contradiction. On the contrary, it flings the contradiction in our faces. The logical mind recoils and rejects one or another side of the contradiction. It would seem impossible to hold on to destiny and freedom at one and the same time. It is here that the guidance of wisdom begins to "bite" – here is a place where we see that these ancient doctrines are not intended as easy consolations or mere explanations. Behind this contradiction, invisible to the intellect in its ordinary state, there lies the deep resolution of this contradiction, the great meaning of the idea of recurrence and destiny. But it cannot be given in words. It can only be given in experience. (16)

When Ouspensky asked Gurdjieff about the validity of his notion of eternal recurrence, his teacher provided a very nuanced answer that contained *practical* knowledge indicating that recurrence could only be understood through inner work and self-transformation. But Gurdjieff

was initially reluctant to share his views: "I remembered that I wanted above all to know what G. thought about "eternal recurrence," about the repetition of lives, as I understood it. I had many times tried to start a conversation about this and tell G. my views. But these conversations had always remained almost monologues. G. had listened in silence and then began to talk of something else."

"Very well," said G., laughing. "I promise to answer any question you care to ask, as it happens in fairy tales." "Well," I said, "tell me what you think of recurrence. Is there any truth in this, or none at all? What I mean is: do we live only this once and then disappear, or does everything repeat and repeat itself, perhaps an endless number of times, only we do not know and do not remember it?"

"This idea of repetition," said G., "is not the full and absolute truth, but it is the nearest possible approximation of the truth. In this case truth cannot be expressed in words. But what you say is very near to it. And if you understand why I do not speak of this, you will be still nearer to it. What is the use of man knowing about recurrence if he is not conscious of it and if he himself does not change? One can say even that if a man does not change, repetition does not exist for him. If you tell him about repetition, it will only increase his sleep. Why should he make any efforts today when there is so much time and so many possibilities ahead – the whole of eternity. Why should he bother today? This is exactly why the system does not say anything about repetition and takes only this one life which we know. The system has neither meaning nor sense without striving for self-change. And work on self-change must begin today, immediately. All laws can be seen in one life. Knowledge about the repetition of lives will add nothing for a man if he does not see how everything repeats itself in one life, that is, in this life, and if he does not strive to change himself in order to escape this repetition. But if he changes something essential in himself, that is, if he attains something, this cannot be lost." (17)

References

- (1) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous* (New York: Harcourt, 2001), p. 161.
- (2) J.G. Bennett *The Way to Be Free* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1980), pp. 107-109.
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