

Groundhog Day

by [Albert Norton, Jr.](#) (February 2023)



Infinity Mirrored Room—Filled with the Brilliance of Life, Yayoi Kusama, 2011/2017

Groundhog Day again. A **double** redundancy for you. A repetition carrying the seeds of its own repetition, like when you sit between facing mirrors at the barber shop and see yourself in a striped apron repeating into infinity. It's like the idea of eternal return, or reincarnation in certain Eastern religions. Think of the meditations on reincarnation compared to reflections on the lake in E.M. Forster's *Passage to India*. Or the reflection (another kind of reflection, let's say "contemplation") in Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* and *Thus Spake Zarathustra* and also Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, unbearable because absent eternal return "einmal ist

keinmal," once is never, so nothing we do matters.

Eternal return can be oversimplified and confused as reincarnation. Pantheism starts with a monist view of reality, in which body and spirit are of one substance. In the dualist Western vision, the body dies but the spirit continues to live, and the spirit is individuated; that is, it's still you. In the monist religions also the body clearly dies; we can see that plainly enough, but whence the spirit, if it is ineluctable from the body? It is envisioned as being released into a general undifferentiated spirit; a world-soul of some kind, or is reconstituted in another body. It may not be a human body, without a God-breathed element differentiating mankind from other animals. God is not transcendent, on this view, so there is no other-worldly Presence apart from the immanent world-soul to animate living things but elevate mankind in relative dignity.

But I say "oversimplification" and "confusion" because the concept of eternal return is distinguishable from (though influenced by) traditional Eastern reincarnation in that we're to imagine the events of a lifetime being repeated in an endless loop, and the idea, apparently, is that this endless repetition is what gives gravitas to what we do as human beings. Nothing is important if it's a one-off event (einmal ist keinmal) but our lives have meaning because we're living out a predetermined and repeated pattern, and the repetition is what lends significance. What you do in the next minute matters because you'll do it again in a succession of lifetimes for all eternity. I'm just telling you the concept, I'm not saying it makes sense.

You might recognize in this way of thinking a variant of existentialism. Think of Sisyphus rolling the rock up the hill, again and again. This is an ancient myth but Albert Camus revived it in an essay in 1942 to express an element of post-war existentialism emphasizing ultimate individuality and what might be called "presentism."

His vision wasn't presented as one of pointless despair but rather as a means of saying all that matters is this present moment. We have no problem rolling a stone uphill, if the task is mentally separated from all that came before or follows after. It's just how we're spending this particular moment. I'm typing these words as an act undertaken in the present, I'm not thinking about whether I will re-type these words forever and ever into eternity. And I'm not thinking about it because I'm concentrating on—and therefore lost in—the moment. I experience only the present, without regarding the significance of this act of typing on what happens next or what happened before. It's enough that I am typing these words.

This is what is meant by “presentism,” except that existentialism would place awareness of the present moment not as the result of willful concentration on the task at hand, but in an inability to see before or after. We have conscious self-awareness not just in the moment, however, but across time. It's why we sacrifice today for a better tomorrow, for example. Squirrels collect nuts for the winter, but the foresight of human beings goes far beyond that kind of rote unselfconscious instinct. Human beings who actually live in the moment, like animals, are yet human enough to be conscious of the pointlessness of what they do. Acute presentism leads to a loss of the felt sense of significance; to Weberian “Disenchantment.”

Presentism is a symptom of malaise because it means putting on blinders, so to speak, to the significance of what we do as against the totality of our lives; and collectively, our history. It is a symptom of despair particular to the totalitarian-leaning postmodern world. An illustration. In the July 2021 *New English Review*, I reviewed Theodore Dalrymple's *Life at the Bottom* (the review titled “Ideological Oppression”). He wrote that much much of the underclass, being afflicted with presentism, was “condemned to live in the

eternal present." And elsewhere in his book:

They never awoke to the fact that a life is a biography, not a series of disconnected moments, more or less pleasurable but increasingly tedious and unsatisfying unless one imposes a purposive pattern upon them.

They are, in other words, unable to see outside the bubble of time and place in which they find themselves. Self-absorption takes the place of self-autonomy. These are the people around you struggling with life though they suffer from no obvious handicap.

The other major point I suggested above from Camus's use of the Sisyphus myth is individualism. Now I am strongly an individualist as that word is contrasted to "socialist," because present-day ideologies of oppression arise from reflexive socialist orientation. But something different is meant in the individualism of existentialism. I would call it "subjectivism" instead, I think that's clearer, but I'll not kick against the goads here. It means that just as time is chopped up into discrete moments with all our attention focused on one moment, so individuals are discrete from the mass of humanity. Space is quantized, time is quantized, humanity is quantized. Severed units of time demark Sisyphus's range of attention, and he himself is a severed unit of humanity. Meaning is not derived from society or a putative God or a general feeling of loving fellow-feeling. It is derived from within. "I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world," (Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*). Meaning is entirely self-generated.

But meaning has to come from outside ourselves. If it's all self-generated we become a black hole of self-absorption consuming ourselves from the inside. We become small feral

beasts like the future Pope Gregory in Thomas Mann's *The Holy Sinner*. Or reduced to a hard nut of lifeless matter rolling around pointlessly on the littered floor of the world. Nothing matters. And we see this in postmodern ideology. Even as we move to socialist orientation in our thinking vis-à-vis the *polis*, we paradoxically become atomized and alone. (This was a significant point in Hannah Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951)). In this way we are ready grist for the totalitarian mill, because in looking outside ourselves we see no God nor even objectivity of value. And so we look instead to the closest authority we can find, the collectivism of the dialectic.

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Albert Norton, Jr is a writer and attorney working in the American South. His most recent book is [Dangerous God: A Defense of Transcendent Truth](#) (2021) concerning formation of truth and values in a postmodern age; and *Intuition of Significance*, a 2020 work weighing the merits of theism against materialism. He is also the author of several award-winning short stories, and two novels: *Another Like Me* (2015) and *Rough Water Baptism* (2017), on themes of navigating reality in a post-Christian world.

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