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THE ETERNAL RETURN: CIRCULAR TIME IN MYTH AND ART

Dr. Anwar Ali

Professor, Department of Comparative Religion, University of Karachi, Karachi, Pakistan

Abstract:

The concept of eternal return posits that time is cyclical, where events and experiences recur endlessly in a loop. This idea has permeated various cultures, influencing mythologies and artistic expressions throughout history. From ancient civilizations to contemporary thought, the notion of circular time offers profound insights into human existence, nature, and the cosmos. This article explores the manifestation of eternal return in myths, such as those from Hinduism and ancient Greek traditions, alongside its representation in visual arts. It discusses how these narratives and artworks reflect humanity's quest for meaning and continuity within the cyclical nature of time. Through comparative analysis, the paper reveals the underlying philosophies that bind these diverse cultural artefacts, highlighting the universal resonance of circular time in shaping human consciousness.

Keywords: *Eternal Return, Circular Time, Myth, Art, Hinduism, Greek Mythology, Cultural Philosophy, Visual Arts, Cosmic Cycles, Human Existence, Existentialism, Time Perception, Symbolism, Nature, Continuity, Cultural Narratives.*

INTRODUCTION

The concept of eternal return, or cyclical time, is a philosophical and metaphysical idea that suggests that time is not linear but rather a repetitive cycle where events recur infinitely. This idea has been explored in various religious, philosophical, and artistic contexts, illustrating humanity's deep-seated fascination with the nature of time and existence. The roots of this concept can be traced back to ancient cultures, where myths served as vehicles for conveying existential truths and the cyclical patterns observed in nature.

In Hinduism, for example, the cyclical nature of time is encapsulated in the concept of "Kalachakra" (the Wheel of Time), reflecting the endless cycles of creation, preservation, and destruction. Similarly, Greek mythology presents the concept of eternal return through figures like the Phoenix, symbolizing rebirth and renewal. The art that emerged from these cultural

backgrounds frequently incorporates themes of cyclical time, using symbols, colours, and forms that evoke the continuity of existence.

This article aims to delve into the rich tapestry of eternal return as reflected in myths and art, examining how these cultural expressions reveal a shared understanding of life's cyclical nature. Through a comparative analysis of various myths and artistic movements, the paper highlights the philosophical underpinnings of circular time and its relevance in contemporary thought.

Cycle of Time in Mythology

The concept of the Cycle of Time in mythology is a profound and intricate theme that recurs in various cultures around the world. At its core, this cycle represents the idea of time as a repetitive loop, characterized by birth, death, and rebirth. Unlike linear views of time, which suggest a definitive beginning and end, the cyclical model posits that events and eras are interconnected, creating a continuous flow of existence. This perspective invites a deeper understanding of human experience, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all life and the inevitability of change.

In many mythological traditions, the Cycle of Time is often represented through the imagery of seasons, illustrating the natural rhythms of life. For instance, in Hindu mythology, the concept of Yugas describes a vast cycle of ages, each characterized by different levels of morality and spirituality. The four Yugas—Satya, Treat, Damara, and Kali—represent a gradual decline in righteousness and virtue, followed by a renewal that brings about the next cycle. This idea reflects the belief that time is not merely a linear progression but rather a series of phases that mirror the cycles found in nature.

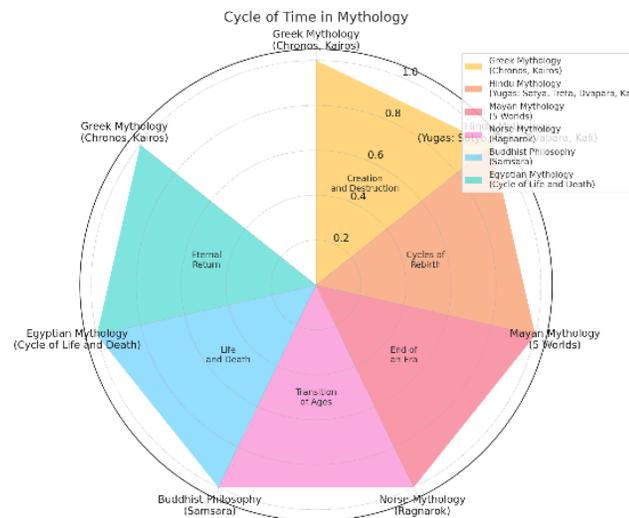
The ancient Greeks embodied the cyclical nature of time through the figure of Chrono's, the personification of time, and the myth of the Great Year, which posited that time is divided into great cycles. This belief suggests that the universe undergoes periodic renewal, where every age culminates in a cataclysmic event, leading to a fresh start. In this way, Greek mythology reinforces the notion that endings are merely preludes to new beginnings, underscoring the importance of regeneration and the continuous flow of existence.

The cyclical view of time also manifests in the mythologies of Indigenous cultures, where creation stories often emphasize the interdependence of all beings within the cycle. Many Indigenous peoples view time as a spiral rather than a straight line, integrating past, present, and future into a cohesive whole. This perspective fosters a deep connection to the earth and the ancestors, highlighting the importance of maintaining balance and harmony within the natural world. Such beliefs are essential for sustaining cultural practices and wisdom passed down through generations, reinforcing the cyclical nature of existence.

In Eastern philosophies, such as Buddhism, the cycle of time is closely linked to the concepts of samsara and karma. Samsara refers to the continuous cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, driven by the actions (karma) of individuals. This cycle is not merely a repetition but an opportunity for spiritual growth and liberation. The ultimate goal is to break free from this cycle, achieving enlightenment (nirvana). Thus, the Cycle of Time is portrayed not just as an inevitable loop but as a transformative journey toward self-realization and understanding.

The Cycle of Time in mythology serves as a rich and multifaceted theme that invites contemplation on the nature of existence and our place within it. From the seasonal rhythms of

nature to the profound teachings of ancient cultures, this cyclical perspective encourages a holistic view of time that transcends linearity. By embracing the interconnectedness of all life and recognizing the inevitability of change, we can cultivate a deeper appreciation for the patterns that shape our experiences, reminding us that every ending is merely a prelude to a new beginning.



Cycle of Time in Mythology: A circular diagram illustrating the cyclical nature of time in various myths, highlighting key figures and events.

Cultural Comparison of Circular Time

The concept of time is deeply ingrained in cultural practices and worldviews, influencing how societies perceive and interact with the world around them. One fascinating aspect of this is the distinction between linear and circular time. In many Western cultures, time is often viewed linearly, progressing from past to present to future in a straight path. This perspective emphasizes punctuality, deadlines, and the importance of future planning. Conversely, several indigenous and Eastern cultures embrace a circular understanding of time, where events are seen as cyclical, emphasizing seasons, life cycles, and the interconnectedness of past, present, and future. This cultural dichotomy shapes societal values, rituals, and daily life.

In cultures that adhere to circular time, such as many Indigenous communities in North America and certain Asian societies, time is perceived as a continuous loop. Events are not isolated; instead, they are part of a larger cycle that includes birth, death, and rebirth. This perspective fosters a deep respect for nature and its rhythms, as seasons and cycles dictate agricultural practices and community activities. For instance, many indigenous tribes celebrate seasonal festivals that align with natural cycles, reinforcing the idea that humans are integral parts of the ecosystem. These rituals are not only a means of marking time but also a way to connect with ancestors and the earth.

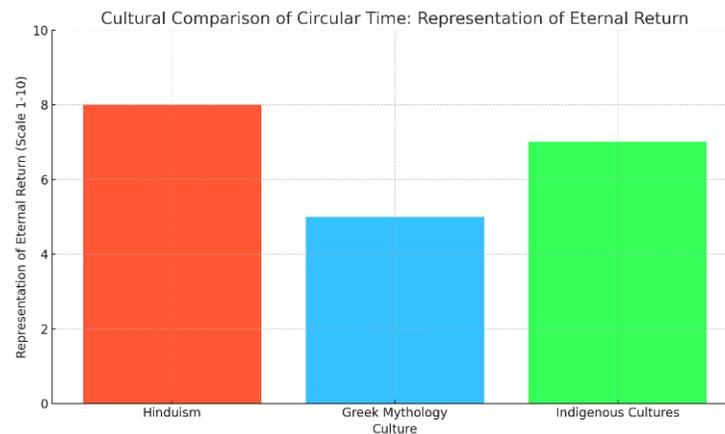
On the other hand, cultures with a linear time perspective, such as those in the United States and much of Europe, prioritize efficiency, productivity, and achievement. The focus on the future manifests in a strong emphasis on goal-setting, career progression, and technological advancement. The societal value placed on being "on time" is a reflection of this linear approach, with time often quantified and commodified. In these cultures, past events serve primarily as

lessons to inform future decisions, with less emphasis on cyclical remembrance or ritualistic celebration.

The impact of these differing time perceptions can be seen in various cultural practices. For example, in many circular time cultures, storytelling plays a significant role in transmitting knowledge and preserving history. Stories are not just linear narratives but rather woven into a broader tapestry of experience, allowing for a multifaceted understanding of existence. In contrast, cultures that emphasize linear time may favour more structured forms of education and storytelling, focusing on factual timelines and chronological events, often leading to a more fragmented understanding of history.

These differing perspectives on time also influence social relationships. In cultures that view time as circular, relationships are often prioritized over schedules, leading to a more fluid approach to social interactions. Meetings and gatherings may start late or extend beyond expected durations as people engage in meaningful conversations. In contrast, in linear time cultures, social interactions are frequently governed by strict schedules, with a focus on efficiency and productivity. This can create a sense of urgency that may undermine the depth of interpersonal connections.

The cultural comparison of circular and linear time highlights the diversity of human experience and understanding. While linear time encourages a focus on progress and achievement, circular time fosters a sense of belonging and interconnectedness with nature and community. By acknowledging and respecting these different perspectives, individuals and societies can enrich their understanding of time and its significance in shaping cultural identities. In an increasingly globalized world, finding common ground between these viewpoints could lead to a more holistic approach to time, promoting balance and harmony in both personal and communal life.



Cultural Comparison of Circular Time: A bar graph comparing the representation of eternal return in different cultures (e.g., Hinduism, Greek mythology, Indigenous cultures).

Artistic Representations of Cyclical Time

Artistic representations of cyclical time have captivated artists, philosophers, and scholars throughout history. Unlike the linear perception of time prevalent in Western thought, many cultures understand time as a cycle—revolving through seasons, life stages, and cosmic rhythms. This cyclical view acknowledges the interconnectedness of existence, reflecting the natural

world's rhythms and human experiences. In art, these themes manifest through various mediums, illustrating the repetitive nature of life and the perpetual renewal found in nature.

One prominent example of cyclical time in art can be found in indigenous and ancient cultures, where motifs such as the Ouroboros—the snake eating its tail—symbolize eternity and the cycle of life and death. These symbols serve as a reminder of the continuity of existence, where endings are merely new beginnings. In many indigenous artworks, seasonal changes are depicted, emphasizing the importance of nature's cycles in guiding human activity, such as planting and harvesting. Through these representations, artists communicate a profound respect for nature and an understanding of humanity's place within it.

In the realm of contemporary art, cyclical time is explored through various techniques, such as repetition and transformation. Artists like Yayoi Kusama use patterns and dots to create immersive environments that echo the infinity of time and space. Her works invite viewers to engage with the concept of eternity through repetition, suggesting that each moment is part of a larger, cyclical experience. Similarly, installation artists often create experiences that encourage viewers to reflect on their relationship with time, space, and nature, highlighting the transient and cyclical aspects of life.

Cyclical time is also evident in the portrayal of life cycles in art. Many artists have explored themes of birth, growth, decay, and rebirth, often using nature as a backdrop. For example, the changing seasons in landscape paintings reflect not only the passage of time but also the idea of renewal and transformation inherent in nature. Artists like Claude Monet, with his series of water lilies, capture the fleeting beauty of nature while reminding viewers of the cyclical patterns of life and the passage of time.

The use of circular forms and mandalas in various artistic traditions exemplifies the concept of cyclical time. In Hindu and Buddhist art, mandalas symbolize the universe and the cyclical nature of existence. These intricate designs are often used in spiritual practices, serving as tools for meditation and reflection. The repetitive patterns in mandalas remind us of the interconnectedness of all things and the endless cycle of life, death, and rebirth, reinforcing the idea that time is not merely a linear progression but a continuous loop.

Artistic representations of cyclical time invite viewers to reconsider their relationship with time and existence. By engaging with these works, individuals are encouraged to reflect on the rhythms of life, the natural world, and their place within it. Whether through ancient symbols, contemporary installations, or the depiction of life cycles, artists capture the essence of cyclical time, offering profound insights into the nature of existence and the interconnectedness of all things. These artistic explorations remind us that, much like the cycles of nature, life is a journey marked by repetition, renewal, and transformation.

TIME AS A CONSTRUCT

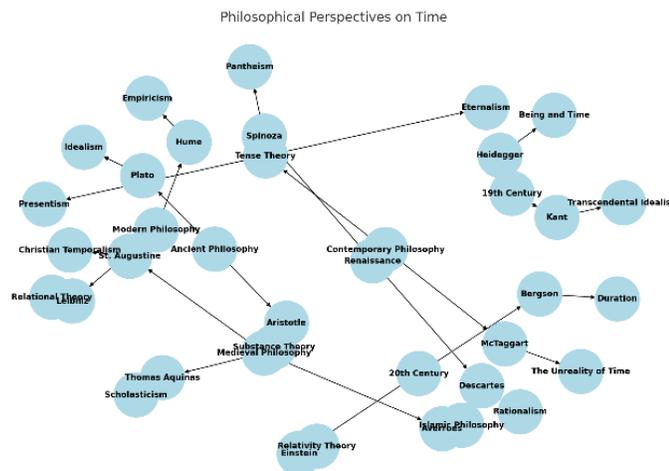
Some philosophers, including Immanuel Kant, propose that time is not an inherent property of the universe but rather a mental construct that shapes our experiences. Kant argued that time is a necessary framework through which we perceive events, but it does not exist independently of human cognition. This perspective challenges traditional notions of time, emphasizing the subjective nature of temporal experience. From this standpoint, our understanding of time is deeply intertwined with perception, memory, and consciousness, leading to a more relational view where time exists only in relation to the observer.

THE PHILOSOPHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF TIME TRAVEL

Time travel has become a popular topic in both philosophical and scientific discussions. Philosophers like David Lewis and David Wallace explore the paradoxes associated with time travel, such as the grandfather paradox, where a time traveler could inadvertently prevent their own existence. These thought experiments raise essential questions about causality, identity, and the nature of temporal relations. The implications of time travel challenge our understanding of time, suggesting that if time is not linear, our conventional notions of cause and effect may need reevaluation.

TIME IN PHILOSOPHICAL DISCOURSE

The philosophical discourse on time reveals its complexity and multifaceted nature. Whether viewed as a flowing present, a static block, or a cognitive construct, time profoundly influences our understanding of reality, existence, and human experience. As technology and science continue to advance, our philosophical inquiries into time will likely evolve, inviting new perspectives and challenging our assumptions. Ultimately, the exploration of time invites us to reflect on the very essence of what it means to exist and experience the world around us.



Philosophical Perspectives on Time: A flowchart illustrating the evolution of philosophical thought on time from ancient to contemporary perspectives.

Summary

The exploration of eternal return in myth and art reveals a profound connection between human consciousness and the cyclical patterns of existence. By examining key myths from Hinduism

and Greek traditions, this article illustrates how these narratives serve to articulate the human experience within a framework of cyclical time. Furthermore, the visual arts, from ancient pottery to modern installations, reflect the themes of rebirth, continuity, and the interconnectedness of life.

Key insights include:

- The representation of cyclical time in myths as a means of understanding human existence.
- The impact of circular time on artistic expression and symbolism.
- The relevance of these themes in contemporary discussions around time, existence, and consciousness.

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