

I Want to Live Again: an Existential Analysis of It's a Wonderful Life

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the existential aspects of the film *It's a Wonderful Life*. Drawing on Jean Paul Sartre's atheistic existentialist perspective, this project investigates the intersections between film and modern philosophy. The film features philosophical ideas from existentialist writings such as Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and *The Gay Science*. Through comparative analysis, this research assesses what types of phenomena cause individuals to turn back to the same conditions that caused them to turn away.

Introduction

Every Christmas season in the past several decades, Frank Capra's classic holiday film *It's a Wonderful Life* airs on major cable television stations all over the world. Each year, many Americans watch this film and are filled with that warm 'fuzzy' feeling that is festively compared to a hot cup of cocoa during the winter months. I would suggest that this film is more than just a holiday tradition; it is a piece of fiction that has a unique interaction with philosophy, specifically existentialism. Philosophically, the plethora of questions, thought provoking ideals, and premises raise a unique puzzle to analyze. The film features conflicts such as free will vs. determinism, being human vs. being automated, as well as universal issues such as suicide, happiness, love, and so on. Since the main character in Capra's film turns back to the same conditions in life that caused his existential crisis, *It's A Wonderful Life* may serve as a useful case study for an existential analysis. Three questions guide this project. First, can this film be interpreted from an existential perspective? Secondly, what is significant about this film, existentially? Finally, why do individuals turn back to the same conditions in life that caused them to turn away?(In other words, what phenomena seem to cause humans to choose suffering over happiness?) To answer these questions, I will use primary texts of Jean-Paul Sartre, and Friedrich Nietzsche, along with some secondary literature such as *Sartre Explained: From Bad Faith to Authenticity* and *Existentialism and Contemporary Cinema: A Sartrean Perspective*. From these texts I will use specific existential ideas to analyze *It's A Wonderful Life* and then examine ideas that are present such as Sartre's anguish, forlornness, and despair along with Nietzsche's affirmation of life and the eternal recurrence I will draw on these texts' characterizations of existentialist ideas to frame my analysis of *It's A Wonderful Life*. I will be relying heavily on Sartre's atheistic approach to existentialism because he acknowledges the

relationship between artistic production and philosophy. In this case *It's a Wonderful Life* acts as a case study regarding narrative of what it means to be human and our experiences.

Existential Perspectives

Before addressing the questions posed above, a foundation of relevant concepts and ideas must be reviewed. The central term in this paper is existentialism. Many philosophers have been labeled (either self-proclaimed or by their successors) as existentialist. These individuals range from Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche in the 19th century, to Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Albert Camus in the mid 20th century and numerous others both during and after their careers including the present.

The term existentialism has had a variety of uses and meanings. Sartre in *Existentialism and Human Emotions* writes that existentialism has become so broad a meaning that it he must explicitly define what he means by existentialism, and specifically in a philosophical plane (Sartre 12). Sartre writes that existentialism is "... a doctrine which makes human life possible and, in addition, declares that every truth and every action implies a human setting and a human subjectivity." (10) For this paper I too will use this definition as my operational meaning for existentialism.

Sartre's aforementioned text *Existentialism and Human Emotions* is used as a mooring device in this paper for my approach to existentialism. The text serves this purpose well because Sartre is writing to defend existentialism and the charges against it in his contemporary setting of post World War II France (10). These charges stem from a broad collection of individuals that Sartre feels makes up the collective community of existential philosophers. He explains that there are two major distinctions within the existential philosophical community, which can be referred to as the Christian and atheistic existentialist (13). He champions the atheistic perspective of existentialism and explains/argues its superiority, and defends it against what he thinks critics argue are the shortcomings of the atheistic approach. There are several specific concepts of atheistic existentialism that are germane to this paper.

The most important concept to explain is the difference that separates the approaches to the relationship between essence and existence. Sartre builds his argument on how the different assumptions to this relationship fundamentally make these two groups incommensurable (13). Essence for this discussion can be generally formulated as being the concept or idea of a thing. For example, when an individual is asked to make or build a chair, before they begin the act of making one must first imagine and formulate the idea or concept of what a chair is. This idea is the essence of the chair they will now build. In contrast, existence is formulated as the actual 'being' of an essence (Sartre 14-15). Continuing with the same example, now that an individual has the essence of a chair, they create it and in doing so the chair is now a thing; the chair is in existence or being. The person has taken the essence and brought it into existence. Thus when creating, essence precedes existence (Sartre 14). Sartre's explanation is that for Christian existentialist the existence of humans is due to God making us. Thus in the same manner we make objects (like in the chair example), we have an idea (essence) about the thing we are going to make and then create it (existence). Hence Sartre writes that from the Christian existentialist perspective, humanity's essence precedes humanity's existence (15). From the atheistic existential perspective the inverse argument is favored. Sartre writes that atheistic existentialism, "...states that if God does not exist, there is at least one being in whom existence precedes essence, a being who exists before he can be defined by any concept, and that this being is man,

or, as Heidegger says, human reality” (15). For this paper I will use the atheistic approach to existentialism, and will adhere to the premise that human existence precedes human essence.

With atheistic existentialism Sartre explains ideas about how essence precedes existence when creation occurs. For atheistic existentialism the first principle must be the focus on subjectivity. Sartre concisely defines subjectivity as, “Man is nothing else than what he makes of himself” (15). As such, “Not only is man what he conceives himself to be, but he is also only what he wills himself to be, after this thrust toward existence” (Sartre 15). Sartre is emphasizing the point that in the atheistic perspective of existentialism, humans create and shape what the essence of humanity is with every choice, decision, and action. In doing this, “Man first of all is the being who hurls himself toward a future and who is conscious of imagining himself as being in the future”(Sartre 16). From these statements we can understand how under an atheistic existential perspective (whose first principle is subjectivity) examines how humanity shapes and creates its own understanding of its human meaning, experience, and reality presently and consciously looking towards the future. With an atheistic existential perspective creative works of fiction about human meaning and experience can be critically analyzed for the purpose of defining what humans feel and understand as the essence of human existence.

I support the idea that as humans create objects from the idea in our mind, the works of fiction act as an object that leaves one’s imprint on how and what is humanity and thus allows us to fulfill our self as a human (51). Sartre uses several stories in his writing, such as his own experiences with a Jesuit priest, the experience of his student during the war, and novels such as *Around the World in Eighty Hours*. All these examples that Sartre mentions and describes may seem entirely factual but they may be utterly fictional or altered at the very least; Sartre could very well have altered the details to more clearly demonstrate what he was trying to convey. The examples he uses serve to describe and explain an idea and concept about humanity that Sartre is expressing or analyzing. Thus he demonstrates explicitly how fiction serves to reify the essence he is trying to convey regarding existentialism. He subjectively chooses how to act in this process of creating.

Film and Existentialism

I have described how fiction is both a fundamental tool for existentialism and germane to thinking existentially under Sartrean theory of atheistic existentialism. I have not answered the question of whether or not the film *It’s a Wonderful Life* can be interpreted from an existential perspective. I have explained how fictional literature has been used for existential writings and thought, but not the medium of film. Thus the discussion now turns to film as a work of fiction.

The film is a creative work directed by Frank Capra and focuses on the protagonist, George Bailey. The film covers topics such as personal struggles and issues with self-meaning or worth, emotions, and the trials and tribulations of the character’s life. The film focuses on George and his experiences in the film.

Film and print are entirely two different mediums, but they also have several similarities. One point may be the accessibility of film and literature in different time periods. *It’s a Wonderful Life* is popular in its own right for our current western pop culture. The American Film Institute has held *It’s a Wonderful Life* as a top 20 film in the last 100 years of cinema (afi.com). It has aired consistently on cable television during the Christmas season since the mid 1970s. In 1987, a Florida judge ordered a man to watch the film as part of his sentence for killing his ill wife, and then trying to kill himself. According to the judge, he wanted to show the man

the value of life. The film is still shown come Christmas time on NBC network. According to the article “ ‘It’s a Wonderful Life’ Turns 65”, the 2011 TV ratings press release showed that NBC's 31st primetime telecast nabbed the network the top 18-49 rating for a non-sports Saturday night in nearly a year. The last time that happened was during the last "It's a Wonderful Life" telecast in December 2010 (tv.yahoo.com).

Film also offers a different experience for the viewer than reading a book. In an article in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, the article explored the impact of Sartre’s writings on Nothingness, had on Cinema. In this article the author writes about films strength in representing the tension between portraying abstract concept of Nothingness and concrete representation of things. ““No other medium can represent the physical surface of reality as meticulously as cinema and no other medium can express the potential emptiness behind that surface as strongly as cinema”(Kovacs 135). This is an ability that print seems to lack, because it can only describe reality but never portray it as it is, in the way film can with images and sound. In *Existentialism and Cinema* the point is made that Sartre himself believed that, “...film must be seen as a cultural experience on a par with Greek art or Philosophy and that, of all the art forms, it most resembles the real world” (Boulé and McCaffrey 6).

By synthesizing these two points: first that atheistic existentialism is a perspective in which human creation is a expression of what one perceives is the essence of being human, secondly that film is a medium that shows not only the specifics of a situation but also the abstract that humans experience, I find that we can indeed examine the film in an existential perspective. This claim is supported by William Pamerleau in his book *Existentialist Cinema* writes:

... film, precisely because of its concrete depictions, can convey insights that inform even the abstract ideas of theoretical philosophy. Generally speaking, there are two ways in which it does so: through its ability to deliver realistic narratives and through the expressive nature of visual imagery. (85)

This film can be interpreted from Sartre’s atheistic existential perspective as a way to understand humanity and human experience through George.

Sartrean Existential Concepts in the Film

The film incorporates numerous philosophical ideas, many of them existential. Nearly each scene has at least one concept, if not more, that has been discussed in major philosophical writings. Many of the philosophical ideas that will be mentioned in this paper may be independent of each other, but the ideas share such similar content that when exemplified in the film the differences become blurred. It would be difficult to describe the depth and nuances of each scene in this way, especially because an inexhaustible amount of arguments could be made in each scene on the varying number of specific philosophical ideas a scene may incorporate. For clarity’s sake, I have chosen to focus on the major idea that a scene exemplifies to show the quality and depth that a scene exemplifies.

The basic plot of Capra’s film begins with the audience being introduced to George Bailey, as a boy with enthusiastic and excited outlook towards life. George is sure that his life will hold a plethora of adventures and wonders to behold. Reality dawns for George though as his plans and aspirations are repeatedly setback as he is presented with obstacles.

The first of many philosophical ideas can be seen in Sartre’s *Existentialism*. When George wants to leave his home of Bedford Falls early in the film, he says to Mary (who would

become his wife):

I know what I'm going to do tomorrow and the next day and the next year and the year after that. I'm shaking the dust of this crummy little town off my feet and I'm going to see the world. Italy, Greece, the Parthenon, the Coliseum. Then I'm coming back here and go to college and see what they know . . . and then I'm going to build things. I'm gonna build air fields. I'm gonna build skyscrapers a hundred stories high. I'm gonna build bridges a mile long . . .

George's plans though are placed on hold by one obstacle after another. The obstacles begin on the night of his younger brother's graduation from high school, on the eve of his departure from home. As he shares his wishes with Mary, he is told that his father (who runs the local Building and Loan) has had a stroke. A local banker and slum lord, Mr. Potter, takes this as an opportunity to try to convince the board of directors of the Building and Loan to stop what he calls the 'sentimental hogwash' of making loans to the disadvantaged people of Bedford Falls that George's father had been instrumental in insuring for the people of Bedford Falls. When George hears of this, he rushes to protest. George persuades the board members to reject Potter's proposal; they agree, but only on the condition that George himself run the Building and Loan. So George reluctantly stays in Bedford Falls and gives the money he has saved for college, to his brother Harry.

At this point in the film what George experiences is an example of Sartrean anguish. In *Existentialism* Sartre defines it as:

The man who involves himself and who realizes that he is not only the person he chooses to be, but also a law-maker who is, at the same time, choosing all mankind as well as himself, can not help escape the feeling of his total and deep responsibility. (18)

We can think about this as one's inescapable feeling of total and deep responsibility for directly choosing one's own, and indirectly humanity's law. This is because each act of an individual posits that they are acting in the way they feel a human being should act in this situation. Sartre uses the story of Abraham, who is still choosing what is "the law" when God demands that Abraham sacrifice his son (19). Abraham in this case is choosing not only what he will do, but what others must do in this circumstance, thus he is not only the law maker for himself but for humanity (19). This situation is very much what George is experiencing in the film. He is faced with a circumstance and choice he must make, to stay behind and run the Building and Loan as his father did, or abandon it and pursue his plans. George exhibits this anguish when he states to a member of the board who explains the condition to him, "Dr. Campbell, now let's get this thing straight. I'm leaving. I'm leaving right now. I'm going to school. This is my last chance. Uncle Billy here, he's your man." When George learns that it is his decision of whether to stay and fulfill the position or go to college that will decide the fate of the Building and Loan, he chooses to stay. The scene depicts George's reluctance to choose as he does giving ample evidence of his anguish in being totally responsible for his choice. His feelings are of total and deep responsibility that he cannot escape.

The next concept that subsequently follows in Sartre's *Existentialism* is forlornness. This

is the feeling that humans experience because they have no excuses for their choices, that we have nothing to cling to because everything is possible (in the sense that atheistic existentialists are not guided by an omnipotent God.), and that because no God exists, we are alone to make our choices (neither fate, nor divine guidance can make them for us). An example to clarify the difference between anguish and forlornness would be in the aforementioned scene when George was deciding whether to take the job or not. Sartre writes:

God does not exist and that we have to face all the consequences of this... The existentialist, on the contrary, thinks it very distressing that God does not exist, because all possibility of finding values in a heaven of ideas disappears along with Him; there can no longer be an *a priori* Good, since there is no infinite and perfect consciousness to think it. (21-22)

Sartre uses a parable of a student he once taught. The student was faced with a major decision during WWII, he had to decide if he would join the Allies and help fight the Nazi's or if he would remain at home and take care of his aging mother. The dilemma for him being that each option had positive and negative impacts. Sartre writes how this predicament places the person in a sense of forlornness because he has nothing to seek guidance from. His religion tells him a number of justifications for each decision. Because existentialism first principle is subjectivity, there is no ultimate rule for him to seek guidance in. He is forlorn because nothing and no one can help him choose (24-29).

This idea is shown in a subsequent scene when there comes a 'run' on the Building and Loan, just as George and Mary are about to go on their honeymoon. In this crisis, Potter seizes the opportunity again to corral the Building and Loan into his control. He offers George's clients a deal to purchase their savings/shares in the Building and Loan for "50 cents on the dollar"; but George and Mary use the \$2000 intended for their honeymoon to weather the financial storm of the townspeople until the Building and Loan's funds are restored. This decision is not easy for George, he hesitantly states to the mob:

Now, just remember that this thing isn't as black as it appears. I have some news for you folks. I was just talking to old man Potter and he's guaranteed cash payments at the bank. The bank's going to reopen next week.

The mob though is unsatisfied with not being able to withdraw all their money, and as one person states that they have taken Potter up on the deal, the crowd begins to clamor for the door. George pleads with them to remain faithful and honor their agreement; the point is raised that people have bills to pay and families to feed; Potter's deal will see those things come to pass. Mary speaks up and asks how much they need. George persuasively says, "Hey! I got two thousand dollars. Here's two thousand dollars. This'll tide us over until the bank reopens." George and company are able to make until close with only 2 dollars to spare. The Building and Loan survives to see another day of business because of George's decision making. George did not have to offer his \$2,000 of honeymoon money, Mary did not need to remind him they had it, in fact Mary had urged George not to stop and see what was happening at the Building and Loan, she pleaded, "George, let's not stop. Let's go.... Please, let's not stop, George."

Instead George left the taxi and his wife to confront the crowd and open the doors to the

Building and Loan. This scene exemplifies Sartre's concept of experiencing forlornness. George chooses to confront this situation that barely avoided disaster because of his choice. Not only was he acting as the 'law maker', as with anguish where he felt the burden that was his choice. George also could not find guidance on how he should chose. There was not 'a priori' option that he could cling to for guidance. Potter did indeed make him an offer that would have saved the Building and Loan, but George scorned it and made a choice that could have condemned the business. Despite his enthusiasm to use the money when it was offered, at the close George laments his decision when he realizes Mary has left and that all but two dollars of their honeymoon money is gone. When speaking to her on the phone his first sentence is to immediately apologize. We can understand about the idea of forlornness in this scene as the inescapable burden one feels to make a decision despite knowing that no one can give them the 'right' answer, we like George are alone to make our choices.

The next aspect that arises in the film is clearly present in two separate scenes. This experience is what Sartre labels as Despair. In *Existentialism* Sartre writes:

[Despair] means that we shall confine ourselves to reckoning only with what depends upon our will, or on the ensemble of probabilities which make our action possible. When we want something, we always have to reckon with probabilities. (29)

In other words Sartre is describing how a human is nothing other than their plan; a person exists only to the extent that they fulfill their self. Thus we are nothing else than the ensemble of our acts, nothing else than our life. This does not mean one person is greater than another because they have fulfilled their self to a greater extent. Instead it is that our acts, the decisions that we make, the choices we make are who we are in the narrowest sense. Sartre is stressing the point that we experience despair because we confine one's self to one's control. This is distinct from forlornness because in that experience it is because there is no 'a priori' that we can seek guidance to make decisions, despite guidance from others, one remains alone in the decision. Despair may seem similar but it is based upon the fact that those decisions we make are confined to what we control. For example, in the aforementioned scene in the film, George may have wanted to just give the Building and Loan patrons all of the money they were asking for. But the vault did not have enough money for the high demand of withdrawals the townspeople were demanding for. That was not a decision George could make because that was beyond his control. To stress the point, the saying "money doesn't grow on trees" was true for George, as it is for all human beings. Of course he would have liked for that to be the case, but it's beyond George's control, hence he could have felt despair.

The second scene that demonstrates despair is on Christmas Eve. While on his way to deposit \$8000 for the Building and Loan, George's uncle Billy (also an employee at the Building and Loan) encounters Mr. Potter and proudly shows him the newspaper article about his nephew Harry, who is about to be honored by the president. Absent-mindedly, Uncle Billy leaves the \$8000 deposit envelope in the folds of the news- paper. Later, Potter discovers it keeps it. As it happens, that same day the bank examiners were to inspect the Building and Loan's records; George discovers that Billy has lost the money and becomes frantic; he searches everywhere in town for the \$8000. In desperation, George takes the blame for this loss and tells Potter that "he" has misplaced the \$8000; he appeals to him for a loan to rescue the company. Potter turns George down and proceeds to inform the authorities for 'embezzlement'. Later, George runs to a nearby bridge; remembering that he has a \$15,000 life insurance policy, he decides to commit suicide; after all, he concludes, circumstances being what they are, he is "worth more dead than

alive.” George is exemplifying what Sartre had written about despair. George very well would have preferred to receive the loan from Mr. Potter, but Potter’s response is beyond George’s control. Just like George feels like he would prefer not to be arrested but that’s beyond his control now. This scene shows George becoming so distraught at this juncture in his life that he finds himself at a point where he thinks the only decision that is within his own control, is to kill himself.

Nietzsche’s Existential Concepts in the Film

When George reaches this deep despair, he enters an existential crisis in which he is in a crisis of self-meaning. We see this by George stating that he is worth more dead than alive, and strongly considering committing suicide. At this point in the film, the themes switch from primarily Sartrean, to primarily that of Friedrich Nietzsche. Specifically two very important concepts from his novels *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and *The Gay Science* are important to my analysis. The transition from Sartre to Nietzsche coincides with the transition in the film, when Clarence, George’s guardian angel, enters the film. When George is contemplating jumping from the bridge into a freezing river, Clarence saves George by jumping into the water himself so that George would jump into the waters and rescue him. After this ironic salvation of George, Clarence grants George’s wish: to have never been born, never to have existed. Clarence shocks George by showing him what the town would have been like if George had never existed. George experiences what is now Potterville and is in a constant state of rejecting this world that Clarence has thrust him into, thereby forcing George to experience his inexistence. Finally, George ends up running from the prospect of never having existed, George returns to the bridge and calls upon Clarence and God to let him live again. His prayer is answered and George is returned to the moment he met Clarence, but more importantly he is returned to himself, to his town, to his loved ones, to his life. George is transformed and is stunned at how wonderful everything about his life is.

These scenes are where the first of Nietzsche’s themes appear. In *Zarathustra* the main character (Zarathustra) says:

Have you ever said Yes to a single joy? O my friends, then you said Yes too to all woe. All things are entangled, ensnared, enamored; if you wanted one thing twice, if ever you said, “You please me, happiness! Abide, moment!” then you wanted all back. All anew, all eternally, all entangled, ensnared, enamored- oh, then you loved the world. Eternal ones, Love it eternally and evermore; and to woe too, you say: go, but return! For all joy wants-eternity. (Nietzsche 435)

Zarathustra is talking about saying yes to *all* of life, not just some good or bad, but all of it as a whole. George in this case is experiencing the absence of his life, which is initially what he had wanted. Clarence however thrust him into this circumstance, which is what George had wanted at that time. Instead he finds that he would rather affirm his life, saying yes to everything it had entailed, both good and bad. The good being his family and friends, and the bad being the missed opportunities and pending legal problems, George now would say yes to all of it.

Two additional ideas are essential to understanding Nietzsche’s concept of the affirmation of life. They too can be found in scenes from the film. The first of these ideas to discuss is ‘spirit’, or Geist. This idea can be understood as the will to live and not looking to the afterlife but instead to this life. This idea is discussed in the section of *Zarathustra* called *The Convalescent*. This section describes how Zarathustra comes down with a great ailment, and

after slipping into a deep sleep or coma, he awakens weak from the sickness, but recovering and coming back to health, overcoming the sickness (327-333). This is the idea of spirit in Nietzsche, the zest for life to overcome and is needed for individuals to say yes to life and not look towards the afterlife. George very much displays this type of crisis with his spirit, specifically when he goes to the bridge and contemplates and then commits to suicide. This is reiterated when he tells Clarence he wishes he had never been born at all, this shows how his spirit is in crisis. During his experience he finds that his spirit is strong, when we see him return to the bridge and begs, pleads, cries for his life to be returned. George in this scene wants nothing more than to live. In the chapter called *The Awakening* Zarathustra's company of men are seen to experience much of the same love for life, their spirits are strong and much like Zarathustra their souls are convalescents but now begin to find their zest for living (422-423). Zarathustra describes this recovery as a battle against his old archenemy, "the spirit of gravity", and the men are winning the fight (422-423).

The affirmation of life may involve one's spirit, but Nietzsche demonstrates or provides for the reader a way to understand if the reader is affirming their life or if they are instead rejecting it and saying no. He uses an idea called the eternal recurrence to explain this process. Nietzsche writes in *The Convalescent* that Zarathustra is the "teacher of the eternal recurrence" (332). In this Zarathustra describes it as:

But the knot of causes in which I am entangled recurs and will create me again. I myself belong to the causes of the eternal recurrence. I come again, with this sun, with this earth, with this eagle, with this serpent- *not* to a new life or a better life or a similar life, in what is greatest as in what is smallest, to teach again the eternal recurrence of all things, to speak again the word of the great noon of earth and man, to proclaim the overman again to men. (333)

What Zarathustra is describing is a system in which humans must relive one's life not in a similar manner, not a better or worse manner, but in the exact same manner. Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* makes a more explicit description of what Zarathustra speaks. In it Nietzsche writes:

What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: "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!

Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: "You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine."(273-274)

George may not be experiencing his life over and over again, but instead he is in experiencing a congruent version of the Eternal Recurrence Nietzsche has written. Nietzsche's Eternal Recurrence in *Gay Science* is a parable I argue. It allows for the reader to place themselves in this experience/situation and then examine their reaction and assess their own spirit, it allows us to question whether or not we have been saying no to life. This recurrence allows for one to challenge if their choices are affirming all of life, or if their spirit is weak and

they are nothing more than ‘living dead’ looking towards the afterlife and not their current life. The eternal recurrence forces one to answer if they are actually affirming their life if they had to do it all over again for eternity. In that way, George’s experience with Clarence is very much about forcing George to answer the question, to which he answers yes, he would live his life rather than say no to it.

The Eternal Recurrence as George’s Experience

This final research question deals with what is the phenomenon that causes individuals to return back to the conditions in life that caused their crisis, as the film depicts with George. We see the climax of George struggling over his life and dealing with an existential crisis when he first arrives at the bridge. George is having a crisis due to several specific reasons. His is a crisis over his life’s meaning and worth. This is where he thinks he is “worth more dead than alive”. Thus suicide seems the only choice for George in his crisis.

Recall Sartre’s definition of anguish: it is one’s inescapable feeling of total and deep responsibility of choosing for themselves and humanity as a “law maker”. Anguish can only be in the presence of freedom (to choose). As Sartre would say we are inherently slaves to our freedom of choice. George’s crisis is centered at this very experience, where he is faced between killing himself and living. Forlornness is the feeling of one’s feeling that they are utterly alone in their decision with no one and nothing to seek guidance from. Additionally the feeling of despair is the feeling that due to these other two conditions dealing with our freedom of choice we shall confine ourselves to reckoning only with what depends upon our will, or on the ensemble of probabilities which make our action possible. These three feelings have overwhelmed George and are at the core of thrusting George into this crisis, and his decision of committing suicide.

George is about to throw himself off when Clarence finally enters the film. Clarence jumps into the river and cries for help, to which George responds by saving Clarence and thus not killing himself. They are in the bridge house drying off after having been pulled out of the river. Clarence confronts George on contemplating suicide as a means to help his family. George listens and agrees that his plan was illogical from that point of view (not that he was wrong in thinking that he is worth more dead than alive, just that it would not have been in his family’s best interest). George instead responds by saying that everyone would have been better off if he had never been born at all. This is a subtle clarification in what George is grappling with in his crisis; consequently it shifts our philosophical view of his experience. He is not necessarily dealing with a crisis rooted solely in anguish, forlornness, or despair, but instead a feeling that is rooted in a question over George’s spirit (or lack of) that Nietzsche writes about. This feeling reveals to us a struggle over whether he can affirm life due to this questioning of the state of his spirit. In *Zarathustra* the chapter called *The Honey Sacrifice* mentions how Zarathustra has stopped striving for happiness, and instead is striving for work, roughly described as having honey in his veins (442). This is Zarathustra’s realization that the state of his spirit is in question, ultimately revealing the struggle over his ability to affirm his life. George very much is like Zarathustra in this way, where he is challenging how committed he is to living, and saying yes to living his life instead of living only to work. The catalyst for George’s crisis is due to monetary and pending legal problems surrounding his work at the Building and Loan. By George stating to Clarence that he still wishes he had never existed at all, he reveals to us that the epicenter of his crisis is not based in anguish, forlornness, or despair over choosing suicide; but his the root of his crisis is a question of not enough/weak spirit because he wants to have “not been born, to have never lived at all”. We should then focus on George’s subsequent experience with Clarence as

Nietzsche's eternal recurrence. As aforementioned, for Nietzsche the eternal recurrence is a method for one to answer whether or not they are affirming life, which is when people are willing to say yes to any part of their life they must affirm it as a whole, good and bad. The response to this is a measure of one's spirit or zest for life. Thus his experience is to resolve his crisis of spirit, he must answer if he will affirm life and say yes to live again.

Yet the eternal recurrence for Nietzsche was not a literal event but a metaphorical/parable argument for readers to see how to explain answer this question of affirming life for themselves. With *It's a Wonderful Life*, the film offers another means for this philosophical concept to be understood. George's experience with Clarence is the means through which George must answer if he will actually affirm his life and everything it entails. He does not literally live his life all over again for the rest of eternity, as Nietzsche states in *The Gay Science* (271). Instead George is thrust into an existence in the world where he is confronted with the absence of each decision he has made. By confronting each difference in this world, George is forced to realize how his choices in life made that world what he knew. By seeing the number of changes to Bedford Falls and the ones he loves, he is forced to relive his life passively through the absence of his life. From the untimely deaths that he prevented of those he loved (such as his brother Harry as a child), to the moral and financial decay of the town into Pottersville. Through the experience of the negation of his being, he is reliving his life and choices that he made. Several different times George ask Clarence why a certain thing, person, or event is not the way it is 'supposed' to be. This inquiry is how we can see that George is indirectly reliving his life, but constantly reflecting back to the way the world is suppose to be via what it is now. Clarence helps support this position by explaining how a certain choice of his was the cause of his reality and how the absence of that choice is the cause of the current conditions George is experiencing. This manifestation of the eternal recurrence is to provoke George into resolving his crisis of spirit. The film depicts the constant struggle of George confronting the decisions he has made and the impact they had on his life and the lives of others; thus forcing him to choose if he would affirm those decision (and his life as a whole) again.

We should focus on similarities between Nietzsche's parable in *The Gay Science* and George's experience with Clarence. In Nietzsche's parable he asks us to imagine that we are in our darkest hour. George most definitely is in his darkest hour in the film, considering his crisis and the fact he has found his meaning to be less than if he was dead. Next, Nietzsche asks us to imagine that a Demon comes to us in this moment of our "loneliest loneliness" (Nietzsche 275). I would contend that this is a parable, and as such is not literal, meaning it is not a literal demon but just a device to help us understand the conflict at present. Despite Clarence being depicted as an angel, he comes to George in his darkest moment and is the device by which George comes to understand the conflict at present for himself. We see this both in the guard house when Clarence confronts George about his premises for committing suicide, and again when Clarence thrust George into this experience. Nietzsche goes on with his parable by explaining how the demon states that the reader will now be forced to life their life over and over and over again throughout eternity from beginning to end repeatedly. Clarence does not make this claim but he forces George into an experience where George is confronted with the choices he has made. The moral of Nietzsche's parable is when he asks the reader what their response would be to this demon. Would you curse it and "throw yourself down and gnash your teeth" (273). Would you rejoice and praise it for the gift it has give you? With that Nietzsche then ask a series of questions of the reader to demonstrate the moral of the parable: have you lived a life that despite your darkest hour you would still want to live, good and bad experiences if you would affirm one you must

affirm them all (274). Nietzsche writes, “The question in each and every thing, “Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?” would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight”(274). In the film George’s experience conforms to this question, with each and every deviation he is confronted with, he is questioning whether he desires the way it is ‘supposed’ to be again instead of this alternative. Nietzsche concludes this passage with, “Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life *to crave nothing more fervently* than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal” (274). We see this is the case for George when after experiencing the world in which he does not exist he cries out to the heavens, “I want to be alive, I want to exist again.” This is George’s explicit affirmation of life.

George is then thrust back to his life, just before he meets Clarence. He is overwhelmed by joy, and runs home to his family. A police officer and journalist confront him at his home. George cheerfully responds, “I’ll bet it’s a warrant for my arrest. Isn’t it wonderful? I’m going to jail. Merry Christmas! Reporters... Oh, look at this wonderful old drafty house.” We see how through the eternal recurrence George’s crisis has been resolved he fervently craves this life good and bad. He is joyful because he has faced this experience that Nietzsche describes and his spirit is strong, he joyfully affirms the life that he had once been trying to end. George desires this life so greatly he willingly affirms the conditions that caused his crisis initially, because is overwhelmed at how wonderful this life is. Thus we see how George’s experience is the eternal recurrence that Nietzsche wrote of in *The Gay Science* and as such it explains how an individual may turn back to conditions willingly in life that caused their crisis.

Conclusion

What drew my attention to this film philosophically was the question of how humans (specifically George) can enter an existential crisis where they reject their life, only to have some sort of experience (i.e. psychological like a pseudo out-of-body experience, or alleged revelation) that changes their choice, they now choose/accept life, but does not alter the conditions in life which drove them into that position. I find that the film offers a very concrete explanation for these events when thought in an atheistic existential perspective. Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence is the measuring device individuals use to answer whether or not they have the spirit to live and affirm their life. Which is when people are willing to say yes to any part of their life they must affirm it as a whole, good and bad. George is experiencing this abstract philosophical idea when he is faced with a reality of the world without George Bailey. The means for George experiencing this though can be answered with Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence as the means for an individual to resolve a crisis (with spirit) and affirm their life. The idea that George’s experience is not a revelation or divine intervention is fundamentally supposed because I am using an atheistic existential perspective defined by Sartre, so we may treat the film as an existential work of humans instead of a pop-culture film to watch during the holidays. This method of Sartre’s can make philosophy relevant to non-academics because of film’s relevance and accessibility in Western life. It allows for people like me to engage with something readily identifiable and interesting, and begin realizing we can ask questions that are important in philosophy and culture. I am able to connect ideas for scholars that are pillars in the philosophical tradition, such as Nietzsche and Sartre, with material that engages and is culturally relevant not just to myself but millions of people around the world.

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