

**NIETZSCHE *VERSUS* GOD
THE DEATH OF GOD AND ATHEISM
IN NIETZSCHE'S PHILOSOPHY**

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In his famous parable of the Madman, Nietzsche proclaims that God is dead. In this parable, the Madman appears in the market place before unbelievers and cries out incessantly, "I seek God! I seek God!" Because the unbelievers do not understand why the Madman asks this, they laugh. Why seek God? After all, who amongst us moderns would be so credulous as to believe in God? Upon seeing their indifference, the Madman answers: "*Whither is God I shall tell you. We have killed him - you and I. All of us are his murderers God is dead.*"¹

On the surface, the proclamation of the death of God is undeniably atheistic. However on closer inspection, it is what Nietzsche means by the death of God and atheism, and the distinct relationship between the two concepts that recasts the meaning of these concepts. In other words, what Nietzsche means by atheism is different, more complex, and subtle than common understanding and perception of atheism. Similarly, the death of God has significantly unique connotations in Nietzschean understanding. It is the death of everything, of all standards that we live by, as opposed to killing God by science and reason. Furthermore, the meanings of these concepts have to be analyzed in the context of Eternal Return, *Urbemensch*,² nihilism, and the will-to-power, all of which, not only are inseparable from each other in Nietzschean philosophy but, in my opinion, indicate Nietzsche's preoccupation with religion and his ardent interest in God.

Nietzsche's atheism is most usually construed in his attacks on the Christian conception of God as well as other-worldly, moralistic, and super-sensory images of God. Nietzsche interprets belief in such conceptions as scapegoat for man, his denial of life's realities.³ Man

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needs something to lean on, something which provides an apparently plausible explanation for his suffering. God becomes the answer for everything. If things are going well, thank God; if not, then blame God. And when things are not going well, it commonly leads to atheism, the killing of God by virtue of science and reason – the almost inevitable results of the Enlightenment.⁴ Whatever the case, man is not to blame for his misery. That, Nietzsche argues, is scapegoating. Nietzsche sees Christianity as providing an escapist solution to the problem of tragic suffering in a number of ways, most overtly by minimizing the importance of this life and offering eternal reward for earthly suffering. In *Daybreak*, the concept of God is treated as a projection of personal egoism:

*“How many there are who still conclude: ‘life could not be endured if there were no God!’ Therefore there **must** be a God! The truth, however, is merely that he who is accustomed to these notions does not desire a life without them: that these notions may therefore be necessary to him and for his preservation – but what presumption it is to desire that what ever is necessary for my preservation must actually **exist!** As if my preservation were something necessary!”⁵*

According to this view, God becomes an illusion. Thus, by virtue of this estimation, Nietzsche is regarded as an atheist because he demonstrates the neurotic basis of most religious belief.⁶ In fact, as Karl Jaspers concludes, Nietzsche eventually confines man to immanence and sets him solely before the future possibility of an earthly *Urbemensch* who is *without* God.⁷

But what does it really mean to be *without* God for Nietzsche? What does the death of God mean in Nietzschean philosophy? In order to understand the underlying meaning, it is essential to consider Nietzsche’s use of the notion of the death of God (as proclaimed and the understanding of which is significantly revealed in the parable of the Madman). In *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel refers to the death of God as an advanced stage of unhappy consciousness which has not yet reconciled itself to a religious and spiritual apprehension of the Absolute. Nietzsche’s attitude toward the death of God alters this Hegelian theme. Nietzsche lauds the death of God, for God’s death signifies a turning point in history. Mankind will be changed because its self-understanding will be changed. A new meaning and justification of history will result, uniquely that of Dionysus, Eternal Return, and the *Urbemensch*. Thus, through his proclamation of the death of God, Nietzsche aims to presage the most prodigious and catastrophic historical experience: the transfiguration of all values, that is, self-

overcoming of humanity and the end of all moralistic versions of the Absolute. Something on which men have lived for centuries has vanished; the heart of Christendom has stopped, and the rest of its body faces death, for the spirit has departed from its members.⁸ Nietzsche likens man's predicament to the legend that long after the death of Buddha his shadow was still to be seen in the cave; it will be long after before all shadows of God have disappeared. Man's first reaction may even be one of relief and encouragement, but later his own culture will undergo a period of "*rupture, destruction, downfall, revolution,*" a "*a stupendous logic of terror, an eclipse of the sun unlike any yet known on earth.*"⁹

It is in this manner that Nietzsche approaches the issue of God. The Madman seeks the meaning God gave humankind, but realizes that meaning is dead.¹⁰ With the death of God, Nietzsche intends to dramatically remold and reconstruct the possibilities of the meaning of atheism. It is in the doctrine of the Eternal Recurrence that Nietzsche rebuilds what he has just destroyed. To accept Eternal Recurrence is to accept a new vision of, a new insight into, the divine. In other words, to accept Eternal Recurrence is to understand a new meaning of Godliness, different from the traditional meaning of Godhood. Nietzsche first presents this doctrine in the following form, which is worth quoting at length:

"How, if some day or night a demon were to sneak in your loneliest loneliness and say to you 'This life as you now live 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 joy and every thought and every sight and everything immeasurably small or great in your life must return to you – all the same succession and sequence – even his spider and this moonlight between the tree, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned over and over with it, a dust grain of dust.'

Would you now throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or did once experience a tremendous moment when you would have answered him, 'You are a god, and never have I heard anything more godly.'

If this thought were to gain possession of you, it would change you, as you are, or perhaps crush you. The question in each and everything, 'Do you want this once more and innumerable times once more?' would weigh upon your actions as the greatest stress. Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to live a life to crave

*nothing more fervently than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?"*¹¹

If man believes in this doctrine, he would have to relinquish his dependence on the preordained meanings of God which come from this "this pitiful' god of Christian monotheism,"¹² the one which has deprived "any right to try to form man as artists cost [men] sublime self-conquest ... [and not let them see] the abysmally different order of rank"¹³ Man cannot be a scapegoat any more and must assume full responsibility for his life. He must cease to look to a non-existent Platonic realm for its answers and instead must remain faithful to this earth. The few who are able to do this attain the height of self-creation. *Urbmensch* is born! He creates new gods which previously man could not. To say that God is dead is, actually, to will the death of God. Indeed, that is what Zarathustra, the later voice of the Madman, says:

*"I would believe only in a god who could dance. And when I saw my devil I found him serious, thorough, profound, and solemn; it was the spirit of gravity – through him all things fall. Not by wrath does one kill, but by laughter. Come, let us kill the spirit of gravity! I have learned to walk; ever since, I let myself run. I have learned to fly; ever since, I do not want to be pushed before moving along. Now I am light, now I fly, now I see myself beneath myself, now a god dances through me."*¹⁴

Zarathustra, upon his descent from the cave – a complete reversal of the Platonic allegory of the cave – claims that God is no longer a living force in the world completely for granted. What mankind had until then considered seriously, that is, concepts such as God, soul, virtue, sin, truth, eternal life, were not realities but mere imaginations. Zarathustra reiterates the message of the Madman, God is dead, but God's death is not to be mourned as the loss of meaning in human life. Nietzsche, through Zarathustra, urges mankind to seek something higher in our lives than the contentment with which we numb ourselves.

*"What is the greatest experience you can have? It is the hour of the great contempt. The hour in which your happiness, too, arouses your disgust, and even your reason and your virtue. The hour when you say, 'What matters my happiness? It is poverty and filth and wretched contentment. But my happiness ought to justify existence itself."*¹⁵

Zarathustra's "positive" message is premised on the idea of the *Urbmensch*. The *Urbmensch*, according to Zarathustra's address, is to be the new goal, new horizon for human beings. The *Urbmensch*

represents something that in principle is unattainable by the merely human: "And man shall be just that for the overman: a laughing stock or a painful embarrassment."¹⁶ The *Übermensch*'s mode of being is continuously creative; his present being and all that he carries over from the past are squandered in acts of creativity toward the future. His existence is the erotic mode of being *par excellence*, and while it surpasses human capacity for resilient self-transcendence, it establishes a project for human beings by serving as this capacity's ideal. It is significant that the *Übermensch* is by definition a goal that human beings will always fail to achieve: "Man is something that shall be overcome."¹⁷ "Man is a rope, tied between beast and overman."¹⁸ Yet, the details of one's life can be seen as steps and experiments towards this goal. The relationship between the ideal of *Übermensch* and the tragic perspective is suggested by Zarathustra's depiction of pursuit of the *Übermensch* as intrinsically valuable.

The underlying faith of Zarathustra's ideal, the *Übermensch*, is the death of God. The implications of God's death are fully considered in the meaning life has for the *Übermensch*. The energetic, vibrant involvement with the life of the world demanded by the project of aspiration toward the *Übermensch* necessarily involves interaction with other human beings. Indeed, Zarathustra's decision to descend from his cave and preach his insights was because of the love of man.¹⁹ His vision of the meaningful human life is inseparable from vital participation in the social world in which one finds himself. Similarly, the parable of "the last man" suggests a mode of life that Zarathustra despises in vivid fashion. But Nietzsche makes clear by virtue of the accident of the tightrope walker the move to a world view that counters the traditional Socratic-Christian world view that kills God, is difficult, perilous, and vulnerable to hostility from those who adhere to inherited values. Risk and troubles are inherent elements of the project, but painful and tragic consequences that follow upon this project are not, as the moral tradition will tell us, an indication that the project is misguided. Quite to the contrary, mishap and pain are exactly what the experimenter should expect, and risk that sometimes ends in fatality is an inseparable correlate of the nobility of this vocation. Nietzschean praise of saintly life for its intrinsic value of self-overcoming, self-cruelty, and self-torture in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* resurfaces with considerable weight in *Beyond Good and Evil*.

Through Zarathustra, we obtain a further understanding of Nietzschean atheism. Nietzsche's use of atheism is meant to dismantle the concept of God – concept of the ascetic ideal. It is *this* version of God that does not exist for Nietzsche, for this "God" is life-denying and *anti* self-overcoming. Thus, Nietzsche's own use of the concept of

atheism does not mean what is commonly understood by the term. What is commonly understood as atheism is, for Nietzsche, something ultimately negative, something that is a reaction of Christianity.

*"Why atheism today? – 'the Father' in God has been thoroughly refuted; ditto, 'the judge,' 'the rewarder.' Also his 'free will,' he does not hear, and if heard he still would not know how to help ... This is what I found to be the causes for the decline of European theism."*²⁰

What Nietzsche himself means by atheism, however, is ultimately positive. His own atheistic statements are more subtle than they appear to be. The struggle for the reader is to find that fine point, to find the face underneath the mask. One of Nietzsche's ways of utilizing atheism is connected with the ascetic ideal. The ascetic ideal in all of its various interpretations, but in particular that of atheism, is a catastrophe. Produced by *ressentiment*, this sense of atheism is simply a depraved form of belief. But Nietzsche has moved beyond this narrow, frigid articulation of the problem of God. Nietzsche finds the ascetic-moral only interpretation of God absurd, a falsification to begin with.²¹ He attacks this interpretation of God when he says:

*"That we find no God – either in history or in nature or behind nature – is not what differentiates us, but that we experience what has been revered as God, not as 'godlike' but as miserable, as absurd, as harmful, not merely as an error but as a crime against life. We deny [this] God as God."*²²

However, this denial of God is not a denial of God *per se*.²³ Instead, Nietzsche considers the ascetic-moral only interpretation of God to be a *misinterpretation* of Godliness: *"One has called it god - that one resisted fatality, that one ruined mankind and made it rot. One should not use the name of God in vain."*²⁴ Thus, Nietzsche's use of atheism is different from the one-dimensional meaning in popular use that simply negates Christianity, or the Christian conception of God. Nietzsche rejects every theism that he regards as corrupt. It may be argued that in this sense Nietzsche is an atheist with respect to any theism based on the ascetic-moral ideal only. His atheism, in a concealed fashion, implies something more than a mere negation of God. As Heidegger put it, *"What to common sense looks like atheism, and has to look like it, is at the bottom the very opposite."*²⁵

The proclamation of God's death is at once the exclamation that history has been essentially nihilistic. Indeed, the use of nihilism and the problem of the death of God are directly related. The demise of God is

summed up through the entire history of the devaluation of the highest values, *i.e.*, the collapse of the Platonic "true world".²⁶ Nihilistically understood, there is no "true world". Nietzsche warns about this "religious instinct," which "refuses the theistic satisfaction with deep suspicion."²⁷ "To sacrifice God for the nothing – the paradoxical mystery of the final cruelty was reserved for the generation that is now coming up; all of us already knew something of this."²⁸ The idea of God, according to Nietzsche, expresses the will to nothingness, the depreciation of life. The fundamental fact of human will is its fear of a vacuum. The atheist discovers that, in fact, it has willed "nothing," namely values which are not only unreal but hostile to reality. Therefore, the death of God means that the very heart has dropped out of existence. For apart from the ascetic ideal, the human lot has had no meaning: "Why man at all? - was a question without an answer; the will for man and earth was lacking; after every great human destiny there surrounded, as refrain a still greater 'In vain!'"²⁹ At this point, experience culminates for Nietzsche in an all-embracing event: nihilism – the conviction of a total contrast between value and fact, "that the highest values devalue themselves."³⁰ It differs from common pessimism by being more thorough, retaining no consolations whatsoever, and by stressing the meaninglessness of evil rather than its mere existence. Nietzsche believes that he has fathomed blacker depths of despair than any European pessimist, and therefore likes to make merry over the would-be-pessimism of Schopenhauer – who, though a pessimist, played the flute after meals – and of other contemporaries who beguiled their gloom in sundry moral or aesthetic ivory towers.³¹ The nihilist is beyond all that. The passion of "in vain" is the nihilist's passion. Nihilism is atheism as ideal-lessness. Thus the nihilist denies God, the good and even truth – all forms of supersensible. Nothing is true, nothing is good. God is dead. In other words, the death of God is the wreckage of old ideals. And the destruction of old ones is, in effect, the creation of new ones. In fact, the essence of Nietzschean project is that it destroys in order to create.

What Nietzsche seeks to destroy is a belief in God based on faith and optimism to create a belief in action and will-to-power. Nietzsche believes that religions are destroyed by belief in faith and morality, and after a while scientific progress also expresses dissatisfaction with the ascetic-moral God, the Christian God, which results in atheism. This is what is meant by killing God with science and reason. However, Nietzsche does not merely negate Christianity. For example, the *Übermensch* is a supra-Christian, a "caesar with Christ's soul."³² Rather, in negating the Christian moral God (which, according to Nietzsche, negates Jesus) and in declaring himself to be the

“antichrist”, Nietzsche actually intends to revive Jesus, to retrieve him from his historical disfiguration. His *“antichrist”* stance is actually a war against Christianity – Christianity as distorted by Paul.³³ For Nietzsche, the traditional Christian meaning of God ought to perish, for such a God is “ungodly” in comparison with the mightiest “God” of all, *i.e.*, Will-to-Power itself. Consequently, Nietzsche’s atheism negates a “ascetic-moralistic” only conception of God in order to reaffirm a revitalized concept of God – God understood as man’s horizon.

ENDNOTES

- 1 *The Gay Science*, n. 125, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, p. 95.
- 2 Throughout this essay, the term *Übermensch* will be used in its original German terminology. It has been translated as “Superman” or “Overman” in Western philosophical language, both of which, however, do not do justice to the original German terminology, especially as conceived by Nietzsche. *Übermensch* is Nietzsche’s idea of what is referred to in Eastern philosophy as “*Mard-e-Kamil*” or the “Perfect Man”. However, Nietzsche’s concept is significantly different from what Maulana Rumi and Allama Iqbal had envisioned.
- 3 In this formulation, Nietzsche seems to be influenced by Schopenhauer who considered the three commands of the saints – solitude, fasting, and sexual abstinence – as denials of life. However, as we later find out (in *Beyond Good and Evil*), Nietzsche lauds these three acts as integral components in the process of self-overcoming for the free spirit. He does not praise them under the Christian schema and justification of these events but as Will to Power, *i.e.*, the will to self-overcome. Hence, for Nietzsche, these acts are “outrageous but noble” (*Beyond Good and Evil*, aphorism 188, trans. Kaufmann, p. 101).
- 4 *Beyond Good and Evil*, aphorism 53, trans. Kaufmann, p. 66.
- 5 *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, sec. 77, trans. Hollingale, pp. 46-47; Higgins (Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*).
- 6 *Beyond Good and Evil*, aphorism 47, trans. Kaufmann, p. 61.
- 7 Karl Jaspers, *Nietzsche: An Introduction to the Understanding of his Philosophical Activity*, trans. Charles R. Wallraff and Frederick J. Schmitz (Chicago: Henry Regency Company, 1965), p. 158.
- 8 *Beyond Good and Evil*, aphorism 53, trans. Kaufmann, p. 66.
- 9 *The Gay Science*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Kaufmann.
- 10 *The Gay Science*, aphorism 125, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Kaufmann, p. 95.
- 11 *The Gay Science*, aphorism 341, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Kaufmann, pp. 101-102.
- 12 *The Antichrist*, aphorism 19, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Kaufmann, p. 586.
- 13 *Beyond Good and Evil*, aphorism 62, trans. Kaufmann, p. 76.
- 14 *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (“On Reading and Writing”), in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Kaufmann, p. 153.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 *Ibid.*

- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 *Beyond Good and Evil*, aphorism 53, trans. Kaufmann, p. 66.
- 21 *The Antichrist*, aphorism 16, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Kaufmann, pp. 582-583.
- 22 *The Antichrist*, aphorism 47, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Kaufmann, p. 627. (Underlining mine)
- 23 "Religions are destroyed by belief in morality. The Christian moral God is not tenable: hence, 'atheism' – as if there could be no other kinds of god (*The Will to Power*, note 151, trans. Kaufmann and Hollingdale, p. 95).
- 24 *The Will to Power*, aphorism 54, trans. Kaufmann and Hollingdale, p.34.
- 25 Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche: The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, trans. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984), pp. 207-208.
- 26 *Twilight of the Idols* ("How the 'True World' Finally Became a Fable"), in *The Portable Nietzsche*, pp. 485-486.
- 27 *Beyond Good and Evil*, aphorism 53, trans. Kaufmann, p. 66.
- 28 *Beyond Good and Evil*, aphorism 55, trans. Kaufmann, p. 67.
- 29 *The Will to Power*, aphorism 2, Kaufmann and Hollingdale, p. 9.
- 30 *Ibid.*
- 31 *Beyond Good and Evil*, aphorism 186, trans. Kaufmann, p. 99.
- 32 *The Will to Power*, aphorism 983, ed. Kaufmann, p. 513; Karl Jaspers, *Nietzsche and Christianity*, "Self Identification with the Opponent", trans. E. B. Ashton (Chicago, Henry Regency Company, 1961), pp. 90-91.
- 33 *The history of Christianity, beginning with the death on the cross, is the history of misunderstanding, growing cruder with every step, of an original symbolism* (*The Antichrist*, aphorism 37, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Kaufmann, p. 610).