

‘God is Dead’- The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche

Carol Langford

Frequently only two things are associated with Nietzsche. The first is that Adolf Hitler presented Mussolini with a bound set of the complete works of Nietzsche on the Brenner Pass and the second is that Nietzsche said that ‘God is Dead.’ The association with Hitler will hardly inspire any of us with confidence although most major authorities on Nietzsche, such as Kaufman, deny that Nietzsche would have supported National Socialism or that he was anti-semitic as has been suggested. On the other hand ‘God is dead’ may have some appeal. Although theists might be shocked at such a claim, atheists would agree with it and the modern phenomenon of Christian non-realism could be accommodating. Either way we can be certain of one key detail. Nietzsche did believe that ‘God is dead.’ He intended us to interpret this not in a literal sense but rather as a metaphor whereby ‘God is dead’ refers to the cultural event of the death of Christianity together with its moral code; the replacement of the religious world view with the profane.

A Nietzschean Critique of Christianity

Nietzsche first used the term ‘God is dead’ in the Madman, section 25, of the Gay Science.

Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly, "I seek God! I seek God!"... "Whither is God?" he cried. "I shall tell you. We have killed him - you and I. All of us are his murderers.".. " God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him."

In saying this Nietzsche meant that society no longer had a use for God. God was, as a cultural fact, cognitively superfluous. The absence or presence of faith makes no difference to humanity and thus belief in God is redundant. Nietzsche recognised the stark implications of this position; without God we’re literally on our own. The death of the Christian God includes the death of Christian ethics that have underpinned western culture since Constantine converted to Christianity in the 4th Century. It is as if the ground has been swept from under our feet but when we try to stand up the ground has gone altogether. What we hold most dear had gone, never to return.

Nietzsche said that society was decadent, falling into decay. He thought that at best people were unaware of this fact; at worst they were aware but refused to face up to the reality of the situation and instead took refuge in self-deception. He recognised that people were not ready to face either the finitude of their own existence or the reality and implications of a God-less existence. The persistence of religion was evidence of this.

Significantly Nietzsche thought that Christianity’s insistence on the pursuit of truth, he calls this the will to truth, that ‘sets us free’ has actually set humanity free from the need of Christianity itself.

Atheism is 'the awe-inspiring catastrophe of a two thousand year discipline in truth that finally forbids itself the lie involved in belief in God.' (The Genealogy of Morals 111:27)

He suggested that the pursuit of truth led to the development of the scientific method that in turn led to the discovery of the 'truth' that naturalistic explanations of our place in the universe are all sufficient. God is superfluous because we have discovered our own answers to the big questions of life. We have plugged the final gaps, the God of the gaps is needed no more.

Nietzsche, having made this discovery has to explain why society has failed to wake up to the fact that God is Dead. The answer he said is to be found in the instrumental role of religion. To suggest that religion might have an instrumental role is to question the possible use that religion could be put to in order to further the aims or aspirations of a particular individual or group within a given society. In doing so the function of religious belief or practice is questioned, not the truth or falsehood of the religion per se. Nietzsche did hold the beliefs and doctrines of Christianity to be fallacious but he was more concerned with the function of religion. His is thus an *ad hominem* argument. He was asserting that although the beliefs of Christianity may be false its usefulness is not necessarily diminished.

Together with Feuerbach, Marx and Freud, Nietzsche is acknowledged as a master of suspicion.

The practice of the hermeneutics of suspicion [is] the deliberate attempt to expose the self-deceptions involved in hiding our actual operative motives from ourselves, individually or collectively, in order not to notice how and how much our behaviour and our beliefs are shaped by the values we profess to disown. (Westphal)

He employed the hermeneutics of suspicion to uncover the hidden motives and thus the hypocrisy of religion. Like Marx, Nietzsche identified the roots of religion as having a sociological base. He believed that religion had originated within primitive societies as a way of placating or controlling nature. Such societies¹ believed that the forces of nature were 'conscious and volitional beings' to whom were attributed every blessing or curse. In the hope of gaining blessings rather than curses a society would attempt to placate the deity with sacrifices. In this way religious practices became established but were no more than constructs that human hands had made. Nietzsche said that Christianity was no exception to the rule; it too had arisen in response to human need. In this case it was the need of the slaves of the Roman Empire in 1CE who sought a means of release from their bondage. Since they were unable to do so by physical force consolation was sought in religion that could provide them with spiritual liberation.

Nietzsche held this to be the most obvious explanation of the genealogy of Christianity but to accept the obvious alone would be to scratch the surface whereas discovery of the genuine motives of religion required greater depths to be plumbed. Inheriting from Schopenhauer the belief that the driving force of human nature is the will to power, evidenced as a desire to be in control of either ourselves or other people, Nietzsche argued that Christianity was simply an expression of this will to power.

There are recipes for the feeling of power, firstly for those who can control themselves and are thereby accustomed to a feeling of power; then for those in whom precisely this is lacking. Brahminism has catered for men of the former sort, Christianity for men of the latter. (Daybreak 65)

He suggested that Christians, as slaves of the Roman Empire, had exercised their will to power by claiming a superior spiritual status to their masters. This was achieved by an inversion of the values of society whereby those who promoted the values of society such as self-interest were said to be culpable before God whereas those who promoted the values of the gospel such as compassion or pity were righteous. Since there was no actual God, Nietzsche argued that the motive for the inversion of values was resentment. The slaves resented the status of the masters but being unable to take this status by physical force they attempted to take it by spiritual force.

Nietzsche used the French term 'ressentiment' to express the depths of resentment. Ressentiment implies suffering whereby the one who suffers requires an explanation for their suffering and looks for someone to blame especially where the suffering is perceived to be undeserved. An act of revenge can dull the sense of suffering but in the case of Christians it appears not to be an option since Christians must 'turn the other cheek' (Matt.5). However Nietzsche believed that Christians of the 1st Century managed to exercise their will to power successfully and without detection through the inversion of their masters' values. This rendered the Christian slaves morally superior to their masters. So successful was this act of resentment that the real motive of revenge remained hidden under the cloak of pure intentions.

Nietzsche identified what he termed the 'morality of mores.' This is concerned with how people come to hold the values they have. Utilising this as an analytical tool he said that morality was determined by the customs of society.

To be moral, to act in accordance with custom, to be ethical means to practice obedience towards a law or tradition from of old... He is called good because he does what is customary.' (*Human All Too Human* 96)

He identified two common traits within systems of morality; the master morality and the slave morality.²

The master morality originated from societies that were structured hierarchically by divisions of class. The ruling classes create and determine society's values and norms that are applicable only in context.³ Nietzsche was in this sense a pluralist, he preferred the term immoralist, because he acknowledged that the values of one society would not necessarily be those of another. The master morality made a distinction between good and bad whereby 'good' applied to the masters and 'bad' referred to the slaves.

As a good man one belongs to the 'good', a community which has a sense of belonging because all the individuals in it are combined with one another through the capacity for requital. As a bad man one belongs to the 'bad' , to a swarm of subject, powerless people who have no sense of belonging together. The good are a caste, the bad a mass like grains of sand. Good and bad is for a long time the same thing as noble and base, master and slave. (*Human All Too Human* 45)

An act was determined to be 'good' in so far as it maintained the existing social order. Thus 'good' and 'bad' originated with the division of class. To be 'bad' was to be one of the majority who Nietzsche declared to be 'base, low minded and plebian; the herd.' Nevertheless to be 'bad' did not make one morally culpable. Nietzsche argued that moral culpability was an idea that had developed from the slave morality that replaced 'bad' with 'evil.' He believed that the slave morality had dominated western society since the establishment of Christianity as the religion of the Roman Empire. He traced the roots of Christianity to Judaism and particularly to the clergy. He said that the practices of Christianity, a 'dangerous sect,' were derived from this.

The resentment of the Jews had led to a slave revolt in morality and the establishment of the slave morality when the values of their masters were inverted to give the slaves spiritual superiority. The values of the slaves were new but imaginary; the antithesis of those of the master morality.

those qualities which serve to make easier the existence of suffering will be brought into prominence and flooded with light: 'here it is that pity, the kind and helping hand, the warm heart, patience, industriousness, humility, friendliness come into honour - for these are the most useful qualities and virtually the only means of enduring the burden of existence.' Slave morality is essentially the morality of utility. (*Beyond Good and Evil* 260)

According to the slave morality the term 'good' should be applied to values such as altruism that were said to be approved by God. Those who were altruistic were then designated as 'good' whilst those who preferred self-interest were 'evil.'

The values which Christianity considered to be 'good' were those illustrated in the life and teaching of the founder, Jesus of Nazareth. Unlike the master morality that had a corollary between 'good' and 'bad,' the slave morality made a distinction between 'good' and 'evil.' This was because the status of the 'good' depended upon the 'evil' of the rest who were denounced as sinners. The denunciation of the 'evil ones', Nietzsche said, is nothing less than an expression of the will to power even though it appears to be the fair and correct dispensation of God's justice.

Nietzsche directed the focus of his attack upon the priests who, he argued, were in a unique position in society since paradoxically they were both strong and weak at the same time. On the one hand they were weak in relation to the masters as a consequence of their own social background. On the other they were strong through the status they enjoyed as God's appointed agents. In their hands Nietzsche held that religion had become a tool of social control. Westphal points out that 'Marx shows how ugly religion can be amongst the rich and powerful but Nietzsche completes the picture by showing how ugly religion can be among their victims. Masters may be sinners but that doesn't make their slaves into saints.' Nietzsche said that Priests exercised pastoral power and that this was the opposite of royal power. By this he was suggesting that the priests' will to power was in part frustrated because they were subject to their masters but at the same time they were of higher status and ability than the other members of the herd because of their special responsibility for the cure of souls.

Knowledge of the soul generates power without the need of physical force..
Pastoral power does not come out of the barrel of a gun but 'uses moral approval as a tactic for behavioural control.'⁴

This position gave the priests considerable power since through it they had a special claim to the 'truth' and promoted the ascetic ideal to the herd.

Ironically Nietzsche said that it was not Jesus of Nazareth but St. Paul who was responsible for developing the slave morality with the priestly role of the Christian Church. Nietzsche believed that Jesus' mission has been misunderstood and his teaching used for ends other than those intended by Jesus.

It is not a faith that distinguishes the Christian: The Christian acts, he is distinguished by acting differently...The life of the redeemer was nothing less than this practice- nor was his death anything else.. he knows that it is only in the practice of life that one feels divine.. only the evangelical practice leads to God. Indeed it is God! ...The bringer of glad tidings died as he had lived, as he had taught- not to redeem men but to show how one must live. This is his legacy to mankind. (*The Antichrist* 33 & 35)

For Nietzsche Jesus embodied the values of the master morality. Jesus criticised the instrumental use of religion and affirmed life, being prepared to die for the values he espoused. Thus Nietzsche distinguished between the religion of Jesus that represented the master morality and religion about Jesus that represented the morality of the slaves.

I shall now relate the real history of Christianity.- The word 'Christianity' is already a misunderstanding - in reality there has only been one Christian, and he died on the cross. The 'Evangel' died on the Cross... from that moment all is lies. (*Antichrist* 39-42)

Nietzsche believed that Paul had taken the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth and used it for his own ends. In doing so anything authentic in Jesus' teaching was corrupted.

Once the Christian Church became established the stage was set for the slave morality to fully develop whereby the priests exercised their will to power through the ascetic ideal that declared humanity's highest calling to be the way of self-denial. The ascetic ideal is based on a dualistic world view which sees suffering as deserved but also as preparing one for a better existence in a future life. Nietzsche said that the origins of the dualistic worldview were to be found in the writing of Plato. He called Christianity 'platonism for the masses.' It was, he said, the way of the 'moral masturbators' which negates life by declaring this present existence to be inferior to that of the 'true' world. The ascetic ideal was maintained through guilt. Human beings were declared guilty before God; their sin had necessitated the crucifixion of Jesus. However the guilt was redeemable since the death which human sin had caused was also the road to salvation.

This life is deemed guilty so that in heaven via a detour through hell there is the promise of a posthumous second innocence. (*Daybreak* 159)

As the priests were the keepers of the keys Nietzsche believed that they had utilised the ascetic ideal to exercise their own will to power. They denied the values of the masters and kept the slaves in their place. As a consequence Nietzsche said that the

priests had turned Christianity into a religion which was life denying not life affirming. His whole philosophical enterprise aimed to denounce God as 'our most enduring lie' and provide an alternative morality which affirmed life.

Unlike those around him who had failed to recognise that God is dead or those who knew but chose to pretend otherwise Nietzsche embraced the challenge of a godless world. He believed that this truth had set humanity free but that freedom was terrifying since the buck now stopped with humanity and not God. At the same time he thought that this new freedom was humanity's greatest opportunity to seize power and control its destiny.

We philosophers and free spirits in fact feel at the news that the 'old God is dead' as if illumined by a new dawn; our heart overflows with gratitude, astonishment, presentiment, expectation - at last the horizon seems to us again free, even if it is not bright, at last our ships can put out again, no matter the danger, every daring venture of knowledge is again permitted, the sea, our sea again lies there open before us, perhaps there has never yet been such an 'open sea.' (*The Gay Science* 343)

He rejected a dualistic worldview arguing that as there are no truths to be discovered we must make our own truths. Morality, he said, is perspectival - determined by culture and thus pluralistic. He called for a 'revaluation of all values' whereby the old values of religion would have to be examined anew. Life could not be lived as before without reinterpretation of the moral norms of society.⁵

The new morality could incorporate some of the old values but would also include new values that might include laughter but also deceit, generosity but perhaps malice. The one key criterion which Nietzsche stipulated for all morality is that must be life affirming. Life had to be seen as an end and not a means to an end. The new 'moralities' would be forged from the will to power that human beings experience as a driving force to be obeyed.

Nietzsche believed that the purpose of life is to realise one's potential as a human being. The person who most fully expresses their will to power and creates their own values realises this potential. Nietzsche called such a person the Superman. Supermen do not evolve but can be present in all stages of history. They are few and far between; the elite. The superman has overcome the will to power through a life of self-discipline. He has mastered all and has created the values he lives by.

He has overcome his animal nature, organised the chaos of his passions, sublimated his impulses, given style to his character - or, as Nietzsche said of Goethe; 'he disciplined himself into wholeness, he created himself' and became the 'man of tolerance, not from weakness but from strength, a spirit who has become free.'

The superman ever seeks a higher vision of life, his morality is a complete rejection of the morality of the herd. Nietzsche interprets the place of the superman within the Eternal Recurrence of the same. With the doctrine of the Eternal Recurrence Nietzsche tried to provide an alternative to the dualistic worldview of Christianity whereby the world is 'outsideless.' In Thus Spake Zarathustra past, present and future are drawn together in the Moment as one continual movement.⁶ Nietzsche

offers Eternal Recurrence as a criterion for assessing the morality of an action. The determinant factor of our actions should thus be that we should will to repeat it eternally. This the superman can do. He has recognised the death of God and overcome nihilism. This is Nietzsche's alternative to the slave morality of Christianity; it is here that he says we can say yes to life.

Notes

1. *Human All Too Human* 111
2. *Beyond Good and Evil*, 260
3. *Ibid* 139 & 26
4. Schutte & Westphal in Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith* p.241
5. Kee, *Nietzsche Against the Crucified* shows how Nietzsche repudiated the suggestion that 'religious and secular people could (share) the same world view take or leave one supernatural being.
6. *Thus Spake Zarathustra* 111, Of the Vision and the Riddle