



Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) is one of the most controversial thinkers in the history of Western thought. Perhaps the most well-known line from Nietzsche's writings, and probably the most misunderstood, is the statement "God is dead." The statement is found in three passages from the text *The Gay Science* (perhaps better translated as *The Joyful Science*), and the most famous is the one in which a "madman" announces to the people the event of the death of God. In order to try and understand what Nietzsche is saying by this statement, one would first have to understand something about Nietzsche's approach to philosophy. One would have to understand something of Nietzsche's critique of the tradition of Western philosophy, his critique of Plato, or rather the legacy of Plato, a particular interpretation of Plato that has had such a tremendous influence upon the history of Western philosophy, or what has also been called "the history of metaphysics." In this traditional interpretation, the main aim of philosophy is to reveal the "true world" beneath the veils of the merely "apparent world." In the

"myth of the cave" in Plato's *Republic* this ideal is expressed in the journey upwards, out of the cave of appearance into the upper world of reality. In Plato's text, the highest reality, the last thing to be seen after exiting the cave and adjusting to the bright light of the upper world is the "sun" itself, and here the "sun," the most important metaphor in the history of Western philosophy, represents the highest truth, ultimate reality, or what Plato calls the "form of the Good." At the end of this "myth" Plato describes those left behind in the cave as "dreaming," and thus, those who have left the cave and discovered the "true world" are those who have awakened from the dream. Nietzsche challenges this understanding of philosophy with the suggestion that the "philosophers of the future" will be like *lucid dreamers*, those who have awakened to the fact that they are dreaming and yet continue to dream. Another way to understand this point is through considering the relationship between philosophy and art. For Plato, while philosophers have the serious task of waking up, exiting the cave and discovering the "true world," artists remain in the cave, the dreamworld, the world of appearance. Nietzsche counters this with the suggestion that the "philosophers of the future" will recognize that they are artists, that all "truths" are really "fictions," the product of an artistic interpretation. Nietzsche challenges the idea of a totally objective or "naked" truth behind the veils of appearance. His "perspectivism" puts forth the more modest view that we only see reality from a particular perspective and that our "truths" are thus the product of an artistic interpretation from a limited perspective.

It should thus be obvious, if one understands anything of Nietzsche's philosophy, that he cannot be claiming to know an objective fact or "truth" of reality with the statement that "God is dead." If one pays careful attention to the imagery in the text it should be clear that the "death of God" is really a metaphor for the critique of Platonism. The "death of God" is presented as through the metaphor of the setting sun, or more dramatically as an "eclipse of the sun," or perhaps even more dramatically as an event in which the earth has been unchained from its sun. The "sun" is, of course, Plato's "sun." Christianity, of course, inherited Plato's notion of truth, and thus it puts forth its interpretation of as the "truth" about "God." In one of his brilliant aphorisms from his late works Nietzsche calls this view into question:

What? is man just one of God's mistakes? Or is God just one of man's?—
(*Twilight of the Idols*, "Maxims and Barbs," §7)

The Death of God

New Struggles.— After Buddha was dead, his shadow was still shown for centuries in a cave—a tremendous, gruesome shadow. God is dead; but given the way of men, there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown. —And we—we still have to vanquish his shadow too. (*The Gay Science* §108).

The madman. —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!" —As many of those who did not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter. Has he got lost? asked one. Did he lose his way like a child? asked another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? emigrated? —Thus they yelled and laughed.

The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. "Whither is God?" he cried; "I will tell you. *We have killed him*—you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? Do we need to light lanterns in the morning? So we hear nothing as yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods, too, decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.

"How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was the holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it? There has never been a greater deed; and whoever is born after us—for the sake of this deed he will belong to a higher history than all history hitherto."

Here the madman fell silent and looked again at his listeners; and they, too, were silent and stared at him in astonishment. At last he threw his lantern on the ground, and it broke into pieces and went out. "I have come to early," he said then; "my time is not yet. The tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men. Lightning and thunder require time; the light of the stars requires time; deeds, though done, still require time to be seen and heard. This deed is still more distant from them than the most distant stars—and yet they have done it themselves." (*The Gay Science*, §125)

The meaning of our cheerfulness.—The greatest recent event—that "God is dead," that the belief in the Christian god has become unbelievable—is already beginning to cast its first shadows over Europe. For the few at least, whose eyes—the *suspicion* in whose eyes is strong and subtle enough for this spectacle, some sun seems to have set and some ancient and profound trust has been turned into doubt; to them our old world must appear daily more like evening, more mistrustful, stranger, "older." But in the main one may say: The event itself is far too great, too distant, too remote from the multitude's capacity for comprehension even for the tidings of it to be thought of as having

arrived as yet. Much less may one suppose that many people know as yet *what* this event really means—and how much must collapse now that this faith has been undermined because it was built upon this faith, propped up by it, grown into it; for example, the whole of our European morality. This long plenitude and sequence of breakdown, destruction, ruin, and cataclysm that is now impending—who could guess enough of it today to be compelled to play the teacher and advance proclaimer of this monstrous logic of terror, the prophet of a gloom and an eclipse of the sun whose like has probably never yet occurred on earth?

Even we born guessers of riddles who are, as it were, waiting on the mountains, posted between today and tomorrow, stretched in the contradiction between today and tomorrow, we firstlings and premature births of the coming century, to whom the shadows that must soon envelop Europe really *should* have appeared by now—why is it that even we look forward to the approaching gloom without any real sense of involvement and above all without any worry and fear for *ourselves*? Are we perhaps still too much under the impression of the *initial consequences* of this event—and these initial consequences, the consequences for *ourselves*, are quite the opposite of what one might perhaps expect: They are not at all sad and gloomy but rather like a new and scarcely describable kind of light, happiness, relief, exhilaration, encouragement, dawn.

Indeed, we philosophers and "free spirits" feel, when we hear the news that "the old god is dead," as if a new dawn shone on us; our heart overflows with gratitude, amazement, premonitions, expectation. At long last the horizon appears free to us again, even if it should not be bright; at long last our ships may venture out again, venture out to face any danger; all the daring of the lover of knowledge is permitted again; the sea, *our* sea, lies open again; perhaps there has never yet been such an "open sea."— (*The Gay Science*, §343)

The Birth of Tragedy

Nietzsche's first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, was published in 1872. In that book he attempted to understand the origin of that art form, tragedy, that had once been so important in ancient Greek culture. Nietzsche's radical thesis was that the high point of Greek culture came, not with Socrates and Plato, but rather a hundred years earlier with Aeschylus and Sophocles. *The Birth of Tragedy* can be divided into three main parts. The first part tells the story of the strange birth of tragedy from out of two opposed, contradictory art impulses, which Nietzsche named after the Greek gods Apollo and Dionysus. The second part tells the story of the death of tragedy at the hands of Socrates and the third part looks to the possible rebirth of tragedy in the operas of Richard Wagner. In Nietzsche's view, tragedy was the highpoint of Greek culture because it was a kind of transfiguring experience which gave the Greeks of the tragic age the strength and courage to affirm life despite the often tragic character of existence. Socrates comes on the scene of *The Birth of Tragedy* as the murderer of what was highest in Greek culture because a naive optimism that denies the tragic character of existence, affirming that if we just have reason, we will then have virtue and thus eternal happiness. In 1886, Nietzsche wrote an "Attempt at a Self-Criticism" of his first book which he included as a preface to a new edition of the work. In this critique, Nietzsche is critical of many aspects of the book, its arrogance and youthful Romanticism, and especially its misplaced hope in Wagner. One of the striking features of the critique is the recasting of the central opposition between tragedy and Socrates as an opposition between art and Christianity. In inheriting the Platonic conception of "truth" Christianity had sided with Plato's condemnation of art. In this "Attempt at a Self-Criticism" we thus find Nietzsche's critique of Christianity as inherently hostile to art and thus also to life.

Attempt at a Self-Criticism

What I then got hold of, something frightful and dangerous, a problem with horns but not necessarily a bull, in any case a *new problem*—today I should say that it was *the problem of science itself*, science considered for the first time as problematic, as questionable. But the book in which my youthful courage and suspicion found an outlet—what an *impossible* book had to result from a task so uncongenial to youth! Constructed from a lot of immature, overgreen personal experiences, all of them close to the limits of communication, presented in the context of *art*—for the problem of science cannot be recognized in the context of science—a book perhaps for artists who also have an analytic and retrospective penchant (in other words, an exceptional type of artist for whom one might have to look far and wide and really would not care to look); a book full of psychological innovations and artists' secrets with an artists' metaphysics in the background; a youthful work full of the intrepid mood of youth, the moodiness of youth, independent, defiantly self-reliant even where it seems to bow before an authority and personal reverence; in sum. a first book, also in every bad sense of that label. In spite of the problem which seems congenial to old age, the book is marked by every defect of youth, with its "length in excess" and its "storm and stress." On the other hand, considering its success (especially with the great artist to whom it addressed itself as in a dialogue, Richard Wagner), it is a *proven* book, I mean one that in any case satisfied "the best minds of the time."¹ In view of that, it really ought to be treated with some consideration and taciturnity. Still, I do not want to suppress entirely how disagreeable it now seems to me, how strange it appears now, after sixteen years—before a much older, a hundred times more demanding, but by no means colder eye which has not become a stranger to the task which this audacious book dared to tackle for the first time: *to look at science in the perspective of the artist, but at art in that of life.* (§2)

To say it once more: today I find it an impossible book: I consider it badly written, ponderous, embarrassing, image-mad and image-confused, sentimental, in places saccharine to the point of effeminacy, uneven in tempo, without the will to logical cleanliness, very convinced and therefore disdainful of proof, mistrustful even of the *propriety* of proof, a book for initiates, "music for those dedicated to music, those who are closely related to begin with on the basis of common and rare aesthetic experiences, "music" meant as a sign of recognition for close relatives *in artibus*²—an arrogant and rhapsodic book that sought to exclude right from the beginning the *profanum vulgus*³ of "the educated" even more than "the mass" or "folk." Still, the effect of the book proved and proves that it had a knack for seeking out fellow-rhapsodizers and for luring them on to new secret paths and dancing places. What found expression here was anyway—this was admitted with as much curiosity as antipathy—a strange voice, the disciple of a still "unknown God," one who concealed himself for the time being under the scholar's hood, under the gravity and dialectical ill humor of the German, even under the bad manners of the Wagnerian. Here was a spirit with strange, still nameless needs, a memory bursting with questions, experiences, concealed things after which the name of

¹ An allusion to Schiller's lines in *Wallensteins Lager*: "He that has satisfied the best minds of the time has lived for all times."

² In the arts.

³ The profane crowd.

Dionysus was added as one more question mark. What spoke here—as was admitted, not without suspicion—was something like a mystical, almost maenadic soul that stammered with difficulty, a feat of the will, as in a strange tongue, almost undecided whether it should communicate or conceal itself. It should have sung, this “new soul”—and not spoken. What I had to say then—to bad that I did not dare say it as a poet: perhaps I had the ability. Or at least as a philologist: after all, even today practically everything in this field remains to be discovered and dug up by philologists! Above all, the problem that there *is* a problem here—and that the Greeks, as long as we lack an answer to the question “what is Dionysian?” remain as totally uncomprehended and unimaginable as ever. (§3)

Indeed, what is Dionysian?—This book contains an answer: one “who knows” is talking, the initiate and disciple of his god. *Now* I should perhaps speak more cautiously and less eloquently about such a difficult psychological question as that concerning the origin of tragedy among the Greeks. The question of the Greeks relation to pain, his degree of sensitivity, is basic: did this relation remain constant? Or did it change radically? The question is whether his ever stronger *craving for beauty*, for festivals, pleasures, new cults was rooted in some deficiency, privation, melancholy, pain? Supposing that this were true—and Pericles (or Thucydides) suggests as much in the great funeral oration—how should we then have to explain the origin of the opposite craving, which developed earlier in time, the *craving for the ugly*; the good severe will of the older Greeks to pessimism, to the tragic myth, to the image of everything underlying existence that is frightful, evil, a riddle, destructive, fatal? What, then, would be the origin of tragedy? Perhaps *joy*, strength, overflowing health, overgreat fullness? And what, then, is the significance, physiologically speaking, of that madness out of which tragic and comic art developed—the Dionysian madness? How now? Is madness perhaps not necessarily the symptom of degeneration, decline, and the final stage of culture? Are there perhaps—a question for psychiatrists—neuroses of *health*? of the youth and youthfulness of a people? Where does that synthesis of god and billy goat in the satyr point? What experience of himself, what urge compelled the Greek to conceive the Dionysian enthusiast and primeval man as satyr? And regarding the origin of the tragic chorus: did those centuries when the Greek body flourished and the Greek soul foamed over with health perhaps know endemic ecstasies? Visions and hallucinations shared by entire communities or assemblies at a cult? How now? Should the Greeks, precisely in the abundance of their youth, have had the will to the tragic and have been pessimists? Should it have been madness, to use one of Plato’s phrases, that brought the greatest blessings upon Greece? On the other hand, conversely, could it be that the Greeks became more and more optimistic, superficial, and histrionic precisely in the period of dissolution and weakness—more and more ardent for logic and logicizing the world and thus more “cheerful” and “scientific”? How now? Could it be possible that, in spite of all “modern ideas” and the prejudices of a democratic taste, the triumph of *optimism*, the gradual prevalence of *rationality*, practical and theoretical *utilitarianism*, no less than democracy itself which developed at the same time, might all have been symptoms of decline of strength, of impending old age, and of physiological weariness? These, and not pessimism? Was Epicurus an optimist—precisely because he was *afflicted*? (§4)

Already in the preface addressed to Richard Wagner, art and *not* morality, is presented as the truly *metaphysical* activity of man. In the book itself the suggestive sentence is repeated several times, that the existence of the world is *justified* only as an aesthetic phenomenon. Indeed, the whole book knows only an artistic meaning and crypto-meaning behind all events—a “god,” if you please,

but certainly only an entirely reckless and amoral artist-god who wants to experience, whether he is building or destroying, in the good and the bad, his own joy and glory—one who, creating worlds, frees himself from the *distress* of fullness and *overflowness* and from the *affliction* of the contradictions compressed in his soul. The world—at every moment the *attained* salvation of God, as the eternally changing, eternally new vision of the most deeply afflicted, discordant, and contradictory being who can find salvation only in *appearance*: you can call this whole artist' metaphysics arbitrary, idle, fantastic; what matters is that it betrays a spirit who will one day fight at any risk whatever the *moral* interpretation significance of existence. Here, perhaps for the first time, a pessimism “beyond good and evil” is suggested. Here that “perversity of mind” gains speech and formulation against which Schopenhauer never wearied of hurling in advance his most irate curses and thunderbolts: a philosophy that dares to move, to demote, morality into the realm of appearance—and not merely among “appearances” or phenomena (in the sense assigned to these words by Idealistic philosophers), but among “deceptions,” as semblance, delusion, error, interpretation, contrivance, art.

Perhaps the depth of this *antimoral* propensity is best inferred from the careful and hostile silence with which Christianity is treated throughout the whole book—Christianity as the most prodigal elaboration of the moral theme to which humanity has ever been subjected. In truth, nothing could be more opposed to the purely aesthetic interpretation and justification of the world which are taught in this book than the Christian teaching, which is, and wants to be, *only* moral and which relegates art, *every* art, to the realm of *lies*; with its absolute standards, beginning with the truthfulness of God, it negates, judges, and damns art. Behind this mode of thought and valuation, which must be hostile to art if it is at all genuine, I never failed to sense a *hostility to life*—a furious, vengeful antipathy to life itself: for all of life is based on semblance, art, deception, points of view, and the necessity of perspectives and error. Christianity was from the beginning, essentially and fundamentally, life's nausea and disgust with life, merely concealed behind, masked by, dressed up as, faith in “another” or “better” life. Hatred of “the world,” condemnations of the passions, fear of beauty and sensuality, a beyond invented the better to slander this life, at bottom a craving for the nothing, for the end, for respite, for “the sabbath of sabbaths”—all this always struck me, no less than the unconditional will of Christianity to recognize *only* moral values, as the most dangerous and uncanny form of all possible forms of a “will to decline”—at the very least a sign of abysmal sickness, weariness, discouragement, exhaustion, and the impoverishment of life. For, confronted with morality (especially Christian, or unconditional, morality), life *must* continually and inevitably be in the wrong, because life *is* something essentially amoral—and eventually, crushed by the weight of contempt and the eternal No, life *must* then be felt to be unworthy of desire and altogether worthless. Morality itself—how now? might not morality be “a will to negate life,” a secret instinct of annihilation, a principle of decay, diminution, and slander—the beginning of the end? Hence the danger of dangers?

It was *against* morality that my instinct turned with this questionable book, long ago; it was an instinct that aligned itself with life and that discovered for itself a fundamentally opposite doctrine and valuation of life—purely artistic and *anti-Christian*. What to call it? As a philologist and man of words I baptized it, not without taking some liberty—for who could claim to know the rightful name of the Antichrist?—in the name of a Greek god: I called it Dionysian. (§5)

Perspectivism

Nietzsche's epistemological position is often referred to as "perspectivism." In opposition to the desire to reveal the 'naked truth,' Nietzsche recommends a more modest position that it is naive to think that we can ever see the world from a point of view that is not a particular perspective. In this aphorism, again from *Beyond Good and Evil*, this notion of perspectivism is clearly connected with the conception of the philosopher as artist and philosophy as fiction:

Forgive me the joke of this gloomy grimace and trope; for I myself have learned long ago to think differently, to estimate differently with regard to deceiving and being deceived, and I keep in reserve at least a couple of jostles for the blind rage with which the philosophers resist being deceived. Why *not*? It is no more than a moral prejudice that truth is worth more than mere appearance; it is even the worst proved assumption there is in the world. Let at least this much be admitted: there would be no life at all if not on the basis of perspective estimates and appearances; and if, with the virtuous enthusiasm and clumsiness of some philosophers, one wanted to abolish the "apparent world" altogether well suppose *you* could do that, at least nothing would be left of your "truth" either. Indeed, what forces us at all to suppose that there is an essential opposition of "true" and "false"? Is it not sufficient to assume degrees of apparentness and, as it were, lighter and darker shadows and shades of appearance different "values," to use the language of painters? Why couldn't the world *that concerns us* be a fiction? (*Beyond Good and Evil*, §34)

In the following famous preface to that text Nietzsche identifies perspectivism as a basic condition of all life and then cracks another joke about traditional philosophers and their desire to possess the truth. The Greek word for 'truth' (*aletheia*) is feminine in gender and Nietzsche perhaps puts his finger on the problem of philosophy by pointing out that truth is a woman. Philosophers, Nietzsche irreverently suggests, have been like love-sick suitors all depressed because they have never understood that this woman-truth can never be possessed.

Supposing truth is a woman—what then? Are there not grounds for the suspicion that all philosophers, insofar as they were dogmatists, have been very inexpert about women? That the gruesome seriousness, the clumsy obtrusiveness with which they have usually approached truth so far have been awkward and very improper methods for winning a woman's heart? What is certain is that she has not allowed herself to be won—and today every kind of dogmatism is left standing dispirited and discouraged. *If* it is left standing at all! For there are scoffers who claim that it has fallen, that all dogmatism lies on the ground—even more, that all dogmatism is dying. . . .

Let us not be ungrateful to it, although it must certainly be conceded that the worst, most durable, and most dangerous of all errors so far was a dogmatist's error—namely, Plato's invention of the pure spirit and the good as such. But now that it is overcome, now that Europe is breathing freely again after this nightmare and at least can enjoy a healthier—sleep, we, *whose task is wakefulness itself*, are the heirs of all that strength which has been fostered by the fight against this error. To be sure, it meant standing truth on her head and denying *perspective*, the basic condition of all life, when one spoke of spirit and the good as Plato did. Indeed, as a physician one might ask: "How could the most beautiful growth of antiquity, Plato, contract such a disease? Did the wicked Socrates corrupt him after all? Could Socrates have been the corrupter of youth after all? And did he deserve his hemlock?" (*Beyond Good and Evil*, Preface)

Nietzsche jests here that perhaps Socrates deserved his hemlock for corrupting Plato with this idea of a truth without veils, a truth that denies the basic perspective condition of all life. Nietzsche's attitude toward Socrates is actually quite complex. If one focuses on the story in the *Apology* about the oracle at Delphi—that the key to wisdom is knowing that one does not possess wisdom—then Nietzsche is perhaps very close to Socrates here. Nevertheless, in his attempt to overturn Platonism and the history of metaphysics, Nietzsche will often target Socrates. Here is Nietzsche's response to Socrates' famous last words:

The dying Socrates.—I admire the courage and wisdom of Socrates in everything he did, said—and did not say. This mocking and enamored monster and pied piper of Athens, who made the most overweening youths tremble and sob, was not only the wisest chatterer of all time: he was equally great in silence. I wish he had remained taciturn also at the last moment of his life; in that case he might belong to a still higher order of spirits. Whether it was death or the poison or piety or malice—something loosened his tongue at that moment and he said: "O Crito, I owe Asclepius a rooster." This ridiculous and terrible "last word" means for those who have ears: "O Crito, *life is a disease.*" Is it possible that a man like him, who had lived cheerfully and like a soldier in the sight of everyone, should have been a pessimist? He had merely kept a cheerful mien while concealing all his life long his ultimate judgment, his inmost feeling. Socrates, Socrates *suffered life!* And then he still revenged himself—with this veiled, gruesome, pious, and blasphemous saying. Did a Socrates need such revenge? Did his overrich virtue lack an ounce of magnanimity?—Alas, my friends, we must overcome even the Greeks! (*The Gay Science*, §340)

This passage further suggests how perspectivism means that knowledge is not passive contemplation but active interpretation:

How far the perspective character of existence extends or indeed whether existence has any other character than this; whether existence without interpretation, without "sense," does not become "nonsense"; whether, on the other hand, all existence is not essentially actively engaged in *interpretation* that cannot be decided even by the most industrious and most scrupulously conscientious analysis and self-examination of the intellect; for in the course of this analysis the human intellect cannot avoid seeing itself in its own perspectives, and *only* in these. We cannot look around our own corner: it is a hopeless curiosity that wants to know what other kinds of intellects and perspectives there *might* be . . . But I should think that today we are at least far from the ridiculous immodesty that would be involved in decreeing from our corner that perspectives are permitted only from this corner. Rather has the world become "infinite" for us all over again, inasmuch as we cannot reject the possibility that *it may include infinite interpretations.* (*The Gay Science*, §374)

Due to the fact that we only see reality from a limited perspective and understand it through a particular language Nietzsche rejects the notion that we can ever arrive at a completely objective, 'factual' view of reality. In his late unpublished notes we see this explanation of his perspectivism:

Against positivism, which halts at the phenomena—"There are only *facts*"—I would say: No, facts is precisely what there is not, only interpretations. We cannot establish any fact "in itself": perhaps it is folly to want to do such a thing. . . .

In so far as the word "knowledge" has any meaning, the world is knowable; but it is *interpretable* otherwise, it has no meaning behind it, but countless meanings.—"Perspectivism." (*The Will to Power*, §481)

That the value of the world lies in our interpretation (that other interpretations than merely human ones are perhaps somewhere possible); That previous interpretations have been perspective valuations by virtue of which we can survive in life, i.e., in the will to power, for the growth of power; that every elevation of man brings with it the overcoming of narrower interpretations; that every strengthening and increase of power opens up new perspectives and means believing in new horizons this idea permeates my writings. The world with which we are concerned is false, i.e., is not a fact but a fable and approximation on the basis of a meager sum of observations; it is "in flux," as something in a state of becoming, as a falsehood always changing but never getting near the truth: for there is no "truth." (*The Will to Power*, §616)

Thus Spoke Zarathustra

Thus Spoke Zarathustra is Nietzsche's philosophical-literary masterpiece. Nietzsche develops in this text his most important ideas but he does so by embedding them in a fictional story. So in this text we find the most powerful expression of his idea of presenting philosophy as fiction. Nietzsche names the central character after the founder of the ancient Persian religion known as Zoroastrianism. Nietzsche traces the error of Western culture all the way back to the Persian prophet—he was the first to portray the entire cosmos as a conflict between good and evil gods, and the first to conceive of a judgment day at the end of the world when the good will be rewarded with eternal life. Nietzsche brings Zarathustra back to atone for his mistakes by teaching a new teaching. Much of the imagery of Nietzsche's text is taken from Zoroastrianism, especially significant is the imagery of the judgment day: at the end of the world all souls must pass over a narrow bridge across the deepest abyss—those who followed the evil god plunge into the abyss while those who followed the good god cross over and gain eternal life. Nietzsche uses this imagery of a dangerous crossing over an abyss throughout the text but it will have an entirely different point.

As the drama of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* unfolds three important, much discussed, and often greatly misunderstood Nietzschean ideas are presented. The first teaching Zarathustra comes to teach is the notion of the *overman* or *superman* (*übermensch*). Often mistaken for some kind of superhero, the *übermensch* for Nietzsche is about the further evolution of humankind. Nietzsche sees humanity as facing an unprecedented crisis in our time which will require a transformation or evolution of humankind. The evolution Nietzsche has in mind is philosophical rather than physical. It will require a questioning of the entire Western philosophical tradition and a completely different attitude toward life.

The second idea presented in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is the *will to power*. This notoriously difficult idea is still often misconceived as simply a desire for power. The *will to power* for Nietzsche is not, however, something that one could choose to have or not, but is rather a characteristic of everything that lives. The question is not whether one should have the *will to power* or not, but rather what kind or quality of *will to power* will manifest. The evolution of humankind will involve a transformation of *will to power*.

The third idea brought forth through Zarathustra is the idea of *eternal recurrence*. The idea is so bizarre that some commentators on Nietzsche don't even consider it, and yet the central drama of what Nietzsche regarded as his most important book turns on Zarathustra's struggle to call up from the depths this abysmal thought. The idea is actually introduced in the penultimate section of book four of *The Gay Science*—the

last section is the beginning of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (book five of *The Gay Science* was written after *Zarathustra*). The idea of the *eternal recurrence* is thus clearly the central idea behind *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Here is the famous passage where the idea is first introduced:

The greatest weight.—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." If this thought gained possession of you, it would change you as you are or perhaps crush you. 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. 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? (*The Gay Science*, §341)

The History of an Error

1. The true world—attainable for the sage, the pious, the virtuous man; he lives in it, *he is it*.
(The oldest form of the idea, relatively sensible, simple, and persuasive. A circumlocution for the sentence, "I, Plato, *am* the truth.")
2. The true world—unattainable for now, but promised for the sage, the pious, the virtuous man ("for the sinner who repents").
(Progress of the idea: it becomes more subtle, insidious, incomprehensible—*it becomes female*, it becomes Christian.)
3. The true world—unattainable, indemonstrable, unpromisable; but the very thought of it—a consolation, an obligation, an imperative.
(At bottom, the old sun, but seen through mist and skepticism. The idea has become elusive, pale, Nordic, Königsbergian.)
4. The true world—unattainable? At any rate, unattained. And being unattained, also *unknown*. Consequently, not consoling, redeeming, or obligating: how could something unknown obligate us?
(Gray morning. The first yawn of reason. The cockcrow of positivism.)
5. The "true" world—an idea which is no longer good for anything, not even obligating—an idea which has become useless and superfluous—*consequently*, a refuted idea: let us abolish it!
(Bright day; breakfast; return of *bon sens* and cheerfulness; Plato's embarrassed blush; pandemonium of all free spirits.)
6. The true world—we have abolished: what world has remained? The apparent one (*scheinbare*) perhaps? But no! *With the true world we have also abolished the apparent one!*
(Noon; moment of the briefest shadow; end of the longest error; high point of humanity; INCIPIT ZARATHUSTRA.) (Twilight of the Idols, 'How the 'True World' Finally Became a Fable')

Nietzsche's Critique of Christianity

Nietzsche's critique of Christianity is seldom understood. Given his attack on the traditional notion of truth it can hardly be that he thinks he has discovered the truth that 'God is dead.' Rather, his critique is that the doctrines of Christianity are put forth as "the truth" of the meaning of the life of Christ despite the fact that these doctrines cannot be anything other than an interpretation of the meaning of that life. Nietzsche's critique of Christianity echoes the theme of Dostoevsky's story "The Grand Inquisitor" from *The Brothers Karamazov* in that the traditional Christian doctrine that teaches eternal reward in exchange for correct belief might, after all, be the very opposite of the teaching of Christ. In *The Antichrist* (perhaps better translated as *The Anti-Christian*) Nietzsche offers a different interpretation.

In the whole psychology of the "evangel" the concept of guilt and punishment is lacking; also the concept of reward. "Sin"—any distance separating God and man—is abolished: *precisely this is the glad tidings.*" Blessedness is not promised, it is not tied to conditions: it is the only reality—the rest is a sign with which to speak of it.

The consequence of such a state projects itself into a new practice, the genuine evangelical practice. It is not a "faith" that distinguishes the Christian: the Christian *acts*, he is distinguished by acting *differently*: by not resisting, either in words or in his heart, those who treat him ill; by making no distinction between foreigner and native. . .

The life of the Redeemer was nothing other than *this* practice—nor was his death anything else. He no longer required any formulas, any rites for his intercourse with God—not even prayer. He broke with the whole Jewish doctrine of repentance and reconciliation; he knows that it is only in the *practice* of life that one feels "divine," "blessed," "evangelical," at all times a "child of God." Not "repentance," not "prayer for forgiveness," are the ways to God: *only the evangelical practice* leads to God, indeed, it *is* "God"! . . .

The deep instinct for how one must live, in order to feel oneself "in heaven," to feel "eternal," while in all other behavior one decidedly does *not* feel oneself "in heaven"—this alone is the psychological reality of "redemption." A new way of life, *not* a new faith. (*The Antichrist*, §33)

If I understand anything about this great symbolist, it is that he accepted only *inner* realities as realities, as "truths"—that he understood the rest, everything natural, temporal, spatial, historical, only as signs, as occasions for parables. The concept of "the son of man" is not a concrete person who belongs in history, something individual and unique, but an "eternal" factuality, a psychological symbol redeemed from the concept of time. The same applies once again, and in the highest sense, to the *God* of this typical symbolist, to the "kingdom of God," to the "kingdom of heaven," to the "filiation of God." Nothing is more unchristian than the *ecclesiastical crudities* of a god as person, of a "kingdom of God" which is to come, of a "kingdom of heaven" beyond, of a "son of God" as the second person in the Trinity. . . .

The "kingdom of heaven" is a state of the heart—not something that is to come "above the earth" or "after death." The whole concept of natural death is lacking in the evangel: death is no bridge, no transition; it is lacking because it belongs to a wholly different, merely apparent world, useful only insofar as it furnishes signs. The "hour of death" is no Christian concept—an "hour," time, physical life and its crises do not even exist for the teacher of the "glad tidings." The "kingdom of God" is nothing that one expects; it has no yesterday and no day after tomorrow, it will not come in "a

thousand years”—it is an experience of the heart; it is everywhere, it is nowhere. (*The Antichrist*, §34)

This “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 practice is his legacy to mankind: his behavior before the judges, before the catchpoles, before the accusers and all kinds of slander and scorn—his behavior on the *cross*. He does not resist, he does not defend his right, he takes no step which might ward off the worst; on the contrary, he *provokes* it. And he begs, he suffers, he loves *with* those, in those, who do him evil. *Not* to resist, *not* to be angry, *not* to hold responsible—but to resist not even the evil one—to *love* him. (*The Antichrist*, §35)

Only we, we spirits who have *become free*, have the presuppositions for understanding something that nineteen centuries have misunderstood: that integrity which, having become instinct and passion, wages war against the “holy lie” even more than against any other lie. Previous readers were immeasurably far removed from our loving and cautious neutrality, from that discipline of the spirit which alone makes possible the unriddling of such foreign, such tender things: with impudent selfishness they always wanted only their own advantage; out of the opposite of the evangel the church was constructed.

If one were to look for signs that an ironical divinity has its fingers in the great play of the world, one would find no small support in the *tremendous question mark* called Christianity. Mankind lies on its knees before the opposite of that which was the origin, the meaning, the *right* of the evangel; in the concept of the “church” it has pronounced holy precisely what the “bringer of glad tidings” felt to be *beneath* and *behind* himself—one would look in vain for a greater example of *world-historical irony*. (*The Antichrist*, §36)

I go back, I tell the *genuine* history of Christianity. The very word “Christianity” is a misunderstanding: in truth, there was only *one* Christian, and he died on the cross. The “evangel” *died* on the cross. What has been called “evangel” from that moment was actually the opposite of that which *he* had lived: “*ill* tidings,” a *dysangel*. It is false to the point of nonsense to find the mark of the Christian in a “faith,” for instance, in the faith in redemption through Christ: only Christian *practice*, a life such as he *lived* who died on the cross, is Christian.

Such a life is still possible today, for certain people even necessary: genuine, original Christianity will be possible at all times. Not a faith, but a doing; above all, a *not* doing of many things, another state of *being*. (*The Antichrist*, §39)

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