

## Nietzsche and God (Part I) *Adrian Samuel*

### *Abstract*

What is distinctive about Nietzsche's rejection of God is that it is not based upon mere rational demonstration – e.g., defending the position that there is insufficient support for the claim X exists, such that X has the properties of God. Rather than argue that God does not exist, Nietzsche claims that 'God is dead'. And this is itself tied up with a belief that rational justification (of which God is both a symptom and a cause<sup>1</sup>) has undermined itself due to reducing the question of meaning<sup>2</sup> to the question of the true.<sup>3</sup> That is, 'God is dead' because the timeless and universal standpoint of God has led to 'nihilism' – the viewpoint that there is essentially nothing meaningful to our world beyond a set of true facts. Against this, Nietzsche champions an essentially 'psychological' approach to the question of the true, which allows him to explore what meaning a particular understanding of reality involves. The paper concludes that Nietzsche's opposition to God is based upon his psychological reductionism (his belief that the objects of decision are reducible to the psychological process of deciding) and his pantheism (his identifying nature as the source of value).<sup>4</sup>

### *Nietzsche & Monotheism.*

Nietzsche is (in)famous for his denunciation of Christianity, and more broadly monotheism. He doesn't mince his words:

'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.' (*Birth of Tragedy*, p.23)<sup>5</sup>

The Jews and Muslims are treated a little more kindly, although even they are seen as essentially 'slavish' and ignoble.<sup>6</sup> In spite of this charged rhetoric, Nietzsche's approach to the question of God is subtle and challenging. Nietzsche succinctly presents his position in what is sometimes called the 'parable of the madman', section 125 of the *The Gay Science*.<sup>7</sup>

'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 am looking for God! I am looking for God!" As many of those who did not believe in God were standing together there, he excited considerable laughter.

'Have you lost him, then?' said one.

'Did he lose his way like a child?' said another.

'Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? or emigrated?' Thus they shouted and laughed. The madman sprang into their midst and pierced them with his glances.

'Where has God gone?' he cried.

'I shall tell you. **We have killed him - you and I.** We are his murderers. But how have we done this? How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What did we do when we

unchained the earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving now? Away from all suns? Are we not perpetually falling? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there any up or down left? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing?

From this passage, it is clear that Nietzsche now sees the idea of God to have become impotent – alienated from the market-place.<sup>8</sup> For no-one berates the ‘madman’ for blasphemy – nor does anyone attempt to help the madman find God. Rather, the madman’s search for God is taken as a bit of a joke – worthy of being mocked and little more. Nietzsche coins this sociological movement towards not taking ‘God’ seriously as the ‘death of God’. That is, the former importance ‘God’ had in structuring our lives has ended.

Further, Nietzsche sees the death of God to be a problem. This is made clear after the sentence ‘The madman sprang into their midst and pierced them with his glances.’ To present this problem, Nietzsche uses the evocative language of the event’s wiping away the entire horizon of what is meaningful for us. He also presents the death of God in terms of our world’s losing its centre of gravity and of energy, the sun. The death of God is also presented as a crisis of direction – of our being sent into free-fall, losing any sense of the purpose and meaning of our lives, vividly presented in terms of our ‘straying as through an infinite nothing’.

In brief then, Nietzsche sees the death of God to lead to the problem of disenchantment – that the ultimate significance of our lives (previously understood in terms of our relationship to God) has been replaced by an essentially insignificant world (of mere causal interaction).<sup>9</sup>

The assumption underlying this is of course that God previously played the role of our world’s centre of gravity, its energising force and orientating direction. Given that assumption, it might be thought that Nietzsche would attempt to rethink the idea of God for his own age. Indeed, there are many examples of Christians attempting to do this, such as the Anglican Bishop Robinson in his controversial book *Honest to God*.<sup>10</sup> Or we can look no further than the Bible itself for exactly the same thing, such as the prophet Amos. In the Biblical Book named after him, the prophet presents these harsh words as coming from God:

I hate, I despise your religious feasts;  
I cannot stand your assemblies.

Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings,  
I will not accept them.

Though you bring choice fellowship offerings,  
I will have no regard for them.

Away with the noise of your songs!  
I will not listen to the music of your harps.

But let justice roll on like a river,  
righteousness like a never-failing stream!’ (Amos, 5:21-24)<sup>11</sup>

What characterises these religious revisionists is typically an appeal to radicalism. Radicality is often confused with extremism in the popular press, but in its proper sense it means going back to the root (radicalism is drawn from the Latin *radix* meaning root). As such, Amos is calling the Jews back to a more authentic relationship to God after they had become overly preoccupied with the outward form of the rituals that were meant to open them on to just that relationship.

Nietzsche however, is different. He is not concerned to rethink and thereby reinvigorate our relationship to God. For Nietzsche, God is the problem. Or, to put the issue more clearly, God is the clearest symptom and cause of the problem, which is justificatory rationality as the standard for all understanding. To explore Nietzsche's rejection of God, we must therefore digress to firstly explore his rejection of justificatory rationality.<sup>12</sup>

### *Justificatory rationality.*

Justificatory rationality is the attempt to ground our beliefs upon basic elements. These foundational elements are typically held to be self-evident or self-justifying, and thereby afford an 'objective' standpoint. The truth of our beliefs thereby lies in their being appropriately referred (either directly or through some more complex chain of reasoning) to an objective standard of justification.

Nietzsche's critique of objectivism lies in his questioning the question of truth. In section 1 of *Beyond Good & Evil*<sup>13</sup>, he writes:

'The will to truth, which is still going to tempt us to many a daring exploit, that celebrated truthfulness of which all philosophers up to now have spoken with respect, what questions this will to truth has already set down before us! What strange, serious, dubious questions! There is already a long history about them—and yet it seems that this history has scarcely begun. Is it any wonder that we finally become mistrustful, lose patience and, in our impatience, turn ourselves around, and learn from this sphinx to ask questions for ourselves? Who is really asking us questions here? What is it in us that really wants "the truth"? In fact, we pause for a long time before the question about the origin of this will—until we finally remain completely and utterly immobile in front of an even more fundamental question. We ask about the value of this will. Suppose we want truth. Why should we not prefer untruth? And ignorance? Ignorance of the self? The problem of the value of truth steps up before us—or are we the ones who step up before the problem? Who among us here is Oedipus? Who is the Sphinx?'

In this passage, Nietzsche puts the question of truth into question.<sup>14</sup> That is, instead of merely attempting to answer the sphinx's<sup>15</sup> question of 'What is truth?', Nietzsche puts his own question to the enigma of truth. He interrogates the traditional philosophical question of 'What is truth?' in terms of the question 'Why truth?'. And he approaches this question 'Why truth?' in terms of the 'value' of this 'will to truth'.

Now the question of value assumes a standard of evaluation – i.e., some way of determining the value of the thing. And that standard is typically the significance the thing has for someone or something else. For example, a picture of my father is valued because I value it – it is valuable to me.<sup>16</sup> Now, as we have seen, Nietzsche is asking after the value of the ‘will to truth’. So he similarly needs to identify what the ‘will to truth’ is valuable to.

Nietzsche’s answer to this is ‘life’. And by ‘life’, Nietzsche means some causal-organic movement to which the act of knowing belongs.<sup>17</sup> Rather than simply attempting to answer the question of what truth is therefore, Nietzsche attempts to situate the question of truth and its answer within the holistic movement of ‘life’. That is, Nietzsche does not see life in terms of truth, as philosophers typically do, when they treat biographical questions as at most useful for determining the validity and accuracy of argument. He rather sees truth in terms of life, inquiring into how different approaches to the question of truth transform the significance or value of life.

Nietzsche’s approach is therefore to treat the question of truth not as a problem that has to be solved, but as rather a symptom and aspect of something greater, which he terms ‘life’. And by ‘life’ he means an all-embracing movement, that includes both causality and consciousness within itself.

We are now in a position to understand why Nietzsche rejects objectivism. This is principally because it takes the question of ‘What is truth?’ as basic, and attempts to simply answer this question by referring our beliefs to an objective standpoint. Against this, Nietzsche raises two criticisms.

Firstly, it is insufficiently honest since it fails to inquire into the reasons for a concern for the truth. – i.e., ‘Why truth?’ (BGE, 25) That is, it is interrogatively deficient, meaning that the significance of the question and answer are inadequately explored.

Secondly, and leading on from the first point, Nietzsche sees objectivism to implicitly reduce our motivations to a merely instrumental role in acknowledging reality. That is, such an approach implicitly reduces the question of meaning (the contextual significance something has) to the question of objective knowledge (the mind-independent reality something has). Nietzsche argues that this is problematic, since knowledge is not simply of a mind-independent reality, but it is also indicative of how our mind conceives and relates to the world. If we are properly to understand the relationship between the question of the true and the question of meaning, we need to abandon such attempts to reduce the question of meaning to the question of the true and thereby recognise the ‘perspectival’ nature of our knowledge. That is, all knowing takes place within a ‘horizon’ of meaning (BGE, 43), and it is through this context of meaning that we are granted a perspective on reality.<sup>18</sup> Perspectivism then, can be seen to articulate Nietzsche’s alternative to objectivism – a context-specific model of knowing.

In summary then, Nietzsche champions an essential holism<sup>19</sup> against objectivism, by rethinking the question of truth in terms of its belonging to (and being a symptom of) the movement of ‘life’. All knowing takes place within and from life, meaning that knowledge is not seen as simply objective (as opposed to subjective), but as

perspectival (a contextually embedded position, that allows Nietzsche to bridge the opposition between subjectivity and objectivity).

### *Objectivism and God*

If Nietzsche is against objectivism then, this still raises the question why he is against God. The principal reason for this is because Nietzsche sees God to be the clearest symptom and cause of objectivist thought – God is the ultimate standard to which our thoughts need be referred and to some extent justified or at least judged. God therefore typifies such an approach, as well as encourages us to see the world in terms of this approach. That is, Nietzsche identifies God with what Thomas Nagel would much later term the ‘view from nowhere’<sup>20</sup> – a purely objective standpoint essentially divorced from our subjective involvement in the world, and yet one which acts as the standard for deciding whether our subjective involvement in the world (principally our decision-making) is true or false.

As we have seen, Nietzsche’s holistic ‘perspectivism’ leads him to reject such a universal standpoint – what might be termed the viewpoint of God. And as we have also seen, Nietzsche’s argument is that such a standpoint fails to take the question of meaning seriously. That is, the attempt to abstract out of contextual specificity so as to achieve an objective standpoint implicitly reduces the contextually specific questions of meaning (what meaning does something have within its context) to a set of objective and yet essentially meaningless ‘truths’. Or more damagingly in the case of God, it projects what is meaningful beyond our world into some ultimate standard of meaning (‘God’, understood as the standard by which we judge the significance of an act). And this is a problem, since it implicitly undermines the meaning of the world for the sake of a ‘fictitious’ ‘other world’.

Nietzsche’s critique of theistic belief is therefore that it is essentially ‘nihilistic’<sup>21</sup> – undermining the meaning of our world (acknowledged through our contextual involvement in it)<sup>22</sup> for the sake of a fictitious reality (a projected standard of meaning), identified with the ‘truth’.

Nietzsche’s critique does not stop here however. For he is not simply interested in claiming that a belief in God undermines our meaningful involvement in the world. He is also interested in exploring how ‘life’ came to undermine itself (deny its own meaningfulness) through that aspect of life which is religion.

### *Religion and Psychology*

This question of the ‘genealogy’ of nihilism leads Nietzsche to adopt an essentially psychological approach to truth claims. That is, Nietzsche is not principally interested in the logical validity or empirical support a particular theory or religious position achieves. He is rather interested in the drives that lead us to attempt to defend particular theories of truth or religious positions (e.g., why was Descartes concerned to identify truth with absolute certainty or why do some people believe that God affords a transcendent justification of life).<sup>23</sup>

Nietzsche explores these drives through the discipline of psychology. Psychology however, should not be understood in merely mental terms. Rather, for Nietzsche, our

psychological drives are not essentially separate from the world we inhabit, but continuous with it. And he explores this continuity between consciousness and causality in terms of his concept of the 'will to power'. The will to power then, as Deleuze<sup>24</sup> rightly notes, is not principally a desire to get power over others (though it can be this at times). It is rather the power to will – the unifying element that all action belongs to, including inorganic matter and consciousness. To embrace the will to power might therefore be understood in terms of immersing oneself in the power to will.

Now by exploring the will to power, of which the psychological process of willing is a part, and of which the will to truth is a smaller part, Nietzsche aims to better understand how our will shares in the movement of life. As Nietzsche writes at the end of the 'Prejudices of the Philosophers', the first chapter of *Beyond Good & Evil*:

'All psychology so far has remained hung up on moral prejudices and fears. It has not dared to go into the depths. To understand it as the morphology and doctrine of the development of the will to power—the way I understand it [...] For from now on psychology is once more the route to fundamental problems.' (BGE, 22)

Instead of attempting to answer the question of the reality of God then, Nietzsche rethinks the question and any attempt to answer it in terms of its revealing a psychology – understood in terms of its disclosing a complex of drives. Different philosophical positions and religious standpoints are therefore evaluated in terms of their being expressions of and drives sharing in the will to power.

We are now in a position to supplement Nietzsche's objectivist critique of God with his psychological critique. For Nietzsche diagnoses life's attempt to transcend its affirmatively interactive drives so as to arrive at a timeless and neutral standpoint as symptomatic of 'life's nausea and disgust with life, merely concealed behind, masked by, dressed up as, faith in "another" or "better" life.' That is, the motivating drive behind such a standpoint is interpreted as a form of escapism from life's drives, rather than as anything substantial in its own right. We might therefore term such a critique of God (and more broadly of truth) as psychological reductionism – the belief that truth's identification is reducible to the psychological process of identifying. Or in other words, a belief in God is reducible to the process by which we came to believe in God.

Nietzsche's psychological reductionism leads to his third principal reason for denying the reality of God. And this is Nietzsche's pantheism. Pantheism is the belief that nature is divine – that everything participates in the divine reality. And Nietzsche's attempt to situate our decisions (about truth) within a universal interplay of drives (the 'will to power') leads him to see the unifying element of the 'will to power' to be the source of value. The transcendent God of monotheism is therefore critiqued on the grounds that it undermines the source of value (nature in its totality, understood as the will to power) for the sake of a fiction.

In summary then, for Nietzsche, the world we directly experience is the only world, and self-denial for the sake of a fiction is psychologically symptomatic of life's

sickness.<sup>25</sup> Against this approach of self-denial for the sake of service, Nietzsche articulates a viewpoint that is celebratory of our drives (the 'will to power').

### *Beyond Good & Evil.*

This 'affirmative' philosophy leads Nietzsche to reject not only the authority of God, but also the authority of all standards of truth that stand over and above 'life' – including moral ones. That is, Nietzsche is also led to reject moral standards of truth, which typically defend the weak against the oppression of the strong. Against this essentially defensive approach to authority, Nietzsche celebrates a culture that respects greatness but is disdainful of respecting those who fail to achieve greatness:

'The European disguises himself with morality because he has become a sick, sickly, crippled animal that has good reasons for being "tame," for he is almost an abortion, scarce half made up, weak, awkward ... It is not the ferocity of the beast of prey that requires a moral disguise but the herd animal with its profound mediocrity, timidity, and boredom with itself.' (The Gay Science, 352)

In short, respect for God and for the weak are sacrificed by Nietzsche for the sake of the freedom of the great, and this is seen to logically follow from a commitment to celebrating the creative possibilities of the will to power.<sup>26</sup>

### *Conclusion*

If Nietzsche is right then, the 'death of God' poses a more significant challenge than whether we attend an act of religious worship or not. God is both a symptom and a cause of the world's disenchantment. That is, a belief in God firstly involves projecting meaning beyond our involvement in the world, due to the fact that we can no longer find sufficient meaning there – i.e., we are psychologically 'sick'. And by projecting meaning beyond our involvement in the world (in the figure of 'God'), we progressively undermine the meaning of that involvement, since meaning now has to be ascribed to events by their being referred to God. God might therefore be seen as a vicious circle of meaninglessness.

To simply abandon a belief in God is therefore not an adequate response for Nietzsche. We rather have to address the fact that our world is now essentially disenchanted – we have lost any essential understanding of the meaning of our world. To simply accept the mechanistic view of modern physics merely assumes this disenchantment, rather than challenges it.

In articulating his own response, Nietzsche tantalisingly points towards the 'overman' (*ubermensch*), but this is never sufficiently developed. It seems to be less a particular person, and more an event, in which our world will be re-enchanted through a celebration of greatness. The ethical implications of this mode of re-enchantment are questionable however.

Whatever the limitations of Nietzsche's proposal to the problem though, he remains a key thinker due to his clearly identifying the problem of the world's disenchantment. That is, Nietzsche radically challenges philosophy's traditional assumption of the

question of meaning in its answering the question of the true – a tradition going right back to Plato. For Nietzsche, the question of meaning is irreducible.<sup>27</sup> Theists reading Nietzsche need to clearly distinguish between the problem Nietzsche identifies and the answer he gives to that problem. By rejecting the latter, while acknowledging the former, like Amos, they might be able to radicalise and thereby reinvigorate a relationship to God in our own age.

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<sup>1</sup> That is, God as symptom is the ultimate example of an ultimate ground for all our knowledge, and God as cause encourages us to believe that our knowledge requires to be grounded.

<sup>2</sup> The question of meaning does not refer here to the semantic question of how lexical signs denote elements of reality. It rather concerns meaning as significance – the question of what significance our experiences are understood to have.

<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche's rejection of God is often presented in terms of an attempt to champion our drives against monotheism's demand for submission. Here I argue that this attempt is itself based upon Nietzsche's more essential challenge to philosophy's traditional approach to inquiry.

<sup>4</sup> This paper aims simply to present Nietzsche's position, rather than criticise it.

<sup>5</sup> Nietzsche, F. (1967) *The Birth of Tragedy & the Case of Wagner*, trans. Kaufmann, USA: Random House

<sup>6</sup> Nietzsche sees the other-worldliness of monotheism to be most clearly revealed in Christianity, since this religion emphasises the inwardness of our coming to experience God (in contrast to Judaism and Islam, which tend to emphasise more the public dimension of godly rule). And that experience is one of denying oneself so as to belong to a more true or godly world – what Jesus termed the 'kingdom of God', and which he enacted in his passion, crucifixion and resurrection. This makes Christianity more overtly life-denying than the other two faiths, but nevertheless, all three faiths share the same essential logic of slavishness rather than creative affirmation for Nietzsche.

<sup>7</sup> Nietzsche, F. (1974) *The Gay Science*, trans. Kaufmann, USA: Random House

<sup>8</sup> That is, the God of religion has died in Europe. However, Nietzsche believes that the *idea* of God does linger on in a sublimated form such as in ideals of progress or in the nation state. These are themselves ultimately doomed however, leaving us with the problem of 'nihilism' – a world in which we can no longer properly inquire into the meaning of our world.

<sup>9</sup> After the 'death of God' and its 'death throes' (such as a belief in progress, etc.), Nietzsche believes that we are left with an essentially barbaric culture of instrumental manipulation. The sociologist Max Weber, following Nietzsche, would later memorably characterise our age in terms of an 'iron cage' of rationality – where we know how to interrelate and use everything, but have lost any real sense of the intrinsically significant (what is significant for its own sake).

<sup>10</sup> Robinson, J.A.T. (1963), *Honest to God*, London: Westminster John Knox Press

<sup>11</sup> Old Testament of the Bible, NIV

<sup>12</sup> Theologians have responded to Nietzsche's challenge by attempting to radicalise the faith. In particular, Don Cuppitt in his *Sea of Faith* has integrated the 'death of God' into a non-realist conception of our relation to God.

<sup>13</sup> Nietzsche, F. (1998) *Beyond Good & Evil*, trans. M. Faber, Oxford: OUP

<sup>14</sup> For Nietzsche, the question of truth is not a objectively neutral enterprise. He discusses how the question has changed its meaning over different epochs (e.g., from Plato's eternal standard of truth, through Stoicism's ideal of the natural order, through Descartes' demand for absolute certainty, etc.). By putting the question of truth itself into question, Nietzsche is attempting to explore how to ask that question – which paradigm of inquiry we should adopt.

<sup>15</sup> The Sphinx is an iconic image of a recumbent lion typically with the head of a person, invented by the Egyptians of the Old Kingdom. Nietzsche is referring to Sophocles' play *Oedipus Tyrannus*, in which the sphinx asks all passersby the famous riddle: "Which creature in the morning goes on four



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feet, at noon on two, and in the evening upon three?" She strangles anyone unable to answer. (The answer is humanity.)

<sup>16</sup> Things can of course be intrinsically valuable (e.g., a husband might be valued for his own sake), but even such things are necessarily valued by something else (e.g., a wife).

<sup>17</sup> In adopting such an approach, Nietzsche is following Schopenhauer, who similarly understood all reality (inorganic and organic) to belong to the movement of the 'will'. Nevertheless, Schopenhauer adopts an essentially negative approach to the eternal struggles of 'life', in contrast to Nietzsche's essentially positive attitude. [Schopenhauer, A. (1967) *The World as Will & Representation*, trans. Payne, New York: Dover, vol. 1 & 2]

<sup>18</sup> Nietzsche's perspectivism can be seen as a development of Kant's transcendental Idealism, with its claim that what we know is always shaped by how we know (the 'categories' of our knowing).

<sup>19</sup> That is, a standpoint in which question of meaning and the question of truth are inextricably intertwined.

<sup>20</sup> Nagel, T (1989), *The View from Nowhere*, Oxford: OUP

<sup>21</sup> 'Nihilism' is Nietzsche's term for reality's meaning essentially nothing.

<sup>22</sup> Heidegger terms this 'being-in-the-world'. Heidegger's four-volume discussion of Nietzsche is a classic for understanding the insights and limitations of Nietzsche's thought. [Heidegger, M. (1991) *Nietzsche*, trans. D.F. Krell, Australia: HarperCollins]

<sup>23</sup> Nietzsche's approach therefore comes close to an *ad hominem* argument, since he explores the character implicit within a particular psychological approach to truth.

<sup>24</sup> Deleuze, G. (1986) *Nietzsche & Philosophy*, trans. Tomlinson, London: Athlone Press

<sup>25</sup> Similar to a 'beautiful soul', who wants to fade away from the cut and thrust of life into some fiction of pure, defenceless beauty.

<sup>26</sup> These achievements need not be at the expense of the weak, for greatness is principally to be achieved psychologically rather than merely physically. And psychological greatness involves our going beyond negative drives such as resentment ('*ressentiment*') which can lead us to be vicious to others or judge ourselves relative to others (e.g., understand our authority in terms of our authority over others). Nevertheless, greatness for Nietzsche *might* involve treating the weak as merely a resource for its own creativity, as he acknowledges.

<sup>27</sup> Heidegger terms Nietzsche's philosophy 'reversed Platonism', due to its subordinating the question of the true to the question of meaning, in contrast to Plato who subordinated the question of meaning to the question of the true. (See Martin Heidegger's *The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking*.)