

# "God is Dead":

## A Nietzschean Primer\*

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### ABSTRACT

Nietzsche's concept of nihilism has been blatantly misinterpreted through the years as merely political phenomena. In this paper, I intended to re-evaluate Nietzsche's utterance that "God is Dead" and his issuance of a Nihilistic process which overwhelms modern day existence in hopes to re-discover what Nietzsche had originally proposed: the necessity of a resurgence of a humanistic evolutionary process, not on a physical sense, but on an existential sense.

### Foreword

"A Nihilist is the man who says of the world as it is , that it ought not to exist, and of the world as it ought to be, that it does not exist" (*Will to Power* Aph. 585 A).

With these words, Nietzsche described the decaying state of the world which threatened to send humanity into a stupefying void. "God is dead" and there is no way to revive "Him". All that once was the Absolute has no reason of being.

Moral consciousness, Christianity and supreme values, thorns thrust into humanity back, have met their match. Yet humanity, in its search for a false sense of

belonging, has been caught by the onslaught of despair, generated by the mediocre interpretations of historicity, thus blinding from the necessary evolutionary process.

Nihilism, that "evil" that surrounds us and whose sole "intent" is to destroy the "civilized" world, has been overrated, its real purpose lost to humanity. What is Nihilism? Why is God dead? and, what does this death symbolize? How is it, that these two seemingly "different" concepts, are really but elements of a superior evolutionary concept?

It would be too pretentious to state that this paper will answer these and many other questions which haunt the subject of Nietzsche's conception of God's death and Nihilism. The intention of this paper is to try to emphasize on those arguments which, to my opinion, seem to be crucial to the interpretation of nihilism and its effects on humanity as Nietzsche foresaw it.

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According to Heidegger, one cannot fully comprehend Nietzsche's concept of nihilism without first understanding Nietzsche's basis for claiming that "God is dead". Heidegger, in his book *Holzwege*, tries to emphasize the importance of understanding this key phrase, which, according to Heidegger, sums up Nietzsche's meaning of nihilism. Man is seen as a historical movement discovered by Nietzsche, that has already ruled throughout the preceding centuries and now determines our own era. Nietzsche sums up this in a brief phrase: "God is dead" (Heidegger 177).

It is a fact documented by mostly all who have studied Nietzsche, that from an early age, Nietzsche had an idea concerning the death of God and of an extinction of all the gods. We can perceive this in some notes taken by Nietzsche while

working on his first book *The Birth of Tragedy* (1870), when Nietzsche writes: "I believe in the old Germanic saying: All gods must die" (Pfeffer 73). Yet, it is not until the third book of Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* (1882), that Nietzsche uses the phrase "God is dead" in the piece titled "The Madman". Here Nietzsche writes of a madman who went to the market place one morning with a burning lantern crying incessantly: "I am looking for God! Where has God gone?" he cried, "I shall tell you. We have killed him... you and I. We are his murderers". And the madman continued, "God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him!"<sup>1</sup>

Nietzsche would again address this conviction in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883). In the Prologue there is a passage where Zarathustra meets an old man in the forest: "And what doeth the saint in the forest?", asks Zarathustra. The saint answers, "I make hymns and sing them; and in making hymns I laugh and weep and mumble: thus do I praise God". "Could it be possible! This old saint in the forest hath not yet heard of it, that God is dead!" (4-6).

Later, in the fourth book of *Zarathustra* (1891)<sup>2</sup>, Zarathustra, in the piece titled "Out of Service", meets with the last Pope who says: "I was seeking the last pious man, a saint and an anchorite, who, alone in his forest, had not yet heard of what all the world knoweth at present". "What doth all the world know at present?", asks Zarathustra. "Perhaps that the old God no longer liveth, in whom all the world once believed?" "Thou sayest it", replies the old Pope sorrowfully. "And I served that old God until his last hour" (288-289).

There are many examples which could be cited, yet it would be futile to continue, since those cited above are proof enough of Nietzsche's persistence on God's death. It would not be until Nietzsche's later works that he identifies this as nihilism.

If one follows Heidegger's plan of attack, we must first take into consideration the phrase "God is dead" and study each of its components separately, so that we

may be capable of understanding more clearly what Nietzsche means by the utterance of these dramatic words.

According to many of the scholars, one must not refer to "God" exclusively in the Christian sense of the word, but it is important to take the concept in a more expansive sense of reality. Heidegger defines God as the supersensible world as it really exists and which rules everything, the ideals and ideas, the purpose and motives which rule and sustain everything that exists and particular humanity, all this which is understood as the highest values (185). Thus, God is a transformation of all earthly and mundane values, into transcendent and absolute values. God, as referred to by Maurice Blanchot in his article "The Limits of Experience: Nihilism", is not only God, "but also everything that, in rapid succession has tried to take its place - e.g., the ideal, consciousness, reason, the certainly of progress, the happiness of the masses, culture, ect." (121).

Still, Nietzsche seems to think of God not only in the metaphysical sense, but in the historical sense. Rose Pfeffer in *Nietzsche: Disciple of Dionysus* interprets God, in reference to the cry of the madman in *The Gay Science*, to signify "the historical God of the Christian tradition" (73). She states that "God symbolizes the whole Platonic-Christian realm of a transcendent reality and its supersensible, absolute values that have dominated the Western tradition"(73). Thus she declares that

"the 'highest values',... originate from the Platonic-Christian tradition, which placed philosophy 'under the guidance of morality'. They are the eternal, immutable values of Plato's realm of ideas, and the transcendent, supersensible norms of Christianity, which transformed the Platonic 'Good' into the Christian God" (Pfeffer 73-5).

One very interesting point to be considered before continuing is that Nietzsche never stated that God didn't exist, only that he is dead. This is clear once one

has been able to formulate the definition of God based on the ideas stated above. It seems Nietzsche wasn't interested in whether that concept was still valid or not. Hence we arrive at Nietzsche's announcement of its death.

Death, in its turn, can be defined in many ways. It could be seen as

"the total and permanent cessation of all the vital functions of an animal or plant; the loss or absence of spiritual life; loss or deprivation of civil life; extinction or destruction" ("Death").

Yet death, in Nietzschean sense, refers to the annulment by man of the supersensible world. This death implicates not only the process by which "that" existing nullifies itself, but it also transforms into its essence (Heidegger 216).

Gathering together the different possible meanings of death, it is possible to formulate a better idea of the importance of Nietzsche's profound and alarming announcement of God's death. To this extent, one can suppose, that act of killing God denotes stripping humanity of its "vital functions" necessary to sustain life and order, yet, it is this same spiritual and mental "crutch" which Nietzsche wants to get rid of. This murder, in Nietzschean terms, is but the mere annulment and transformation of those old "supreme" values which have existed before present times, it could be said, that to Nietzsche's understanding, "supreme" values do nothing more than cripple man's progress through the ages. Pfeffer warns us not to take this as an "atheistic statement, or as a cry for the revival of the old faith". To her the phrase "God is dead" is a stand against the "Platonic-Christian" tradition of transcendence and against those in the 19th century, who having lost all faith, continued with the tradition (Pfeffer 74). In simpler terms God's death is the elimination of "all" which the concept of God was responsible for (Kockelmans 65).

This loss of the "divine" principles, by which man had supposed the order of the material world, is drowning. This experience of emptiness, of nothingness, can be defined as an experience where one perceives that one's former perceptions were arranged in an arbitrary form. Man has known of the existence of this void for a long time, yet he has preferred to act as if this void did not exist, as if the universe has not lost its meaning. To the majority of people, the disappearance of God has no effect over the state of things. All remains in its place, in harmony. Yet, Nietzsche seemed to understand, that it was time for man to acknowledge this void for what it was: the means to create new values. This shall be discussed later on.

Now, before continuing it is important to introduce the concept of Nihilism. Up to now, we have arrived at a stage where nothingness plays an important part of Nietzsche's concept of God's death. It was Nietzsche's understanding that this nothingness was not limited to moral/religious themes, but that it was intrinsic to all things, to all aspects of humanity, from political, to social, to existential, to nature, etc... With the mention of nothingness as the product of God's death, we can assume that Nietzsche introduces the concept of Nihilism, given that the word "nihil" is Latin for "nothing".

Nihilism, in a broad sense of the word, implies total negation of something. From there, one can derive the different types of nihilism which are present in the world. To an extent, the first philosopher to coin the word nihilism was the American William Hamilton, who in his work *Lectures on Metaphysics*,<sup>3</sup> describes Hume's Phenomenism, which denies the existence of a substantial reality, as nihilistic. Yet, one can find nihilistic influence as early as Gorgias (5th century B.C.), who stated: "(a) nothing exists, (b) if anything exists, it is incomprehensible and (c) if anything is comprehensible, it is incommunicable" (Freeman 128). Thus, we have epistemological nihilism in Hume's case and metaphysical nihilism, which is the negation of valid moral values; pessimism,

exemplified by Schopenhauer's considerations of existence as a mere "reflection " of the irrational impulse of Will; Russian nihilism, denouncing that only destruction was creative and that all can be destroyed, should be trashed and what survived was good (which could be considered as influencing Nietzsche's stance on philosophizing with a hammer); and Buddhist nihilism, which denies alternatives to a given position, and the negation of this negation, thus the "void" is seen as true Absolute (Ferrater Mora 2365-7).

But what of Nietzsche's nihilism? Why is Nietzsche's interpretation of nihilism so fundamental for understanding the time in which Nietzsche lived, wrote and died, and the time he foresaw? What makes thinkers like Heidegger, Camus, Sartre and Derrida heed Nietzsche's prophetic words and try to prepare mankind for the forecoming circumstances?

It is easily observed that Nihilism existed well before Nietzsche's time; yet, it was Nietzsche who dared to point out that nihilism is not the consequence of a few scattered ideals, restricted to a very limited area, but a movement which encompasses all mankind. And so Nietzsche defines the concept of nihilism in a few words: "What does nihilism mean? That the highest values are losing their power" (*Will Aph.* 2). Nietzsche complements the urgency of this statement by adding: " There is no answer to the questions: ' to what purpose '?" (*Will Aph.* 2). Thus Nietzsche sums it up by stating "God is dead".

What causes this void, this nothingness defined as nihilism, which permeates modern and contemporary times? Why is there no more purpose? In other words, what causes the death of God?

Going back to madman's cry, we can observe that Nietzsche proposes humanity to be the culprit of this "horrendous" act. Why man? And how did man commit this "crime"? In general opinion, it was man's elevation of his own mundane moral concepts to a superior plane in an attempt to establish moral and absolute truths by which he could govern his acts the primordial reason of humanity's downfall.

Yet, if it was man who promoted the establishment of the "supreme" values, as we can deduce from Nietzsche when he writes: "The 'inferior species' ('herd', 'mass', 'society') is forgetting modesty, and inflates its needs into 'cosmic' and 'metaphysical' values. In this way all life is 'vulgarized': for inasmuch as the 'mass' of mankind rules, it tyrannizes over the exceptions, so that these lose their belief in themselves and become Nihilists" (*Will* 27). It is obvious, that man being an "entity" of limited capacity and containing many faults, is logically incapable of establishing "absolute", supreme values. Humanity's continuous search for the Absolute, the truth, a search which is endless in form, becomes the main cause for this prolonged void. As a consequence, if God, as a "supersensible" principle and as a result of all that is real, is dead, if the supersensible world of the ideas has lost its power of commitment, and over all, its awakening and constructive power due to nihilism, then there remains nothing that the humanity can adhere to and by which to guide itself. Thus humanity loses all that it held as "supreme" and is left with nothingness, a prolonged nihilism resulting in a sickening void, which humanity feels it must recapture and refill with the lost "meaning" of life.

Another riveting culprit of the abysmal emptiness which mankind faces today is science and the scientific method. In a broad sense, Nietzsche is also considered a prophet of humanity's plunge into a world of turmoil and confusion. Man's continued search has left him orphaned of all sustaining values, abandoning him with an empty shell which falsely supplies man with a reason to be. There is no real knowledge left. Just a mere description of what must be, the observable actions. Science becomes the tool by which the world can be destroyed, adopting Nietzsche's nihilism as its guide. Thus, science becomes nihilistic, "the meaning of a world deprived of meaning" (Blanchot 122-3), and as its foundations, there is nothing else than ignorance. And so, not needing to interpret, science declares its own rules, rules which can lead destruction by the mere act of transforming the world.

Not only did Nietzsche foresee the consequences of science for the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, but also foresaw wars of ideologies, with consequences unimaginable to modern Europe:

"For when truth enters into a fight with the lies of millennia, we shall have upheavals, a convulsion of earthquakes, a moving of mountains and valleys, the like of which has never been dreamed of. The concept of politics merged entirely with a war of spirits; all power structures of the old society will have been exploded --all of them are based on lies: these will be wars the like of which have never yet been seen on earth. It is only beginning with me that the earth knows great politics" (*Ecce Homo* 327).

But intrinsic to all, there seems to exist an unknown, hidden cause for nihilism's rampage through time. A cause whose power to create existential turmoil throughout time and space, without sparing a life, is second to none: reason. Stanley Rosen, in his book *Nihilism*, describes reason as a condition which objectifies, reifies and alienates, destroying all that is genuinely human by imposing strict, analytical, inhuman "man-made categories of mathematized ontology" over humanity's existential essence (Rosen xv). Reason pretends to become a tool for the achievement of human projects, yet it is not a faultless tool, as stated by Rosen when he declares that reason "emerges from the pre-rational stratum of desire, ... to master nature" (Rosen 56). Ultimately, reason is unable to speak of itself in terms of good and evil, transcending these limits and resulting in nihilism (Rosen 57).

Returning to Heidegger's interpretation, Nietzsche seems to conceive nihilism as comprised by three distinguishable phases: (a) the complete or classical nihilism phase, (b) the incomplete or romantic nihilism phase, and (c) the self-overcoming of nihilism or "amor fati" phase. The complete or classical phase is characterized by the total negation of not only the previous supreme values. In contrast, the

incomplete or romantic phase is characterized by a partial negation of the supreme values. Nietzsche writes:

"Imperfect Nihilism --its forms: we are now surrounded by them. All attempts made to escape Nihilism, which do not consist in transvaluating the values that have prevailed hitherto, only make the matter worse; they complicate the problem" (*Will Aph.* 28).

We have new values taking over, but they are being elevated to the transcendental domains left empty by the existing old supreme values. Contrary to this, the classical phase not only destroys the old supreme values, but also their location (Heidegger 87).

Furthermore, as stated above, Nietzsche claims that humanity is suffering from the effects of the incomplete nihilism: "... we are now surrounded by them" (*Will Aph.* 28). Later on, Nietzsche would describe the four different periods comprised by the incomplete phase, which he subtitled "The Periods of European Nihilism" (*Will Aph.* 56). The first period, "The Period of Obscurity", is the period where everything is done to preserve the "old institution" without endangering the "new institutions" that are emerging. In other words, it is welcoming of a new regime without the abandonment of the old regime.

In the second period, "The Period of Light", there is a conscious awareness of the opposition between the old values and the new ones, yet humanity is not ready to leap from one to the other: "We understand the old, but are far from being sufficiently strong for the new" (*Will Aph.* 56). The life threatening aspects of the old values are comprehended by all, yet there is insufficient courage to risk jumping into the new order of life.

From there we arrive at the third period, "The Period of the Three Great Passions: contempt, pity, destruction", where humanity proclaims war against itself. Finally the fourth and last period arrives, "The Period of Catastrophes",

where man, both the weak and the strong, must decide their course, between the old and "death", and the new and "life".

Now, there is one more phase of nihilism's history which must be discussed, the phase of the overcoming of nihilism or the "amor fati" (love of destiny) phase. This phase, in a sense, can be described as the key to deciphering Nietzsche's works. Here Nietzsche proposes the end of the nihilistic process by its own hands. Even nihilism suffers from nihilism. Thus Nietzsche calls for an acceptance of life for what it is, accepting the negative and destructive essence of life. "The great creator," remarks Rosen, "must also be a great destroyer; in destroying or accelerating the natural decadence of the past, he also destroys his own historical consciousness and becomes like a child, freed from loyalty to and vengeance against the old world, able to create new values in the innocence of his playful strength" (73). Hence, the nihilistic destruction of "civilization" is accelerated by nihilism's own internal nihilistic process, leaving the superman to raise and create a new "civilization", free from the restraints imposed by the old "supreme" values, as legendary Phoenix rising from its own ashes.

There must be a complete and total destruction of all preceding substance so "the child" of Zarathustra's teachings may create new and better things. Nietzsche's Zarathustra is an arsonist, whose teachings consume the decadent civilization with its nihilistic fire, making way for the superman to rise from the ashes (Rosen 74). And in the wake of nihilism's fire, the weak perish under the force of its destructive hammer, leaving a chaos primed for a new creation.

In this preface to *Will the Power*, Nietzsche writes:

" What I am now going to relate is the history of the next two centuries. I shall describe what will happen, what must necessarily happen: the triumph of Nihilism... This future is already proclaimed by a hundred different homes; as a destiny it announces its advents..."(*Will Preface 2*).

And later Nietzsche writes:

"... Nihilism is the only possible outcome of our greatest values and ideals, because we must first experience Nihilism before we can realize what the actual worth of these 'values' was... sooner or later we will be in need for new values" (*Will* Preface 4).

Thus Nietzsche can be seen as a prophet of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, as a new Zarathustra who forewarns humanity of a necessity to which they are blind and deaf, and so far unprepared to deal with.

#### *Conclusion*

Camus once wrote: "In this world rid of God and of moral idols, man is now alone and without a master" (70).

These words reflect Nietzsche's influence on twentieth century thinking. Nietzsche knew that man's "logical" search through "reason" for an "absolute truth" which would "save" man from non-being, would eventually lead man into an empty mechanical shell. Man cannot continue to adhere to obsolete values, as to a lifejacket, while he ponders on the viability of new values. He must let go of these treacherous leeches which only prolong the agony of the unending void's sapping of man's strength, and accept life and its responsibilities for what they are; no more, no less. Life is a continuing changing process, and only through change can it continue to thrive. Man must now realize that he is his own master. Thus he must take over and bring to life a new world, free from the maladies, the weakness and the sickness of the old world and its values.

In conclusion, Nietzsche comprehended that God's death was a given necessity in the nihilistic process of the world, yet he forewarned on the dangers of not accepting God's death for what it really was: man's liberation from mediocrity, thus allowing him to pursue his appointed self-evolution. Man's futile mediocrity has prolonged the nihilistic process to a dangerous degree, where man will trap himself in an unending void. Nietzsche's "solution" is to accept life, accept the good and the bad part of the destiny which is given. to paraphrase Ludwig Schajowicz, it does us no service to close our eyes in front of nihilism's threats. Neither is it enough that we engage with "something" in order to bestow meaning to our lives. If we decide to fight for a cause without being able to believe in it, or without being able to believe that the favorable time of the fights has arrived, we are subjecting ourselves to the circumstances instead of assuming a destiny (Schajowicz 384). We must assume our destinies; we must become destroyers of the "sickness", through the disinfecting and purifying process of nihilism, so that the "children" may "play" in a clean atmosphere, and create!

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[1] Quoted in J. Kockelman's article "Nietzsche's God is Dead" published in *The Great Year of Zarathustra (1881-1981)*, edited by David Goicochea (Lanham, Maryland, UP of America, 1983).

[2] This fourth part of Nietzsche's Zarathustra was published separately from the first true part in 1890. Later in 1892 it was published in conjunction with the three previous parts.

[3] Mentioned by Ferrater - Mora in his book *Diccionario de Filosofía*. 4 vols. Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1979.

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