

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

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On 14 January 1880, at the beginning of his most productive period, and only eight years prior to his collapse into madness, Nietzsche wrote to his friend Malwida von Meysenbug, complaining of his deteriorating health. He tells her that he hopes for the stroke that, he believes, will put an end to his suffering. “As regards torment and self-denial, my life during these past years can match that of any ascetic of any time; nevertheless, I have wrung from these years much in the way of purification and burnishing of the soul – and I no longer need religion or art as a means to that end” (Middleton 1969: 170–71). In the same letter he goes on to say that he is proud of the fact that he has done this work “of self-help” alone; and that he has moreover “given to many an indication of how to rise above themselves, how to attain equanimity and a right mind” (*ibid.*).

For those of us who think of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) as the pre-eminent atheist philosopher of the nineteenth century – indeed, perhaps the pre-eminent atheist philosopher of all time – such claims should be startling. Self-transformation, purification, equanimity, a right mind: these are among the familiar goals of religion. And, indeed, in the letter Nietzsche himself says as much, even allowing that religion and art are the usual ways people accomplish such goals.

But consider also:

Moralizing and *religious* literature is the most full of lies ... Alongside religious wars there is always a *moral war* going on: that is, *one* impulse wants to subjugate humanity; and as religions gradually die out, this struggle will become all the more *bloody* and *visible*. We are only at the beginning!
(Nietzsche 1988: 262, my trans.)

Or the famous ‘madman’ passage from *The Gay Science*, always worth quoting one more time:

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 ... 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? ... God is dead ... How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was 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? ... 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 ..."

It has been related further that on the same day the madman forced his way into several churches and there struck up his *requiem aeternam deo*. Led out and called to account, he is said to have replied nothing but: "What are these churches now if not the tombs and sepulchers of God?"
(Nietzsche 1974: 125)

What is perhaps most striking about this passage – and many other less poetic ones like it – is Nietzsche's insistence that for us there is no God, matched with his insistence that the belief in God is the highest thing humanity has yet accomplished. To many this sounds bizarre: if we are correct that "God is dead", that there is no God, how could one hold that the (false) belief in God was also the highest thing we had achieved? But for Nietzsche, the value of a belief will be measured not against its truthfulness, but against its usefulness, against its tendency to promote life and flourishing.¹ And this is the heart of his philosophy of religion, his superficially paradoxical-seeming embracing of many of the goals of religion while attacking individual religions (especially, of course, Christianity) with a vigour and incisiveness that has never been matched. Nietzsche argues that religion was life-promoting for us for many thousands of years, but it is no longer,

1. So Nietzsche writes: "The falseness of a judgment is for us not necessarily an objection to a judgment; in this respect our new language may sound strangest. The question is to what extent it is life-promoting, life-preserving, species-preserving, perhaps even species-cultivating ... renouncing false judgments would mean renouncing life and a denial of life" (1966a: 11).

especially because of Christianity's active promotion of a reversal of healthy values. Nevertheless he argues that many of the psychological needs previously served by religion are still pressing needs for the people of his own time. It is just that these needs must be served in new ways.²

In this brief survey of Nietzsche's various thoughts on the philosophy of religion – his position evolves over time – I shall begin by discussing his early notion that art may stand as a spiritual substitute for religion. Next I turn to the description of the evolution of spirituality he offers in his masterpiece *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in the famous passage on “The Three Metamorphoses”. The centrepiece of the essay is his critique of the origins of, and the value system promoted by, Christianity, as presented chiefly in *The Genealogy of Morals*. I shall briefly remark on his discussion on the Laws of Manu, Islam and Buddhism, and I shall wrap up with his own late ideas on value, the religious impulse and spiritual transformation in *The Antichrist* and *Ecce Homo*.

SCHOPENHAUER, MAN'S HIGHEST METAPHYSICAL ACTIVITY,
AND THE ÜBERMENSCH

Nietzsche's early writings, from his years in school at Pforta, show an unusually devout teenager and young man (cf. Hayman 1980: 29). But by the time of college, the young Nietzsche had already rejected the Christianity of his upbringing (Nietzsche's father, who was a pastor, died while Nietzsche was very young, which has led some to speculate that his attack on God had deep psychological causes) (cf. *ibid.*: 26), and his writing starts to show that he sees a tension between religious belief and the truth. In a letter to his sister he writes:

If we had believed from youth onwards that the soul's salvation depended on someone other than Jesus – on Mahomet, say – we would no doubt have felt equally blessed. Surely it is faith alone that imparts blessedness, not the objective behind the faith ... Genuine faith never fails. It fulfils whatever the believer expects from it, but it does not offer the slenderest support for a demonstration of objective truth.

Here the ways of men divide. Do you want to strive for peace of mind and happiness? Then believe. Do you want to be a devotee of truth? Then seek. (Ibid.: 66–7)

2. I agree with Julian Young when he writes that Nietzsche is “above all a religious thinker” (2006: 201).

Nevertheless Nietzsche does not abandon the goals of religion, and the first real phase of his philosophical thinking about religion begins with Arthur Schopenhauer, the ancient Greeks and his work in *The Birth of Tragedy*.

In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche has a view of life that depends very heavily on his youthful, enthusiastic reading of Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*. Nietzsche discovered Schopenhauer when he was twenty-five years old, and he was completely captivated by Schopenhauer's pessimism and his idea that life could be redeemed through the power of art (in its opening pages he even explains that *The Birth of Tragedy* is written in the spirit of Schopenhauer and to his honour). The basic problem confronted by *The Birth of Tragedy* is the problem of Job. Life is full of suffering, and the suffering seems to be without explanation, without purpose. A further, related problem is one that Nietzsche takes from Schopenhauer's interpretation of Kant: life as we actually experience it is not 'reality', it is rather an illusion created by our minds, which necessarily structure a more fundamental chaos that, were it not structured by the mind, would make life unlivable. This establishes a dichotomy that is a staple of many religious traditions: this world we all live in is somehow less valuable or less real than the other world, the one we do not know or directly experience, which is where the truth resides. The ancient Greeks, Nietzsche argues, recognized this dichotomy, and he introduces his parallel distinction between the Apollonian and Dionysian aspects of artistic creation to show how the Greeks reconciled themselves with this unfortunate, schizophrenic fact of life.

Nietzsche's idea of the Apollonian is typified by the so-called plastic arts, especially sculpture and architecture, but also drawing and painting. Here the artist has taken formless matter and with technical skill created structure, relying on principles of harmony, balance, and order. Nietzsche compares the process to the act of dreaming, suggesting that while the structure created is importantly illusory – it is an order imposed by an active agent on more fundamentally disorderly material – it is also a great consolation to us, it makes us feel (literally, in the case of architecture) 'at home', it dignifies who we are and reassures us about existence. This is one fundamentally religious role played by religion: it makes sense of (crazy, dangerous, unpredictable, frightening) life for us, it gives us the illusion of security and stability, it dignifies us.

The notion that there is something 'illusory' about the plastic arts may be irritating to some (especially architects). The idea, when persuasive, seems to rely heavily on the illusions created by, for example, drawing and painting. The ancient Greek artist Zeuxis was said to have painted grapes so life-like that the crows would fly down and peck at them; the perspectival illusions of figural drawing – foreshortening of the limbs, and so on – were already well known in ancient Greek times, and perspectival illusions are also appealed to as a metaphor for Nietzsche, as is *trompe l'oeil* and other techniques used by artists to create visual illusions. The point, of course, is that there is something attractive and comforting about these illusions, and that the artist cannot achieve the comforting effect except as an illusion.

But there is also the other side of life. Beneath the consoling and useful illusion created by our senses and our actively artistic mind is the threatening reality of chaos, our inability to control our own destiny, the savagery of the world around us and (at least at times) our own nature, and the certainty of death. Without an awareness of these aspects of existence – which are not, for the young Nietzsche, illusory, but real or the fact of the matter – our lives become devoid of meaning and disconnected from reality. The role of the Dionysian – typified, for Nietzsche, by the art of music – is to provide, in a non-destructive way, for an intimacy with these psychologically menacing powers. Thus the art of music also provides for our release from the bonds of our individuality (here the influence of Schopenhauer, who thought that our selfhood was one more illusory creation of a mind that cannot bear to confront reality, is particularly obvious), in the familiar experience of unity with one another and with nature that comes in intense musical experience. The orgiastic festivals of Dionysus, a kind of ancient Greek rock concert, in which the drinking and dancing continued for days until the participants collapsed in exhaustion, sought to create this kind of abandon, which transports the individual beyond himself into the collective whole of nature and the universe. The Dionysian festival celebrated madness and even violence. But these are, Nietzsche insisted, crucial aspects of life, and to ignore them was to fail to understand existence and our place within it.

For the young Nietzsche, then, the highest religious experience was that which acknowledged and enhanced both these aspects of human spirituality: in the case of the ancient Greeks, this was the art of tragedy; in his own day, it was the Wagnerian opera. (At the time of *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche was operating very much under the spell of his friend and sometime mentor Richard Wagner; soon his friendship with Wagner would come to an ugly end, and his view of Wagnerian opera radically changes.) In tragedy we experience and celebrate both the formal constraints (and familiar comforts) of the Apollonian, and the dangerous excesses and fatal agonies of the Dionysian. We are both beguiled by our rational minds and intoxicated by our irrational natures, and so we are reconciled with the necessary illusions of the mind while affirming the deeper meaning of life that exceeds the mind's grasp. This, for Nietzsche, is “man's highest metaphysical activity” (1966b: 18), and how we get religion.

While Nietzsche quickly abandons the neo-Kantian distinction, taken from Schopenhauer, between an illusory world of our mental lives and the real world of irrational nature (characterized, according to Schopenhauer, by “the will to life”), he continues to emphasize the importance of the Dionysian throughout his philosophical work. In fact, in what we can take as his last word on the subject of the philosophy of religion (and much else), he concludes his final work, *Ecce Homo*, with: “Have I been understood? – *Dionysus versus the Crucified*” (1968a: 101). We shall take up the interpretation of that aphorism at the end of this essay.

We should not leave the subject of Nietzsche's early Schopenhauerism without briefly addressing the influence on Nietzsche of Schopenhauer's idea of ‘the saint’.

Schopenhauer had the idea that human spiritual perfection was attained not so much through the assistance of religion (although Schopenhauer thought that religion mostly assisted our spiritual efforts, he thought it would only take us so far) as through the example of greatly spiritual individuals who strove to understand the truth and embody it: the artist, the genius and the saint. The artist shows us the truth; the genius describes the truth to us or reveals it in analysis; the saint actually lives according to the truth. The saint is the ideal type of spiritual human being, who has freed himself from the narrow-minded values of his society and his time in the attempt to establish the complete freedom of mind necessary to see through the illusions of ordinary experience.

For Schopenhauer, the saint's understanding of life is inevitably pessimistic (the truth the saint sees is that life is painful and meaningless), and so his way of living conveys resignation with, and ultimately retirement from, our everyday, suffering world. Nietzsche does not follow Schopenhauer in this: soon after *The Birth of Tragedy* he begins to develop his mature view, which embraces Schopenhauer's ideal of the great spiritual type while rejecting his pessimism in favour of a life-affirming, this-world-affirming model of spirituality. Nevertheless, throughout his intellectual career we see in Nietzsche the Schopenhauerian theme that our spiritual goals can best be seen (and most likely will be achieved) through individual spiritual growth and effort, in higher types of human beings.³ When Nietzsche invents his famous character Zarathustra and the fictional Zarathustra proposes his own fictional character, the *Übermensch*, the echoes of Schopenhauer's saint (also, certainly, Schopenhauer's artist) are audible (2005: 8–9).⁴ But the *Übermensch*, who represents the loftier spiritual heights that Zarathustra believes we can attain, is, unlike Schopenhauer's saint, not a denial of this world and this life, rather just the opposite: "The *Übermensch* is the meaning of the earth" (*ibid.*: Prologue, §3).

Thus Spoke Zarathustra is a religious book through and through, offering as it does Nietzsche's excursus on the consequences and the opportunities provided by the death of God in language that deliberately parodies that of the New Testament (and many other religious texts), and the book is too rich and complex for us

3. Even Young, who is principally concerned to argue that Nietzsche's philosophy of religion is grounded in his thinking about what might provide the best community, agrees that Nietzsche finds the highest expression of spirituality in the exceptional individual; see Young (2006: 185). I have not argued for or against Nietzsche's "religious communitarianism" (in Young's phrase) because, unlike Young, I do not think Nietzsche conceives of his philosophy of religion in these terms. Nevertheless, Young's book is excellent, and I recommend it to anyone who wants to go deeper into Nietzsche's philosophy of religion.

4. Zarathustra meets an old saint living in the forest when he first descends his mountain to give the good news of the *Übermensch* to the world; in fact, the saint – who does not know that 'God is dead' – is the very first person Zarathustra meets.

to make much progress on its analysis here.⁵ However, one passage cannot be left out: the famous discussion of “The Three Metamorphoses” at the opening of book I:

I tell you of three metamorphoses of the spirit: how the spirit becomes a camel, the camel a lion, and the lion at last a child ... What is difficult? So asks the spirit that would bear much; then it kneels down like a camel wanting to be well laden.

What is the most difficult, you heroes? So asks the spirit that would bear much, that I may take it upon me and rejoice in my strength ...

But in the loneliest wilderness the second metamorphosis occurs: here the spirit becomes a lion who would conquer his freedom and be master in his own desert.

Here he seeks his last master: he wants to fight him and his last god; for final victory he wants to fight the great dragon.

Who is the great dragon that the spirit will no longer call lord and god? “Thou shalt,” is the name of the great dragon. But the spirit of the lion says, “I will.” ...

“All value has long been created, and I am all created value. Truly, there shall be no more ‘I will.’” Thus speaks the dragon.

My brothers, why is there need of the lion in the spirit? Why is not the beast of burden, which renounces and is reverent, enough?

To create new values – that, even the lion cannot accomplish: but to create freedom for oneself for new creating – that the might of the lion can do ...

But say, my brothers, what can the child do that even the lion could not do? Why must the preying lion still become a child?

The child is innocence and forgetting, a new beginning, a game, a self-propelled wheel, a first movement, a sacred Yes-saying.

Yes, for the game of creating, my brothers, a sacred Yes-saying is needed: the spirit now wills his own will, and he who had been the world’s outcast now conquers his own world. (Nietzsche 2005: 25–6)

The camel represents the Judaeo-Christian way of being in the world. The camel wants to be weighed down with a burden from outside itself, with “The Law” or God’s morality, with an externally generated understanding of the meaning of life, and it wants this because it is difficult to carry this burden, because it is strong enough to carry this load. It is a proof of the strength and virtue of the camel that

5. Interested readers should see Loeb (2009). Some helpful discussion of Nietzsche’s philosophy of religion is also contained in the introduction and endnotes to my own translation of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Nietzsche 2005).

the load it carries is not too heavy for it to bear. The camel yearns for what is difficult: and what could be more difficult than satisfying the law of God?

But, Zarathustra teaches, the spirit changes: and next we see the lion, which represents the Renaissance and Enlightenment insistence on freedom and self-determination. This is where we find ourselves today, Nietzsche thinks: confronting the dragon of 'thou shalt', of Judaeo-Christian morality (portrayed in its philosophical form, Nietzsche thinks, in the morality of Immanuel Kant; see Vol. 3, Ch. 21), and even more the notion that all value has already been created, that there is no more value for humanity to discover or create. The idea represented by the dragon is that value is a function of our being told what we ought to do, rather than ourselves deciding what is valuable; and though the lion cannot itself create value, it is necessary so that we may be in a position to create value. The lion, who represents human freedom, can overcome the dragon of our past ideas of value and create the spiritual space necessary for the emergence of the child. It is the lion, then, that kills God.

The child lives in the land of spiritual opportunity that Zarathustra believes the future will bring, the country of the *Übermensch*. The spirit has not become the child yet: we are still overcoming the 'thou shalt' of our spiritual past. For the creation of new values, Zarathustra suggests, we need the freedom to forget the past, we need innocence, we need the creative spirit acting entirely on its own, out of the pure pleasure of creating (thus, "the game of creating"). This is a very optimistic view of history and human nature, and it is offered by Zarathustra only after he considers, in "The Prologue", the other alternative: the nihilism that is represented by what he calls "the last man" (Nietzsche 2005: 12–14). Zarathustra is not naive: he argues that we are at a turning point, that the freedom created by the lion could plunge us into the confusion and self-destruction that is nihilism and the radical loss of all real value, or we may find that this freedom allows us to begin the process of value creation all over again, that our culture may be refreshed by, or even reborn in, an entirely new way (or ways) of understanding our spiritual place in the universe.

As I have charted it, then, the evolution of the first stage of Nietzsche's philosophy of religion is from an early, ardent Christianity, to his quasi-Schopenhauerian idea that we can achieve our spiritual ideals in aesthetic (and especially Dionysian) experience, and then to his invention of the *Übermensch*, the saint-like, child-like ideal for the future of humanity, who has the freedom and the power to create new values. By the time of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the central idea of Nietzsche's philosophy of religion is clear: the primary spiritual function of humanity is to create value. We now move to the next stage of his thinking, in which he provides a more detailed analysis of the kinds of value-creation humanity can pursue. For his next great thesis is that human beings have (and have pursued) one of two options: to create values that promote our flourishing, or to create values that interfere with the same. We have created gods that have helped us on our way, but we have also created gods – like, he thinks, the Judaeo-Christian god – who have hindered us:

There are *nobler* ways of making use of the invention of gods than man's self-crucifixion and self-abuse ... this can fortunately be deduced from any glance at the *Greek gods*, these reflections of noble and proud men in whom the *animal* in man felt deified, did *not* tear itself apart and did *not* rage against itself. (Nietzsche 1968b: 94)

WHAT IS IGNOBLE? THE BIRTH OF CHRISTIANITY

Nietzsche's analysis of the Judaeo-Christian value system is, by his own lights, nothing less than a historical account of man's self-crucifixion and self-abuse. We do not want to address the minutiae of Nietzsche's account of the development of Judaeo-Christian morality: that is a subject for ethicists. For the purposes of his philosophy of religion, we need to understand the larger forces in human psychology and the social structure that allow the Judaeo-Christian way of looking at the world to take such vigorous hold of Western civilization.

In *The Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche tells a kind of state of nature story. Imagine human beings before the pressures of the environment sent them into communities and villages. These human beings were closer to non-human animals, and they could freely express their natural drives, including the drive to cruelty. As people began to band together, the drive to cruelty was modified: it was expressed in attacks on other human communities. There were, Nietzsche tells us, "terrible outbreaks" of cruelty among these small tribes, and indeed if we look at the literature of war in early human civilization we find chronicles of these frightening explosions of cruelty, which however are viewed by their perpetrators (and, as Nietzsche points out, even their victims) as entirely legitimate. But as communities begin to live increasingly near to one another, as trade emerges and population growth necessitates more and more shared borders, the drive to cruelty becomes increasingly difficult to express. People have to get along with one another. But this repression of the drive to cruelty does not eliminate the drive; rather, Nietzsche argues, in an idea he takes from Schopenhauer (and which is put to great use by Freud), the drive turns inward. This is when, according to Nietzsche, a new kind of consciousness emerges: a divided consciousness, which is both aware and aware of itself as aware. This divided consciousness is a manifestation of the drive to cruelty: that drive, turned inward, has found its expression in allowing one part of consciousness to inflict pain on the other. This is the development of what Nietzsche calls "the bad conscience", and it is experienced by consciousness as a kind of psychic pain.

Enter the priest. Once this divided consciousness and psychic pain are established, an explanation or an answer to these questions is called for: why am I in pain? Why do I suffer this mental distress? This is fertile ground, Nietzsche argues, for the flourishing of the type of religious leader that he calls, generally, "the priest", or "the priestly class". The priest can give reasons for the pain of the divided consciousness, and that reason is "guilt".

You will have guessed what has really happened here, *beneath* all this: that will to self-tormenting, that repressed cruelty of the animal-man made inward and scared back into himself, the creature imprisoned in the “state” so as to be tamed, who invented bad conscience in order to hurt himself after the *more natural* vent for this desire to hurt had been blocked – this man of the bad conscience has seized upon the presupposition of religion so as to drive his self-torture to its most gruesome pitch of severity and rigor. Guilt before *God*: this thought becomes an instrument of torture to him. He apprehends in “God” the ultimate antithesis of his own ineluctable animal instincts; he reinterprets these animal instincts themselves as a form of guilt before God (as hostility, rebellion, insurrection against the “lord,” the “father,” the primal ancestor and origin of the world): he ejects from himself all his denial of himself, of his nature, naturalness, and actuality, in the form of an affirmation, as something existent, corporeal, real, as God, as the holiness of God, as God the Judge, as God the hangman, as the beyond, as eternity, as torment without end, as hell, as the immeasurability of punishment and guilt. (Nietzsche 1968b: 92)

The priest provides the sufferer with an explanation for his suffering (Nietzsche writes: “For every sufferer instinctively seeks a cause for his suffering” [*ibid.*: 94]) and, in Nietzsche’s account of the development of Christianity, he does so in an historical context that also vindicates the sufferer’s undesirable social position. For along with his invention of “guilt before God” to explain psychic pain, the priest brings a new value system that will show the sufferer how to escape his pain.

Human beings, suffering from themselves in one way or other ..., uncertain why or wherefore, thirsting for reasons – reasons relieve – thirsting, too, for remedies and narcotics, at last take counsel with one who knows hidden things, too – and behold! They receive a hint, they receive from their sorcerer, the ascetic priest, the *first* hint as to the ‘cause’ of their suffering; they must seek it in *themselves*, in some *guilt*, in a piece of the past, they must understand their suffering as a *punishment*. (*Ibid.*: 101)

Human beings suffer, so the story goes, because they fail to live up to what God requires of them. But now the question naturally arises: what does God require of us? How can we escape this suffering? Thus an odd, natural psychological fact – that we cannot express our drive for cruelty when we are in society together – creates the opportunity for the priest to transform the way we think about ourselves and our society. The sufferer will no longer need to feel painful guilt before God if only he subscribes to the value system taught by the priest.

Nietzsche provides some evidence for his speculative historical thesis by pointing out that, in German, the word *Schuld* means both 'guilt' and 'debt'.⁶ According to Nietzsche, the priest takes our consciousness of mental suffering and explains it in terms of a debt that we have to God: the pain is the nagging of an unsatisfied creditor, it is the awareness of something that we have not yet, but ought to have, repaid. Thus when, in the hands of the priest, bad conscience becomes guilt we realize that we have only ourselves to blame; it is on account of our own, individual failure to pay a debt to God that we suffer. And how do we pay our debt to God, so as to free ourselves from this debt/guilt (*Schuld*)? The priest will show us.⁷

The priest uses guilt to accomplish what Nietzsche takes to be one of the most profound and ultimately disastrous creative acts of human history: the inversion of the value system of Western civilization. Here Nietzsche introduces his well-known distinction between the moralities of 'good versus bad' and 'good versus evil'; between 'master morality' and 'slave morality'. At the heart of the value system of 'good versus bad' is the notion that what is good is that which is good for me and people like me, that which we consider to be noble, elevated, worthy; what is bad is that which is beneath us, that for which we have contempt, that which is ignoble, debased, cheap. The list of virtues and goods for master morality includes wealth, friendship, sex, strength, pride, physical health, above all the goods and virtues of 'this world'; the sorts of things and activities the human animal is naturally drawn towards. The list of vices and things to be avoided is easy to anticipate: poverty, solitude, denial of the body, sickness and so on. But here is the opportunity for the priest. If he can convince the slaves – who, of course, far outnumber the masters – that the masters subscribe to what is in fact an ungodly value system, and that what the slaves themselves already possess, how they already live, is truly the more valuable in the eyes of God, then he will have a large and eager audience.

So the priest turns the old value system of the masters on its head, and invents slave morality and with it the value pair 'good and evil'. Everything the masters possess and do is not merely bad, but evil, condemned by God himself: property, pride, sex, even food. And what the slaves have, and of necessity practise, is not merely good in the sense of good-for-me-and-mine, but good in a more exalted sense, blessed, good in the eyes of God: poverty, weakness, humility, denial of the body, chastity. These reversed values of the good-bad morality are, of course, the traditional Christian virtues. The old 'good' is the good of this world; the new 'good' is the good of the next world. The old 'bad' is what we all recognize as bad

6. Nietzsche's thesis that Christianity has such a hold over us because of the psychological condition of guilt goes all the way back to *Human, All Too Human*, where he argues that we feel guilty because we cannot live up to the example of Christ's "unegoism", because egoism and selfishness is hard-wired into human nature. See Nietzsche (1986: bk I, §§132–3).

7. Simon May (1999) is especially helpful on the question of bad conscience and guilt (see esp. *ibid.*: 77–8). On this subject I also recommend Christopher Janaway (2007), esp. ch. 8.

in this world; the new 'evil' is what was counted good in this world, and will be the cause of eternal punishment in the next.

The psychological motive power behind this inversion of values is what Nietzsche calls *ressentiment*, usually translated simply as 'resentment'. The (individual or class) consciousness that operates according to resentment defines itself entirely in terms of what it is not: it does not create anything new, but only insists that it *is not that*, it is the opposite of that. Thus it remains psychologically and creatively derivative of the value system that it defines itself against, and this, Nietzsche argues, prevents it from growing and flourishing. Its self-definition and its goals are entirely negative. Like the fox and the sour grapes in Aesop's fable, the resentful consciousness finds satisfaction solely in terms of denying the value of that which it knows it could not possess, and for the reason that it knows – although never admits to itself – it could not possess what it truly desired.

Thus God and the afterlife, the traditional foundations of Western religion, are merely a kind of sales pitch employed by the greatest salesmen in the history of the West, the priests, who are trying to convince us to buy a new morality. The truth of the matter is, as Nietzsche tells it, that it is not God who has given us morality, but morality that has given us God. And we have bought the pitch because – at one point in our history, at least – we knew we could not have what we most desired: power, wealth, health, and so on. As slaves we resented the masters, and the priests exploited this resentment and the pain of consciousness to convince us of the merits of a new value system that depended entirely on, and reflected, the misery of our condition.

But the story does not end here. The denial of life that is crucial to the priest's new morality – the asceticism of the priest – brings with it another principle that is itself hostile to the invention of God: the will to truth. Nietzsche writes:

All great things bring about their own destruction through an act of self-overcoming; thus the law of life will have it ... In this way Christianity *as a dogma* was destroyed by its own morality; in the same way Christianity *as morality* must now perish, too: we stand at the threshold of *this* event. After Christian truthfulness has drawn one inference after another, it must end by drawing *its most striking* inference, its inference *against* itself; this will happen, however, when it poses the question *What is the meaning of all will to truth?* (1968b: III, §27)

Christianity has created the will to truth (as opposed, for example, to the will to art and beauty, or the will to mythology), which is precisely what has led to the death of Christianity as a system of belief. When the 'madman' in *The Gay Science* passage quoted at the outset of this chapter wildly shouts that "God is dead", this is what he is proclaiming: because we have sought the truth, operating with a Christian value system that emphasizes the importance of truth, we have indeed uncovered the truth that there is no God. But things will get worse still, when

the impulse toward truth turns its gaze back on itself and asks: and what value is expressed here? Then, Nietzsche thinks, even the moral system that Christianity has created and supported will be undermined.

The most fateful act of two thousand years of discipline for truth ... in the end forbids itself the *lie* of faith in God. You see what it was that really triumphed over the Christian god: the concept of truthfulness that was understood ever more rigorously, the father confessor's refinement of the Christian conscience, translated and sublimated into scientific conscience, into intellectual cleanliness at any price. (1974: 307)

Ultimately, Christianity espouses the value of asceticism, that is, the good of a way of thinking that denies the importance of one's own particular well-being. When the gaze is turned outward in the manner of the ascetic, so that one finds value even in those things that run contrary to one's own interest – when indeed the fact that an enquiry stands contrary to one's interest may serve as a proof of the validity of that enquiry – then it is not long before one discovers that the truth of the matter may no longer agree with what one wants to believe is the case. That is, even if Christianity was serving the interests of humanity, the asceticism that it champions would eventually have uncovered that the Christian value system was based on a falsehood: the existence of God and the afterlife. And given that, on Nietzsche's account, Christianity is both based on a falsehood and stands in opposition to human flourishing, it is hardly surprising that we who have learned, because of Christianity, to love the truth, are now moving beyond it. We are no longer camels who want to carry the law as a proof of our strength: part of the burden we carried was the pursuit of truth, and that pursuit has made us happily and perhaps unexpectedly into free, defiant lions. It remains to be seen whether we can become creative children.

DIONYSUS VERSUS THE CRUCIFIED

In 1888, the last year of his intellectual life, Nietzsche's philosophy of religion becomes deeply polarized. On the one side, his attack against Christianity could not be more ruthless. On the other, his naturalist-mystical tendencies – present in subtle ways throughout his writing (much as these same tendencies are always evident beneath the surface of the work of one of his favourite ancient Greek philosophers, Heraclitus) – now become unmistakable. The two works that express these two superficially contradictory but genuinely complementary positions are *The Antichrist* and *Ecce Homo*.⁸

8. The other two works of his great year, 1888, were *Twilight of the Idols*, which offered his closing opinions on the questions of truth and the classic philosophical problems, and *The*

Nietzsche's polemic against Christianity begins early. In his 1874 essay on "Schopenhauer as Educator", in a remark that reminds one of many of Kierkegaard's complaints about "Christendom",⁹ Nietzsche is already attacking Christianity in so far as it has been used as tool by the state:

One should only recall what has gradually become of Christianity under the selfishness of the State. Christianity is certainly one of the purest revelations of this urge for culture and especially for the ever renewed generation of the saint; as it has been used hundreds of times, however, to turn the mills of the State's forces, it has gradually become diseased to the very marrow, hypocritical and full of lies, and has degenerated to the point where it contradicts its original aim. (1983: 72)

Here Nietzsche offers a political explanation for what is one clear theme of what we have seen thus far: although Christianity has served a great spiritual purpose, creating, among many other desirable things, an entire structure of value that includes (and champions) the value of truth, now it serves only to interfere with what is good for humanity. By the time of *Beyond Good and Evil* and *The Genealogy of Morality* he is feeling less generous towards Christianity: he argues that there is something sick and dangerous at the core of the Christian way of seeing things, that resentment was the driving force of Christianity from the outset, and so it was bound to interfere with our long-term flourishing.

When he gets to *The Antichrist*, in 1888, he is no longer pulling any punches. In his discussion of the idea of a 'holy lie' and the Hindu Laws of Manu, for example, he writes that it is not the fact that Christianity tells lies (he takes this as a given) that he objects to; his complaint against Christianity depends on the ends to which it puts its lies.

That 'holy' ends are lacking in Christianity is *my* objection to its means. Only *bad* ends: the poisoning, slandering, denying of life, contempt for the body ... It is with the opposite feeling that I read the Law-book of Manu, an incomparably spiritual and superior work such that to *name* it in the same breath as the Bible would be a sin against the spirit. (1954a: 183)

Or, from the same year, in *Ecce Homo*: "Christian morality – the most malicious form of the will to lie, the actual Circe of mankind: that which has ruined it"

Case of Wagner, which is a last exercise in aesthetics (providing a nice closing bracket to a career that opened with *The Birth of Tragedy*).

9. Nietzsche (1986: 124), in another distinctly Kierkegaardian formulation, suggests that to be a Christian is just to be born into a Christian country, in much the way that one becomes a drinker of wine because one is born into a nation of wine drinkers.

(Nietzsche 1968a: “Why I am a Destiny”, §7). In the same passage he even suggests that what defines him as a philosopher is that he has unmasked the lie that is Christian morality, showing that it runs counter to those basic human drives and needs that are essential to our well-being.

But one might reply to Nietzsche that Judaeo-Christian morality and Judaeo-Christian spirituality are not the same thing (Nietzsche himself writes that “religions are destroyed by belief in morality” [1968c: §151]), and that, for example, the basic spiritual lesson of Christ himself, that God is love, also stands at the heart of much Jewish thinking about the spiritual life. Nietzsche recognizes this, and many of his remarks about Christ and about certain strains of the Jewish tradition are sympathetic.¹⁰ (So, for example, in a note from 1888: “What did Christ *deny*? Everything that today is called Christian” [Nietzsche 1968c: §158].) And Nietzsche does not argue that religion itself necessarily runs counter to the goals of human flourishing: in a discussion of Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Christianity and Buddhism, for example, he divides the five according to whether they are affirmative of human worth or essentially negative in their view of humanity. Hinduism (and the Laws of Manu) and “Mohammedanism [and] the older parts of the Old Testament” turn out to be affirmative religions, products of a ruling class that actually advance humanity (Nietzsche 1968c: §145); Christianity and Buddhism are negative religions, because they deny the value of (at least, ordinary everyday) existence. But Buddhism still wins out over Christianity, because its negativism is a kind of philosophical acceptance, where the negativity of Christianity is merely frustration and impotence:

Among the nihilistic religions, one may always clearly distinguish the Christian from the Buddhist. The Buddhist religion is the expression of a fine evening, a perfect sweetness and mildness – it is gratitude toward all that lies behind, and also for what is lacking: bitterness, disillusionment, rancor; finally, a lofty, spiritual love; the subtleties of philosophical contradiction are behind it, even from these it is resting: but from these it still derives its spiritual glory and sunset glow. (– Origin in the highest castes –)

The Christian movement is a degeneracy movement composed of reject and refuse elements of every kind: it is not the expression of the decline of a race, it is from the first an agglomeration of forms of morbidity crowding together and seeking one another out ... It also stands in opposition to every spiritual movement, to all philosophy: it

10. See, for example, the positive view of Jesus’ spirituality in Nietzsche (1968c: §160, November 1887–March 1888), where he argues that the central view of Jesus is that “sin is of no account”. Nietzsche’s arguments supporting many aspects of Jewish culture and spirituality are throughout his literature: his ire with Judaism is generally reserved for when it becomes Christianity.

takes the side of idiots and utters a curse on the spirit. Rancor against the gifted, learned, spiritually independent: it detects in them the well-constituted, the masterful. (Nietzsche 1968c: §154)

The analysis here depends on Nietzsche's by now familiar idea that the merit of a system of value depends on the outlook of those who invented it: when it comes from the higher classes or castes, from the noble or master classes, it tends to reflect the empowered, confident position of those creators; when it comes, however, from the poor, the weak, the dispossessed, the base or ignoble (in Nietzsche's language), it tends to reflect the bitterness and impotence of those (for Nietzsche, reactive and resentful) creators. Thus Buddhism and Christianity, while both expressions of nihilism, express that nihilism in different ways: for the Buddhist nihilism is a positive expression of power and control, of strength and self-assertion; for the Christian nihilism is a negative expression of weakness and confusion, of impotence and the need to pity and be pitied.

The fact that the origins of a value system certainly do not entirely determine the evolution and products of that value system is a fair complaint to advance against Nietzsche's analysis. One expects that he would reply by insisting that, if anything, Christianity has evolved into something still worse than what we find at its origins, and here reasonable minds can clearly disagree (more than once Nietzsche has been defensibly asked: 'Can we really have too much pity in the world?'¹¹). And there is an obvious danger of supposing that one can stand outside of a value system – of all value systems – in order to evaluate the relative merits and demerits of any particular value system. The question of how one might rank value systems – a subject that obsessed the late Nietzsche – is fraught with difficulties. But the more interesting point for us is that he does not, as we might naively suppose, dismiss religion *tout court* (even while hanging on to strong views of the importance of spirituality); rather, he encourages us to recognize the dependence of spirituality on systems of religion, and to judge those religions on the basis of their resulting moralities and the impact of those moralities on human flourishing.

Nietzsche does not offer us only critiques of past religions: he has his own positive theory of spirituality. We have already gestured toward it with the discussion from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and indeed in the late work he repeatedly refers to *Zarathustra* as the key text for understanding his spiritual views. Nietzsche accepts as a premise what seems to be a view shared by all of the major world religions and the ancient Greek tragic view, as he understands it: life is full of suffering. The most important spiritual question, Nietzsche thinks, is how one responds to the fact of suffering life presents us with. Nietzsche sees something redemptive

11. The attack is first advanced in Philippa Foot's famous essay on Nietzsche's ethics, "Nietzsche: The Revaluation of Values" (1973), reprinted in Richardson & Leiter (2001).

about suffering, but, unlike the Christian view, he does not suppose that we are redeemed by suffering: he insists that we do not need redemption, that life does not need redemption. It is our view of suffering, rather, that stands in need of redemption; that is, we must understand suffering not as an indictment of life and our living of it, but as an essential aspect of life that constitutes part of what makes life worth living. To put his view into a simple slogan, Nietzsche advocates redemption *of* suffering as a celebration and affirmation of human beings and this life, rather than redemption *by* suffering as a protest and an accusation against human beings and this life.

But this is strong medicine, and difficult to take. Suffering is awful. How can one not merely (as we usually do) do our best to avoid suffering, nor even (as we struggle to do) attempt to be resigned to it or reconciled with it, but actually embrace suffering, truly be as grateful for the suffering in our lives as we are for the joy?

My formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati*: that one wants nothing to be other than it is, not in the future, not in the past, not in all eternity. Not merely to endure that which happens of necessity, still less to dissemble it – all idealism is untruthfulness in the face of necessity – but to *love* it ... (Nietzsche 1968a: “Why I am so Clever”, §10)

Elsewhere in developing the same thesis he refers to the great German poet Goethe’s “joyful and trusting fatalism” in which, Nietzsche writes, the “totality of everything is redeemed and affirmed ... Such a faith is the highest of all possible faiths; I have baptized it with the name *Dionysus*” (Nietzsche 1954b: 55).

It is a bit hard to know what to make of this. It seems like a kind of psychological imperative about how to guide one’s emotional and spiritual – even, perhaps, intellectual – disposition toward the world and one’s life within it. Elsewhere Nietzsche introduces his idea of “the eternal recurrence”, and the thought experiment he proposes is very much in line with the fatalism he describes here: that is, how would one have to view oneself and one’s own life in order to be able to earnestly and enthusiastically desire that every single event in one’s life not only occur exactly as it had, but over and over again, throughout eternity? It seems to require a kind of revolution in one’s mental states that reminds us of the profound psychological changes frequently referred to in the literature on mysticism; it is hard not to imagine Nietzsche, here, as a kind of Zen monk rapping the rest of us with a stick until we break through to *satori* and the truth.

But elsewhere in *Ecce Homo* he is less grand in his psychological ambitions, and more helpful. He writes: “*What is the seal of liberation?* – No longer being ashamed before oneself” (Nietzsche 1974: bk 3, §275). Here he goes on to suggest that to understand what it means to love one’s destiny is simply to escape from shameful-ness oneself and to refuse to put others to shame. This certainly does not solve the problem of human suffering writ large, but at the least it might eliminate an awful

lot of the psychological suffering we inflict on one another and on ourselves, and it gives us some idea of what he means by his endorsement of thorough and joyful fatalism. The emphasis on freedom from shame also captures much of what he wants to insist on most of all, spiritually speaking: that we should be grateful for what we are and how we live, rather than view ourselves, one another and our lives on earth as something to be escaped. His last word on the subject, at the close of *Ecce Homo*, is characteristically pithy, incisive and brilliant: “Have I been understood? – *Dionysus versus the Crucified ...*” (Nietzsche 1968a: 101).

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On AESTHETICS see also Ch. 13; Vol. 1, Ch. 15. On MORALITY see also Chs 4, 12; Vol. 2, Ch. 12; Vol. 3, Chs 2, 8, 12, 14, 21, 22; Vol. 5, Ch. 6. On PSYCHOLOGY see also Chs 15, 20. On suffering see also Ch. 6. On TRUTH see also Ch. 8; Vol. 1, Ch. 13; Vol. 2, Ch. 17; Vol. 3, Chs 3, 8, 13; Vol. 5, Ch. 4. On WORLD RELIGIONS see also Chs 6, 14.