

## 5. THE MORAL ARGUMENT

### i. Moral Relativism and Religion

Between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> of August 2011, several London boroughs and districts of cities and towns across England witnessed unprecedented levels of rioting, looting and arson, the most serious civil unrest for a generation. Prompted by the police shooting of a 29-year-old man, Mark Duggan – a suspected member of a local criminal gang – the rioting spread to Manchester, Birmingham, Bristol and Liverpool. Five people were killed, and by 15 August over 3000 people had been arrested, with over 1000 charged. Many reasons were given for these events. Some blamed decades of politically-correct policing, some blamed the government's spending cuts and the racial tensions arising from multi-culturalism, while others pointed to the breakdown of family life and the appearance of feral adolescents, weaned within a culture of entitlement.

#### **Pope Benedict's Denunciation of Moral Relativism**

A few weeks later, on 9 September, Pope Benedict XVI offered his own explanation. The riots, he said, were the corrosive effects of *moral relativism*. This is the belief that there are no fixed and objective moral rules, and that accordingly men and women may determine what is right by their own subjective estimates of what is right and not by reference to any absolute criterion of morality. Given this absence of any moral consensus, the Pope argued, it is hardly surprising that society should disintegrate, and that the events in England should become increasingly commonplace. With every action now justified solely by individual preference, any concern for the welfare of others may be disregarded and people may do what they like, no matter how abhorrent their actions.

When policies do not presume or promote objective values, the resulting moral relativism, instead of leading to a society that is free, fair, just and compassionate, tends instead to produce frustration, despair, selfishness and a disregard for the life and liberty of others . . . Moreover, the active fostering of the essential values of a healthy society, through the defence of life and of the family, the sound moral education of the young, and a fraternal regard for the poor and the weak, will surely help to rebuild a positive sense of one's duty, in charity, towards friends and strangers alike in the local community.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Quoted in *The Catholic Herald*, 9 September 2011.



Pope Benedict XVI

The Pope's views were not unexpected. Six years before, on 18 April 2005 and shortly before his election as Pope, the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger had delivered a withering denunciation of relativism: 'We are building,' he said, 'a dictatorship of relativism that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one's own ego and desires.'<sup>1</sup> Pope Benedict's views tread a well-worn path, held by many apologists for religion. It is often called the 'Karamazov defence', taking its name from Feodor Dostoevsky's last novel, *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), in which one of the brothers, Ivan Karamazov, makes the famous remark: 'If

there is no God, then everything is permitted.' Religion, in other words, provides the necessary antidote to the permissiveness of moral relativism. We know – just know – that certain actions have a normative ethical value: that lying and murdering people is intrinsically wrong and that keeping one's promises and defending the innocent are intrinsically right. We have no doubt, in other words, that these actions accord with moral truths, truths that are not provisional but *categorical*, that are *objective* and not subjective, and that they determine those moral standards that it is our duty to obey. If we then ask the question, 'Why are these moral truths objective truths?' the answer is, 'Because these truths are grounded upon the existence of God, because God alone validates these truths.' So:

1. If absolute moral laws exist, then God exists.
2. Absolute moral laws exist.
3. Therefore God exists.

The simplicity of this progression reveals how closely the moral argument for God shadows previous *a posteriori* arguments for divine existence. Rather than talking about our immediate experience of how things move or are caused and shaped in our world (Chapter 2), we are now speaking of something very different but equally evident to us, namely, that from time to time we make moral decisions, having to choose between right and wrong. This act of moral decision-making, which is so much a feature of our everyday lives, is the first step in the demonstration that God exists; one which, we should make clear again, does not have the status of an *a priori* proof – a proof, that is, in the sense that it would be illogical to deny it – but is rather a demonstration that the whole business of moral decision is grounded upon God's existence, and that therefore without God the fact that there are certain absolute moral rules would be rendered inexplicable. Thus from morality we may infer the existence of God.

### The Moral Argument for God

<sup>1</sup> The Vatican translation of the sermon preached before the College of Cardinals.

It is also worth noting that the moral argument has one fairly obvious advantage over any atheistic alternative, namely, that without God there is no binding  *motive* to be good. For if it is part of the categorical structure of a universal moral truth that it should be binding upon the individual, this would clearly not be the case if breaches of the law went unpunished. But whereas human justice is imperfect, God's justice is not; and for the wrongdoer this has an immediate, and entirely salutary, consequence. The civil authorities, through the institutions of justice, seek to punish the guilty; but success is not guaranteed and criminals sometimes escape conviction. But when dealing with a divine and omniscient justice, crime never pays; and here we have no qualms that justice will not be served. For if not in this life then in the next a system of divine rewards and punishments will operate, which the law-breaker cannot avoid and by which he or she will be certainly condemned.

### EXERCISE 1

**Why do you approve or disapprove of the following practices? Do your conclusions convince you that there are absolute moral rules or not?**

Blood sports  
 Polygamy  
 Celibacy  
 Castration  
 Homosexuality  
 Animal experimentation  
 Human experimentation  
 Abortion  
 Eating the dead  
 Lying to protect the innocent  
 Euthanasia for elderly parents  
 Violence towards the disabled

The moral argument for God has a distinguished pedigree. The two great Reformation figures of Martin Luther (1483-1546) and John Calvin (1509-1564) subscribed to it, as did René Descartes (1596-1650), John Locke (1632-1704) and George Berkeley (1685-1753). More surprisingly, given his criticism of other theistic proofs, another advocate is Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), although some scholars have suggested that this was something of an aberration on Kant's part and a later embarrassment, with Kant rejecting it altogether in later life.<sup>1</sup> That said, Kant's moral case for God is the most important and influential in the history of the argument, to the point indeed that some have said, quite wrongly, that the

<sup>1</sup> This argument is advanced on reading the *Opus Postumum*, a fragmentary work discovered after Kant's death.

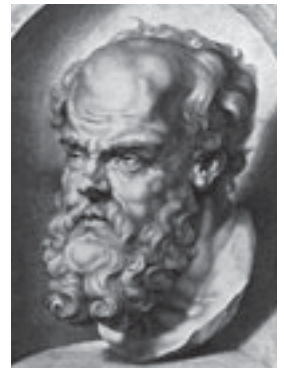
moral argument begins with Kant.<sup>1</sup> In much more recent times, the moral argument's most widely-known supporter has been the novelist and scholar C.S. Lewis (1898-1963), perhaps best known now for his children's books, *The Chronicles of Narnia*. In his own lifetime, however, Lewis was a hugely popular writer and broadcaster on religious matters, with his *The Problem of Pain* (1940), *The Screwtape Letters* (1942), and *Miracles* (1947) reaching a wide readership. Amongst these his *Mere Christianity* (1964) provides a classic account of the moral argument. There is, says Lewis, something over and above our observations of the natural world, something 'which is directing the universe, and which appears to me as a law urging me to do right and making me feel responsible and uncomfortable when I do wrong.'<sup>2</sup> More recent still are versions of the moral argument that have come to be known as 'divine command theories.' These, as their name suggests, have concentrated on God's role as the authoritative legislator of the moral law: God creates the law in much the same way as human lawgivers, setting out the rules of behaviour by legislative act. Another modern variant talks of God as the 'commander': that morality issues from divine command – that 'X is good' because 'God commanded X' – and that accordingly one acts morally when one obeys unconditionally divine commands.



C.S. Lewis

## ii. Criticisms of the Moral Argument

The problem before us, then, is whether or not moral rules are dependent on God's existence. This question is invariably framed by reference to Socrates' consideration of the issue in Plato's dialogue *Euthyphro*. On his way to the law courts Socrates meets a young theologian, Euthyphro, who is bringing an action against his father, alleging that he had murdered a labourer at the home estate on Naxos. This, the young man affirms, is the 'holy' thing to do. But what does this mean? asks Socrates. Euthyphro explains: that 'what is pleasing to the gods is holy, and what is not pleasing to them is unholy.' But this explanation does not satisfy Socrates: the gods, after all, may differ among themselves about is right and wrong, so that what is pleasing to Zeus may not be pleasing to Cronus or Uranus. So Euthyphro offers a third definition: 'holiness is what the gods all love, and its opposite is what the gods all hate, unholiness.'<sup>3</sup> At this point Socrates asks the all-important question, one which has set the agenda for all subsequent discussion: 'Is what is holy', he asks, 'holy because the gods approve of it, or do they approve of it because it is holy?'<sup>4</sup> This question can be formulated as follows:



Socrates

1 Kant' argument, it has to be said, is of notorious complexity and for that reason I am omitting it altogether from this discussion. More intrepid readers may care to read my analysis of the argument in *QG*: 235-250.

2 *Op.cit.*, London, Fontana Books, 1964, p.33.

3 *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, translated Lane Cooper, Bollingen Series 71, New York, Pantheon Books, 1966, p.174.

4 *Ibid.*, p.178.

*Either*: a right action is right because God approves (or commands) it;

*Or*: God approves (or commands) a right action because it is right.

### The Euthyphro Dilemma

This clarifies the matter before us. The first proposition makes moral action dependent on God but the second proposition does not. In the first case the believer acknowledges that the God whom he worships is good and that accordingly anything that God commands, wills or ordains will be good. But such assumptions are absent in the second case. This is not because there is no God – no atheistic claim is being made at this point – but because no moral agent would describe any action as a ‘divine command’ unless he had *already* established that what God is commanding *is good*. In other words, the statement that ‘X is right’ is *first and independently* validated as being good, and only *afterwards* applied to God as a command worthy of him. It is not so much, then, that nothing is morally wrong unless God has forbidden it, but rather that God would not forbid anything that was not morally wrong – i.e., that what he forbids depends on some *prior standard of goodness*. It does not take much to see that this second possibility is highly damaging to any claim that objective moral values depend on the existence of God. For having this independent standard of judgment means that deciding whether an action is right or wrong requires no appeal to theistic premisses. Thus, even though God may exist, his existence makes no difference to the moral situation, and thus his existence cannot be inferred from our everyday experience of moral decision-making.



Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz

In view of these remarks, it will come as no surprise that, of all the arguments deployed by believers to establish God’s existence, the moral argument is generally considered the weakest. This is initially indicated by the fact that many believers are themselves divided on the issue. Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225-1274) rejected it on the grounds that moral laws must be, like the laws of logic and mathematics, absolute, universal and unchangeable and so accessible to individuals whether they are believers or not. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716) is equally dismissive. The moral argument, he claims, replaces the notion of a loving God with an autocratic deity, whose every whim must be right. ‘For why praise Him for what He

has done if He would be equally praiseworthy for doing the opposite? Where will His justice and His wisdom be, if all that remains of Him is some kind of despotic power. If His will takes the place of reason, and if, by the very definition of tyranny, what pleases the Almighty is *ipso facto* just.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Discourse on Metaphysics* (1686), edited and translated with an Introduction and

Leibniz' remarks draw our attention to another fairly obvious weakness of command theory. If God's commands are by definition good, then *whatever* he orders must be good. So if we follow God's instructions in the Old Testament book of Numbers Chapter 30, and slaughter an entire tribe and take 30,000 virgins as our reward, this action is right because God ordered us to act in this way. For who are we to disobey, when anything that God commands must be good? But the same would be true if God changed his mind and ordered us to do something entirely different. Again, it would be our duty to obey, no matter how inconsistent or changeable the divine instructions may be. Thus we are at the mercy of divine whim, which was Leibniz' point.

Of course, one way out of this difficulty would be to say that such an order should be ignored because it is unworthy of a God that is good and that he could not possibly have ordered us to do such terrible things, that there must be some mistake, and that we cannot be expected to act contrary to our basic moral intuitions, i.e., that murder and rape can never be part of our moral duty. This defence is very weak. In the first place, it is built on a highly selective reading of scripture, so overlooking the numerous other atrocities sanctioned by the God of the Old Testament, such as plunder, torture, slavery, genocide and ethnic cleansing; but in the second place, and more importantly, we have now in effect abandoned divine command theory altogether. For once we have agreed that murder and rape can never be part of our morality, we have admitted that certain actions have been excluded *on other grounds* than that God did or did not command them. In other words, the decision to obey (or not) has here been *preceded* by an independent evaluation of whether a particular command is good (or not), the decision being in this case that the order to murder and rape is an evil command and so something that God would forbid and not command. Here, to make the point again, we have employed a prior *standard of goodness* in deciding what God would and would not do, and so invalidated the claim that what God commands is necessarily good. For we must now admit that there are other reasons for saying that a certain moral action is or is not worthy of God; and that it is these reasons, independently reached, which inform us whether or not this action ought to be performed. So in the moment we credit goodness to God we invalidate any argument that goodness comes *from* God alone.

**Evaluate the following as a disproof of the existence of God:**

1. God, to be the proper object of our worship, must be all-good.
2. Obeying what God commands must therefore be good.
3. All moral action must be autonomous action (i.e., freely undertaken).
4. Therefore no moral action can derive from submission to God's will.
5. Therefore no moral agent can worship a God who requires obedience
6. Therefore there is no God.

**EXERCISE 2**

Glossary by R.N.D. Martin and Stuart Brown, Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 1988, p.40.

There is another problem. God-based morality, Pope Benedict assured us, has an objective quality lacking in other competing moralities, and so does not suffer from the moral ambiguities of moral relativism, where, we were told, moral principles are justified by no more than the fact that they are *believed* to be true, where believing them to be right makes them right. This, we were told, makes personal preference the measure of moral truth, makes it impossible to condemn outrageous behaviour, and explains why society is in its present parlous condition, where what may be reprehensible in one person may not be in another. But no such equivocations are to be found when it is God who defines the good, where the moral action is prescribed quite precisely by the divine command and where all that is required of the agent to do good is to act in unqualified obedience to what God prescribes. These commands are clarified within the religious tradition and communicated to the faithful in a variety of ways: perhaps through the scriptures (e.g., the Bible, Torah or Koran), perhaps through the commands handed down by great religious leaders (e.g., Jesus, Mohammad, Buddha) or perhaps, more intimate still, through the inner voice of conscience. But whatever the specific mechanism of transmission, the believer knows that he or she stands under an absolute moral obligation to obey what is commanded, and that what individuals do or do not do in response will either acquit or condemn them at some later date of reckoning.

### **Ambiguities in Religious Morality**

But this is not as easy to understand as it appears. For even if we set aside the objection already voiced – that the divine command is hardly fixed, being subject to change as the divine mood changes – we still have the problem of determining more precisely what that command requires us to do, when, looking about us, we can see only too well how the same command can be treated very differently by various religious groups. So the fact that God's commands may be quite specific does not mean that they are uniform in their practical application. As an example, take the prohibition 'Do not kill'. This seems straightforward enough and accounts for the pacifism of Quakers. But other Christian groups are happy to set this command aside, arguing that killing is justified in time of war or in the defence of the innocent. And other differences appear when we apply the same prohibition to such contentious issues as capital punishment, abortion and euthanasia. Here, too, one group invariably denounces another in the name of a scriptural precedent that they both share. The fact, then, that the same religious tradition can generate different moral positions in response to a quite specific command weakens the claim that it is only here, and not with the secular moralities, that access can be gained to an authoritative and divinely revealed truth, with rich rewards for the obedient.

And we may widen our net still further. For recalling the 'Many-Gods Objection' from Chapter One,<sup>1</sup> we may say that for every moral truth practised by religion A, the logical possibility remains that religion B will condemn it; and that any practical application that religion B commends will be condemned by another religion C, and so on and so forth. Thus for

<sup>1</sup> See above, pp. 5-6.

every religion commending one course of action, and threatening all others, there is another actual and possible religion threatening that course of action and recommending another course of action and rewarding all others or indeed, which is more likely, itself alone. It is, of course, also logically possible that among all these religions there is only one true religion, and that it is only here that benefits are awarded; but quite what that religion is will be impossible to say, given that we have now generated an infinite number of logically possible religions. It is also logically possible, of course, that no religion is the only true religion and that all religions are false.

Let us set these difficulties to one side and turn now to the second strand of the moral argument for God. This involves the claim that rules of moral behaviour are much more likely to be upheld if there is a post-mortem system of rewards and punishments administered by an all-seeing judge incapable of error. The imperfections of human justice are here contrasted with the perfections of divine justice, securing the believer in his certainty that the moral laws are not merely objective in character but (ultimately) absolute in execution. By this means the prospect of inescapable judgement makes moral obedience not merely the right thing to do but also the *pragmatic* thing to do, which is to say that obedience has, in this instance, *practical consequences*. This second strand, in other words, makes a deliberate appeal to individual self-interest, indicating that there are definite benefits to be gained from religious belief, which neither atheism nor agnosticism can provide.

This advice to act prudentially, to do good while alive in order to secure the benefits accruing after death, is most famously given by Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) in his *Pensées* – a collection of literary fragments published posthumously – and appears in the novel form of a game of chance, better known as *Pascal's Wager*. As a devout Catholic Pascal assumed not only that God exists but that belief carries with it certain rewards and punishments: put bluntly, theists will enjoy the bliss of heaven and atheists the terrors of hell. Thus in deciding whether God exists or not, there are clearly defined *pay-offs*. Accordingly, one must decide which is the better bet, i.e., which of the two provides the greater pay-off, given the odds being offered. So Pascal reasons as follows: If you bet on God existing, and God does not exist, nothing is lost and no harm is done. If you bet on God *not* existing, and God does not exist, nothing is lost and no harm is done. But if you bet on God not existing, and God *does* exist, then everything is lost and a great deal of harm has been done: you have now lost your chance of everlasting happiness and punishment awaits. Thus the gambler on God, if he is prudent, will always bet on God. For this, after all, is a game of chance in which there could not be a higher pay-off, where there is 'an infinitely happy life to be won.'<sup>1</sup>

Of course, Pascal's assumption – that there is life after death – is the crucial one; and unsurprisingly atheists are quick to point out, first, that there is absolutely no empirical evidence to suggest that, once this life is done, we

### Pascal's Wager



Blaise Pascal

<sup>1</sup> *Op.cit.*, edited and translated by A.J. Krailsheimer, London & New York, Penguin Books, p.151.



### Criticisms of the Wager

shall somehow be called upon to live another; and second, that there are clear psychological reasons why believers should persist in this fancy (arguments that I shall come to in the next chapter). But these criticisms notwithstanding, there still seems something deeply problematic about the suggestion that individuals are somehow better motivated to act morally during their lifetimes if they know that they will somehow be called to account after their deaths.

The great English philosopher, G.E. Moore (1873-1958), thought Pascal's Wager 'absolutely wicked',<sup>1</sup> and it is not difficult to see why. The Wager first assumes that God is a revengeful being and that some kind of retributive action will be taken against those who deny his existence. Without, then, the possibility of damnation, no prudential bet would be necessary: with nothing to lose, there would be no reason to place a bet one way or the other. On the other hand, if Pascal is wrong about God and God is not revengeful but indeed all-forgiving – as many believers suppose – then the denial of God's existence carries with it no dire consequences and the force of the Wager is largely dissipated, with theists now no better off than atheists. Indeed, in some ways, atheists may even be better placed. One of the most obvious criticisms to be levelled against Pascal's gambler is that, in betting on God, he is acting solely from self-interest; and that, while his actions may certainly be prudent, they are also morally reprehensible in their cold-blooded calculation, determined more by the desire to escape punishment than by any desire to do good for its own sake. But why should God prefer this type of person to one who has set aside the profit-incentive in favour of a higher moral incentive, namely, never to believe anything on insufficient evidence? So, for all we know, a moral God may prefer *moral unbelief* (unbelief honestly achieved) to *immoral belief* (belief motivated by self-interest), and so the best bet may be, after all, to wager against God, thus offering a return denied to self-serving believers. Honesty, then, may still be the best policy, with God rewarding intellectual integrity rather than pragmatic opportunism. One is here reminded of a conversation recorded by the editor of the *L'Encyclopédie*, Denis Diderot (1713-1784):

*Mme La Maréchale*: Are you not Monsieur Crudeli?  
*Crudeli*: Yes, Madame.  
*L.M.*: The man who believes in nothing?  
*Crudeli*: I am.  
*L.M.*: But your morals are the same as a believer's?  
*Crudeli*: Why not, if that believer is an honest man?  
*L.M.*: And do you put that morality into practice?  
*Crudeli*: As well as I can.  
*L.M.*: What! You do not steal, or kill, or pillage?  
*Crudeli*: Very rarely.  
*L.M.*: Then what do you get out of not believing?  
*Crudeli*: Nothing; but does one believe in order to get something out of it?<sup>2</sup>

1 Quoted by Paul Levy, *Moore*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, p.214.

2 'Conversations with a Christian Lady' (1774), *Diderot's Selected Writings*, New York, Macmillan, 1966, p.253.

**Which of the following religious beliefs do you consider the most likely? Do any of them undermine Pascal's Wager?**

**EXERCISE 3**

I believe in a God...

that punishes unbelievers.

that punishes those who believe in him for selfish reasons.

that rewards honest unbelief.

that punishes everyone.

that punishes no one.

Reviewing these criticisms, one is now in a better position to appreciate why, even among believers, the moral argument is viewed with such misgivings. If it has any appeal it is as a supplement to arguments already provided for God's existence, but as a 'stand-alone' argument it has little merit. As we have seen, the existence of an objective moral law is first employed to establish the argument's first premiss – that there is a God – and then this self-same premiss is used to establish its conclusion, namely, that without God's existence there would be no objective moral law. This argument, we need hardly add, is circular and so fallacious. And other absurdities follow on. For if it is the case that moral values do require God, then believers have the additional embarrassment of having to agree that atheists of the stature of Lucretius, Spinoza, Mill, Hume, George Eliot, Einstein and Russell were all somehow morally deficient and on a lower level of moral awareness than the most mundane and commonplace of believers.

Behind each of these famous names lies a philosophy of moral behaviour that owes nothing to any notion of God's existence. The theological alternative can therefore only obtain intellectual credibility when it has demonstrated not just that these arguments are somehow philosophically deficient but, going further, that *any* secular theory of morality is somehow incomplete without God. Certainly 'That there is a God' may stand as one explanation of why we share common moral values; but there are many other explanations, less metaphysically ambitious. What if we omit the religious overtones of Kantian theory and say that moral absolutes can be generated through the deployment of the categorical imperative? Or why not agree with Thomas Hobbes that morality proceeds from an entirely selfish motive, which is to protect citizens both from themselves and from the otherwise brutish state of nature? Or why not look to the evolutionists, who argue that moral rules create a stable environment in which to rear vigorous individuals, so increasing their chances of survival? These are just three theories that spring to mind, but many more could be listed. The point, to repeat, is that these arguments must be shown to be unsuccessful if the religious argument is to be successful; but no such extensive critique has as yet been forthcoming.

I am not alone, therefore, in concluding that there is absolutely no mileage in the moral argument for God: a view shared by many others, including James Rachels (1971), J.L. Mackie (1982), Robin Le Poidevin (1996), Michael Martin (2002), Anthony Grayling (2003) and Kai Nielsen (1990, 1993).<sup>1</sup> Nielsen makes an interesting point with which to finish this part of our discussion. The fact that any naturalistic ethics, like any of those I have just listed, lacks any orientation towards a teleological creation – that there is some overarching purpose *to* life – does not mean that there that no purpose is possible *in* life, that there can be no moral ambitions in a godless world, and that the atheist, just like the believer, may yet seek to reduce human pain and suffering or to foster happiness, love, comradeship and fraternity. We do not, then, need God to give moral significance to our lives.

We do not need a God to *give* meaning to our lives by making us for his sovereign purpose and perhaps thereby robbing us of our freedom. We, by our deliberate acts and commitments, can give meaning to our own lives. Here man has that ‘dreadful freedom’ that makes possible his human dignity; freedom will indeed bring him anxiety, but he will then be the rider and not the ridden and, by being able to choose, seek out, and sometimes realize those things he most deeply prizes and admires, his life will take on a significance. A life lived without purpose is indeed a most dreadful life – a life in which we might have what the existentialists rather pedantically call the experience of nothingness. But we do not need God or the gods to give purpose to our lives or to give the lie to this claim about nothingness . . .<sup>2</sup>

### iii. Nietzsche’s Critique of Religious Morality

I want now to turn to what is undoubtedly the most venomous critique ever made of religious morality: that by the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900, **Biography: pp. 205-07**).<sup>3</sup> In terms of its literary style, dramatic character and sheer vitriol, no attack upon Christian ethics can equal it. I regard Nietzsche, along with Marx and Freud,<sup>4</sup> as the third member of the great triumvirate of atheism. The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur has called these three the pre-eminent ‘philosophers of suspicion’ – given that each of them, in their different ways, is suspicious of surface-meanings and seeks to unmask the fraudulent belief that the norms of culture and society are founded on infallible, universal truths.<sup>5</sup> In Nietzsche’s

1 Rachels, ‘God and Human Attitudes’, reprinted in *Divine Commands and Morality*, ed. Paul Helm, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1981, pp34-48; Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1982, pp.102-118; Le Poidevin, *Arguing for Atheism*, London & New York, Routledge, 1996, pp.77-87; Martin, *Atheism, Morality and Meaning*, Buffalo, New York, Prometheus Books, 2002; Grayling, *What is Good?*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2003, pp.59-63.

2 *Ethics without God*, Amherst, N.Y., Prometheus Books, 1990, p.86. Quoted in my *QG*, p.280.

3 The following account is an amended version of that given in my *TAC*, pp.188-197.

4 For extended discussions of Marx and Freud, see below, pp.140-62.

5 *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1970, p.5.

case, the focus is upon the distorted vision of man presented primarily by Christianity, in which a corrupt ethic makes weakness both honourable and praiseworthy, which infects the natural flow of the 'will to power', and which in consequence has so domesticated the individual to the point where his full potential can never be explored or ever realized. As he writes: "That which defines me, that which makes me stand apart from the whole of the rest of humanity, is the fact that I *unmasked* Christian morality."<sup>1</sup>

Nietzsche's concerns are two-fold: the first critical, in standing as the strict adversary of Christian morality; the second positive, in seeking to provide an image of a new type of human being, one that is the antithesis of the Christian. These twin ambitions have as their backdrop Nietzsche's single most powerful and most publicized conviction that 'God is dead'. This assertion is made many times, but is best expressed in *The Gay Science* (1882), in the parable entitled 'The Madman.' I quote the passage in full:

Have you not heard of that mad man 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. Why, did he get lost? 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 yelled and laughed. The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes.

"Whither is God?" he cried. "I shall tell you. *We have killed him* – you and I. All of us 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 this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving now? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there any up or down left? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night and more night coming on all the while? Must not lanterns be lit in the morning? Do we not hear anything yet of the noise of the grave-diggers who are burying God? Do we not smell anything yet of God's decomposition. Gods too decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we, the murderers of all murderers, comfort ourselves? What was holiest and most powerful of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives. Who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must not we ourselves become gods simply to seem worthy of it? There has never been a greater deed; and whoever will be born after us – for the sake of this deed he will be part of a higher history than all history hitherto."

Here the madman fell silent and looked again at his listeners; and they, too, were silent and stared at him in astonishment. At last he threw his lantern on the ground, and it broke and went out. "I come too early," he

### 'God is Dead'

<sup>1</sup> *Ecce Homo*, translated, with an Introduction, by R.J. Hollingdale, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1979, pp.131.

said then; “my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering – it has not yet reached the ears of man. Lightning and thunder require time, the light of the stars requires time, deeds require time even after they are done, before they can be seen and heard. This deed is still more distant from them than the most distant stars – *and yet they have done it themselves.*”

It has been related further that on that same day the madman forced his way into divers churches and there sang his *requiem aeternam deo*. Led out and called to account, he is said to have replied every time, “What are these churches now if they are not the tombs and sepulchers of God?”<sup>1</sup>

In this celebrated passage Nietzsche is describing not so much God’s death but more exactly the death of the belief that a God exists. The statement that ‘God is dead’ (*Gott ist tot*) is not to be taken literally – that a being, once alive, has now died – but refers to a much more potent cultural fact: that human beings have turned away from God and no longer have any need of him as a source of moral value. Nor does this mean that God’s death requires the death of belief, that the one is an implication of the other: one may, after all, still retain the fiction of God’s existence despite the fact that there really *is* no God, an idea that has now been ‘eliminated’. This point is made in the Introduction to Nietzsche’s most famous book *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-1885), where the isolated saint, who spends his days singing God’s praises, is unaware of this terrible truth: ‘Could it be possible? This old saint in the forest has not yet heard anything of this, that *God is dead.*’<sup>2</sup> But for those who are aware of how things stand, or for those unaware but who must now be educated to the painful reality of their situation, the death of belief is an event of profound personal and social significance: their faith in a theocentric and providential universe that has sustained them for centuries must now be jettisoned. But for Nietzsche this provides a unique opportunity to discard once and for all the ‘conceptual cobweb-spinning’ of religion that has so impoverished our lives. God may be dead, and this may indeed be a verifiable fact of our civilization, but what must now be attempted is, as it were, to kill the beast off. This Nietzsche aims to achieve not just by exposing the tawdry nature of religious aspirations, so excising any *motivation* to believe, but also by undermining religion’s appeal of making life endurable through the promise of an after-life and immortality, which only serves to devalue and denigrate man’s actual life through the fable of a judgment to come. This is the central drive behind Nietzsche’s critical programme: that having exposed religion for what it is – and in particular the Christian religion – no return to a religious morality will be intellectually tenable or emotionally satisfying. That achieved, Nietzsche can then proceed to the second phase of his

1 Translated by Walter Kaufmann in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, edited by Kaufmann, Cleveland & New York, The World Publishing Company, 1968, pp.105-106.

2 *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in *The Portable Nietzsche*, translated, edited, with a critical introduction and notes by Walter Kaufmann, New York, Viking Press, 1969, p.124.



Friedrich Nietzsche

programme, to the positive enterprise. That is, to offer a ‘revaluation of all values’ or a ‘higher morality’ suitable only for a new kind of man, the *Übermensch* (the Overman), who operates ‘beyond good and evil’, and who gives meaning to life in a world no longer inhabited by God. In this respect, the *Übermensch* is not man’s successor but God’s. And with this usurpation of the place previously held by God, human beings can at last remove the principal obstacle to the development of strong and intellectually free individuals, and can finally break through the bonds of conventional morality and create their own values.

The force of Nietzsche’s atheism can best be appreciated when he proceeds beyond the denial of God’s existence to the denial of all those estimable characteristics traditionally associated with the Christian way of life. It is not enough to state that God is a ‘failure of the intellect’ and ‘our most enduring lie’.<sup>1</sup> What is further required is to show how theistic belief was able to arise, how such a confusion of the mind could have acquired such weight and importance. How was it possible that Christianity could achieve such a success, so that qualities such as meekness, humility, self-denial, modesty, pity, compassion, and denial of the flesh should be esteemed *virtues*, as part of the Christian ideal, when in fact they are no such thing but aspects of a creed that maims and debilitates life?

I *condemn* Christianity. I raise against the Christian church the most terrible of all accusations that any accuser ever uttered. It is to me the highest of all conceivable corruptions . . . it has turned every value into an un-value, every truth into a lie, every integrity into a vileness of the soul . . . Parasitism as the *only* practice of the church; with its idea of anemia, all hope for life; the beyond as the will to negate every reality; the cross as the mark of recognition for the most subterranean conspiracy that ever existed – against health, beauty, whatever has turned out well, courage, spirit, *graciousness* of the soul, *against life itself*.<sup>2</sup>

In order to show how this process occurred, Nietzsche offers a quasi-historical survey of the origins of different moralities, the ancestry of which will reveal how the decadent ethics of religion, and of Christianity in particular, have arisen. Nietzsche’s definitive description of this process is given in his *On the Genealogy of Morals* of 1887. Here he depicts two contrasting moralities. On the one hand is *noble morality*, with its key distinction between ‘good and bad’; on the other is *slave morality*, with its

1 *The Gay Science* (1882), Nos. 151 & 344, translated by Walter Kaufmann, New York, Vintage Books, 1974.

2 *The Anti-Christ* (written 1888, published 1895) in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Kaufmann, pp.655-656.

### Nietzsche’s denial of Christian values

## Noble and Slave Morality

core contrast between ‘good and evil.’ The *Genealogy* is for the most part concerned to show how the transition from the one to the other is effected. The idea that ‘goodness’ originates with those for whom goodness is useful, or to whom goodness is shown – i.e., the poor and dispossessed – is wrong. Rather, goodness is associated with everything that is ‘noble’, that is, with those who have the power to establish their actions as good by sheer force of will and privilege. The heroic and warrior qualities displayed by the aristocratic class are intelligence, courage, physical and mental strength, and pride. By contrast, ‘bad’ designates everything inferior that lacks these qualities, a social under-class, which possesses the opposite qualities of weakness, vulgarity, meanness etc. Nietzsche provides etymological warrants for this ‘pathos of distance.’ So the German ‘gut’ is traced through to ‘godlike’, and the German for ‘bad’ (*schlecht*) is followed through to *schlicht*, standing here for the ‘common man.’<sup>1</sup>

What we have here is an order of rank, the noble type of man representing an ascending scale, the lower man a descending scale: these, as we shall soon discover, are not merely two social classes but rather two attitudes towards life. But how does the transition from noble to slave morality occur? This happens through ‘the priestly mode of valuation.’ The priests, motivated by the powerful emotion of *ressentiment* towards their aristocratic superiors, canonize instead a value-system ascetic in character, far removed from the sensory and physical pleasures endorsed by the nobility.<sup>2</sup> The classic embodiment of these values is Judaism. Fuelled by their hatred of those who are their natural oppressors, they take their revenge by a radical reversal of values, by converting the noble virtues of courage, self-confidence and intelligence into the vices of cruelty, arrogance and pride:

It was the Jews who, with awe-inspiring consistency, dared to invert the aristocratic value-equation (good=noble=powerful=beautiful=happy=beloved of God) and to hang on to this inversion with their teeth, the teeth of the most abysmal hatred (the hatred of impotence), saying “the wretched alone are the good; the poor, impotent, lowly alone are good; the suffering, deprived, sick, ugly alone are pious, alone are blessed of God, blessedness is for them alone – and you, the powerful and noble, are on the contrary the evil, the cruel, the lustful, the insatiable, the godless to all eternity; and you shall be in all eternity the unblessed, accursed, and damned!” . . . One knows *who* inherited this Jewish revaluation. . . With the Jews there begins *the slave revolt in morality*: that revolt which has a thousand years behind it and which we no longer see because it – has been victorious.<sup>3</sup>



1 *The Genealogy of Morals*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, translated and edited, with commentaries, by Walter Kaufmann, New York, The Modern Library, Random House, 1968, p. 467.

2 The French *ressentiment* is a key term in Nietzsche’s philosophy and goes beyond the English ‘resentment’. For while it retains the sense of bitterness towards stronger and more privileged individuals, Nietzsche’s *ressentiment* generates *values*: the priests internalise and rationalise their weakness, and transform it into a morality that enslaves the strong.

3 *Ibid.*, 470.

There is little doubt about the identity of the morality pronounced victorious here. If one wants to know who has won this battle – the master or slave, Rome or Judaea – then the answer is clear:

Consider to whom one bows down in Rome itself today, as if it were the epitome of all the highest values – and not only in Rome but over almost half the earth, everywhere that man has become tame or desires to become tame: three Jews, as is known, and one Jewess (Jesus of Nazareth, the fisherman Peter, the rug weaver Paul, and the mother of the aforementioned Jesus, named Mary). This is very remarkable: Rome has been defeated beyond all doubt.<sup>1</sup>

The exemplification of the slave revolt in morality (*der Sklavenaufstand in der Moral*) is Christianity, but its victory is entirely ruinous for the development of the autonomous and life-embracing individual. With its gospel of self-denial and self-sacrifice Christianity places centre stage the attributes that slaves, as slaves, inevitably display before their masters – impotence, timidity, cowardice – and converts them into the virtues of humility, patience, friendliness, and love of neighbour. Whereas the distinction between ‘good and bad’ in noble morality indicated an aristocratic indifference towards its social inferiors, the slave morality now applies the distinction ‘good and *evil*’ – the word ‘evil’ replacing ‘bad’ as an expression of its *ressentiment*, of its all-consuming hatred for all that is noblest and best. This revaluation of value is completed by looking at the world as a prison of vice from which it is necessary to escape, thereby promising salvation, through faith, in an invisible other world. Thus Christianity perpetuates ‘the most fatal seductive lie that has yet existed . . . I reject every compromise position with respect to it – I force war against it. Petty people’s morality as the measure of things: this is the most disgusting degeneration culture has yet exhibited. And this kind of ideal still hanging over mankind is “God”!’<sup>2</sup>

It is tempting to see in Nietzsche’s account of the dominance of Christian morality a reworking of Darwinian evolutionary theory, but here significantly reversed as the subjugation of the ‘fittest’ by the ‘weak’. If the natural order of things were left intact, the struggle for survival between the two competing moralities of noble and slave could only have one outcome: the victory of the healthy man over the sick, wherein ‘the bird of prey’ always devours ‘the tender lamb.’<sup>3</sup> But this is not now the case. For it is the extraordinary and wholly lamentable achievement of religion, and in particular of the priestly caste come to power in Judaism and Christianity, that it should channel its fear and loathing of its natural masters – of all that is brightest and best – into the creation of morality.

1 *Ibid.*, 489.

2 *The Will To Power* (written 1883-1888, first edition 1901), new edition revised and translated by Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, New York, Vintage Books, 1968, No. 200, p.117.

3 *The Genealogy of Morals*, pp.480-481



Religious morality, in other terms, is *ressentiment* made flesh, binding the strong man with the cords of ‘Thou shalt not’, with a whole raft of life-denying commands, infecting the healthy mind with ‘bad conscience’ (*schlechtes Gewissen*): that, for example, sex is sinful, that the body is sinful, that every thought and action is sinful. Furthermore, and with a final twist of the knife, religion introduces the refinement of ‘bad conscience’: not merely bad conscience in relation to others but bad conscience in relation to God – a conscience, therefore, that can never find pardon because, whatever one does in mitigation, one remains forever guilty.

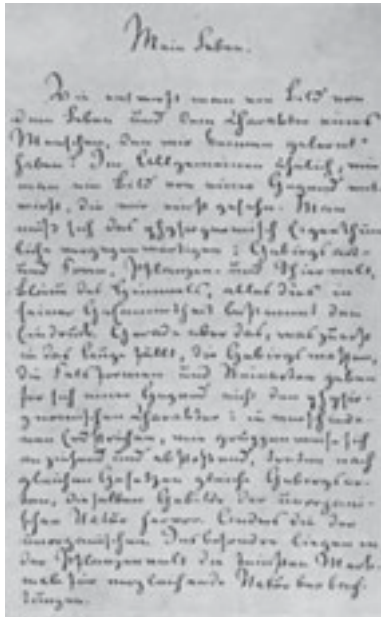
In this psychological cruelty there resides a madness of the will which is absolutely unexampled: the *will* of man to find himself guilty and reprehensible to a degree that can never be atoned for; his *will* to think himself punished without any possibility of the punishment becoming equal to the guilt . . . ; his *will* to erect an ideal – that of the “holy God” – and in the face of it to feel the palpable certainty of his own absolute unworthiness. Oh this insane, pathetic beast – man! What ideas he has, what unnaturalness, what paroxysms of nonsense, what *bestiality of thought* erupts as soon as he is prevented just a little from being a *beast in deed!* . . . Here is *sickness*, beyond any doubt, the most terrible that has ever raged in man; and whoever can still bear to hear (but today one no longer has ears for this!) how in this night of torment and absurdity there has resounded the cry of *love*, the cry of the most nostalgic rapture, of redemption through *love*, will turn away, seized by invincible horror. – There is so much in man that is hideous! – Too long, the earth has been a madhouse!<sup>1</sup>

### Christian Morality Unmasked

This in outline completes the first and critical part of Nietzsche’s programme; and it leaves us with this crucial insight into the nature of morality. Morality in general, and Christian morality in particular, are not what they seem, i.e., the outcome of an absolute moral law or the conscious embodiment of the ultimate values prescribed by an infallibly just God; rather, they are the products of a deceit or subterfuge, camouflaging an ulterior motive, but one which Nietzsche’s genealogical survey has now unmasked. *This hidden purpose is the defeat of the strong by the weak.* Take, for example, the Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount, so often regarded as a summation of Christian virtues. Here are paraded the poor and meek, those who turn the other cheek but who will yet inherit the Kingdom of God. This is the precise expression of ‘herd morality’, of a preference for disease rather than health, which, forged by the *ressentiment* of the slave towards his master, now ruthlessly brands in the pieties of religion all the natural life-affirming instincts of men as shameful ‘sins’ or ‘guilts’, as impulses and desires for which forgiveness must be asked in a life to come. This is the morality of the ‘tarantulas’, which fills the whole world with the storms of their revenge: “We shall wreak vengeance and abuse on all whose equals we are not” – thus do the tarantulas vow.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 529.

<sup>2</sup> *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 212.



Nietzsche's handwriting

The perception, however, that there exists a fundamental inequality between human beings – a perception recognized here by the priests but which only serves to fuel their jealousy and desire for revenge – now provides Nietzsche with the prologue to the second, and positive, phase of his programme. To reveal the truth that there is a fundamental *inequality* between human beings simultaneously unmasks the religious proposition – that all men are equal in the sight of God – as a metaphysical postulate of morality that is self-evidently untenable, as a verifiable inversion of the fact that there are some individuals who are not simply different from others but clearly superior. A universal code of ethics would perhaps be sustainable if moral agents were relevantly similar, but because agents are relevantly different, an all-embracing morality must

necessarily do harm to some. What is thus required is a morality for these happy few. Here, then, the choice is between the prefabricated ethics of the domesticated herd animal, who cannot live his life without the fiction *that God lives*, and the morality 'beyond good and evil' of those exceptional sovereign and autonomous individuals of strength, to whom the secret has been revealed *that God is dead*. This truth, which the madman illuminated with his lantern, is the single most exhilarating fact of an atheistic culture: one is now liberated from the straightjacket of religion and the moralities of custom; but it also presents atheism with its most daunting challenge. The template of morality that God provided *external to life* must now be replaced by a morality *internal to life*. The death of God does not, that is to say, dissolve morality into a nihilistic acceptance that nothing is true and that life is valueless: it rather relocates the meaning of life *within life*, or rather and more particularly, within the individual who embraces life and rejects the ascetic ideal. The burden of morality, of defining what right conduct is, is thus removed from God and placed upon the shoulders of men, upon those who can bear the loneliness of living within a meaningless world *because one organizes a small portion of it oneself*.<sup>1</sup> It is in this respect that the *Übermensch* is not man's successor but God's. For following God's obituary, this 'new man' must take on the God-like role of being the originator of truth and the creator of one's own moral self. The *Übermensch* accordingly designates a new kind of man, a *self-creating* individual, who is mankind's own supreme achievement, and totally different from the selfless and unegoistic individual lauded by Christianity.

<sup>1</sup> *The Will to Power*, No.585 (A), p.318

**The *Übermensch*  
ideal and the  
Will to Power**

The individual stands here as one of those ‘free spirits of the first rank’ who, as a kind of artist, freely shapes his own self as a work of art. This same idea is incorporated within the dominant conception of Nietzsche’s later thought: the Will to Power (*Der Wille zur Macht*). Although often, and incorrectly, construed as the desire for power over others – an interpretation along racist lines which would legitimate the repressive and barbaric treatment of *untermenschen* and which Nietzsche would deplore as an example of the ‘demon of power’ – the Will to Power has more to do with self-sufficiency and self-confidence, with the self’s own drive to foster its creative abilities in a world without dogmatic beliefs. The Will to Power, we should say, is the primary quality of the man of *moral action*, who, in his sheer zest for life, determines his own goals and who, unlike his passive and slavish counterpart, displays obedience not to the imposed norms of religion or society but only to *himself*. Thus the death of God, far from leading to the disintegration of one’s self, now issues in a surge of optimism, in a liberation of all those natural instincts of life, to a resounding affirmation of life which was previously repressed by the guilt-inducing ordinances of God.<sup>1</sup>

There is one important amendment to make. If the world of formulaic religious morality is rapidly disappearing, it has not gone entirely, and indeed it remains for many people the consolation of their lives. Nietzsche is well aware of religion’s seductive quality: it offers answers to the perennial questions of what life is for, of why we should live in a particular way, of why pain exists, and it alleviates our anguish before death. To those secure in the comforts of religion, the *Übermensch* ideal will therefore remain a repugnant vision, offering none of these consolations. But the fact is that this security has been forever undermined by the death of God and that we now live in a post-theistic world. All else is illusory. Accordingly the comforts of moral certainty and final justification are already in the process of being replaced. So much we have seen already. And at first glance Nietzsche’s replacement – his vision of the man who is a meaningful world unto himself – appears to be no more than an elitist individualist, who would doubtless endorse the Dostoevskian formula, with which I began this chapter, that ‘If God is dead, then everything is permitted.’ But things are not quite as they appear. For Nietzsche, the appearance of a higher form of humanity is not an end in itself but provides a model directing our aspirations, projecting us beyond what we are to what we might become. The *Übermensch* thus has wide *social* and *educative* implications, in the sense that he remains a *goal* which all should seek and some may attain, provided only that they live in an

<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche’s affirmation of life finds additional support in his doctrine of Eternal Recurrence, which I can only sketch here. The idea is that everything moves in an infinitely repeated circular course – a fact that should be enough to depress anyone. But this is not the case with the *Übermensch*. For such is his passionate affirmation of life that he embraces every moment of living even though knowing that all will be endlessly repeated. Once again utter futility is overcome by the indomitable will to power.

environment conducive to the exercise of their Will to Power and thus to their own individual flourishing. This is what Zarathustra means when he proclaims that the *Übermensch* is the ‘meaning of the earth.’<sup>1</sup> The quest to become the autonomous author of one’s own self is the only alternative left after God’s death; and the very fact that Nietzsche provides no precise description of what this may entail – no exact recipe for moral conduct – only serves to highlight the enormous range of flourishing that is possible within the variety of individual efforts.

It is in this light that Nietzsche’s position within the pantheon of atheists should be appreciated. Nietzsche is not an atheist in the comparatively straightforward mold of a Hume or a Russell, or in our own day of a Dawkins or a Dennett,<sup>2</sup> which seeks to undermine belief by demolition, by showing the intellectual weakness of its arguments. Indeed, Nietzsche is frankly fairly dismissive of this approach: one proof only gives way to another, and, besides, since no proof ever caused faith, no counter-proof will ever demolish it. But more importantly, atheists of this stripe do not ‘understand how to make a clean sweep.’<sup>3</sup> In making this attempt Nietzsche stands as the prophet of a new post-metaphysical world, in which the meaning lost by the loss of God has been regained by a meaning found within the human range of self-discovery. This is a life-affirming philosophy meant to incite revolution within the realm of moral conduct by arousing our thirst for self-hood at that precise moment – at the ‘twilight of the idols’ – when the religious alternative has lost all value.

This type of atheism has sometimes been called ‘axiological’ or ‘constructive’ atheism, in as much as it offers a narrative of salvation – or more precisely a narrative of salvation *away from* salvation – which cannot proceed until the individual is first released from the gospel of a life-denying and death-obsessed religion, and comes to recognize, once and for all, that the world is without purpose or goal. Nietzsche’s influence in this regard has been immense and is not just confined to philosophy. Nietzschean ideas are to be found in the psychology of Sigmund Freud and Alfred Adler, in the novels of Thomas Mann and Joseph Conrad, in the plays of Bernard Shaw, and in the poetry of Stefan George, Rainer Maria Rilke, and W.B. Yeats. Understandably the philosophical line of influence is much easier to trace. Nietzsche is the immediate and acknowledged forerunner of what has come to be called *atheistic existentialism*. I am thinking here particularly of Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980, **Biography: pp.211-12**), Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) and Albert Camus (1913-1960). Nor should one forget the

## Nietzsche’s Importance

1 *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p.125.

2 Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that neither Dawkin’s *The God Delusion* (2006) nor Hitchen’s *God is not Great* (2007) makes any mention of Nietzsche, and that he appears in a solitary footnote in Sam Harris’ *The End of Faith* (2004).

3 *Daybreak*, translated by R.J. Hollingdale, with an introduction by Michael Tanner, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982, p.93.

so-called ‘death of God’ movement during the 1960s (whose membership included Paul van Buren, Thomas Altizer and William Hamilton), or the debt acknowledged to Nietzsche by George Betailles (1897-1962), Michel Foucault (1926-1984) and, much more recently, by Michel Onfray (b.1959), whose extraordinary polemic *In Defence of Atheism* (2007) is set specifically within a Nietzschean frame of reference.

All these philosophies have common Nietzschean themes. They are adamant that man is the exclusive measure of meaning and being, and that his baptism as the image of God is a morally reprehensible deception. They affirm that the powers of a human being are intrinsically part of him, and that it is this belief that gives dignity to his life, that radicalizes his ambition to improve his earthly lot and enhance the welfare of others, an ambition that would otherwise be mired in the fantasy of a life to come. While the atheistic way is the vehicle of what the existentialists call ‘authenticity’, and is marked by maturity, realism, and creative power; the theistic way is marked by ‘inauthenticity’, by infantilism, delusion, and abject submission, wherein one cravenly cedes to God the creative power that properly belongs to men alone. The religious ideal thus stands as the polar opposite of what Albert Camus has called ‘the only original rule of life today: to learn to live and to die, and in order to be a man, to refuse to be a god.’<sup>1</sup>



Nietzsche in his final illness, 1899

1 *The Rebel*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1973, p.269.

1. What is the relevance of the 'Euthyphro dilemma' for the moral argument for God's existence?
2. 'What God commands must be good.' What problems follow from this claim?
3. 'No person possessing free will can act morally in obeying a divine command.' Discuss.
4. According to Nietzsche, what are the moral implications of the claim that 'God is dead'?
5. Is it the case that, without God, everything is permitted?

**STUDY QUESTIONS**

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**GUIDE TO FURTHER READING**