Friedrich Nietzsche Pronounces "God is Dead": *The Gay Science* (1882)

Abstract

Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844–1900) had a tremendous impact on German philosophy in the nineteenth century and was one of its most original, provocative thinkers. After studying theology and philology, he was offered a professorship in Basel in 1869, at the mere age of 24. He briefly participated in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71 as a military medic. In 1879, he was forced to give up his professorship in Basel because of health problems (he suffered from poor eyesight and frequent migraines). In 1889, he had a mental breakdown (brought on by syphilis) from which he never fully recovered.

Nietzsche is often regarded as a key proponent of an irrationalist philosophy. But he was a powerful and eloquent cultural critic, eager to unmask the hypocrisy of the educated German middle classes [*Bildungsbürgertum*]. Nietzsche's famous pronouncement, "God is dead," is from *The Gay Science* [*Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*] (1882). It appears near the end of the excerpt reprinted below, in section 25 ("The madman"). The argument advanced in the preceding sections makes the logic of Nietzsche's startling conclusion more comprehensible. Nietzsche attributed "God's death" to powerful contemporary currents in German thought, including rationalism and the natural sciences, both of which had deemed God untrustworthy.

Source

THIRD BOOK

108
New struggles. — After Buddha was dead, his shadow was still shown for centuries in a cave—a tremendous, gruesome shadow. God is dead[1]; but given the way of men, there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown. — And we—we still have to vanquish his shadow, too.

109
Let us beware. — Let us beware of thinking that the world is a living being. Where should it expand? On what should it feed? How could it grow and multiply? We have some notion of the nature of the organic; and we should not reinterpret the exceedingly derivative, late, rare, accidental, that we perceive only on the crust of the earth and make of it something essential, universal, and eternal, which is what those people do who call the universe an organism. This nauseates me. Let us even beware of believing that the universe is a machine: it is certainly not constructed for one purpose, and calling it a "machine" does it far too much honor. Let us beware of positing generally and everywhere anything as elegant as the cyclical movements of our neighboring stars; even a glance into the Milky Way raises doubts whether there are not far coarser and more contradictory movements there, as well as stars with eternally linear paths, etc. The astral order in which we live is an exception; this order and the relative duration that depends on it have again made possible an exception of exceptions: the formation of the organic. The total character of the world, however, is in all eternity chaos—in the sense not of a lack of necessity but of a lack of order, arrangement, form, beauty, wisdom, and whatever other names there are for our aesthetic anthropomorphisms. Judged from the point of view of our reason, unsuccessful attempts are by all odds the rule, the exceptions are not the secret aim, and the whole musical box repeats eternally

its tune[2] which may never be called a melody—and ultimately even the phrase “unsuccessful attempt” is too anthropomorphic and reproachful. But how could we reproach or praise the universe? Let us beware of attributing to it heartlessness and unreason or their opposites: it is neither perfect nor beautiful, nor noble, nor does it wish to become any of these things; it does not by any means strive to imitate man. None of our aesthetic and moral judgments apply to it. Nor does it have any instinct for self-preservation or any other instinct; and it does not observe any laws either. Let us beware of saying that there are laws in nature. There are only necessities: there is nobody who commands, nobody who obeys, nobody who trespasses. Once you know that there are no purposes, you also know that there is no accident; for it is only beside a world of purposes that the word “accident” has meaning. Let us beware of saying that death is opposed to life. The living is merely a type of what is dead, and a very rare type. Let us beware of thinking that the world eternally creates new things. There are no eternally enduring substances; matter is as much of an error as the God of the Eleatics.[3] But when shall we ever be done with our caution and care? When will all these shadows of God cease to darken our minds? When will we complete our de-deification of nature? When may we begin to “*naturalize*” humanity in terms of a pure, newly discovered, newly redeemed nature?[4]

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114
How far the moral sphere extends. — As soon as we see a new image, we immediately construct it with the aid of all our previous experiences, *depending on the degree* of our honesty and justice. All experiences are moral experiences, even in the realm of sense perception.[5]

115
The four errors.[6] — Man has been educated by his errors. First, he always saw himself only incompletely; second, he endowed himself with fictitious attributes; third, he placed himself in a false order of rank in relation to animals and nature; fourth, he invented ever new tables of goods and always accepted them for a time as eternal and unconditional: as a result of this, now one and now another human impulse and state held first place and was ennobled because it was esteemed so highly. If we removed the effects of these four errors, we should also remove humanity, humaneness, and “human dignity.”

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117
Herd remorse. — During the longest and most remote periods of the human past, the sting of conscience was not at all what it is now. Today one feels responsible only for one’s will and actions, and one finds one’s pride in oneself. All our teachers of law start from this sense of self and pleasure in the individual, as if this had always been the fount of law. But during the longest period of the human past nothing was more terrible than to feel that one stood by oneself. To be alone, to experience things by oneself, neither to obey nor to rule, to be an individual—that was not a pleasure but a punishment; one was sentenced “to individuality.”[7] Freedom of thought was considered discomfort itself. While we experience law and submission as compulsion and loss, it was egoism that was formerly experienced as something painful and as real misery. To be a self and to esteem oneself according to one’s own weight and measure—that offended taste in those days. An inclination to do this would have been considered madness; for being alone was associated with every misery and fear. In those days, “free will” was very closely associated with a bad conscience; and the more unfree one’s actions were and the more the herd instinct rather than any personal sense found expression in an action, the more moral one felt. Whatever harmed the herd, whether the individual had wanted it or not wanted it, prompted the sting of conscience in the individual—and in his neighbor, too, and even in the whole herd. — There is no point on which we have learned to think and feel more differently.

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119
No altruism! — In many people I find an overwhelmingly forceful and pleasurable desire to be a function: they have a very refined sense for all those places where precisely *they* could "function" and push in those directions. Examples include those women who transform themselves into some function of a man that happens to be underdeveloped in him, and thus become his purse or his politics or his sociability. Such beings preserve themselves best when they find a fitting place in another organism; if they fail to do this, they become grumpy, irritated, and devour themselves.

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121
Life no argument. — We have arranged for ourselves a world in which we can live—by positing bodies, lines, planes, causes and effects, motion and rest, form and content; without these articles of faith nobody now could endure life. But that does not prove them. Life is no argument. The conditions of life might include error.[8]

122
Moral skepticism in Christianity. — Christianity, too, has made a great contribution to the enlightenment, and taught moral skepticism very trenchantly and effectively, accusing and embittering men, yet with untiring patience and subtlety; it destroyed the faith in his "virtues" in every single individual; it led to the disappearance from the face of the earth of all those paragons of virtue of whom there was no dearth in antiquity—those popular personalities who, imbued with faith in their own perfection, went about with the dignity of a great matador. When we today, trained in this Christian school of skepticism, read the moral treatises of the ancients—for example, Seneca and Epictetus—we have a diverting sense of superiority and feel full of secret insights and over-sights: we feel as embarrassed as if a child were talking before an old man, or an over-enthusiastic young beauty before La Rochefoucauld[9]: we know better what virtue is. In the end, however, we have applied this same skepticism also to all *religious* states and processes, such as sin, repentance, grace, sanctification, and we have allowed the worm to dig so deep that now we have the same sense of subtle superiority and insight when we read any Christian book: we also know religious feelings better! And it is high time to know them well and to describe them well, for the pious people of the old faith are dying out, too. Let us save their image and their type at least for knowledge.

123
Knowledge as more than a mere means. — Without this new passion—I mean the passion to know—science would still be promoted; after all, science has grown and matured without it until now. The good faith in science, the prejudice in its favor that dominates the modern state (and formerly dominated even the church) is actually based on the fact that this unconditional urge and passion has manifested itself so rarely and that science is considered *not* a passion but a mere condition or an "ethos." Often mere *amour-plaisir*[10] of knowledge (curiosity) is felt to be quite sufficient, or *amour-vanité*[11], being accustomed to it with the ulterior motive of honors and sustenance; for many people it is actually quite enough that they have too much leisure and do not know what to do with it except to read, collect, arrange, observe, and recount—their "scientific impulse" is their boredom. Pope Leo X once sang the praises of science (in his brief to Beroaldo[12]): he called it the most beautiful ornament and the greatest pride of our life and a noble occupation in times of happiness as well as unhappiness; and finally he said: "without it all human endeavors would lack any firm foothold—and even with it things are changeable and insecure enough." But this tolerably skeptical pope keeps silent, like all other ecclesiastical eulogists of science, about his ultimate judgment. From his words one might infer, although this is strange enough for such a friend of the arts, that he places science above art; but in the end it is nothing but good manners when he does not speak at this point of what he places high above all of the sciences, too: "revealed truth" and the "eternal salvation of the soul." Compared to that, what are

ornaments, pride, entertainment, and the security of life to him? “Science is something second-class, not anything ultimate, unconditional, not an object of passion”—this judgment Leo retained in his soul: the truly Christian judgment about science.

In antiquity the dignity and recognition of science were diminished by the fact that even her most zealous disciples placed the striving for *virtue* first, and one felt that knowledge had received the highest praise when one celebrated it as the best means to virtue. It is something new in history that knowledge wants to be more than a mere means.

124
In the horizon of the infinite. — We have left the land and have embarked. We have burned our bridges behind us—indeed, we have gone farther and destroyed the land behind us. Now, little ship, look out! Beside you is the ocean: to be sure, it does not always roar, and at times it lies spread out like silk and gold and reveries of graciousness. But hours will come when you will realize that it is infinite and that there is nothing more awesome than infinity. Oh, the poor bird that felt free and now strikes the walls of this cage! Woe, when you feel homesick for the land as if it had offered more *freedom*—and there is no longer any “land.”

125
The madman. — Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly: “I seek God! I seek God!” — As many of those who did not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter. Has he got lost? asked one. Did he lose his way like a child? asked another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? emigrated? — Thus they yelled and laughed. The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. “Whither is God?” he cried; “I will tell you. *We have killed him* — you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? Do we not need to light lanterns in the morning? Do we hear nothing as yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods, too, decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it? There has never been a greater deed; and whoever is born after us—for the sake of this deed he will belong to a higher history than all history hitherto.” Here the madman fell silent and looked again at his listeners; and they, too, were silent and stared at him in astonishment. At last he threw his lantern on the ground, and it broke into pieces and went out. “I have come too early,” he 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 men. Lightning and thunder require time; the light of the stars requires time; deeds, though done, still require time to be seen and heard. This deed is still more distant from them than the most distant stars—*and yet they have done it themselves*.” 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 always to have replied nothing but: “What after all are these churches now if they are not the tombs and sepulchers of God?”

126
Mystical explanations. — Mystical explanations are considered deep. The truth is that they are not even

superficial.

NOTES

[1] This is the first occurrence of this famous formulation in Nietzsche's books. We encounter it again in section 125 below, which has been anthologized again and again after it was quoted in the chapter on "The Death of God and the Revaluation" in the first edition of Kaufmann (1950), and then included in *The Portable Nietzsche*. It even brought into being a predictably stillborn movement in Christian theology that created a short-lived sensation in the United States. But most of those who have made so much of Nietzsche's pronouncement that "God is dead" have failed to take note of its other occurrences in his works which obviously furnish the best clues to his meaning. The most important passages include section 343 below and seven passages in *Zarathustra* (VPN, pp. 124f., 191, 202, 294, 371–79, 398f., and 426). This list includes only places in which death or dying are mentioned expressly. No less important are sections 109–56. [Please note: this footnote and all subsequent ones are taken from Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, edited by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Random House, 1974.]

[2] This is an allusion to the doctrine of the eternal recurrence.

[3] A group of early Greek philosophers who lived in Southern Italy. The most famous among them, Parmenides, was born about 510 B.C.

[4] "Naturalize" is here used in the sense of naturalism, as opposed to supernaturalism. Man is to be reintegrated into nature.

[5] This is the transition from the first part of Book III, which is cosmological-epistemological, to the second part, which deals with morality. Section 108 is best seen as a prologue to Book III. But it should be noted how the final sentences of sections 109, 110, and 113 point to Nietzsche's central concern with what is to become of man—a concern that is moral in the broad sense of that word although Nietzsche's views may seem "immoral" to some apologists for traditional morality.

[6] *Twilight of the Idols* contains a chapter with the title, "The Four Great Errors" (VPN, 492–501). Nietzsche does not repeat himself there, but there is a striking continuity in his thought.

[7] *verurteilt zum Individuum*: In German, Jean-Paul Sartre's celebrated dictum that man is "condemned to be free" (*L'être et le Néant*, 1943, p. 515; *Being and Nothingness*, translated by Hazel E. Barnes, 1956, p. 439) is rendered and often quoted as *zur Freiheit verurteilt*.

[8] Cf. the first sections of *Beyond Good and Evil*, especially "untruth as a condition of life" in section 4. What kind of error is meant is explained in section 110 (first paragraph) and in sections 111, 112, and 115.

[9] François de La Rochefoucauld (1613–80) whose *Maxims* are among the treasures of French literature. Their literary form and perfection as well as their unsentimental psychological penetration clearly made an impression on Nietzsche. Most of them (there are about seven hundred in all) are no more than two or three lines long; few, more than half a page. Without being at all mechanical or even deductive in manner, the author continually calls attention to the motive of human self-interest.

[10] Love based on pleasure.

[11] Loved based on vanity.

[12] It will be noted that Nietzsche's "quotation" is rather free, and that the pope did not really keep silent about "the knowledge and true worship" of God. But these criticisms do not undermine Nietzsche's point which he actually understates.

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