



## P R E F A C E

Nietzsche and Derrida on *idolatry*? Might this be a how-to manual—something like *Idolatry for Dummies*? Actually, if anything, this is a how-*not-to* manual in which Nietzsche turns out to be one of the instructors not because of his own idolatry (though he is guilty of that too) but because of his substantial abilities as idol detector. It may be difficult to imagine thinkers such as Nietzsche acting as spiritual mentors, but—at least in regard to idols—they have much to teach us. As the reader will soon discover, the philosophers considered in this book are particularly helpful in both detecting idolatry and showing us how idolatry functions.

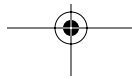
Before we proceed, though, I need to provide an explanation, sketch an outline, give an apology and add a disclaimer.

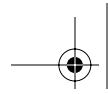
### **Explaining**

What do Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), Jacques Derrida (1930-) and Jean-Luc Marion (1946-) not only have to do with one another but also with Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) and Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995)? The answer is wrapped up with what has been termed the religious or theological turn in phenomenology. In 1991 Dominique Janicaud published a text titled *The Theological Turn of French Philosophy*.<sup>1</sup> Unlike the phenomenology practiced in the early

---

<sup>1</sup>Dominique Janicaud, *Le tournant théologique de la phénoménologie française* (Paris: Éditions de l'Éclat, 1991), translated as "The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology," pt. 1 of *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn": The French Debate* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), hereafter *PTT*. As Janicaud tells us, his text was written as a *constat*, a report on the French philosophical landscape between 1975 and 1990 (*PTT* 16). For Janicaud, the most remarkable feature of philosophizing in that period was its concern for the transcendent (or, as he puts it, "the opening to the invisible, to the Other, to a pure givenness, or to an 'archi-revelation'"—*PTT* 17). All of that may sound incomprehensible at this point, but it should become considerably clearer as we proceed. Also see Janicaud's "sequel" to *Tournant théologique* titled *La phénoménologie éclatée* (Paris: Éditions de l'Éclat, 1998).





stages of its reception in France, say with Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), the “new phenomenologists” such as Jean-Louis Chrétien, Michel Henry and Jean-Luc Marion use phenomenology to focus on religion. That turn in phenomenology is made possible by two transition figures, Levinas and the later Heidegger. Even though Levinas can be counted among the first French phenomenologists (in one sense), he makes the theological turn possible by turning phenomenology’s gaze toward “otherness” (that which is “different” from ourselves), particularly that of ultimate Other.

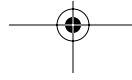
Heidegger is likewise a pivotal figure due to the increasing interest in religious themes in his later philosophy. And although already deeply influenced by Levinas in the 1960s, in the last two decades of the twentieth century Jacques Derrida himself became increasingly concerned with transcendence as worked out in ethics and religion, no doubt in part due to the influence of his former student Marion. While it may be too simple to say (as does Janicaud) that there has been a move from “atheist phenomenology” to “spiritualist phenomenology,” such has been the trend not just in France but also in the rest of European philosophy.<sup>2</sup>

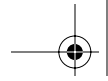
But this trend represents a significant reorienting of the focus of phenomenology.<sup>3</sup> Whereas the founder of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, stressed the essential “immanence” to consciousness of the phenomena, Levinas and Marion argue that phenomena remain transcendent (or “other” to us) and thus outside of our control. Although such transcendence is particularly true for God, it is also true of human beings and perhaps even for events or certain objects. This emphasis on transcendence is double-sided: the questioning of the immanence of phenomenology is done in order to “save” the transcendence of the phenomena. Both Levinas and Marion see any claims of having “grasped” not only God but even our neighbor or “the world as it really is” as idolatrous, for we in effect claim to take the place that can be filled only by One.

While one can interpret Levinas and Marion as simply rebelling against the foundational principles of phenomenology (as does Janicaud), one can also read them as stressing aspects that have always been part of phenom-

<sup>2</sup>Of course that move is at least partially understandable, given Sartre’s lack of religiosity, Levinas’s Judaism and Marion’s Roman Catholicism.

<sup>3</sup>This is not to say that religion has not been treated phenomenologically. But the relation between religion and phenomenology has always been complicated, to say the least.





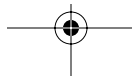
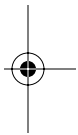
enology and so revealing a fundamental tension within phenomenology. The latter is the path I will follow here. However much Levinas and Marion rock the foundations of phenomenology, they remain deeply indebted to Husserl and Heidegger, so that the debate is internecine. When Derrida accused Marion of being a phenomenological heretic at the first Religion and Postmodernism Conference at Villanova University in 1997 (see *God the Gift and Postmodernism*, p. 66), the question was clearly a matter of who has stayed most true to phenomenological orthodoxy.

Yet the argument used by Levinas and Marion was foreshadowed in Nietzsche, who denounces almost the entire Western philosophical tradition as idolatrous. On Nietzsche's read, philosophers at least as far back as Plato have attempted to usurp the place of God and "take control" of the world. So phenomenologists have hardly been alone in such a project, and they have not been necessarily more adept at idolatry than their predecessors. Even the very concept known as "the God of the Philosophers" was simply an idol, created because it was useful to philosophers. Thus "the death of God" for Nietzsche is only the death of an idol that couldn't actually die because it was never alive. For Heidegger, the death of "the God of the Philosophers" spells the end of the project known as "metaphysics" (i.e., the attempt to *comprehend* being) and opens up the possibility that theology can be finally freed from philosophy in order to be true to faith.

Applauding both Nietzsche and Heidegger for helping release theology from its Athenian captivity, Marion argues for the possibility of a revelation that is truly transcendent, a *Logos* freed from any philosophical *logoi*. But in response to Marion, a somewhat less sanguine Derrida questions whether Jerusalem can so quickly rid itself of Athens, or even the degree to which it might wish to do so. Can there be a "phenomenology" of that which by nature escapes our grasp? Can we meaningfully speak (use a *logos*) of the transcendent—that which defies human *logos*? And would we really *want* such a revelation?

### Outlining

Linking the Johannine warning against idolatry (1 Jn 5:21) with the Pauline warning against vain philosophy (Col 2:8), the introduction explains the notion of "conceptual idolatry" and examines how both Nietzsche and Jesus "sound out" idols. In chapter one we follow Nietzsche's idol detection as it turns toward such philosophical idols as



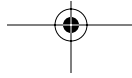


“System” and see how Christ as *Logos* differs from philosophical *logoi*. Chapter two examines the meaning of “the death of God” and its implications for the future of philosophy. Nietzsche’s surprising moral conventionality (as inheritor of the Greek conception of *agōn*) is contrasted to Christ’s fundamental break with “Morality” in chapter three. Chapter four provides a brief sketch of Levinas, with particular attention to the difficulties his thought raises, as background for Derrida and Marion.

Chapter five traces the basic notions of Derrida’s early thought and notes how they become central to his thinking on ethics and religion. The problems of “speaking” about God as worked out by Derrida, and the internal problems in Derrida’s thought, are the focus of chapter six. In chapter seven the basic account of phenomenology given in the introduction is expanded by a more detailed analysis of the problem of otherness in Husserl and Heidegger. Chapter eight puts that theory to work as we consider the ways Marion attempts to overcome idolatry. The possibility of Marion’s project, as well as the internal limitations of phenomenology, is the topic of chapter nine. Finally, the epilogue attempts to consider our position as knowers and witness bearers, in light of both the dangers and the value of philosophy for maintaining orthodoxy.

### **Apologizing in Advance**

Writing about idols is an audacious thing to do. Who am *I* to pronounce on idolatry—or even just to raise a few uncomfortable questions? As the old saying goes, pointing a finger at someone else means there are three pointing back at oneself. The more one considers the ways idols are created and maintained, the more one sees one’s own idols for what they are—and the more one humbly realizes that there must be other idols that still go undetected. Marion observes that “one must obtain forgiveness for every essay in theology” (*God Without Being*, p. 2). Theology always attempts the impossible: finite, sinful human beings speaking about the glorious, holy and infinite God. How can we adequately speak of God? Yet how can we do anything else? Such is theology’s fundamental *aporia*. We are *called* to speak of God and on his behalf, but we are always inadequate to do so. If theology requires repentance, then deconstructing idols requires even more. For one attempts not merely to speak of God but to show why other efforts in so speaking have gone awry, all the while knowing (or, more accurately, not *really* knowing) one’s own inadequacy.





**The Fine Print**

Finally, a small disclaimer. Any reader who expects that this text will serve as the infallible guide to deconstructing and overcoming idolatry should stop reading *now*. Idolatry is not the sort of thing that one simply overcomes. At best, one becomes aware of its presence and works very hard to root it out, ever aware that it can always return and that even our attempts to overcome idolatry can themselves turn into new forms of idolatry. For an idol is like a clever virus—its presence is often subtle, and it can take on new and shifting forms. But even if there is no effective vaccine against idolatry, it certainly can and must be fought.

\* \* \*

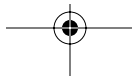
This text grew out of a senior seminar on postmodernity that I have taught at Wheaton College for a number of years. The seminar was initially motivated by a summer seminar led by Merold Westphal, hosted by Calvin College and sponsored by the Pew Foundation. My thanks to Merold (who has always been a source of great encouragement and wisdom), the participants in that original seminar and its sponsors.<sup>4</sup> But I am most grateful to my students at Wheaton, from whom I have learned so much. Many thanks to Jonathan Ellsworth for editing a very early version of this text and commenting on the present version. Although the feedback of all of my students has helped in ways too numerous to mention, I am grateful to Drew Dalton for commenting on the manuscript. I am particularly indebted to the careful reading by Daniel Hoisington, who has championed and challenged my thought along the way. James K. A. Smith's extensive comments likewise proved invaluable. John Koenig kept me from committing some errors of New Testament exegesis in the introduction. Of course, the usual disclaimer goes without saying. If there is anything of value in this text, then the wisdom of others undoubtedly helped make it possible. For errors, lack of insight and sheer stupidity I happily take responsibility.

I wish to thank Wheaton College for the release time made possible by the Junior Faculty Achievement Award and a much-appreciated sabbatical.

Finally, no words are adequate to express my gratitude to my wife, Jacqueline Cameron, for putting up with me during this lengthy process.

---

<sup>4</sup>Unfortunately Merold Westphal's book *Overcoming Onto-Theology: Toward a Postmodern Christian Faith* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001) appeared too late for me to take it into account in this text.

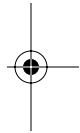




## 2

---

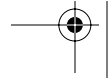
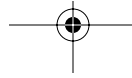
### “GOD HAD TO DIE”

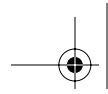


**G**od is dead’—Nietzsche. ‘Nietzsche is dead’—God.” So reads a popular “Christian” T-shirt. While I know of no recorded revelation in which Nietzsche’s death is pronounced by God, Nietzsche does indeed speak of God’s death. The question, though, is exactly how we should take this claim. An obvious possibility is put by Heidegger as follows:

One could suppose that the pronouncement “God is dead” expresses an opinion of Nietzsche the atheist and is accordingly only a personal attitude, and therefore one-sided, and for that reason also easily refutable through the observation that today everywhere many men seek out the houses of God and endure hardships out of a trust in God as defined by Christianity. (*WN* 57)

Heidegger dismisses this reading, partly because it misses Nietzsche’s point that metaphysics is at an end. While Heidegger’s read of Nietzsche as metaphysician (to which we shall return at the end of the chapter) has much to commend it, the death of God really does have a specifically *religious* impact. Moreover, Nietzsche’s pronouncement must be understood from the viewpoint of his own life and that of the culture at large.





### Who Died?

There is every reason to think that Nietzsche was a devout and true Christian believer in his childhood. Since his father and grandfather were Lutheran ministers and he was raised in a Christian home, Christian belief came to him naturally. At age thirteen Nietzsche wrote the following:

I have firmly resolved within me to dedicate myself for ever to His service. May the dear Lord give me strength and power to carry out my intention and protect me on my life's way. Like a child I trust in His grace: He will preserve us all, that no misfortune may befall us. But His holy will be done! All He gives I will joyfully accept.<sup>1</sup>

It is hard to imagine a stronger expression of genuine piety. Yet by the time he was eighteen, he no longer had any faith left. What happened?

Given Nietzsche's later attitude toward Christianity, one might expect that some traumatic event was responsible for his loss of faith. Such does not seem to have been the case. Moreover, although one might be tempted to speculate that Nietzsche rebelled against an overly strict upbringing, there is no evidence to that effect. When Nietzsche finally told his mother about his turn from faith, his demeanor seems to have been marked more by reluctance than by rebellion. His explanation to her was that he now thought Christianity to be simply superstition. Much later in life he described the change as "a skepticism that first appeared so early in my life, so spontaneously, so irrepressibly, so much in contradiction to my environment, age, models, origins" (*GM*, preface, p. 3). In his last text, Nietzsche claimed that his aversion to Christianity came about "from instinct."<sup>2</sup>

But what exactly was Nietzsche skeptical about? While I shall venture an answer to that question, it seems to me the answer is far from clear. Jörg Salaquarda notes that

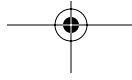
Nietzsche was familiar, above all, with two types of religious faith: on the one hand, the practical faith of his mother, which lacked theological reflection and sophistication entirely; and, on the other, the more rationalistic tradition of his aunt Rosalie, who was the dominating theological figure in the family after the death of his father.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>From Nietzsche's *Aus meinem Leben (From My Life)*, quoted in R. J. Hollingdale, *Nietzsche: The Man and His Philosophy* (London: Ark, 1985), p. 19.

<sup>2</sup>*EH*, "Why I Am So Clever," p. 1.

<sup>3</sup>Jörg Salaquarda, "Nietzsche and the Judeo-Christian Tradition," in *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche*, ed. Bernd Magnus and Kathleen M. Higgins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 92.





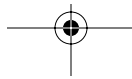
One might argue that Nietzsche's mother was the dominant influence on his faith in his early years. Certainly the kind of piety he expressed at thirteen seems more reflective of her faith than of Rosalie's rationalistic faith (what we might term today "classic liberal theology"). But as Nietzsche's thought matured, understandably Rosalie's influence became more prominent. Much of Nietzsche's adult criticism of Christianity is probably read most accurately as attacking the rationalistic strand of Christianity, in which Christianity is reduced to something purely "rational." Put bluntly: while Nietzsche as an adult cannot take his mother's pietistic sort of faith seriously, he is reluctant to criticize it. Conversely, while he takes the rationalistic expression of Christianity seriously, he finds that it rings hollow. In effect, Nietzsche applies his tuning hammer to this particular brand of "Christianity" and finds it to be simply an idol.

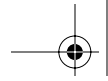
However questionable counterfactual speculation—asking "what if" questions—may be, it is interesting to wonder what Nietzsche might have made of a serious pietism that was coupled with robust theological reflection. Note that his mother and Aunt Rosalie provided him with examples of each taken separately. How might Nietzsche have responded to a faith that he would have been forced to take seriously that did not succumb to the criticism of being soulless? Perhaps his opinion of Christianity would have been somewhat different.

In any case, despite the fact that Nietzsche's skepticism was a personal phenomenon, it clearly reflected the culture of the time. Whereas belief in God had once been a dominant part of European culture, it was on the wane in Nietzsche's day. Thus Nietzsche's loss of faith seems to be the result of a realization that educated people of his day were finding religious belief decreasingly acceptable. His own move from devout faith to disbelief, then, parallels what he sees as the wider cultural shift. Note that the so-called death of God is proclaimed as a cultural phenomenon.

Haven't you heard of that madman who in the bright morning lit a lantern and ran to the marketplace crying incessantly, "I'm looking for God! I'm looking for God!" Since many of those who did not believe in God were standing around together just then, he caused great laughter. Has he been lost, then? asked one. Did he lose his way like a child? asked another. . . . "Where is God" he cried. "I'll tell you where. *We have killed him*—you and I. We are all his murderers." (*GS* 3:125)

The madman—who can be reasonably interpreted as representing





Nietzsche—considers himself an accomplice in the crime but not its architect or even executor. The role of the madman is instead prophetic in nature: he proclaims what has taken place and predicts what is to come. God's death places us in "an infinite nothing," in which there is only "empty space" (GS 125). Interestingly enough, the madman's hearers are described as "those who do not believe in God." While there may be others who do not already know the news, the people in the public square certainly do. Indeed they are comfortable enough with the news to heckle the messenger. Yet later in the same passage they are depicted as responding with "astonishment." Why so? One way of explaining their reaction is that while they already "know," they are surprised to hear anybody actually say it aloud and in public. It is a social outcast who is bold enough to say what many people think but are uncomfortable saying. It is likewise appropriate for a madman to *see* that to which some people are blind. As far back as the medieval period, it was thought that the insane have a special ability to discern what others might miss.<sup>4</sup>

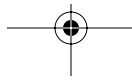
Who were these people "in the know"? Certainly the group would have included radical thinkers of Nietzsche's day. Nietzsche was not the first to write of the death of God. During his time as a university student, he undoubtedly read and was deeply influenced by Max Stirner.<sup>5</sup> Nearly thirty years before Nietzsche's own proclamation, Stirner had written that "man has killed God in order to become now—'sole God on high.'"<sup>6</sup> The parallel between this passage and the one above are striking.

But many unbelievers were to be found within the church. Such people attended church and made pretensions to belief. After all, in Nietzsche's day these were culturally expected behaviors. Although Nietzsche descended from a line of Lutheran ministers, it is hard to know how serious their respective Christian commitments were. Hollingdale comments that Nietzsche's grandfather, who was a significant influence on the young Friedrich, "strikes one as being about as

<sup>4</sup>It might also be tempting to say that without God one goes mad, though that is probably not a point that Nietzsche (who did eventually go mad but hadn't at this point) would have had in mind.

<sup>5</sup>Nietzsche never actually refers to Stirner in any of his texts, but he clearly had read him. See Max Stirner, *The Ego and His Own*, ed. John Carroll, trans. Steven T. Byington (London: Cape, 1971), p. 25, and Irving M. Zeitlin, *Nietzsche: A Re-examination* (Cambridge: Polity, 1994), pp. 113-22.

<sup>6</sup>Stirner, *Ego and His Own*, p. 109.





devout and other-worldly as Laurence Sterne,” but there is no indication that Nietzsche’s father had been a paragon of piety either.<sup>7</sup> Søren Kierkegaard’s complaints about the sickly state of the Lutheran Church in Denmark are well known, and the German Lutheran Church was no better.<sup>8</sup> Both had degenerated into bodies more important for conferring social status than for promoting genuine faith. The “faith” of many members had little to do with what committed Christians would consider real. Christian belief in the Germany of Nietzsche’s day was clearly under attack. Although there were many factors at work, three important ones should be mentioned.

First, exactly half a century before Nietzsche’s birth, Immanuel Kant published his *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1794).<sup>9</sup> There he argued that religion—specifically Christianity—needed to be reconfigured to meet the demands of reason. Anything not acceptable to modern science ought to be scrapped. One result of this rationalistic house-cleaning was that anything “miraculous” was no longer to be taken seriously. In effect, Kant gives us a philosophical version of the Jefferson Bible. But far more important, the basic categories of Christianity were subverted. Kant exchanges original sin and Christ’s incarnation for, respectively, “the evil principle” and “the good principle.” Being “religious” involves following the commands of “the Legislator of all duties.” God becomes no more than a moral commander, and Christianity is reduced to an exemplary moral system. There is still a need for God in such a system, but only as a kind of ground for moral responsibility. In turn, Christ’s place in Christianity is as moral example. No doubt much of the Christianity that Nietzsche experienced was this rational sort, in which Christ is merely a good man and following him is roughly equivalent to following the Golden Rule.

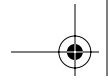
A second, and even more serious, blow to Christianity came from Ludwig von Feuerbach’s *The Essence of Christianity* (1841), in which he argues that the concept of god (specifically, the God of Christianity) is

<sup>7</sup>Hollingdale, *Nietzsche*, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup>One might argue that Kierkegaard and Nietzsche represent two very different responses to the Lutheran church of their day. Whereas Kierkegaard embraces a radical faith that requires that the individual choose either Christ or the world, Nietzsche rejects faith in Christ in favor of faith in the world (and we shall see what Nietzsche’s “worldly faith” looks like in the following section).

<sup>9</sup>Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, trans. Allen Wood and George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).





the product of human invention. What Christians call "God" is simply a projected composite of their own characteristics taken to the highest level of perfection. Thus Feuerbach contrasts "the true or anthropological essence of religion" (part one of his book) with "the false or theological essence of religion" (part two). Whereas Christians think their religion is theologically based, it actually has an anthropological basis. Religion arises from a desire of human beings to elevate themselves above other animals, to project a kind of vision of what they could become.

Man—this is the mystery of religion—projects his being into objectivity, and then again makes himself an object to this projected image of himself thus converted into a subject. . . . Thus man, while he is apparently humiliated to the lowest degree, is in truth exalted to the highest. . . . Man has no other aim than himself.<sup>10</sup>

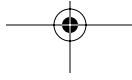
So religion ends up being like truth for Nietzsche: a way in which human beings exalt themselves. Like Nietzsche, Feuerbach thinks he is merely pointing out what actually *is* the case. While the idea that God is merely the result of "projection" has become the almost unquestioned orthodoxy among secular psychologists and many others, we must not forget how startling Feuerbach's thesis must have seemed in Nietzsche's day.

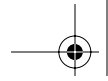
Given the reductionism of Kant and the atheism of Feuerbach, it is understandable why a further shift takes place. If Christ ends up being merely an example and Christianity only a set of moral teachings, why do we really need either? In his *Life of Jesus* (1835) David Strauss argued that Christianity is based not on "the historical Jesus" but on "the ideal Christ"—our moral example. Later, in *The Old Faith and the New* (1872), Strauss—who had read Feuerbach and been deeply influenced by him—took the next logical step and rejected Christianity altogether, even though he retained Christian morality. By the time Nietzsche was writing—the 1870s and 1880s—Strauss's "new faith" had become quite popular, even among many for whom church attendance was still a part of their routine.

It is in this context that the madman makes his announcement. So who died? The death of God involves for Nietzsche at least four deaths. First,

---

<sup>10</sup>Ludwig von Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), pp. 29-30.



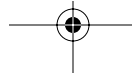


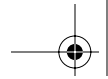
there is the loss of “the God of Christian faith”—the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who sent his Son Jesus Christ. Of course it is not so much that this particular God has “died” as that religious belief in any gods is, on Nietzsche’s account, no longer plausible. Nietzsche doesn’t argue that their existence is impossible; he just assumes it is very unlikely.

Nietzsche also finds implausible, second, “the God of the philosophers”—the *ens realissimum* (literally, the most real being). This is merely the “highest concept” of philosophy, “the last, the thinnest, the emptiest” (*TI*, “‘Reason’ in Philosophy,” p. 4). In the same way that Plato’s Forms were postulated out of thin air, so this concept of God is simply a philosophical creation. As noted earlier, Nietzsche doesn’t really argue against the Forms. Neither does he provide an argument against the God of the philosophers. But with the demise of the true world comes the demise of the god of the philosophers. Even philosophers cannot believe in this god anymore. Of course since the concept has precious little content, the death of the god of the philosophers does not represent much of a loss. Or we might go so far as to say that instead of being a loss, the death of the god of the philosophers represents a significant gain. For that god is merely an idol (what Levinas calls “a certain god inhabiting the world behind the scenes,” *OTB* 185), whose hollowness has finally been sounded out by Nietzsche’s hammer. “That which dies does not have any right to claim, even when it is alive, to be ‘God,’” points out Marion (*IAD* 1). The death of this god, this “non-god” who cannot hear and has no power and simply leads us astray, is cause for rejoicing. In this important respect, even if not in certain others, Christians can find in Nietzsche an ally—someone who proclaims what they themselves should have been more vocal in proclaiming.

Third, Nietzsche decries “the Christ of faith.” It is not merely that this figure is mythical but that this figure is the bearer of *bad* news, what Nietzsche calls the *dysangel*. Simply put, Christ’s bad news is a denial of life (we will address this charge shortly).

Fourth and finally, the historical figure of Jesus (who for Nietzsche is merely human) is a much more complicated story. Nietzsche makes a sharp distinction between him and Christianity. Speaking of Jesus, he says, “In reality there has been only one Christian, and he died on the Cross. The ‘Evangel’ *died* on the Cross. What was called ‘Evangel’ from this moment onwards was already the opposite of what *he* had lived” (*A* 39). Jesus the man—like all of the others—is dead, though at least he





actually was once alive, whereas the other three are simply fictions.

Not surprisingly, Christians of Nietzsche's day tended to respond to his announcement of God's death in one of two ways.<sup>11</sup> On the one hand, some saw his writings as simply attacks on Christianity and its message. Nietzsche was on this read a blasphemer, a dangerous madman, an immoral person and an antichrist. Since his "doctrines" were simply negations of the gospel, they were to be avoided. Certainly they were not to be taken seriously. The best antidote against Nietzschean poison was lack of contact. On the other hand, some Christians took Nietzsche and his criticism seriously. They saw Nietzsche as a perceptive critic who had accurately described the state of Christian belief in their time.

Among those who took Nietzsche's criticisms seriously, there were at least two responses. One was to argue that while Nietzsche's ideas were wrong, there was much to be learned from his astute diagnosis. Responding himself to the bankruptcy of liberal theology in the early part of the twentieth century, Karl Barth pointed out that what is called Christianity sometimes stands squarely against the teachings of Jesus.

The greatest witness against Christianity is the pitiable figure of the everyday Christian, whose complacency—he has no thought of seeking his salvation with fear and trembling—is a clear demonstration that the decisive assertions of Christianity are of no importance. It is the Church, which is the very thing against which Jesus preached and taught His disciples to fight, embodying the triumph of that which is anti-Christian no less than the modern state and modern nationalism.<sup>12</sup>

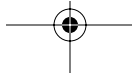
While Barth certainly does not adopt Nietzsche's ideas, he is convinced that Nietzsche's assessment of Christendom is—at least in some regards—all too true. The other response that took Nietzsche's criticism to heart argued that Nietzsche's ideas were not so far from Christian ideas after all. While I shall later argue that there is something to this claim, the attempt by figures such as theologian Hans Gallwitz to argue that Christianity needed to recover its more "manly" values seems questionable.<sup>13</sup>

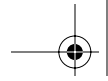
---

<sup>11</sup>For an enlightening account of Nietzsche's reception in Germany, see Steven E. Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany, 1890-1990* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), pp. 201-31.

<sup>12</sup>Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 3/4, *The Doctrine of Creation*, trans. Harold Knight et al. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1960), p. 238.

<sup>13</sup>Hans Gallwitz, "Friedrich Nietzsche als Erzieher zum Christentum," *Preussische Jahrbücher* 83/84 (1896). I shall take up the topic of "manliness" shortly.





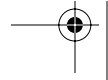
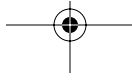
Yet all of these are distinctly Christian responses *against* Nietzsche. How did Nietzsche himself interpret the death of God? One can read it as being simply the next stage in the maturing of humanity. In order for human beings to grow up, God needed to die. Only then could they be (as Stirner had aptly put it) “*sole* God on high.” God’s existence is problematic because it creates responsibility. Thus, says Nietzsche, “we deny God, and denying God we deny responsibility” (*TI*, “The Four Great Errors,” p. 8).<sup>14</sup> If God is dead, we are no longer responsible to anyone other than ourselves. This idea of maturity is a particularly modern one, exemplified by Kant’s essay “What Is Enlightenment?” Just how “mature,” though, is this idea of God’s death? If one considers what Nietzsche says in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, there would seem to be a kind of childish aspect to the death of God. “But to reveal my heart entirely to you, friends: *if* there were gods, how could I endure not to be a god! *Therefore* there are no gods. I, indeed, drew that conclusion; but now it draws me” (*Z*, “On the Blissful Islands”).

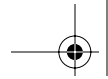
One could possibly read these remarks as Nietzsche’s (or Zarathustra’s) simply rejecting the God of the philosophers. If one takes this path, then the God being rejected is not the incarnate God. Yet I will not take such a path here. Although it may be dangerous to construe these remarks too autobiographically, I think they may give us an important clue to the real reason Nietzsche rejects God in general and Christianity in particular. True, it is Zarathustra who claims to “reveal [his] heart,” but it is hard not to think that such is Nietzsche’s heart also. Note the logic of this passage. God’s existence is not denied, say, because arguments for his existence fail to be persuasive. It is denied because Zarathustra cannot bear to acknowledge something or someone above him. If someone is going to get to be God, then it is not going to be someone *else*.

This idea that the death of God is not merely a general cultural movement but a direct result of personal will is taken up again later in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, where “the ugliest man” says:

He—*bad* to die: he looked with eyes that saw *everything*—he saw the depths and abysses of man, all man’s hidden disgrace and ugliness. . . .  
He always saw *me*: I desired to take revenge on such a witness—or

<sup>14</sup>Another possible way of reading Nietzsche here is that he is denying causality. But I won’t take that route.





cease to live myself. The god who saw everything *even* man: this god had to die! Man could not *endure* that such a witness should live. (Z, "The Ugliest Man")

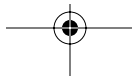
Note that God "dies" because human beings are unwilling to allow him to live. They may feel that they can no longer believe in him, but the inability may be self-induced. No one forces any of us into that position.

The death of God is, for Nietzsche, both positive and negative. At times Nietzsche depicts God's death as a great loss. After making his announcement, the madman "forced his way into several churches and there started singing his *requiem aeternam deo*" (GS 3:125).<sup>15</sup> It must not be forgotten that the madman prefaces his announcement by saying, "I'm looking for God!" There is a sense of resignation to having lost something that one once truly loved, like the child who mourns that she can no longer believe in Santa Claus. There is a further—and much more ominous—possible result. Christianity had provided the backbone of European culture. If it is lost, then does not nihilism loom in the future? Such a possibility worries Nietzsche. But the solution was not shoring up a sinking edifice but taking it down all the way. As he puts it, "That which is falling should also be pushed" (Z, "Of Old and New Law Tables," p. 20). One pushes, even if there is a tinge of nostalgia for what once stood. Of course at other times Nietzsche speaks of this transition buoyantly, calling it a "relief" (GS 5:343).<sup>16</sup> With God out of the way, it is finally time for something that affirms life.

But where does one go from there? Whereas Kant had reduced Christianity to little more than law with a lawgiver, Strauss takes the further step of removing the lawgiver. But he still retains the moral system of Christianity. So why not follow Strauss's way of dealing with the death of God? Apart from the fact that Nietzsche labels Strauss a philistine (and subjects *The Old Faith and the New* to merciless logical, stylistic and even grammatical criticism), he (rightly) takes Strauss's new "faith" to be baseless. Nietzsche writes that Strauss "announces with admirable candor that he is no longer a Christian, but that he does not want to disturb anyone else's solace. . . . [B]ut we realize with consternation that his ethics are constructed independently of the question: 'How do we conceive

<sup>15</sup>*Requiem aeternam deo* translates as "grant God eternal rest."

<sup>16</sup>One could criticize Nietzsche for being inconsistent here. Or one could just recognize that feelings are often conflicting.





the world?”<sup>17</sup> In other words, even though there is now no metaphysical basis for Christian morality, it remains quite undisturbed for Strauss. But how can one still take Christian morality seriously when its source and undergirding are no longer intact? Nietzsche thinks such a move is impossible.

If you give up Christian faith, you pull the *right* to Christian morality out from under your feet. This morality is simply *not* self-evident: one has to bring this point home again and again, despite the English dimwits. Christianity is a system, a view of things that is conceived as a connected *whole*. If you break off a major concept from it, faith in God, you break up the whole as well: there are no necessities left to hold onto anymore. . . . Christian morality is a commandment; its origin is transcendent; it is beyond all criticism, all right to criticism; it is true only if God is truth—it stands and falls with faith in God. (*TI*, “Raids of an Untimely Man,” p. 5)

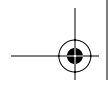
Although this passage is explicitly directed against George Eliot (one of the “English dimwits”), it can be taken as a general critique.<sup>18</sup> If what we call God is merely an idol, then his “truth” is merely an ideology. One cannot logically renounce the first and retain the second (as “Truth”), for the very conception of moral law requires a lawgiver. Thus to avoid being merely a blind ideologue, Strauss needs to take not just a half-step but a full one.

In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* Nietzsche refers to people who have lost faith in God but are still looking for something higher than themselves to justify their existence as “the last men” or “the ultimate men.” These are—for Nietzsche—the true nihilists. They assume there must be an “otherworldly” (literally, “metaphysical”) answer to the question “What is the meaning of life?” But they fail to find it. Some, like Strauss, attempt to erect an idol of morality even though they deny its otherworldly metaphysical foundation. Others erect what Nietzsche calls “the new idol,” the ideal of the state. But Nietzsche would consider both of these to be blatant examples of ideology—and also unsuccessful. Even though

<sup>17</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, “David Strauss the Confessor and Writer,” in *Unfashionable Observations*, trans. Richard T. Gray (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1995), §2.

<sup>18</sup>Despite the fact that Nietzsche’s caricature of Eliot as a “dimwit” is, even for Nietzsche, rather over the top, one must not forget that Eliot had championed and translated both Strauss’s *Life of Jesus* and Feuerbach’s *Essence of Christianity*. On Nietzsche’s read, she just didn’t understand the implications of their thought. Having given up Christian theology, she had to make herself “respectable again as a moral fanatic in the most frightening way” (*TI*, “Raids of an Untimely Man,” p. 5).





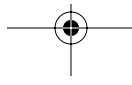
he cannot have Christianity as a whole, Strauss is willing to keep Christian morality because it consoles him. But what he ends up keeping is really just a version (or, more accurately, a *perversion*) of Christian morality that he has created to fit his own needs. For Strauss, following Christ means little more than "being a good person." The kind of radical abandonment of oneself to Jesus Christ—taking up one's cross—is simply nowhere to be found.

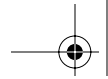
Similarly, the promise of the state is that (on Nietzsche's read) "it will give *you* everything if *you* worship it" (*Z*, "Of the New Idol"). The state is likewise something that we have set up to fulfill our needs. Ultimate Men crave comfort. Zarathustra describes them as follows: "We have discovered happiness,' say the Ultimate Men and blink. They have left the places where living was hard: for one needs warmth. One still loves one's neighbor and rubs oneself against him: for one still needs warmth" (*Z*, "Zarathustra's Prologue"). Ultimate Men are still willing to love their neighbor, but their motivation is personal gain. Should neighbor love prove difficult, it would likely be dropped too.

One might be tempted to call these Ultimate Men "the ultimate hypocrites." But how much do they exemplify "genuine" hypocrisy? That depends on the sense of hypocrisy we have in mind. If hypocrisy is claiming to be something that one is not, then they probably qualify as *hypokritai*—actors. After all, they act as if nothing has happened—as if the religious status quo has not been altered (though they "blink"). At least people like Strauss know that such is not the case, for he realizes that his redefined sense of "faith" is not coextensive with Christian orthodoxy.

But Nietzsche makes the seemingly counterintuitive observation that there are relatively few *real* hypocrites. "The few hypocrites I have met were imitating hypocrisy: they, like almost every tenth person today, were actors" (*TI*, "Raids of an Untimely Man," p. 18). Instead of being hypocrites because they are actors, they are only acting as hypocrites. To have genuine hypocrisy, thinks Nietzsche, there must be real belief. "Hypocrisy belongs to the ages of strong faith, when even if you were *forced* to display a different faith, you didn't let go of the faith you had" (*TI*, "Raids of an Untimely Man," p. 18). Nietzsche thinks that hypocrisy is hard to find because nobody really believes anything—or at least with strong conviction. The problem of a "lack of hypocrisy," then, is not limited to Christians; rather Nietzsche thinks it is a feature of the intellectual life of the time.

But if Ultimate Men are characterized by a lack of hypocrisy because





they are nihilists, can Nietzsche possibly be a nihilist also? Presumably he does not see himself as a hypocrite, at least in regard to beliefs concerning the meaning of life. Would that disqualify him from being a nihilist?

### **God's Death and the Possibility of Life**

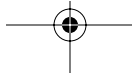
For Nietzsche, Christian morality is “*not* self-evident.” In fact he thinks that it is at odds with some of our deepest drives and desires. In that observation I think Nietzsche is somewhat correct (as we shall later see). But more important, Nietzsche thinks that Christian morality—not to mention Jewish and Platonic morality, for that matter—is fundamentally opposed to life. Whether he is right in this respect depends on what we mean by “life.”

Despite the fact that Nietzsche considers the Ultimate Men to be the nihilists, one of the most widely disseminated ideas about Nietzsche is that he himself is a nihilist. If nihilism is defined as the ideas (1) that human existence (or simply life) is meaningless and (2) that there are no values (moral or otherwise), then we can quite categorically say that Nietzsche is *not* a nihilist. Nietzsche has a very definite set of values and takes these very seriously. Indeed he even has a set of “moral” values.<sup>19</sup> But if nihilism is defined to mean “there are no universal or metaphysically based moral values—values of *true* ‘right and wrong’”—then Nietzsche most assuredly *is* a nihilist. Of course since Nietzsche thinks that the very idea of moral values is wrongheaded, he does not consider himself to be a nihilist (and it would be impossible for him to take himself to be a nihilist). But in order to see in what sense Nietzsche qualifies as nihilist, we need to consider what he means by “life.” Not only is Christian morality not “self-evident,” neither are Nietzsche’s conception of life and values.

“The wisest sages of all times have reached the same judgment about life: *it's worthless*” (*TI*, “The Problem of Socrates,” p. 1). Such might seem to be Nietzsche’s view. But it is actually a view that he attributes to Socrates. Speaking of the “sages,” with Socrates particularly in mind, Nietzsche thinks that we “should take a close look at them” before simply accepting their view (*TI*, “The Problem of Socrates,” p. 1). On Nietzsche’s read, there are at least three problems with the sages’ judgment.

First, the very attempt to assess life’s value from the perspective of a

<sup>19</sup>See the chapter “Nietzsche’s Virtues” in the delightful book *What Nietzsche Really Said* by Robert C. Solomon and Kathleen Higgins (New York: Schocken, 2001).





living person is futile. Here Nietzsche seems to be guided by the assumption of modern science that one needs to take an "objective" (outside or removed) position to know something aright. Since we are "parties to the dispute" (*TI*, "The Problem of Socrates," p. 2), there is no way we can step outside, no possibility of making an "objective" judgment on the matter. Of course the claim to be able to step outside is as old as philosophy itself.

Second, the idea that life must have some sort of justification or meaning outside of itself is simply misguided. Already with Socrates there is the perceived need to provide "reasons" that life is valuable and that one's values have a moral force. For Nietzsche, life is simply valuable in itself; it needs no justification or "meaning." He thinks all claims along the lines of "Life is valuable because . . ." are wrongheaded. Life is *intrinsically* valuable, so it needs no further or other justification.

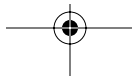
Third, the attempt to judge life places oneself above it. I become superior to life (since I and my reason become its measure), and in effect I take the place of God. It might be thought that Nietzsche advocates precisely this move with his idea of the death of God. But I think Nietzsche suggests (even though he fails to spell it out clearly) exactly the opposite: the death of God means that *no one* can be God. For Nietzsche, Platonic philosophy and Christianity have both been attempts to play God; but neither can be justified. Richard Rorty can be read as an heir of Nietzsche when he calls for the need "to de-divinize the world" in such a way that "we no longer worship *anything*."<sup>20</sup> Of course whether Nietzsche (or for that matter Rorty) ends up attempting to be God (or god) in his own little way is certainly open to question.

Yet why does Socrates feel compelled to provide a justification for life in the first place? On Nietzsche's read, the need is due to an encroaching *décadence* of Athenian culture.<sup>21</sup> Aristocratic Athenians had always assumed that they were noble. They exhibited a remarkable sense of self-certainty, taking it for granted that their particular traits exemplified "goodness."<sup>22</sup> But whereas Athenians had been sure that this conception of virtue (*doxa*) was equivalent to "true" virtue (*epistēmē*), now they

<sup>20</sup>Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 21-22.

<sup>21</sup>Nietzsche always uses the French term, as he does for *ressentiment*.

<sup>22</sup>Elsewhere Nietzsche says that "the 'well-born' simply *felt* themselves to be the 'happy'" (*GM* 1:10).





were not so sure. Already in Socrates' day the Sophists were arguing that Athenian morality was purely provincial and thus could make no claims to universality.

Enter the good doctor Socrates, whose *pharmakon* (literally both "medicine" and "poison") is the art of reasoning or dialectic. Socrates provides an "equation" in which "reason=virtue=happiness" (*TI*, "The Problem of Socrates," p. 10). Because we are by nature "rational" beings, if we act according to reason, we shall be virtuous and thus happy. But since virtue is defined by rationality and since rationality is at least often (even though not always) opposed to our instinctual desires, being virtuous sometimes (often? usually?) requires going against our instincts.

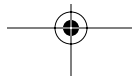
On Nietzsche's account, this formula does not shore up the crumbling foundations of Athenian morality; it instead retools it in a different direction. The old sense of morality was based precisely on instincts. So Socrates' cure for *décadence* proves to be a poison to life. This is why Nietzsche thinks that Socrates gives us only a different sort of *décadence*. For Socrates, life can be given meaning only by way of rational justification; for Nietzsche, rational justification is what kills life, since life needs no justification.

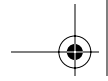
Nietzsche's conception of life (*das Leben*) can be partially explained by his notions of the "will to power" and what he somewhat misleadingly calls "master morality." But one must be clear as to what he means by these terms, for they are often misinterpreted (and complete clarity on them would be, at best, what Husserl terms an "infinite task").

Let's begin with the will to power. The narrower (and most common) interpretation of the will to power goes along the following lines. According to Nietzsche, all of us wish to have power, and indeed our sole motivation for anything we do in life is to have power: whatever would give us power is what we seek.<sup>23</sup> Of course we may not always be correct in determining that something will actually give us power, but such is always our motivation. On this read Nietzsche is a "psychological egoist," someone who insists that however altruistic we may appear at times, our motives are always selfish. Even Jesus Christ is motivated by the will to power.

But there is also a much broader interpretation. David Allison aptly

<sup>23</sup>One finds such a read, to varying degrees, in Arthur Danto, *Nietzsche as Philosopher* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965); Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*; and Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, 4th ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1974).





characterizes the will to power as "the will to live, the pulsions of instinct and impulse, the continually transforming energy of excess and superabundance that constitutes the whole of organic and inorganic existence."<sup>24</sup> It is the force within us that causes us not merely to strive for high goals but to create ever greater challenges for ourselves. On Nietzsche's account, all that is beautiful, majestic, creative and worthy of praise has the will to power as its source.

Is either of these readings to be preferred at the expense of the other? I think they are both necessary, and even taken together they in no way exhaust the multiple meanings of "will to power." The will to power *is* creative and life-giving—that is, good and beautiful things do indeed spring from the will to power. Yet—at least it seems to me—this creativity is always ultimately directed toward oneself and always involves some degree of appropriation. Robert Solomon and Kathleen Higgins quote the following passage from Nietzsche to show that even love for Nietzsche arises from the will to power; however, Nietzsche's version of love turns out to be highly problematic.<sup>25</sup>

What distinguishes those good-natured people whose faces radiate good will from the rest? They feel well in the presence of another person and quickly fall in love with him; consequently they wish him well, and their first judgment is: "I like him." In such people there is the following succession: the wish to appropriate (they do not scruple much over the worth of the other person), quick appropriation, delight in possession, and action for the benefit of the person possessed. (*GS* 3:192)

Being well-disposed toward and liking another person are genuine characteristics of love. But appropriating the other, presumably for one's own ends, and treating the other as a possession and conquest are not part of love at all (even if one also takes action on behalf of the other). One does not love by possessing. This passage well shows the intermingling characteristics of the will to power.

---

<sup>24</sup>David B. Allison, *Reading the New Nietzsche* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), p. 108.

<sup>25</sup>See Solomon and Higgins, *What Nietzsche Really Said* (in which the Kaufmann translation of *The Gay Science* is cited). Higgins and Solomon are to be commended for helping dispel many long-standing myths about Nietzsche, both in this popular text and in their more scholarly writings. Yet in the attempt to show that Nietzsche's thought is far more plausible than most people assume, they sometimes remove the rough edges of Nietzsche's ideas and make them overly tame. I read Nietzsche as *wanting* to shock the reader with ideas that are not readily systematized or domesticated.





What then of “master morality”? Nietzsche defines it by saying that in the “masters,” the good equals noble, proud, exalted; in contrast, bad equals vulgar, plebeian, contemptible. The opposite of these noble people are cowardly and unsure of themselves, people who are followers rather than leaders. Noble people regard themselves as creators of values: they do not adopt the values of others but create them. Aristocrats have historically exemplified master morality, and Nietzsche argues that these people were always originally barbarians whose strength was not primarily physical but of the soul.

Just who are these “masters,” though? It is common—though seriously misguided—to assume that Nietzsche has someone like Conan the Barbarian in mind. After all, the film with that name takes as its epigraph a portion of one of Nietzsche’s epigrams in *Twilight of the Idols*: “What doesn’t kill me makes me stronger” (*TI*, “Epigrams and Arrows,” p. 8).<sup>26</sup> Equally misguided is the interpretation of J. P. Stern, who claims that “no man came closer to the full realization of self-created ‘values’ than A. Hitler.”<sup>27</sup> Nietzsche’s “overman” is characterized not so much by strength of body (Conan’s strong suit) but by strength of character, depth and creativity.<sup>28</sup> Hitler was certainly characterized by determination, but it is hard to imagine Nietzsche considering him creative or particularly “deep.” Admittedly, it is true that Nietzsche often speaks of Napoleon in glowing terms, calling him a “master,” one of the “great human beings” and even “*ens realissimum*” (*TI*, “Raids of an Untimely Man,” pp. 44-45). Yet Napoleon lacks “noblesse of character” according to Nietzsche, so there is a deficiency (*WP* 1026).

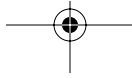
The poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe provides a better example for Nietzsche.

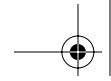
Goethe conceived of a human being who was strong, highly cultivated, skilled in everything bodily, with self-control and self-respect—a human being who is allowed to dare to accept the entire scope and wealth of naturalness, who is strong enough for this freedom; a tolerant human being, not out of weakness but out of strength. (*TI*, “Raids of an Untimely Man,” p. 49)

<sup>26</sup>Nietzsche also claims that “the free human being is a *warrior*” (*TI*, “Raids of an Untimely Man,” p. 38).

<sup>27</sup>J. P. Stern, *A Study of Nietzsche* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 117.

<sup>28</sup>Though sometimes translated as “superman,” the term *Übermensch* is more literally rendered as “overman.” Kaufmann points out that Nietzsche does not invent this term but finds a precedent in the classical writer Lucian, who speaks of a *hyperanthropos*. See Kaufmann’s *Nietzsche*, p. 307.





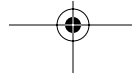
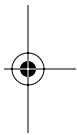
Although Goethe has a healthy appreciation for all things bodily—such as the passions—he also admires inner control. It is this combination of strengths that Nietzsche so praises. Thus as strange as the juxtaposition might sound, it is understandable for Nietzsche to describe the master or overman as “the Roman Caesar with Christ’s soul” (*WP* 983). As we shall see shortly, Jesus is a kind of hero figure for Nietzsche, for he represents a strength of character that Nietzsche finds highly admirable. Coupling the inner strength of Jesus Christ with the Roman emphasis on outer strength would yield a “complete” man—a true “master.”

In contrast, “slave morality” arises out of the common herd, the dregs of society, those uncertain of themselves. The slaves attempt to persuade themselves that the aristocrats are not really happy and not truly “good.” In place of the master values, the slave exalts precisely “those qualities which serve to make easier the existence of the suffering,” such as patience, humility and friendliness (*BGE* 260). Nietzsche goes on to label this a morality of utility. Of course the master also acts according to utility, choosing those values that best enable life to flourish. But adherents of slave morality would not see themselves as practicing it to benefit themselves: they would see themselves as being “good” for “moral” reasons. On Nietzsche’s read, however much the slave might wish to protest otherwise, slaves find it useful to adhere to slave morality to better their lot in life.

Nietzsche claims that slave morality arises out of the slaves’ resentment (*ressentiment*) of those in power over them. In effect, they are guilty of what retailers call “price switching”—taking an inexpensive price tag and placing it on an expensive item. Except their switch is a complete reversal of all values, in which vices become virtues and virtues are turned into vices. Thus weakness becomes admirable and the strength of the aristocracy is seen as something evil.

Of course the major problem with slave morality is that it denies life, which for Nietzsche is at heart appropriation—taking what we need and making it our own. The very foundation of existence—the will to power—is denied and repressed (even though it still manifests itself in subtle ways). The values of the master, on the other hand, affirm life.

Technically speaking, of course, master morality is no morality at all. Nietzsche considers it “beyond good and evil”—the title of the principal text in which Nietzsche discusses this theme. There are two senses in which this is true. First, a master does not submit to the ruling ideas of





what constitutes good and evil. The master has no need of moral affirmation—the recognition by a second party that the “right” thing has been done. Second, such a person recognizes morality for what it is—a human creation that has no real basis. Nietzsche thinks that the concept of “evil” was invented by the ancient Zarathustra (i.e., Zoroaster), which is to say, “it did not descend to them as a voice from heaven” (Z, “Of the Thousand and One Goals”). The concept has plagued Western thought ever since. In place of the opposition “good and evil,” Nietzsche gives us merely “good and bad,” with “good” being whatever promotes life and “bad” whatever impedes it. On Nietzsche’s account, there simply is no true moral system that prescribes a moral right and wrong. Morality is not something that has been revealed, nor is it even something we discover by reason. Rather we create it, so it is an idol of our own making. In fact, the very concept of morality is a human creation for Nietzsche. As we have seen, though, Nietzsche still affirms a set of values.

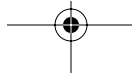
### Heidegger on Nietzschean Idolatry

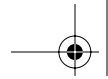
Does the philosophy of Nietzsche spell the end of transcendence, the end of the possibility that human beings could go beyond themselves (or perhaps just the end of human beings’ *thinking* that they could go beyond themselves)? And what becomes of idolatry?

On Heidegger’s read:

The pronouncement “God is dead” means: The suprasensory world is without effective power. It bestows no life. Metaphysics, i.e., for Nietzsche Western philosophy understood as Platonism, is at an end. Nietzsche understands his own philosophy as the countermovement to metaphysics, and that means for him a movement in opposition to Platonism. (WN 61)

For Nietzsche, the *requiem aeternam deo* is likewise the “*requiem aeternam metaphysicae*.” Although he seems more than a little unclear as to where thinking ought now to go, certainly it must give up what he takes to be the hallmarks of metaphysics. First, it must avoid nihilism, or at least nihilism of the sort that devalues without revaluing. As we have seen, Nietzsche fears such a nihilism and wishes to keep it at bay. Second, thinking may no longer invoke the suprasensory. If one appeals to that which cannot be verified by the senses, then one makes a move that can be neither supported nor countered. So Nietzsche wishes to avoid getting caught in that game. Third, since for Nietzsche “systemiz-





ing" and metaphysics go hand in hand, one must avoid any kind of system that forces reality into an artificial construct. The best way to keep from systemizing is to resist tying up loose ends.

But as Heidegger reminds us, the danger of a countermovement is that it can easily end up being essentially the same as what it opposes. Heidegger gives us what at first glance may seem a rather surprising read of Nietzsche.<sup>29</sup> Even though Nietzsche sees himself as finally having overcome the philosophical failing known as metaphysics, Heidegger argues that Nietzsche gives us yet another instance of metaphysics. In fact, on Heidegger's read, Nietzsche's metaphysics proves to be a particularly spectacular example of metaphysics, one that reduces everything to the basic category of will to power and thus ends up being itself a manifestation of that will to power. Despite all of Nietzsche's talk of moving beyond metaphysics, and thus beyond Western philosophy as usually practiced, he remains at least somewhat entrenched in that tradition.

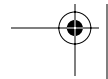
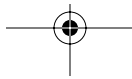
What are we to make of Heidegger's claim that Nietzsche regards nihilism as "the fundamental event" and "inner logic" of Western history (WN 67)? We have already seen that nihilism can be variously defined, so what does Heidegger mean? Heidegger reads Nietzsche as claiming that the movement of Western metaphysics has been characterized by a simultaneous overturning and repositing of values, making nihilism into "an ongoing historical event" (WN 66). Thus nihilism usually involves a twofold movement—a "devaluing" and a "revaluing" of values.

While such an interpretation of Nietzsche and of the history of Western thought may perhaps be too sweeping,<sup>30</sup> certainly Platonism (not to mention Christianity) can be interpreted as overturning a set of values and setting up another in its place. Similarly, the death of God (the

---

<sup>29</sup>Heidegger's account of Nietzsche has been criticized for (1) being primarily based on *The Will to Power* and (2) overemphasizing the notion of "will to power" in Nietzsche's thought. *Will to Power* is a collection of aphorisms from Nietzsche's notebooks, compiled by his—how might one say this politely?—philosophically challenged sister Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche. The book (published after Nietzsche's death) was initially acclaimed as the last word on his thinking, but it has now come to be viewed by many as suspect and perhaps even something to be disregarded. My own view places it somewhere in between. While Nietzsche's texts should be taken as the standard for understanding his thought, *Will to Power* is a useful supplement. Moreover, the notion of will to power *does* play a central role in Nietzsche's thought from beginning to end, and often does so without being explicitly named—however much some interpreters might prefer it otherwise.

<sup>30</sup>Heidegger's evidence for this claim is the second aphorism in *Will to Power*: "What does nihilism mean? *That the highest values are devaluing themselves.*"





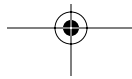
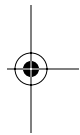
suprasensory) can be seen as the devaluing of a long-held set of values. Yet this latter movement is only onefold, for it devalues without replacing. Nietzsche calls it “incomplete nihilism,” which “attempts to escape nihilism without revaluing our values” (*WP* 28). Such is the solution of the Ultimate Men like Strauss, who undermine the old values but still hold on to them. In contrast, Nietzsche wants to be a “complete nihilist” by taking the further step of reevaluation.

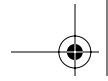
There are several ways Nietzsche might be criticized for being merely a partial nihilist. However much he criticizes Strauss, he may perhaps be more like Strauss than he cares to admit. Nietzsche actually does admit to being a *décadent*, but he claims to have “resisted.”<sup>31</sup> To whatever extent, though, that Nietzsche exemplifies and thus fails to overcome Christian values—in the sense of not merely renouncing them intellectually but also giving up all traces of them practically—to that extent he is only a partial nihilist.<sup>32</sup> But Heidegger suggests that there is an even more serious problem. On his read, to escape metaphysics altogether (as opposed to becoming merely a countermovement that ends up being swept into what it opposes) requires “the overturning of the nature and manner of valuing” (*WN* 70), not merely the substitution of one set of values with another. Nietzsche attempts to break with metaphysics and its valuing system by adopting the value of “life,” which ostensibly does not appeal to any realm beyond and so would seem to be classifiable as a nonmetaphysical value. Does Nietzsche *really* overturn “the nature and manner of valuing”? Does he not instead just substitute a different sort of value? Is his system really all that different, then?

It seems to me that one can add a third aspect to this charge of not being a “complete” nihilist. Not only does Nietzsche not really break from the valuing game, but his “new” values turn out to be not so new: he is the champion of some very old-fashioned values. Thus for all of Zarathustra’s brash talk of being the one “who smashes [the] tables of values, the breaker, the law-breaker” (*Z*, “Zarathustra’s Prologue,” p. 9), Nietzsche *himself* knows better. He heartily endorses earthly values and sees the move of anarchy as fraught with *aporia*. Instead of being a cre-

<sup>31</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1966), preface.

<sup>32</sup>Of course if “overcoming” requires giving up all traces, then there is simply no overcoming. Yet if Nietzsche exhibits specifically *Christian* values, he is (by his own definition) a *décadent*.





ator, Nietzsche is more a Stoic affirmer of life and its values. Indeed the ideal of the creator seriously conflicts with Nietzsche's adoption of the essentially Stoic view that one ought to accept the past, present and future for what they are rather than attempt to change them. If these moments are all essentially what they are, there is no real sense in which one can be a creator. At best, one "creates" by accepting what is and must be.

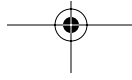
Here it is helpful to turn back to the discussion of Colossians 2:8 in the introduction. In that passage Paul characterizes "philosophy and empty deceit" as "according to human tradition" and "according to the elemental spirits of the universe" (Col 2:8). The term "elemental spirits" or simply "elements of the world" (*stoicheia tou kosmou*) is not completely clear in Paul. Since *stoichea* derives from *stoichos* (row or rank), one can read Paul as referring to a hierarchy of spiritual powers (as do many commentators) or even the Old Testament law.<sup>33</sup> But since Paul links "philosophy" with these "elemental spirits," it seems plausible to interpret him as talking about philosophy that is concerned with the elements. Of course much of early Greek philosophy is concerned with understanding the elements of the world, whether material elements like earth, air, fire and water or more spiritual elements like the *nous* and *logos*. But it is hard to imagine a more obvious candidate here than Stoicism, which takes its basis precisely from the *stoicheia* of the cosmos.

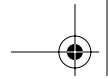
Since Paul himself exhibits certain Stoic tendencies and there are striking similarities between Stoic and Christian thinking, he should not be read as simply denouncing all aspects of Stoic thought. Paul's point is not that philosophy (or Stoicism in particular) is simply "wrong" but that it has been surpassed (and thus shown to be inferior) by the advent of the *Logos*. Thus he says that "while we were minors, we were enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world" (Gal 4:3) and Christ represents our final overcoming of that enslavement (whether defined as philosophy or as the law).

An important comparison can be drawn here between Jesus and Nietzsche. Jesus overcomes the law by fulfilling it (a point to which the next chapter will return at length). We can argue that he does the same with the *logos* of philosophy. His is not the simple overturning or negation of either the law or philosophy but a *fulfillment* that both affirms

---

<sup>33</sup>Paul implies that the "weak and beggarly elemental spirits" are the rules and observances of the law (Gal 4:9-10).





and negates. Likewise, Nietzsche rereads Stoicism. Yet does Nietzsche truly overcome or surpass it? The next chapter will return to this question as well.

Far from being a complete nihilist, then, Nietzsche seems to exemplify precisely what he seeks to overcome. Heidegger accuses Nietzsche of not really understanding the essence of nihilism, which for Heidegger is the very attempt of “valuation.” The problem with the valuation game is that in order to value something, one must place oneself above it in the role of judge. But in so doing one *devalues* that thing. To be fair to Nietzsche, he seems to understand rather well that this is the problem with all philosophical attempts at valuing life (a point noted earlier). Yet I wonder whether Nietzsche might fall into the trap of valuing life by some conception of life. Does he ultimately place himself under life, or does he allow life merely to value itself?

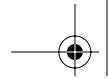
Further, does Nietzsche fall prey to the charge of systemizing? On the one hand, we have seen that sometimes he goes to great lengths to avoid any reductive philosophizing. This is particularly evident in his discussion of truth. Certainly Nietzsche does not display the usual philosophical discomfort with loose ends and even contradictions. On the other hand, the notion of the will to power can be read as the ultimate unifying idea in Nietzsche’s system. It is hard to imagine that anything would escape its grasp. While the will to power may not be the most systematic *logos*, it still seems to qualify as a *logos* of sorts and proves to be a heavy-handed explanation. And following in Plato’s footsteps, Nietzsche never really *argues* for the will to power; rather it is merely asserted.

We have seen that for Nietzsche the whole of Western thought can be characterized by a successive overturning of values that is rooted in the will to power. If even valuation itself springs from the will to power, then all valuation must ultimately spring from domination. Heidegger connects the will to power with Nietzsche’s emphasis on the creativity of the artist. For Nietzsche, art is the essence of all willing that opens up perspectives and takes possession of them.

Still, Heidegger thinks Nietzsche helps us to see a kind of idolatry that we might easily otherwise miss. Heidegger reads Nietzsche’s attack as being directed against a very particular conception of God—as *ens realissimum*—and Heidegger is all for such an attack.

The heaviest blow against God is not that God is held to be unknowable,





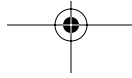
not that God's existence is demonstrated to be unprovable, but rather that the god held to be real is elevated to the highest value. For this blow comes precisely not from those who are standing about, who do not believe in God, but from the believers and their theologians who discourse on the being that is of all beings most in being, without ever letting it occur to them to think on Being itself, in order thereby to become aware that, seen from out of faith, their thinking and their talking is sheer blasphemy if it meddles in the theology of faith. (WN 105)

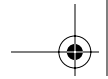
Thus Heidegger insists that "the death of God" is best interpreted as the death of Christendom. For Nietzsche, Christendom is the historical, world-political phenomenon of the church and its claim to power within the shaping of Western humanity and its modern culture. Christendom in this sense and the Christianity of New Testament faith are not the same. Even a non-Christian life can affirm Christendom and use it as a means of power, just as, conversely, a Christian life does not necessarily require Christendom. Therefore a confrontation with Christendom is not necessarily an attack on what is Christian, any more than a critique of theology is necessarily a critique of faith, the interpretation of which theology is said to be. So one can view Nietzsche's criticism as against an idol of a particular sort, one that Christians themselves would not wish to affirm.

Of course the true God can never be reduced to *ens realissimum* or the highest being or the greatest value. As Heidegger points out, "Never can man put himself in the place of God, because the essence of man never reaches the essential realm belonging to God" (WN 100). God is always God and resists all of our attempts at idol creation. Yet Heidegger sees these *attempts* as idolatry of the greatest order. Not only are they truly monumental in scale (for what could be a greater idol than, say, "God as highest being"?), but they seem like ways to *honor* God. So they are all the more enticing and deceptive. But they are just further examples of substituting a human *logos* for the divine *Logos*.

This is why Heidegger says that "thinking begins only when we have come to know that reason, glorified for centuries, is the most stiff-necked adversary of thought" (WN 112). Echoing Heidegger, we can say that true worship begins only when we renounce the creations of our own reason and worship God alone.

However much Nietzsche ends up succumbing to an idolatry of his own, he still can prove to be a helpful ally in the fight against idols.





When Nietzsche pronounces the death of God, he pronounces the death of what can be only an idol or an ideology. That death should be the cause for much rejoicing, for the death of an idol means at least the possibility of the life of an icon. As Christians, we should follow Nietzsche in using the hammer to sound out idols, even if they turn out to be idols graven by our own hands or minds. Moreover, Nietzsche is to be commended for his unrelenting attack on the rationalistic forms of Christianity of his day, for they too were idols. There are few more penetrating analyses of the bankruptcy of the “Christianity” of Kant and Strauss than Nietzsche’s.

But is Nietzsche right about the meaning of life? How does Nietzsche’s conception of life differ from that of Jesus? We turn to those questions in the following chapter.

