

Friedrich Nietzsche

“Examine and comment on Nietzsche’s ideas about religion.”

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Section 1: Introduction

Nietzsche was born in Röcken bei Lützen in 1844, a period when faith in Christianity was reaching an all time low, with the rise of rationalism and works such as Darwin’s *On the Origin of the Species* starting to undermine religious beliefs previously held as sacrosanct. It was also a period dominated by the romantic philosophy of thinkers such as Hegel. Romanticism was concerned with spirituality and things beyond our world, something Nietzsche would later reject.

Nietzsche spent the first four years of his life in the rural German town where his father (and grandfather before him) was minister of the Lutheran Church. At the age of four Nietzsche’s father passed away, and the family moved. Nietzsche rebelled against his Christian roots in his teens and adopted a sceptical view of religion.

As he progressed through boarding school and entered the University of Bonn in 1864, Nietzsche showed great academic potential. In fact he impressed his tutor so much he was awarded his degree without examination, and shortly afterwards left for a teaching position at the University of Basel, in Switzerland, at the unprecedented age of 24. In this time Nietzsche had shown great interest in Schopenhauer, an interest he shared with his new friend Richard Wagner, whose music inspired him greatly.

In 1879 however, upon publishing *Human All Too Human*, Nietzsche broke away from both Schopenhauer and Wagner. The break-away from Wagner was probably due to conflicts between Wagner’s lifestyle and Nietzsche’s maturing philosophy – Wagner was

nationalistic and anti-Semitic, and Christian; three things Nietzsche's later works heavily criticised. Nietzsche's subsequent works were almost opposites of Schopenhauer's in some areas, for example Schopenhauer's ideas about love, sympathy and self-sacrifice are the complete opposite of Nietzsche's materialism and focus on the individual. At the same time poor health forced Nietzsche to resign from his position at the university, expatriated from his native Germany he spent much of the rest of his life wandering Europe.

In 1889 Nietzsche had a mental breakdown; he remained insane thereafter until his death in 1900. His sister, Elisabeth, who had been working to establish an Aryan, anti-Semitic colony, cared for Nietzsche in his final years, and used some of his philosophy regarding master and slave morality as justification for beliefs which ultimately became Nazism.

Section 2: Works

The Birth of Tragedy (1872) was Nietzsche's first published book, in it he primarily deals with classical Greek culture and its possible applications in modern society. Nietzsche, in tune with the romanticist thinkers of the time, saw pre-Socratic Greek culture as a healthy society since it inspired creativity. Nietzsche observed that since that time culture had been more and more dragged down by logic and legalism; as Urvin Zeitling says; "*For Nietzsche, the primary aim of a healthy and robust culture ought to be the fostering and nurturing of higher specimens of all sorts, an aim to which all else ought to be subordinated.*"ⁱ This principle was later expanded by Nietzsche into master and slave moralities, where slave morality is the altruistic society we currently live in, and master morality is the creative, individualistic society we should be forming.

Nietzsche wanted to see us recover some of this creativity, which no doubt influenced his close friendship with the bohemian composer, Wagner. Nietzsche used a metaphor of the two gods, Apollo and Dionysius to explain his ideas, where Dionysius represents poetry and creativity, and Apollo a more narrow-minded and traditional approach to art. Quite how well this metaphor stands up to close scrutiny is dubious, given that Nietzsche contorts the interpretations of these gods to his own ends.

ⁱ '*Nietzsche – A re-examination.*' By Urvin Zeitung, Policy Press 1994

Nietzsche also expanded these ideas into how we deal with suffering in the world, comparing Dionysius and Apollonian approaches. The Apollonian approach was, for the Greeks, the Olympian gods. By “passing the buck” to the gods, the Greeks could feel better about suffering knowing that the gods were working for them and without the gods they would have perished long ago. Nietzsche, however, says this does not satisfy the ‘soul’ since it means our lives are controlled by external forces. Nietzsche says that Dionysius allows man to transcend that suffering; “*Dionysus removes the veil from men's eyes, showing them the grand, dark chaos that sits in their hearts, and in the hearts of all men. Dionysus urges man to rejoice in this chaos, to lose himself, and thus to grow beyond his suffering.*”ⁱ By this Nietzsche meant that suffering is not an intrinsically ‘bad’ thing for us to endure, and that we should be able to use our suffering to our advantage.

However, Michael Tanner quickly points out that while it can be said that Apollo and Dionysus are in opposition, “*that should not be taken to mean that they are enemies.*”ⁱⁱ Nietzsche himself explained this saying “*these two very different tendencies walk side by side, usually in violent opposition to one another, inciting one another to ever more powerful births.*”ⁱⁱⁱ

Another of Nietzsche’s most influential works was ‘*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*’ (1891), it was also his last key work, and shows us how his thoughts and style had changed through his life. At this stage, Nietzsche had retired from teaching, and spent much of his time travelling, writing and thinking aloud as he went. This makes some of his writings hard to interpret. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* was written with the Persian prophet Zarathustra as a protagonist for Nietzsche’s ideas. Expanding upon the Dionysius beliefs from *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche says that the aim of humanity should be to protect the most creative people in society, which will allow civilisation to progress.

Nietzsche says that we are all driven by a will to power, as shown in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*; “*There is much that life admires more than life itself; but out of that very*

ⁱ ‘SparkNotes : Philosophy Study Guides : The Birth of Tragedy : Philosophical Themes’
<http://www.sparknotes.com/philosophy/birthoftragedy/themes.html>

ⁱⁱ *Nietzsche* by Michael Tanner

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Birth of Tragedy* by Nietzsche

admiration speaks the **will to power**.ⁱ Nietzsche however is rather vague as to what he means by power, whether he means self-control or domination of others. Nietzsche does talk about what he calls *Übermensch*, or ‘supermen’. These are the people who separate themselves from the human restrictions of ‘morals’ and ‘hardship’ and live their life to the best. In the book *Zarathustra* is one of these people, who upon many years of contemplation returns to try and teach what he has learnt about the will to power. Zarathustra preaches to other potential supermen: “*Man is something that shall be overcome ... I urge you my brothers, remain faithful to the earth, and believe not those who speak to you of otherworldly hopes.*”ⁱⁱ By “*otherworldly hopes*,” Nietzsche is referring to the ‘Apollonian’ hope that mass-cultures can offer, for example Christianity, which offers escapism from the suffering in this world by saying that a better life will follow.

Section 3: Main Ideas

“‘Where has God gone?’ he cried. ‘I shall tell you. We have killed him – you and I. We are his murderers.’”ⁱⁱⁱ

The notion that “*God is Dead*” is perhaps the thing Nietzsche is most remembered for. He does not literally mean that God, or Jesus, has physically died because to Nietzsche God was never a physical being in the first place. What we can interpret Nietzsche as meaning is that the sociological construct of ‘God’ was now beyond its sell by date. Nietzsche said that there was no need for God anymore, science and rationalism had made Him redundant; “*the absence or presence of faith makes no difference to humanity.*”^{iv} This makes Nietzsche a nihilist, meaning he believes that no moral values exist, “*I deny morality as I deny alchemy, I do not deny that there have been alchemists who believed in these premises and acted in accordance with them.*”^v

Nietzsche believed that God had his uses, religion had established systems of morality across the world, it had offered hope and answers before science was able to provide them. However, in our modern world, we don’t need God for those answers anymore. In fact we

ⁱ *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* by Nietzsche

ⁱⁱ *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* by Nietzsche

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Gay Science* by Nietzsche

^{iv} *Dialogue Issue 16 2001* : “*God is Dead*” by Carol Langford.

^v *Daybreak* by Nietzsche

realise that we *never* needed God for those answers, they were always there around us, we just had to find them. As Carol Langford so nicely puts it, “*we have plugged the final gaps, the God of the gaps is needed no more.*”ⁱ

Nietzsche followed in the footsteps of Freud and Marx with regard to his views on the roots of religion (and specifically Christianity). He believed that religion had its purpose as the “gap filler”, and allowed humans to deal with the hardship in the world. Nietzsche used the French word *ressentiment* to describe suffering which we perceive to be unjustified. We look for an explanation or a scapegoat for this suffering; Nietzsche demonstrates that religion is just that - it is a way of dealing with the human feeling of *ressentiment*. In this way while Nietzsche may have totally disagreed with the doctrines of religion, that wasn't what he was *really* interested in; what he was more concerned with was the *function* of religion.

In this manner Nietzsche says that religion is self-deception, it is a human construct to help us deal with our finite existence, and the suffering we experience in the world. Now we have a far more secular society, where belief in God doesn't make any difference to us, and the doctrines of the religions become more and more dubitable as science shows them to be inaccurate. Nietzsche shows this in *The Gay Science* where the protagonist preaches, “*the greatest recent event – that God is dead, that the belief in the Christian God has become unbelievable*”.

In Section 2 we saw how Nietzsche recognised the conflict between Apollo and Dionysus. For Nietzsche, Christianity and “God” represented Apollo, since they often restricted creativity and expressionism by forcing ‘values’ upon us. Nietzsche identified two distinct versions of morality, master and slave. He identifies and analyses these in his work *The Genealogy of Morals*.

Master morality, Nietzsche says, is derived from hierarchical society. The ruling class have the power to determine what is right and what is wrong. This is a pluralist society, since it means that morality is based on the society you are in. What is moral in one society is not what is moral somewhere else. In such a society, “*the good are a caste, the bad a mass like*

ⁱ *Dialogue* Issue 16 2001 : “*God is Dead*” by Carol Langford.

grains of sand. Good and bad is for a long time the same thing as noble and base, master and slave”ⁱ In this way the ‘good’ are united, “combined with one another through their capacity for requital.”ⁱⁱ In this way it is ‘bad’ to be part of the majority, to be “base, low minded and plebeian; the herd.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Slave morality is the system that Nietzsche believes enchains us now. It is basically a reversal of master morality. In master morality we see the ‘good’ are the powerful ones, while in slave morality the ‘good’ are in fact the ‘slaves’, the workers, the underclass, the ‘herd’. Nietzsche said that slave morality arose from the *ressentiment* of the Jews. The Jews were mistreated and endured much suffering and slavery, to deal with this their minds made them out to be the ones who were better off really. They invented a system of values that gave them *spiritual* if not physical superiority over their captors.

For the slaves, what is good becomes what eases their suffering, and is useful for the majority. Nietzsche summarises this in *Beyond Good and Evil* where he says, “Slave morality is essentially the morality of utility.” Slave morality also makes one (dangerous in Nietzsche’s opinion) distinction that master does not; in master morality, there is good and bad, in slave morality there is good and **evil**. This additional distinction is what allows the slaves to have such a feeling of superiority over their enslavers. Nietzsche says it is just the slaves expressing their own *will to power*, they too want to excel and succeed, however they mask this under the illusion of God’s justice.

Nietzsche went on to say that further evidence that Christians are only satisfying their will to power, when they claim to be selfless, is the role of the priest. The priest is in a conflicting position, since he has both faith, which makes him ‘good’, but also power, which should make him ‘bad’. The priests could then use this power to their own ends as they expressed their will to power. As Schutte and Westphal explain, “*knowledge of the soul generates power without the need of physical force. Pastoral power does not come out of the barrel of a gun, but uses ‘moral approval as a tactic for behavioural control.’*”^{iv} By

ⁱ *Human All Too Human* by Nietzsche

ⁱⁱ *Human All Too Human* by Nietzsche

ⁱⁱⁱ *Human All Too Human* by Nietzsche

^{iv} *Suspicion and Faith* by Schutte & Westphal in Westphal.

this it is meant that religion becomes a tool for social control, in the hands of the priests – something Marx also recognised.

That said, Nietzsche felt that Jesus embodied master morality, not slave morality. This is because Jesus criticised the corruption of the Jewish temple, he was open minded and a life affirmer, standing up for his beliefs. Nietzsche felt that Christianity as we know it is a severe distortion of the views of Jesus himself – as demonstrated in the quote: “*The Evangel died on the cross, from that moment on all is lies,*”ⁱ

Nietzsche said that it was St. Paul who corrupted Jesus’ master morality, and sets the stage for the dualism we now associate with Christianity. It is the dualism that Nietzsche objects to, because it is denying there is a problem by saying that that problem is irrelevant in the long term. We negate life by saying that this current existence is meaningless in comparison to the afterlife or “true” world – because of this we are less likely to excel and try in *this* life. Nietzsche calls this idea, “*moral masturbation.*”

Nietzsche believes that our society is currently enslaved by slave morality, he says that creativity and free thought is being quashed by religion and ‘apollonian forces’, Nietzsche says that since God is no longer in our way, holding us back, we can now push ourselves to be the best people we can. In this way Nietzsche embraces our Godless reality.

“Even if it is not bright, at last our ships can put out again, no matter the danger, every daring venture of knowledge is again permitted ... Our sea again lies open before us, perhaps there has never been such an open sea.”ⁱⁱ

Nietzsche said we need to start again, to scrap what we have been taught by religion as being ‘moral’ and ‘right’, and to build our own system of morality, not based on slave morals, but on master morality. We should be life affirming, and see life as an end, not a means to an end – which is often the dualist approach Nietzsche criticises so heavily.

ⁱ *The Anti-Christ* by Nietzsche

ⁱⁱ *The Gay Science* by Nietzsche

According to Nietzsche the purpose of our life is to succeed, as demonstrated by our will to power. We strive to reach our potential, and thus our morality should be based around that. Those who reach their potential are the supermen, they have reached their peak – it is them Nietzsche is interested in protecting, since they can do the most good for our societies.

The superman is, to Nietzsche, the next stage of evolution, “*man is to ape as superman shall be to man.*” The superman (or overman) is someone who fully fulfils his potential in life. They overcome and are not affected by suffering, the weak, pain or modern values, nor are they affected by human compassion, which is probably our greatest weakness as it lets the weak hold back the strong. The superman must be prepared to live by his own values, not those dictated by society, to do this they must first overthrow the current system of values, “*and whoever would be a creator in good and evil, verily he must first be a destroyer who breaks values. Thus the highest evil belongs to the highest goodness; but that is creative.*”ⁱ

Nietzsche’s ideas can be seen as social Darwinism, Nietzsche says “*what is the ape to man? A laughingstock or a painful embarrassment? And man shall be just that for the overman; a laughingstock or painful embarrassment.*”ⁱⁱ Nietzsche says that we are not all destined to become supermen, it is only a minority of us that can do so, but that minority need to be protected.

Nietzsche believes in eternal recurrence. He says that since the universe is infinite, things will occur infinitely - in which case we should be making decisions that we would wish to be repeated infinitely. The superman is the person who makes a decision they would be happy to stick with forever, infinite times over. The superman does things which are life affirming, they look out for themselves so they can achieve their maximum potential.

Section 4: Latter Works

While Nietzsche’s ideas about morality and “God is Dead” have usually been seen as his own beliefs, we have to bear in mind that, especially in his later works, Nietzsche told his stories through a protagonist. For example in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* Nietzsche writes “*Fellow creators, Zarathustra seeks fellow harvesters and fellow celebrants: what are*

ⁱ *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* by Nietzsche

ⁱⁱ *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* by Nietzsche

herds and shepherds and corpses to him?”ⁱ Now we don’t know if Nietzsche is putting his own ideas into the mouth of Zarathustra (rather like Plato and Socrates), or whether it is Nietzsche’s intention that the words of Zarathustra are different to his own beliefs. In fact in both *The Gay Science* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* the words “God is dead” are spoken by madmen who are not taken seriously by their audience. Whether this is Nietzsche sharing his frustration about not being taken seriously himself - or whether he doesn’t **want** us to take the ideas that seriously - is open to debate.

As Nietzsche’s ideas progressed, so did his style of writing, he began using more and more natural metaphors in his work, and expressing his ideas in terms of these metaphors - which are reminiscent of pre-Socratic philosophy –makes his works more poetic, but less easily interpreted. As Michael Tanner explains; “*what Nietzsche was trying to do in it [Thus Spoke Zarathustra] was to establish himself as a philosopher-poet, and for that purpose he employed a set of idioms that reveal dismayingly what his idea of poetry was.*”ⁱⁱ

It should also be considered that Nietzsche did not intend for his books to be read cover to cover without prior knowledge of his earlier works. He wanted his readers to note and understand the progression in his ideas from his earliest works to his later ones. Most of Nietzsche’s later works were written while he wandered Europe, and as Nietzsche himself comments; “*A book such as this is not for reading straight through or reading aloud, but for dipping into, especially when out walking or on a journey, you must be able to stick your head into it and out, again and again and discover nothing familiar around you*”ⁱⁱⁱ

Lastly we should also remember that *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* was written just after what Michael Tanner describes as “*the single most devastating experience of Nietzsche’s life,*”^{iv} which was his rejection by Lou Salomé, the only woman Nietzsche loved. This event is bound to have affected Nietzsche’s outlook on life, and may have contributed to his eventual insanity.

ⁱ *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* by Nietzsche

ⁱⁱ *Nietzsche* by Michael Tanner

ⁱⁱⁱ *Daybreak* by Nietzsche

^{iv} *Nietzsche* by Michael Tanner

Section 5: Nietzsche's Influence

Nietzsche's Influence on Nazism

Perhaps the most dangerous application of Nietzsche is that his anti-Semitic sister Elizabeth perverted his views into Nazism. Elizabeth was married to an infamous anti-Semite and together they took his works (after his descent into insanity) and interpreted them as pro-Nazi propaganda.

The first issue here, as *Zeitung* puts it, is “*does Nietzsche write from a strictly aesthetic standpoint, as some scholars have argued or from a political standpoint as well?*”ⁱ The point being made is that does Nietzsche mean us to interpret his works as political manuscripts or as philosophical ideas? Nietzsche did use a lot of war rhetoric in his works, as the philosopher Lewis Lampert observes; “*Nietzsche's free use of the rhetoric of warfare makes it all too easy to overlook the fact that the essential warfare is spiritual warfare against global adversaries who have the laws on their side, and that even that warfare is a means to an end and not an end in itself.*”ⁱⁱ So while Nietzsche did use war metaphors in his work, which may initially appear pro-Nazi, Nietzsche is just being eloquent in his use of language and using complex analogies to explain his ideas in an almost poetic form.

Some parts of Nietzsche's work do make him appear pro-Aryan, and his beliefs about the *better* types being more deserving than the lower types are along the same lines as Hitler's *Meine Kampf* and its subordination of the Jews. In *The Anti Christ* Nietzsche says “*what type of human being one ought to breed, ought to will, as more valuable, more worthy of life.*” This sounds very much like Nazism, and Nietzsche continues, “*... he has, hitherto, been the thing to be feared, and the reverse type has been willed, bred, achieved, the domestic animal, the herd animal, the sick animal, the Christian.*”ⁱⁱⁱ This quote is almost dehumanising the lesser type, in Nietzsche's case the Christian – but the links to Nazism and the justification of the Holocaust through dehumanising the Jews is obvious.

Nonetheless, as Robert Wicks is quick to point out, Nietzsche's work can be twisted to mean *anything*, he says it is easy to obtain “*passages whose juxtaposition appeared to justify war, aggression and domination for the sake of nationalistic and racial self-*

ⁱ ‘Nietzsche – A re-examination’ by Urvin Zeitung, Policy Press 1994

ⁱⁱ ‘Nietzsche's Teaching: An Interpretation of Thus Spoke Zarathustra’ by Lewis Lampert

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Anti Christ* by Nietzsche

glorification”ⁱ The other thing that must be pointed out is that Nietzsche was *not* nationalistic. Numerous quotes including “[Germans] have no conception of how vile they are” show this, and as Alasdair Macintyre says, “[Nietzsche] hated pan-Germanism in all forms and especially in its racist, anti-Semitic ones.” It was, in fact, in part Wagner’s anti-Semitism which caused their friendship to break up; in *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche in fact praises the Jews; saying “we artists among the spectators and philosophers are grateful for this to the Jews.”ⁱⁱ

Rather ironically 150,000 copies of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* were issued to German soldiers in World War Two - along with the Bible. While Nietzsche’s words may be contorted to mean many things, they are most certainly not pro-Christian. Christianity was part of the Aryan ideal, and based on that alone it is hard to see Nietzsche as a Nazi.

Nietzsche and Existentialism

Nietzsche’s wider influence is on the development of existentialism, which is “a philosophy which does not cognize objects ... [but which] elucidates and makes actual the being of the thinker.”ⁱⁱⁱ For Descartes there were two separate elements which comprised a human being – the mind and the body – it was the interaction of these two things which defined ‘us’. Nietzsche, on the other hand, believed in one thing – our *will*. For him there was no body and mind, there was just will. “One should not think of the will as an identifiable active force, but simply as the *man*.”^{iv} Whereas to Descartes philosophy was about introspection, trying to observe the interaction between the mind and the body – to Nietzsche introspection was no more useful than perceiving the world around us since the mind and body are one. It is this principle of *will* which is at the centre of existentialism. To return to the definition by Jasper; existentialists are concerned with the “*the being of the thinker*” which to Nietzsche was the *will to power*.

Existentialists are concerned with freedom for people; Nietzsche expressed that because he wanted people to see that there were no such things as moral laws, because morals were just social constructs which we accept as law and set in stone. Like Kant, Nietzsche believed

ⁱ ‘Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy’ by Robert Wicks

ⁱⁱ *Beyond Good and Evil* by Nietzsche

ⁱⁱⁱ *Die Geistige Situation der Zeit* by Jaspers

^{iv} *Existentialism* by Mary Walnook. Oxford University Press 1970

there were no absolute morals, and that “*moral value is something which springs into being only when there is an actual human agent deciding what to do, and doing it.*”ⁱ

Nietzsche’s ideas about rationalism and humanity were expanding by more modern philosophers including Paul Tillich, as well as Nietzsche’s contemporary Martin Heidegger. These works were again expanding by existentialists such as Sartre and Camus, and have become key to atheist existentialism. Sartre defined existentialism as the belief that “*existence precedes essence,*”ⁱⁱ again saying that before anything else we are what we are, as Nietzsche said “*a man is an animal whose nature has not been fixed.*”ⁱⁱⁱ

Section 6: Conclusions

It would be nice to give a succinct summary of Nietzsche, however as Hollingdale puts it: “*you begin to suspect that Nietzsche cannot be encapsulated at all, even within the biggest capsule.*”^{iv} In short, Nietzsche was a great thinker who has had a wide-reaching but almost indefinable impact on 20th century thought; he influenced many later philosophers as well as influencing “*the entire ‘cultural climate’ of this [20th] Century*”^v. A nihilist himself, he anticipated existentialism and his belief in *will to power* and “*God is Dead*” made for an impressive and revolutionary philosophy.

To what extent we can interpret his work is dubitable, his works are often contradictory and full of complex metaphors. There are also issues with what the characters in his stories, such as *Zarathustra* say, and what Nietzsche himself actually believes. Nonetheless Nietzsche’s rejection of morality and his feelings towards Christianity, which developed from what was perhaps simple teenage rebellion of his upbringing to an intense hatred, are expressed over and over again in his works.

While Nietzsche was always quick to criticise Western morality as *slave morality* he never really provided us with any explanation of how we should go about reforming society based on *master morality*. He leaves us with questions like if we are to reject all morals, does that

ⁱ *Existentialism* by Mary Walnook. Oxford University Press 1970

ⁱⁱ *Existentialism is a Humanism* by Sartre

ⁱⁱⁱ *Beyond Good and Evil* by Nietzsche

^{iv} Hollingdale

^v Hollingdale

mean anything is permissible? In our journey to express our *will to power* and potentially become supermen, should we be compassionate? Nietzsche criticised the “*blessed are the meek ... blessed are the merciful ... blessed are the peacemakers*ⁱ” attitude of Christianity, but we are left with the problem that, if the better types are to be more ‘worthy’, what of the lower types? While he does not seem to condone the attitude in Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* of exile or the ‘Final Solution’, he does not explain quite how we should be dealing with law and order if there are no absolutes and people are *not* of equal worth.

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ⁱ Matthew 5:2-9