

Daniel W. Skubik / October 24, 1997 / Seminar discussion paper for
85420: G-d in Modern Philosophy (Dr. R. Cunningham)

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 - 1900)

Every true faith is also infallible -- it does accomplish what the respective faithful person hopes to gain from it. But it does not prepare a reference point whatsoever which could guarantee its objective truth. Here the paths of human beings part. If you prefer peace of mind and happiness, then better believe! But if you would like to be a disciple of truth, turn to research!

-- *Letter to Elisabeth Nietzsche, 11 June 1865*

Biographical Sketch

The academic (and perhaps surprisingly even popular) writing on Nietzsche's life and work would easily fill an entire range in the library's shelving.¹ Rather than attempt a brief sketch based on combing this extended literature, let me more simply present the following excerpts (with a few bracketed interpolations and footnotes based upon my own more limited reading) from Walter Kaufmann, a relatively sympathetic and close interpreter of Nietzsche's life and writings.² These extracts are taken from Kaufmann's contribution on Nietzsche to the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, and appear under the terse heading, "Life and Pathology" (at V: 504-506):

"Nietzsche was born in Röcken, Prussia [on October 15th, 1844]. His father, Ludwig Nietzsche, a Lutheran minister, was 31, and his mother, the daughter of a Lutheran minister, was 18. His paternal grandfather had written several books, including *Gamaliel, or the Everlasting Duration of Christianity: For Instruction and Sedation . . .* (1796). Many of Nietzsche's ancestors were butchers; none of them seem to have been, as he believed, Polish noblemen. His father christened him Friedrich Wilhelm after King Friedrich Wilhelm IV of Prussia, on whose birthday

¹ Harvard University's Hollis Library catalogues some 64 biographies since the 1920s, and more than 50 of those were published within the past 25 years. The further catalogued collection of monographs and studies covering his life and works total nearly 2000, and again the bulk of those are post-Second World War releases. Cambridge and Oxford both contain similarly bulging catalogues, as much in English as German and French, along with some interesting studies in Japanese and Chinese. This vast academic literature does not include other, more popular endeavors like Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (Simon & Schuster, 1987), which contains a sustained polemic against Nietzsche's influence in modern American, especially academic, life.

² Kaufmann was largely responsible for introducing English readers to Nietzsche's works through his translations and commentaries beginning in the 1950s. For a fair but rigorous critique of Kaufmann, his pragmatic and humanistic interpretations of Nietzsche's works and philosophy, and even choice of works translated versus those he left untouched, see Richard Schacht's "Introduction" to the 1996 Cambridge University Press edition of Nietzsche's *Human, All Too Human* (trans. R.J. Hollingdale, 1996/1986).

he was born. The king became mad a few years later; so did Nietzsche's father. Nietzsche later shed his middle name, along with his family's patriotism and religion, but in January 1889 he, too, became insane. . . .

"In January 1850, Nietzsche's widowed mother lost her youngest son [Ludwig died in 1849 of "softening of the brain"; the child had been born in 1848] and moved her family to Naumburg. The household there consisted of Friedrich, his mother (who died in 1897) and sister, his father's mother, and two maiden aunts. This, as well as his sister's character, helps to account for some of Nietzsche's snide remarks about women.³

"In 1858 Nietzsche accepted free admission to Pforta, a famous boarding school a few miles from Naumburg. He was often at the head of his class and acquired an excellent classical education. . . . [Kaufmann goes on to note that Nietzsche's favorite poet was Hölderlin, one of Germany's greatest poets who also died hopelessly insane.]

"He studied theology and classical philology at the University of Bonn, but in 1865 he gave up theology and went to Leipzig [to study philology with Friedrich Ritschl]. . . . As a student at Leipzig, Nietzsche discovered Schopenhauer and [began a personal relationship with] Richard Wagner, the two greatest influences on his early thought, as well as F.A. Lange's *History of Materialism*. In a letter dated November 1866, Nietzsche wrote, 'Kant, Schopenhauer, and this book of Lange's -- more I don't need.' . . . [He would later break all personal ties with Wagner (1878) -- having published a work glorifying him, *Richard Wagner in Bayreuth* (1876), Nietzsche would subsequently excoriate Wagner and his music in *The Case of Wagner* and *Nietzsche contra Wagner* (1888); as well as develop his thought along lines quite different to Schopenhauer's.]

"[In 1869, Friedrich Ritschl recommended Nietzsche for the chair of classical philology at the University of Basel.] Nietzsche had not yet written a doctoral dissertation, let alone the dissertation generally required before a doctor of philosophy becomes a *Privatdozent*, or the additional book required for an associate professorship, yet he was appointed an associate professor at Basel at the age of 24. . . . Leipzig [afterwards] conferred the doctorate without thesis or examination, and in April 1870 he became a full professor. [His first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, was not published until 1872. See the attached photocopy of the appendix from John

³ Kaufmann argues that Nietzsche lived a celibate life (with at most perhaps one or two diversions during his student years), and that any disease like syphilis which might account for his madness and his chauvinism [a popular canard in anti-Nietzsche Christian polemic of this century] is either nefarious, unsubstantiated rumor or, if true, was the result of contagion during military service when he acted as a nurse to others on the battlefield. One must look elsewhere for their origin. Nietzsche's views on women were in any case notorious: "Everything in woman is a riddle, and everything in woman hath one solution--it is called pregnancy. . . . Let man fear woman when she hateth: for man in his innermost soul is merely evil; woman, however, is mean." At the conclusion of this passage on women we find in the mouth of an old woman with whom Zarathustra is speaking the sage advice, "Thou goest to women? Do not forget thy whip!" [*Thus Spake Zarathustra* (I, xviii)]

Richardson's *Nietzsche's System* for a bibliography of Nietzsche's principal works and their dates of composition.]

"Throughout his life Nietzsche's health was poor. His doctors kept warning him to preserve his very bad eyesight by reading and writing less. He disregarded this advice, fought severe migraine and gastric pains with long walks and much writing, and took pills and potions to purchase a little sleep. [Due to recurring illness, and the lack of collegiality he experienced at the university, Nietzsche resigned his chair in 1879. As Copleston notes, "And for the next ten years he led a wandering life, seeking health in various places in Switzerland and Italy, with occasional visits to Germany" (at 392).] His books became his life. As they found no response, his style became shrill, and losing his inhibitions [due in great measure to the rapid deterioration in his physical and mental condition], he said in his later books what he had said earlier only in some of his letters. . . . In January 1889, Nietzsche collapsed in a street in Turin . . . [and] vegetated until his death [on August 25th, 1900]." ⁴

⁴ Stern concludes his chronology of Nietzsche's life and works with an interesting, though not wholly sympathetic, speculative assessment as to the etiology of Nietzsche's collapse into insanity:

A diagnosis of tertiary syphilis cannot now be seriously doubted. [Franz] Overbeck's speculation [that Nietzsche's illness was one of his "masks" and thus simulated or brought on by his way of life] is not an alternative to this diagnosis, but a complement to it. It is based on the plausible premise that, having chosen what was beyond his capacity to accomplish, Nietzsche feared the moment when he would be overwhelmed by the evidence of his inadequacy to his chosen task. In the face of the evidence, which now -- at the end of 1888 -- takes the form of an increasingly unmanageable convolute of notes and plans and skeleton outlines, his self-criticism does not abate but becomes if anything more radical and destructive. For one who at all times was given to strenuousness and self-laceration, and incapable of intellectual compromise, there now arises the need to withdraw from an impossible situation, to 'clown' his way out of it. And if this, or something like this, is what really happened, it need not surprise us that such a mind, heedless and passionate in all its actions and reactions, might then no longer find its way back into sanity. It is not very different from what happened to Hamlet. [at 33-34]

G-D IS DEAD

What is truth? -- Who will not be pleased with the conclusions which the faithful take such delight in coming to? -- "Science cannot be true for it denies God; and consequently it cannot be true, -- for God is truth." It is not the deduction but the premise which is fallacious. What if God just were not truth, and if it were exactly that which was proven? if he were instead man's vanity, lust for power, the ambitions, the fear and the enraptured and terrified folly of mankind? -- *The Dawn of Day* (aka *Daybreak*, §93)

Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* (aka *The Joyful Wisdom*)

Nietzsche is probably best known for his pronouncement that G-d is dead. He is most certainly not the first (to be thought an) atheist: many before him had claimed that G-d does not exist. But he was the first to declare that G-d is "dead" -- meaning there is significant sense in the assertion that once G-d was, but now is no more. (It is likewise noteworthy that this claim subsequently found its natural voice not amongst pre-war atheists or agnostics in Europe, but rather amongst the death-of-G-d theologians in North America during the 1960s.)

The earliest and extended statement of this claim comes from his *The Gay Science*, a collection of numbered rhymes, aphorisms and studied vignettes ⁵ that capture key thoughts in the development of Nietzsche's philosophical perspective on life in 19th century Europe. It is here Nietzsche introduces his madman:

Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly: "I seek God! I seek God!" -- As many of those who did not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter. Has he got lost? asked one. Did he lose his way like a child? asked another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? emigrated? -- Thus they yelled and laughed.

⁵ I leave it to Nietzsche scholars to settle the on-going debate as to whether this collection is a deliberately ordered, coherent set of insights (à la Kaufmann), or more a ragbag collection of unrelated thoughts (à la Stern). In either case, it is commonly asserted that one reason for Nietzsche's preference for aphorism was his continuing illness, which made it impossible to write in any other manner; short spurts of lucidity was all he had available to him, and into those moments he emptied his energies with insights as complete as those relatively brief periods of work allowed. What becomes fascinating is the later aping of this aphoristic style in the writings of subsequent philosophers, the most conspicuous being Wittgenstein, whose notebooks pose similar interpretive conundrums.

The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. "Whither is God?" he cried; "I will tell you. *We have killed him* -- you and I. All of us are his murderers. . . . Do we hear nothing as yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods, too, decompose. God is dead. And we have killed him." . . . Here the madman fell silent and looked again at his listeners; and they, too, were silent and stared at him in astonishment. At last he threw his lantern on the ground, and it broke into pieces and went out. "I have come too early," he said then; "my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men. Lightning and thunder require time; the light of the stars requires time; deeds, though done, still require time to be seen and heard. This deed is still more distant from them than the most distant stars -- *and yet they have done it themselves.*" [§125]

This passage must be the most frequently anthologized portion of Nietzsche's work. Yet, the full import of the claim(s) here is not certain, at least to this reader. As a first approximation, it can be said that herein lies no ontological claim: that is I take it as certain he is not proposing there really was a divine being whose blood was shed by humankind⁶ and so now that once-living being lies quite literally mordant. Neither is it a philological or mere semantic claim, about the use and content of the term "G-d" in 19th century European culture. Nor is it a cry for epistemological clarity, akin to some felt need to re-enter the tarnished medieval proofs for G-d's existence.

I would suggest one ought to view this (sort of) passage in the same way one might best view Nietzsche's doctrine of the eternal recurrence (discussed below). That is to say, G-d's death is an existential claim that captures our actual state of being. In short, we must recognize that we are indeed alone, wholly responsible for who and what we are and do. (Alternatively, as Sartre is later to assert, because there is no G-d we are condemned to be free.) Whatever assurance we might have had of some Other fashioning the boundaries of our lives must be given up to the

⁶ We'll take a look at Nietzsche's view of Christ, below. But such is not, I reckon, a key to this--or similar--passages.

truth: like Freudian children who have killed their father, we now have no one to whom to turn in our need. This we have done, with our own hands, though we knew not what we were doing.

The difficulty with this interpretation is that it doesn't fit very snugly or plainly with other passages that equally assert G-d's death. Two instances, occurring both before and after the passage cited at length above, come to the mind, each of which are short enough to quote in full:

After Buddha was dead, his shadow was still shown for centuries in a cave -- a tremendous, gruesome shadow. God is dead; but given the way of men, there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown. -- And we -- we still have to vanquish his shadow, too. [§108 -- this is in fact the first instance of Nietzsche's use of the phrase, "God is dead."]

and,

"God himself cannot exist without wise people," Luther said with good reason. But "God can exist even less without unwise people" -- that our good Luther did not say. [§129]

These may indeed be existential claims, but they strike more as claims concerning what remains to be and must be done, rather than claims of what already has been accomplished but not fully realized or internalized in one's life. It would still seem that G-d is dead; yet he has not died, for the vestige of his presence, his shadow, continues to exert [unwarranted] pull or control over human life.

There is also clearly here an allusion to and play on Plato's allegory of the cave. Recall that in the *Republic*, Socrates tells the story of a cave where prisoners are chained in such a way they can see only shadows of things and persons projected onto the cave's wall by the light of a fire (Book VII). The prisoners consequently know nothing of what is real, nor are they illumined by the real source of light and life. That is what it means to live an unexamined, unreflective life. Likewise here for Nietzsche, religions and their deities represent but differing caves and their associated shadows projected for the continuing ignorance and enslavement of the prisoners

bound to see only that which is unreal. We need to find our way out of these caves into the light of the real world. Meanwhile, such gods will continue to exert lingering effects as long as there remain those "unwise people" unwilling to come up (and who cannot be dragged up?) out of their respective caves into the light of day.

In this same vein is the scathing, unexpected assertion that even those who claim to be constructing their lives in accordance with science . . . those who might be said to have participated in the killing of G-d, and are living outside the shadowy cave are not themselves truly free:

For some time past there have been no *free spirits*; for they still believe in truth. When the Christian Crusaders in the East came into collision with that invincible order of assassins, that order of free spirits *par excellence*, whose lowest grade lives in a state of discipline such as no order of monks has ever attained, then in some way or other they managed to get an inkling of that symbol and tallyword, that was reserved for the highest grade alone as their *secretum*, "Nothing is true, everything is allowed," -- in sooth, *that was freedom* of thought, thereby *taking leave* of the very belief of truth. Has indeed any European, any Christian freethinker, ever yet wandered into this proposition and its labyrinthine *consequences*? Does he know from experience the Minotauros of this den? -- I doubt it -- nay, I know otherwise. Nothing is really more alien to these "monofanatics," these so-called "free spirits," than freedom . . . ["What is the Meaning of Ascetic Ideals," §24 in *The Genealogy of Morals*]

As Nietzsche notes elsewhere, we still believe in G-d because we believe in grammar.⁷ The point is not so much that god-talk explicitly remains ensconced in modern language -- even if only in common cursing and invective, but that the very structure of our language (and hence culture) is grounded upon notions of reason and truth, *viz.* that our linguistic constructions will correspond to reality. It is that very foundation which of necessity is to be overthrown if we are to spawn the

⁷ " 'Reason' in language: oh what a deceitful old woman! I fear we are not getting rid of God because we still believe in grammar . . ." [" 'Reason' in Philosophy," §5 in *Twilight of the Idols*]

"revaluation of values," the latter being Nietzsche's ethical project as the forerunning state or even prodrome to the realization of his *Übermensch*.

Yet, this varied language must needs be juxtaposed with the claims made in Book V of his *The Gay Science*, for there we find different imagery playing off the verbiage of §125:

The greatest recent event -- that "God is dead," that the belief in the Christian god has become unbelievable -- is already beginning to cast its first shadows over Europe. For the few at least, whose eyes -- the *suspicion* in whose eyes is strong and subtle enough for this spectacle, some sun seems to have set and some ancient and profound trust has been turned into doubt; to them our old world must appear daily more like evening, more mistrustful, stranger, "older." But in the main one may say: The event itself is far too great, too distant, too remote from the multitude's capacity for comprehension even for the tidings of it to be thought of as having *arrived* as yet. Much less may one suppose that many people know as yet *what* this event really means -- and how much must collapse now that this faith has been undermined because it was built upon this faith, propped up by it, grown into it; for example, the whole of our European morality. . . .
Indeed, we philosophers and "free spirits" feel, when we hear the news that "the old god is dead," as if a new dawn shone on us; our heart overflows with gratitude, amazement, premonitions, expectation. At long last the horizon appears free to us again, even if it should not be bright [§343]

Here the shadow is not the vestige of some dead god holding sway in a cave (that "G-d is dead" just means he is no longer believable), but the natural result of the dimming of what was once thought real and is now to be seen to be without substance, *inter alia* European morality, now that we realize there is no G-d acting as a Kantian guarantor to our traditional way of life.⁸ The shadow constitutes a "prophetic gloom"⁹ preceding an inevitable collapse, and represents the essence of Nietzsche's gaiety that is inscribed in the title of his text.

⁸ In an attack on George Eliot and the foolish penitential-like English attempts to maintain a Christian morality even when one has given up belief in G-d, Nietzsche makes his point again: "When one gives up Christian belief one thereby deprives oneself of the *right* to Christian morality. . . . Christian morality is a command: its origin is transcendental; it is beyond all criticism, all right to criticize; it possesses truth only if God is truth -- it stands or falls with the belief in God." ["Expeditions of an Untimely Man," §5 in *Twilight of the Idols*]

⁹ Cf. Nietzsche's use of shadow in this passage with that of Marx and Engels in the opening line of their *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848): "A spectre is haunting Europe -- the spectre of Communism." (They go

What is less clear is just who comprises this group of philosophers and free spirits that can sense this new dawn and so announce it and its implications to those as yet without proper or mature vision. There is good argument that there is in fact only one such personage, Nietzsche himself in the guise of Zarathustra -- the Persian philosopher who, per Nietzsche's assessment, bequeathed us right and wrong, and who must as its progenitor be the one who proclaims morality's demise.¹⁰ If so, the "we" of this passage is the authorial cry of a singularly lonely man, indeed.

on to proclaim that the old powers of Europe may attempt to "exorcise this spectre" but they will fail.) I have not read any commentator who explicitly draws attention to this parallelism of imagery between Marx's spectre and Nietzsche's shadow, but it strikes me as too similar in tone and import to be passed over lightly.

¹⁰ "Already at the beginning of this history I hinted at the reasons which led my brother to select a Persian as the incarnation of his ideal of the majestic philosopher. His reasons, however, for choosing Zarathustra of all others to be his mouthpiece, he gives us in the following words: -- 'People have never asked me, as they should have done, what the name Zarathustra precisely means in my mouth, in the mouth of the first Immoralist; for what distinguishes that philosopher from all others in the past is the very fact that he was exactly the reverse of an immoralist. Zarathustra was the first to see in the struggle between good and evil the essential wheel in the working of things. The translation of morality into the metaphysical, as force, cause, end in itself, was *his* work. But the very question suggests its own answer. Zarathustra *created* the most portentous error, *morality*, consequently he should also be the first to *perceive* that error, not only because he has had longer and greater experience of the subject than any other thinker -- all history is the experimental refutation of the theory of the so-called moral order of things: -- the more important point is that Zarathustra was more truthful than any other thinker. . . . The overcoming of morality through itself -- through truthfulness, the overcoming of the moralist through his opposite -- *through me* --: that is what the name Zarathustra means in my mouth!'" [Closing observation and quotation by Elizabeth Förster-Nietzsche in her "Introduction" to *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1905)]

Nietzsche's *The Anti-Christ*¹¹

Like Feuerbach before him, Nietzsche is quite prepared to reject religion as popularly held or understood, especially the Christian religion, on the grounds of its etiology. That is, having propounded a (more-or-less) plausible anthropological-cum-psychological tale of religion's origins,¹² the assumed conclusion is that it is clearly, wholly foul and fouling. However, and unlike Feuerbach, Nietzsche can quite readily ("cheerfully" in Copleston's estimation) commit this genetic fallacy since the gravamen of his writings is not logically to disprove or reorient but utterly to replace Christianity with his revaluation of morals.

To advance this project, he offers a revaluation of the Christ of the gospels: recalling Nietzsche's attribution of "free spirit" to those who can see that G-d is dead, he claims here that "One could, with some freedom of expression, call Jesus a 'free spirit' -- he cares nothing for what is fixed: the word *killeth*, everything fixed *killeth*. The concept, the *experience* 'life' in the only form he knows it is opposed to any kind of word, formula, law, faith, dogma." [§32] This Jesus is a "symbolist" who stands outside all politics, history, culture, and dialectics. He leaves us as example life as it is to be lived, not words or doctrines to be believed. [The latter fixation and

¹¹ There remains some debate about whether the title is better translated *Anti-Christian* than *Anti-Christ*. I deem the latter to have the better of the argument, both as a matter of context and transparent use of the same term in other writings as noted by the majority of Nietzsche scholars. But what I have not seen taken up in this translation debate is the issue of the sense of the prefix, "anti." It could, of course, mean "against" or "in opposition to" -- a common negative connotation. But just perhaps, particularly in this context, it would be preferable to suggest the classical connotation, not wholly lost in New Testament Greek, of "substitute," "alternate," or "replacement for." Hence, Nietzsche's anti-Christ is not [merely] opposed to the Christ of the gospels, but comprises his attempt to proffer a new, "replacement" Christ in the gospel's stead -- arguably the greater threat posed by the anti-Christ of the NT.

¹² For what it's worth, I would judge Nietzsche's tale of nature worship leading to formalized resentment less plausible than Feuerbach's projectionist reconstruction, but far better than Marx's or Freud's suggestions on the rise of religious consciousness in human society.

foundation of the church is attributed chiefly to the cowardice of the apostles and especially the priestly, tyrannical work of Paul, the "dysangelist" who created Christianity as we know it.]

For all that, Jesus ultimately failed to leave a viable legacy. What began with his life ("a Buddhistic peace movement" [§42] of an actual happiness on earth) ended with his death on the Roman cross as a political criminal (a "holy anarchist"):

What *I* am concerned with is the psychological type of the redeemer. . . . The attempts I know of to extract even the history of a 'soul' from the Gospels seem to me proofs of an execrable psychological frivolity. Monsieur Renan, that buffoon *in psychologicis*, has appropriated for his explication of the type Jesus the two *most inapplicable* concepts possible in this case: the concept of the *genius* and the concept of the *hero*. But if anything is unevangelistic it is the concept of hero. . . . To make a *hero* of Jesus! -- And what a worse misunderstanding is the word 'genius'! Our whole concept, our cultural concept 'spirit' had no meaning whatever in the world Jesus lived in. To speak with the precision of the physiologist a quite different word would rather be in place here: the word idiot. [§29]

It is highly probable, though not certain, that use of the word "idiot" here is not the simple pejorative it might seem (and which assumption led Elizabeth Nietzsche to censor the early translations of this and other of her brother's writings). Rather, its usage is likely meant to invoke reference to Dostoyevsky's Prince Mishkin, who is the referent of and protagonist in his story, *The Idiot*.¹³ Still, even with that understanding, the usage is not all that kindly: Mishkin is an ineffectual, naive young man whose life and death are less tragic than the natural outworking of a seemingly epileptic-related retarded mental capacity such that he is unable properly to understand and relate to the world around him. Such goodness is not a superior otherworldliness so much as

¹³ Nietzsche clearly knows of Dostoyevsky and his work: he makes direct reference to him in a subsequent section of the book, comparing the world of the Gospels to that of a Russian novel. But it is not known whether he had actually read that particular novel (I do not know when it first appeared in German, but the earliest English translation of *The Idiot* was available only in 1887 -- nearly 20 years after its serialization in the Russian press) or simply coincidentally happens to share the notion of childlike innocence being the moral equivalent of idiocy, a turn of phrase Nietzsche employs in other passages. That Dostoyevsky understood his character to embody basic Christian-like goodness is clear from his letters: he wished to present a wholly good man (even in those cases where some might reasonably evaluate Mishkin's behavior less charitably?), somewhat along the lines of a character like Don Quixote, and chart the course of such a life in Russian society.

the goodness that follows an inability to choose otherwise. It is a sad and austere, rather than compelling, picture of goodness portrayed in those pages. If this is the comparison Nietzsche means to draw, the compliment is at best rather rough. To present it in slightly less harsh colors, one apt point of similarity is that everyone who came into contact with Mishkin misunderstood him, used and abused him, and failed truly to befriend him or seek his good. So, too, with Christ: "in reality there has been only one Christian, and he died on the Cross." [§39]

If there is to be any spiritual revival (meaning a true reevaluation of values), then, it must be a revival of passion in and for life grounded on Nietzsche's reading of the 'soul' of Jesus (hence of an anti-Christ),¹⁴ and total rejection of the scriptures as they have been received and practiced. (In fact, a principal problem for Nietzsche is that what he deems the misanthropic, anti-life dogmas of the church have been received and believed, but never practiced -- they have never made a life-affirming difference in anyone's life, and so Christianity stands naked and condemned.) Only his transformative understanding and way of life holds fruitful possibility . . . can become the ground or fertilizer for the ultimate realization of his *Übermensch*.

¹⁴ In this regard, Nietzsche makes a final substitution for this Jesus by saying of himself, "I am the anti-ass *par excellence*, and on this account alone a monster in the world's history -- in Greek, and not only in Greek, I am the *Antichrist*." ["Why I Write Such Excellent Books," §2 in his autobiography, *Ecce Homo*] For insight into the anti-ass attribution, see "The Ass-Festival" in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (IV, lxxviii).

Nietzsche on Eternal Recurrence

I have purposefully avoided excursus into Nietzsche's genealogy of morals, the peculiar role of religion in their generation, and the content of his projected revaluation. We may need to turn to such socio-psychological topics in our oral discussion, but they lie outside the narrower confines of a paper on Nietzsche's philosophical treatment of G-d.¹⁵ True, our conception of G-d . . . any conception of the divine, will for Nietzsche be linked to the particular story one can tell about the rise of the reference group's morality. But that is the long and short of it: conceptions of the divine amount to religious talk for the enforcement of morals (even for those movements about which he has some positive remarks to set down, such as his rosy references to Buddhism in India and others in the East). Religion, *inter se*, has no independent content. Consequently, I would judge the discussion of [the contemporary Christian] G-d's death to be by far the more important aspect of his thought.¹⁶

Neither would it be wholly worthwhile, however interesting, to investigate his attacks against Christianity (or particular Christians, be it Paul or Pascal). We have already seen some of what he makes it (and them) out to be. We might of course note in passing that many of his criticisms are valid and valuable insights into a decadent institution and the powerlessness of mere religiosity (both for his day and our own). But like Bertrand Russell's diatribe, "Why I Am Not a Christian," such remarks tell us little if anything about whether there is a G-d and what he is like: a wholesale rejection of metaphysics does not itself destroy the metaphysical realm at which one is

¹⁵ I'll likewise leave aside for Friday any detailed discussion of other major themes only tangentially related, such as Nietzsche's epistemological perspectivism and his axiological will to power.

¹⁶ To reiterate, he assumes there is no G-d as such, and so seeks a genealogical explanation for notions like G-d and the growth of the Christian church. Having successfully constructed an etiology for this disease, he is prepared to excise the cancerous growth from the body politic.

shaking one's fist. (Indeed, at whom is Nietzsche shaking his fist if not at the G-d whom he so vehemently seeks to deny? But that is to take psychological liberties, so I'll avoid straying down that path as well.)

There remains, nonetheless, one important element in Nietzsche's teachings that might help shed some additional light on his view of G-d and life. That is his doctrine of eternal recurrence (sometimes translated as eternal return). What he means by the phrase "eternal recurrence" is actually relatively straightforward: like the classical Greek notion of recurring cycles, Nietzsche posits an everlasting repetitive re-cycling of finite life in infinite time. What is not so clear is what he means to make of the doctrine so enunciated:

What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliness and say to you: "This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every jot and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence -- even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down and again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!"

Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: "You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine." If this thought gained possession of you, it would change you as you are or perhaps crush you. The question in each and every thing, "Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?" would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight. Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life *to crave nothing more fervently* than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal? [*The Gay Science*, §341]

As suggested in our opening section, one -- and quite popular -- way to read this and similar passages¹⁷ is to focus on its existential import. That is to say, the demon (akin to Descartes' thought experiment) presses us to consider our lives and the fundamental attitude we hold toward

¹⁷ Nietzsche says that this is his first announcement of "the basic idea of *Zarathustra*," where eternal recurrence is further developed in several sections.

our lives. If one can honestly say that one's life is sufficiently valuable as to be worth living again and again (i.e. one is sufficiently "well disposed" towards oneself), then one is rightly disposed toward life. This attitude or approach can thereby be spun out through, say, ethical or aesthetic assessments: in the former case, one is to live out commitment to some certain ethical theory or call; in the latter, one is to live out commitment to some identifiable aesthetic construction of life; in either case the focus is on living an ethical or artistic whole such that recurrence is actually desirable.¹⁸ If this is the proper interpretation of Nietzsche's thought, it is a delightfully constructed but relatively unproblematic clarion call to live consciously . . . deliberately, in all one does. There is no direct challenge to any religion or religious thought, here. It sits rather well, in fact, with a variety of secular and religious calls to live an examined life.

There is another interpretive route, and one that poses a great deal more weight on how to construe life and the universe in which we find ourselves. It has been suggested by some, like Arthur Danto, that Nietzsche's eternal recurrence is meant to be a cosmological doctrine.¹⁹ Based upon some unpublished notes where Nietzsche has sketched proofs for finite lives recurring in infinite time, it is suggested that this recurrence is actual, presenting not merely an existential challenge via some intriguing thought experiment but positing a universe in which all is quite literally being re-cycled throughout eternity. It is akin to some Eastern thought, but with no escape or release permitted for humanity.²⁰ If this interpretation is correct, one outcome is a

¹⁸ This "Yes" to life is the special province of Nietzsche's *Übermensch* subsequent to his revaluation of values; it cannot be expected either of slaves or even masters, who are but men caught up in common morality, to assent. For further sketch of these existential approaches, see Magnus & Higgins' texts and notes.

¹⁹ Arthur C. Danto, *Nietzsche as Philosopher* (NY: Macmillan, 1965)

²⁰ Perhaps this is in the back of his mind when he contrasts Buddhism with Christianity, claiming that "Buddhism makes no promises but keeps them, Christianity makes a thousand promises but *keeps none*." [*The Anti-Christ*, §42]

fundamental antagonism to any religion that speaks of redemption, eternal life, heaven and hell, and so forth.

Should this cosmological interpretation be favored over an existential one? I hesitate to enter a debate where even long-lived Nietzscheans fail to tread. Perhaps the release of his notebooks in English over the coming years will yield clearer answers. But it is fair to say that if the cosmological can be shown to be well grounded in Nietzsche's thought, the existential maintains little of its meaning or force: the point would hardly be existential angst if recurrence were inevitable; at best it would act as a warning, no more. He must then be read as presenting a clear challenge to any of the monotheisms to disprove his science, or else give up their god.

As for the viability of his proofs: while modern physics might be used to place Nietzsche on the defensive (the standard model posits a finite universe in finite time), cosmologists have not agreed a final resolution nor constructed an accepted TOE. Hence, Nietzsche's challenge wavers, but still stands. What does remain pellucidly clear is that one cannot have such a Nietzschean universe and a Christian one. We must choose.

Recommended Readings

- Copleston, Frederick. S.J. *A History of Philosophy. Vol. VII: Fichte to Nietzsche.*
Nietzsche's life and philosophy are detailed on pp. 390-420 (NY: Image Books, 1985)
- Kaufmann, Walter. "Translator's Introduction," in *The Gay Science*, at pp. 3-26 (NY: Vintage Books, 1974) [this, along with Kaufmann's overview of Nietzsche's thought from the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry noted at the beginning of this paper, provides an easy-to-digest capsule of Nietzsche's larger themes]
- Magnus, Bernd and Higgins, Kathleen M. "Nietzsche's works and their themes," in *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche* (eds. Magnus & Higgins), at pp. 21-68 (Cambridge University Press, 1996)
- Parkes, Graham. "Nietzsche and East Asian Thought: Influences, impacts, and resonances," in *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche* (eds. Magnus & Higgins), at pp. 356-383 (Cambridge University Press, 1996)
- Richardson, John. *Nietzsche's System* (Oxford University Press, 1996)
- Salaquarda, Jörg. "Nietzsche and the Judaeo-Christian tradition," in *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche* (eds. Magnus & Higgins), at pp. 90-147 (Cambridge University Press, 1996)
- Schacht, Richard. "Introduction," in *Human, All Too Human*, at pp. vii-xxiii (Cambridge University Press, 1996/trans. R.J. Hollingdale 1986)
- Stern, J.P. *A Study of Nietzsche* (Cambridge University Press, 1979) [contains a somewhat choppy but useful chronology of Nietzsche's life at pp. 1-34; and see especially his chapter on "The third experiment: the God-less theology" at 139-170]