

THE SELF-OVERCOMING OF NIHILISM: "GOD IS DEAD"



When he published a new edition of *The Gay Science* in 1886, Nietzsche added a fifth book entitled "We Fearless Ones," in the first aphorism of which he writes as follows:

The meaning of our cheerfulness . The greatest recent event that "God is dead," that belief in the Christian God has become unbelievable-is already beginning to cast its first shadow over Europe .

For the few at least, whose eyes, the suspicion in whose eyes is strong and sharp enough for this spectacle, some sun seems to have set, some ancient and deep trust to have turned into doubt: to them our old world must seem daily more like evening, more suspicious, stranger, "older." [GS 343]

Ordinary people do not understand the implications of this event .

They do not understand "how much must collapse, now that this belief has been undermined, because it had been built upon it, supported by it, and had grown into it: for example, the whole

of European morality." However, Nietzsche presses those who are supposed to have already clearly seen the shadow that was soon to cover Europe:

"What is the matter that even we look forward to this approaching gloom without any sense of participation, and above all without any worry or fear for ourselves?" The upshot of this event is not necessarily sad and gloomy; it is rather something like a new kind of "illumination, happiness, relief, serenity" :

In fact, we philosophers and "free spirits" feel as if we are illumined by a new dawn, on receiving the news that "the old God is dead"; our hearts overflow with gratitude, wonder, premonition, anticipation.

At last the horizon seems to us open again, even if it isn't bright; at last our ships may venture out again, venture out in the face of whatever danger; all the daring of the searcher after knowledge is again permitted; the sea, our sea again lies open before us; perhaps there has never yet been such an "open sea ."

The passage exemplifies the structure of Nietzsche's nihilism and existential attitude perfectly.

His nihilism emerged with the death of the Christian God, and his existential attitude is that of a seafarer departing on a voyage of dangerous exploration into the vast ocean of life that had opened up as never before through the death of God .

For Heidegger, Nietzsche's statement that "God is dead" means

that "the suprasensible world is not an effectual force . It affords no kind of life. Metaphysics, which is for Nietzsche western philosophy understood as Platonism, is over" (Holzwege 200) .

It means further that that "the sphere for the essential being and appropriative event [Ereignis] of nihilism is metaphysics itself." I would add emphatically that Nietzsche extended the sphere of nihilism not only to metaphysics but even more so to the field of ethics .

At any rate, Platonic/Christian metaphysics and its entire system of ethics have become problematic. In that sense:

"Nietzsche's phrase gives a name to the destiny of two thousand years of western history."

How, then, did Nietzsche himself take the fact that the entire Platonic/ Christian system had lost its historical influence?

It is clear that the rise of the natural sciences in the modern era struck a forceful blow to that system . Nietzsche speaks of this in On the Genealogy of Morals:

Has the self-diminution of the human being, its will to self diminution, not progressed inexorably since Copernicus? Alas, the faith in human worth, its uniqueness and indispensability in the rank-order of creation has gone-the human has become an animal, literally an animal, without reservation or qualification; the human, who formerly believed itself to be almost divine ("child of god," "God-man") .

Since Copernicus, humanity seems to have got itself on to a sloping plane-already sliding faster and faster away from the center-into what? into nothingness? into the "piercing feeling of its own nothingness" ? That's fine! this would be just the right way into the old ideal? (GM III, 25)

In fact, when Copernicus unhinged the earth from its central position in the heavens, he also banished human being from its central position in the spiritual world, the world of morals in the broad sense. As the external world gradually ceased to be "God's creation," so too did "the relation to God" gradually disappear from the inner world. Human beings, whose relation to God was lost, now began to appear to be related to animals.

With the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, a new atheism took form with social-scientific consequences. After going through Rousseau, Kant, and Hegel, this atheism reappeared in a still deeper form. Eighteenth century atheism, the "first wave" of atheism in the modern era, merely denied the existence of God from the standpoint of a mechanistic view of nature; the second wave, nineteenth century atheism as represented by Feuerbach, tried to radicalize the denial by forging ahead to a point of paradox or irony.

In this later development, atheism arrived at the position that the concept of a God who created human beings is merely a fiction created by human beings, and in the process tried to elucidate the psychological process by which this fabrication came to be .

The fact that the origin of "God" is located within consciousness and that it involves a self-deception meant that atheism was no longer an idea that assaults us from without, but one that strikes to the very roots of subjectivity.

Besides its psychological (or, as it would later be called, "psychoanalytical") explanations of how the concept of God arises within human consciousness, this deeper atheism also projected the model on to history, in an effort to explain the origins of religion in human history. These two approaches, like the blades of a scissors, cut the concept of "God" off at the roots. Nietzsche appears to have been aware of this phenomenon:

Historical refutation as the ultimate refutation . Formerly one sought to prove that there is no God-nowadays one demonstrates how the belief that there is a God could arise and how it gained such weight and importance: with that, the counter- proof, that God doesn't exist, becomes superfluous.

When one formerly refuted the "proofs of the existence of God" that were put forward, there always remained the doubt whether better proofs could be found than those just refuted: in those days atheists did not know how to make a clean sweep. (Dawn 95)

This deeper atheism does not simply stop with a shaking of the foundations of religious consciousness; it also confounds human self-consciousness and forces one to a new self-understanding.

Feuerbach must have made his contemporaries feel as if the ground had been dug out from under their feet. While for some it must have caused severe torment, for others it must have instilled a strong feeling of liberation. Nietzsche places the "young Germans" of the 1830s and 1840s in this latter group

(GM lit 4)