

## **Nietzsche**

*The Gay Science, The Genealogy of Morals*, excerpts

PHIL101

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### Section III: How do I know?

#### Reading III.7

Nietzsche was originally trained in philology, the study of ancient languages. In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, this was a cutting edge discipline, made possible by recent archaeological discoveries of antiquity. The 19<sup>th</sup> Century was a period of tremendous intellectual development, with important developments in biology, physics, astronomy, geology, history, sociology, anthropology, economics, and psychology, developments that continue to inform our modern consciousness. We came, at this time, to understand that the universe was far older and far larger than previously thought; we came to understand that the earth itself was far older, and that its human inhabitants stretched back into the far past to include great and ancient civilizations as well as the most primitive eras and cultures. We came to understand the biological nature of our origins, during this period, and began to appreciate more fully the depths of the human mind and the varieties of human cultures.

Against this backdrop, Nietzsche considers the nature of such fundamental social phenomena as morality and religion. How should we understand such behavior in a scientifically-informed way? What might our biology and social structures have to do with our morals and religious beliefs? Nietzsche became deeply skeptical of traditional accounts of the religion and morality. He believed, like Feuerbach, that our religious beliefs were largely an expression of our self-image. Unlike Feuerbach, however, Nietzsche saw the bonds of religious belief as unhealthy in many respects. For one thing, Nietzsche believed, our traditional religious beliefs tend to impede our development because they represent the universe and our nature in absolute, static terms: Nietzsche saw our nature as continually evolving, along with all else that exists, whereas the concept of an eternal, unchanging God implies an eternal and fixed human nature. Further, Nietzsche believed that some of our present religious beliefs were antithetical to the joy and fullness of living that are possible for us, on his view. He believed that Christianity in particular is the product of a “slave” mentality originating in the captivity of the Jews in ancient Egypt.

Nietzsche’s writing style is unusual for a philosopher. He writes in aphorisms, short, self-contained comments on our world and experience, and employs vivid and powerful rhetorical devices to present his picture of the world. Included below are a number of these aphorisms, or passages from them, illustrating some of his views.

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Among the views expressed below, look for the following themes:

**Theme 1: Nietzsche announces the “Death of God”, which entails the cultural demise of belief in God and profound the intellectual and moral consequences.**

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

The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. “Whither is God?” he cried; “I will tell you. *We have killed him*—you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? Do we not need to light lanterns in the morning? Do we hear nothing as yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods, too, decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.

“How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it? There has never been a greater deed; and whoever is born after us—for the sake of this deed he will belong to a higher history than all history hitherto.”

Here the madman fell silent and looked again at his listeners; and they, too, were silent and stared at him in astonishment. At last he threw his lantern on the ground, and it broke into pieces and went out. “I have come too early,” he said then; “my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men. Lightning and thunder require time; the light of the stars requires time; deeds, though done, still require time to be seen and heard. This deed is still more distant from them than the most distant stars *and yet they have done it themselves.*”

It has been related further that on the same day the madman forced his way into several churches and there struck up his *requiem aeternam deo*.<sup>1</sup> Led out and called to account, he is said always to have replied nothing but: “What after all are these churches now if they are not the tombs and sepulchers of God?”<sup>2</sup>

The centerpiece of Nietzsche’s philosophy, as represented here, is his Death of God thesis. God is “dead”, Nietzsche asserts, and we are his largely unwitting killers. Why does Nietzsche say that God is “dead” rather than simply saying that God does not exist? Is the melodrama just for effect or does it carry some significant content?

Perhaps one reason for this language is to call attention to both God and by extension ourselves as biological phenomena. As mentioned above, Nietzsche is much affected by the anthropological and biological developments of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Accordingly, humans and things human are in his eyes a species of organism to be understood as such. The large-scale features of humanity may be understood as the large-scale features of an organic species, and this includes our religious as well as intellectual and moral behavior. Large-scale feature of humanity emerge or “grow” over time just as they may diminish or “die out.” Belief in God is just one such broad pattern of behavior in an interesting, highly complex form of organism, mankind.

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<sup>1</sup> I.e., a requiem, a funeral mass, for God. The word ‘requiem’ means to rest; ‘*requiem aeternam deo*’ means “rest in peace, God.”

<sup>2</sup> *The Gay Science* §125

The extent to which God has played an important role in the lives of western humans can scarcely be overstated. Consider the influence of the Judeo-Christian tradition over the past two thousand years: it has been the dominant geopolitical force since it overcame the Roman empire, bringing broad unity of belief and custom from Siberia to the Polynesian Islands. Two general features of this influence may be emphasized, here. First is a profound epistemological doctrine, the doctrine of **objective truth**. This doctrine asserts that there is a single, correct and unbiased account of every state and every thing that exists. The roots of this doctrine extend into our earliest intellectual development as do those of the Judeo-Christian conception of God as an omniscient seer of all things. If there exists an omniscient being in some sense detached from this world, then it makes sense to think of there being “a truth” about this world – namely, the truth as this god sees it. The power of this idea is itself profound: it provides a ground for science as a rational human endeavor.

God’s role as ground of objective truth explains the intellectual unease entailed by his “death”. As we loosen our notion of a single true account of reality, our sense of the world as well-ordered diminishes. Previously, and in particular during the age of faith preceding the enlightenment, humans conceived the universe as oriented around us and our earth. There was an objective difference between up towards the heavens and down towards the center of the earth. The sun existed to warm our planet, to foster life. All things existed for a purpose, sometimes illuminated for man but always known by God as part of his divine plan. Absent the lynch pin of this world order, God, we might very well find ourselves “straying as through an infinite nothing.”

For Nietzsche, the notion of an all-seeing God entails also that there is a “truth” about humanity: what God sees us to be is what we are. Humans are a defined entity; we have a nature to which we may cleave more or less closely. There is, in other words, a proper way to be a human and there are then other, non-proper ways, deviant ways that the human being may adopt. And this leads us to the second important consequence of the concept of God, for Nietzsche, which is an application of the first. Where there is an objective truth about mankind, there will also be objective truths about the behavior appropriate to man – i.e., an objectively correct moral scheme. Moral truth, on this view, consists in those facts that God understands as definitive of human being. Behavior deviating from this norm will be “inhuman” or “sub-human”, as we sometimes say. On Nietzsche’s view, however, morality varies significantly at all levels of human association.

**Theme 2: A moral code plays a central role in defining and preserving a people’s way of life – as distinct from the idea that morality is an objective matter of absolute right and wrong.**

**What preserves the species.**—The strongest and most evil spirits have so far done the most to advance humanity: again and again they roused the passions that were going to sleep – all ordered society puts the passions to sleep – and they reawakened again and again the sense of comparison, of contradiction, of the pleasure in what is new, daring, untried; they compelled men to pit opinion against opinion, model against model. Usually by force of arms, by toppling boundary markers, by violating pieties – but also by means of new religions and moralities. In every teacher and preacher of what is *new* we encounter the same “wickedness” that makes conquerors notorious, even if its expression is subtler and it does not immediately set the muscles in motion, and therefore also does not make one that notorious. What is new, however, is always *evil*, being that which wants to conquer and overthrow the old boundary markers and the old pieties; and only what is old is good. The good men in all ages are those who dig the old thoughts, digging deep and getting them to bear fruit – the farmers

of the spirit. But eventually all land is exploited, and the ploughshare of evil must come again and again.<sup>3</sup>

**Theme 3: One powerful and fundamental social dispute engages two competing moral codes, the “noble” or “master” code, on the one hand, and the “common” or “slave”, on the other.**

*Noble and common.*<sup>4</sup>—Common natures consider all noble, magnanimous feelings inexpedient and therefore first of all incredible. They blink when they hear of such things and seem to feel like saying: “Surely, there must be some advantage involved; one cannot see through everything.” They are suspicious of the noble person, as if he surreptitiously sought his advantage. When they are irresistibly persuaded of the absence of selfish intentions and gains, they see the noble person as a kind of fool; they despise him in his joy and laugh at his shining eyes. “How can one enjoy being at a disadvantage? How could one desire with one’s eyes open to be disadvantaged? Some disease of reason must be associated with the noble affection.” Thus they think and sneer, as they sneer at the pleasure that a madman derives from his fixed idea. What distinguishes the common type is that it never loses sight of its advantage, and that this thought of purpose and advantage is even stronger than the strongest instincts; not to allow these instincts to lead one astray to perform inexpedient acts—that is their wisdom and pride. ...<sup>5</sup>

... While the noble man lives in trust and openness with himself (*gennaios*<sup>6</sup> “of noble descent” underlines the nuance “upright” and probably also “naïve”), the man of *ressentiment*<sup>7</sup> is neither upright

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<sup>3</sup> With the reference to the ‘ploughshare of evil’, Nietzsche alludes to the Biblical passage foreseeing the transformation of the swords of war into the plows of peace:

<sup>2</sup> In days to come  
the mountain of the LORD’s house  
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,  
and shall be raised above the hills;  
all the nations shall stream to it.

<sup>3</sup> Many peoples shall come and say,  
“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,  
to the house of the God of Jacob;  
that he may teach us his ways  
and that we may walk in his paths.”

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,  
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

<sup>4</sup> He shall judge between the nations,  
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;  
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,  
and their spears into pruning hooks;  
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,  
neither shall they learn war any more. (*Isaiah 2*)

<sup>4</sup> The titles are Nietzsche’s, as found in his *The Gay Science*. In some of his works, we find such titles; in others, not.

<sup>5</sup> *The Gay Science 3*

<sup>6</sup> I.e., from the ancient Greek, *gennaios*, meaning noble, high-born, excellent, genuine; this term itself derives from *genea*, family or race, birth, offspring.

<sup>7</sup> Here, Nietzsche, writing in German, uses the French term for resentment. The German equivalent, *der Ärger*, lacks the exact connotation of the word we share with the French, which carries a sense of bitterness and impotence.

nor naïve nor honest and straightforward with himself. His soul *squints*; his spirit loves hiding places, secret paths and back doors, everything covert entices him as *his* world, *his* security, *his* refreshment; he understands how to keep silent, how not to forget, how to wait, how to be provisionally self-deprecating and humble. ...<sup>8</sup>

... All that has been done on earth against “the noble,” “the powerful,” “the masters,” “the rulers,” fades into nothing compared with what the *Jews* have done against them; the Jews, that priestly people, who in opposing their enemies and conquerors were ultimately satisfied with nothing less than a radical reevaluation of their enemies’ values, that is to say, an act of the *most spiritual revenge*. For this alone was appropriate to a priestly people, the people embodying the most deeply repressed priestly vengefulness. It was the Jews who, with awe-inspiring consistency, dared to invert the aristocratic value-equation (good = noble = powerful = beautiful = beloved of God) and to hang on to this inversion with their teeth, the teeth of the most abysmal hatred (the hatred of impotence), saying “the wretched alone are the good; the poor, impotent, lowly alone are the good; the suffering, deprived, sick, ugly alone are pious, alone are blessed by God, blessedness is for them alone—and you, the powerful and noble, are on the contrary the evil, the cruel, the lustful, the insatiable, the godless to all eternity; and you shall be in all eternity the unblessed, accursed, and damned!” ...<sup>9</sup>

In the faith in what? In the love for what? In the hope of what? These weaklings! — they too wish to be strong some time; there is no doubt about it. Some time their kingdom also must come — “the kingdom of God” is their name for it, ... — they are so meek in everything! Yet in order to experience that kingdom it is necessary to live long, to live beyond death, — yes, eternal life is necessary so that one can make up for ever for that earthly life “in faith,” “in love,” “in hope.” Make up for what? Make up by what? Dante, as it seems to me, made a crass mistake when with awe-inspiring ingenuity he placed that inscription over the gate of his hell, “I too was made by eternal love”: at any rate the following inscription would have a much better right to stand over the gate of the Christian Paradise and its “eternal blessedness” — “I too was created by eternal *hatred*” — granted of course that a truth may rightly stand over the gate to a lie! For what is the blessedness of that Paradise? Possibly we could quickly surmise it; but it is better that it should be explicitly attested by an authority who in such matters is not to be disparaged, Thomas of Aquinas, the great teacher and saint. “*Beati in regno celesti*,” says he, as gently as a lamb, “*videbunt pœnas damnatorum, ut beatitudo Mis magis complacet*.”<sup>10</sup>

#### **Theme 4: The forms of life possible for humans absent the concept of God includes a powerful, joyous, if fearsome freedom of self-determination.**

**Excelsior** [*Ever upward*].—“You will never pray again, never adore again, never again rest in endless trust; you do not permit yourself to stop before any ultimate wisdom, ultimate goodness, ultimate power, while unharnessing your thoughts; you have no perpetual guardian and friend for your seven solitudes; you live without a view of mountains with snow on their peaks and fire in their hearts; there is no avenger for you any more nor any final improver; there is no longer any reason in what happens, no love in what will happen to you; no resting place is open any longer to your heart, where it only needs to find and no longer to seek; you resist any ultimate peace; you will the eternal recurrence of war and peace: man of renunciation, all this you wish to renounce? Who will give you the strength for that? Nobody yet has had this strength!”

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<sup>8</sup> *Genealogy of Morals* I.10

<sup>9</sup> *Genealogy of Morals* I.7. It is important to note that appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, Nietzsche is not an Anti-Semite. While he regards this moral code as corrupt, Nietzsche rejects the moral absolutism that would designate any person or object “bad” or “good” in and of itself.

<sup>10</sup> *Genealogy of Morals* I.15. The passage from Aquinas reads, in English: “The blessed in the kingdom of heaven will see the punishment of the damned, in order that their bliss be the more delightful them.” *Summa Theologica* III *Supplementum* Q.94, Article 1.

There is a lake that one day ceased to permit itself to flow off; it formed a dam where it had hitherto flowed off; and ever since this lake is rising higher and higher. Perhaps this very renunciation will also lend us the strength needed to bear this renunciation; perhaps man will rise ever higher as soon as he ceases to *flow out* into a god.<sup>11</sup>

**The meaning of our cheerfulness.**—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. This long plenitude and sequence of breakdown, destruction, ruin, and cataclysm that is now impending—who could guess enough of it today to be compelled to play the teacher and advance proclaimer of this monstrous logic of terror, the prophet of a gloom and an eclipse of the sun whose like has probably never yet occurred on earth?

Even we born guessers of riddles who are, as it were, waiting on the mountains, posted between today and tomorrow, stretched in the contradiction between today and tomorrow, we firstlings and premature births of the coming century, to whom the shadows that must soon envelop Europe really *should* have appeared by now—why is it that even we look forward to the approaching gloom without any real sense of involvement and above all without any worry and fear for *ourselves*? Are we perhaps still too much under the impression of the *initial* consequences of this event—and these initial consequences, the consequences for *ourselves*, are quite the opposite of what one might perhaps expect: They are not at all sad and gloomy but rather like a new and scarcely describable kind of light, happiness, relief, exhilaration, encouragement, dawn.

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; at long last our ships may venture out again, venture out to face any danger; all the daring of the lover of knowledge is permitted again; the sea, *our* sea, lies open again; perhaps there has never yet been such an “open sea.”—<sup>12</sup>

**One thing is needful.**—To “give style” to one’s character—a great and rare art! It is practiced by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and then fit them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye. Here a large mass of second nature has been added; there a piece of original nature has been removed—both times through long practice and daily work at it. Here the ugly that could not be removed is concealed; there it has been reinterpreted and made sublime. Much that is vague and resisted shaping has been saved and exploited for distant views; it is meant to beckon toward the far and immeasurable. In the end, when the work is finished, it becomes evident how the constraint of a single taste governed and formed everything large and small. Whether this taste was good or bad is less important than one might suppose, if only it was a single taste!

It will be the strong and domineering natures that enjoy their finest gaiety in such constraint and perfection under a law of their own; the passion of their tremendous will relents in the face of all stylized nature, of all conquered and serving nature. Even when they have to build palaces and design gardens they demur at giving nature freedom.

Conversely, it is the weak characters without power over themselves who *hate* the constraint of style. They feel that if this bitter and evil constraint were imposed upon them they would be demeaned; they become slaves as soon as they serve, they hate to serve. Such spirits—and they may be of the first rank—are always out to shape and interpret their environment as *free* nature: wild, arbitrary, fantastic,

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<sup>11</sup> *The Gay Science* §285

<sup>12</sup> *The Gay Science* §290

disorderly, and surprising. And they are well advised because it is only in this way that they can give pleasure to themselves. For one thing is needful: that a human being should *attain* satisfaction with himself, whether it be by means of this or that poetry and art, only then is a human being at all tolerable to behold. Whoever is dissatisfied with himself is continually ready for revenge, and we others will be his victims, if only by having to endure his ugly sight. For the sight of what is ugly makes one bad and gloomy.<sup>13</sup>

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Nietzsche's writing is intentionally provocative. He seeks to challenge us to come to terms with his claims. Perhaps this is an application of his enjoinder to create a personal style, to become an individual of one's own devising. Such a style would also seem to reflect his rejection of objective truth in favor of something less abstract, such as human interaction. In any case, few readers remain indifferent to him.

Nietzsche is a moral relativist. Right and wrong are primarily rules of behavior within a given society. Societies themselves are forms of communal life subject to change, sometimes gradual, oftentimes sudden and violent. Once we see this important truth, he thinks, some of us will be in a position to determine values for ourselves. This is a heady notion. In practice, however, it is not easy to divorce oneself from one's culture and its norms.<sup>14</sup>

The metaphysical underpinning of Nietzsche's moral view is his notorious "Death of God" thesis. In his parable of the "madman", we are presented with the intellectually and morally challenging vision of life without belief in God. Such a life constitutes an intellectual challenge because of the role that the idea of God plays in our intellectual life. Our standard conception of God entails his omniscience, and as the all-seeing overseer of our universe, God stands as a guarantor of cosmic order and meaning. If there is a God, in other words, it is reasonable to suppose that the universe is an ordered realm and that our place in it, like the place of all things, has some reason or purpose.<sup>15</sup> But without this assumption, we are "continually plunging." We lack an intellectual ground on which to base our understanding of the universe and ourselves. We exist in a vast space without a center, an endless time without a beginning. The very notions of objective truth and mind-independent reality are at risk.

Along with this broad lack of order, of course, our moral standards too lose their ground, as mentioned above. There are no standards of right and wrong that we can appeal to that are not themselves open to question. As some of Nietzsche's remarks suggest, this may be cause for celebration. We are free of the dictates of any god. No being can define for us the "right" way to live or prohibit us from any "wrong". We are free to make of our lives what we will and wish. But this freedom is at the same time terrifying and its responsibility overwhelming. Nietzsche distinguishes a "strong" from a "weak" type by reference to the attitude that one takes towards this freedom. It is far from clear how many of us might in fact flourish under this idea. As we

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<sup>13</sup> *The Gay Science* §343

<sup>14</sup> Consider, for example, the case of Dostoevsky's character Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*. Raskolnikov is a young man preoccupied with such a vision of moral independence. But when he murders an old woman for her money, he finds himself unable to escape the remorse that a "stronger" type might disdain. Nietzsche knew of and admired Dostoevsky's works.

<sup>15</sup> Note the direction of this conditional statement: *if* God exists, *then* we may suppose the existence of a divine order. Kierkegaard, too, calls our attention to this proposition. If we assume God to exist, then we may see the world as imbued with order. But this requires the prior assumption of God's existence. We reason not from the obvious divinity of the world order to the existence of God, but, rather, assume God's existence in the first place.

will see in our reading from Sartre, many of us devote much of our energy to evading this freedom, fruitless though these efforts may be. Together, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Sartre have much to do with defining the condition and attitudes of modern humanity.

**Ask Yourself:**

Remember: your capacity to re-state these ideas is central to your understanding of them

1. To what extent is belief in God “dead” in our culture, today? What are some specific examples in which God or reference to God plays a decreasing role? In what respects, if any, does belief in God remain an important force in our culture?
2. What does it mean to be resentful of the conditions of human life, as Nietzsche understands the matter?
3. What does Nietzsche mean by saying that God has “died” – why doesn’t he simply say that God does not exist?
4. What, for Nietzsche, is the significance for our intellectual lives of the death of God?
5. What, for Nietzsche, is the significance for our moral and personal lives of the death of God?
6. What does Nietzsche identify as “good” and what imperative might this entail?