
READING NIETZSCHE'S THE DEATH OF GOD AND HIS LISTENERS

Kajornpat Tangyin¹

ABSTRACT

Nietzsche in his famous section on the “madman” in *The Gay Science*, announced an event which he called “the death of God.” This event involves not only a movement away from religion but also a movement away from traditional values. It is the beginning of an age where the major question is the overcoming of ‘nihilism’. This paper wishes to examine this announcement by focusing upon its listeners, not only the people in the marketplace who ‘didn’t believe in God’, but also the academics who read Nietzsche. What does it mean to accept the death of God? What does it mean to accept the movement beyond traditional values and metaphysics? And most importantly, what of the people outside of the marketplace and the academic orbit whom Nietzsche is addressing? If Nietzsche wishes to reevaluate all values, is this meaningful to the majority of the population of the world who still struggle to preserve their values and spirituality? This paper wishes to examine Nietzsche both inside and outside of his intended audience.

Keywords: Nietzsche; the Death of God; the Overman; Metaphysics

Introduction

On trying to understand Nietzsche's philosophy, we sometime must understand what lies behind his words. We cannot place him in any school of thought or traditional way of doing philosophy. He marks what we can consider to be a historical time or a critical relationship to a tradition. Reading Nietzsche's works without any prejudice is a difficult task. He aims deep into our heart and questions all what we believe, and we automatically struggle to defend our own beliefs.

Not only does he reject the authority of tradition, he also rejects the values which rests upon tradition. The idea of the death of God, is a part of this rejection. The greatest challenge is to react to the announcement of the death of God and the consequences for morality. Robin Small remarks:

One can at most specify certain recognizable philosophical principles for which Nietzsche often expresses support: the idea that the world is one of becoming, not of being, and as a consequence of this, an opposition to any doctrine that posits a reality over and above the world of appearance. An important corollary is the rejection of traditional religion, not only as a metaphysical doctrine but also in its implications for moral concepts.²

What Nietzsche did, according to Small, is to dig at the roots of the Western tradition. But here it should be remembered that his project remains addressed to the Western tradition and its limits. Any tradition in human history is grounded in complex systems, and any radical change in human history is mostly caused by many complicated events. The announcement of change of traditional values may have meaning to the listeners of the madman in the marketplace when he proclaims the death of God. But it may not have such meaning within other complex historical traditions. The aim of this paper is also to focus on who the madman's and Nietzsche's real listeners are.

Unchaining the Earth from its Sun

Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* as we know published a year before his masterpiece *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Nietzsche referred to the death of God in the end of the first part of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: "Dead are all gods: now we want the overman to live."³

Whiter is God" he cried. "I shall tell you. We have killed him – you and I. All of us are his murderers.... God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we, the murderers of all murderers, comfort ourselves? What was holiest and most powerful of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives.... Must not we ourselves become gods simply to seem worthy of it? There has never been a greater deed; and whoever will be born after us - for the sake of this deed he will be part of a higher history than all history hitherto."⁴

God as Dante put it in his *Divine Comedy*, is 'the love that moves the Sun and the other stars.' Now, for Nietzsche, with this unchaining of the earth from its sun, we are now we have lost in empty space. We did not know where to go, no goal to attain, just strayed into an infinite nothing. The death of God uprooted all references from human understanding of life to the stars. All meanings of everything referring to God seemed to wipe away after the dead of God. This also means that the Western metaphysics rooted in Greek 'Logos' and passed through Christian God has come to an end. The ethical values founded in God need to be revalued in a new context.

Heidegger, in his book *Off the Beaten Track*, spent a long chapter on taking account of Nietzsche's the death of God. Heidegger attempted to explain Nietzsche's the death of God with a full comprehensive view from the madman to the overman and to Nietzsche's nihilism in *The Will to Power*. Heidegger is one of the main sources of the interpretation of Nietzsche. And the meaning underlying Nietzsche's the death of God, according to Heidegger, means to the death not only the Christian God

but also the Western metaphysics in general.

It is clear from this sentence that Nietzsche, in speaking about the death of God, means the Christian God. But it is no less certain and no less to be kept in mind beforehand that Nietzsche uses the name “God” and “Christian God” to indicate the supersensory world in general... “God is dead” means: the supersensory world has no effective power. It does not bestow life. Metaphysics, which for Nietzsche is Western philosophy understood as Platonism, is at an end. Nietzsche understands his own philosophy as the countermovement against metaphysics, i.e., for him, against Platonism.⁵

Heidegger saw Nietzsche’s the death of God as the end of the Western metaphysics which coincided on a metaphysical idea of ‘being’ whereas Nietzsche asserted the priority of Heraclitus’s ‘becoming’. Beginning with Plato, the world of becoming was considered the world of shadows, and the true world was placed prior to change and ‘becoming’. Likewise, Christianity is condemned like Platonism as a falsification of the lived world of becoming. The metaphysical being of Platonism and Christianity provide a stable center which provides meaning to the world of becoming.

But the rejection of this stable source being prior to becoming creates a crisis. Heidegger interpreted the madman scene according to his reading of the history of Western philosophy. For him, the phrase “God is dead” is not just the confession of an unbeliever, but is something far deeper. This is reflected in the three questions the madman asked: “How were we able to drink the sea dry? Who gave us the sponge to wipe the entire horizon away? What did we do when we unchained this earth from its sun?”

When he cites the relationship between earth and sun, Nietzsche is not just thinking of the Copernican revolution in the modern conception of science. The word “sun” will also remind us of Plato’s parable. According to the parable, the sun and the realm of its light are the surroundings in which beings appear in accordance with their appearance, in accordance with their visible aspect (in accordance with the ideas). The sun forms and delimits the field of vision in which beings show themselves as beings. The “horizon” means the supersensory world as the one that truly is. This is at the same time the entirety that embraces and includes everything in itself like the sea. The earth as the residence of man is unchained from its sun. The realm of the supersensory which has its being in itself (*an sich seienden*) is no longer the normative light above man. The whole vision has been wiped away. The entirety of beings as such, the sea, has been drunk dry by men. For man has risen up into the I-hood of the *ego cogito*. With this uprising all beings become objects. As what is horizon no longer illuminates of itself. It is now only the viewpoint set in the dispensation of value of the will to power.⁶

His interpretation of this scene is remarkably interesting, and it allows for deeper reflection on the madman’s message. Nietzsche’s the sun, according to Heidegger, can be traced back to Plato’s allegory of the sun. Later in Augustine, the sun becomes the main metaphor represent the transcendental God. Heidegger does not proclaim the death of God, but he attempts to end the Western metaphysics of presence. Nietzsche should be considered as the one source of Heidegger’s project of the end of metaphysics.

Reading Nietzsche through the history of Western philosophy, calls our attention to the transition from Greek *cosmocentrism* to the medieval *theocentrism*, and finally to the modern anthropocentrism. The rising of *anthropocentrism* moves God from the sphere of human being. The traditional function of the idea of God began to be replaced by science

and human affairs. If God is dead, then what will replace the creation of meaning and value in the world? Nietzsche provided a new model of the human being who is not dependent upon tradition or religion, who doesn't obey but creates. This is what he proclaims as the "overman" in his work *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*; a new model of the enlightened person for the coming age.

The Listeners

The people who listen to the madman's attempt at enlightenment are the group of non-believers. Small observes:

It must be noted that the message of the death of God is addressed not to believers but to 'those who do not believe in God'. The assumption is that there are no believers in the modern world, or at least in the market place, symbol of mass society. When Zarathustra encounters one believer, a hermit who lives apart from society, he refrains from revealing that God is dead; the message is only for those who have brought it about. The hermit is 'untimely' too, and would appear as absurd in the marketplace as the mad man.⁷

We can examine this in more detail. In his *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in this work, Zarathustra descends from the mountain and meets an old man. Zarathustra has a conversation with the old man and ends with some questions pointing out the differences between the old man and Zarathustra.

"And what is the saint doing in the forest?" asked Zarathustra.

The saint answered: "I make songs and sing them; and when I make songs, I laugh, cry, and hum: thus I praise God. With singing, crying, laughing, and humming, I praise the god who is my god. But what do you bring us as a gift?"

When Zarathustra had heard these words he bade the saint farewell and said: “What could I have to give you? But let me go quickly lest I take something from you!” And thus they separated, the old one and the man, laughing as two boys laugh.

But when Zarathustra was alone he spoke thus to his heart: “Could it be possible? This old saint in the forest has not yet heard anything of this, that God is dead!”⁸

Zarathustra has nothing to offer the believer. He departs before he risks taking his belief. But the fact that the believer remains ignorant of the death of God remains a puzzle to him. Robert C. Holub, in his book *Friedrich Nietzsche*, points out:

Finally the madman falls silent, and the drama of the scene continues when he throws down his lantern, which bursts among the onlookers. He continues then in a somewhat different vein, claiming that he has come too early, that the deed of which he speaks occurs slowly, or at least that the news of it travels slowly. The very men who are atheists are still far away from recognizing the import of their own deed. The aphorism ends with a report that the madman has sung the requiem for God in churches and was asked to account for his actions. He did so by calling the churches the tombs and sepulchers of God.⁹

Heinrich Heine, a German poet in that period, wrote a poem relevant to this idea.

Our heart is filled with shuddering compassion – it is ancient Jehovah himself who is preparing for death. We knew him so well, from his cradle in Egypt, where he was reared among divine calves and crocodiles, sacred onions, ibis, and cats.... We saw him emigrate to Rome, the capital, where he renounced all national prejudices and proclaimed

the divine equality of all nations, and with such fine phrases established an opposition to old Jupiter, and intrigued until he gained supreme authority and from the Capitol ruled the city and the world *urbem et orbem*. We saw how he became even more spiritual, how he whimpered in bland bliss, becoming a loving father, a universal friend of man, a world benefactor, a philanthropist – but all this could avail him nothing – Do you hear the little bell ringing? Kneel down. They are bringing the sacraments to a dying god.¹⁰ Do those who still believe remain insulated from the announcement of the death of God? Is it the end of the long tradition of the Christian God? Or is it just the end of the metaphysical scheme of the Western tradition? Some thinkers amplified Nietzsche's the death of God to all areas in the Western tradition such as culture, religion, metaphysics, and morality. Yet many emphasize that the madman has come too early, the people were not ready to hear his message.

Other interpretations of this message may open us to see other meanings behind these words. Kellenberger, in the book *Kierkegaard and Nietzsche*, also gave us other perspectives about Nietzsche's the death of God.

God, in the religious tradition that Nietzsche is addressing, is a living God. Only a living God can die, only a God that has animated lives and given them direction and substance can die. Part of the import of Nietzsche's theme is that the God who provided moral direction and significance for our lives can no longer play this role. The story of this God no longer engages us at a deep enough psychological level to play this role, and so in this sense, too, God is dead.¹¹

If God does not exist, a famous statement of Dostoyevsky, all things are permissible. But yet this does not apply in the case of Kierkegaard whose 'knight of faith', does not replace God, but on the

contrary, is the one who surrenders to God's command even if it has to perform a teleological suspension of the ethical as in the case of Abraham. Both Nietzsche's overman and Kierkegaard's 'knight of faith' show the limits of rationality but they aim in different directions.

Actually, the idea of the death of God did not originate from Nietzsche. It was a common theme of philosophers in the nineteenth century. Karen Armstrong, in her book *A History of God*, described this atheistic movement:

Not surprisingly, this notion of God was quite unacceptable to many people in the postrevolutionary world, since it seemed to condemn human beings to an ignoble servitude and an unworthy dependence that was incompatible with human dignity. The atheistic philosophers of the nineteenth century rebelled against this God with good reason. Their criticisms inspired many of their contemporaries to do the same; they seemed to be saying something entirely new, yet when they addressed themselves to the question of "God," they often unconsciously reiterated old insights by other monotheists in the past.¹²

Atheism became one of the dominant features of that period and attempted to 'liberate' the human from God. This desire for a new spirit of independence from God was rooted in several factors including the advances in science, and technology. So the madman's announcement about the death of God itself has a history. It was one of the main themes of the great thinkers in the nineteenth century like Feuerbach, Marx, and Freud. Nietzsche's idea of the death of God, along with being a statement about an event in history, is firmly rooted in a period of history.

Little Gods

We should now consider more deeply, what takes God's place after the death of God. Richard Schacht observes:

His concern is not merely with the establishment and proclamation of God's non-existence; he is declaring himself to have gone further, addressing himself to the question which now emerges of how we are to reinterpret the world and ourselves and revalue our lives and our possibilities, given that we are no longer to think about them in relation to the existence of a transcendent deity.¹³

So to appear worthy of the death of God we ourselves must become gods. Oaklander writes:

Thus, the death of God liberates and frees us to make our own decisions and choices. Before we were slaves to God: We obeyed god, we were ruled by God, and we acted in accordance with His commands. But now we can become legislators of our own values, we can become little gods, we can become masters of ourselves. We no longer need to be ruled by objective values, but can now be ruled by ourselves.¹⁴

But is it possible to set man in the place of God? Heidegger argued against this idea. For Heidegger:

Man can never be set in God's place because the essence of man never attains the essential realm of God... The overman does not, and not ever, step into the place of God; rather the place for the overman's will is another realm of another grounding of beings in their other being. This other being of beings has meanwhile become subjectivity."¹⁵

So according to Heidegger, it is subjectivity that has become the new God. And this also corresponds to the listeners in the marketplace. In the twenty-first century, we are faced with the full development of this new subject of the marketplace. Those in the marketplace now are still unfazed by the announcement of the madman. The ground of their

values seems to be shaped by a consumer culture rather than religious or metaphysical guidance. God, and metaphysics are commodities that they cannot consume.

Likewise, the announcement of the madman can only be made to academics who have likewise been long conditioned by the rejection of religion and metaphysics. As for the believers, they go to the church and sing, praise and attend mass regularly as the hermit. If Nietzsche's the madman proclaims the death of God, the believers may say 'long live God.' According to Nietzsche in the nineteenth century, God is dead. For the twenty-first century, God is still alive.

The subtitle of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is 'a book for everyone and no one.' Indeed, Nietzsche's the death of God seems to resonate only for its specialized readers, or among a particular groups like academicians.

Conclusion

Nietzsche's announcement about the death of God through the madman probably resonated with his academic followers, and their attraction to a skepticism concerning traditional values. This was a skepticism which was rooted in Western academic history, is in part, a Western critique of its own excessive rationality and logocentrism.

In *Daybreak*, Nietzsche writes that "to accept faith just because it is customary, means to be dishonest, to be cowardly, to be lazy. And do dishonesty, cowardice, and laziness then appear as the presupposition of morality?"¹⁶ And in *Human All Too Human* he writes that "Public opinion – private laziness", "Convictions are more dangerous enemies of truth than lies."¹⁷ According to Nietzsche, the opposite way with conviction is skeptics, "One should not be deceived: great spirits are skeptics.... Men of conviction are not worthy of the least consideration in fundamental questions of value and disvalue. Convictions are prisons.... A spirit who wants great things who also wants the means to them, is necessarily a skeptic."¹⁸ This is the project of the overman that come after the death of God.

But we can consider the contestation of the two spirits, the spirit of change and the spirit of conservation, has happened throughout the history of human thought. Alfred North Whitehead, in his book *Science and the Modern World*, provided a remarkable insight on this point: “Mere change without conservation is a passage from nothing to nothing.... Mere conservation without change cannot conserve.”¹⁹ Religion and tradition does not necessarily become obsolete with time, even in the face of change. With this insight, we realize that Nietzsche is just one path in philosophy which reacted strongly to the main traditions. Nietzsche’s life itself involved philosophizing with a hammer, or playing the role of the overman. His strength of his writings comes from the relation between his philosophy and his biography. For him, philosophy should not be just a play of rationality but should be receptive to life and power. This inspired his listeners to question the values of their lives and resist those traditional values which diminished the experience of life. And so Nietzsche became one of the leading philosophers for so many contemporary thinkers and listeners. Yet outside of the West, God is still alive among many people and never died in the heart of believers. Therefore, Nietzsche’s announcement about the death of God cannot be heard among those of the marketplace, it cannot be told to believers, and it is receptive only to members of the Western academic world. So for Nietzsche, God is dead, but some may say, on the contrary, that Nietzsche is dead, or Nietzsche as an academic exercise in philosophizing.

ENDNOTES

¹ Kajornpat Tangyin is the full-time lecturer of the Graduate Program in Philosophy and Religion, and the director of the Professional Ethics Center at Assumption University of Thailand.

² Robin Small, "Nietzsche." In *The Nineteenth Century: Routledge History of Philosophy*, Vol. 7, edited by C.L. Ten. (London: Routledge, 1994), 180.

³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. section 3. in *The Portable Nietzsche*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. (London: Chatto & Windus, 1971).

⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, section 125 "The Madman." in *The Portable Nietzsche*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. (London: Chatto & Windus, 1971).

⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, ed. and trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 162.

⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, ed. and trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 194-195.

⁷ Robin Small, "Nietzsche." In *The Nineteenth Century: Routledge History of Philosophy*, Vol. 7, edited by C.L. Ten. (London: Routledge, 1994), 192.

⁸ Nietzsche, 2

⁹ Robert C. Holub, *Friedrich Nietzsche*, (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995), 136-137.

¹⁰ Heinrich Heine, *The Romantic School and Other Essays*, ed. Jost Hermand and Robert C. Holub (New York: Continuum, 1958), 200.

¹¹ J. Kellenberger, *Kierkegaard and Nietzsche*, (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1997), 74.

¹² Karen Armstrong, *A History of God*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993), 352.

¹³ Richard Schacht, *Nietzsche*, (London: Routledge, 1983), 122.

¹⁴ L. Nathan Oaklander, *Existentialist Philosophy: An Introduction*, (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1992), 88.

¹⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, ed. and trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 190-191.

¹⁶ Nietzsche, 101

¹⁷ Ibid, 482-483

¹⁸ Ibid, 54

¹⁹ Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, (New York: The Free Press, 1953), 201.

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