

Introduction to Philosophy

Reason and Religious Faith: The Death of God

As you read the material for the next class, keep the questions below in mind. To answer these questions you will have to reflect critically on what you have read and possibly re-read important passages. Keep in mind that there are two basic kinds of information that you need to look for in the readings:

1. What are the main points or conclusions that an author accepts with respect to a particular issue?
2. What are the reasons, important considerations, and evidence that lead the author to accept that conclusion?

For our purposes, *it is information of the second sort that will be our primary concern* since our most basic task is to *evaluate the reasons and evidence* that are offered to support accepting one possible conclusion about an issue, rather than another.

Although I strongly suggest that you write out brief answers to these questions, you do not have to turn in written responses. You do, however, need to be prepared to speak intelligently to these issues in the next class meeting.

Reading

- Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Death of God".

Background

Friedrich Nietzsche is well-known known for his attacks on virtually everything that has been considered sacred: God, truth, morality, equality, democracy and most other modern values. Although Nazi theoreticians attempted to associate these ideas with their own cause, responsible interpreters agree that Nietzsche despised and unambiguously rejected both German nationalism and anti-Semitism. Little else in his thought is so unambiguous, at least in part because he rarely writes in a straightforward, argumentative style, and because his thought changed radically over the course of his life.

In the following excerpts from his work, Nietzsche accepts a naturalistic (i.e., not supernatural) understanding of human beings. He maintains that while naturalism does not undermine all values, it does deny those endorsed by the major ideal of value, the Christian Moral Ideal or CMI (do not let the "Christian" part fool you, Nietzsche sees this ideal firmly rooted in most Western and Eastern religion and philosophy—to this end Nietzsche usually refers to it as the "ascetic ideal"). The CMI takes the highest human life to be one of self-denial, denial of the natural self, thereby treating natural or earthly existence as devoid of intrinsic value. Values always come into existence in support of some form of life, but they gain the support of the CMI only if they are given a life-devaluing interpretation. The CMI interprets acts as wrong or "sinful" because the acts are selfish or "animal"—because they affirm natural instincts; it is assumed that anything truly valuable must have a source outside the natural world.

According to Nietzsche, the CMI contains its own undoing. First it deprives the natural world of value by placing the source of all value outside nature (by making it supernatural). Then, it promotes the value of truth above all else, which necessarily leads the CMI to honestly recognize that there is nothing outside nature (Nietzsche believes this is the inevitable consequence of science and the history of philosophy). Among the casualties of this process is belief in God, as Nietzsche dramatized by proclaiming that "God is dead". Without God to provide a foundation for the CMI, there is nothing on which to justify the CMI or its purpose, nothing to inspire human beings to take on the task of becoming more than they already are. Modern culture therefore has insufficient defenses against eruptions of barbarism, such as the two world wars, which Nietzsche predicted as a large part of the history of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

But Nietzsche saw that there was now no way to go back to earlier values. His hope rested instead with "new philosophers" who have lived and thought the values of the CMI through to their end and thereby recognized the need for new values. His own writings are meant to exhibit such a new ideal, often by exemplifying old virtues that are given a new, life-affirming interpretation.

Questions

1. According to Nietzsche, what is the origin of knowledge and logic? What purposes are these things supposed to fulfill? Is it to give us truth or something different? What does this have to do with "untruth as a condition of life"?
2. To whom does the madman announce the news of the death of God? Why doesn't Zarathustra tell the old saint in the forest this news? What is the "de-deification of nature" and how is this related to the death of God?
3. According to Nietzsche, why do people believe in God? What hostility does Nietzsche detect in Christianity? What purpose is the belief in God supposed to fulfill? Does Nietzsche believe this is a good or bad purpose? Does belief in God actually fulfill this purpose?