

Nietzsche, nihilism and the death of god



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche while producing many works, consistently wrote on five main concepts: nihilism; revaluation of values; will to power; the eternal return; and the overman. Yet all these concepts stem from another concept which was not previously mentioned and is possibly what Nietzsche is most well known for. Even those who can merely utter Nietzsche's name can usually tie it to the proclamation of the death of God.

This essay aims to focus not on Nietzsche the man, but his concepts of nihilism and the death of god with reference to Nietzsche's works themselves as well as input from secondary sources, on Nietzsche and his philosophy. However neither of these concepts can be fully explained without delving into the other major concepts in Nietzsche's philosophy of nihilism, revaluation of values, will to power, the eternal return and the overman. The ways in which these concepts all link to the death of God will be discussed throughout this essay, so as to further explain the condition of nihilism.

Firstly the concept of the death of God, in Nietzsche's philosophy is key to explaining nihilism. The death of God was proclaimed by Nietzsche in *The Gay Science* (1874), through a parable entitled *The Madman*, in which two main points are evident. The Madman in an early morning market place states to his audience " God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him" (Nietzsche, in Van Tongeren 2000, p. 279). The key point, from which a question can be raised, is how did we (human kind) kill god? Walter Kaufmann (in Solomon, p. 10) believed that human kind killed God by losing faith in God, by falling into a void in which humankind's dignity and values are lost.

That is to say, that human kind no longer is governed by God and no longer fears his rapture; all rules laid down by God are no longer adhered to by mankind (Heidegger 1979, p. 4). From this we can understand the death of god as the cause of nihilism, as nihilism is when the highest of values are devalued (Goudsblom 1980, p. 11). That is to say that all values in place to the advent of the death of god, must be re-valued, thus beginning the onset of nihilism.

The other key point in the madman parable is that the madman also states “ I come too early ... my time has not come yet” (Nietzsche, in Van Tongeren 2000, p. 279), which indicates that the message of the death of God failed because it was delivered to an audience who did not believe in God (Van Tongeren 2000, p. 283). Therefore the key problem with the death of God is that human kind did “ not understand or admit” (Van Tongeren 2000, p. 285) what this meant. Nietzsche provided, for those willing to accept the death of God, a path by which to live. Nihilism was for Nietzsche a response to the death of God.

For when the previous way of life had become redundant, and new way of life had to be made, nihilism. Yet Nietzsche said that prior to this there was the first instance in which the values by which humankind lived by were to be shaken, outlined in *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887) Essays. In the beginning, mankind found itself divided into the high and low classes. The higher class consisted of those that had power namely the priests or high religious officials. These priests felt a sense of superiority, which was justified by the fact that they were indeed superior and highly ranked clergymen.

This sense of superiority Nietzsche called the pathos of distance in which they became alienated from the low. Through this feeling what was considered good and bad gained its meaning, that which was associated with the priests was good and that which was associated with the lower class was bad. The lower class, from this situation, began to have growing resentment of those in the higher class. The ideas of what was good and bad reversed and the low became pious and the high became impious. From this change came the slave morality, where the low were good and the high and all they possessed was bad.

With the uprising of the lower class and thus the creation of the slave morality, the priests began to doubt their superiority over the low. The high succumbed to the slave morality and the way in which the high lived their lives began to be classed as sinful. From this the priests began to have guilt for their superior lives, and their values too undertook revaluation, after which they began to live by ascetic ideals. The ascetic ideal is whereby one is to abstain from all that the powerful and privileged have at their disposal, for example wealth, alcohol and lust to rule.

However by denying these things, a secret lust for them is created. However if they had never been denied, then the lust would never have eventuated. It is from this ascetic ideal that high religious officials draw their power within society, yet it is also in this ideal that they find inner torment, and wishful thinking of a different life. The only way the high religious officials are able to rise above the herd is to turn to nihilism, to revalue all their values and to no longer live a life of ascetics (Schacht 1995).

Nihilism can take, depending upon the meaning taken by it, many different forms. Nietzsche believed that the whole of society around him had been affected by nihilistic thought and that not just current society but for the century preceding and the century to follow would be afflicted with nihilism. Goudsblom (1980) believed that nihilism was the path taken when existence had lost all meaning, yet he posited that there were two forms of nihilism which could be drawn from Nietzschean thought; active nihilism and passive nihilism.

Active nihilism is seen as a force which destroys all false values and creates a new way of thought, it does not despair woe is me, nor is it just the thought that all must be destroyed, it is action in this thought (Goudsblom 1980, p. 12). Passive nihilism is the resignation to the ever-looming hopelessness and produces active search for something to believe in, for loss of previous beliefs. Yet the common ground these two hold is purposelessness, which brings us closer to the meaning behind nihilism (Goudsblom 1980, p. 12).

Goudsblom (1980) found in Nietzsche's words the best way to define nihilism as "that the highest values devalue themselves" (p. 11). This means that for a nihilist, all values have become obsolete; "life has no objective, that any purpose which we attribute to existence is no more than our interpretation of it, false and untenable" (Goudsblom 1980, p. 11). For the realisation of all this, the nihilist is helpless to its consequences and is engulfed by the sense of nothingness that comes with this realisation.

The revaluation of all values takes place as the death of God removed the foundations which all values rested upon. This means that the foundations

for values are removed, yet they did not just drift away. By revaluing values, the previous values must undergo drastic change (Goudsblom 1980, p. 11). To understand fully the transvaluation of values, it must be understood how Nietzsche conceptualises values. To begin, Nietzsche finds that values are not something which occurs naturally, that is they do not exist without mankind.

This is shown through Nietzsche's words in *The Gay Science* (1974): Whatever has value in our world does not have value in itself, according to its nature—nature is always value-less, but has been given value at some time, as a present—and it was we [mankind] who gave and bestowed it. (in Von Eschenbach 2006, p. 54) This paragraph clearly shows that Nietzsche firmly believed that values were not discovered but created by mankind, which is to say that without man, there would be no value.

Over time values became something that humans came to will and that they would prefer to will nothingness than to not will. Therefore it is evident that values form their basis in the human need for survival, expression of desire and exertion of power. Evidently, values exist to serve human interest or purposes and lie at the heart of human preservation and enhancement (Von Eschenbach 2006). So when a shift to nihilistic thought takes place, a new centre of values needs to be established, this for Nietzsche is in the will to power.

It is in the will to power that the new set of values draws their standards and rules from, that the nihilist will ultimately draw from the necessary tools to overcome nihilism (Heidegger 1979, p. 6). For Nietzsche saw the condition of nihilism as problematic and through will to power this condition was able to

be resolved (Solomon 1973, p. 203). The will to power is the basic tenet of existence, for both living and nonliving life forms. Heidegger (1997) states that the will to power for Nietzsche is “ the accruing of power by power for its own overpowering” (p. 7).

That is to say that the will to power is the way by which all action takes place. All possible motivation from within the human comes from the will to power, which also serves as the ground and character to all change; that is to say that by no longer living by ascetic ideals, the human returns to a natural human state, whereby the very centre of any being is the will to power. But this is not just true for the human; all action that takes place comes from the will to power. Nietzsche also created what he called the *Übermensch*, basically translated as the superhuman or Overman (Heidegger 1997).

The Overman was the basis for the ideals behind the will to power. A state that is basically unachievable for the common man. But this is that which Nietzsche said everybody should draw the basis of their character from. By constantly striving for this state of the Overman, one could continually better oneself and not be content with just being human-all-too-human. The Overman is one which does not live by the rules of society, yet lives as if he does not know that there are values and norms of society which are predetermined.

The Overman decides his own rules and norms and is therefore unaffected by society, yet has the ability to affect society in his surrounds. The Overman whilst constantly striving for self enhancement lives naturally. That is to say that natural human impulse is not repressed within the Overman and to do

so would be detrimental to the Overman. For it is these qualities which sets the Overman apart from the rest of society, so to repress any natural urges for the Overman would make him no better than the common man.

This distance is key to the concept of the Overman. For he is not simply a higher evolution of man, but he is separate from man altogether and that the emergence of the Overman could be seen as the indication of the fall of mankind. The Overman is not one which struggles, but is one to bring into effect mans struggles to be more like the Overman with the realisation of their downfalls. The Overman also never knows death as man does, as the Overman is an ideal and idyllically takes joy in the process of the eternal recurrence of the same (Van Tongeren 2000, pp. 245-246).

Eternal recurrence of the same is the condition in which the Overman, the will to power and the revaluation of values takes place (Heidegger 1979, p. 7). Nietzsche suggested that the nature of the will to power is cyclical; it is in this cycle that the values are posited, validated and justified by power and power alone. That means that only what is achieved by power can be seen as value or having value and this is how standards and guides of value are sourced from the will to power.

This constant overpowering of the self is a cycle which shall not rest nor fall content, it is continually becoming. Nietzsche's conception of time is not as man would have it, chopped up into past present and future, but cyclical in that instead of everything being in a state of being, everything exists in a state of becoming. Nietzsche presented this concept of the eternal return in *The Gay Science* (1974), through his parable *The greatest weight* in which someone is confronted by a demon who speaks to you about time.

In this parable the demon says of time that “[t]he eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it” (Nietzsche in Van Tongeren 2000, p. 292). This shows how Nietzsche believed that time existed with no linear direction, following the endless cycle of creation, destruction and re-creation (Schroeder in Stauffer and Bergo 2009, p. 239). This concept Nietzsche believed could be taken in two ways, one would “throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus?” (Nietzsche in Van Tongeren 2000, pp. 292-293).

This is the way that Nietzsche believed the common man would have reacted, that this news would be daunting to the common man, the notion that one might have to relive all the hardship and sorrow already experienced. This thought would have in Nietzsche’s words “would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight.” (Nietzsche in Van Tongeren 2000, p. 293). However this is not the way with the Overman. The second way, in which Nietzsche believed the words of the demon could be taken, is the way in which the Overman would have taken the prospect of the eternal return.

In Nietzsche’s words “you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: ‘You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine.’” (in Van Tongeren 2000, p. 293). The Overman is one who takes joy in the eternal return, as he is not man, and this concept is a weight which as previously said, is far too great a weight for man to be burdened with and would instead of undertaking a change, would simply be crushed by the weight of the concept.

This is another way in which Nietzsche is sure to make evident the distance between man and the Overman, for the Overman is something for the

common man to strive for, but can never actually reach. So in conclusion, the death of God is the cause of nihilism. At the advent of the death of God, man drew no comprehension of the event or admitted that the death of God had even occurred, there was simply a shift to nihilistic thought.

The primordial priests were the proto-nihilists, the first of their kind and emerged out of the creation of the slave morality and the ascetic ideal. It was the ascetic ideals which were the direct result of the slave morality. Nevertheless, nihilism in any form is whereby the highest values devalue themselves. Values are a creation, not discovery of man and do not occur naturally. Nietzsche saw nihilism as the condition to which the will to power was the cure and the will to power as the basis of all existence. The Overman forms the ideals at the core of the will to power.

The Overman is one who among many things, takes joy in the eternal return of the same and is a model by which common men should strive for, in their efforts to overcome nihilism. The eternal return of the same is for Nietzsche, the condition in which existence takes place; it is not linear but cyclical and this is a concept which is horrific for the common man, but joyous for the Overman. Yet the crucial concepts to take from this essay is that nihilism finds its origins in the death of God and the only way by which man can overcome nihilism is by the will to power.