

## Nietzsche - the Death of God

Many previous philosophies have claimed that there is a meaning to life. This meaning may be related to God, as in Christianity, or it may be found in some "higher purpose" e.g. Hegelianism and Marxism all view history as unfolding in a particular way and that the meaning of our lives is determined by the relationship we have this process.

Previous philosophies also assume that the meaning of life is a) universal (the same for everybody) and b) independent of choice (we can't choose to give life an alternative meaning; it is something that we discover)

Nietzsche rejects both these ideas. There is no "objective" meaning to life for us to discover.

Nietzsche is well aware that this rejection of objective meaning has profound (and unsettling) consequences.

The following quote from *The Gay Science* expresses the disorientation experienced when one fully appreciates the consequences of rejecting all objective meaning. The quote also describes the way in which modern people were/are losing faith in an objective meaning.

*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 am looking for God\*! I am looking for God!"*

*As many of those who did not believe in God were standing together there, he excited considerable laughter. Have you lost him, then? said one. Did he lose his way like a child? said another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? or emigrated? Thus they shouted and laughed. The madman sprang into their midst and pierced them with his glances.*

*"Where has God gone?" he cried. "I shall tell you. **We have killed him - you and I.** We are his murderers. But how have we done this? How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What did we do when we unchained the earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving now? Away from all suns? Are we not perpetually falling? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there any up or down left? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is it not more and more night coming on all the time? Must not lanterns be lit in the morning? Do we not hear anything yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we not smell anything yet of God's decomposition? Gods too decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we, murderers of all murderers, console ourselves? That which was the holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet possessed has bled to death under our knives. Who will wipe this blood off us? With what water could we purify ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we need to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we not ourselves become gods simply to be worthy of it? There has never been a greater deed; and whosoever shall be born after us - for the sake of this deed he shall be part of a higher history than all*

*history hitherto."*

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

*It has been further related that on that same day the madman entered divers churches and there sang a requiem. Led out and quietened, he is said to have retorted each time: "what are these churches now if they are not the tombs and sepulchres of God?"*

*\*God should be understood as any system of objective meaning and purpose to life.*

Remember, with no objective meaning to life, there are no objective moral values. It is impossible to condemn or praise actions in the way we are used to doing. We are literally set adrift in a cold meaningless world. The familiar certainties, whether they are religious, philosophical or moral have all been taken away from us.

### The solution

Nietzsche recognises that living with the realisation that life has no objective meaning is very challenging.

He argues that we must **create** meaning and purpose in our lives. This is a task that requires a great deal of psychological strength and few people can fully accomplish it.

The story, or narrative, we use to describe and interpret our lives is important at this point.

The old philosophies (such as Christianity, Marxism, Hegelianism, Platonism) all construct "grand narrative", stories that a) describe the past, b) explain the present and our relation to it, and c) provide a direction for the future. As we know, Nietzsche rejects these grand narratives. This does not mean, however, that we cannot create a **personal narrative** that performs the same function as a grand narrative, but on an individual basis.

There is no objective meaning to be discovered in the world. We can, however, create a meaning and sense of purpose by creating a personal narrative.

Each individual must create a narrative that places themselves at the centre and as the hero. We must learn to view our lives from a distance, and create a narrative in the same way that a great artist might. Living a meaningful life means living it as though in the process of creating a fine work of literature.

*the art of viewing ourselves...from a distance and, as it were, simplified and transfigured – the art of watching and transforming ourselves...Without this we would be nothing but foreground and live entirely in the spell of that perspective which makes what is closest at hand...appear as if it were vast, and reality itself. (The Gay Science 78)*

Our day to day concerns (passing an exam, getting to school on time, making friends with someone...) can appear to be **the** reality of our lives. We need to distance ourselves from these concerns and look at the whole of life from the perspective of the personal narrative **that we have created**. Within this narrative, we are the central character and we are the hero. In a very real sense, we are to become like artists. We are to create the narrative within which our lives become meaningful.

The story we create should tell us who we are and, importantly, provide direction for the future. It is worth remembering that the absence of universal values means that there is no external vantage point from which this narrative can be judged. It is our personal narrative with significance for us. (This point can also form the basis of a very important criticism of Nietzsche's ideas - to be examined later)

Nietzsche famously presented his **doctrine of eternal recurrence** as a means of testing how successfully one had created a narrative in response to the objective meaninglessness of life.

*What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: 'This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more' ... Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: 'You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine.' (The Gay Science 341)*

How would you respond? A truly healthy (in the psychological sense) individual would be delighted at the thought of reliving their life over and over again. They have successfully created a narrative that gives their life meaning. Each moment in the healthy individual's life can be seen as a necessary part of the whole of their life. The successful individual affirms their life. Even those moments when the individual despaired, or failed, are affirmed. They are viewed as necessary steps which led the way towards greater events. In Nietzsche's words, we must find a way to turn, "filth into gold" (The Gay Science 8) For example, an individual may say something along the lines of, "looking back at my life, it was necessary for me to do badly in my exams in order for me to realise that I didn't want to follow a conventional career route" or "if I hadn't become ill, I would not have realised just how important it is to enjoy every minute of one's life"

Most of us, unfortunately, are not so successful. A truly "sick" individual despairs at one's life (or of life in general), and perhaps looks for an escape route such as heaven, nirvana, or simply non-existence. The thought that one must repeat one's life again and again is an appalling one.

## **The Ubermensch**

The *Ubermensch* or *overman* is the name Nietzsche gives to the type of person who can pass the test of eternal recurrence. The overman is a special kind of person who can embrace the objective meaninglessness of life and create a narrative that truly places them at the centre and as a hero. They can turn “filth into gold”. They are psychologically very strong.

It seems then that for Nietzsche, the only response to the death of God is to be strong enough to create a narrative for oneself within which one can locate individual meaning and purpose. The overman is the person who can truly achieve this feat.

## **Problems with Nietzsche’s position**

- 1) If there are no objective values, then we lose the ability to evaluate the moral worthiness of the narratives we create. For example, the serial killer may construct a narrative within which she is the hero and within which she finds meaning. She may even decide that she would be delighted to repeat her life over and over again. Most people would see that there is something deficient in this particular narrative and would wish to condemn it. If we accept Nietzsche’s views, we are powerless to do this.
- 2) Without an external authority (be it God, morality, reason) it becomes extremely difficult for us to justify our narratives to ourselves. What criteria do I use to determine which direction my narrative should point? Why should I choose one direction instead of another? For example, I might decide that to view my life as a process of events that culminate in me becoming a successful singer. Why should I choose this outcome? Why don’t I choose a narrative that points me in the direction of becoming a loyal friend or a good parent? Without an external authority, my choice of narrative appears to arbitrary and unstable.
- 3) Nietzsche rejects any sense of objective morality and yet he seems to suggest that it is better to be “healthy” than to be “sick”. Is there a contradiction here?