



## The Death of God

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'God is dead.' These are the most famous words that the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) wrote. But how could God die? God is supposed to be immortal. Immortal beings don't die. They live for ever. In a way, though, that's the point. That's why God's death sounds so odd: it's meant to. Nietzsche was deliberately playing on the idea that God couldn't die. He wasn't literally saying that God had been alive at one time and now wasn't; rather that belief in God had stopped being reasonable. In his book *Joyful Wisdom* (1882) Nietzsche put the line 'God is dead' in the mouth of a character who holds a lantern and looks everywhere for God, but can't find him. The villagers think he is crazy.

Nietzsche was a remarkable man. Appointed as a professor at the University of Basel at the very young age of 24, he looked set for a distinguished academic career. But this eccentric and original thinker didn't fit in or conform, and seemed to enjoy

making life hard for himself. He eventually left the university in 1879, partly because of ill health, and travelled in Italy, France and Switzerland, writing books that hardly anyone read at the time, but which are now famous as works of both philosophy and literature. His psychological health declined and he spent much of his later life in an asylum.

In complete contrast to Immanuel Kant's orderly presentation of ideas, Nietzsche's come at you from all angles. Much of the writing is in the form of short, fragmentary paragraphs and pithy one-sentence comments, some of them ironic, some sincere, many of them arrogant and provocative. Sometimes it feels as if Nietzsche is shouting at you, sometimes that he is whispering something profound in your ear. Often he wants the reader to collude with him, as if he is saying that you and I know how things are, but those foolish people over there are all suffering from delusions. One theme he keeps returning to is the future of morality.

If God is dead, what comes next? That's the question Nietzsche asked himself. His answer was that it left us without a basis for morality. Our ideas of right and wrong and good and evil make sense in a world where there is a God. They don't in a godless one. Take away God and you take away the possibility of clear guidelines about how we should live, which things to value. That's a tough message, and not one most of his contemporaries wanted to hear. He described himself as an 'immoralist', not someone who deliberately does evil, but someone who believes that we need to get beyond all morality: in the words of the title of one of his books, 'beyond good and evil'.

For Nietzsche, the death of God opened up new possibilities for humanity. These were both terrifying and exhilarating. The downside was that there was no safety net, no rules about how people had to live or be. Where once religion had provided

meaning and a limit on moral action, the absence of God made everything possible and removed all limits. The upside, at least from Nietzsche's perspective, was that individuals could now create their own values for themselves. They could turn their lives into the equivalent of works of art by developing their own style of living.

Nietzsche saw that once you accept there is no God, you can't just cling to a Christian view of right and wrong. That would be self-deception. The values that his culture had inherited, values such as compassion, kindness, and consideration of other people's interests, could all be challenged. His way of doing this was to speculate about where these values originally came from.

According to Nietzsche, the Christian virtues of looking after the weak and helpless had surprising origins. You might think that compassion and kindness are obviously good. You've probably been brought up to praise kindness and despise selfishness. What Nietzsche claimed is that the patterns of thought and feeling that we happen to possess have a history. Once you know the history or 'genealogy' of how we come to have the concepts that we do, it is hard to think of them as fixed for all time and as somehow objective facts about how we ought to behave.

In his book *The Genealogy of Morality* he described the situation in Ancient Greece when powerful aristocratic heroes built their lives around ideas of honour, shame and heroism in battle rather than kindness, generosity and guilt at wrongdoing. This is the world described by the Greek poet Homer in the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*. In this world of heroes, those who were powerless, the slaves and the weak, were envious of the powerful. The slaves channelled their envy and resentment towards the powerful. Out of these negative feelings they created a new set of values. They turned the heroic values of the aristocrats on their head. Instead of celebrating strength and power like the

aristocrats, the slaves made generosity and care for the weak into virtues. This slave morality, as Nietzsche calls it, treated the acts of the powerful as evil and their own fellow feelings as good.

The idea that a morality of kindness had its beginnings in feelings of envy was a challenging one. Nietzsche showed a strong preference for the values of the aristocrats, the celebration of strong warlike heroes, over the Christian morality of compassion for the weak. Christianity and the morality derived from it treats every individual as having the same worth; Nietzsche thought that was a serious mistake. His artistic heroes like Beethoven and Shakespeare were far superior to the herd. The message seems to be that Christian values, which emerged from envy in the first place, were holding humanity back. The cost might be that the weak get trampled on, but that was a price worth paying for the glory and achievement that this opened up for the powerful.

In *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883–92) he wrote about the *Übermensch* or ‘Super-Man’. This describes an imagined person of the future who is not held back by conventional moral codes, but goes beyond them, creating new values. Perhaps influenced by his understanding of Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution, he saw the *Übermensch* as the next step in humanity’s development. This is a bit worrying, partly because it seems to support those who see themselves as heroic and want to have their way without consideration of other people’s interests. Worse still, it was an idea that the Nazis took from Nietzsche’s work and used to support their warped views about a master race, though most scholars argue that they distorted what Nietzsche actually wrote.

Nietzsche was unfortunate in that his sister Elisabeth controlled what happened to his work after he lost his sanity and for

thirty-five years after his death. She was a German nationalist of the very worst kind and an anti-Semite. She went through her brother's notebooks, picking out the lines she agreed with and leaving out anything that criticized Germany or didn't support her racist viewpoint. Her cut-and-paste version of Nietzsche's ideas, published as *The Will to Power*, turned his writing into propaganda for Nazism, and Nietzsche became an approved author in the Third Reich. It is highly unlikely that, had he lived longer, he would have had anything to do with it. Yet it is undeniable that there are plenty of lines in his work that defend the right of the strong to destroy the weak. It is no surprise, he tells us, that lambs hate birds of prey. But that doesn't mean we should despise the birds of prey for carrying off and devouring the lambs.

Unlike Immanuel Kant, who celebrated reason, Nietzsche always emphasized how emotions and irrational forces play their part in shaping human values. His views almost certainly influenced Sigmund Freud, whose work explored the nature and power of unconscious desires.