A Nietzschean Critique of Spirituality

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As one of the central figures of atheistic existentialism, Friedrich Nietzsche was anti-Christian, anti-Buddhist, and overall anti-religion. Nietzsche's atheism is not one that simply disbelieves these frameworks but actively *rejects* their central tenets. But what did Nietzsche think about "spirituality" in a broad sense? This is an interesting question in the current age, as Western citizens are leaving structured religion in masses, often stopping short of atheism to describe themselves under the umbrella of amorphous spirituality. As the title of this exploration suggests, Nietzsche's view of spirituality is roughly as critical as his view of the church, precisely because Nietzsche believes that the Western conception of spirituality has its direct origins in the dogma of Western religion. Two aphorisms found within his profound four-part book *The Gay Science* will be examined as evidence of this concept.

Aphorism 108 of *The Gay Science* is titled "New Struggles." It begins the third section of the book and provides the reader with a startling allegory.

> After Buddha was dead, his shadow was still shown for centuries in a cave—a tremendous, gruesome shadow. God is dead; but given the way of men, there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown.—And we—we still have to vanquish his shadow, too.

Unpacking this metaphor requires a solid understanding of three vital concepts: (1) the death of God, (2) the Buddha parable, and (3) what the "shadow" means in this context. The death of God is actually the simplest, and it essentially refers to the fact that—in Nietzsche's atheistic worldview—it no longer makes sense to believe in God. This is due to several factors, including scientific discoveries such as Darwin's Theory of Evolution and the like. During pre-modernity, God was the only accessible answer to the questions regarding how and why humans exist. Enter modernity, and this is no longer the case. Hence, Nietzsche's dramatic statement on the death of the Christian God.

Nietzsche's description of the shadow of the Buddha is actually quite literal, as it was believed for many centuries that travelers could see Buddha's silhouette on a particular cave wall, as recorded by Buddhi mystics who made pilgrimages there. "South of the city, half a yojana, there is a rock-cavern, in a great hill fronting the south-west; and here it was that Buddha left his shadow. Looking at it from a distance of more than ten paces, you seem to see Buddha's real form" (Fa-Hien 8).

Nietzsche applies the concept of the "shadow" to the death of God by explaining that even though God is dead, His shadow still haunts us. Like an afterimage, the silhouette of Judeo-Christianity still towers over Western civilization, despite the fact that the object which once cast the shadow has disappeared. Interpreting this allegory, one might

easily say that the remnants of God still pervade our supposedly post-God society, including the fact that many non-religious and spiritual people still uphold primarily Judeo-Christian values. From this intriguing allegory, Nietzsche begins to state his critique in literal terms in the following aphorism.

The title of Aphorism 109 of *The Gay Science* is "Let Us Beware," and is initially structured as a warning: a warning against *spirituality*. The term "Let us beware" is repeated six times throughout the section, each accompanying a further development of Nietzsche's message.

> Let us beware of thinking that the world is a living being. [...] We have some notion of the nature of the organic; and we should not reinterpret the exceedingly derivative, late, rare, accidental, that we perceive only on the crust of the earth and make of it something essential, universal, and eternal, which is what those people do who call the universe an organism. This nauseates me. Let us even beware of believing that the universe is a machine: it is certainly not constructed for one purpose and calling it a 'machine' does it far too much honor.

In this initial warning, Nietzsche attacks the over-generalizations that people make. As humans have discovered certain "laws" of nature, they have taken to push them onto reality as a whole. But these ideas that humans have discovered only apply to the crust and waters of planet Earth, not to the entirety of the cosmos. Take the idea of *growth*, for example. The concept itself has significant application in the realm of biology, as living beings take in nutrients and increase their mass. As stated, this applies exclusively to the *crust and oceans of the Earth*, the only place where life exists (as far as we know). Despite the fact that this idea applies *only* to the organic world, humans have mapped it onto non-living, inorganic things. It is not uncommon for someone to say that a star or a black hole or even the whole universe "grows," despite the fact that the concept of *growth* simply does not apply to inorganic objects. Nietzsche's further critique of considering the universe a "machine" is extremely concise and accurate, as it's a truly Judeo-Christian belief to claim that the whole chaos of reality is directed to fulfill one particular task. The idea of the universe being a machine also implies that it was "constructed," which not-so-coincidentally happens to be another Judeo-Christian concept. From this first warning, Nietzsche shows the reader how considerations of the universe as being "alive" or "automated" have deep origins in traditional religion, and are not at all new. From these traditional religious understandings, Nietzsche furthers his critique of the concept of "order" itself.

> The astral order in which we live is an exception; this order and the relative duration that depends on it have again made possible an exception of exceptions: the formation of the organic. The total character of the world, however, is in all eternity chaos—in the sense not of a lack of necessity but of a lack of order, arrangement, form, beauty, wisdom, and whatever other names there are for our aesthetic anthropomorphisms.

The key to understanding this particular element of the critique is the final word: anthropomorphism. Humans have certain qualities that are completely and unequivocally *unique* to humans alone. However, with our capacity for abstract thought and imagination, humans going all the way back to ancient times have had the habit of assigning entirely human characteristics to non-human animals and even inanimate objects. This is a natural tendency, as it's often the case that if children are asked why the sun shines, they reply with something along the lines of "because it's happy." Nietzsche warns us against doing this, however, as there's no truth to the fact that there's a human-like order to reality. As he states, all of our perceptions of "order" or "balance" are mere

snapshots on a massive timeline of tremendous disorder and chaos. Our assignment of these terms is both a mistaken instinct of psychology, as well as one of the remaining hidden concepts of the dominant religious frameworks of the past.

Towards the end of aphorism 109, Nietzsche offers readers an important term that serves as a potential solution to the issues he presents: "de-deification" (Nietzsche 169). As he questions:

> When will all of these shadows of God cease to darken our minds? When will we complete our de-deification of nature? When may we begin to "*naturalize*" humanity in terms of a pure, newly discovered, newly redeemed nature?

Although this finale to aphorism 109 is posed as a question, it's really meant to be interpreted as a call to action. What Nietzsche is proclaiming here is that now that God is dead, it is our duty to rid ourselves of all the afterimages that his presence created over the past two thousand years. In rejecting spirituality as one of these "shadows," he calls upon Western civilization to de-deify its relationship to the world by coming to understand that most of the characteristics we assign to reality are merely anthropomorphic projections of distinctly human qualities. As a call to action, Nietzsche also desires that humanity view itself from a purely naturalistic standpoint, and that humans cease moralizing themselves and one another.

As Nietzsche demonstrates in these two aphorisms from *The Gay Science*, the popularity of vague spirituality is not as novel as it may seem. By establishing the allegory of Buddha's shadow, using it to describe the West's current relationship with the death of God, and calling for the de-deification of reality, Nietzsche shows readers a problem with a potential solution, so long as humanity is courageous enough to abandon its previous frameworks and push forward into an entirely new conception of the world.

Works Cited

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