

# DIONYSUS AGAINST THE CRUCIFIED: NIETZSCHE CONTRA CHRISTIANITY, PART 1

Stephen N. Williams

## Summary

*This is the first part of a two-part study of Nietzsche and Christianity. Nietzsche's phrase 'Dionysus against the Crucified' is used as a kind of text for the articles. 'Dionysus' is the principle of life: raw, tragic, joyful, but real, subject to no extraneous principle. 'The Crucified' is the principle of death: anti-natural, symbolising consciousness of sin and foreboding authority of God, imposing a morbid principle on life. This part is strictly descriptive and although it outlines some elements in Nietzsche's philosophy, it suggests that philosophy as such will not provide an adequate response.*

## I. Introducing Nietzsche

Wherever there are walls, I shall ascribe this eternal accusation against Christianity upon them - I can write in letters which make even the blind see... I call Christianity the one great curse, the one great intrinsic depravity, the one great instinct for revenge for which no expedient is sufficiently poisonous, secret, subterranean, petty—I call it the one immortal blemish of mankind...

So ends, but for a phrase or two, Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Antichrist*, written in 1888.<sup>1</sup> Not long afterwards, he collapsed

---

<sup>1</sup>*The Antichrist in Twilight of the Idols/The Antichrist* (London: Penguin, 1990), sec. 62. From now on, section or page numbers will be included in the text where it is clear what work is cited. Nietzsche's works, and the abbreviations used, are: *The Antichrist* (AC) (London: Penguin, 1990); *Beyond Good and Evil* (BGE) (London: Penguin, 1990); *Daybreak* (D) (Cambridge: CUP, 1982); *Ecce Homo* (EH) (London: Penguin, 1979); *The Genealogy of Morals* (GM) (New York: Vintage, 1966); *The Gay Science* (GS) (New York: Vintage, 1974); *Human, All Too Human* (HH) (Cambridge:

in the piazza Carlo Alberto in Turin, sobbing, arms thrown around a carthorse that was being flogged. He never recovered sanity and died eleven years later, in 1900.

The words quoted, together with the closing words of his literary autobiography, *Ecce Homo*, which was produced soon afterwards, fittingly brought to its climax Nietzsche's authorship. *Ecce Homo* closes: 'Have I been understood?—*Dionysos against the Crucified...*' (p. 134). I shall take the words of *The Antichrist* as a barometer of Nietzsche's sentiment and the words of *Ecce Homo* as a text for this lecture.<sup>2</sup> Before trying to expound the text, four preliminary observations are in order.

(1) Although we confine our attention to Nietzsche contra Christianity, it is misleading to suppose that we can appreciate the full import of his attack by considering Christianity in isolation. Nietzsche was, in a fashion, contra woman; contra Germans; sometimes, it seems, contra most other things too. In the final year of his sane life he put

---

CUP, 1986); *The Twilight of the Idols* (TI) (London: Penguin, 1990); *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (TSZ) (London: Penguin, 1969); *The Will to Power* (WP) (New York: Vintage, 1967). Unless otherwise indicated, references are to section and not to page numbers in the works.

<sup>2</sup>This article, which is a slightly revised version of the 1996 Tyndale lecture in Philosophy of Religion, attempts to provide readers with an orientation to some important themes in Nietzsche's work. In Part Two, forthcoming in the next issue of *Tyndale Bulletin*, I hope to offer a response to Nietzsche. Nietzsche is an important enough figure to deserve a wide readership. Hence, I have tried to balance specifically philosophical with rather wider concerns, although much depends on what one regards as philosophy. Here, I make no attempt to add to the avalanche of scholarly or original material that has appeared over the years. For this, consult the volume in the excellent 'Cambridge Companion' series, B. Magnus and K. Higgins (eds.), *Nietzsche* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996). In relation to the present article, mention should be made of two works in particular. The first is the neglected but immensely valuable study by P. Moroney, *Nietzsche's Dionysiac Aristocratic Culture* (Maynooth: Kairos, 1986). The second is the recent study by M.A. Gillespie, *Nihilism before Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). This not only reveals the depths required in a proper treatment of 'Dionysus against the Crucified'. It also contains an important thesis on the origins of modernity. Despite the recent proliferation of studies, some general older works that offer quick surveys are useful, such as Van Riessen's *Nietzsche* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1960).

together, in addition to the writings mentioned, the posthumously published *Nietzsche contra Wagner*, following up *The Case Against Wagner* written earlier still that year. By confining myself to Christianity, I shall certainly be stripping Nietzsche of much in his literature that is associated with and illuminates his anti-Christianity.

(2) Neither these remarks, nor the title of the lecture, are meant to suggest that Nietzsche's authorship was dominated by negativity. Although the severity of his anti-Christian denunciations may attract many of his anti-Christian readers, the force of his authorship, taken as a whole, lies equally in its presentation of an alternative evangel, inspired by prophetic vision. The concept of Dionysus will indicate that.

(3) Although our treatment is thematic, the method of exposition does not imply that Nietzsche's thought was static. His thought has long been periodized by Nietzsche scholars, although the detail of periodization is less secure than the knowledge that Nietzsche's ideas developed. Still, his attacks on Christianity over the years constitute a sufficient unity to enable an overall treatment. The words of *The Antichrist* are a shrill crescendo, but neither in their mood nor their substance do they really misrepresent the charges Nietzsche lodged over the decade or so prior to them, when the anti-Christian motif was emerging overtly in the major publications.

(4) In taking as a text 'Dionysus against the Crucified', there is no hope or intention of offering a comprehensive exposition of this phrase, still less of subsuming under that rubric everything in Nietzsche's contra-Christianity. Some of Nietzsche's opposition is standard nineteenth century sceptical criticism.<sup>3</sup> The evidence suggests that Nietzsche's early theological studies, specifically historical-critical study of the Scriptures, were largely responsible for the dethronement of his Christian belief.<sup>4</sup> But, important as it is that we take note of this, it does not constitute what is *distinctive* in Nietzsche's thinking. That will be our quarry.

---

<sup>3</sup>Amongst many examples that could be given, see *HH* I.113 and *BGE* III.52-54.

<sup>4</sup>J. Salaquarda reports on this in 'Nietzsche and the Judaeo-Christian Tradition' in Magnus and Higgins (eds.), *Nietzsche*, ch. 3.

It may seem that a heavy price is exacted of those who concentrate on what is distinctive in Nietzsche's anti-Christianity, in the context of philosophy of religion. Is there not insanity in some of the literature and bizarre idiosyncrasy in much of it? What is really of value for philosophers or, indeed, for any serious religious thinkers? One must certainly grant that the clinical onset of insanity may have taken some literary toll on the latest literature. But no one who has read Nietzsche's major works properly can write off the substantial content of the last products as just a piece of inchoate insanity. On idiosyncrasy: indeed, Nietzsche lacked for little in that department. But his thought, at its very roots, has firm grounds in early Greek, specifically pre-Socratic, philosophy.<sup>5</sup> Further, idiosyncrasy has contributed towards influence. That influence has been considerable. Everyone who thinks today, said Martin Heidegger, does so in Nietzsche's light and shadow.<sup>6</sup> Stanley Rosen writes: 'Friedrich Nietzsche is certainly the most influential philosopher in the Western non-Marxist world.' In similar vein Charles Taylor characterizes all influential European philosophy as 'neo-Nietzschean'.<sup>7</sup> Finally, Alasdair MacIntyre, whose work we discuss below, has described Nietzsche as 'the moral philosopher of the present age'.<sup>8</sup>

The value of looking at Nietzsche in a specifically philosophical context naturally depends on one's view of philosophy. Nietzsche's thought is most congenial to those who work in the continental rather than the analytic tradition. Nietzsche could regard himself as a philosopher in the mode of a psychologist. (BGE I.23) It has been proposed that the reception of Nietzsche renders the distinction between philosophy and literature evanescent or meaningless. We shall not enter here into the dispute over rival conceptions of philosophy, or the borderlands between the history of

---

<sup>5</sup>See the thorough survey in Moroney, *op. cit.*

<sup>6</sup>See K. Ansell-Pearson, *An Introduction to Nietzsche as a Political Thinker* (Cambridge: CUP, 1994) 1.

<sup>7</sup>For these and other accolades, see R. Pippin, *Modernity as a Philosophical Problem: on the Dissatisfactions of European High Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) 84.

<sup>8</sup>*After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1981) 107.

philosophy and the history of ideas. However, it is worth remarking that the introductory essay in the recently published *Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche* contains the early observation that Nietzsche's 'critique of traditional morality has become a force in the reflections of some leading Anglophone philosophers, such as Bernard Williams, Richard Rorty, Martha Nussbaum, Alasdair MacIntyre and Philippa Foot.'<sup>9</sup>

It is not surprising that the interest of analytic philosophers in Nietzsche centres on his moral thought. Of the aforementioned philosophers, none has had higher general exposure over these last years than MacIntyre. So it is fitting that we now turn to him.

## II. Christianity contra Life

In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre pitted Nietzsche against Aristotle in terms of 'one of two genuine theoretical alternatives confronting anyone trying to analyze the moral condition of our culture'.<sup>10</sup> According to MacIntyre, the 'Enlightenment Project of Justifying Morality Had to Fail' (chapter title) because it sought to find a rational basis for moral beliefs continuous with and inherited from a Christian-Aristotelian tradition. It had to fail because the Enlightenment worked with a conception of human nature which broke with that tradition. Yet, the discarded conception was required to make sense of the moral beliefs retained. Nietzsche saw this failure clearly, and proceeded to get rid of the beliefs along with their basis. Morality is now the expression of will—individual will; hence morality is an individual's morality. Nietzsche was preoccupied with the question of how we can invent new tables of 'what is good and a law'. It is 'in his relentlessly serious pursuit of the problem, not in his frivolous solutions that Nietzsche's greatness lies, the greatness that makes him *the* moral philosopher, if Enlightenment moral philosophy is the only alternative.'<sup>11</sup> MacIntyre judges this, in fact, *not* to be the

---

<sup>9</sup>p. 2.

<sup>10</sup>*After Virtue*, 104.

<sup>11</sup>*After Virtue*, 107.

only alternative. However, his exposition and nuanced advocacy of the power of an alternative Aristotelian philosophy is beside our point.

MacIntyre returned to Nietzsche in his Gifford Lectures, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*.<sup>12</sup> Here, he offered a defence of a Thomist conception of morality and moral enquiry, an alternative to both a rationalist and a Nietzschean approach. He tackled Nietzsche's 'genealogical' approach to morality, whereby Nietzsche aspired to write 'the history of those social and psychological formations in which the will to power is distorted into and concealed by the will to truth.'<sup>13</sup> 'The specific task of the genealogist of morality', MacIntyre rightly says, 'was to trace both socially and conceptually how rancour and resentment on the part of the inferior destroyed the aristocratic nobility of archaic heroes and substituted a priestly set of values in which a concern for purity and impurity provided a disguise for malice and hate.'<sup>14</sup>

MacIntyre engages with Nietzsche contra the moral tradition, not just contra Christianity specifically. However, in *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* he remarks: 'both the perspective of the genealogist and the concomitant repudiation of the distinction between the real and the apparent involve the rejection of Christian theology.'<sup>15</sup> What MacIntyre says is familiar enough, but it is not a comprehensive view of Nietzsche's rejection of Christianity. Admittedly, MacIntyre's brief is not to describe that specific rejection.<sup>16</sup> But he encourages the adoption of a rather misleading perspective on Nietzsche. Nietzsche steers MacIntyre towards an analysis of the Homeric, in contrast to the Aristotelian, virtues. But as we shall see, Nietzsche's interest lies in the dionysiac, not just the Homeric, element in pre-Socratic culture. On the one hand, I

---

<sup>12</sup>London: Duckworth, 1990.

<sup>13</sup>*Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, 39.

<sup>14</sup>*Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, 40.

<sup>15</sup>*Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, 67.

<sup>16</sup>Note Pannenberg's opinion that Nietzsche's influence on traditional piety was equal to or greater than his influence on the erosion of moral concern: *Christian Spirituality and Sacramental Community* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1984) 19.

shall not pursue the Homeric here; on the other, I doubt if MacIntyre could well afford to neglect the dionysiac.

It is certainly true that the genealogical approach to morality and the repudiation of the distinction between the real and the apparent express Nietzsche's opposition to Christianity. The genealogical approach, spelled out in *The Genealogy of Morals*, caps a discussion that begins to roll seriously in the first major work where Christianity is a direct object of attack, *Human, All-Too Human*.<sup>17</sup> Here, Nietzsche's analysis of morality is combined with a strongly-worded repudiation of Christianity, where the author's heart as regards the heart of the matter is very much on his sleeve. Christianity proclaims a pathetically enfeebled sinner, God being the projection of this poisoned spiritual sensibility (I. 114). God is regarded by Christianity as 'the real', favourably contrasted to, and supremely the modifier of, the world of human existence:

Go through the moral demands exhibited in the documents of Christianity one by one and you will find that in every case they are exaggerated, so that man *could* not live up to them; the intention is not that he should *become* more moral, but that he should feel *as sinful as possible*. (I.141, p. 77)

He keeps up this line of attack in his next work, *Daybreak*, where we read of Christianity's 'repellent flaunting of sin' (I.29). Then, in the next work again, *The Gay Science*, we read of the 'Christian resolve to find the world ugly and bad' (III.130). This is but a sample.

In *The Genealogy of Morals*, we learn how this obnoxious intelligible world was produced from a world that Christianity cunningly relegated to the category of 'the apparent world'. Taking his cue from anticipatory remarks in the immediately preceding work, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche argued that Morality was the imposition on life of the historical resentment of an enslaved people, the Jews, who furnished Christianity with the conceptual ability to develop its ethic of altruism and

---

<sup>17</sup>I use the familiar 'The Genealogy of Morals', but the title may be better rendered 'Towards a Genealogy of Morals'. Nothing in this article hangs on the particular translations I cite.

compassion. Nietzsche is a kind of naturalist. Raw life is marked by the will-to-power, the maximisation of power of an organism, which is its natural tendency. As he elsewhere makes clear, this is unlike what he takes to be the Darwinian idea of organic *preservation*.<sup>18</sup> Nietzsche's main opposition to Christianity is that it proclaims a dastardly lie about life. It is anti-life, setting moral clamps upon life's innate motions, presuming and projecting another world which blots the daylight of life out of this one. This, of course, is the gravamen of the charge which concludes *The Antichrist* and which we cited at the beginning.

It is in this light that we must understand 'against the Crucified' in the phrase 'Dionysus against the Crucified'. The Crucified is the symbol of redemption, rather than the historical Jesus. True, when the historical Jesus gets in Nietzsche's way, he does not hesitate to take a swing. This is so from the beginning of the anti-Christian literature, when, in *Human, All Too Human*, the accusation is lodged that Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, divides human nature against itself, causing us to impose on ourselves a burdensome and self-slaying ethic in the name of a world of values, whose president is God. Morality is internal division of the self (I.137). But despite Nietzsche's criticisms, you can certainly get worse than Jesus. Christianity is much worse, according to *The Antichrist*, which identifies Paul as the one who corrupted Jesus' teaching. Jesus himself is now surrounded by pathos rather than being the butt of Nietzschean hostility (32-35). Christianity is about the Crucified as the symbol of redemption, and you can get no worse than that. It is at this point that we turn to the jewel in the Nietzschean crown, the piece which bears the name *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

### III. Thus Spoke Zarathustra

This is a strange work. It is haunting; quasi-mystical at some points; poetical at all points. It is also, some will judge,

---

<sup>18</sup>See, for example, the discussion under the heading 'The Will to Power as Life' in *WP* (ed. W. Kaufmann), pp. 341-66.



religiously weird and philosophically futile. Nietzsche, however, took a different view. He regarded it as the greatest book the world had ever seen; consequently, the best that he had written. Commenting on it in *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche said: 'On one occasion Zarathustra strictly defines his task—it is also mine—the *meaning* of which cannot be misunderstood: he is *affirmative* to the point of justifying, of redeeming even the entire past.' (p.110)

The premise of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is that God is dead.<sup>19</sup> The task of the eponymous agent is to make something of godless life, something as grand as God Himself, so that vacuous nihilism does not become the order of the human day. Having discerned the death of God, Nietzsche's problem was not just *what* should be created in God's stead, but *how* individuals should create life, meaning and value. For although God is dead, the shadow of God remains to darken the entire historical, cultural, social scene. The shadow takes its darkest shape in the form of Christian morality, which urgently needs banishing.<sup>20</sup> The individual must create, must be a creator as hard as hammer, must shatter the old law-tables, and Nietzsche's summons to this is at the heart of the book.<sup>21</sup>

You shall not steal! You shall not kill!—such words were once called holy; in their presence people bowed their knees and their heads and removed their shoes. But I ask you; where have there ever been better thieves and killers in the world than such holy words have been? Is there not in all life itself—stealing and killing? And when such words were called holy was not *truth* itself—killed? Or was it a sermon of death that called holy that which contradicted and

---

<sup>19</sup>Karl Lowith once succinctly stated that 'Nietzsche's actual thought is a thought system, at the beginning of which stands the death of God, in its midst the ensuing nihilism, and at its end the self-surmounting nihilism in eternal recurrence': *From Hegel to Nietzsche: the Revolution in Nineteenth Century Thought* (London: Constable, 1965) 193. This work repays careful study.

<sup>20</sup>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' (GS III.108).

<sup>21</sup>In *EH* p. 104 Nietzsche tells us that this is a 'decisive chapter'.

opposed all life?—O my brothers, shatter, shatter the old law-tables! (p. 219)

The Judaeo-Christian commands are impositions on life, as are Kantian imperatives, the legitimate rational offspring of that tradition. We must destroy these structures. This opens up a perspective on the Crucified, for the exercise of destruction is also an exercise in self-redemption. 'To redeem the past and transform every "It was" into an "I wanted it thus"—that alone do I call redemption' (p. 161). Here is the apex of the summons to and striving for self-redemption. From an individual point of view, read as a prescription for what Nietzsche calls 'self-overcoming', its prosaic, but devastating, application, is that nothing in the past must entangle the present in the coils of remorse, forcing constraint upon action. Action must be unfettered, creative, possible only as the issue of, accompaniment to, or perhaps enablement of, self-redemption.<sup>22</sup> Of course, the Cross stands in the path.

O my brothers, I direct and consecrate you to a new nobility; you shall become begetters and cultivators and sowers of the future... Let where you are going, not where you have come from, henceforth be your honour... not that... a ghost, called holy, led your ancestors into promised land, that I do not praise; for in the land where the worst of all trees, the Cross, grew—here is nothing to praise. (p. 221)

At this particular point, the focus of redemption from the past is this: 'You shall *make amends* to your children for being the children of your fathers; *thus* shall you redeem all that is past! This new law-table do I put over you' (p. 221). And 'it must seem bliss to you to press your hand upon millennia as upon wax...' (p. 231).

We could certainly continue longer in this vein from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, but I want to refer to just two more passages. Nietzsche had apparently completed a tripartite *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* at the beginning of 1884, but by the following year he had added and privately published a supplementary

---

<sup>22</sup>My description fails to relate these ideas clearly because I doubt if they should be schematized very tightly in Nietzsche's own work.

fourth part, often regarded as less significant than the first three.

In this part, Zarathustra meets a succession of potential disciples. The ethos of the post-God world and wasteland suffuses this fourth part. Zarathustra meets, amongst others, a retired pope and asks: 'Do you know *how* he [God] died? Is it true what they say, that pity choked him, that he saw how *man* hung on the Cross and could not endure it, that love for man became his Hell and at last his death?' (p.272) The old pope does not answer. Zarathustra concludes his meeting with the pope with the words 'for this old god no longer lives; he is quite dead.' He next meets 'the ugliest man', probably a type of the atheist. Something of the importance of this, our second passage, is seen from the fact that Rosen, in his recent detailed commentary on *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, devotes more time to this than to any other section of Book IV, bar its longest section, 'Of the Higher Man'.<sup>23</sup>

Zarathustra, having traversed forests and mountains, suddenly comes upon new scenery 'and stepped into the Kingdom of death'. His mind becomes encumbered by heavy things; he has stood in this valley before. On visual and audible contact with the ugliest man, he suddenly succumbs to temptation. '*Pity overcame him*' and he sits down. He has met the murderer of God. Before he can leave the scene, the ugly creature addresses him eloquently, even plaintively, climaxing like this. You, Zarathustra, teach that all creators are hard,

'...but he—*had* to die; he looked with eyes that saw everything—he saw the depths and abysses of man, all man's hidden disgrace and ugliness. His pity knew no shame; he crept into my distant corners. This most curious, most over-impudent, over-compassionate god had to die... The god who saw everything, *even man*; this god had to die! Man could not *endure* that such a witness should live.' Thus spoke the ugliest man. Zarathustra, however,

---

<sup>23</sup>S. Rosen, *The Mask of Enlightenment: Nietzsche's Zarathustra* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995) 216-22. The quotations from Nietzsche that now follow our text are taken from *TSZ*, pp. 275-79.

rose and prepared to go; for he was chilled to his very marrow.

The Cross is the symbol of the eternal antagonism between God and humanity; one must die that the other might live. Co-existence is impossible. The logic of life, which we shall shortly encounter with Dionysus, dictates their incompatibility. Redemption entails redemption from God and the Cross.

Before moving from the Crucified to Dionysus, we need to pause with the question of pity, which has surfaced in this scene from Zarathustra. Nietzsche regarded this as a most important question. Prior to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in *Daybreak*, a book 'on the prejudices of morality', Nietzsche had applied his analysis to Christianity in Book I and to pity in Book II. Now in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, he stated: 'Pity, however, is the deepest abyss; as deeply as man looks into life, so deeply does he look also into suffering' (p. 177). Then, prefacing *The Genealogy of Morals*, written after *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche wrote as follows: 'I began to understand that the constantly spreading ethics of pity, which had tainted and obliterated even the philosophers, was the most sinister symptom of our sinister European civilization' (GM p. 154). Nietzsche regarded this as a philosophical and not just a cultural novelty: Plato, La Rochefoucauld, Spinoza and Kant are thinkers of great diversity, but they are one in their inability to regard pity as a virtue. The post-Kantian philosopher whose thought most demanded indictment on this score was Arthur Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer disagreed with Kant when Kant located the source of morality in the rational, legislative will. Schopenhauer took its source to lie, rather, in *Mitleid* (compassion) spontaneously arising from within, occasioned by the sight of fellow-suffering, the only criterion of moral action.<sup>24</sup>

If, for Schopenhauer, compassion is the criterion of the moral, cruelty is the criterion of the immoral action. So egoism is morally indifferent, at least on the argument of *The Basis of*

---

<sup>24</sup>Though Schopenhauer claimed to arrive at this phenomenologically, he added his own metaphysical exploration which appealed to another aspect of Kant's philosophy, and drew on oriental monism. See *The Basis of Morality* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965).

*Morality.* Nietzsche came to believe that Schopenhauer's teaching on this point was an insidious falsehood. Egoism belongs to raw, natural humanity. Altruism, when it takes the form of compassion, is a moral device which has a deep psycho-sociological and historical-cultural explanation; but it is not ego-istically natural and not quintessentially moral. The pity of a divine Saviour creates the worst of all possible worlds. First we have created God; then we have demeaned existence; then we have billed God our pitying rescuer from our fallen estate. Two observations are in order here.

(1) It may seem that Nietzsche's asseverations on pity or compassion should generate least sympathy of all the aspects of his thought, even amongst those who partake of something of the Nietzschean spirit as regards Christianity. Be that as it may, what his observations certainly do is to warn us that compassion is under threat when it is accorded moral centrality on the basis of feeling. Here, of course, we could engage figures as diverse as Hume and Rousseau. Nietzsche does not think that the springs of compassion are guaranteed to remain natural in *homo sapiens* as Schopenhauer and others might have thought, for they are not, in truth, natural, at least not in any sense paraded in Christian or contemporary post-Christian philosophy. I fear that here he was close to the mark. At any rate, Schopenhauer does not show us why we should regard compassion as a durable element in human nature. This vestige of remnant Christian morality (as Nietzsche interpreted it) thus seems inadequately protected.

(2) It is a familiar criticism of Nietzsche—and one that can be offered on non-Christian and non-religious premises—that Nietzsche's general philosophy, including his perspective on creation, redemption and pity, is individualistic. This may be sustained even on the admission that concerns about both culture and politics are respectively central to and present in Nietzsche's work. It is not surprising to find connections detected here between Nietzsche and Leibniz; a monadological atmosphere indeed clings to Nietzsche's description of the will-

to-power.<sup>25</sup> Once the relational nature of human beings is understood as constitutive of, and not contingent to, their kind, it becomes easier to entertain the possibility that the cultivation of pity is part of the human good. Yet Nietzsche would have interpreted this move as covertly religious (he regarded secular socialism as such), strengthening the instinct of dependence which, at least in Europe, can but jeopardise the gains of atheism.

What Nietzsche needed to block the move to resurrect the corpus of Christian morality was a positively vibrant doctrine or vision of Man. So we move over at this point to the question of Dionysus, quitting the matter of Christian redemption to the strains of *The Antichrist*: 'God is sick'; 'God is spider'; 'with the symbol "God on the cross" one could sum up everything downtrodden...' (18, 58).

#### IV. The Philosopher of Eternal Recurrence

The god Dionysus was central in Nietzsche's earliest published full-length work, *The Birth of Tragedy*. Looking back on it, its author referred to 'a profound hostile silence with regard to Christianity throughout the book.' (EH p. 79) Dionysus is here contrasted not to the Crucified, but to Apollo; the principle of disorder and frenzy meets the principle of form and order.<sup>26</sup> It was the book of a Classical scholar even if not, according to contemporary critics, of Classical scholarship. In this volume, Dionysus functioned to encourage Wagner to promote a simulacrum of pre-Socratic culture. But we cannot here limn the Wagnerian angle.

---

<sup>25</sup>See M. Heidegger, 'The Word of Nietzsche: "God is Dead"' in *The Question concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977). There are several references to Leibniz in this essay. Heidegger's interpretation has been controversial, partly on account of his excessive use of Nietzsche's material published in English under the title *The Will to Power*, and we are certainly not committed to Heidegger's interpretation. Nevertheless we must not assume that Heidegger's word on Nietzsche is dead; see Gillespie, *Nihilism before Nietzsche*, 174-78.

<sup>26</sup>This is admittedly a dangerously crude characterisation.

Nietzsche regarded Socrates and Plato as decadents; so too were the Greek tragedians who colluded with them in abetting the decline of tragic sensibility. For they imposed reason upon life, making it the foundation of moral virtue. Life was netted in a scheme of systematic rational-optimistic harmony. This rational-moral world view has no better credentials than does Christianity. Platonism and Christianity ('Platonism for the people') commonly posit a transcendent and life-denying value-laden realm. Dionysus symbolizes the a-rational principle that informs our world, and the forces and drives of nature versus imposed morality. The Christian creation and preservation of a transcendent and other-worldly realm is at the same time an attitude of resigned pessimism towards this world. Dionysus combats both rationalistic optimism and religious pessimism. He is the symbol of an affirmative attitude towards raw life, raw life marked by tragedy, which cannot be trimmed, tidied or Socratically butchered to fit the mould of rational harmony. Dionysus embraces life joyfully and unreservedly, though tragically and through pain.

The most dramatic statement of Nietzsche's dionysian principle comes in the celebrated doctrine of eternal recurrence. At the end of the *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche speaks of himself as 'the last disciple of the philosopher Dionysus...I, the teacher of eternal recurrence' (p. 120f). In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche writes of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: 'The basic conception of the work [is] the idea of eternal recurrence, the highest formula of affirmation that can possibly be attained...': he describes the affirmation as dionysian (pp. 99, 106ff).

Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal recurrence enjoys the status of a teaching universally regarded as central in his mature thought, but historically subjected to a disconcertingly wide range of interpretations. It is basically the thought, or the picture, of everything recurring eternally. At the end of *The Gay Science*, book IV, which leads right on to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, there is a section entitled 'The greatest weight':

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; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence...’ Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: ‘You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine.’ (IV. 341)

At a point as dramatic as—perhaps more dramatic than—any other in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Zarathustra comes to a gateway where two paths meet.

Must not all things that *can* run have already run along this lane? Must not all things that *can* happen *have* already happened, been done, run past? ...and must we not return and run down that other lane out before us, down that long, terrible lane—must we not return eternally?’ (p. 178)

‘Behold’, Zarathustra’s animals tell him, ‘we know what you teach: that all things recur eternally and we ourselves with them, and that we have already existed an infinite number of times before and all things with us...’ (p. 237). The quotations seem to make the teaching superficially plain, if intellectually disagreeable. Nietzsche’s notebooks reveal his interest in the cosmological features of this theory. Presumably regarding space as a receptacle, he averred that the configurations of energy are finite in number, while time is infinite. From this, he derived the proposition that all finite configurations of energy will be repeated and infinitely recur. Human beings, like the rest of the world, consist of such an energetic constellation, so their life-patterns and deeds will recur eternally.

Nietzsche describes this as an *affirmative* formulation. This manifests its dionysian spirit. However, here too is a way into what has been called the existential interpretation of the philosophy of eternal recurrence, what Magnus called *The*



*Existential Imperative*.<sup>27</sup> Roughly speaking, the idea is that the truth of the theory qua cosmological is irrelevant to its existential force, and that Nietzsche recognised this. The existential force is this: we are so to act that, were everything to recur eternally, that is how we would act. We could call this, I think, the imperative of cyclical sempiternity, in contrast to the Kantian maxim of universalisability. The weight of eternity thus lies on our deed. Nietzsche denied the freedom of the will regarded as a liberty of indifference; if we can use such categories without disturbing Nietzsche's philosophy, we might characterize him as glorying in a liberty of spontaneity. A Spinozistic *amor fati* is expressed in the affirmation of eternal recurrence and the notion of eternal recurrence accents most emphatically Nietzsche's autarchic philosophy of self-affirmation. This is all dionysian. Zarathustra professes a longing for deep, deep eternity, which is a dionysian investment of tragic time with ultimate significance. '...Joy wants itself, wants eternity, wants recurrence, wants everything eternally the same... All things, are chained and entwined together, all things are in love' (pp. 331f). We are expressing a primordial unity.

However Nietzsche's doctrine is interpreted, Dionysus is incarnate in the figure of Zarathustra, who embodies Nietzsche's ideal of the *Übermensch*, he who must now be formed to replace the enfeebled humanity created and crushed in Christian religion, and disappointedly kept in bondage by the German culture for which Nietzsche once had such high hopes. The *Übermensch* is surely 'he' and surely a minority figure; there is a herd-man with a herd-mentality—let him remain so—but if everyone stays at or sinks to that level, woe betide culture. Christianity has exercised precisely that downward, egalitarian drag. It proclaims the equality of all, a promulgation which its secular successors, democracy and socialism, contemptibly perpetuate. Dionysus has more to do than inspire individuals to joyful affirmation of tragic life. He must inform such reaches of our culture as can be shaped by

---

<sup>27</sup>B. Magnus, *Nietzsche's Existential Imperative* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1978).

the true *Übermenschen*. Dionysus versus the Crucified is a struggle over cultural formation and not just for the individual soul.

There is hope for some; for whom? It is time we brought in 'the philosopher'.

## V. We Philosophers

What we have provided so far may seem like slim pickings indeed for philosophy. To repeat: it depends on one's ideas about philosophy. For those who have got no philosophy out of Nietzsche so far, even what follows will constitute no harvest unto eternally recurring philosophical joy. But at least we shall get on to familiar themes. Nietzsche's higher men of the future include, if not principally consist of, philosophers.

Nietzsche was capable of combining some of the ruminations which we have reported with attention to more detailed problems of philosophy. Thomas Mann was not alone in finding 'something spurious, irresponsible, unreliable and passionately frivolous' in Nietzsche's philosophy, possessed, as it was, of a 'raging denial of intellect in favour of the beauty, strength and wickedness of life.'<sup>28</sup> But for Nietzsche the denial of the intellect in philosophy is not at all absolute; Mann's formulation requires heavy modification before it can command our assent. The integration of unimpeachably philosophical concern into those concerns that I have tried to delineate so far is most conveniently demonstrated from *Twilight of the Idols*, which may be the best resumé of Nietzsche's mature anti-Christian thought.

At its beginning, Nietzsche discusses 'The Problem of Socrates', which consists in the equation: reason-virtue-happiness.<sup>29</sup> He proceeds to criticise the role reason has played in philosophy. It has missed life and handled 'conceptual mummies'. The chief evidence of this miscreant habit is the philosophical demotion of 'appearances', a demotion so nobly

<sup>28</sup>E. Behler, 'Nietzsche in the Twentieth Century' in Magnus and Higgins (eds.), *Nietzsche*, 306.

<sup>29</sup>The discussion and quotations from Nietzsche are taken from pp. 36-64.

resisted by one of Nietzsche's philosophical heroes, Heraclitus; a demotion in the service of stable being. Nietzsche's own 'fundamental and new insight', as he put it, can be stated in four theses:

- (1) This world is *the* (only) reality.
- (2) The philosophers' and Christians' 'real world' has been 'constituted out of the contradiction to the actual world'.
- (3) This other world is the expression of our slanderous vengeance on life.
- (4) This expression—witness a religion like Christianity and a philosophy like Kant's—is the symptom of decadent life, to which dionysian affirmation must be opposed.

To bring *Twilight of the Idols* to its climax, Nietzsche elaborates on Dionysus. After a short exposition of 'Morality as Anti-Nature' he sets out 'the Four Great Errors' which he exposes in the train of establishing his Four Noble Truths.

### 1. The Error of Confusing Cause and Consequence

Nietzsche refers to this as 'reason's intrinsic form of corruption.' 'The most general formula at the basis of every religion and morality is: "Do this and this, refrain from this and this - and you will be happy!"' But this is 'the great original sin of reason'. Things are just the opposite with a well-constituted human being. 'In a formula, his virtue is the *consequence* of his happiness and not vice versa.' This is inexplicable unless one grants a physiological basis to morality. Nietzsche was persuaded that the biological life of *homo sapiens* is instinctively evaluative, *i.e.*, life's instincts constitute what, if anything, can be called natural evaluation. 'Everything good is instinct.' In the preceding work, *The Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche had closed the first of his three essays with a note expressing the wish 'that the philosophy department of some leading university might offer a series of prizes for essays on the evaluation of moral ideas' (p. 188). Linguistics would play an important role here. But 'it would also be necessary for that

purpose to enlist the assistance of physiologists and medical men.' Moral injunctions and tables of values 'require first and foremost a physiological investigation and next a critique on the part of medical science.'

Nietzsche had touched on this before. 'To construct anew the laws of life and action—for this task our science of physiology, medicine, sociology and solitude are not yet sufficiently sure of themselves' (*D*, V.453). In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche had raised the question: 'What is known of the moral effects of different foods? Is there a philosophy of nutrition?' (I.7) To return to *The Genealogy of Morals*, the future task of the philosopher becomes 'to solve the problem of value, to determine the true hierarchy of values' (p. 188). The resolution begins when one exposes the error of deriving happiness from putative virtue, instead of deriving virtues from the joyful affirmation of instinct.

## 2. The Error of Free Causality

'We believed ourselves to be casual agents in the act of willing...'. A free ego *causes* 'x' by volition and by thought, we say. However, both the conception of a consciousness (mind) and an ego (subject) with causal powers are erroneous. Although he does not say it here, Nietzsche held consciousness to be the evolutionary result of the need for communication. It is a social phenomenon, but not an inalienable attribute of the human species (*GS* V. 354). Action is basic; consciousness is epiphenomenal. From the standpoint of philosophy of religion, we must remember that Nietzsche held that belief in a causal ego and conscious spirit behind and antecedent to action both enable, and are established by, a mistaken conception of God.

## 3. The Error of Imaginary Causes

Following this, we perceive that what actually comes late, like motive, appears early, upon our errant reflection on the matter. Physiological facts generate what we conceive of as motives; but motives, with causal powers, do not exist. Religion is mistaken—there is no such reality as sin, causally responsible for physiological states like weakness or disease. On the contrary, physiology is causally responsible for our positing of

the entity 'sin'. 'Morality and religion fall entirely under the *psychology of error*.'

#### 4. The Error of Free Will

Free will is a device. Theologians produce with special fecundity in this region, generating responsibility and accountability. 'Men were thought of as "free" so that they could become guilty.' The ego is invented to further a moral-religious agenda.

With the four errors, we seem finally to enter a region where serious philosophical critique of Nietzsche becomes possible in principle for everyone in the business. Nietzsche regards the philosophers of the future as men who accept these propositions and will lead the way in an evaluation of all hitherto-received values. They will embody, in their persons and deeds, the overcoming life. They will not be beholden to traditional methods of evaluation. Inasmuch as philosophical convictions are embedded in Nietzsche's contra-Christianity, we seem to have arrived now at a point for critical intervention.

Admittedly, we are on reasonably familiar turf in philosophy of mind, moral philosophy and philosophy of religion, and Nietzsche's distinctiveness has vanished. Still, we may say, let us hear the arguments for the above theses and not just their assertion, and we can get a handle on the material in order to respond philosophically to Nietzsche's contra-Christianity.

But Nietzsche still eludes us. Even if we could cull from his literature a reasonably solidly-argued case for the kind of naturalism he constructed out of biology, physiology and anthropology, we should not penetrate the heart or strike the root of his philosophical endeavour. In reporting on the fourth error, on the freedom of the will, we noted Nietzsche's claim that it is the product of a moral-religious agenda. Philosophical statements, standpoints or systems are governed by our will. As we begin to make our descent to a conclusion, let us turn to Part I of *Beyond Good and Evil*, subtitled: *Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*. This was published after *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and

before *The Genealogy of Morals. Beyond Good and Evil* was written in the belief that:

...the struggle against Plato or... the struggle against the Christian-ecclesiastical pressure of millennia—for Christianity is Platonism for ‘the people’—has created in Europe a magnificent tension of the spirit such as has never existed before; with so tense a bow one can now shoot for the most distant targets. (p. 32)

In the first part of this work, Nietzsche attacked the following: post-Kantian German philosophy, for its supposed discovery of a *faculty* that sustains the synthetic *a priori*; materialistic atomism (on the ground of the non-entity of atomic unit-particles); the Cartesian ego; the metaphysical centrality of the Schopenhauerian will; and the conceptualisation of the will in terms of free or unfree, instead of strong and weak (let us establish, instead, a positive place in life’s economy for domination and covetousness, for they are natural).

So there is grist to the mill of standard philosophical argument, but the ‘prejudices of the philosophers’ go deeper than any of this. Philosophers talk about, and apparently seek, truth. But what is it in us that *wants* the truth? Why and whence such a positive evaluation of truth? Philosophical enquiry is not dispassionate.

It has gradually become clear to me what every great philosophy has hitherto been: a confession on the part of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir; moreover, that the moral (or immoral) intentions in every philosophy have every time constituted the real germ of life out of which the entire plant has grown. To explain how a philosopher’s most remote metaphysical assertions have actually been arrived at, it is always well (and wise) to ask oneself first: what morality does this (does *he*) aim at? I accordingly do not believe a ‘drive to knowledge’ to be the father of philosophy, but that another drive has, here as elsewhere, only employed knowledge (and false knowledge!) as a tool. (I. 6)

In *Daybreak*, Nietzsche had asserted that 'all philosophers were building under the seduction of morality', aiming not really at certainty and truth, but at '*majestic moral structures*' (p. 3). As Nietzsche says at the end of *Beyond Good and Evil*, 'Every philosophy also *conceals* a philosophy; every opinion is also a hiding place, every word also a mask' (IX.289). Now those 'moral intentions' that constitute the root of the philosophical drive are antithetical to life. But one day, the new philosopher will come, a new man, a different breed. Nietzsche has a vision, a vision that depends somewhat on standard philosophical argumentation for its sustenance, but springs from a heart that prescribes and proscribes for the mind the area in which it must garner its conclusions. We need to understand the vision before we set about the detailed philosophical response.

## VI. Conclusion

The possible philosophical responses to Nietzsche's contra-Christianity are legion. From our brisk survey alone, we can see how one response could quite legitimately take the form of a quarrel with his philosophical anthropology. But, generally a more effective response would entail exploring the psychology out of which Nietzsche spins out his theses, repaying his compliment to Christianity. One then enquires about *his* motivations. For this, Nietzsche is quite prepared. It should be a congenial task for the Christian philosopher. Reformed philosophy has sometimes emphasised the religious root of thought.<sup>30</sup> Augustine and Calvin testified to the fundamental nature of the will, driving the intellect.

Yet, while one might try either to combat Nietzsche on philosophical anthropological grounds or block him by reciprocating his psycho-social analysis, it is surely in the presentation of an alternative vision that the power of a riposte must lie. A renewed understanding of the humanity of Christ, revealer of true humanity, will undergird this. And this philosophy cannot provide. Philosophy of Nietzsche's kind is

---

<sup>30</sup>The work of Dooyeweerd comes to mind.

met by religious vision, not philosophical analysis.<sup>31</sup> Even if Nietzsche professed to see in the Crucified the shadow of Pauline dogma, he glimpsed also in Jesus the possibility of an alternative humanity.<sup>32</sup>

And what of Dionysus? There is a scene in *Prince Caspian*, the fourth volume of C.S. Lewis' Narnia series, when the inhabitants of Narnia rejoice in the presence and deliverance of Aslan. They join to celebrate their unity and joy in the leonichristic presence in riotous dance. Amongst the dancers, Lucy notices

...a youth, dressed only in fawn-skin, with vine leaves wreathed in his curly hair. His face would have been almost too pretty for a boy's, if it had not looked so extremely wild. You felt, as Edmund said when he saw him a few days later, 'There's a chap who might do anything—absolutely anything.'<sup>33</sup>

The character is Bacchus. Bacchus is another name for Dionysus and much of the traditional mythological symbolism associated with Bacchus turns up (unannounced, of course) in Lewis' account. The sequence is a striking one even in the plethora of striking accounts extended over the seven volumes; this particular one is, I think, unparalleled in any other. The dionysian is allowed its place—in the presence of Aslan. As Susan says to Lucy:

'I wouldn't have felt safe with Bacchus and all his wild girls if we'd met them without Aslan.' 'I should think not' said Lucy.

---

<sup>31</sup>If any philosopher in the Christian tradition comes to mind, it is surely Kierkegaard. Apparently, Nietzsche did not read him: see WP p. 53. M. Weston's low-key study, *Kierkegaard and Modern Continental Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1994), including his discussion of Levinas, is worth reading in this connection.

<sup>32</sup>In addition to the celebrated discussion of Jesus in *The Antichrist*, note the words in BGE 269 (p. 208): 'It is possible that within the holy disguise and fable of Jesus' life there lies concealed one of the most painful cases of the martyrdom of *knowledge about love*.'

<sup>33</sup>C.S. Lewis, *Prince Caspian* (London: Lion, 1980) 136f.



There Lewis ends the chapter.

Dionysus, of course, means much more for Nietzsche than is signified here. And as far as this extract goes, Nietzsche would have viewed Lewis as an arch-Platonist, and the Narnian novels as a corruption of Christian children as insidious as the Socratic corruption of Athenian youth. Prosaically stated, Lewis attempts here a bold this-worldly affirmation, possible only on the basis of another world. Something like this task is set for us in response to Nietzsche, though the derivation, from christology, of the dionysian moment in Lewis' theanthropology, is a delicate and difficult task. Perhaps philosophy can help us in that derivation. Something like it is required in response to Nietzsche's contra-Christianity. If it could be as influential as Nietzsche has been, the task is mandatory. We shall at least probe the possibilities in the second part of this discussion.