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Continuation of Paper – Existentialism: Asking Questions for which There Are No Answers.

Establishing and reflecting on many of the elements above named, many philosophers in modern times have contributed to this philosophical method, reluctantly named "Existentialism." The denial of objective forms and *a priori* principles, and the individual's response to this rejection; I would regard this as a fundamental thread connecting all the philosophies covered under the Existentialist umbrella. Many of these philosophers, Kierkegaard not the least of which, have since been noted for the resulting pessimistic, even depressing outlook on life and existence that view proposes, at least initially. Contrasting to these views however is one who would be regarded as one of Existentialism's founders and main contributors, who instead viewed the loss of form as a liberation for the human spirit on a self-chosen quest for power *vis-à-vis* human creativity. This philosopher, in addition to his significant contribution to Existentialism, has by some been regarded as the father of post-modern philosophy:[1] Friedrich Nietzsche.

The Prophet Nietzsche

I once saw a t-shirt with two captions on it, one on the top that read, "God is Dead – Nietzsche," and one underneath that read, "Nietzsche is Dead – God." I laughed. I wondered if this shirt was reflecting the designer's philosophical acuity, or if he or she was simply reacting with disdain toward Nietzsche's for his statement, it being a threat to their belief system, which he or she was afraid to question. I noted the irony that in so doing, the designer would effectively be demonstrating several of Nietzsche's arguments. I then wondered if Nietzsche would laugh at the t-shirt too.

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[1] Schacht 390

Of course, Nietzsche's statement, "God is dead," is often misunderstood. He does not mean that an eternal transcendent entity called God has somehow passed out of existence, recognizing the logical contradiction, nor is he asserting that the existence of God has been disproven. As Schacht asserts, "Recognizing that the 'God-hypothesis' cannot be directly refuted once and for all, he attempts instead to subvert it decisively by depriving it of all credibility."[2] Nietzsche regarded God as a human concept: "Man created God in his own image," as a symbol of human power, and a tool for gaining a feeling of control over a chaotic and frightening world.[3] God was a security blanket that humans were afraid not to believe in. As time went on, humans recognized the inadequacy and irrelevance of this practical use for the God-hypothesis: God doesn't work that way.[4] But refusing to let go of their childish dependence on their created deity, religion changed its focus, and became the advocate of the disadvantaged: enter Christianity. Needless to say, according to Nietzsche, as social and philosophical history continued to unfold, empiricism demonstrated its power, social structures and ideal principles fell,[5] and the dreadful fear of nihilism was exposed as a motivation for belief in God. Thus the plausibility and utility of the God-hypothesis diminished more and more, culminating in the definitive proclamation that Nietzsche would place on the lips of mad man: belief in God has become completely useless, i.e., "God is dead."[6]

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[2] Schacht 398

[3] In cases of many ancient religions, this is actually correct. Many ancient nations had a national god, whose power by comparison with other nations' gods was measured by its respective nation's military successes against those other nations. Ancient peoples also believed that the elements of nature: the weather, the sun rise, the oceans, agricultural fertility, etc., could be manipulated through rituals directed toward those elements' representative gods. There is even evidence in the Bible to support that many ancients had this understanding. However, one could also argue decisively that much of the narrative content of the Bible, particularly the prophets, displays the conflict between this human tendency to categorize God as such, and God himself, YHWH, who transcends manipulation. So Nietzsche was right – in fact his complaint against Judeo-Christianity is the same as that of the prophets against the Baal fertility cults and the priestly sacrificial cults, and the same as Jesus' complaint against the scribes and the Pharisees. However, ignorant of his allegiance with these parties, Nietzsche generalizes about the motivation for faith, and so was also wrong.

[4] One may also trace this theological development in the Wisdom books of the Bible, particularly Ecclesiastes and Job.

[5] I believe that Nietzsche was right again in predicting the 20th century decline of social institutions, and the rise of relativism and secularism.

[6] *The Joyful Wisdom* 1882

This statement, in Nietzsche's view, puts the nail in the coffin, not just of faith within Judeo-Christian religion, but of all conceptual forms upon which one finds meaning in life, including metaphysics, natural science, nationalism, universal morality, ideology, socio-historical development[7], and so forth.[8] It is here that we encounter an existentialist thread in Nietzsche's philosophy. Nietzsche immediately recognizes the implications of this realization: nihilism, the complete lack of meaning and value of anything at all: the void, into which the existentialist must stare. However, unlike many other existentialists, Nietzsche consciously refused to submit to the resulting despair. Instead, his choice to seek a positive, rational alternative to nihilism[9] will occupy his philosophical works.

In fact, Nietzsche regarded the death of the "God concept" as a positive, freeing the individual from what he regarded as its childlike dependence on God and from the restrictive, anti-evolutionary elevation of the disadvantaged, which he regarded as an inhibition of human potential. Nietzsche's alternative to nihilism consisted in assigning value to what he would call the "will to power."[10] Conceding that his knowledge of the world around him could be nothing more than a reflection of his own concepts that resulted from his relationship with that world,[11] Nietzsche proposed that a "will to power" *could be[12]* the fundamental motivating force within nature: human relations, social institutions, art and architecture, *etc*., are all the product of a natural creative tendency to order, which then enhances further creativity.[13] Nietzsche argued that humans can assign *value* to those realities and moral choices that encourage this "will to power." According to Nietzsche, such an assignment, while not justifiable on strictly universal, conceptual grounds, can be regarded as more than purely subjective, in that it encourages human

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[7] Hegel's philosophy of History as evolution towards a destined goal.
[8] Schacht 392 and 398
[9] other than conventionalism or subjectivism, which Nietzsche regarded as simply stepping stones to Nihilism. Schacht 403.
[10] Ibid 401.
[11] Ibid 402; this is consistent with his explanation for the creation of God as a reflection of human power and fear.
[12] Nietzsche offered this as a tentative alternative, not a definitive one. 402
[13] He also suggested that the world could fluctuate between order and disorder, or that all events recur eternally (Schacht 402).

development in harmony with both Darwinian natural selection and the human capacity for self-awareness and reflection.

This value assignment has a significant consequence for morality. As noted above, Nietzsche regarded religious systems, Christianity in particular, as inhibitive of human development. He felt its naïve, fear motivated focus on compassion disregarded the reality of human distinctions, in particular the fact that different humans are endowed with different capacities for the creative enhancement of life vis-à-vis their "will to power." In other words, different people could be measured with differing value. To Nietzsche, this result is not only acceptable, but desirable, in that it encourages human enhancement. Humans could thus become "supermen" as he would call them, men [sic] developing in their potential, in their ascendancy over nature and the world from which they came, and mastery of their own destinies. Lavine writes, "Human beings must now find the courage themselves to become gods in a world without God." While not an objective formal truth that exists outside of the human subject, this end, in Nietzsche's estimation, is an end that can be embraced; it is both reasonable and in the interest of human betterment to sacrifice the conventional, to abandon God (i.e. conceptual form) in order to achieve it.

Evaluation

Obviously, Nietzsche's philosophy will be forever tarnished by its use by the Nazi's and Fascists in the first half of the 20th century; these party's use of his sister Elizabeth's interpretation of his philosophies were, at the very least, used as an excuse, if not a motivating factor for the xenophobic, nationalistic atrocities of World War II. Personally, I believe these atrocities to be a perversion of Nietzsche's intent.

Visionary, and even prophetic, are his predictions about the collapse of social, political and religious structures within the 20th century, and the resulting reassignment of value and meaning onto the enhancement of the individual. Countless examples can be given to show the

truth of these predictions. Also laudable is Nietzsche's exposure of the ulterior motives that one often finds behind religious belief. I would not be surprised if his analysis had contributed to modern Biblical and Theological scientific criticism.

Still, in my view, his philosophy has some problems. First of all, in recognizing these aforementioned ulterior motives for religion, Nietzsche grossly generalizes,[14] not considering other motivations for religious belief that may view God as more than a function of fear and utility. In fact, because of his skewed perspective, he missed the fact that the Bible itself is primarily concerned with *combating* the social tendency to reduce belief in God to fear-motivated utilitarian superstition, the very charge Nietzsche accused the Bible of encouraging. As such, Nietzsche exposes his own ignorance, and I would argue that the grounds for his attack on the credibility of belief in God are not nearly as well established as he supposes.

Nietzsche is impressively honest and consistent in recognizing that abandonment of belief in God (and all objective conceptual form *per se*) will inevitably confront us with nihilism as its alternative. And his solution to the problem is certainly ingenious. However, I find myself troubled with his *denial* of the universal, to be followed by *acceptance* of a sort of *quasi-universal* assignment of value in the creative "will to power." It seems to me that after denying formal concepts, Nietzsche then finds a clever logical trick in order to bring it back again, rather than accept the nihilism he has left himself with. And his decision to do so is motivated by the very ulterior motive he charges against religion: fear of despair.[15] In addition, while his grounds for the choice of the "will to power" as a measure of value is impressive, I would argue that his choice is arbitrary. One could just as easily argue in favor of assigning any number of motivations as measures of value: compassion, scientific knowledge, domination, chaos, destruction, and so forth. Not to mention the fact that while Nietzsche argues for a natural tendency towards order on the basis of his observation of nature, in physics, the second law of

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[14] something existentialists aren't supposed to do.
[15] Lavine 325

thermodynamics[16] tells us *definitely* that in terms of energy, there is actually a natural tendency towards *chaos*, that is in fact unavoidable. As such, I believe that Nietzsche's solution, while ingenious, doesn't really solve his problem with nihilism at all.

Conclusion

Regardless, I cannot help but acknowledge Existentialism, and in particular Nietzsche's contribution to it, as an important contribution to human reflection itself, and I would even say a necessary step in the intellectual maturation of humanity. Personally, I believe this to be all the more true for the maturation of religious belief. As a person of faith, I do believe in conceptual forms as pre-existent and in universal laws of morality, as all rooted fundamentally in a God, whom I believe to be *love*, and I feel confident in my ability to demonstrate this belief as reasonable. However, I *must* concede that my belief in the existence and nature of God is *not provable*, either rationally or empirically, and therefore neither are any formal concepts or ideals, all of which are contingent on the existence of God. In my view therefore, to have faith, I must choose between two alternatives. I may become a fideistic idolater, holding fast to my unprovable concepts and systems as though *they* were God, and ignoring all evidence to the contrary, and thus making myself a fool that will never be able to pass on the beliefs I cherish. Or I can become an existentialist, letting go of my reliance on those systems, allowing myself to question everything, facing God as that "other" that will not be controlled, and then freely choosing to have faith and to love this transcendent God. As such I see the existential process of reflection as an intellectual companion to any form of faith conversion, which always involves accepting a kind of existential kenosis, which then makes possible a new life of existential freedom, and a mature, trusting relationship with God, the source of that freedom.

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[16] Originally proposed by Clapeyron, 1834. Demonstrated 1837. Extrapolated by Clausius in 1865. Proposed as definitive for all isolated systems by Boltzmann 1872. Boltzmann's theory proven by Thomson in 1874. The 2nd law of thermodynamics is universally accepted, and noted as the one scientific law that has never been contradicted experimentally.

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