Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 – 1900) was a German philosopher, poet and literature artist in general, who was an adherent of German Idealism, while being regarded as one of the founders (together with Søren Kierkegaard) of Existentialism. Therefore, he can be seen as the first German Existentialist. Nietzsche was very unsatisfied with the conditions around his lifetime, that mostly covers the era around the fin de siècle. Therefore, he chose to wander around, writing a lot of works. Like most intellectuals, he was ahead of the times and many contemporaries couldn’t do anything with it. As he became famous after his death, his sister became the editor of his works, abusing his anti-nationalist works to make nationalist works out of them, preparing them for fascism. However, Nietzsche was never nationalist nor fascist, and opposed anti-semitism.

Nowadays, luckily many people try to bring back Nietzsche in its original sense. His most famous works probably have been “The Joyful Wisdom” (Chemnitz, 1882), “Thus Spoke Zarathustra” (Chemnitz, 1883), “On the Genealogy of Moral” (Leipzig, 1887), “The Antichrist” (1888, later published in a collection: Leipzig, 1894/95) and “Ecce Homo” (Leipzig, 1888/89). The Joyful Wisdom is very famous for its Aphorisms, Thus Spoke Zarathustra is a novel that tries to state Nietzsche’s main thesis which are told through fictional travels by Zarathustra. Ecce Homo was Nietzsche’s last original book in which he tries to give an insight into himself as philosopher and his works.

In this short article, I want to talk about the probably most famous Aphorism, which is Aphorism No. 125, titled “The Madman”, which he published in “The Joyful Wisdom”. An aphorism normally is defined as a small saying, a phrase or expression. It is very popular in internet culture when someone takes a phrase from a famous person and then quotes it, so it looks like this: “God is dead. (Nietzsche)”

There are famous people who used Aphorisms as a writing technique, such as Mahatma Gandhi, who wrote down a phrase per day for a friend. The collection of this phrases is a book full of aphorisms. Nietzsche however misuses the word on purpose by writing...
aphorisms in form of short stories. Therefore, Nietzsche’s Aphorism No. 125 should be presented in full length at first, to give a clearer image of what Nietzsche meant.

“Have you ever heard of the madman who on a bright morning lighted a lantern and ran to the market-place calling out unceasingly: ‘I seek God! I seek God!’ As there were many people standing about who did not believe in God, he caused a great deal of amusement. Why is he lost? said one. Has he strayed away like a child? said another. Or does he keep himself hidden? Is he afraid of us? Has he taken a sea-voyage? Has he emigrated? the people cried out laughingly, all in a hubbub. The insane man jumped into their midst and transfixed them with his glances. ‘Where is God gone?’ he called out. ‘I mean to tell you! We have killed him,—you and I! We are all his murderers! But how have we done it? How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the whole horizon? What did we do when we loosened this earth from its sun? Whither does it now move? Whither do we move? Away from all suns? Do we not dash on unceasingly? Backwards, sideways, forwards, in all directions? Is there still an above and below? Do we not stray, as through infinite nothingness? Does not empty space breathe upon us? Has it not become colder? Does not night come on continually, darker and darker? Shall we not have to light lanterns in the morning? Do we not hear the noise of the grave-diggers who are burying God? Do we not smell the divine putrefaction? for even Gods putrefy! God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him! How shall we console ourselves, the most murderous of all murderers? The holiest and the mightiest that the world has hitherto possessed, has bled to death under our knife, who will wipe the blood from us? With what water could we cleanse ourselves? What lustrums, what sacred games shall we have to devise? Is not the magnitude of this deed too great for us? Shall we not ourselves have to become Gods, merely to seem worthy of it? There never was a greater event, and on account of it, all who are born after us belong to a higher history than any history hitherto!’ Here the madman was silent and looked again at his hearers; they also were silent and looked at him in surprise. At last he threw his lantern on the ground, so that it broke in pieces and was extinguished. ‘I come too early,’ he then said, ‘I am not yet at the right time. This prodigious event is still on its way, and is travelling, it has not yet reached men’s ears. Lightning and thunder need time, the light of the stars needs time, deeds need time, even after they are done, to be seen and heard. This deed is as yet further from them than the furthest star, and yet they have done it!’ It is further stated that the madman made his way into different churches on the same day, and there intoned his
Quite long, isn’t it? However, the aphorism became that famous that there is a joke that spread on the Internet stating “‘God is dead.’ – Nietzsche, 1883 ... ‘Nietzsche is dead.’ – God, 1900” \(^2\). But what does Nietzsche actually means when he created the madman accusing the people of the murder of God?

The writing style is very interesting in itself. The madman runs through a place where no one believes in God, while he is the only believer. In real life, Nietzsche was an atheist (as it was always assumed, but read other thesis below), but religion still had a large influence, so one might say that while Nietzsche was in a society with believers, the madman in his work is in a society without believers, thus the scene is just upside down from reality, and like Zarathustra, the madman is someone who is understood by no one, and people laugh at him and can’t understand his point. One can feel the incomprehension given to the figures. Just as many during Nietzsche’s lifetime were not able to understand Nietzsche himself, and back then many people still did not take him serious. The key to this scene is Nietzsche’s understanding of religion. Nietzsche probably (!) believed that God is only created in the minds of the adherents. The morality which is derived from religion (see Part 4) is only hypocrisy and Nietzsche was convinced that God lost its function because of what the believers of God made out of God himself \(^3\). The reason why morality becomes obsolete without God is the fact that during his life time morality was mainly Christian. If one did not believe in Christianity, there would be no use to follow Christian rules. In my opinion, we do not even need a religion to find it out, we can take society as well. If we try to fit in society, we are enslaved with morality, but if we live the life on our own, there is no disadvantage, when not following morality (it is only difficult, if the society is largely dependent on the state, i.e. if the state can tell you how to dress (e.g. force you to wear a headscarf), then it is far more difficult to get out of society). However, what Nietzsche tried to tell us when saying God is dead can be summarized as “Either we died because of our religion or our religion dies because of us” \(^4\).

So now it is clear why the people laugh at the madman. The madman is individual and unique in his thinking and feels free to believe in what he wants, but the society does not understand him. Therefore, as a result of ‘societal ignorance’ (introduced in Part 15), people start to insult him and ask stupid questions as a polemic showing the communication problem between the madman and the society. The rather mad behavior of the madman is a symbol. He is not mad
because of his strange behavior, but people tend to regard him to be mad because of his belief. He is probably not mad as such, but people see madness in him – or even ignorance – for not conforming into society. But what does Nietzsche mean when he says “We have killed him – you and I” and accuses the others and himself of murder – or to be precisely the murder of God?

There were many attempts to this question in philosophical history and none seemingly proved to be right or wrong. Even I can only try to find an interpretation in Nietzsche’s wonderful literature work, but as it both, artistic literature and aphoristic literature, the short stories leave a lot of space for interpretation – but also for thinking deeper. In my opinion – and I want to emphasize that it is the way I understand the passage – the killing of religion as such, might lead to a problem, as people strive for a place of certainty (such as a paradise in after-life), and therefore taking away their religion – or in other words ‘killing God’ – does not only solve problems, but also creates new problems (remember that Marx stated on Feuerbach that the latter put away the flowers, but not the chains, see Part 17). Therefore, atheism as such does not create a new ‘ultimate truth’. Lesley Chamberlain stated on the ‘God is dead’-question: “I mean this wasn’t an atheist broadside against belief and believers of the kind we’ve become accustomed to in our own time – or, not only. It was an attack on the tight association of reason and divinity, which had begun with Plato and carried through the Christian tradition until René Descartes in the 17th century. In Descartes’s ‘first philosophy’ the subject must doubt any ‘truth’ available to him in the world, unless he can prove it rationally. Descartes finessed his method with six proofs of God ensuring reason’s access to truth. But his peers could see that whether or not God existed was irrelevant to the new scientific method. […] Nietzsche’s rebellion was a way of saying that no great metaphysical forces governed human life and created a framework for meaning, every individual faced the possibly absurdity of existence alone. Yet this was hardly the only meaning of his ‘death of God’”.

The need of independence and self-governance was already discussed in Part 12 and 13, when I analyzed, summarized and criticised Juche philosophy. The importance of being master of one’s own destiny and shaping one’s own fate was explained in depth in the last parts, and therefore does not need to be emphasized again (and thus is seen as given).

In the 19th century, the most popular philosopher was Hegel, and thus every philosopher in Germany had to ‘struggle’ with his thesis. Marx wrote on Hegel, and Nietzsche probably put up Hegel’s thought, too, as the idea of a death of god even appears in Hegelianism, however it does not stand for atheism, but for a religious renewing in the Hegelian triad, and therefore
one can imagine it like this: “God werd geboren toen de mens zich bewust werd van de sterfelijkheid en eindigheid van alle dingen. Als een soort intuitief ontologisch godsbewijs volgt uit dit bewustzijn van sterfelijkheid en eindigheid dialectisch een bewustzijn van onsterfelijkheid en oneindigheid: het concept van wording of vergankelijkheid brengt het concept van zijn en onvergankelijkheid voort als haar antithese door die verandering en vergankelijkheid simpelweg te ontkennen. Tegenover de ervaring van deze wereld, gekenmerkt door vergankelijkheid, komt zo een denken van een onvergankelijk zijn te staan dat als een onvergankelijk zijn ook zelfs een hogere realiteit lijkt te bezitten en de vergankelijke wereld lijkt te funderen dus eerst mogelijk lijkt te maken. Men herkent hier – behalve de geboorte van God – uiteraard de antieke Griekse filosofie in: Het christendom als synthese: de dood van God en de secularisering van het westen [...]. Maar de seculiere Verlichting moest de wereld herscheppen als het beeld van God om zich van God zelf te kunnen ontdoen. De dood van God impliceert aldus dat de wereld zelf goddelijk moet worden”.

So through the understanding of fugacity and immortality, people give birth to God to rescue themselves from death into an eternal life in another world. This works as long as no conflict arises, that’s the Hegelian thought. The thought that people could be immortal somehow and somewhere, wherever it is, seems to be a ‘higher reality’ since it is a further thought developed out of the knowledge that one has to die. So if one says ‘I must die’, he still can say ‘I can live in paradise’, as a new conclusion. However, religion becomes formalised and develops not in a means that is useful for the people, leading to an antithesis. As a result, the world where people believe in a God turns into a world without necessary believe to a God and religion and state are separated – that’s a compromise. Thus, the synthesis is the secularisation. Anyways, whatever was attributed to God before cannot ultimately be attributed to God anymore, which means that the old world cannot continue, but a new world is created instead. The idea behind it is not creating a new world as such, but rather a renewal of society as such – probably even a cultural renewal. Even further, it can be a renewal beyond a certain culture. This is Nietzsche in the Hegelian system, and while the French Revolution and the British Enlightenment pushed away God, the idea of god still played an important role in philosophy in the 20th century – thanks to Hegel – although famous philosophers, such as Feuerbach and Marx proposed atheist views (but Marx got most of his fame after his death, and even more after Nietzsche’s death). Nietzsche probably tries to liberate German philosophy and eliminate the necessity of God, but replace it by reason. So we can say that “de dood van God impliceert de dood van elke eenheid (en daarmee van elke metafysica, inclusief de moraal) en van elke representatie (‘zolang de grammatica
bestaat zullen we nog niet van God af zijn’), welk postmodern differentiatiefilosofie weer leidt tot de transcendentie als de absolute Ander en een postseculiere religie voorbij elke representatie” 89.

So as stated above, Nietzsche was aware that realising that there is no need for God, and as a result taking away religion, is no solution (even senseless as God lives on through language), if human-beings stay the same at the same time. Therefore, his answer is ‘further development’. He also realised that this development cannot take place, if religion continues to exist, such as it existed during his lifetime. Nietzsche proposes the ‘Übermensch’ (also called ‘Overman’ in English), that he describes as a developed human-being over the beings of nowadays, therefore that new kind of man stands over man.

As God is dead, there is no supernatural being that can offer values and the new further developed being can develop new values. However, recent research has suggested that Nietzsche was rather a Pantheist than an Atheist, although this is still heavily debated. So when we talk about the ‘Übermensch’, we do not need to think of how the ‘God is dead’-parable is meant, but we have to make the assumption that God is dead to create the ‘Übermensch’. What we know for sure is that Nietzsche criticised the monotheist institutions and their value system, so Nietzsche saw God within Christianity as outdated, but we cannot say what Nietzsche thinks about God in general – although he might reject the term God for whatever other phenomena that could replace God as such (hypothetically thought, as we cannot say for sure). So while Christianity and the dogmatic belief in God is rather destructive towards life, the ‘Übermensch’ is free and creative, and therefore affirms life.

The ‘Übermensch’ idea goes back to the idea of ‘ewige Wiederkunft’ (eternal rearrival) in which Nietzsche proposes that time is something very unlimited, while the possibility of events is limited, which means that every event has to be repeated somewhere on the time span. Another influence on the way to ‘Übermensch’ was the thought of the ‘will to power’, a very controversial thought as it was always reinterpretated – and far too often misinterpreted (with severe consequences). However, what Nietzsche possibly meant when he talked of ‘will to power’ was the realisation of life-affirming dualisms. Nietzsche probably was inspired by Anti-Darwinists who tried to find evidence to reject the struggle for existence.

The Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary defines Nietzsche’s ‘will to power’ as an element of the Übermensch “to perfect and transcend the self through the possession and exercise of creative power” 10. As Nietzsche thinks that every event happens again and again, the need of developing away from the recent circumstances arises and a new step has to be reached. This is very interesting if it is compared with Hegel’s triad. Nietzsche probably saw a huge cliff
between thesis and antithesis at the time of the fin de siècle, and thus proposed the ‘Übermensch’ as synthesis. The idea of man and overman is often compared to the Buddhist life wheel. When one reaches the overman state, it is like the enlightenment. Of course we cannot compare Nietzsche with Buddhism directly, but we can use the terms to build parables and to simplify Nietzsche’s highly complex ideas with well-known and understandable terms. Nietzsche’s ‘Übermensch’ is sometimes described to be an anti-project since it shows the absence of any project. So while Sartre saw human-beings as a project (“L’homme n’est rien d’autre que son projet, il n’existe que dans la mesure où il se réalise, il n’est donc rien d’autre que l’ensemble de ses actes, rien d’autre que sa vie”), Nietzsche’s ideal of the human-being is the absence of a project, as it is far elsewhere.

However, although this idea should be taken into consideration, it is difficult to put it in this aspect, since Sartre’s idea of a project was developed far later and it is very difficult to put a direct link to it, therefore I just leave it here as a hypothesis – one of many done about the Übermensch and Nietzsche. During my research, I read a lot of (rather ‘popular’) ideas on the internet that Nietzsche was both at the same time, a Communist as well as a supporter of German National Tribalism, which I think is complete non-sense. Maybe Nietzsche had several Communist points in his teaching (at least as a Communist I’d be glad if it was true that he was a Communist, too, but to stay honest, I have no real evidence for it), but he especially was not a nationalist of what any kind, since Nietzsche resigned German citizenship and even wrote in his biography that he had Polish ancestors (which is mostly doubt today) – just not to be called a German (or to make it more difficult to fit in a nationality into him). If Nietzsche should be classified then he can be seen as a man-in-nature, rather than a man-in-society, since he always put his own ideas above those of any collective, even risked his support and friendships just in seek for truths, and was seen a provocative when he declared God’s death, however, Nietzsche always continued and stayed faithful to himself. When we compare Nietzsche as man-in-nature with Socrates, then Socrates was rather a societal being. So we can see that Nietzsche is a good example for strict reasoning. Nietzsche’s Aphorism No. 125 is very interesting in two ways, when we see it in modern day language as ‘The Madman’ orginally was called ‘Der tolle Mensch’ in German. The word ‘toll’ in the sense of ‘mad’ is very old-fashioned nowadays, but the word means ‘brilliant’ or ‘fabulous’ today, which gives the headtitle a double sense.

During his lifetime, he was barely known and just became famous after death. We can learn a lot from him until today. Nietzsche proved that morality is obsolete and he suggested a de-religionisation (but did not deny that there could be a ‘metaphysical world’, which means
that religion can take place in another way). Despite that, he emphasized the development of human-beings and analyzed the human qualities, such as his creative powers that can be used to develop on a higher stage.

Notes:

2. Unfortunately, the authorship of this joke remains unclear, but as Nietzsche’s phrase is credited with the year 1883, the author probably refers to the ‘God is dead’-reference in ‘Thus Spoke Zarathustra’ rather than in ‘The Joyful Wisdom’.
7. passage translated by the author: “God is born when man gets aware of mortality and finiteness of all things. As a kind of intuitive ontological proof of God follows from this awareness of mortality and finiteness, dialectically an awareness of immortality and infiniteness: this concept of genesis or fugacity puts the concept of being and ephemerality further as his antithesis through the changing of fugacity simply by avowing [its existence]. Oppositely to the experience of this world, characterized by fugacity, such arises a thought of immortality that as immortality itself is a higher reality, [which] it seemingly possesses, and the past world seemingly just makes this possible. One sees here – except the birth of God – naturally the Greek philosophy in [it]. Christianity as synthesis: the dead of God and the secularisation of the West. [...] But the the worldly Enlightenment had to create the world [again], as the image of
God, to get rid of God himself. The dead of God implies thus that the world has to become divine itself.”

8. De dood van God

9. passage translated by the author: “The death of God implies the death of every unity (and therefore of every metaphysics, including morality) and every representation (as long as grammar exists, we will not get away from God’), while post-modern differential philosophy goes to transcendence as absolute ‘Oher’ and an post-secularised religion beyond every representation.”

10. Merriam-Webster, Entry: will to power, http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/will%20to%20power (retrieved on 01 March 2016)

11. such as described in: Bennett, Benjamin: Goethe As Woman – The Undoing of Literature, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001, p. 184

12. Longeart, Maryvonne: Jean-Paul Sartre, http://www.ac-grenoble.fr/PhiloSophie/logphil/auteurs/sartre.htm (retrieved on 03 March 2016)

13. passage translated by the author: “Man is nothing else than his project, it just exists in the measure where it is realised, it is thus nothing else than the putting together of his actions, nothing else than his life.”

14. Duden for instance proposes that ‘toll’ means ‘ungewöhnlich, unglaublich’, ‘(umgangssprachlich) großartig, prächtig’ or even ‘(veraltet) sich aufgrund einer Psychose auffällig benehmend’, but also suggests several other meanings, see http://www.duden.de/rechtschreibung/toll (retrieved on 3 March 2016)

15. The Ideas of Nietzsche, Academy of Ideas (see Recommendation)

Recommendation:


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