

# Nietzsche and the Idea of God: Is God Good or Bad for your Psychological Health?

*David Leo Tracey*

## Preview

Nietzsche tells us that he is more interested in the idea of God than in God as such. The idea of God is not a mind-independent entity; it is a human idea. He writes: "In former times, one sought to prove that there is no God—today one indicates how the belief that there is a God could arise and how this belief acquired its weight and importance."<sup>1</sup> He continues, "The 'kingdom of heaven' is a state of the heart—not something lying 'above the earth' or coming 'after death.'"<sup>2</sup> And finally, "the kingdom of God does not 'come' chronologically historically, on a certain day ... it is an 'inward change in the individual.'"<sup>3</sup> As one commentator writes, Nietzsche asks "a series of questions that concern the religious man, not religion itself."<sup>4</sup> Whether or not one believes in God, the fact that people do believe in God is still a phenomenon in the world for which we must account. Nietzsche's question is not 'does God exist?' It is: why do people believe in God, and what insight does this yield into human psychology? Under the influence of Feuerbach, he answers that "religion can be exhaustively accounted for by the psychology of error,"<sup>5</sup> and he demonstrates how basic human psychology accounts for the idea of God. Hence, if naturalism is an attempt to account for phenomena without reference to the supernatural, then showing that human psychology accounts for the idea of a supernatural God is a quintessential instance of naturalism: the idea of God has its origins in nature.

ISSN 1918-7351

Volume 9 (2017)

## **Nietzsche and the Idea of God: Is God Good or Bad for your Psychological Health?**

*David Leo Tracey*

*Keywords: Nietzsche; God; religion; philosophical psychology; naturalism; health; organizing principles; degeneration; vitality; creativity*

Nietzsche tells us that he is more interested in the *idea* of God than in God as such. The idea of God is not a mind-independent entity; it is a human idea. He writes: “In former times, one sought to prove that there is no God—today one indicates how the belief that there is a God could arise and how this belief acquired its weight and importance.”<sup>1</sup> He continues, “The ‘kingdom of heaven’ is a state of the heart—not something lying ‘above the earth’ or coming ‘after death.’”<sup>2</sup> And finally, “the kingdom of God does not ‘come’ chronologically-historically, on a certain day ... it is an ‘inward change in the individual.’”<sup>3</sup> As one commentator writes, Nietzsche asks “a series of questions that concern the religious man, not religion itself.”<sup>4</sup> Whether or not one believes in God, the fact that people do believe in God is still a phenomenon in the world for which we must account. Nietzsche’s question is not ‘does God exist?’ It is: why do people believe in God, and what insight does this yield into human psychology? Under the influence of Feuerbach, he answers that “religion can be exhaustively accounted for by the *psychology of error*,”<sup>5</sup> and he demonstrates how basic human psychology accounts for the idea of God. Hence, if naturalism is an attempt to account for phenomena without reference to the supernatural, then showing that human psychology accounts for the idea of a supernatural God is a quintessential instance of naturalism: the idea of God has its origins in nature.

The number of interpretations concerning what Nietzsche means by the idea of God is dizzying; a brief catalogue is in order. One of my goals here is to

---

<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, Cambridge University Press, 1997, 54.

<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, The Anti-Christ, in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*, Cambridge University Press, 2005, 32.

<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, Vintage Books, 1968, 99.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Valadier, Dionysus Versus the Crucified, *The New Nietzsche: Contemporary Styles of Interpretation*, ed. David Alison, The MIT Press, 1985, 247.

<sup>5</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, Twilight of the Idols, in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols And Other Writings*, Cambridge University Press, 2005, 181.

show how these many variable and seemingly incompatible interpretations may be reconciled within a single interpretation. Some take ‘God’ as Nietzsche’s term for what, in metaphysics and ontology, is called being. On this reading, the human idea of God is equivalent to the human idea of the first cause, the prime mover, the highest principle, or the Being that grounds all being.<sup>6</sup> Others emphasize the Judeo-Christian elements that are often present in Nietzsche’s treatment of the matter.<sup>7</sup> On this reading, the human idea of God is an idea of a savior or redeemer. Still others emphasize what Nietzsche calls the remaining shadows of God, i.e., the values of notions like truth or freedom which can function in our thinking as substitutes for the role once played by the idea of God.<sup>8</sup> Some emphasize the distinction between how he treats monotheism on the one hand, and polytheism on the other.<sup>9</sup> Some point out that, for Nietzsche, if Apollo and Dionysus too are human ideas, they are ideas that represent existing forces of nature.<sup>10</sup> And finally, I will argue that the strongest interpretation of Nietzsche’s conception of the idea of God, and the one which is able to account

---

<sup>6</sup> Heidegger, for example, writes that the “pronouncement ‘God is dead’ means: The supersensory world is without effective power. It bestows no life. Metaphysics ... is at an end.” Martin Heidegger, ‘The Word of Nietzsche: “God is Dead”’ in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. W. Lovitt (Harper and Row, 1977), 61. Graham Ward summarizes this position as follows: “God” for Nietzsche is a name that “sums up a way of doing philosophy in which the highest principle is sought that grounds the possibility of all things,” and further, “God” is a name “for ‘absolute reality’ ... the origin and measure of all things,” and for “Being in modernity’s understanding of metaphysics.” Graham Ward, *The Post-Modern God: A Theological Reader* (Blackwell, 1997), xxviii.

<sup>7</sup> Giles Fraser, for example, writes that “Nietzsche’s phrase ‘the death of God’ has multiple resonances” and “Nietzsche was obsessed with Christianity, and certainly intended God, in ‘the death of God,’ to be thought of, on one level at least, as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” Giles Fraser, *Redeeming Nietzsche: On the Piety of Unbelief*, Routledge, 2002, 19-20. And Walter Kaufmann writes that the phrase “God is dead” “is the language of religion; the picture is derived from the Gospels.” “God is dead” and “we have killed him;”—this is “an attempt at a diagnosis of contemporary civilization, not a metaphysical speculation about ultimate reality.” Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Anti-Christ* (Princeton University Press, 2013),

100.

<sup>8</sup> See Christopher Janaway, *Beyond Selflessness: Reading Nietzsche’s Genealogy* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 7-9, 166-167. And Lawrence Hatab writes that, for Nietzsche, “the death of God is equivalent to the end of truth.” Lawrence J. Hatab, “Nietzsche, Nihilism and Meaning,” *The Personalist Forum*, 3/2 (1987), 93.

<sup>9</sup> See Tyler T. Roberts, *Contesting Spirit: Nietzsche, Affirmation, Religion* (Princeton University Press, 1998), 50.

<sup>10</sup> Nietzsche writes: “We have considered the Apolline and its opposite, the Dionysiac, as artistic powers which erupt from nature itself, *without the mediation of any human artist.*” Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy, in The Birth of Tragedy And Other Writings* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 19. Christoph Cox writes: “The Apollonian and the Dionysian ... are thoroughly immanent to nature. Indeed, before they are figures that describe human artifacts such as music, sculpture, and drama, the Apollonian and the Dionysian are natural forces.” Christoph Cox, *Nietzsche, Dionysus, and the Ontology of Music*, in *A Companion to Nietzsche*, ed. Keith Ansell Pearson (Blackwell, 2009), 499.

for each of these alternatives, would be that which defines the gods for Nietzsche as the justifying ground of one's "commanding psychological principles."<sup>11</sup>

One question cuts across each of these interpretations: whichever idea of God is under analysis, Nietzsche wants to know whether this idea of God is good or bad for one's life and health. Janko Lavrin correctly notes that Nietzsche's concern is to determine "whether ... belief in God ... is a positive or a negative value for life."<sup>12</sup> My aim here is to show that, for Nietzsche, the value of the idea of God for life is ambiguous. More specifically, for Nietzsche, ideas of God originate in nature inasmuch as they are useful or beneficial for our survival, but he also shows that this same beneficial value can be the source of degeneration. In short, ideas of God can have both degenerative and convalescent effects; they can be both healthy and unhealthy. I define the scale of sickness and health in the terms of the *Genealogy's* third treatise. Sickness corresponds to being ashamed of oneself and turning against or negating oneself. Health corresponds to taking pride and joy in oneself and affirming and increasing oneself. And while some thinkers have argued that, for Nietzsche, polytheistic ideas of God(s) are healthy and a monotheistic (Judeo-Christian) idea of God is unhealthy,<sup>13</sup> I don't think that this claim holds up entirely under scrutiny. Indeed, in the *Genealogy*, we are shown techniques by which a philosopher can re-appropriate the unhealthy Christian idea of God to their own healthy ends, and in *The Birth of Tragedy* we are shown how the polytheistic idea of the gods becomes degenerative under the Socratic influence. Nietzsche is pulled in two directions at once concerning the value of the idea of God. I want to show that, for Nietzsche, whether philosophical or religious, poly- or mono-theistic, the value of the idea of God for life is ambiguous: it can be beneficial, but it can also be harmful and degenerative; it can be healthy or unhealthy.

### The Ambiguous Value of the Idea of God

I will start by providing textual evidence of this ambiguity. On the one hand, Nietzsche is clear that he takes religiosity and its corresponding ideas of God to be profoundly degenerative. He writes: "that which has been revered as God" is actually "harmful" and even "*a crime against life*."<sup>14</sup> And, "under the holiest of names I pulled up destructive tendencies; one has called God what weakens, teaches weakness, infects with weakness."<sup>15</sup> And finally, "the concept of 'God' invented as a counter-concept of life—everything harmful, poisonous, slanderous, the whole hostility unto death against life synthesized in this concept

---

<sup>11</sup> Kieth M. May, *Nietzsche and the Spirit of Tragedy* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1990), 1. I have re-appropriated May's words to my own end here. May actually *defines* the gods as "commanding psychological principles." My point is different, i.e., that for Nietzsche, the gods are the securing ground of one's commanding psychological principles.

<sup>12</sup> Janko Lavrin, *Nietzsche; A Biographical Introduction* (Scribner, 1971), 117.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Roberts, *Contesting Spirit*, 50-51.

<sup>14</sup> Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, 45.

<sup>15</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 34.

in a gruesome unity!”<sup>16</sup> Having demonstrated elsewhere that a will to self-harm originates out of the internalization of the will to cruelty, Nietzsche’s main point in each of these quotations is that humans invent the idea of God as the ultimate technique with which to inflict cruelty upon their selves.

But on the other hand, and seemingly counter to his greater polemic, various claims throughout his work show that Nietzsche *values* something positively in the idea of God as well. First of all, Nietzsche is clearly devastated by the death of God; he felt, writes Kaufmann, “the agony, the suffering, and the misery of a Godless world.”<sup>17</sup> “Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? ... Is not night continually closing in on us? ... God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.... What was holiest and most powerful of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives.”<sup>18</sup> Why would Nietzsche express this devastation if he saw no value in the idea of God? This alternative valuation is expressed clearly when, having argued that ideas of God express a condemnation of one’s self and life, Nietzsche then states:

That should be enough, once and for all, about the descent of the ‘holy God.’—That the conception of gods does not, as such, necessarily lead to that deterioration of the imagination which we had to think about for a moment, that there are nobler ways of making use of the invention of gods than man’s self-crucifixion and self-abuse, ... this can fortunately be deduced from any glance at the Greek gods. ... These Greeks, for most of the time, used their gods expressly to keep ‘bad conscience’ at bay so that they could carry on enjoying their freedom of soul: therefore, the opposite of the way Christendom made use of its God. They went very far in this, these marvelous, lion-hearted children.<sup>19</sup>

Here, the claim that the idea of God is harmful or degenerative recedes. This Greek idea of many gods is said to express freedom and health, and to optimize the conditions of the Greek believer. And the notion that this healthy function may be restricted to polytheistic ideas of the gods is dispelled when, concerning Israel’s ‘original’ conception of Yahweh, Nietzsche writes that “Yahweh expressed a consciousness of power. Israel’s joy in itself and hope for itself: Yahweh allowed people to expect victory and salvation, he allowed people to trust that nature would provide what they needed.”<sup>20</sup> Here, no trace of the claim that the idea of God is harmful or degenerative remains.

In sum, Nietzsche tells us that degenerative and beneficial powers belong to the idea of God. What is beneficial in this idea, and what is degenerative? We are pointed towards an answer in a crucial passage from *Human, All Too Human*:

---

<sup>16</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols And Other Writings* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 150.

<sup>17</sup> Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 98.

<sup>18</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 120.

<sup>19</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 64-65.

<sup>20</sup> Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, 22.

One, certainly very high level of culture has been achieved when a man emerges from superstitious and religious concepts and fears and no longer believes in angels, for example, or in original sin, and has ceased to speak of the salvation of souls.... Then, however, he needs to take a retrograde step: he has to grasp the historical justification that resides in such ideas, likewise the psychological; he has to recognize that they have been most responsible for the advancement of mankind and that without such a retrograde step he will deprive himself of the best that mankind has hitherto produced.<sup>21</sup>

If we locate the idea of God under the category of religious concepts, then we see here that, on the one hand, emancipation from the idea of God indicates a high level of culture, and yet at the same time, some historical and psychological justification, or some value, resides in the idea of God as well. With the rest of this paper, I will discuss the psychological justification for, or what Nietzsche takes to be psychologically beneficial—and degenerative—in, the idea of God for human animals. I'll first discuss the beneficial, and then the degenerative.

### **The Benefits of the Idea of God**

Nietzsche tells us that many around him have, “over generations, dissolved any religious instinct, so that they no longer know what religion is good for, and only register its presence in the world with a type of dull amazement,”<sup>22</sup> and he tells us what he thinks religion is good for. Ideas of God in particular, he says, originate in nature largely because they encourage survival and self-preservation. This section aims to demonstrate how they do so, or, just how ideas of God benefit human animals. An essential element of this form of self-preservation is the fact that ideas of God fulfill psychological needs. This fulfillment is what Nietzsche calls the psychological justification that resides in religious ideas. At base, Nietzsche argues that the most plausible answer to the question ‘Why do people believe in God?’ is that this belief fulfills some basic psychological requirements. That is, that we posit the idea of God reveals that we need to posit the idea of God.

What needs are fulfilled by the idea of God? Nietzsche continually identifies various human needs. In the *Genealogy* he discerns a human need to will some end, aim, or goal.<sup>23</sup> In *The Gay Science* he discerns a human need to

---

<sup>21</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 22-23.

<sup>22</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 52.

<sup>23</sup> Explaining the causal mechanism that accounts for or produces the ascetic ideal, Nietzsche writes: “From now on he could *will* something,—no matter what, why and how he did it at first, the *will itself was saved*.... all that means, let us dare to grasp it, a *will to nothingness* ... but it is and remains a *will*... And to conclude by saying what I said at the beginning: man still prefers to *will nothingness*, than *not will*.” Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, 120.

know the meaning, purpose, or reason of life.<sup>24</sup> And in *Zarathustra* he discerns a need to esteem or to create, judge, and evaluate meanings and values.<sup>25</sup> But Nietzsche does not rigorously distinguish these needs, and they overlap one another conceptually: at some points, for Nietzsche, to have a will is to have a purpose or a reason for life; elsewhere, he takes meaning and aim as synonyms, and equates esteeming and creating meanings and values with esteeming and creating goals. I think that we can account for this overlap if each of these needs expresses a common root. I propose that the object of any one of these needs always functions psychologically as a *governing organizational principle* for whoever expresses the need. An organizational principle is a pole from which the elements of a set derive their value and meaning. An aim, a goal, a meaning, a value, an evaluative position, all of these have the power to function as a pole from which the details of a life derive intelligibility for some perspective. For example, a *goal* may dictate the meanings of various phenomena; one who takes on the goal of writing a doctoral dissertation may find sociality and libations newly defined as temptations or distractions, while certain texts or discussions are defined as helpful or useless towards one's aim. For a given perspective, everything is defined in relation to the governing organizational principle, and if this principle is called into question, then so are the meanings of every element so defined. By discerning so many needs, Nietzsche observes that human animals psychologically need a governing organizational principle for their lives. Every need he identifies is an expression of this more fundamental psychological need for organization. This is why Nietzsche stresses the value of organization for life. He writes: "The Greeks gradually learned to organize the chaos by following the Delphic teaching." This "is a parable for each one of us: he must organize the chaos within him by thinking back to his real needs."<sup>26</sup> I claim that, for Nietzsche, ideas of God benefit humans by securing basic organizing principles.

I will recount two of Nietzsche's examples of organizational principles. The first, taken from *The Anti-Christ*, is the following: written in the history of Israel, and specifically in the facts that the people of Israel were allowed "to expect victory and salvation," and "to trust that nature would provide what they needed,"<sup>27</sup> Nietzsche discerns the people's faith in their own unique dignity, or in

---

<sup>24</sup> "Human nature on the whole has surely been altered by the recurring emergence of such teachers of the purpose of existence—it has acquired one additional need, the need for the repeated appearance of such teachers and such 'teachings' of a purpose. Man has gradually become a fantastic animal that must fulfill one condition of existence more than any other animal: man must from time to time believe he knows *why* he exists; his race cannot thrive without a periodic trust in life—without faith in the *reason in life!*" Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 29.

<sup>25</sup> "No people could live that did not first esteem; but if they want to preserve themselves, then they must not esteem as their neighbor esteems... Humans first placed values into things, in order to preserve themselves—they first created meaning for things, a human meaning! That is why they call themselves "human," that is: the esteemer. Only through esteeming is there value, and without esteeming the nut of existence would be hollow." Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Cambridge University Press, 2006, 42-43.

<sup>26</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," in *Untimely Meditations* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 122-123.

<sup>27</sup> Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, 22.

their status as the chosen people. This faith must be a basic organizing principle from which the people of Israel derive the meanings and values of the various elements of their lives. This must be so because a people can only believe that they will always be victorious, and that nature will always provide what they need, if they presuppose that nature, in some sense, strives to serve their own ends. This faith in this special dignity grounds an understanding of nature as something that will always provide what is needed. This faith defines nature as something that exists *for* them and for the sake of them. This faith is a pole which defines the further elements of life for the people of Israel.

Second example: in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche describes the Greek practice of distinguishing and ordering types of identities, such as the slave and the freeman. He describes the “rigid, hostile barriers” that were “established between human beings”<sup>28</sup> or, “the caste-like divisions which necessity and arbitrary power have established between men” such as between “the aristocrat and the man of lowly birth.”<sup>29</sup> These practices reveal an underlying commitment to *the law of identity*. It is on the basis of the presupposition that an individual is identical with itself, but not with another individual, that individuals are so rigidly distinguished from one another. Thus, Nietzsche discerns the law of identity to be the organizing principle of Greek cultural and political life, and this principle is placed in the governing position when Nietzsche claims that Apollo—whom he calls the “leader” and “father” of “the entire Olympian world”<sup>30</sup>—is “the most sublime expression of imperturbable trust in this principle,”<sup>31</sup> i.e., in the principle of identity.

In both cases, a basic foundational principle acts as the ground for a great many further actions, statements, institutions, and beliefs. The people of Israel hold that they are the chosen people, privileged by a unique dignity, and this faith forms the basis for the belief that nature will provide what is necessary and a host of corresponding actions. The Greeks hold that an individual is identical only with itself, and this law forms the basis of social and political divisions amongst peoples and types. In both examples, the governing organizational principle serves to *preserve life*. This is clearer in the case of the Greek law of identity. Nietzsche claims that caste-order, order of rank, and splitting off into types are all “necessary for the preservation of society.”<sup>32</sup> Hence, calling the law of identity into question may very well threaten our continued existence.

It is less clear how faith in one’s own unique dignity could facilitate self-preservation. Nietzsche argues that this faith “allowed people to trust that nature would provide what they needed—above all, rain.”<sup>33</sup> Israel’s people *need* rain to

---

<sup>28</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 1.

<sup>29</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, “The Dionysiac World View,” in *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*,

<sup>30</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 22.

<sup>31</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 17.

<sup>32</sup> Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, 59.

<sup>33</sup> Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, 22.

fall. All human animals—indeed, all organisms—need certain forces and elements beyond their control to play out in certain ways. Nietzsche writes:

Every individual ... feels how his existence, his happiness, that of the family and the state, the success of any undertaking depends of these arbitrarinesses of nature: certain natural events must occur at the right time, others fail to occur. How can one exercise an influence over these terrible unknown powers, how can one fetter the domain of freedom? thus he asked himself, thus he anxiously seeks: are there then no means of regulating these powers through a tradition and law in just the way you are regulated by them?<sup>34</sup>

We never have absolute certainty of or control over what happens next. Our knowledge of what the future will bring is unreliable. Under these conditions, Nietzsche writes, individuals reflect “on how to *impose a law on nature*” and “the religious cult is the outcome of this reflection.”<sup>35</sup> Moreover, “the meaning of the religious cult is to determine and constrain nature for the benefit of mankind, that is to say to *impress upon it a regularity and rule of law which it does not at first possess*.”<sup>36</sup> Without a guarantee of regularity in nature, individuals may be dominated in the present, and the future may bring tragedy to even the most powerful. These possibilities threaten the very survival of the individual. Thus, a drive to self-preservation expresses a desire to impress reliability upon nature, or in other words, to effectively force nature to conform to the requirements of one’s organizational principles.

And yet, of course, belief in one’s unique dignity does not necessarily make it true that rain will always fall when it is needed. What Nietzsche actually tells us is that this faith allows one to *expect* victory and salvation, and, to *trust* that nature will provide what is needed. He argues that uncertainty can lead to paralysis or inaction, which hinder self-preservation. An individual may recognize that their actions do not matter since they still depend upon the contingencies of nature for mere survival. One may lose faith in the value or importance of one’s actions when they realize that, no matter what effects they cause, these too may be undone in time, or simply undermined by greater forces. Fear of contingency, of possibility, can prevent an individual from living. But if uncertainty leads to inaction, faith in some organizational principle incites action. The faithful are able to trust or believe that the future will continue to be in their best interest, and so—in the case of Israel—they act *as if* the future will be as the past, and rain will continue to fall. Thus, believers are liberated from the paralysis of anxiety elicited by anticipation of an unknown future, and hence rendered free to act.

---

<sup>34</sup> Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, 64.

<sup>35</sup> Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, 64.

<sup>36</sup> Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, 65.

Again, in each example, a first principle grounds countless further elements. But a question persists: on what grounds ought we hold to the first belief? These grounds can be called into question; they are not secure or guaranteed. Nietzsche says that we learn through experience that everything is susceptible to domination, change, and destruction, or, that anything can be lost. Governing organizational principles too can be called into question and become uncertain or insecure. In his clearest example of such an experience, Nietzsche demonstrates how the Dionysian festivals revealed to the Greeks that even one's individual identity can be called into question: the master and slave can become equals. He refers to the orgiastic "Babylonian Sacaea,"<sup>37</sup> and writes that from "all corners of the ancient world ... from Rome to Babylon, we can demonstrate the existence of Dionysiac festivals..."<sup>38</sup> During such festivals, "caste-like divisions ... disappear; the slave is a free-man, the aristocrat and the man of lowly birth unite in the same Bacchic choruses."<sup>39</sup> And "the slave is a freeman, now all the rigid, hostile barriers, which necessity, caprice, or 'impudent fashion' have established between human beings, break asunder," while "each person feels himself to be not simply united, reconciled or merged with his neighbor, but quite literally one with him..."<sup>40</sup> If these festivals reveal that a slave is and is not equal to a master, then the law of identity is called into question. Nietzsche writes of "the enormous *horror* which seizes people when they suddenly become confused and lose faith in the cognitive forms of the phenomenal world ... whenever this breakdown of the *principum individuationis* occurs."<sup>41</sup>

Nietzsche writes a speculative history of the origin of the Greek gods. He writes: "The Greeks knew and felt the terrors and horrors of existence; in order to live at all they had to place in front of these things the resplendent, dream-born figures of the Olympians."<sup>42</sup> Here, the need fulfilled by the idea of the gods is protection from terror. What is terrifying—both here and in other examples given by Nietzsche—is that one's basic organizational principles are being called into question. The Olympic gods protect against this possibility. Nietzsche's claim is that notwithstanding what fills this role, the first principle, the governing organizational principle, is taken to be secure or legitimate on the basis of the divine authority of its origin. He writes: "The authority of the law is grounded in the theses: God *gave* it, the ancestors *lived* by it."<sup>43</sup> Yahweh allows the people of Israel to keep faith in their individual dignity; Apollo secures one's imperturbable trust in the law of identity. The idea of God has the power to act as the ground of the ground; ideas of God provide psychological security for one's governing organizational principles. This is the pivotal notion: the idea of God protects one from the terror of recognizing that even their most basic governing principles are

---

<sup>37</sup> Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 20.

<sup>38</sup> Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 20.

<sup>39</sup> Nietzsche, *Dionysiac World View*, 120.

<sup>40</sup> Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 18.

<sup>41</sup> Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 17.

<sup>42</sup> Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 23.

<sup>43</sup> Nietzsche, *Anti-Christ*, 58.

susceptible to change, and it lays a legitimating ground for a livable organizational principle. To this end, some ideas of God may be more effective than others, but it is this capacity that they all share: an idea of God always has the ability to ground or legitimate a secure governing principle for human animals to seize upon when everything else is vulnerable to destruction. Apollo, for example, protects one from recognizing the truths revealed by the Dionysian festivals. In sum, for Nietzsche, human animals psychologically need for their organizing principles to be secure, and on this basis he hypothesizes that the idea of God is invented as a particularly effective means of securing one's basic organizational principles. For Nietzsche, the benefit of the idea of God is that it serves to preserve life. It is a vital error: an error that allows us to go on living.

### The Degenerative Idea of God

Nietzsche often returns to two points: first, that suffering is a necessary element of life—"life functions *essentially* in an injurious, violent, exploitative and destructive manner, or at least these are its fundamental processes and it cannot be thought of without these characteristics."<sup>44</sup> And second, that change is unavoidable—"The fact is indeed this, that one certainly cannot deny the reality of change"<sup>45</sup> and "anything in existence, having somehow come about, is continually interpreted anew, requisitioned anew, transformed and redirected to a new purpose by a power superior to it."<sup>46</sup> Nietzsche claims that, for certain weak constitutions, these two unavoidable truths are intolerable. Weak individuals are those who evaluate suffering and change negatively; they take suffering and change to be negative aspects of life. In *The Anti-Christ*, Nietzsche demonstrates how these unavoidable truths are revealed to the people of Israel, and he uses this opportunity to recount the transition from a healthy God to a degenerative God. Originally, Nietzsche says, "Yahweh expressed ... Israel's joy in itself and hope for itself."<sup>47</sup> Then, he writes:

This state of things remained the ideal for quite a while, even when it was being brought to a tragic end: anarchy from the inside, Assyrians from the outside. But the people kept their supreme desire alive.... But all hopes were left unfulfilled. The old God *could* not do the things he used to do. He should have been let go. What happened? His concept was *altered*,—his concept was *denatured*: this was the price for retaining it.<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morality*, 50.

<sup>45</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "Philosophy During the Tragic Age of the Greeks," in *Early Greek Philosophy and Other Essays* (Russell & Russell, 1964), 141.

<sup>46</sup> Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morality*, 51.

<sup>47</sup> Nietzsche, *Anti-Christ*, 22.

<sup>48</sup> Nietzsche, *Anti-Christ*, 22. Dylan Jaggard provides the following commentary on this passage. "Unfortunately, Nietzsche does not bother to supply some of the essential historical background to this change. He makes casual reference to historical events, telling us for example that the Jews were threatened by "anarchy from the inside, Assyrians from the outside." The single kingdom reigned over by David and Solomon was, after the latter's death, split into two separate kingdoms

Nietzsche's point here is that, for weak individuals, the reality of suffering and change—indeed, tragic change—cannot be reconciled with an idea of God that promises joy and hope. How can it be true that (a) God promises that nature will provide what the people need, while it is also true that (b) the state of things is “being brought to a tragic end” as a result of “anarchy from the inside” and the “Assyrians from the outside?” God could no longer be said to prevent suffering or even to provide comfort; it was no longer believable that God promised a people all that they needed. What was needed was a God that allows for the possibility of suffering and tragic change, even when these are negatively evaluated. An effective idea of God must be able to account for this negative evaluation of change and suffering. Here, Nietzsche locates the origin of what he calls that most deceitful interpretive mechanism of the Christian idea of God, taking Christianity as an extension and development of Judaism. If, he says, suffering and tragedy are unavoidable, then Christianity will use them to its own ends.

Christianity offers life an aim: eternal salvation in God's kingdom of heaven. This aim is said to be achieved through repentance; repentance in suffering allows for salvation in the future. On Nietzsche's reading, two elements of this doctrine of salvation ensure that the Christian idea of God allows for the possibility of change and suffering, even where these are negatively evaluated. First, concerning change, it is essential that this aim is located in an *afterlife*. It is located beyond the worldly here and now; it is an otherworld. This goal of life, salvation in God's kingdom, is always and forever available to life, precisely because it is set beyond life, after-life. This goal is quite literally unachievable within life, which guarantees that all living individuals can always adopt the goal of salvation: there can always be hope. That this aim is beyond life ensures that no moment of worldly change or contingency can take this goal away from life. Nietzsche writes: “Christianity promises everything and *delivers nothing*.”<sup>49</sup> The promise must not be fulfilled, for then life would lose its aim. If everything is susceptible to change and destruction, this one aim, the kingdom of heaven, is not, for it is beyond the realm of everything. The goal here provided to life remains continually on the horizon, always and forever beyond life. Hence, the

---

of Israel in the north and the much smaller Judah to the south. This occurred in 925 BCE. This did not by any means mark an immediate decline. There was relative prosperity during these years. However, establishing their legitimacy was a difficult thing to do for the new generation of kings, hence the anarchy from within that Nietzsche mentions. The political instability that this resulted in was eventually taken advantage of by the Assyrians. Around 733/2 BCE they invaded and conquered much of the northern kingdom. Samaria, the capital, fell in 721. The Assyrians demanded tribute from Judah in the south. In 587 BCE the Babylonians, who had gained ascendancy over the Assyrians, destroyed the temple in Jerusalem. Much of the population of Judah was exiled to Babylonia, including some of its most important leaders and priests. The Jews found themselves in an almost impossible position. Yahweh had, it seemed, completely abandoned them.” Dylan Jaggard, “Nietzsche's AntiChrist,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche*, ed. Ken Gemes and John Richardson (Oxford University Press, 2016), 349.

<sup>49</sup> Nietzsche, *Anti-Christ*, 38.

aim of salvation in the kingdom of God acts as an eternal and unwavering pole in the minds of believers from which to derive the meanings and values of the elements of life, and indeed, the meaning of life. And second, concerning suffering, it is essential that suffering be interpreted as an indication of guilt and the process of repentance, which allows for one's future salvation. For Nietzsche, ascetic Christianity ensured that "suffering was interpreted" in that "it brought all suffering within the perspective of guilt."<sup>50</sup> "I suffer: someone or other must be guilty"—and every sick sheep thinks the same. But his shepherd, the ascetic priest, says to him ... you yourself are this somebody, you yourself alone are to blame for it."<sup>51</sup> Now suffering is always already more evidence of one's guilt, the process of repentance, and the promise of salvation. With these two elements, no instance of worldly change or worldly suffering could ever be an argument against the Christian idea of God.

In what sense does such an idea of God cause degeneration? Nietzsche is clear concerning the point at which religious concepts become degenerative. He writes: "To show the downside of these religions as well and throw light on their uncanny dangers: there is a high and horrible price to pay when religions ... serve themselves and become sovereign, when they want to be the ultimate goal instead of a means alongside other means."<sup>52</sup> Now, as we have seen, the idea of God fulfills one's psychological need for security. Then the problem, or even the paradox, is this: what most effectively fulfills this need is an idea that claims to be a sovereign or ultimate end-in-itself, since the ultimate or the sovereign resists change and what resists change is what will most effectively act as a secure and even eternal ground that is accessible to all—including the weak. But why is an idea of God degenerative when it is implicated in a religious claim to sovereignty? Here, we must return to our definitions of sickness and health. If sickness corresponds to a negation of oneself, and health to an affirmation and increase of oneself, then we must ask of this 'self.' This self too is susceptible to change—again, change is unavoidable; everything is susceptible. But this means not only that the self can be dominated or destroyed, but also that it may be re-created, sublimated, or made stronger and more perfect. These progressive future possibilities are repressed wherever a commitment to permanence is asserted, and the Christian idea of God is uniquely successful at psychologically securing one's organizational principles precisely because of its claim to permanence. What I think makes a sovereign idea of God uniquely degenerative for Nietzsche is that it destroys or represses the possibilities of the future.

In the *Genealogy's* preface, Nietzsche asks: what if "the present *lived at the expense of the future?*"<sup>53</sup> And he argues that we live comfortably in the present at the cost of the future. Concerning Christianity, Nietzsche writes: Religion "spreads sunshine over such eternally tormented people and makes them bearable even to themselves.... It refreshes, refines, and *makes the most of*

---

<sup>50</sup>Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morality*, 120.

<sup>51</sup>Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morality*, 94.

<sup>52</sup>Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 55.

<sup>53</sup>Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morality*, 8.

suffering, as it were. In the end it even sanctifies and justifies.”<sup>54</sup> Christianity comforts by positing the existence of an eternal otherworld, invulnerable to change. This is comforting because a lack of permanence or security can be, as we have seen, terrifying and even life-threatening. With the doctrine of judgment, a doctrine of hope, Christianity and the promise of the kingdom of God sustain individuals through the struggle and anxiety of impermanence. As this aim is beyond the realm of becoming, it cannot be taken away or called into question, whatever else happens in one’s life. Nietzsche claims that “strong hope” is an intense “stimulus to life” and sufferers are “sustained by a hope.”<sup>55</sup> As Julian Young writes, this provides life with ...

... a destination such that to reach it is to enter ... a state of ‘eternal bliss’, a heaven, paradise, or utopia. [This] ... give[s] meaning to life by representing it as a journey; a journey towards ‘redemption, towards an arrival that will more than make up for the stress and discomfort of the traveling.’<sup>56</sup>

By sustaining hope, this mode indeed succeeds in preserving life by alleviating individual exhaustion with continual change and suffering. For those who value suffering and change negatively, the present is successfully made comfortable as their suffering and change are subsumed by a hope-providing meaning-giving intransitory world order. But precisely because of this success, believers take Christian meanings and values to be more valuable than the process that created them. Their primary concern becomes sustaining these comforting meanings and values. In order to perpetuate itself, the Christian mode of life claims to be eternal, or, it conceals the fluidity of its form. The more one believes the ground to be eternal, the more psychologically secure are their basic organizing principles. This is why, on Nietzsche’s reading, the Christian mode of life claims to be intransient, or, the only eternally valid and legitimate mode of living; Christianity “stubbornly and ruthlessly declares, “I am morality itself, and nothing else is moral.””<sup>57</sup> Nietzsche writes:

When the emphasis of life is put on the ‘beyond’ rather than on life itself—when it is put on nothingness—, then the emphasis has been completely removed from life. The enormous lie of personal immortality destroys all reason, everything natural in the instincts,—everything beneficial and life-enhancing in the instincts, everything that guarantees the future, now arouses mistrust.<sup>58</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup>Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 55.

<sup>55</sup>Nietzsche, *Anti-Christ*, 19.

<sup>56</sup>Julian Young, *The Death of God and the Meaning of Life*, Routledge, 2003, 1.

<sup>57</sup>Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 90.

<sup>58</sup>Nietzsche, *Anti-Christ*, 39.

What exactly is Nietzsche saying here? First, he claims that Christians flee from reality and its anxieties by taking refuge in the ideal.<sup>59</sup> Reality refers to the eternal fluidity of form; reality is the fact that we do not know with certainty that anything is impervious to change, becoming, or destruction. But Nietzsche condemns as unhealthy, sick, degenerate, or corrupt, any position that attempts to negate or deny reality, or the ongoing process of becoming. This is because, if life itself is that which remains open to the possibility of change, becoming, and creation, then a life which closes off such possibilities is a life which actively negates itself. For Nietzsche, an essential aspect of any healthy position is that it will not attempt to negate or deny the possibility of change. By providing life with a secure and pre-given organizational principle, namely the aim of eternal salvation, Christianity allows individuals to deny, hide from, or cover over the possibility that even this principle is vulnerable to collapse. Thus secure in its ways, the danger of this dominant mode is that individuals may cease to create meanings and values altogether, since they have been provided with meaning and value to fulfill their needs and to anesthetize their suffering. The life that such a mode preserves is a life that no longer creates or determines new organizing principles. Christianity thus suspends individual engagement with the process of creating and requisitioning new organizational principles of one's own. For Nietzsche, Christianity—and indeed most forms of the ascetic ideal—thus separate an individual from their power to perpetually create and re-determine new principles for life. Ultimately, I think that this is why Nietzsche tells us that “the religions which have existed so far (which have all been *sovereign*) have played a principal role in keeping the type “man” on a lower level,”<sup>60</sup> precisely because they remain committed to a single set of postulates, and so actively discourage the cultivation of a stance that is open to absolute possibility, or, that is open to the possibility that our most basic principles could be called into question. Nietzsche exclaims, “Almost two thousand years and not one new God!”<sup>61</sup> It is this lack of creativity which he sees as shameful and degenerative.

## Conclusion

According to Nietzsche, the value of the idea of God for life is clearly ambiguous. On the one hand, it is a vital error which serves to preserve life by providing psychological security in one's basic organizational principles. On the other hand, the idea of God serves to preserve life most effectively by committing to assertions of permanence, and such assertions undermine the

---

<sup>59</sup> Nietzsche tells us he admires those who show “*courage* in the face of reality” and, polemically, he claims that “Plato is a coward in the face of reality,—*consequently* he escapes into the ideal.” Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 226. John Richardson helpfully explicates this passage as follows: “[Nietzsche] takes Plato to have recognized and experienced the world's hard reality as becoming, but to have then been too weak for this insight.... He retreats from properly facing this unsettling feature of reality, distracting and consoling himself by imagining another world that above all does not change or become.” John Richardson, *Nietzsche's System* (Oxford University Press, 1996), 90.

<sup>60</sup>Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 56.

<sup>61</sup>Nietzsche, *Anti-Christ*, 16.

continual processes of change and becoming that compose reality. In other words, the idea of God preserves life, but it preserves a degenerating life, or a life which no longer serves to increase and recreate itself. If the essence of life is creation and redetermination, then, on Nietzsche's reading, the life preserved by an unhealthy idea of God is a life turned against its own essence, alienated from what it can do. In the final analysis, for Nietzsche, a healthy mode of life will serve to affirm and increase creation, requisition, transformation, and possibility, while an unhealthy mode of life misjudges what is of value here. Instead of valuing the process of creating as an expression of life, an unhealthy mode of life values some creation as an end in itself. Hence, the question which arises here is this: can an idea of God express an affirmation of creativity? Nietzsche clearly gestures in this direction in both his discussions of Israel and the Greek gods. In each case, we are told, the respective ideas of God are not external, transcendent, or otherworldly postulates. Rather, they are expressions of immanence; they are creative expressions of selves, peoples, affects, and the here-and-now. The healthiest ideas of God, for Nietzsche, are expressions of life rather than postulates of eternity beyond life. If an unhealthy concept of God is "a counter-concept of life,"<sup>62</sup> or the positing of a nothingness beyond what is here and now, the healthiest ideas of God are precisely the opposite: nothing less than expression of life as it lives, dynamically, and always open to the possibility of radical growth and change.

---

<sup>62</sup>Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 150.